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Language in the Mind

# How to Learn a New Language and Why It Matters

Techniques for learning languages and which one will best enhance job prospects.

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 Reviewed by Gary Drevitch



All children are born with the same kind of brain wiring, so at the outset, we are all equally adept at learning any possible human language. For a newborn, any language is, in principle, as easy or as difficult to learn as any other. But from the early teens, due to the loss of neurons in the brain, it becomes more difficult to acquire a new language with native-like competence.

## Which is the most difficult language to learn from scratch?

From this perspective, the issue of which language is most difficult to learn from scratch is only really relevant for learning second or other languages, after a mother tongue (or tongues, in the case of bilingual communities) has been acquired. And in the context of learning a second language, then the answer to this question, in fact, depends on what

Language is varied. Obviously, as humans the world over have, broadly, the same physiology, and hence, the same capacity for sound and speech production, we therefore have the same physical potential to speak any other language. Nevertheless, there's a huge variation in terms of sounds used by any given language; not all languages select the same set of sounds.

The kind of British English (Received Pronunciation) that I speak, for instance, has about 40 to 50 distinct sounds. Linguists call these phonemes, and each word is made up of a different set of sounds. So, for example, the word 'cat' has three separate sounds: /k/, /æ/, and /t/. Some African languages—particularly some of the 'click' languages—can have many, many more. Some Western African languages, as well as some indigenous languages in the Americas, have a very high number of distinct sounds—up to 144. Other languages have far fewer: Hawaiian only has 11, and there's one Amazonian language with 10 sounds for females, while males make use of 11.

The advice from the UK Foreign Service Institute is that, if you're an English native speaker, Japanese is the most difficult language to learn—followed by Arabic, Polish, Georgian, Mandarin, Hungarian, and Thai. Essentially, these are all languages that have a totally different vocabulary system, pronunciation, and grammatical system compared to English.

### **What's the easiest way to learn a new language?**

You need three main elements to be effective: You have to learn smart, you have to practise, and you need some kind of motivation so that you don't give up.

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Oxford University Press' foreign language dictionaries, for example, keep a set of close to 3,600 important words that underpin their editions, a number which has crept up over the years. Oxford lexicographers have analysed texts using statistical patterning, and so on, in order to identify the most important and most frequently used words in English. So, my advice, in terms of language learning, is to focus on the most frequent and useful core words in the language you've decided to learn.

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A claim I've seen made frequently online is that just 300 words make up 65% of all written material in English. Hence, it's worthwhile looking at word-frequency lists and being targeted in your vocabulary learning. After all, it stands to reason that some words will be more frequently used than others in any language.

Another smart way to approach vocabulary learning is to think about what you're learning the language for: If you're learning to be an engineer, concentrate on learning those professional terms first. Also, be targeted with grammar. You don't have to learn everything; again, identify grammatical

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about it.

**Practise:** My advice is to interact in your language daily without travelling—and with modern technology this is so easy to do. Depending on one's area of interest, one can focus on music or literature, download books, comics, and newspapers, or watch videos on YouTube. You can link up with site-based conversation practise tutorials, find Skype language buddies, or pay people who speak other languages to talk about things with a mutual interest.

**Motivation:** The final element is to have a strong personal motivation—for example, having a romantic partner who is a native of the other language, particularly if you don't share a language. Another example is a professional motivation. Or it might be a hobby—a fondness for a particular culture, for example. Identify what motivates you, and focus on those factors.

### **Which language should I learn to improve my employment prospects?**

An investment bank conducted a study in 2014 which suggested that French is the world's fastest-growing language. The study found that, in 2010, Mandarin was spoken by 10% of the world's population, and that English was second with 8%, followed by Spanish 6% and French at 3%.

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But this is forecast to change by 2050, due to the projected population growth in Sub-Saharan Africa, which is a Francophone area. So it's projected that there will be 750 million French speakers in the world by 2050, with Mandarin and French both spoken by around 8% of the population. Spanish is expected to be at 7% and English at 5%, due to slower population growth.

But you have to put that in context: In terms of employment prospects, English is still the world's global language. Of the 195 countries in the world, 67 have English as their primary or official language; in 27 more, English has secondary status. In 2006, it was estimated that there were 400 million native speakers of English in the world and 400 million second-language speakers. We should also add to that the 600-700 million speakers who use English as a foreign language; they're not fully competent, but have some level of competence. Hence, over 1.5 billion people know English to some degree. And English is on a plane far beyond any other language in terms of influence and reach. It's the lingua franca for aviation, academic publications, pop lyrics, law, economics, and diplomacy.

