



# What do you need to know to learn a foreign language?

Paul Nation

School of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies  
Victoria University of Wellington  
New Zealand

11 August 2014

# Table of Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	• Twenty language learning activities .....	4
	• A summary of the book	
<b>Chapter 1</b>	<b>What do you need to do to learn a foreign language?</b> .....	8
	• Will following the principles described in this book help my learning? .....	8
	• <b>Principle 1:</b> Work out what your needs are and learn .....	9
	what is most useful for you	
	• <b>Principle 2:</b> Balance your learning .....	9
	• <b>Principle 3:</b> Apply conditions that help learning .....	10
	• <b>Principle 4:</b> Keep motivated and work hard–Do what needs to be done ..	11
<b>Chapter 2</b>	<b>Work out what your needs are and learn what is most useful for you</b> .....	12
	• Why are you learning the language? .....	12
	• How much language do you need to learn to cope with being .....	14
	a foreign tourist?	
	• Finding out about useful words and phrases by using a concordancer .....	15
	• Find out how much you know already .....	16
<b>Chapter 3</b>	<b>Balance your learning–learn through listening and reading</b> .....	18
	• How can you learn a language through listening? .....	18
	• How can you learn a language through reading? .....	19
	• Is it a good idea to choose a book that interests you and read it from .....	22
	the beginning to the end learning all the new words you meet?	
<b>Chapter 4</b>	<b>Balance your learning–learn through speaking and writing</b> .....	24
	• How can you learn a language through speaking? .....	
	• How much vocabulary do you need to know to watch a movie? .....	
	• How can you learn a language through writing? .....	
<b>Chapter 5</b>	<b>Balance your learning–do deliberate study of language features</b> .....	34
	• What should teachers do? .....	34
	• What learning should learners do? .....	34

<b>Chapter 6</b>	<b>Balance your learning—get fluent at using what you know</b> .....	38
	• Developing listening fluency .....	38
	• Developing speaking fluency.....	39
	• Developing reading fluency.....	40
	• Developing writing fluency.....	41
<b>Chapter 7</b>	<b>Apply conditions that help learning</b> .....	43
	• Learning conditions .....	43
	• Applying the learning conditions.....	44
	• Making the best use of a teacher.....	45
<b>Chapter 8</b>	<b>Keep motivated and work hard</b> .....	48
	• How long does it take to learn another language? .....	48
	• Keep motivated.....	51
	• Work hard .....	54
<b>References</b>	.....	56

### Notes

- Note 2.1: Are all words created equal?
- Note 4.1: Do children learn languages better than adults?
- Note 5.1: What is the keyword technique?
- Note 8.1: What are the most important principles of language learning?
- Note 8.2: How much reading do you need to do?

### Acknowledgements

I am very grateful to David Johnson for his reflections on his own substantial language learning experience and his very practical feedback on this book, particularly on the value of deliberate attention to pronunciation. Janet Holmes provided very detailed comments for making it more practical and accessible for language learners. Frank Boers, Stephen Epstein, Claudia Bernardi, and Nicola Gilmour provided useful encouraging feedback on the book.

## Introduction

This book is for adult learners of a foreign language. If you are learning a language like English, French, German, Indonesian, Chinese, or Samoan in a country where this language is not commonly spoken, then this book will help you.

The suggestions in this book can be used when studying a language by yourself without a teacher, or when you are the only person learning with a teacher, or when you are following taught classes.

## Twenty language learning activities

This book describes twenty activities that you can do on your own. These are described in activity boxes throughout the book. Each activity box describes the activity, and explains its benefits. All the activities are listed in the following table. The number (3.1) in the table below indicates that this activity can be found in Chapter 3 and is in the first activity box in that chapter.

Strand	Skill	Activity (Number)
Meaning-focused input	Listening	Reading while listening (3.1)
	Reading	Extensive reading (3.2) Narrow reading (3.3)
Meaning-focused output	Speaking	Role play (4.2) Prepared talks (4.3)
	Writing	Read and write (4.4)
Language-focused learning	Listening	Transcription (5.2)
	Reading	Intensive reading (5.3)
	Speaking	Memorized sentences or dialogues (4.1)
	Writing	Delayed copying (5.4)
Fluency development	Listening	Repeated listening (6.1)
	Speaking	4/3/2 (6.2)
	Reading	Repeated reading (6.3) Speed reading (6.4)
	Writing	10 minute writing (6.5) Repeated writing (6.6)
General purpose		Word cards (5.1) Linked skills (7.1) Issue logs (8.1) Spelling practice (5.5)

The book is based on a lot of research but to keep the book as brief and practical as possible, only a few studies are cited. For more references, see Nation, I.S.P. (2009) *Teaching ESL/RFL Listening and Speaking*. New York: Routledge, Nation, I.S.P. (2009) *Teaching ESL/RFL Reading and Writing*. New York: Routledge, and Nation, P. (2013) *What should Every EFL Teacher Know?* Seoul: Compass Publishing.

## A summary of the book

There are four things that you need to do when you learn a foreign language:

Principle 1: Work out what your needs are and learn what is most useful for you

Principle 2: Balance your learning across the four strands

Principle 3: Apply conditions that help learning using good language learning techniques

Principle 4: Keep motivated and work hard—Do what needs to be done

You need to spend equal amounts of time on each of the four strands:

1 learning from meaning-focused input (listening and reading)

2 learning from meaning-focused output (speaking and writing)

3 language-focused learning (studying pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar etc)

4 fluency development (getting good at using what you already know)

## Language learning activities

You need to be clear why you are learning the language. If speaking the language is your main goal, you need to get some help on pronouncing the language early in your study of the language. If reading is your main goal, do a lot of regular deliberate learning of vocabulary and a lot of reading.

There are about twenty language learning techniques that you should use and you need to understand how to use these techniques well and in the right balance. These are described in the activity boxes in this book.

When you start learning the language, get hold of the 120 item survival vocabulary for that language from Paul Nation's web site, and learn that using word cards. If the survival vocabulary has not been made for your language, get a speaker of that language to help you make it, using the English survival list as a guide. If you like using a tablet or cell phone, find a good flash card program for doing your word card learning. Otherwise, use small cards putting the foreign word or phrase on one side

and the translation on the other. Become really fluent with the survival vocabulary by practicing it over and over again.

Get a movie that you like in the foreign language and find the script for it on the web. Watch parts of the movie many times while studying the script.

Get a short book in the foreign language and start working your way through it with a dictionary. An easy book is best and the books that native-speaking children use at school when they are first taught to read can be a good choice. When you have read the book carefully, read it again at least twice more quickly. Put the repeated words on to word cards to study.

Do lots of easy reading every week.

Try to arrange a regular speaking time with a native speaker either face-to-face or on the web. Practice useful role plays of common situations, such as greeting people and saying goodbye, buying things in a shop, asking for help and asking directions. Repeat these role plays several times so they can be done fluently. Keep a list of them so they can be practiced again and varied over several weeks.

Learn useful phrases and sentences as whole units but also make sure you understand their parts and how they fit together. Understanding the parts makes the whole phrase or sentence easier to remember.

Avoid learning near synonyms, opposites or members of a lexical set together. Lexical sets are groups like the months of the year, the names of fruit, colours, parts of the body and articles of clothing. If you learn the words in such pairs or groups at the same time, the words in them get mixed up with each other making them harder to learn.

Spend some time regularly studying and practicing pronunciation, preferably with a teacher who understands about the sounds of the language. This is very important if you are learning a language such as a tone language like Chinese which uses very different sounds from your first language.

### ***The conditions for language learning***

The two most important conditions supporting learning are spaced repetition and the quality of attention given to items. Quality is increased by recalling what you have met, making varied recalls, analyzing and elaborating on language items, and giving deliberate attention.

Learning a language involves a lot of work and even the most talented language learners work hard at a learning a language, so be prepared to work hard, work regularly and keep your motivation high by noting your successes in using the language and in increasing your language knowledge. Set regular weekly goals for words to learn, pages to read, and minutes to spend doing listening. Keep a record of what you do so you can see your progress.

This chapter outlines four basic principles that learners should follow when they are learning another language. In the following chapters each of these principles is given much more detailed attention. This chapter thus provides an overview of the book.

Principle 1 → Work out what your needs are and learn what is most useful for you

Principle 2 → Balance your learning

Principle 3 → Apply conditions that help learning

Principle 4 → Keep motivated and work hard—Do what needs to be done

## • Will following the principles described in this book help my learning?

This book can help you, and here are some possible reasons why.

If your language course does not provide **large amounts of input through reading and listening at the right level for you**, then you are missing a very important opportunity for learning. Research with very young foreign language learners, found that by increasing the amount of interesting and understandable written input without increasing class time, learners had almost double the language proficiency gains of those who followed a program involving the same amount of class time but with much less input. These gains were maintained a year later.

Similarly, if you are not doing **deliberate** learning through using bilingual word cards, but instead are spending time doing a variety of vocabulary related exercises, you are likely to be learning vocabulary at less than half the rate that you could easily achieve.

If your course does not include **fluency development activities** such as timed reading, then following a timed reading course taking a total of around three hours of study will increase your reading speed in the foreign language by at least 50% and in some cases will double your reading speed.

There is a lot of research on learning foreign languages, but the findings of this research do not always get put into practice. Applying the findings of some of this research can result in very dramatic increases in learning.



## Principle 1: Work out what your needs are and learn what is most useful for you

If you are clear about why you are learning a language, you can better choose what and how to learn. Most people want to be able to speak a language, but some have the goal of reading it.

If you are already part of the way through your language study, then test yourself to see how much you know.

To get an idea about how much you need to learn when you learn another language, here are some vocabulary size figures from English. It is likely that European languages like French, Spanish, Dutch and German require similar vocabulary sizes. Other languages are likely to require similar sizes but there is no research on this.

To be familiar with 98% of the running words in a friendly informal conversation, or to be familiar with 98% of the running words in a movie, you need to know around 6,000 different words. To be familiar with 98% of the running words in a novel or newspaper, you need to know around 8000-9000 different words. This is a lot of words and native speakers learn them at the rate of around 1,000 different words a year, until they reach a vocabulary size of close to 20,000 different words.

However, as we shall see, not all words are created equal, and with a vocabulary of 1,000 to 2,000 of the most useful words we can hold adequate conversations and get most things done.

## Principle 2: Balance your learning

Balancing learning is probably the most important principle, but it does require some skill and effort in applying it.

The principle of the four strands says that if you want to have a well-balanced language course, you need to spend equal amounts of time on

- 1 learning from meaning-focused input (listening and reading)
- 2 learning from meaning-focused output (speaking and writing)
- 3 language-focused learning (studying pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar etc)
- 4 fluency development (getting good at using what you already know).

