

The Perfect Language Learning Method

by Heather Gamble

(Originally written in 2015, revised in 2025)

Is there a perfect method for learning a language? Language learning is complex. Unlike memorizing historical dates or solving math problems, learning a language is like unlocking a secret code to connect with people. Language learners have different learning styles and strengths. They might be extroverted or introverted. They might be analytical or intuitive. So, is there a perfect language learning method that can work for everybody?

We arrived in Samarkand in 1996 with the task of learning Tajik, a challenging undertaking that was compounded by the lack of resources available to us at the time. Initially, we had no textbook, no grammar book, and no children's books to read, leaving us to rely on a list of the most common verbs as our primary learning aid. In addition to my list of verbs, I was able to find some books in the target language, and I had friendly and patient neighbours to practice with. After a year, I was tasked with serving as the language coach for our team. This new role required me to shift my focus from learning a language for myself to understanding the principles of language learning. I embarked on a quest to find the perfect language learning method. I read books about how to learn a language. I attended conferences. I reflected on my own language learning successes and failures. And I studied the experiences of other language learners. I also learned about various learning styles. And I developed personalized plans for new team members, continually refining my approach in pursuit of that elusive perfect method.

Eclectic language learning

One year, while attending a conference, I had the opportunity to browse through a book that a fellow attendee had brought along, entitled "How to Learn Any Language" by Barry Farber. As a linguist who can speak 25 languages, Barry Farber shares valuable tips and insights in his book, some of which were familiar to me, while others were new and noteworthy. One chapter that particularly caught my attention was "The Multiple-Track Attack,". This approach, he says, "simply parts from the absurd notion that you should choose a grammar book or a cassette course or a reader or a phrase book; instead it sets you up with all of the above and more simultaneously". As I reflected on my own language learning experience, I realized that this approach was remarkably similar to the one I had used during my first year of learning Tajik, where I had used a wide range of materials and activities to acquire the language.

As I thought about my language learning journey, I began to view it as a process of layering, where each method or tool I used represented a single layer in a stack. By building this stack with diverse resources, I would often encounter words, phrases, and grammar structures that I had seen before, which reinforced my understanding. If I learned a word or sentence through a language learning activity and then encountered it again while reading a book, I found that it was more likely to stick in my memory. Seeing a word in different contexts reinforced my learning, and I was able to retain it more effectively. By using a variety of language learning techniques and activities, I was able to find things that worked well for my

learning style and keep the learning process engaging and interesting. This helped me to stay motivated and excited about language learning.

I later discovered that this approach is formally known as "eclectic language learning," a theory that emerged in the 1990s and has since gained popularity. Eclectic language learning is an approach that involves combining various methods, techniques, and resources to suit an individual's learning style, preferences, and goals.

Eclectic language learning is flexible and adaptable, and uses a combination of resources like textbooks, online courses, language learning apps, interactions with native speakers, and immersion experiences. The learning process is adapted to the individual's unique strengths, weaknesses, and interests, rather than attempting to fit the learner into a rigid, one-size-fits-all framework.

As we move forward, we will explore a wide range of techniques and activities that you can incorporate into your eclectic language learning journey. My goal is to help you make your language learning experience enjoyable and engaging, and to empower you to discover the methods and activities that work best for your unique learning style. By embracing this flexible and adaptive approach, you can create a language learning experience that is tailored to your interests, needs, and goals.

Working with a language helper

Before moving overseas, I had the opportunity to receive training on "barefoot language learning," a method that relies solely on interacting with native speakers of the target language, without the aid of textbooks or grammar books. This approach sounded appealing to me, and I was eager to try it out. Although my team leader had arranged for a language teacher to visit me twice a week, I found that incorporating elements of barefoot language learning into my lessons was highly beneficial, and I decided to take a self-directed approach to our lessons. Rather than relying on my teacher to prepare a lesson plan, I would identify the specific topics and phrases that I wanted to learn and use our lesson time to focus on those areas. This allowed me to prioritize the language skills and knowledge that I needed to acquire in order to communicate effectively in my daily life. For example, I might want to learn how to buy material, pay my electric bill, or ask my neighbor about their family. By taking ownership of my learning process, I was able to ensure that our lessons were tailored to my specific needs and goals. This approach also helped me to avoid learning unnecessary information and instead focus on the language skills that would be most useful to me in my everyday interactions.