From a historical perspective, the global use of English is a legacy of the influence of the former British Empire. This was the biggest empire the world has ever seen, with around 25% of the world's population and 23% of the world's territory controlled from London at its peak in the early 1920s. When the U.S. surpassed the UK as the world's dominant economy following the Second World War, the importance of English continued to grow, especially in the light of American cultural ex-

language.

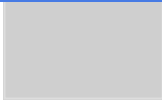
If you're already a native English speaker, then which other language you should learn to best improve your job prospects depends on which geographical area and also which sector you want to work in. So potentially, languages to learn might include Arabic, Spanish, Japanese or Mandarin—and possibly Russian in the future, depending on how its economy and influence continue to develop. There are also the consequences, in a European context, for the continued significance of English. Whatever form Brexit ultimately takes when the dust settles, and what the effects are on the UK workforce, this will affect how important other European languages become in terms of whether British employees will need to speak other languages to conduct business in continental Europe.



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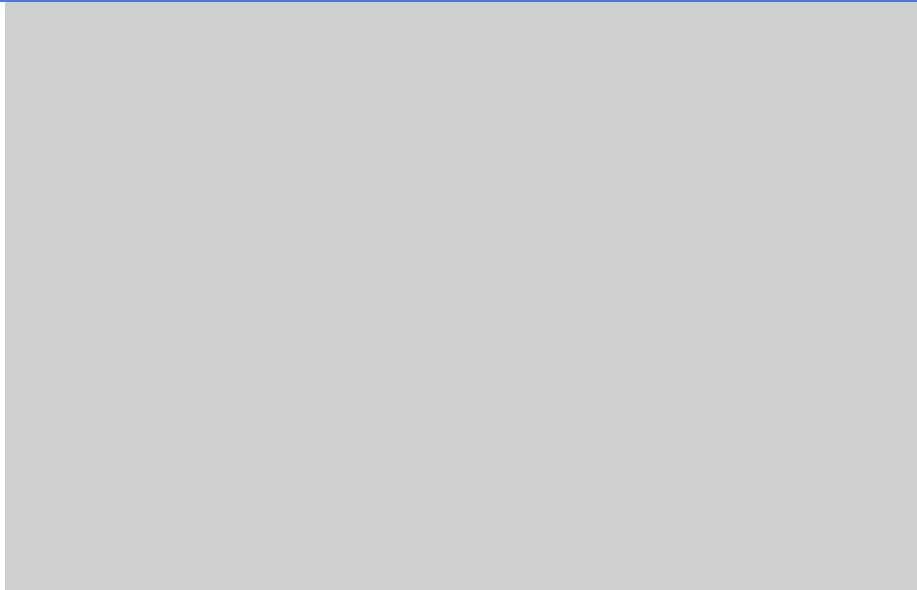


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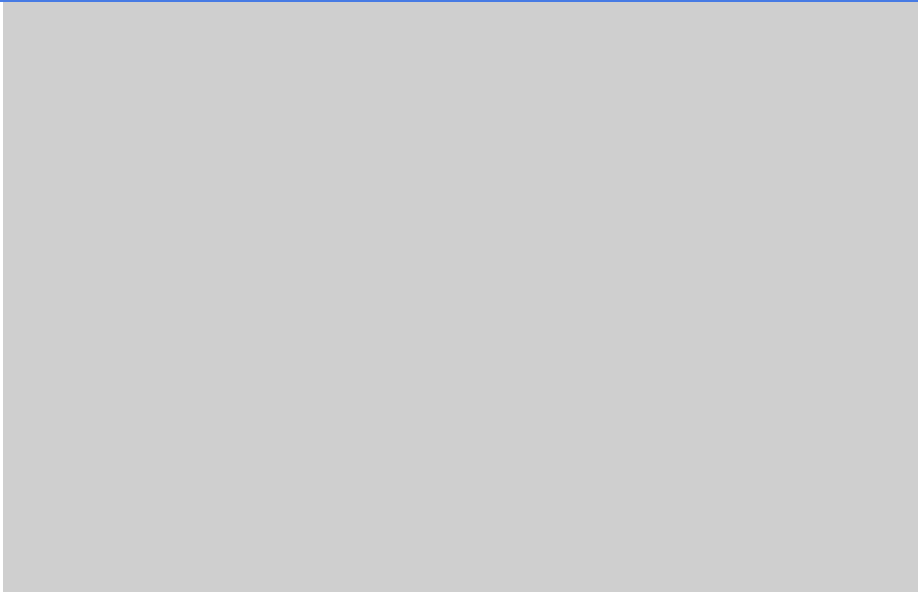


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