All four strands are important and they need roughly equal amounts of time. In Chapters 3 to 6 we will look at how this can be done.

If the language you are learning has a sound system that is very different from your native language, it is worth deliberately learning about the sound system of the foreign language. This means finding a teacher who can do more than say sounds for you to copy; the teacher needs to explain how the sounds are produced in your mouth. An alternative is to do that study yourself. Some people can learn the sounds well without help or study, but if you are having difficulty with the sounds, then it is best to have a teacher.

If your goal is only to read the language, then the time that you would spend on output (strand 2) can simply be changed to more reading input. Similarly, if your goal is just to speak the language (particularly if the script of the language you are learning is difficult), you may want to make all of your input strand consist of spoken language.

### Principle 3: Apply conditions that help learning

Learning a language involves both deliberate and incidental learning, and these both involve the conditions of repetition, retrieval (recall), varied meetings and varied use, using visuals, and deliberate attention. Good learning also involves avoiding interference which makes learning more difficult. We will look in more detail at these conditions in Chapter 7, but they are mentioned throughout the book because they are so important.

Is there a best method for learning a language? Unfortunately, the answer is no. Language learning can occur through all kinds of methods. What is most important is that good principles of learning are applied.

You may have heard of methods like grammar-translation, aural-oral, the silent way, Suggestopaedia, the communicative approach, and TPR (Total Physical Response). These all have their supporters and attackers. Each method has its strengths and weaknesses and there is no research that shows the superiority of one method over another.

It is fine to follow a particular method although it is not necessary. What is important is that there is a balance of learning opportunities across the four strands of meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, language-focused learning, and fluency development. It is also important that the learning conditions of repetition, retrieval, varied meetings and varied use, deliberate attention, and deep processing occur.

The most useful items to learn should get the most attention and you need access to material which is at the right level for you.

## Principle 4: Keep motivated and work hard–Do what needs to be done

Many people begin learning a language and then give up when they see how much work is required. It takes young native speakers many years to learn their first language and they are highly motivated to learn it.

When learning a foreign language, there is often not the immediate motivation of being able to use what you have just learned. It is usually easier to learn when the language is being used around you. A learner of a foreign language needs to set short-term goals where there are signs of progress and achievement. This can be as simple as learning twenty new words, or learning how to answer the telephone. Having clear short term goals can keep motivation high. In Chapter 8 we will look more closely at motivation and working hard.

A very useful principle to follow when learning most things is the time-on-task principle. This principle says if you want to learn something, do it a lot. If you want to learn to read, read a lot. If you want to learn to speak, speak a lot. This is a rather crude quantity-based principle, but it works. The more time you spend doing something, usually the better you will become at doing it.

It is easy to criticize this principle because it concentrates on quantity rather than quality. However, there is a lot of research to support it.

In the following chapter we will look at finding out what you need to learn.

To work out what your language learning needs are, first focus on what you already know, and what you plan to do with the language you are learning. What are your reasons for learning that language?

- **Why are you learning the language?**

Language is used for a wide range of purposes and one way of speeding up learning is to focus on a particular purpose and the language needed for that purpose. So, it is helpful to be clear about your purpose in learning a particular language. For example, are you learning the language so that you can travel where that language is spoken? Table 2.1 looks at reasons for learning a language and how these affect what you need to learn.

**Table 2.1** Reasons for learning another language and what you need to learn

Reasons	Learning focuses
I am just interested in the language	Spoken language should be your major focus at the beginning.
I am living in a country where this language is spoken and I want to be able to communicate with others	Spoken language should be your major focus. You should make a list of your speaking needs and keep adding to it. It is worth starting with some of the Survival vocabulary (Nation and Crabbe, 1993)*.
My partner or another family member is a native speaker of that language	Spoken language should be your major focus. If the family member is willing and able to help you, you should start with useful repeated routines such as greetings and talking around daily repeated activities such as getting a meal ready or talking about what happened during the day.
I want to travel in countries where that language is spoken	You do not need to learn a lot of the language. Learn the Survival vocabulary. Aim for a high degree of spoken fluency with the items in that very limited vocabulary. Put all of the survival vocabulary on to word cards.
I need to know this language to read books related to my work or subject area	You should begin working with the texts you want to read. This is because the technical words in the subject area make up a very large proportion of the running words in such texts (somewhere between 20% and 30% - that is one in every three to five words will be a technical word). If you read outside your subject area you will need to learn many words that are not useful in your subject area.

I need to study for a degree using this language	Start working with the texts you will use in your study. Put unknown words onto word cards and do the same with repeated phrases. Study these cards every day.
I want to use this language to do business with people who speak this language	Start working with conversational spoken language and then move to business-focused conversation.
It is a university or school requirement and I want to pass the final exam	Get examples of the final exam and prepare for the kinds of questions the exam asks.

\* Go to Paul Nation's web site to find the survival vocabulary in a range of different languages in the Vocabulary Resource Booklet

The list of reasons in Table 2.1 is roughly ordered according to the strength of motivation to learn the language. The strongest motivation is usually a strong feeling of personal interest. The weakest motivations are those where other people's requirements are forcing you to do something. Motivation is highly likely to have an effect on how hard you work at learning the language.

### Note 2.1: Are all words created equal?

If we do a frequency count of words in a text, no matter how long that text is we get the same pattern of results. A small number of words are very frequent, and a large number of words are very infrequent.

*A rather small number of words are very frequent*

The ten most frequent words of English typically cover 25% of the words in any text and the 100 most frequent words cover around 50%. Have a look at a page and see how often *the* word occurs (It occurs in almost every line in this paragraph!). By itself, that word covers 7% of any written English text. The most frequent 1,000 words cover around 80% of the words in most texts. In some languages the coverage figures are even higher than this.

When learning words, it is good to learn the high frequency words first. The effort of learning these words is well repaid by opportunities to meet and use these words. Vocabulary specialists typically see the high frequency words of English as consisting of around 2,000 to 3,000 words. Only a small number of these words are function words (words like *the, a, of, because, it, one, which, that*). Most are nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs (content words).

You can make a frequency ranked list of the words in the language you want to learn by going to Sketch Engine [www.sketchengine.co.uk](http://www.sketchengine.co.uk). (See the instructions near the beginning of Chapter 2 of this book). You don't have to learn these words in exactly the same order in which they occur in the list, but you should learn them in groupings of say 100 words that roughly match the frequency list.

*A large number of words are very infrequent*

Half of the words in any text will occur only once in that text. So, if you read a novel which is 100,000 words long from beginning to end, you will meet around 5,000 different words (*Captain Blood* is 115,879 words long and contains 5,071 different word families). Half of the different words that you meet (well over 2,000) will occur only once. That means there will not be repeated opportunities to meet these words to help learn them, and if you look them up in a dictionary and study them, you may have to wait a long time before you meet them again.

One of the skills in learning a language is to know what words are worth learning at each stage of your proficiency development.

Because there are many low frequency words, it is best to read material that uses a controlled vocabulary so that your time is not spent on low frequency words that are not useful for you at your present level of proficiency.

For more on this topic go to [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zipf's\\_law](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zipf's_law).

### • How much language do you need to learn to cope with being a foreign tourist?

There is good news here. With around 120 words and phrases (which would take a total of four hours of deliberate study to learn), you can deal with the most basic requirements. These basic requirements include meeting and greeting people, being polite (*please, thank you*), going shopping, ordering food, seeking directions, reading signs, finding somewhere to stay, talking about yourself, and controlling language input.

This survival vocabulary is available in over 20 different languages. It is very similar to the word and phrase lists that you find at the back of tourist guide books, except that this one has been well researched. You can find these lists at <http://www.victoria.ac.nz/lals/staff/paul-nation.aspx>. It is a good idea very early in your language study to make sure that you have covered all the survival vocabulary because this is made up of very useful language items.

## • Finding out about useful words and phrases by using a concordancer

You can find out about particular words and phrases by using a computer-based tool called a concordancer. It is worth spending an hour or so learning how to use a concordancer because a concordancer can quickly give you lots of examples of a word or phrase you are interested in. These examples can be a great help for learning for the following reasons.

- 1 The examples will help you see the range of senses of a word or phrase, and will help you see which are the commonest senses.
- 2 The examples can show you how a word or phrase is used.
- 3 The number of examples can help you see how frequent a word or phrase is.
- 4 The examples can show you what words a particular word occurs with.

This information is useful for deciding whether to learn a word or phrase and can help you learn it by enriching the information you have about that word.

What is a concordancer? A concordancer is a program where you type in a word or phrase or two or more words, and the program searches for examples of these in a collection of texts (a corpus). There are two kinds of concordancers. The easiest to use are online concordancers where you go to a web site and use the program and corpus that the web site provides. Here are some useful web sites.

Netspeak [www.netspeak.org](http://www.netspeak.org)

Just the word [www.just-the-word.com](http://www.just-the-word.com)

Wordneighbours [www.wordneighbours.ust.hk](http://www.wordneighbours.ust.hk)

Word and phrase [www.wordandphrase.info](http://www.wordandphrase.info)

Compleat Lexical Tutor [www.lextutor.ca](http://www.lextutor.ca)

The concordancer at [www.sketchengine.co.uk](http://www.sketchengine.co.uk) allows free searching for a limited time in a very wide variety of languages and corpus sizes.

The other kind of concordancer is one that you download to your computer and so you do not use it online. You need to provide your own corpus to search for examples. It is not too hard to find a corpus or to make a corpus, but it is best to start learning about concordancers using an online concordancer. The best free downloadable concordancer is AntConc which can be found on Laurence Anthony's web site <http://www.antlab.sci.waseda.ac.jp/software.html>.

Here is an example of output from a concordancer, using the search word *contrary*.

- 1 The facts described are contrary to the principles enshrined in the constitution
- 2 come in and wing it." Contrary to some of his statements in the past, Redford in
- 3 are a legitimate issue, contrary to the view that every criticism of her intellect
- 4 The Sierra Club to the contrary notwithstanding, the Supreme Court's June 29
- 5 are wise and welcome. Contrary to what critics say, the new policy poses no
- 6 the literal and popular sense. On the contrary, "hope ... can be situated only in
- 7 an experience that precedes it. On the contrary, language makes experience possible.
- 8 knowledge, be predicted. To the contrary, reversing human expectations, it

The output can be sorted in the concordancer to make it easier to see patterns. Look at this video to see an example of a concordancer being used. [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QbwgruJ4\\_gA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QbwgruJ4_gA)

- **Find out how much you know already**

If you have already been studying a language for a year or more, then see how much you now know. To do this for English, go to [www.my.vocabularysize.com](http://www.my.vocabularysize.com) and measure your vocabulary size. Knowing your vocabulary size helps you understand how far you have to go in learning the language and is also a useful guide in finding suitable reading material. Table 2.2 shows how you can use your vocabulary test results to choose reading material in English.

