



# How to Learn Any Language in 3 Months

Language learning, or developing practical fluency in a target language, need not be complicated. Principles of cognitive neuroscience and time management can be incorporated to provide a simple set of discrete steps that lead to conversational fluency in 1-3 months.

I have used the approaches detailed here, developed mostly during four years of East Asian linguistics research at Princeton University, to learn to speak, read, and write Japanese in 6 months, Mandarin Chinese in 3 months, and Italian in 1 month. This decrease in time is reflective of the refinement of learning technique and not indicative of Chinese being twice as easy as Japanese, for example.

The resulting system is based on a rule of thirds, each of which requires equal attention.

## **The Trinity Rule of Three:** **Effectiveness (Priority)** **Adherence (Interest)** **Efficiency (Process)**

Effectiveness, adherence, and efficiency refer to the “what”, “why”, and “how” of learning a target language respectively. In simple terms, you first decide what to learn, based on what will provide the most versatile knowledge base in the least time (priority); you then filter materials based on your likelihood of continued study, or adherence (interest); lastly, you determine how to learn the material most time-efficiently (process).

**Effectiveness:** If you select the wrong material, it does not matter how you study or if you study - practical fluency is impossible without the proper tools (material). Thus, prioritizing content is the first step of analysis before ever beginning study. Very smart people waste years focusing on material that is of only marginal use. Before you can prioritize and assign importance, one must very specifically determine the objectives and reasons for studying a given language. Ask yourself: Will the chosen material get me to where I want to go in the least amount of time? This is often easier answered by asking yourself: “What will I be doing with the language, with whom, and in what context?”

**Adherence:** If you do not have a compelling interest and reason for studying the material, you will not study it as necessary. Review, and multiple exposures to the same material, will always present an element of monotony, which must be countered by an interest in the material. Even if you select the most effective material and efficient method, if you don't adhere with repeated study, those initial steps will have no value. By analogy, the practical implications of adherence can be applied to exercise or any other area of skill development. Even if sprinting uphill with bowling balls in each hand were the most effective way to lose bodyfat, how

long would the average person adhere to such a program? If you have no interest in politics, will you adhere to a language course that focuses on this material? Ask yourself: Can I study this material every day and adhere until I reach my fluency goals? If you have any doubt, change your selection. Oftentimes, it is best to select content that matches your interests in your native language. Do not read about something that you would not read about in English, for example, if English is your native language. Use the target language as a vehicle for learning more about a subject, skill, or cultural area of interest. Do not use poor material as a vehicle for learning a language - it will not work.

**Efficiency:** It matters little if you have the best material and adherence, but study using a method that does not ensure accurate recall and recognition in the shortest period of time. Ask yourself: Will this method allow me to reach accurate recognition and recall with the fewest number of exposures, within the shortest period of time? If the answer is no, your method must be refined or replaced.

In this first article, we will address Effectiveness and the “what” of initial language acquisition as it applies to vocabulary. Pareto’s Principle of 80/20 dictates that 80% of the results in any endeavor come from 20% of the input, material, or effort. We can adapt this principle and prioritize material based on its historically recorded likelihood and frequency of usage. To understand 85% of a language and become conversational fluent may require 6 months of applied learning, to reach the 95% threshold could require 10-15 years. There is a point of diminishing returns and % improvement per hour invested.

The 100 Most Common Written Words in English:

1. the
2. of
3. and
4. a
5. to
6. in
7. is
8. you
9. that
10. it
11. he
12. was
13. for
14. on
15. are
16. as
17. with
18. his
19. they
20. I
21. at
22. be
23. this
24. have
25. from

26. or
27. one
28. had
29. by
30. word
31. but
32. not
33. what
34. all
35. were
36. we
37. when
38. your
39. can
40. said
41. there
42. use
43. an
44. each
45. which
46. she
47. do
48. how
49. their
50. if
51. will
52. up
53. other
54. about
55. out
56. many
57. then
58. them
59. these
60. so
61. some
62. her
63. would
64. make
65. like
66. him
67. into
68. time
69. has
70. look
71. two
72. more
73. write
74. go
75. see
76. number
77. no
78. way

79. could
80. people
81. my
82. than
83. first
84. water
85. been
86. call
87. who
88. oil
89. its
90. now
91. find
92. long
93. down
94. day
95. did
96. get
97. come
98. made
99. may
100. part

The first 25 of the above words make up about one-third of all printed material in English. The first 100 comprise one-half of all written material, and the first 300 make up about sixty-five percent of all written material in English. Italicized words are articles and tense conjugations that can often be omitted in some languages or learned for recognition (understanding) but not recall (production).

Most frequency lists are erroneously presented as the "most common words" in English, with no distinction made between written and spoken vocabulary. The 100 most common words as used in speech are considerably different, and this distinction applies to any target language:

1. a, an
2. after
3. again
4. all
5. almost
6. also
7. always
8. and
9. because
10. before
11. big
12. but
13. (I) can
14. (I) come
15. either/or
16. (I) find
17. first
18. for

19. friend
20. from
21. (I) go
22. good
23. goodbye
24. happy
25. (I) have
26. he
27. hello
28. here
29. how
30. I
31. (I) am
32. if
33. in
34. (I) know
35. last
36. (I) like
37. little
38. (I) love
39. (I) make
40. many
41. one
42. more
43. most
44. much
45. my
46. new
47. no
48. not
49. now
50. of
51. often
52. on
53. one
54. only
55. or
56. other
57. our
58. out
59. over
60. people
61. place
62. please
63. same
64. (I) see
65. she
66. so
67. some
68. sometimes
69. still
70. such
71. (I) tell

72. thank you
73. that
74. the
75. their
76. them
77. then
78. there is
79. they
80. thing
81. (I) think
82. this
83. time
84. to
85. under
86. up
87. us
88. (I) use
89. very
90. we
91. what
92. when
93. where
94. which
95. who
96. why
97. with
98. yes
99. you
100. your

Individual word frequency will vary between languages (especially pronouns, articles, and possessives), but differences are generally related to rank within either list, rather than omission and replacement with a different term not found in one of the above two lists.

Content and vocabulary selection beyond the most common 300-500 words should be dictated by subject matter interest. The most pertinent questions will be "What will you spend your time doing with this language?" If necessary, the most closely related rephrasing would be "What do I currently spend my time doing?" As stated in the overview, do not read about something that you would not read about in English, for example, if this is your native language. Use the target language as a vehicle for learning more about a subject, skill, or cultural area of interest. Poor material never produces good language. Feed your language ability foods you like, or you will quit your "diet" and cease study long before you achieve any measurable level of proficiency.

As a personal example, I used martial arts instructional manuals to compete effectively in judo while a student in Japan. My primary objective was to learn technique and apply it in tournaments, with language skill development as a far subordinate priority; as a result, I had motive to learn the captions of the step-by-step diagrams in each book. Although one might assume that the cross-over of material to other subject matter would be minimal, the grammar is, in fact, identical

to nearly all other written and spoken dialogues. The vocabulary may be highly specialized, but I eclipsed the grammatical ability of 4 and 5-year students of Japanese within 2 months of studying and applying sports-specific instruction manuals. The specialization of my vocabulary didn't present a single problem in communication, it is important to note, as I was spending 80% of my free time training with people who also spoke with the highly specialized vocabulary unique to sports training and athletic development.