



# How to learn languages fast

In this short post, Italian language teacher and course author Stefano Lodola shares his best tips to learn languages fast and explains the theory behind them.

## Language is communication

It is really fascinating how human beings communicate with each other and with everything in the world.

From their first cry, they start communicating with the world around them. We are bestowed with a unique ability to use language, which opens to us a whole world of fantasy.



## Common struggles of language learners

However, language learning is not an easy road to walk on.

Have you ever felt frustrated because you couldn't retain vocabulary no matter how hard you tried to memorize them?

Or when you were sure you "understood" a grammar rule only to find yourself at a loss for words trying to use it in a conversation?

Do you think that some people are naturally good at it while others struggle with it?

Actually, learning a foreign language is one of the most difficult things a human brain can do.

Indeed, it is common to miss words you've never heard in a conversation, mispronounce words or make grammar mistakes.

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This is frustrating for many people who try to learn a new language while ignoring how language learning works.

## Solutions

In this article, you'll learn the essential concepts of language learning that will boost the progress of your language learning endeavors.

You'll also be able to tell if that popular language app is really helpful or it's just hype.

Are you ready? Let's discover how to learn languages fast.

## Summary

What will we talk about?

- How to start learning a new language: focus on speech over text;
- Why it is important to listen at a natural speech rate;
- The difference between studying a language and learning one;
- Comprehensible input: the unconscious process that allows language learning;
- How to remember information: the spaced repetition technique;
- Other simple strategies for how to learn languages fast and easy.

## Focus on speech over text

First of all, any language should be learned like you learn your mother tongue.

It's time to go back to your childhood and just think of yourself as a child who learns his/her first language and has no idea about the difference between written and oral skills of the language he/she is exposed to learn.

Just ask yourself in what order do you learn your mother tongue?

The answer is:

1. Mimicking = listening + speaking
2. Reading
3. Writing

So, just focus on speech over text. Once you learn to speak, you naturally become fluent in your target language.

Let me tell you an amazing fact.

Did you know that there are around **7000 languages** spoken in the world today and more than half of them lack any written form?

This must tell you how important it is to learn to speak a language, rather than read or write it.

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- For example, Shanghainese, Hakka, and Hunanese varieties of the Chinese language do not have any **written form**.
- Similarly many varieties of Arabic language particularly spoken in Morocco, Algeria and Levantine lack written scripts.
- 80 percent of the African languages spoken today are void of written script.

Another thing which will help you how to learn languages fast is giving an apt focus to comprehensible input and with a natural speech rate.

To simplify these fancy words, you need to do as much listening as you can in the target language and the data you should use must include language spoken naturally.

There is no need to rush and it is always okay to miss and not understand while you are learning.



## Listen at a natural speech rate

Let's see now why it is important to listen at a natural speech rate.

Slow audio is something I frequently see listed as a “wonderful feature” in language tools.

Is it, though, a good idea to slow down the audio? Is it boosting your language learning or hindering you?

Slow audio is quite appealing at first glance.

“Can’t understand the news on French television? Oh, well how about we slow it down? Then you’ll understand.”

And, of course, when it’s slower, it’s easier to understand.

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Not to mention the experience we have when we speak with native speakers of our target language.

“Ahhh, they speak so fast!”

So, why is it so hard to understand audio at normal speed?

Real language, spoken in the real world, is nothing like what you learned in school.

To begin with, textbook language is:

- **Simplified.**
- **Suited for beginners.**
- **Using simple vocabulary and grammar whenever possible.**

Second, the audio in textbook conversations is:

- **Performed by experienced voice actors.**
- **Spoken slowly, clearly, and articulately.**

Words and phrases are not spoken the same way they are in your textbook.

When words are uttered at a natural speed, the “correct” pronunciation of words is lost.

The words themselves change, as does the way they’re pronounced.

People don’t simply speak quicker in real life, they also speak differently.

What does this mean?

It means that when audio is read slowly and clearly, many of the features that define speech are lost.

As I said before, this isn’t always a bad thing. As a beginner, you need support.

But where it becomes a problem is when you move further than the beginner stage and want to learn to understand native speakers – the “real thing”.