I also learned a helpful acronym, GLUE, which has stuck with me throughout my language learning journey. Although I'm not sure who originally coined this, it has proven to be a valuable reminder of the key steps involved in effective language learning. The acronym GLUE stands for Get, Learn, Use, and Evaluate. When working with a language helper or teacher, it's essential to get the information and language skills that you need, and then to learn and practice them on your own. Next, you should try to use the new language skills in real-life situations and evaluate how well they work for you. This might involve asking yourself questions like, "Was I able to accomplish my goal?" or "Did my neighbour understand what I was trying to communicate?" By following this GLUE framework, you can stay focused on learning the things that you really need.

Total Physical Response

One of the most engaging and effective language learning activities to do with a language helper is Total Physical Response (TPR). Developed by James Asher in the 1960s, TPR is a language learning method that connects verbal input and physical actions to enhance the learning process. By combining language instruction with physical movement, TPR helps learners to create a stronger association between words and actions, making it easier to remember and recall new vocabulary and phrases.

To use TPR with a language helper, it's essential to start by ensuring that your helper understands the importance of listening, comprehension, and connecting verbal input with physical actions. Your language helper can begin with simple commands, such as "stand up", "sit down", "walk", "stop", or "raise your hand." Initially, your language helper will demonstrate each action as they give the command, helping you to associate the verbal input with the physical action. As you become more comfortable with the vocabulary, your helper can gradually phase out the demonstrations, giving you the opportunity to respond physically to the commands on your own.

As you progress with TPR, the commands given by your language helper can become increasingly complex. For example, your helper can start combining verbs with nouns, such as "pick up the pen", "put the book on the table", or "go to the window." This will help you to develop your understanding of the language, including the relationships between different words and phrases. By gradually introducing more complex commands, you'll be able to build on your existing knowledge and improve your listening comprehension.

Point and Listen, Listen and Point

One specific type of Total Physical Response (TPR) activity is "point and listen, listen and point." For this activity, the learner will gather a set of objects or pictures of objects, which will serve as the focal point for the exercise. The activity is divided into two parts: "point and listen" and "listen and point." During the "point and listen" phase, the learner points to each object, and the language helper provides the corresponding word or phrase. The learner repeats this process until they feel comfortable moving on to the next stage. In the "listen and point" phase, the language helper says the word, and the learner responds by pointing to the correct object. To begin, I recommend starting with a set of 10 objects per session and then adjusting the number up or down as needed to suit your pace and comfort level.

Once you've learned a set of vocabulary items using the "point and listen, listen and point" method, you can use the items in some other TPR activities. This can involve using the objects as props to act out scenarios, demonstrate actions, or practice conversations.

Formal language class

When I first started studying Tajik, I didn't have access to a formal language class. However, I strongly believe that taking a language class can be incredibly beneficial, and it's definitely worth exploring if it's an option for you. Being part of a class with fellow learners can be a great motivator, and it also provides a sense of community and accountability. Additionally, being in a class setting allows you to gauge your progress and ensure that you're learning at a suitable pace. Some language classes may focus primarily

on textbook learning, with an emphasis on grammar and reading comprehension, and it's essential to balance this with ample opportunities for listening and speaking practice outside of class time. Ideally, a good language teacher will adopt an eclectic approach, incorporating a range of activities and resources to help students develop well-rounded skills in reading, writing, listening, and speaking.

Grammar

A grammar book can be a valuable tool in your language learning toolkit. I recall that about six months into my own language learning journey, I was given a basic grammar book written by another Tajik language learner. This book was a treasure trove of information, and as an analytical thinker, I found it fascinating to delve into the grammar. I worked my way through the book from cover to cover, completing the exercises and activities included, which helped me to understand the language's structure and rules.

