

Learning a language is a never-ending process, and that goes for both your first language and any [additional languages](#). This blog discusses the best ways to improve your language skills so that you are best prepared for carrying out interpreting assignments and your other day to day communications.

One of the most obvious ways of improving would be to hire a language tutor, however, this isn't suitable for all budgets and there are many other, free ways to improve.

Language exchanges

A language exchange is where you team up with people who speak, or are learning your language, while you are interested in learning theirs. You can be practice partners and help each other to learn.

Given that interpreting involves dealing with real people in real situations, a language exchange is one of the best ways in which to improve your pronunciation, vocabulary, and conversational skills. You can do this in a relaxed environment and it's a great way to meet new people and learn about other cultures. This in turn may stimulate you to delve further into language when booking a trip to a country where the language is spoken or by investigating films or literature.

It's important to strike a balance between having an exchange with someone who will push you, correct you and make you improve, and someone who you're so friendly with that they're afraid to point out any mistakes you make. Interrupting a conversation every thirty seconds just for the sake of a prepositional error may be too extreme, make the whole experience unenjoyable and thus counter-productive. Likewise, if you make the same mistake a hundred times without being corrected it will have become a habit, which will be more difficult to eradicate. Establish some ground rules with your language partner which work for both of you and most of all, have fun!

Travel

Immersing yourself 24/7 in a language which you wish to improve has its obvious benefits. You just have to leave your hotel and you're surrounded by people conversing, road signs, televisions on in bars – you can't help but absorb the language, to a greater or lesser extent. You can strike up

conversations with people, grab a newspaper, or just simply idle time away in a bar watching the news and get language practice right away.

However, you must be aware of the pitfalls of such an approach. It's not for everyone and isn't foolproof. Indeed, many aspiring linguists use the lack of such an opportunity as the reason why they have not been able to develop their second or third language as if it's the underlying reason for all their language woes. They believe that by spending extensive time (or any time at all) in a country where your first language isn't spoken you will benefit quickly with comparatively little effort. Yet you still have to be willing to work at it, be proactive, persistent and not be disheartened by any problems you face along the way. For example, if you've got a good level in Brazilian Portuguese and head to the Azores then you are likely to be surprised to see your comprehension levels plummet and people resorting to speaking English to you. While this is frustrating, it should be seen as a great opportunity to improve your ear for accents, dialects and varieties of the language. Some people will be more willing to chat than others, which is to be expected.

Digital Content

In this day and age there is a large amount of content available online for all tastes and ages. Get in the habit of putting on a rolling news channel in a language in which you're seeking to improve while doing day to day tasks (like the washing up) or find a podcast which interests you and which you'll look forward to listening to. If you feel your listening skills need work, then try watching a fairly easy to follow series and alternating episodes between having the subtitles on and off. Streaming services such as Netflix have multiple programmes in a variety of languages so is a good source for content.

Make an effort to not always choose material which is too easy for you – while it is satisfying to know you understand 100% of what is being said or discussed, it means that you have reached the point in which you need to stretch yourself again (if indeed the sole purpose of the content is for language improvement, not pleasure).

Avoid being too passive in your experience – for example, try listening to a minute's worth of content and then writing a transcription of it. You might find this harder than you think, and upon seeing the actual transcription or subtitles you miss certain details. This is a great way to force yourself to really focus and improve.

Making use of dead time

While you might think your hectic schedule offers no room for language improvement, if you were to find time efficient ways of improving your linguistic skills you would be surprised as to what you could achieve in short windows of time in which you would probably be doing little or nothing otherwise.

For example, take all of those moments where you're at a bus stop, idly flicking through Instagram or Twitter. In those ten minutes you could be using a flashcard app such as Quizlet to refresh your brain with some recent vocabulary you picked up. If you believe that merely picking up your phone is a recipe for distraction-disaster then look for something that works for you.

An approach which worked fantastically for me was having five new words written down on a piece of paper in my wallet with the translations into my second language on the other side. I would look at this when waiting for the lift to come or in the queue at the supermarket and once I'd learnt all of these words I would throw the paper away and create another five-word list. Experiment and discover methods that work for you.

If you are an [interpreter](#), you can use this method to expand your knowledge of terminology - for example medical terminology that may be useful in an assignment. If you are studying for an interpreting qualification, this can be particularly useful.

Make an active effort to spend five minutes a day talking to yourself or having an imaginary conversation with someone. During this time you will activate vocabulary which may have been fading from your memory as well as realising that you didn't know the word for what you were trying to express.

In conclusion, there are many different and varied ways of improving your language, and it is really a personal choice which ones you use and which work best for you. The main point is to never stop learning languages, particularly if you are working in a language centric occupation such as interpreting.

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