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There are just two reasons why you are not able to understand something spoken in a foreign language:

- You don't understand the words.
- You don't understand how it's pronounced at natural speed.

Consider the last time you listened to something challenging in your target language.

It doesn't matter if it's the news, a YouTube video, or something else.

Can you tell which of the two issues mentioned above made it tough to comprehend?

In my experience, when you struggle with natural speech, most of the time it's because you simply don't know the words.

## How to listen at a natural speech rate?

The first rule is to listen to comprehensible input, which is content that is just slightly above your current level.

That way, you're not putting too much effort into understanding.

The second rule is to choose content that has full transcripts so you can read along while listening.

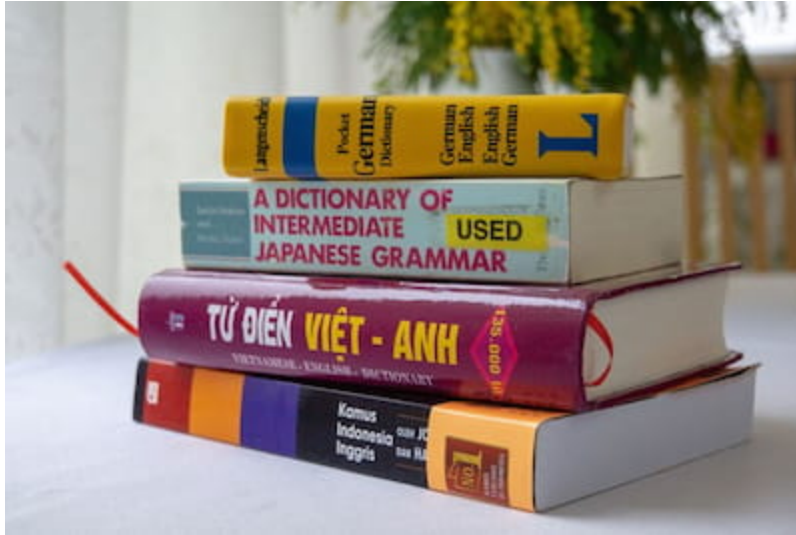
You can see what's being said if you need help, compare the spoken to the written word, and there's no need to slow down the audio with transcripts.

It's also actually ok to miss some words.

While listening to audios at normal speed you are developing the ability to understand the way native speakers talk, not just learning new vocabulary.

And just like magic, you'll be able to understand native speakers when they're talking at a natural speed.

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## Language learning vs acquisition

Moreover, there is a difference between studying a language and learning one.

You know the struggle pretty well.

**When** you study a language you focus on your grammar and vocabulary and it is good because both of them improve your level, but language and its use in the real world are far more than this.

Language learning is a complex phenomenon and the debate between two schools of thought i.e. **Behaviorist** and **Mentalist** is there to prove it.

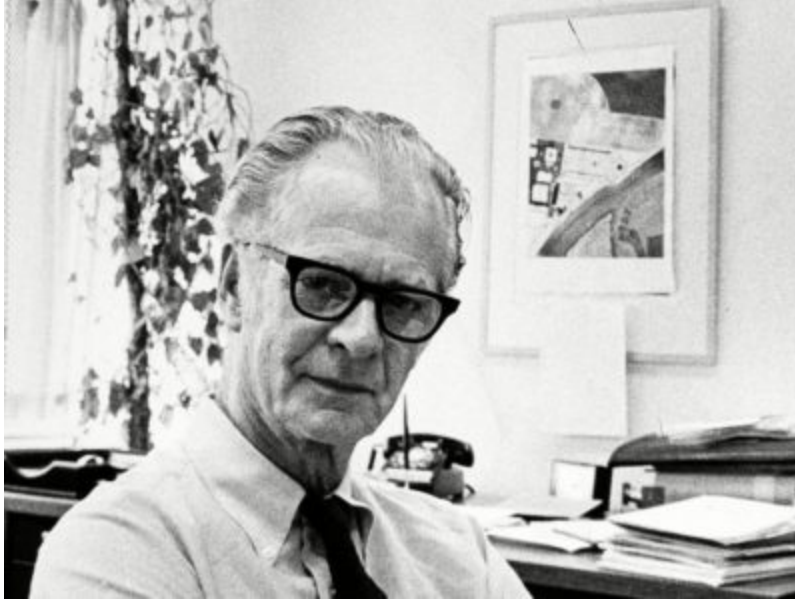
The former is associated with the works of **B.F. Skinner** delineates that language acquisition is all about building associations in the world through imitation and reinforcement.