Some people argue that studying grammar is not necessary, citing the fact that children learn their first language without any formal knowledge of grammar rules. It's true that children are able to pick up the grammar of their native language through exposure and imitation, without necessarily understanding the underlying rules and principles. However, this approach can be more challenging for adult learners, who may not have the same level of access to native speakers and immersion opportunities. While it's not impossible to learn a language in the same way that children learn their first language, it would require a significant amount of time and input from a native speaker or language coach. Fortunately, as adults, we have the ability to comprehend and learn from grammar books.

While grammar is an essential aspect of language learning, it's not the only factor to consider. It's possible to become so focused on getting the grammar right, that you neglect the importance of actually using the language to communicate. As you consider your own language learning approach, I would encourage you to find a balance between studying grammar and using the language in context. By combining grammar study with opportunities for listening, speaking, reading, and writing, you can create a comprehensive language learning plan that helps you to achieve your goals.

Reading

When it comes to language learning, reading is an essential skill to develop, and one of the best ways to do so is by finding native-to-native books, which are written in the target language for native speakers. Although we couldn't find any children's books in our target language when we first started learning, I was determined to learn how to read and picked up a book that was far beyond my level at the time. Initially, I had to look up every single word, but as the weeks turned into months, I started to recognize words I had already learned and was eventually able to read entire sentences without needing to consult a dictionary. Unlike listening, where it's generally more beneficial to start with material that you can mostly understand, reading allows you to work on the material even when it is challenging. If you have access to written materials in the local language, don't be afraid to start reading from day one, even if the books seem difficult. Children's books, such as toddler books or read-aloud books, can be a great place to start, but I would not suggest using books designed to teach children how to read, as they often focus on phonics and may not use common vocabulary. Instead, consider using textbooks written for young students, which often use simple language and can be a great way to learn new vocabulary and

grammar in context. For example, I once picked up a 2nd-grade math book and was surprised to find that I could read it with minimal dictionary lookups. Science textbooks can also be a great resource. If you are interested in agriculture, for example, try reading the chapters on the life cycle of plants in a 3rd-grade science book? By choosing books that interest you, you can make reading an enjoyable and rewarding part of your language learning journey.

Listening

I've found that many language learners overlook the importance of listening in their language learning journey, and I must admit that I didn't prioritize it enough in my early days of learning. So, how can you effectively listen to and learn from audio materials in your target language? The most crucial rule is to listen to content that you can mostly understand, aiming for a comprehension level of at least 80% or even up to 90 or 95%. This is because listening to something that is completely incomprehensible will yield little benefit, and catching only a few words or phrases here and there will not make the most of your study time. To get the most out of listening, you need to be actively engaged, repeating useful phrases in your mind, and paying close attention to words and phrases that you're still struggling to master. This means avoiding the temptation to simply play audio in the background while doing other activities, such as baking or falling asleep.

So, what kinds of materials can you listen to? If you're learning a popular language, you may be able to find commercial language learning systems that include accompanying audio materials. However, even with these resources available, I highly recommend working with a language helper who can record custom materials tailored to your needs. This could start with simple words and phrases, but over time, you can move on to longer recordings, such as descriptions of pictures, explanations of how to perform everyday tasks, examples of giving directions, or lists of questions to ask in specific situations. For instance, you could listen to a recording of a language helper explaining how to make a traditional dish or describing a local landmark.

To get the most out of these recordings, I suggest listening to each one several times over the course of a week or more. Once you've reached a point where you can understand 100% of any recording, you can move it to a separate folder on your computer and review it only occasionally. Ideally, you'll want to have a folder with about an hour's worth of recordings that are at least 80% understandable. Regularly update this folder with new materials that are slightly more challenging. This will help you to continuously improve your listening skills and stay motivated throughout your language learning journey. By following this approach, you can make listening a valuable and enjoyable part of your language learning routine.

Speaking

Speaking is, in my opinion, the most crucial activity in language learning, and it's essential to embrace it from the outset. While some individuals may be naturally introverted or hesitant to speak until they feel more confident, it's vital to find ways to overcome these tendencies. Language learning is ultimately about communication, and speaking is a fundamental aspect of this process. If your goal is to converse with others, then speaking should be a priority from day one. The longer you delay speaking, the more challenging it will be to start. To make the most of your language lessons, aim to speak for at least half of

the session with your language helper. Let's explore various strategies to get you speaking and practicing your language skills.

