

*An introduction to your smartphone as a language learning tool*

*Many people say that they would like to learn a language but they find it too difficult. Well, learning a language does require an effort, a daily effort. This is sure. Yet, we make it unnecessarily difficult because we tend to mirror the approach to language learning in school, which has been thus far a MASSIVE FAILURE. Not just a failure, a massive, epic, legendary failure. Indeed, we “study” English at school for a number of years, I don’t even remember how many; then, our first trip, to the English-speaking world, we arrive in London (or New York, Sydney, doesn’t matter), and much to our dismay, we can’t understand anything. It is a really frustrating, disheartening experience.*

*Now, it is very fashionable today to blame it on the scarcity of native teachers. Oh, please, stop, stop with this rubbish. The problem lies in the conception itself of what a language is. We’re taught it is a set of logical rules that we need to master along with a list of exceptions, which we need to learn by heart, and then we’re almost done, you just need to build the vocabulary and apply the rules to it. So, pick up pen and paper and start conjugating verbs and declining nouns (notice that those who will make this kind of speech have generally never learned any foreign language). Now, it is just difficult to express in words the absurdity of an expression like ‘just need to learn the vocabulary’ given that even learning a basic 2,000-word vocabulary of a language requires an enormous effort. It is the whole conception of language should be overturned: learning a language means, first and foremost, learning to SPEAK it, but this misconception tells us that it is virtually ANYTHING but speaking. It is writing, playing with syntax, studying paradigms, very individual activities, while a language serves the purpose of interacting with other people.*

*Therefore, it should go without saying that the best way to learn a language is by interacting with other people as soon as possible. No, you don’t have to wait to reach a decent level, you have to throw yourself into the water and swim. Of course, you will speak badly: doing something badly is a necessary step to get to do it well. Do you think you can take up a guitar and start playing like Carlos Santana? No, you will start by playing two chords and badly. Look, this is exactly the way children learn a language: they start speaking as soon as possible and they do it badly of course but they improve fast, and they are not even fully developed. This is not because – let us challenge a longstanding misconception – their brain is better suited to do so, actually this is not the case. They do so because they have no choice. It is swim or sink for them; therefore, they put themselves in it and learn. There is also another important factor: unlike adults, children are free from the fear to result ridiculous. Ok, this is admittedly not easy to overcome but it can be done, it is worth it. Once you throw yourself in the water, things start looking less frightening.*

*Now, you may object, “Ok, smart arse, I live in Lapland and I want to learn Catalan, where am I going to find somebody to practice the language with?” This question is understandable, but a bit anachronistic in 2019, the answer is quite obvious: online! I will now briefly mention a few wonderful resources. No, I haven’t received any funding by anybody. First of all, I suggest you give a chance to Fi3M email courses from polyglot Benny Lewis on how to adopt a hands-on approach to language learning. You will also receive some tasks to perform daily who will definitely help you get out of your comfort zone. Then, a website I find incredibly good is Italki, where you can find partners for language exchanges and also affordable private lessons with professional teachers. I have had some lessons on Skype with Italki teachers and I can tell you they are really good. There is also a nice forum where you can ask questions and discuss topics with fellow members. Another good resource is LingQ, which offers the chance*

to have lessons with language tutors, like Italki, and is also more oriented on reading and listening, providing lessons, notes, podcasts, and so on. There are also websites which are dedicated to language exchanges on Skype or even pen pals via email. It is, for instance, the case of My Language Exchange or Conversation Exchange. An excellent resource, if you want to have a chat with a native speaker of your target language, is HelloTalk, an app you can just download and use on your smartphone. Speaking about apps, there are quite a few. Often, they are less than ideal but they can still be useful. I will tell you something about the three apps I use most. I would start with the superpopular Duolingo, which I have to tell you, is not my favorite one. There is a lot of hype about Duolingo, you can even hear people saying that they became fluent in a language just by using it... well, that is rubbish, it does not work like that. Still, it is useful to train your ear a bit over small-sized chunks of language and it is free. This is very important. You can find it as an app but you may also use the website with your laptop, as you prefer. In the latter case, you may also engage in conversations with the Duolingo community. Another app which I use and I find very useful to build vocabulary is Memrise which, unlike Duolingo, is based on spaced-repetition algorithms. It is not exactly a flashcard app like Anki (which everybody says it's great but I don't like it too much), and I find it much more useful, much more functional. Of course, it is not free, but all in all, it is very cheap (the first year is €23, I think... basically €2 per month... how much are you charged for a fruit juice at your local bar?). Like Duolingo, you can use the Memrise app and the web-based version. Then, there is Language Drops, which is very ingenious, although to my knowledge it is only available as a smartphone app. Language Drops is again very good to build a solid vocabulary by using verbal, visual, and kinesthetic techniques. The app is very well designed and it will meet the needs of those of you who really are rushed off your feet because it is based on five-minute sessions.

And then, of course, there are thousands of resources, podcasts, YouTube channels. For instance, if you're interested in learning Portuguese, I would suggest that you give a chance to Portuguese with Marcia Macedo and to Speaking Brazilian. If you want to learn French, I personally like InnerFrench very much. If you are interested in Italian, I have recently come across Italiano con, Eli. There are plenty, just be curious, try, and find the resources which work best for you. Above all, please, find somebody to chat with on Skype. That will make a difference in a short time.

Of course, none of these resources alone will teach you the language, but a good combination of these will help you take significant steps ahead without having to move to the country where the language is spoken, which is, of course, the most effective way, but not many people can afford it, and, once you overcome the first obstacles, you may start reading books, watching movies, living at least part of your life in that language. Because you don't just speak a language, you actually live it –even without moving from your place.

Ok, it is all for today. Thank you very much for reading this text. The videos will be back on October 30. Now, I'm taking a little break because I'm going to visit my little sister in Galicia (A Coruña!!!) for the first holiday in seven years. Of course, then I'll be back and, I know myself a bit, I will probably come back with some books on the Galician language, so maybe, later on, it will be the topic of a video. So, see you in four weeks; meanwhile, have fun, enjoy yourselves, and keep exploring languages! Bye!