However, the latter expounds on the notion that people learn a language because they are pre-programmed to do so.

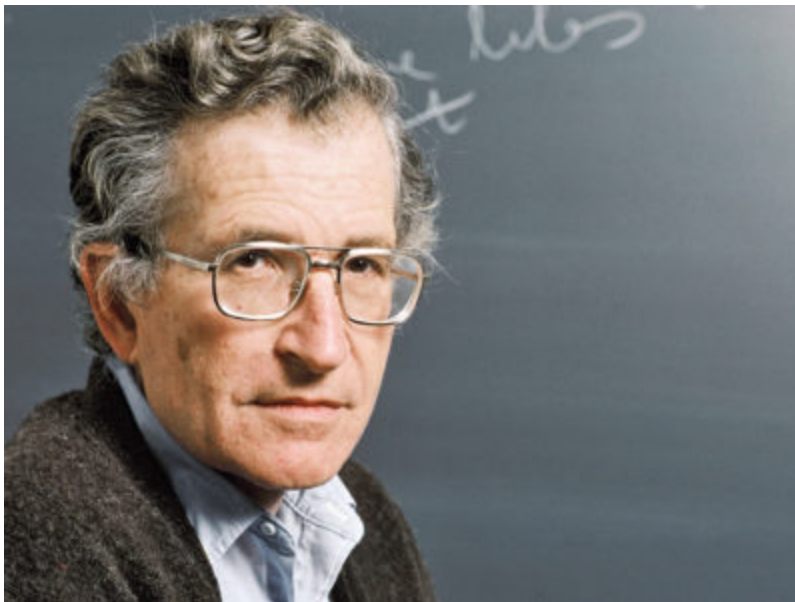
Skinner's theory provides an environmental explanation on language acquisition and renders that language learning is dependent on the environment in which a child is kept.



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On the other hand, Chomsky's theory of language acquisition gives a biological explanation of language learning and states that language is an innate ability that all humans possess.



**BOSTON – OCTOBER 20: Noam Chomsky poses while in his office at M.I.T. University (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) in Boston, Massachusetts on the 20th of October 1987. (Photo by Ulf Andersen/Getty Images)**

Sometimes it gets frustrating to think about these theories when you are simply trying to learn a new language.

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And the interesting thing is even with these debates, the issue of language learning is still waiting for a definite answer.

It is because language is a very versatile phenomenon and it is not possible for one school to cover it entirely.

## Comprehensible input

Let's see this example:

There's a scene in the movie [Love Actually](#) where Jamie, played by Colin Firth, is studying Portuguese. He's in a classroom with row after row of similar language students, all of whom are wearing headphones and repeating simple Portuguese sentences over and over.

You may be familiar with the [language learning](#) trend that this scene referred to. It's known as the "[Audio-lingual Method](#)," and it was popular from the 1940s through the 1960s.

The concept was that if you heard something enough times and repeated it enough times, you would eventually memorize it and learn the language.

That is only one of the hundreds of language learning theories that gained popularity throughout the last century.

There are many more.

When you consider the huge range of approaches to language learning, you might wonder, "Do we know anything about how people learn languages?"

Especially when so many websites and businesses claim to use "science-based" methods!

It turns out that we know a lot about language learning, and the input hypothesis created by linguist Stephen Krashen has received a lot of research support.

Stephen Krashen developed [the Input Hypothesis](#) in the 1970s and 1980s. It's a group of five hypotheses.

They're a bit complex, but very simply Krashen is stating that the process of "learning a language" is not the same as, say, learning geography or philosophy. We can't read a book about it and then come to "know" it.

Instead, language learning happens through an unconscious process. The necessary ingredient—the crucial, essential core—of that unconscious process is comprehensible input.

## What is comprehensible input?

In English, comprehensible input refers to language that you can understand.

Things you hear (podcasts, the radio, conversations, and so on) as well as things you read are examples of language inputs.