Conversation

Conversation practice is a vital component of language learning, and your language lessons should be utilized to prepare you for real-life conversations. When engaging with native speakers outside of your lessons, try to steer the conversation towards topics that you're currently working on or want to improve. For instance, during my initial spring in Samarkand, I decided to focus on learning the names of various fruits. Throughout the week, I made a conscious effort to bring up the topic of fruit in every conversation I had, asking questions like "What's your favorite fruit?" or "How do you typically prepare apples?" This approach allowed me to practice my language skills in a practical and relevant way. Consider identifying areas where you'd like to improve your conversation skills and work with your language helper to develop the necessary phrases and vocabulary. You can also practice role-plays, reverse role-plays, and other interactive exercises to build your confidence and fluency.

Engaging in conversations with native speakers in your community, especially during the early stages of language learning, can be daunting and challenging. It's not always easy to determine who to talk to or how to initiate conversations. One effective strategy is to try to interact with the same people on a regular basis, such as a neighbor, a local vendor, or a coworker. By doing so, they'll become more familiar with your language proficiency and can adjust their communication style accordingly. It's also essential to be honest about your understanding and not pretend to comprehend something if you're unsure. Whenever someone says something that you don't understand, stop them and ask for clarification. This approach will help you maintain a learner's mindset and ensure that the other person continues to adapt their language to your level of comprehension.

Talking to yourself

Talking to yourself may seem like an unconventional language learning technique, but it can be a highly effective way to practice your speaking skills, particularly during downtime. When I was learning Tajik, I would often talk to myself while walking to the bazaar, describing my surroundings, and imagining conversations with others. This approach helped me identify areas where I needed to improve my vocabulary and grammar. By talking to yourself, you can maximize your language learning time and develop your fluency. Consider talking to yourself while doing everyday tasks like showering, washing dishes, or walking to class. This technique will enable you to practice conversations you want to have with friends and neighbors, making you more confident and prepared for real-life interactions.

Sentence Drills

Sentence drills are a valuable speaking exercise that can help you cement grammar rules and improve your fluency. Take a sentence you've come across while reading or listening, and repeat it several times, replacing one word at a time. For example, start with the sentence "I need to go to the bazaar" and replace the last word with alternatives like "park," "post office," or "kitchen." This exercise can help you internalize grammar patterns and build your vocabulary. You can also use sentence drills to practice

different parts of speech. By incorporating sentence drills into your language practice, you'll be able to improve your speaking skills.

Phrasebooks

Phrasebooks can be a great resource for language learners, as they provide a comprehensive collection of useful phrases and vocabulary. One of the benefits of phrasebooks is that they include translations, making it easier to understand the context and meaning of new words. About 9 months into language learning I remember getting a simple phrase book that somebody had typed out and photocopied. It was about 100 pages long. I read that book from front to back several times all the while rejoicing that I could understand everything. Every unfamiliar word had the translation right there. I also used this phrase book to get sentences to use for sentence drills.

Flashcards

While there's some debate about the use of flashcards in language learning, they can be a useful tool when used correctly. The argument against using flashcards is that when we learn a new word we need to associate it with the object or action itself, and not with the English translation of the word. To use flash cards in a more helpful way, instead of writing the English translation on the back of the card, try using a picture, sentence, or synonym to help you associate the new word with its meaning. For instance, if you're learning the word for "chair," you could draw a picture of a chair or write a sentence or two containing the word, like "The chair is in the living room." You can also write synonyms or antonyms of the word. This approach will help you to learn meanings of words without using translation.

Interactive resources

Interactive resources like language learning apps and websites can be a great addition to your language learning toolkit. While I didn't have access to these resources when I started learning Tajik, there are now many options available, although they may not have options for less commonly spoken languages. Duolingo, Anki, and Memrise are just a few examples of popular language learning platforms that offer interactive exercises, quizzes, and games. Spend some time exploring these resources and find the ones that work best for you. Incorporating interactive resources into your language learning can help you to stay motivated and help you to track your progress.