**Table 2.2** Matching vocabulary size to reading material for meaning-focused input

Vocabulary size	Source of reading material
1,000 words or less	Choose books from the early levels of published graded readers
1,000-2,000 words	Choose books from the middle levels of published graded readers
2,000-4,000 words	Choose books from the later levels of published graded readers
4,000 words or more	Choose books from the Mid-frequency readers

Unfortunately, other languages do not have readily available vocabulary size tests, but here is a rough way of getting similar information about how much vocabulary you know.



- 1 Get a frequency ranked list of words in the language you are learning. You can do this by going to [www.sketchengine.co.uk](http://www.sketchengine.co.uk).
- 2 Start with the most frequent word and go through the list deciding if you could give a meaning for each word. If you already know a lot of words in that language, look at every fiftieth word (in that case multiply your known words by fifty to calculate how many words you know).

Here is how you can get a frequency ranked word list for any of many different languages.

- 1 Go to [www.sketchengine.co.uk](http://www.sketchengine.co.uk)
- 2 Choose the language corpus (the collection of texts) you want by choosing from the table **Corpora** or click **Show all corpora** just below the table. If the corpus is very large you may have to wait for a minute or two. A **Make concordance** box will appear, but don't use that.
- 3 On the far left, click **Word list**. Don't change any of the settings but just click the **Make wordlist** button near the bottom of the box. Wait while the program creates a list for you.
- 4 In the list at the far left, click **Save**. If you only want the first 1000 words (that is plenty if you are beginning to learn the language), click the **Save Word List** button.

To measure knowledge of the first 2000 words of French, go to [http://www.lex tutor.ca/tests/yes\\_no\\_fr/](http://www.lex tutor.ca/tests/yes_no_fr/).

If you know very little of the language, the frequency-ranked list can be a useful rough guide for learning (see **Note 2.1: Are all words created equal?**). Most of the words at the top of the list will have grammatical functions and need to be learned in sentence contexts.

In the next chapter we will look at learning through listening and reading.

### • How can you learn a language through listening?

A useful thing to do in the very early stages of learning another language is to listen to the way in which the language is spoken, even when you don't understand anything at all. An effective way to do this is to watch a movie with subtitles which uses that language. This kind of form-focused listening helps you get a feel for the language which will be very useful when you begin to speak it yourself.

Later, as your skill in the language develops, a good way to get some listening practice is to find a movie where you can download the script of the movie and study it before watching it. The first step is to read the script looking up the words you don't know and working out what the sentences mean. Then you can watch the movie with subtitles. Then a few weeks later watch it again.

Similarly, many graded readers now come with an accompanying CD which provides the spoken version of the text. You can try reading before listening, and reading while listening.

#### **Activity 3.1: Reading while listening**

While you listen to a recording, you silently read the same text.

This activity uses one skill (reading) to support the other (listening). Learners prefer listening while reading over listening by itself and tend to gain higher vocabulary learning scores and comprehension related scores when reading while listening.

### • How much vocabulary do you need to know to watch a movie?

Movies are usually under 10,000 running words long (a novel is usually over 100,000 words long). Movies typically contain around 1,000 different word families. These words come from a range of frequency levels.

To follow most of the words in a movie without any preparation, you need to have a reasonably large vocabulary – at least 3,000 words and preferably around 6,000

words. Because the number of different words in a movie is not so large, preparing for a movie by reading the script and studying the vocabulary is a manageable task.

Because the amount of meaningful input that you get has a strong effect on how much of the language you learn, you should try to regularly get lots of listening and reading input at the right level of difficulty for you.

### • How can you learn a language through reading?

There is very good research showing that it is possible to learn a lot of a language through reading. If you want to use reading as a way of developing language proficiency, what should you do?

- 1 Read texts which are at the right level for you. This is easy to do if you are a learner of English, but probably impossible for learners of many other languages. This is because in English there are many books, called *graded readers*, which are specially written within a controlled vocabulary for learners of English. Graded readers are books specially written for foreign language learners, so that at almost every level of proficiency learners can read books which are at the right level for them. Graded readers are written at various levels within a controlled vocabulary. Almost every major language teaching publisher has their own series of readers. Oxford University Press has the Oxford Bookworms, Cambridge University Press has the Cambridge English Readers, Penguin has the Penguin Readers and Heinemann has the Foundation Readers and the National Geographic readers.

The Oxford Bookworms series has the following levels.

Level	1	2	3	4	5	6
New words	400	300	300	400	400	700
Total words	400	700	1,000	1,400	1,800	2,500

So, a learner who knows only 400 words can read several books at level 1 of the series.

One of the good things about graded readers is that every word that is met is probably worth learning, even if that word is not repeated in the book.

Graded reader series end at around 3,000 words. If you know more words than this, you should read the Mid-frequency readers which are written at the 4000, 6,000, and 8,000 word levels. They are free and can be found at Paul Nation's web site <http://www.victoria.ac.nz/lals/staff/paul-nation.aspx>. They can be read on electronic readers or tablet computers.

For more information on graded readers visit the Extensive Reading Foundation web site, and to see which have been voted the best graded readers. There are a few graded readers in Japanese and a few in French.

If you are learning a language other than English, it is useful to get hold of the books that native speakers use at school when they begin to learn to read. This is because these books are written for learners with small vocabularies and do not introduce words that these first language learners are unlikely to know. Another good source of reading is to read an encyclopaedia especially written for young children.

- 2 Accompany reading with deliberate learning from word cards or flash card programs (see **Chapter 5**).
- 3 Read electronic texts using a program that has easy dictionary look-up. For example, using Kindle or Kobo, you can look up the meaning of a word just by touching it. To put a text into Kindle, you need to find your special Kindle email address. To find this address, logon to the Amazon Kindle web site. Choose *Your account*, and click on the first heading of the vertical menu, *Your account* (If you don't see the left hand column, it may be because you have not yet logged in to your account). In the far left column, under the heading *Your kindle account*, click *Personal document settings*. This will give you a list of the email addresses of your devices or apps. You can email any document you want to read to this address and it will appear on your Kindle app on your device.
- 4 Make sure you do plenty of reading. The higher your level of proficiency, the more you will need to read in order to meet words at the right level for you enough times to have a chance to learn them (see **Note 8.2: How much reading do you need to do?**).

Reading helps language learning by providing the important learning condition of repetition. That is, through reading learners meet words, word groups and grammatical constructions several times and so have a good chance of learning them.

### **Activity 3.2: Extensive reading**

Extensive reading involves doing large quantities of reading using material which is at the right level for you. Ideally, this reading should be enjoyable. Material which is at the right level contains no more than two unfamiliar words in every 100 running words (about 1 unknown word or less in every five lines). For elementary and intermediate learners, this means reading books written within a controlled vocabulary (graded readers).

The aim should be to read a book a week, spending at least an hour or two per week reading. In a well-balanced language course, just under a quarter of the course time should be spent on extensive reading. Two thirds of this time should be spent reading material containing a few unknown words, and one third of this time should be spent quickly reading very easy material in order to develop reading fluency.

It is not necessary to sit comprehension tests on the reading, although there are web sites for learners of English which provide such tests (see the Extensive Reading Foundation web site <http://erfoundation.org/wordpress/graded-readers/mreader>).

The research on extensive reading has shown that it brings about improvement in reading, vocabulary growth and a wide range of language skills and knowledge.

Research has shown that through reading we learn vocabulary, word groups, grammatical features and improve our reading skill. Reading can also result in feelings of success; it is not enormously time consuming, and can be very enjoyable.

### **Activity 3.3: Narrow reading**

Staying within a single topic or subject area is sometimes called narrow reading. It has three major positive effects on language learning. Its strongest effect is to reduce the total number of different words that you meet. Having a lot of different topics results in a very diverse vocabulary, and in many more words that will occur only once in the texts.

In addition by staying within the same subject area you build up a lot of useful content knowledge that will make reading easier and so will make guessing unknown words from context easier.

You can do narrow reading by (1) reading within a specialist area of knowledge, preferably one that you already know a lot about, (2) following the same story or general topic area when reading newspapers, or (3) doing the Issue logs activity (see **Activity 8.1**).

However, if you already have a rather large vocabulary, over 6,000 or 7,000 words, it may be more useful for you to read widely so that you can meet more unknown words that you can learn. Reading across a range of different topics greatly increases the number of different words that you meet. You need to consider whether this is a good thing or a bad thing for you at your present level of proficiency.

Is it a good idea to choose a book that interests you and read it from the beginning to the end learning all the new words you meet? Generally this is not a good idea if the book is not written in a controlled vocabulary, or if the book is not on a topic that you already know a lot about. The main reason why it is not a good idea is that it will contain a large number of unknown words (possibly more than 1000), most of which will be well outside your current knowledge and which will not be repeated in the book or even in the next book you read. Around half of the different words in any text occur only once. You are likely to meet an unknown word in every line of the text.

However, it is worth struggling through a book if one or more of the following conditions apply:

- 1 The book is a set text for your course.
- 2 The book is an important text in the academic field that you are studying. It will help you learn the technical vocabulary of your field.
- 3 The subject matter of the book is very familiar to you and the technical terms are similar to those in your L1.
- 4 It is a novel that you have already read in your first language so you can easily guess or skip a lot of the unknown words.

You can make reading such a book easier if you buy an electronic version of the text or scan it to make an electronic version (Do not distribute the electronic version to other people as this will break copyright). If you put the text in an electronic reader like Kindle or Kobo you can get easy dictionary look-up. A useful alternative to reading a long text is to do narrow reading of a variety of short texts on the same topic.

When you have read a long text, is it better to re-read the same book or read a different one?

The advantages of re-reading a book are

- 1 it will be a lot easier than reading it the first time
- 2 it will guarantee repetition of the vocabulary
- 3 it will provide an opportunity for recall of previously met vocabulary to occur
- 4 it may help develop reading fluency
- 5 it will take much less time than reading a different book of the same length.

The advantages of reading a different book are

- 1 some of the words met in the previous book will be met again in varied meetings
- 2 there will be many new words to learn.

These lists suggest that re-reading is a good idea, and that it would be good to have a mixture of re-reading and different reading in a language learning program.

In the early stages of language learning your goal should be to spend at least around a half an hour to an hour per week doing meaningful listening and reading. You need to increase this time as proficiency develops.

Having looked at learning through input, in the next chapter we look at learning through output (speaking and writing).

Listening and reading are called the receptive skills because they involve receiving input, while speaking and writing are called the productive skills. In general, producing language is more difficult than receiving it because when producing it, choices have to be made about which words to use and which grammatical constructions they occur in.