Krashen makes it clear that you can't just read or listen to anything and expect to improve your language skills.

You should read or listen to things that you can understand. Language acquisition is most effective, he claims, when the input is only a little more advanced than your level.

Is Krashen correct? Is comprehensible input relevant? Is there proof for the input hypothesis? Is this how to learn languages fast?

There's a lot of evidence to suggest that he is.

According to [several studies](#), language learners who have had greater exposure to the language are more proficient in it.

There's also evidence that foreign language learners often pick up grammar rules they've never been taught, suggesting that language learning can happen without instruction.

These studies show that substantial learning occurs through exposure to the language, even in the absence of direct language instruction.

We become fluent thanks to normal people who [show us how to say](#) things, not tutors who teach us grammar rules.

## Spaced repetition

Now, remember the time as a child when you crammed everything for exams?

While you managed to perform well on the exam, think about how much you remember after a few weeks? Probably very little, right?

Well, there's a better way to retain information.

It's called [spaced interval repetition](#).

Simply put, we remember things better if we're exposed to them over time at certain intervals.

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It is because learning a language is different from learning other information and if you are using spaced repetition technique you would be using it to learn vocabulary, patterns, and grammar rules in the target language.

There are many ways to use spaced repetition techniques, for instance you can practice it with your friends and family, you can use flashcards, or even your own recording. It is up to you!

We remember better when we use words and grammar over and over.

Don't worry if you can't catch words or can't keep the pace.

Even mumbling helps.



## Phrases in context, not single words

But, what would happen if you just kept on learning long lists of words without knowing their proper usage? Probably a linguistic catastrophe right?

It is very important for language learning to learn the language used contextually.

We remember information better when it's put into context.

It also makes sense because, eventually, you learn things to put them into practice, right?

Language and context are inseparable and if you are learning a language the right way is to learn phrases and their correct contextual usage.

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I have seen that many language learners try to memorize vocabulary without knowing its proper usage and end up using language incorrectly.

If you learn phrases and their contextual usage you would be able to learn a language faster because in the real world what we say is nothing more than a bunch of phrases used by people in what we can call social coordination with each other.

You just need to learn how to adapt those phrases and replicate them in future contexts.

## Bypass your native language

It's also important to notice that when you take help from your native language or cognitively use it for translation into the target language you become dependent on it.

On the contrary, if you think directly in the target language, you become fluent in it.

You should be thinking directly in the target language.

The best way to achieve that is through language immersion. This involves learning by trial and error while sticking to the target language.

## Focus on useful vocabulary

With this in mind, did you know that in a foreign language, 1,000 words can get you a long way?

When you look at the raw numbers, they may not appear to be so simple. The Oxford English Dictionary contains more than 170,000 English word entries.

There are 370,000 Mandarin Chinese words in the “[Hanyu Da Cidian](#)” dictionary, and 200,000 Russian words in the “[Explanatory Dictionary of the Living Great Russian Language](#)”.

Most languages have related numbers of words circling.

As a language learner, these numbers can appear crazy!

How are you [going to](#) remember all of those words?

Luckily, you don't need to learn nearly as many words to communicate effectively. Most native speakers know only a small amount of these totals.

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Setting goals and identifying what you want to focus on are the first steps to learning effectively.

Start with a subject that you are particularly interested in. Perhaps you'd like to learn how to cook like a native chef or read about soccer.

The most successful learners are motivated to study because they choose vocabulary based on their interests and needs. You should be as excited about learning new terms as possible!

Then identify what the most common words are.

In every type of speech or writing, the most common words will be the most common words. They pop up everywhere!