Commercial language programs

If you have access to commercial language programs like Rosetta Stone or The Learnables, they can be a useful supplement to your language learning. However, it's essential to remember that these programs should be used in conjunction with other language learning activities, such as speaking with native speakers, practicing with a language helper, and engaging in real-life conversations. While commercial programs can provide a structured and comprehensive approach to language learning, they may not always prepare you for the essentials of real-life communication. I learned this lesson when I tried to use my language skills to communicate with a Russian visitor after I had worked my way through a Russian

language course, only to realize that I was unable to say even the most basic things that I needed. I could say “Here is my visa.” or “The boy is eating an apple under the tree.”, but I had no idea how to say, “Would you like some more tea?”

Memorization

Memorization can be a powerful tool for language learning, particularly when it comes to building fluency and reinforcing new vocabulary. About halfway through my first year of language learning, I decided to memorize a passage of scripture, which consisted of 14 verses. While it was challenging at first, I persevered and eventually committed the entire passage to memory. This experience not only helped me develop my language skills but also gave me a deeper connection to the material and a sense of accomplishment. You don't need to memorize entire texts, but try to find opportunities to practice memorization, such as learning poems or songs. In many parts of the world knowing poetry is part of the culture, so if that is true where you are learning language, you should definitely give it a try. Memorizing can help you develop a stronger sense of the language, improving your vocabulary and cementing some grammar constructs. It is important to note here that memorization cannot take the place of active language production - speaking, writing and forming your own sentences - because true language mastery comes from using and creating with the language.

Music

Music can be a great resource for language learners. Spend some time exploring the music of your target culture, learning traditional songs, popular hits, and children's songs. Music can help you develop your listening skills and improve your pronunciation. You can also use music to learn new vocabulary, practice your grammar, and develop your fluency. By incorporating music into your language learning routine, you can make it more enjoyable and engaging.

AI Chatbots

AI chatbots are a relatively new development in language learning, but they can be used in so many creative ways to help you learn. You can use ChatGPT, or one of the many other AI chatbots, to create a grammar lesson for you, or to generate text, or to make a multiple-choice vocab quiz, or to explain the origins of a word, and so much more. Chatbots are great for generating texts in subject areas that you are currently studying. For example, if you are learning how to talk about cooking, ask for a chocolate cake recipe. If you ask the question in Russian, the answer will be in Russian.

Some AI chatbots also have a voice feature. I currently use the Microsoft Copilot app to study Russian. With Copilot's voice chatbot I can have conversations in English in which I ask questions about Russian grammar. Chatbots are like a very patient language helper, willing to explain things over and over again with numerous examples. I also ask the chatbot to quiz me on topical vocab, like fruits and vegetables or weather words.

I can also have a conversation with the voice chatbot in a language other than English, like Russian or Tajik. For example, I can ask it to tell me a short story, or describe a city, or explain how to do something.

While AI chatbots cannot replace human interaction, they can provide a convenient and accessible way to practice your speaking and listening skills.

Other activities

There are many more activities you can do while learning language. Hopefully the things I have talked about so far will give you some ideas for creating the perfect eclectic language learning program for you.

I only briefly mentioned working with a language helper. We looked at a few activities like Point and Listen, Listen and Point, and Total Physical Response. These are great to do with your language helper. Here, in brief, are a few more suggestions.

- Look through and talk about photos in a photo album
- Use wordless picture books to create stories
- Use busy pictures as a starting point for conversation
- Use wordless videos to practice telling stories and describing things
- Use pictures of people, animals and nature as you work on building descriptive vocabulary
- Record yourself speaking and have your helper give you immediate feedback
- Do role plays
- Cook something together
- Go on an outing together
- Discuss all the things you can do with a piece of paper, or with an egg, or with a stopwatch.
- Learn idioms
- Learn about her family, the history of her country, her traditions

If you run out of ideas of fun things to do with your language helper, just ask your favourite AI chatbot for suggestions.