According to the principle of the four strands, which we follow in this book, over one quarter of the time in a well-balanced language learning program should be devoted to the productive skills of speaking and writing. This includes developing fluency in speaking and writing.

### **Note 4.1: Do children learn languages better than adults?**

When considering this question, it is important to distinguish between learning a second language and learning a foreign language.

Learning a second language involves learning a language while living in a country where the language is spoken. Children do this very well, and generally the younger they are, the better their learning will be. Learners are much more likely to acquire a native-like pronunciation of the language if they begin learning a second language at a young age (before six or seven years old).

Learning a foreign language occurs in a very different situation. There is not usually a strong need to learn the language, there are not a lot of opportunities to meet and use the foreign language, motivation needs to be very high, and the time available is usually very limited. When learning a foreign language, adults have some advantages: they are better at aiming for long-term goals, at keeping working at the learning, and they often have learning skills and strategies that they have already practised in other learning. Adults are also better able to reflect on their learning and take personal control of it.

### • **How can you learn a language through speaking?**

The quickest way to begin speaking in another language is to memorize useful phrases and sentences. The very first phrases and sentences should come from the survival vocabulary which includes greetings, expressions of politeness, the language needed for shopping and moving around, numbers, the language needed in a restaurant, and brief descriptions of yourself, your work, and your reasons for being in the foreign country.



### **Activity 4.1: Memorized sentences and dialogues**

Write the sentences you want to memorize on small cards with their first language translation on the back. Ideally, you should get some help with pronunciation of these phrases and sentences before working on memorizing them.

When memorizing, look at the first language translation and try to recall the foreign language phrase or sentence. **Activity 5.1** describes how to use word cards.

The phrases and sentences should be ones that you can use immediately. Table 8.5 contains a list of situations that you could use to prepare short dialogues to memorize.

Deliberate memorization is fast and long-lasting and makes material readily available for language use.

As your proficiency in the language develops, it would be useful to set up a regular conversation group of learners (and hopefully including a native speaker or two) who meet to practice conversation. During these conversation sessions, you can work your way through a list of situations you are likely to be in, doing small role plays of these situations. Each situation should be practiced several times, two or three times in one session, and then once or twice in increasingly spaced subsequent sessions.

In an ordinary conversation, a native speaker is unlikely to correct a foreign language learner if what the learner says is understandable even if not correct. It is therefore useful to find someone who is both willing and capable of giving you corrective feedback about your speaking. It is also useful to decide on a particular focus for correction, such as the pronunciation of a certain sound or the use of a particular grammatical feature so that the corrections are not overwhelming.

### **Activity 4.2: Role play**

Role-play activities involve two or three people working together acting out the parts in a common situation such as going to the doctor, buying things in a shop, seeking directions, ordering food in a restaurant, and starting up a conversation with a stranger.

Each person in the pair or group takes on a different role and they act out the situation. At the end of each role-play, the players should comment on how they could improve what they just did. Then they should immediately do the role-play again adding in the improvements. If it is possible to do it a third time straight after that, then that is a good thing to do. The same role-play should be practised again two or three times in later sessions.

If the topic is carefully chosen, role play activities prepare you for spoken language use.

### **Activity 4.3: Prepared talks**

It is worth developing short talks that you can write out, memorize, get checked, and then practice. These can include topics that you would be likely to talk about with other people, for example, the work that you do, your hobbies, interesting things that you have done in the foreign country, your family, and what visitors to your country should go to see.

Another useful activity involves imaginary mental conversations. This activity can be largely silent but there is value in speaking aloud (although not in public places!). The activity involves imagining a conversation with a real person who you can visualise, perhaps a movie star. You simply practice speaking to them in your mind, polishing the conversation until you are happy with it.

When you are studying by yourself, speaking is the hardest skill to develop because of a lack of opportunity to talk to others. You need to do your best to find these opportunities through direct contact with native speakers or other learners and through electronic contact using programs like Skype.

#### **• How can you learn a language through writing?**

There should be three kinds of writing in any language course you take. The first kind of writing is done carefully, with the help of a dictionary if necessary, and focuses on accuracy. Someone else who is proficient in the language should correct it so that you can get feedback about the accuracy of your writing. The second kind of writing should focus on fluency, and the most useful activity for doing this is 10 minute writing (see **Activity 6.3**). The third kind of writing (see **Activity 8.1: Issue logs**) focuses on quantity of writing under careful conditions and does not require feedback on the language, although it would be useful to get it.

### **Activity 4.4: Read and write**

Writing is easier if you bring a lot of knowledge to what you write. Choose a topic that is relevant for you, read about it in your first language and in the foreign language, and then write about it, using everything that you have read.

Instead of just reading and writing, you can listen and write, or watch, listen and write (watching a movie before writing for example) (see **Activity 7.1: Linked skills activities for a similar kind of activity**).

The time-on-task principle says that the more time you spend on an activity, the better you will be at doing it. The more you practice, the better you become. All the four skills, listening, speaking, reading and writing, improve with large amounts of regular practice. You will not only learn the particular skill, you will also improve your vocabulary and grammar.

In the two previous chapters we have looked at learning through using the language. In the next chapter, we look at a different kind of learning—deliberate learning—which makes up the third of the four strands of a well-balanced course.

Deliberate learning is very efficient and effective and so it is worth doing it. This deliberate learning can involve the teacher teaching, but it must also involve you as the learner taking responsibility for your own learning.

- **What deliberate learning should you do?**

You need to organize your own deliberate learning. The most important deliberate learning activity is using word cards (see **Activity 5.1**). You need to take control of this very effective activity and keep using it to learn new vocabulary and even more importantly to keep revising previously met vocabulary. You may find that some teachers advise against using this strategy largely because of the belief that all vocabulary learning needs to occur in context. They are wrong. It is important that there is vocabulary learning in context through meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, and fluency development, but it is also important that there is deliberate decontextualised learning through the use of word cards, because such learning is very efficient and effective. Some people also believe that because word card learning involves first language translation, it encourages thinking in the first language rather than the foreign language. Research however has shown that in the beginning and intermediate stages of language learning the first and foreign languages are unavoidably stored together. Using bilingual word cards is a very effective deliberate learning strategy that you should use.

As well as word card learning, you should also use concordancers to study words and grammar (see **Chapter 2**), you should do dictation, transcription, delayed copying, and oral repetition activities to gain familiarity with spoken and written forms, and you should do intensive reading preferably using an electronic reader such as Kindle so that there is easy word look-up.

### Activity 5.1: Word cards

Using word cards to learn vocabulary is just one step in learning a word. Using word cards is a deliberate learning strategy and fits into the language-focused learning strand of a course.

1. Write the word to be learned on one side of a small card and its translation on the other side. This encourages you to recall the item after the first meeting. Each recall strengthens the connection between the form of the word and its meaning. Seeing them both together does not do this.
2. In the beginning, start with small packs of cards -- about 15 or 20 words. Difficult items should be learned in small groups to allow more repetition and more thoughtful processing. As the learning gets easier, increase the size of the pack -- more than 50 seems to be unmanageable simply for keeping the cards together and getting through them all in one go.
3. Space the repetitions. The best spacing is to go through the cards a few minutes after first looking at them, then an hour or so later, then the next day, then a week later, and then a couple of weeks later. This spacing is much more effective than massing the repetitions together into an hour of study. The total time taken may be the same but the result is different. Spaced repetition results in longer lasting learning.
4. For words which are difficult to learn, use depth of processing techniques like the keyword technique (see Note 5.1). Think of the word in language contexts and situational contexts. Break the word into word parts if possible. The more associations you can make with an item, the better it will be remembered.
5. Make sure that words of similar spelling or of related meaning are not together in the same pack of cards. This means days of the week should not be all learned at the same time. The same applies to months of the year, numbers, opposites, words with similar meanings, and words in the same set such as items of clothing, names of fruit, parts of the body, and things in the kitchen. These items interfere with each other and make learning much more difficult.
6. Keep changing the order of the words in the pack. This will avoid learning where the meaning of one word reminds you of the meaning of the next word in the pack.
7. Say the word aloud to yourself. This helps the form to enter long term memory.
8. Write phrases or sentences containing the words on the card too where this is helpful. This particularly applies to verbs. Some words are most usefully learned in phrases.

### Note 5.1: What is the keyword technique?

The keyword technique is a very effective and well researched way of helping remember vocabulary. It involves the following steps.

**Step 1:** Think of a word in your first language (or another language you know) that sounds like the L2 word or the beginning of the L2 word. This is your keyword.

**Step 2:** Think of an image involving the meaning of the L2 word and the meaning of the meaning of the keyword. It is important that you actually visualize this image in your mind. So, the keyword technique has four parts.

- (1) The new L2 word
- (2) The keyword
- (3) The image involving the L2 word and the keyword.
- (4) The meaning of the L2 word.

In the following examples, the four parts are numbered to match the four parts of the technique. If you are Indonesian and you want to remember (4) the meaning of (1) *parrot*, then you can use (2) the Indonesian word parit meaning “ditch” as the keyword. You then (3) imagine a parrot in a ditch.



So the keyword performs two functions: to provide a form link, e.g. parit-parrot, and to provide a meaning link ‘parrot’-‘ditch’. If you are Thai and you want to learn (1) the English word *council*, then you can use as (2) the keyword the Thai *phrase khâaw sǎan* which means ‘uncooked rice’.



You think of (3) the meaning of uncooked rice in an image with the meaning of *council*, as in the picture. This then helps you to attach (4) the meaning of *council* to the form council.

The keyword technique works because it makes you process more than one feature of a word and this processing is not shallow in the way that exact repetition is shallow. The only limit is your imagination! The keyword does not have to sound exactly like the foreign word to be learned, and it does not have to be like all of the word. If the form of the keyword is like the beginning of the foreign word, then that is usually enough. In research, the keyword technique typically results in 25% more learning than other deliberate learning activities.

(adapted from Nation, I.S.P. (2008). *Teaching Vocabulary: Strategies and Techniques*. Boston: Heinle Cengage Learning)

## • How can you learn multiword phrases?

Words typically occur with other words to make up phrases. Most of these phrases have a meaning that is closely related to the meanings of the words that they contain, for example, *next week, six o'clock, strong tea, in a minute*. For some phrases, the relationship between the meaning of the phrase and the words it contains is not quite so clear, but there is still a strong connection. For example, *kill two birds with one stone, see the light at the end of the tunnel, you know, for instance, think about*. For a small number of phrases, the meaning of the parts has no obvious connection with the meaning of the whole, for example, *at all, of course, as well, by and large, raining cats and dogs*.

There are many words to describe these various kinds of phrases such as *idioms, collocations, multiword units, figuratives, and lexical bundles*. However, what is important about all the various kinds of phrases is that it is worth giving some deliberate attention to them as phrases, because this will help towards more accurate and fluent use of the language.