In any language, there are four main groups of vocabulary words that we can talk about:

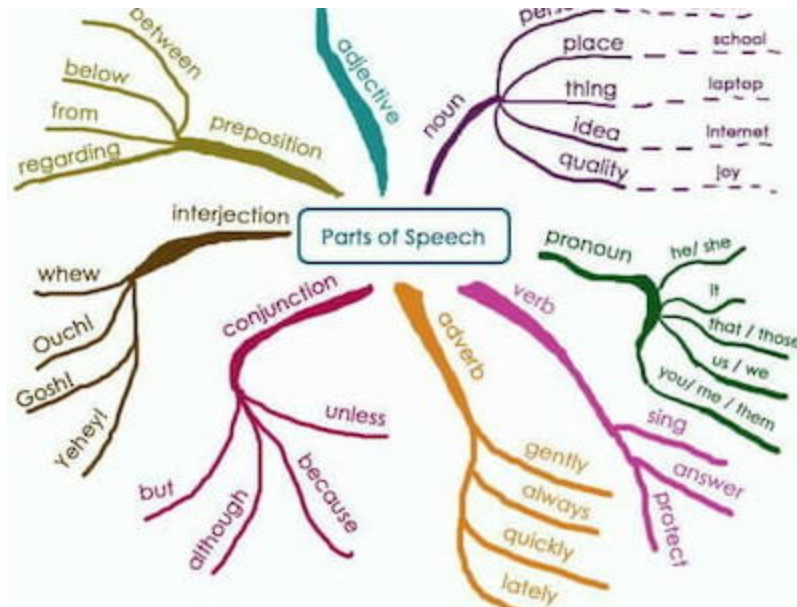
- **high-frequency words;**
- **academic words;**
- **technical words;**
- **low-frequency words.**

You can normally ignore academic, technical and, low-frequency words unless you have a particular need to learn them. To quickly improve your communication skills, focus on high-frequency words.

Avoid also generic wordlists, but rather create your own one.

You will be more likely to recall a new word if it is used in a context you find interesting or are enthusiastic about.

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## Grammar tree vs mastery order

At the same time, don't feel discouraged if you struggle with certain grammar patterns.

The order we are exposed to **grammar patterns** is not the same order we master them.

For example, articles in Italian. They're indispensable to make correct sentences from Day 1, but that won't prevent you from getting understood even when you forget them or use the wrong one.

There is a difference between learning the rules of a language and putting them to use.

For instance when we learn language rules we are exposed to a whole world of "this and that" or "ifs and buts".

However, once you start speaking you will realize that it is important to convey the meaning to the listener/audience, and sometimes even if you forget to use, for instance, an article in a sentence you still can make sense to other people.

So, do not feel discouraged because it takes time to speak the accurate language.

## Every language is different

For all these reasons, learning resources should be specifically designed for the language.

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One-fits-all materials translated into several languages rarely work.

As a polyglot, I can tell you that every language is different and you need to adopt the right source for all the languages you want to learn.

Every language comes with a culture and it is essential for you as a learner to know this difference.

Secondly, languages differ in their structure. For instance, the English language has an agreement of Subject+Verb+Object, however, the Turkish language has an agreement of Subject+Object+Verb.



## Learning materials should make your life easier

This also applies to language courses.

Many popular ones have so many fancy features demanding your attention that you lose focus, but is this how to [learn languages fast](#)?

Every minute of your study time should be spent learning and practicing, not maintaining the app or earning badges

## Stay motivated – fun vs progress

Many language apps give users a false sense of accomplishment with scores and badges when they're not really making progress.

You should find the motivation to study within yourself and not rely on flashy interfaces that are designed to keep you entertained.

To keep yourself motivated you can make friends with similar linguistic goals, keep on switching between language learning tools, play language games or even plan travels to the country where your target language is spoken.



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Remember, there are other people struggling just like you!

## How to learn languages fast: recap

Here's a quick rundown of what we learned today:

- It's necessary to listen at a natural speech rate when learning a new language;
- Start learning a new language by focusing on speech rather than text;
- The distinction between studying and learning a language;
- Language learning is possible through comprehensible input, which is an unconscious process.
- The spaced repetition strategy can help you recall information.
- Other basic approaches for how to learn foreign languages fast and effectively like taking live lessons or self-study programs that prompt you to speak.



## Enjoy learning

Now that you know more about how to learn languages fast, you can embrace more effective methods and set realistic expectations about your progress.

With a focus on speaking and daily practice with well-designed materials, you can make progress faster and have fun on the way to fluency.

# How to learn languages fast

Now that you know how things work, you'll learn faster and you'll also be able to choose the right resources.

Enjoy learning languages!

Are you serious about learning Italian? Check out our premium resources to become fluent fast!