There are also lots of activities that you can do on your own. I have already mentioned listening to recordings and music. As you progress in language you can also listen to podcasts and watch movies. For writing practice you can text your friends, journal or write cards to people. For reading practice, read signs in shops, and adverts on billboards. Read magazines. Follow local channels on social media. Do crossword puzzles in your target language. For speaking practice, try simultaneously translating into your target language as you watch a show on TV.

Common pitfalls

I've talked about a wide range of resources to create a layered and comprehensive learning experience. By incorporating some or all of these various tools, activities, and resources, you can make eclectic language learning work for you.

I want to switch gears now and talk about common pitfalls that can hinder the language learning process. A few years ago, the Telegraph published an article, "Learning a foreign language: five most common mistakes," which highlights several key areas to be aware of. These include not listening enough, lack of curiosity, rigid thinking, relying on a single method, and fear. Let's delve into some of

these areas and explore additional factors, like lack of time and lack of motivation, that can impede language learning.

One of the critical areas to focus on is cultivating curiosity. If you lack a genuine desire to discover the intricacies of the language and the culture in which it is spoken, you may be putting yourself at a disadvantage. As linguist Greg Thomson aptly puts it, language learning is about "relearning your world." It's not just a matter of translating words from your native language to the new one; rather, it's about immersing yourself in a new world and relearning everything anew. For instance, instead of just seeing a table, you learn to see it as a "stol" in your new language. To foster curiosity, try observing people and events, and jot down things that catch your attention. This might lead to questions, which can, in turn, spark a deeper interest. You can also find lists of ethnographic interview questions online, which can serve as a starting point for exploring the culture and language. As you dig deeper, you'll likely find yourself asking more questions, and this curiosity will drive your language learning journey.

Another significant obstacle to overcome could be fear of speaking in the new language. To combat this, find a language helper who is encouraging and supportive, someone who will give you the freedom to practice speaking without fear of judgment. Talk as much as you can with your language helper and try to develop a "language route." This involves identifying a regular route where you can interact with the same people every day, such as shop assistants, neighbors, or coworkers. This will help you build confidence in your speaking abilities. If you're hesitant to meet new people, consider having a coworker accompany you on your language outings until you feel more comfortable. Additionally, practice speaking to yourself as a way to build confidence before engaging in conversations with others.

Lack of time is often cited as a common excuse for not making progress in language learning. However, it's essential to reevaluate how you spend your time and identify opportunities to incorporate language learning into your daily routine. Look for moments where you can multitask, such as listening to language recordings while cooking or exercising. You can also try reciting a poem or phrase out loud while doing everyday tasks like brushing your teeth. Consider replacing some of your native language activities with ones in your target language, such as journaling, browsing recipes online, or listening to music. Even small changes, like doing your grocery shopping at local markets instead of supermarkets, can provide opportunities for language practice.

Attitude is another crucial aspect of language learning. If you approach the process with a lack of desire or motivation, you'll likely struggle to make progress. It's essential to reflect on why you're learning the language in the first place and what drives your interest. If you're learning a language because you have a deep desire to speak with people in that language, but you can't motivate yourself to put in the effort to learn the language, then try to remind yourself of your goal daily, focusing on the end result that you want to achieve. As Barry Farber suggests, "Don't separate your life into 'fun' and 'study.' Harmonize language study with your activities." This means finding ways to incorporate language learning into your daily life, rather than treating it as a separate, tedious task.

It's also important to avoid relying on a single learning style. While you may have a preferred learning style, such as visual, auditory, or tactile, it's essential to recognize that language learning benefits from a multimodal approach. Just as learning to tune a piano requires a combination of watching, listening, and doing, language learning requires a mix of different activities and approaches. Therefore, if you're a visual learner who relies heavily on reading and writing, make a conscious effort to practice speaking and

listening as well. This may involve seeking out language exchange partners, watching TV shows or movies in the target language, or engaging in conversations with native speakers.

While there may be other barriers to language learning, it's essential to identify and address the ones that are holding you back. If you are aware of common pitfalls, you can overcome obstacles and make progress towards your goals.

In conclusion, language learning is a complex and challenging process. Embracing an eclectic approach to language learning, will help you to stay on track, achieve success, and have fun while learning.