There are several ways of giving this attention.

- 1 Work out how the meanings of the parts relate the meaning of the whole. For phrases and clauses that have a figurative meaning, this may involve seeing the connection between the literal meaning and the figurative meaning. For example, *gave me the green light* has the literal meaning of seeing a green traffic light. Its figurative meaning is getting permission to move forward.
- 2 Look at the form of the phrase. About 20% of phrases in English make use of alliteration (words beginning with the same sound), such as *leading light, baby boom, head held high* or some other sound connection such as similar vowel sounds (*blue moon*), rhyme (*when the cat's away, the mice will play*), repetition (*by and by*), and partial rhyme (*last gasp*).
- 3 Think about and find out about the history of the phrase. Where do *toe the line* and *cut and run* come from?

Just as words differ in their frequency of occurrence, so do phrases. Some are very frequent and a much larger number are not so frequent (see **Note 2.1: Are all words created equal?**). You can check to see how frequent a phrase is by using a concordancer (see **Chapter 2**).

- **Is it good to learn related words together?**

Although it seems like a good idea to learn related words at the same time, whether it is helpful or not depends on the relationship between them. Words like near synonyms (*embarrass-humiliate, prevent-protect*), opposites (*hot-cold, long-short*), and members of a lexical set (days of the week, colours, the names of fruit, articles of clothing, parts of the body) are best **not** learned together. The effect of learning them together is so strong that it can make learning 50% to 100% more difficult. Being 100% more difficult means that it would take twice as many repetitions to learn these words compared to learning unrelated words. It has been suggested that where the related words are nouns, objects which are nearer to each other in shape, *apple-orange*, are more likely to interfere than objects which are different in shape, *banana-orange*.

The relationship that helps learning is where the words are related as if in a story (*frog, pond, green, slimy, hop, croak*). So, it is a good idea to note words from your reading onto word cards as these words are unlikely to be members of the same lexical set.

When learning items that are similar to each other there is not only the difficulty of learning the items but also the difficulty of not mixing them up with each other. If the words also have some formal similarities this can make interference even more likely. We are more likely to confuse *Tuesday* and *Thursday* than *Tuesday* and *Sunday* because *Tuesday* and *Thursday* begin with the same letter and both contain *s* and *day*.

The way to reduce the effects of interference is to learn possibly interfering items at different times, not together.

### **Activity 5.2: Transcription**

Transcription involves getting a recording of a short spoken text on a relevant topic and replaying it many times while trying to make a written version of it. The text should only be around 100 words long. It is best to choose a spoken text where you can get a written version to check and correct what you have transcribed. When you re-listen to the text it is OK to pause its playback and focus on parts of the text.

This deliberate learning activity improves listening skills and provides useful feedback on word and phrase recognition.



### **Activity 5.3: Intensive reading**

Intensive reading is a way of deliberately focusing on language features as they are used in context.

Intensive reading involves working your way slowly and carefully through a text with the help of a dictionary. Your goal is to gradually understand the text by working out the meaning of the parts you do not understand at first. The activity can be done alone, or with the help of another learner, or with the help of a teacher. Often translation is used as a way of clarifying parts of the text.

Another way of doing intensive reading, especially for learners working alone, is to do repeated reading paying attention to different aspects of the text on each repetition. For example, the first reading could focus on the unknown vocabulary in the text and on comprehension. The second reading could focus on useful multiword units that could be used productively in later speaking or writing. The third reading could focus on the use of some of the function words in the text, such as prepositions or articles. The value of this intensive repeated reading is that when we read our main focus is on the meaning and thus largely the content words. When we are familiar with the content, we can then give our attention to how the language is being used to convey messages, and this kind of attention is very useful for language learning. This kind of repeated attention with a change of focus is also worth doing while listening, such as when watching a recorded TV program or a movie.

### **Activity 5.4: Delayed copying**

Choose a useful and relevant text around 200 words long (about 20 lines). Read to understand it with the help of a dictionary if necessary. Then look at the first four or five words in the text, try to hold them in your memory, and then copy them down onto a piece of paper without looking back at the text. As you work your way through the text copying it, try to hold longer sequences in your head. The benefit of the activity comes from trying to hold longer and longer phrases in your head before you write them down.

This deliberate learning activity improves handwriting skills and memory for phrases.

### Activity 5.5: Spelling practice

If the language you are learning uses a writing system or a spelling system that is very different from that of your first language, it is worth giving some deliberate attention to the writing system.

An effective way to do this is to write the words or phrases you want to practice in a list down the left hand side of a lined page. If the writing system uses letters of the alphabet (unlike Chinese), write the first letter of each word after the end of each word.

rhythm    r  
agree     a  
common   c

Fold the paper so you can only see the first letters, and then try to write the words from memory.

rhythm    rhythm  
agree     agree  
common   common

Unfold the paper and check your work. Write the first letter of each word again, fold the paper, and write the words again. Do this until each line is filled.

### • How do you learn pronunciation?

Learning to pronounce the language in a clear way is a very important learning goal.

Clear pronunciation will help you to be better understood by native speakers, and they will also appreciate your efforts. Like other aspects of language knowledge, it is helped if there is the opportunity to listen to the language (meaning-focused input), to speak (meaning-focused output), to study aspects of pronunciation (language-focused learning), and to get fluent in listening to and speaking about easy familiar topics (fluency development). Young children seem to have little need for language-focused learning to develop their pronunciation of another language, and rely on the three meaning-focused strands.

Older learners are much less likely to develop a native-like pronunciation, although some do. Most older learners may need to be satisfied with a comprehensible accented pronunciation, although extra effort can result in improvement. For older learners, the quality of their pronunciation is likely to depend on their opportunities to use the language, and the amount of time and effort they spend on the deliberate study of pronunciation.

The deliberate study of pronunciation should involve first of all finding out what the difficult sounds are. This will largely depend on the differences between your first language and the language you are learning. Secondly, the individual sounds that are difficult should be studied and practised in simple syllables. The study of how sounds are made is called *articulatory phonetics*. For example, for learners of English, the sound at the beginning of *the, this, there, and that* is often a problem. Knowing whether it is voiced or voiceless, whether it is a stop or fricative, and what parts of the mouth are used to make the sound can help in learning to pronounce the sound. The sound in *the* is a voiced (using your vocal cords), fricative (using top teeth and tip of the tongue).

Once a difficult sound can be made in an isolated syllable, it needs to be practised in the most common words that it appears in, and should be also practised in phrases and short sentences. It is not a good idea to practice such sounds in tongue twisters as these are often too difficult even for native speakers.

A well-informed teacher is particularly helpful when learning individual sounds. Practice in words and phrases can be done using a computer-based audio editor which can slow speech down. The freely available program *Audacity* is a good choice. Also, repeatedly imitating clips from movies can help with pronunciation.

It is worth spending time on pronunciation early in the learning of a language because later remedial work on pronunciation requires much more effort.

### • How do you learn grammar (or anything)?

A large part of this book focuses on the principle of the four strands. This principle says that in order to have a proper balance of opportunities for learning, we need to spend about one quarter of our time learning through input, about one quarter of our time learning through output, about one quarter of our time doing deliberate learning, and about one quarter of our time working with easy input and output in order to develop fluency. The principle of the four strands is a very powerful principle because it allows us to answer questions like *How do we learn grammar?*, *How do we learn vocabulary?*, *How do we learn to speak in another language?* and so on. Let us look at an example of this by addressing the question *How do we learn grammar?*.

Typically, people think of the learning of grammar as involving learning the names of parts of speech, learning to describe grammatical constructions, and learning how to correct errors. However, these are all ways of doing deliberate learning, and most of the learning of grammar needs to involve using the language.

We can learn grammar through listening and reading. When we repeatedly meet grammatical constructions in our reading and listening, we learn them without having to give them much, if any, deliberate attention. This is partly because a lot of grammar learning occurs through learning phrases, that is, we learn what words go with other words. The more we read and listen, the more we have a chance to increase our receptive grammatical knowledge.

We can also learn grammar through speaking and writing. When we speak and write, we notice gaps in our knowledge, and this noticing increases the chances that we will give attention to these gaps when we listen and read. That is, having to speak and write can improve the chances of learning through listening and reading. We can also learn grammar through speaking and writing by taking chances. That is, we try out phrases and constructions that we are unsure about to see if they work. Often this trying out makes use of patterns from our first language. So this trying out can be a risky business which may result in error, but it is an important way of learning.

We can learn grammar deliberately, by studying it and by memorizing useful phrases and sentences but deliberate study of the grammar should make up much less than one quarter of your language learning time. Useful grammar study activities include using substitution tables if they are available, getting feedback on spoken and written production (correcting errors), doing dictation activities, and having small amounts of clear simple explanations of important grammatical features.

Just as we can learn grammar through meaning-focused input and meaning-focused output, we can also learn grammar incidentally through fluency development. Fluency development involves working with very easy familiar material with some encouragement to go faster. Fluency development activities can provide large amounts of input and output, and because of this increased exposure to the language, fluency development activities can add to and strengthen grammatical knowledge both receptively and productively.

### • How do you learn vocabulary?

The four strands principle applies to the learning of vocabulary in the same way that it applies to the learning of grammar, and to the learning of the skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. We need to learn vocabulary through meaning-focused input, through meaning-focused output, through language-focused learning, and through fluency development. Meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, and fluency development activities are all communicative activities where we are

involved in understanding and producing messages. The basic requirement of these communicative activities is that we are working at a level of difficulty which is suitable for our present level of proficiency.

The deliberate learning of vocabulary involves deliberately studying unknown words (preferably through the use of bilingual word cards), deliberately focusing on vocabulary with the help of a teacher or a dictionary as when doing intensive reading, getting feedback on our spoken and written production, and deliberately learning strategies such as guessing from context, using word cards, analysing words into word parts, and dictionary use.

We can apply the four strands in the same way to the learning of the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. Because three of the strands involve communicative activities, the major differences between the learning of listening, speaking, reading and writing come from the focus on input (listening and reading) or output (speaking and writing), and particularly on the ways of doing deliberate learning for each of the four language skills.

Deliberate learning activities are typically the kinds of activities we think about when we think of how to learn another language. However, deliberate learning is only one strand of a well-balanced course and should take up no more than one-quarter of the total time in a course.

In the next chapter we look at the fourth strand of a course—fluency development.

So far, in following the principle that there should be a balance of learning opportunities, we looked at learning through input (listening and reading) in Chapter 3, we looked at learning through output (speaking and writing) in Chapter 4, and in Chapter 5 we looked at deliberate learning. In this chapter, we look at the fourth strand – fluency development.

Fluency involves making the best use of what you already know. At every stage of language proficiency right from the very beginning lessons, you need to be fluent in using what you have already learnt. For example, when you learn the numbers, you should be able to recognise them quickly in a spoken form, so that when you go into a shop to buy something, you can understand the price.

There are several popular ideas about fluency. When we say that someone is fluent in the language, we mean that they know a lot of the language and know it well. That is not the kind of fluency that we are talking about here. Another meaning of fluency is that someone is able to choose exactly the right word or phrase at the right time to suit the occasion. That also is not the kind of fluency that we are talking about here. In this chapter, when we use the word fluency, we simply mean the speed at which you can produce and understand the language. This is a very simple idea of fluency, but it is a very important language learning goal.

How do you become fluent? Fluency activities have four important characteristics.

- 1 They involve easy familiar material that contains no unknown vocabulary or unknown grammatical features.
- 2 They include some pressure to go at a faster speed.
- 3 They involve a large quantity of practice.
- 4 They involve a focus on receiving or communicating messages.

Let us now look at a range of activities for developing fluency across the four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

### • Developing listening fluency

Listening fluency can be developed with the help of a digital recorder with a variable speed control or a playback program with speed control such as the Windows Flash

player (just right click in the play screen and look under *Enhancements*). A useful way to begin is to get a recording of a text which is also available in written form. The text should not be too long, around 200 or 300 words. The first step is to study the written text carefully to make sure that it is completely understandable. Then, listen to the text while looking at the written version, setting the digital playback to a slow speed. Then over several days, increase the speed of the playback so that eventually you are listening to the text at a close to normal speed.

Repeated listening (without increasing the speed) can also be done with short films or movies with subtitles. Repetition is an important factor in fluency development because repeated material becomes easier, and repetition provides quantity of practice.

### **Activity 6.1: Repeated listening**

Get someone to record the numbers from one to ten in the foreign language in a random order, for example, 6, 3, 8, 1, 7, 10, 2, 9, 4, 5, 3, 10, 3, 6. Each number should occur several times in a different place in the order so that you have plenty of opportunity to hear the same number again and again without knowing that it is coming. Write the numbers in order from 1 to 10 on a piece of paper, and as you listen to the recording point to the number that you hear. When you can do it easily at a slow speed, increase the speed and do it again. Keep doing this until you can easily recognize the numbers in their spoken form. It is best if you spread of the practice across several days rather than have one concentrated session of listening to the numbers.

This activity makes use of repetition and increasing speed, and quickly develops fluency in comprehending numbers. You can also use it for days of the week, months of the year, greetings names of food and many other things.

## • **Developing speaking fluency**

In order to develop fluency in speaking, it is useful to produce the same spoken material again and again. The 4/3/2 activity is well suited to this.

### **Activity 6.2: 4/3/2**

In the 4/3/2 activity, you speak on a very easy topic to a listener for 4 minutes. The listener does not interrupt or ask questions but simply listens carefully. Then you speak on exactly the same topic again

to a different listener, but this time you have only 3 minutes to complete the same talk. Once again, the listener does not interrupt the speaking but just listens. Finally, you speak on exactly the same topic again to a new listener, with only 2 minutes to complete the talk.

The 4/3/2 activity contains the four requirements for fluency development - easy material (the topic is very familiar to you), pressure to go faster (because of the reducing time), quantity of practice (4+3+2 minutes), and a focus on communication (three different listeners). In the early stages of proficiency, instead of 4/3/2 you might find it easier to do 3/2/1½. The decreasing time in the activity most affects fluency, and the repetition has a greater effect on improving accuracy and complexity.

If you are learning a language on your own, then you may not have the opportunity to do the 4/3/2 activity with different listeners. However you can do repeated speaking on your own without an audience.

- **Developing reading fluency**

Reading fluency involves being able to read silently with good comprehension at a speed of around 250 words per minute.

Reading fluency develops through reading lots of easy familiar material. In English, there are speed reading courses which contain texts that are written within very controlled vocabulary levels (1,000 words, 2,000 words) and which do not contain difficult grammatical constructions (see Sonia Millett's web site) (see **Activity 6.4**). These texts are all of the same length and are accompanied by comprehension questions. When you read each one you keep a record of your reading time, and record the time and comprehension score on graphs. You do twenty pieces of reading like this, completing about two or three each week. By doing such a course, you can increase your reading speed by at least 50%, and you may even double your reading speed. Speed reading courses like these do not result in super-fast reading, but they result in reading speeds which are close to those of native speakers, at around 250 words per minute.

Another way to increase reading speed is to read very easy material. If the language you are learning has graded readers (unfortunately not many languages beside English do), then you can read texts which are written at a very easy level with strict vocabulary control.

If easy written material is not available, then reading speed can be increased by doing repeated reading.



### **Activity 6.3: Repeated reading**

Repeated reading involves reading the same material at least three times, each time trying to increase the speed at which it is read. Repeated reading can be done while reading aloud, or while reading silently. It is a good idea to keep a record of the time taken for each reading.

If repeated reading is done while reading aloud, then a reasonable goal is a reading speed of around 150 words per minute. If repeated reading is done while reading silently, then a reasonable goal is a reading speed of around 250 words per minute.

When doing repeated reading it is important that the material being read is understood. Reading fluency must involve comprehension.

### **Activity 6.4: Speed reading**

A speed reading course typically involves a set of twenty passages of equal difficulty, each followed by a set of multiple-choice comprehension questions based on the passage. The reading passages are written within a controlled vocabulary so that you will not meet any unfamiliar vocabulary. You choose a passage, note the time or start a timer, and quietly read the passage trying to maintain a reasonable speed. When you reach the end of the passage, note the time you have taken to read it and then turn the passage over to answer the comprehension questions. When answering the questions, do not look back at the passage. Then get the answer key and score the answers to the questions. The time to read the passage is converted to words per minute using a table and this speed is entered on your speed graph. Your comprehension score is entered onto your comprehension graph. All of this takes only a few minutes.

Then a couple of days later read a different text measuring speed and comprehension, until eventually all twenty texts have been read.

Speed reading courses like this will help you increase your reading speed by 50% and maybe even double your reading speed. The aim is to reach speeds at around 250 words per minute with comprehension scores of around 7 or 8 out of 10.

## **• Developing writing fluency**

Writing fluency is particularly important if you have to take written exams in the language you are learning. There are two useful techniques that you can use to develop writing fluency—10 minute writing, and repeated writing.

### **Activity 6.5: 10 minute writing**

In 10 minute writing, you choose an easy topic to write about that you are interested in. You should use a digital timing app and write for exactly 10 minutes. Try to write as much as you can in the time. At the end of exactly 10 minutes, count the number of words that you have written and enter that number on a graph. Do 10 minute writing two or three times a week.

Because this is a fluency development activity, do not worry about any mistakes that you make but simply concentrate on writing more.

This is an easy activity to do without a teacher. As with other fluency development activities, you should not worry too much about errors as doing so could slow down your writing.

### **Activity 6.6: Repeated writing**

Repeated writing is particularly useful if you have to sit tests where you know the kind of question you will have to answer and you are able to prepare answers for the test. It is also useful for written tasks that you need to do very often.

Repeated writing involves doing a piece of writing, getting it checked and corrected, looking at it carefully, putting it away and then writing it again from memory. When you have completed the piece of writing, you can check your writing with the original (see **Activity 5.2: Delayed copying** for a similar activity). The same piece of writing should be repeated at least two or three times, so that the final production can be done fluently.

One way to develop fluency at a very low level of proficiency is to memorize useful phrases and sentences (see **Activity 4.1: Memorized sentences and dialogues**). This memorization ensures that what is produced is accurate, and through practice it can be produced fluently. The most useful sentences and phrases to memorize are those in the survival vocabulary. However, it is important to consider why you are learning the language and the opportunities that you have to use it, and find and memorize useful sentences and phrases related to this use.

At every stage of language proficiency, you should be able to use what you have learnt in a fluent way.

We have now covered the four strands of a course which is number 2 in our list of basic principles. In the next chapter we look at principle 3 – apply conditions that help learning.

The aim of this chapter is to help you understand the learning conditions that lie behind many of the activities that are recommended for language learning. By understanding these conditions, you should be able to use these activities well. Knowing why you are doing something can improve the way you do it.

- **Learning conditions**

The more something is repeated, the more likely it is to be learned.

Repetition works best if it is spaced. That is, rather than having all the repetitions occurring together in a short time, there should be a reasonable amount of time between the repetitions. As a word becomes better known, the spacing should get quite large, such as a space of several weeks or months. Well-designed flash card programs apply this idea of increasingly spaced repetitions. When we read, we also tend to get spaced repetitions.

The effects of repetition are strengthened if quality of attention is added to each repetition. An important and easily applied way of adding quality is retrieval. Retrieval involves bringing something that you have met before back to your consciousness. For example, having heard the name of an object, a few minutes later you try to recall what that name was. Each successful retrieval strengthens the connection between the word form and its meaning. The more successful retrievals, the better the learning will be. Note that if you see a word and its meaning written together, this is not a retrieval, because you did not have to recall the meaning or the word. So, if for example you are about to look up a word in the dictionary and you know you have already looked it up before, it is good to spend a few seconds trying to recall its meaning before looking it up. One of the major reasons for using word cards or flash card programs as a way of deliberately learning vocabulary is that these techniques encourage retrieval. You see the word form and then have to try and retrieve its meaning, or you see the meaning and have to try and retrieve the word form. There is no set number of repetitions for learning to occur, but a minimum would be at least eight, and the more the better.

Another way of adding quality to a repetition is varied meetings and varied use. Varied meetings involve meeting the same word again in reading or listening in

different forms, different contexts, and different senses. *Different forms* means that the word may have different endings such as plural compared with singular or present compared with past. *Different contexts* means that the word occurs with a different grammatical function or in connection with different words from previous meetings. For example, we may first meet the word *cry* in *The child cried and cried*. The next time we meet it may be as a reporting verb in *Stop there, he cried*. *Different senses* means that the word is used with a slightly or rather different meaning that is still related to its core meaning. For example, you may meet the word *sweet* when it refers to a taste and then you may meet it again when it refers to someone's face. There are different degrees of variation and the more varied the meetings, the more likely the word is to be remembered. So far we have looked at varied meetings such as occur in listening and reading.

Varied use also occurs in speaking and writing. The more we use a word in different ways, the more likely we are to remember it. Varied use has more powerful effects than varied meetings.

So far we have looked at repetition, retrieval, and varied meetings and varied use. Learning is also helped, at least for some learners, by associating visual images with language items and language use. When we use language to do things, this use has its visual associations and probably helps learning. One theory of learning, the dual coding theory, says that things processed visually and linguistically will be remembered better than those coded only in one of these two ways. Pictures however can have a negative effect if they distract too much attention from the language items that need to be learned.

Deliberate attention is also a major condition affecting learning.

### • Applying the learning conditions

Because repetition is so important for learning, it is good to work out ways of repeating the same activities over and over again. This repetition should involve retrieval wherever possible and should be varied in small ways so that there is opportunity for varied use. Here are some ways of getting repetition.

- 1 Re-read a book you have already read before
- 2 Listen to a book you have already read before. If the book is in electronic form, you can use a text-to-speech program to do this. Some web sites like Project Gutenberg have both written and spoken versions of the same text.

- 3 Do linked skills activities (See **Activity 7.1**). That is, write about what you have read, talk about what you have written.
- 4 Keep coming back to things that you did a few days or weeks ago.

### **Activity 7.1: Linked skills activities**

Linked skills activities are among the most useful activities for language learning. They involve working with the same content material across three different skills, for example, reading a passage, then listening to the passage, and then writing about the passage. Because the same material is focused on, there are plenty of opportunities for repetition. Through this repetition the tasks become easier, so that by the time you get to the third part of a linked skills activity, this third part has the characteristics of a fluency development activity.

The four skills include listening, speaking, reading, and writing, and in a linked skills activity typically three of these four skills should occur. The success of a linked skills activity will depend on how closely the same content material is repeated in each of the three parts of the activity.

#### • **Making the best use of a teacher**

While it is possible to learn a language by yourself, there are clear advantages in having a teacher. Let us look at the advantages of having a teacher by seeing what activities across the four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing along with deliberate learning can benefit from having a private teacher.

For listening, the teacher can record texts for transcription. This means that you get well pronounced listening input while trying to make sense of the language features. A teacher is also very useful for helping and developing fluency with numbers, phrases and useful sentences (**Activity 4.1 Memorized sentences or dialogues**). The teacher can also be a very supportive partner in communication activities which provide practice in both meaning-focused listening and speaking. It is often useful to begin a lesson with such speaking particularly when the conversation draws on material covered in earlier lessons.

For speaking, in addition to conversation practice, you can talk with your teacher about your issues log (**Activity 8.1**), you can check the language in your prepared talks (**Activity 4.3**), you can practice pronunciation, and you can use the teacher as a source of useful phrases and sentences to memorize in order to gain fluency in elementary

speaking. You can also use a private teacher as your partner in variations of the 4/3/2 fluency development activity. The essence of this activity is repeated retrieval of the material that you want to practice, and although you may have to repeat the same material to the same listener, the teacher, the teacher is likely to give you useful feedback after the activity, and also help you during the first delivery to correct what you are saying.

For reading, the teacher can help you with intensive reading (**Activity 5.3**), dealing with any reading problems that you have including understanding vocabulary and grammar points.

For writing, the teacher can provide feedback on your writing, helping you correct important written texts that you may often need to produce.

Private teachers are likely to come with their own lesson plans and ideas of teaching, and it is useful if you can guide the teacher to some degree by making sure that you get a balance of opportunities for learning across the four strands of meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, language-focused learning, and fluency development.

If you are not working with a private teacher, but are part of a foreign language class, it may be useful to see if the teacher is willing to run part of the class at least using a negotiated syllabus.

A negotiated syllabus exists when the teacher and the learners negotiate with each other to decide how they will make use of the class time. The typical way of introducing a negotiated syllabus is for the teacher to teach the course for a few days or weeks, and then get the learners to recall the kinds of things that have been done in class over that period of time and list them on the whiteboard. The teacher then says that you have seen what we can do in class but now I want you to talk with each other and then to talk with me to see what you would like to do over the next week or two. The resulting discussion will be more practical if the teacher puts a blank timetable on the whiteboard. This makes the learners see that they can't just have an unlimited list of suggestions but have to fit them into the time available for the class. After negotiating the various suggestions, the teacher then puts the suggestions into practice in the following week or two weeks, and then at the end of that time the negotiation can occur again.

Such negotiation makes sure that the class activities and content are meeting the learners' needs, and a negotiated syllabus can provide very useful feedback for a teacher.

One of the major problems with a negotiated syllabus is that learners are often not aware of the full range of possibilities that can occur when learning a language. By reading this book, I hope that you are now aware of such possibilities, and thus could play a very useful and informed part in negotiating a syllabus.

Not all teachers may welcome learners playing an active part in deciding what should be taught and how it should be taught. On the other hand, many teachers will welcome it, because it makes their job easier and ensures that the learner or learners will be satisfied with the classes.

### • How necessary is a teacher?

The teacher's most important job is to plan so that there is a balance of opportunities for learning across the four strands, and so that the most useful material is met at each stage of learning. Learners can do this planning themselves, but they need to know about the language they are learning. A well-informed teacher can be a big help here.

The teacher's next most important job is to organize. According to the principle of the four strands, three-quarters of the learning time should be spent using the language for communicative purposes (meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, fluency development) at the level which most suits you. A teacher can play an important part in choosing and organizing the activities which provide this communicative activity. When learning one-to-one with a private teacher, the teacher can be a very supportive communication partner.

A teacher is particularly useful when doing language-focused learning. The teacher can provide correct models of pronunciation and grammatical use to copy. The teacher can also provide feedback on errors, explain words and grammar difficulties, and model appropriate language use. The teacher can also provide useful cultural information.

Overall, a good teacher is of great value when learning a language. However, a well-informed learner can do many of the teacher's jobs, and a goal of this book is to help learners become more informed about language learning.

In the next and final chapter of this book, we look at the fourth principle, which involves keeping engaged with learning the language.

### • How long does it take to learn another language?

The following information is taken directly from Pimsleur (1980). The Foreign Service Institute of the Department of State in the United States rates the languages they teach, based on the difficulty their students have had over the years in mastering them. Group 1 is “easiest”, Group 4 the “hardest” (Table 8.1).

On average, a person learning a difficult language will take more time to reach the same level of proficiency as a person learning an easy language. Table 8.2 briefly describes five levels of proficiency.

“FSI researchers studied the performance of all their students during a three-year period, noting the ratings they received after various periods of training. Table 8.3 shows the results for the “easy” languages, and for the “hard” languages.”

Pimsleur notes that these figures are based on high quality, intensive instruction of around 30 hours per week. The information about what can be achieved in certain time spans provides a rough indication of whether the goals of a course are realistic or need to be changed, or whether extra time needs to be found through study outside of regular class time.

**Table 8.1** Difficulty ratings of languages for native-speakers of English

Group 1 (The easiest)	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4 (The hardest)
French	Bulgarian	Amharic	Arabic
German	Burmese	Cambodian	Chinese
Indonesian	Greek	Czech	Japanese
Italian	Hindi	Finnish	Korean
Portuguese	Persian	Hebrew	
Romanian	Urdu	Hungarian	
Spanish		Lao	
Swahili		Polish	
		Russian	
		Serbo-Croatian	
		Thai	
		Turkish	
		Vietnamese	



**Table 8.2** Language mastery ratings for social and business purposes

<p><b>1. Elementary proficiency.</b> The person is able to satisfy routine travel needs and minimum courtesy requirements.</p> <p><b>2. Limited working proficiency.</b> The person is able to satisfy routine social demands and limited work requirements.</p> <p><b>3. Minimum professional proficiency.</b> The person can speak the language with sufficient structural accuracy and vocabulary to participate effectively in most formal and informal conversations on practical, social and professional topics.</p> <p><b>4. Full professional proficiency.</b> The person uses the language fluently and accurately on all levels normally relevant to professional needs.</p> <p><b>5. Native or bilingual proficiency.</b> The person has speaking proficiency equivalent to that of an educated native speaker.</p>
---

So, if a native speaker of English wants to learn a hard language like Arabic to a level of limited working proficiency in an intensive course, it is likely to take that learner around 24 weeks to reach that level.

**Table 8.3** Learning rates for “Easy” and “Hard” languages

“Easy” Languages		“Hard” languages	
Proficiency ratings of FSI students speaking a Group 1 language after specified periods of training		Proficiency ratings of FSI students speaking a group 2-4 language after specified periods of training	
Training period	Rating	Training period	Rating
8 weeks (240 hours)	1/1+	12 weeks (360 hours)	1/1+
16 weeks (480 hours)	2	24 weeks (720 hours)	1+/2
24 weeks (720 hours)	2+	44 weeks (1320 hours)	2/2+/3

These figures are for native speakers of English learning another language. It is probably true that the information in the tables also works the other way. That is, because Japanese is classified as a hard language for native speakers of English, it is also likely that English will be a hard language for native speakers of Japanese, and an easy language for native speakers of Swedish.

It is interesting to think of the reasons for the different levels of difficulty of different languages for native speakers of other languages. An obvious difference is the writing system of the language. Many of the languages in groups 3 and 4 in Table 8.1 use a writing system that is unlike the English alphabet. Some of these writing systems like those of Korean and Thai use an alphabet which should make them easier to learn than Chinese or Japanese which make use of symbols for whole words. Another difference involves pronunciation. Languages like Vietnamese and Mandarin use tones, such as a low tone, a high tone, a falling tone, or a rising tone, and each word has to be said with the appropriate tone. Another difference related to pronunciation is whether the language is stress-timed or syllable-timed. English is a stress-timed language with roughly equal times between stresses. Indonesian is a syllable timed language with roughly equal time given to each syllable. Because of these different kinds of timing, it sounds to a speaker of one language that speakers of the other language speak very quickly.

Yet another source of difficulty is the closeness of the relationship between the languages based on their history. English is closely related to Swedish, Dutch, French, Italian, and Spanish. These languages share a lot of similar vocabulary which we call cognates and these cognates make the learning of vocabulary much easier. Around 60% of the vocabulary of English comes from French, Latin or Greek. Now because of the large amount of contact between speakers of different languages, and particularly because of the global influence of English, a lot of English words are being borrowed by speakers of other languages. These borrowings often result in changes to the form of the words but they are usually recognisable. There are often meaning changes too. The following words are used in Japanese and they have been borrowed from English. Can you guess their meaning? *apato*, *kisu*, *hamberga*, *warudo siris*. They mean apartment, a romantic kiss, hamburger, world series (in baseball).

The word building system can differ greatly from language to language. Like French Latin and Greek, English uses prefixes, stems and suffixes in many of its words. Finnish and Hungarian use many suffixes to indicate a wide range of different meanings.

Grammatical differences can also be a major source of difficulty. Someone learning English has to deal with the tense system of English (past tense and present tense), the use of singular and plural, countable and uncountable nouns, and English articles (*a* and *the*). Someone learning Malay has to deal with the use of classifiers where a special classifying word has to be used with particular nouns when indicating how many there are. For example, we have to say six sheets of paper, three sticks of matches, four animals of cows, each of the underlined words being the appropriate classifier for that particular noun.

Your knowledge of your first language has a major effect on the difficulty of learning another language and this becomes even more noticeable when you learn the other language later in life and as a foreign rather than second language.

Learning a language is thus a big job, and learning it well will take several years. It is therefore important that you keep working on learning the language and using whatever opportunities you can find to make use of it. It is thus good to keep yourself highly motivated about learning and to have positive views of your chances of success in learning. Let us now look at what you can do to keep yourself motivated.

- **Keep motivated**

A good thing to do is to talk to other learners who have been successful in learning the language and to get advice from them about what made them successful and what they found useful in their learning. You should think carefully about this advice, comparing it with the conditions described in Chapter 7.

Because learning another language is a long-term project, it can be motivating to break it down into short-term goals. An obvious short-term goal is to decide to learn a certain number of words each week, for example, 20 words a week. Over the period of the year this adds up to 1000 words which is around the learning rate of native speakers of English. When doing this learning, remember to apply the guidelines described in Chapter 5 on deliberate learning using word cards. Another short-term goal is to do a certain amount of reading at the right level each week. In the early stages of language learning, doing a total of somewhere between an hour or two hours a week each week (around 20 minutes a day) can have very good effects on learning, especially if the material being read does not contain many unknown words. Similarly, setting regular weekly goals for listening can greatly add to the amount of understandable input that you get. It may be helpful to motivation if you keep a brief record of this weekly work, ticking off each week as you complete the work. You might want to set yourself the rule that every day you do some work on learning and using the language even if on some days you spend only a few minutes. Big jobs are completed through many small steps.

The language items that you learn should be clearly relevant to you, and you need to give some thought about the situations in which you want to use the language so that you can make sure that all of these situations are covered in your learning. Table 8.4 contains a list of common and useful situations that you might wish to consider.

**Table 8.4** Common spoken language use situations

- |   |                                 |
|---|---------------------------------|
| • Talking about the weather                 | • Talking about your country    |
| • Talking about yourself and what you do    | • Asking for directions         |
| • Talking about your family                 | • Giving directions             |
| • Talking about your hobbies                | • Asking about public transport |
| • Talking about what you have done recently | • Using the post office         |
| • Talking about a movie                     | • Using the bank                |
| • Talking about a book                      | • Using public transport        |
| • Talking about a TV program                | • Using a restaurant            |
| • Talking about your recent travels         | • Buying takeaway food          |
| • Talking about your home town              | • Using the telephone           |

You can work out the words and sentences that you will need in such situations, memorize them and practice them.

If you are reading this book, then you are following an important motivational principle – learn about how to learn. There is an enormous amount of research on learning including language learning, and the purpose of this book is to explain some of the findings of this research in a practical way. If you understand why you are learning things in a certain way, then this increases your confidence and the skill with which you do the learning. For example, in Chapter 7 on learning conditions, we looked at the importance of spaced learning. Spaced learning results in much more learning and more secure learning than massed learning. Good learners take responsibility for their own learning and are not completely reliant on teachers to organise their learning for them. There is a whole field of study about taking responsibility for your own learning and this is called learner autonomy.

Different learners have different learning styles, but there are also important learning principles that need to be adapted to whatever style of learning you prefer. Note 8.1 lists the principles that we have looked at in this book.

**Note 8.1: What are the most important principles of language learning?**

1. Work out what your needs are and learn what is most useful for you, giving particular attention to items which occur frequently in the language.
2. Balance your learning across the four strands of meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, language-focused learning, and fluency development.

3. Apply conditions that help learning, particularly spaced repetition, retrieval, varied meetings and varied use, elaboration, and deliberate attention, particularly by using effective language learning activities.
4. Keep motivated and work hard by setting short-term goals, doing something to learn the language every day, learning useful things, learning about learning, learning about the language, and developing a specialist interest.
5. Spend time on task, spending a lot of time using the language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) that you need to learn.
6. Avoid interference by separating items which are closely related in meaning such as near synonyms, opposites, and members of a lexical set.
7. Take responsibility for your own learning by learning how to learn, by setting clear manageable goals, and by monitoring your learning.
8. Take every possibility to use and practice what you know. Although these opportunities may be limited outside the classroom, the Internet now provides a wealth of such opportunities. In addition, the relative ease of foreign travel also makes it possible to visit countries where the language you are learning is spoken, and if you prepare for such experiences carefully you can gain an enormous amount from them.

Several researchers have suggested principles for language learning (Ellis, 2005; Krahnke and Christison, 1983; Nation and Macalister, 2009) and the different suggestions at least partly agree with each other.

Learning a language is an interesting activity in its own right. That is, as we have seen, it is useful to observe the principles that work when learning a language, and it is also interesting to learn about the nature of language and the particular language you are learning, and to learn how the language is used in relation to the customs of the users of the language. Focuses of attention can include the following—language families (What language family does the foreign language fit into? What are other languages in this family? How are these languages related historically?), word building (Does the language make use of prefixes and suffixes? What are the most common ones? Do dictionaries contain an analysis of word parts for each word?), classifiers (Does the language make use of classifiers? What are the more general purpose classifiers?), What do people say and do in certain common cultural practices such as eating, meeting and leaving, giving thanks, refusing an offer, offering a gift and receiving a gift? This learning about language can be done through the L1, at least at the beginning of language learning. Its goal is to develop knowledge that will make deliberate language learning more analytical and effective.

Motivation can also be kept high if you develop a specialist interest that involves using the language (see **Activity 8.1: Issue logs**). The danger with issue logs is that a large proportion of the new vocabulary involved in a specialist area is technical vocabulary. In some specialist areas, this specialist vocabulary is unique to the subject area. In other specialist areas, much of the specialist vocabulary is also used outside the subject area, and so knowing the specialist vocabulary will help with language use outside that specialist area. For example, the vocabulary of anatomy in English is largely unique to that subject area (*costal, cervix, cardiac*). The vocabulary of environmental issues (*green, pollution, waterways*) is familiar outside that subject area. Choosing a topic that contains more widely useful topic-related vocabulary is better for language learning. Topics can include sports (Sumo in Japanese), a current event (trade talks or sovereignty disputes), a hobby (cooking in Thai), or a cultural practice (wayang kulit in Javanese).

### **Activity 8.1: Issue logs**

An issue log is a record of data gathered from a wide range of sources over a sustained period of time. For example, if the topic chosen by an individual is marriage customs in a particular culture, then data can be gathered about their history, current practice, and people's attitudes to marriage. Data can be gathered through reading books, articles and newspaper reports, by listening to news broadcasts, by observing marriage ceremonies, and by interviewing people. Because the primary goal of an issue log is to provide opportunities for language use and language learning, data-gathering, analysis and writing up or orally recording the data should continue over several months or years.

Ideally, the data-gatherer should report on the topic on a regular basis to other learners and to the teacher so that there is an opportunity for spoken interaction and repetition of the language features involved. However, an issue log can also just be an individual activity.

By focusing on a narrow topic area, the vocabulary load of the topic-related listening and reading input is greatly reduced (by at least 50%) compared with focusing on a varied range of topics. In addition, background knowledge of the topic is quickly built up, making it easier to deal with the input material and to gain large quantities of understandable input.

- **Work hard**

Learning another language requires a lot of learning (several thousand words as well as the grammar of the language) and a lot of practice (at least hundreds of hours). Although the task is a large one, it is manageable as long as you keep working at

it in a persistent way. When the task is broken down into daily and weekly goals, it does not seem so overwhelming. For example, Note 8.2 indicates how much time should be spent reading in order to have a good chance of increasing your vocabulary size in a substantial way. Such amounts of reading will also have a positive effect on grammatical knowledge and reading skill.

**Note 8.2: How much reading do you need to do?**

Is it possible to read enough to have a chance of learning most of the words you need to know? Table 8.5 gives approximate figures for the amount of text that needs to be read to meet most words at each 1000 word family level enough times (around 12) to have a chance of learning them. It assumes a moderate reading speed of 150 words per minute. Table 8.5 provides not only weekly time requirements, but also daily (5 days a week) time requirements.

Table 8.5: Amount of reading input and time needed to learn each of the most frequent nine 1,000 word families in English

1000 word list level	Amount to read	Time needed for reading per week (per day) at a reading speed of 150 words per minute
2 <sup>nd</sup> 1,000	200,000 words	33 minutes (7 minutes per day)
3 <sup>rd</sup> 1,000	300,000 words	50 minutes (10 minutes per day)
4 <sup>th</sup> 1,000	500,000 words	1 hour 23 minutes (17 minutes per day)
5 <sup>th</sup> 1,000	1,000,000 words	2 hours 47 minutes (33 minutes per day)
6 <sup>th</sup> 1,000	1,500,000 words	4 hours 10 minutes (50 minutes per day)
7 <sup>th</sup> 1,000	2,000,000 words	5 hours 33 minutes (1 hour 7 minutes per day)
8 <sup>th</sup> 1,000	2,500,000 words	6 hours 57 minutes (1 hour 23 minutes per day)
9 <sup>th</sup> 1,000	3,000,000 words	8 hours 20 minutes (1 hour 40 minutes per day)

Note: The per week figure is based on forty weeks, the daily rate is based on 5 days a week.

Table 8.5 shows that from the 4<sup>th</sup> 1000 level on, the increase required in the amount of reading is 500,000 words per year. From the 7<sup>th</sup> 1000 level on, over an hour a day five days a week, forty weeks of the year would need to be devoted to reading. This is a lot, but it assumes that this quantity of input is coming only through reading. Spoken sources are of course possible but these provide less intensive input. It takes around two hours to watch a typical 10,000 word movie (a rate of around 83 words per minute, or just over half of a reading rate of 150 words per minute). Nonetheless, an hour to an hour and forty minutes five times a week is possible.

There are no magic ways to learn a language without putting time and effort into the learning. However, if this time and effort is guided by knowledge about how to learn a language, and you keep working at learning and using the language, then you will surely be successful and enjoy the thrill of being able to speak another language

## References

- Nation, P. (2013a). *What should every ESL Teacher Know?* Seoul: Compass Publishing. (Available free at [www.compasspub.co/ESLTK](http://www.compasspub.co/ESLTK))
- Nation, P. (2013b). *What should every EFL Teacher Know?* Seoul: Compass Publishing.
- Nation, P. & Crabbe, D. (1991). A survival language learning syllabus for foreign travel. *System, 19*(3), 191-201.
- Nation, I. S. P., & Yamamoto, A. (2012). Applying the four strands to language learning. *International Journal of Innovation in English Language Teaching and Research, 1*(2), 167-181.
- Pimsleur, P. (1980). *How to Learn a Foreign Language*. Boston: Heinle and Heinle.