

Learn any language in one lesson...sort of

Timothy Butthod

The Idea

It all started on a train from France to Germany when I was eighteen. I had studied French in high school, so I was able to communicate pretty well there, but I was going to Germany, and I knew no German at all. Before leaving for my great European adventure, I had bought a 14-language phrasebook. This little five-dollar gem had a brief overview of key phrases in each language, so I opened to the German section. Fortunately I was on the train, so I had time to study. I didn't become fluent in German on that train ride, but I did pick up a few words and phrases.

Then the story repeated itself on a train from Germany to Holland, later in Italy and Spain. It was just a quick overview of each language (greetings, basic nouns, verbs and adjectives, how to order a meal or check in to a hotel, numbers, etc.)—not too much to take in, but enough to see some simple grammar patterns. You can't learn a language in one train ride, but you can memorize a bit (greetings, numbers), and become familiar with the rest of it so you know how to go back and look it up when you need it.

After years of traveling, I realized a few things. First, I realized what my goal was. I was not trying to learn these languages perfectly. I was not trying to read literature, give speeches or do business in these languages. All I wanted to do was talk to people a little bit, order a meal or ask directions, but I wanted to do it now. I also realized something about the language I needed. There were certain words, phrases and grammar patterns that I needed again and again.

The Basics

In every country, in any language, I tended to want to say the same things. Using my experience I could predict the language I might need. This way I was able to focus my study more efficiently. There were basically three categories of things I

wanted to learn.

Some of the things I needed were set phrases, like “How much?” or “Do you have a room available for tonight?” For sentences like this, you basically have to memorize them. Since you learn it as one unit, you really don’t have to worry about grammar. You just memorize a whole sentence as if it were a long vocabulary word. This isn’t as hard as it seems, however. If you have to say the same thing over and over, day after day, it starts to roll pretty smoothly off your tongue after a while.

The second category is phrases like “Where is the restroom?” You could simply memorize it and use it whenever you need to go to the restroom. However, it is very likely that you will also need to ask about other things, like the telephone, the station or the youth hostel. For that purpose, it’s more efficient to learn “Where is…?” as one unit and plug in the appropriate vocabulary in the blank. You can follow the same process for phrases like, “I’d like a …, please,” or “My … hurts.” Learning phrases like this is sort of a mix between learning grammar and vocabulary. You memorize the building blocks, but you put them together differently each time.

After you get used to using these semi-fixed phrases, you will probably want to say more original things. To get the freedom you need to talk about different topics and ideas, you will need to learn some basic rules of grammar. Over the years, I have put together a list of grammar points that I think are important if you want to make your own sentences in a new language. No one has time to learn everything, so you have to be careful to choose the points that are most useful. For example, I have found that the modal verb forms “can,” “want to,” and “have to” are often quite useful, but the modals “should” and “might” don’t seem to be as useful at a basic level.

Using these principles, I developed a skeleton framework of basic expressions to learn, looking up other words to plug in as the need arose. In this article I will propose that framework for you and give an example. This way, when you travel abroad, you can start talking immediately, without waiting until you’ve spent years learning the language. It won’t be perfect, but you have to start somewhere.

The Guide

Appendix One shows my worksheet for organizing the basic information in any language. Use a dictionary and a phrasebook to fill in the information, and you'll have your own homemade mini-language guide.

Appendix Two is an example of the guide, filled out with basic words and phrases in Spanish.

After you have put together your mini-language guide, you probably already have some idea about the key words and basic grammar of the language. Carry it around and study it; you can even laminate it. Don't be shy about pulling it out and looking at it during your trip.

Even if you don't have a chance to travel, this kind of project can be interesting and informative. I tried out the idea of a mini-course in several languages this year with the second-year students at Hiroshima Bunkyo Women's University in a course called International Communication, and now most of them can say some basic words in French and Spanish, and they can even decipher words in Russian and Korean. At the very least, I believe they understand a bit about how a language works, and they may feel a little less of a barrier when they go on to travel the world in the future.

Appendix One**Mini-Language Guide:** _____

If you travel to another country, it's always useful to speak a little of the language. Even if you can't speak fluently, knowing a few basic phrases can make your trip more interesting. If you learn these key phrases before you go, you can communicate at a very basic level in any language.

Basic PhrasesGreetings

Hello _____

Goodbye _____

Thank you _____

You're welcome _____

I'm sorry/Excuse me _____

Situational phrasesWhere is the bathroom? _____

How much is it? _____

I'd like some coffee, please. _____

Help! _____

Vocabulary*Numbers:* 1, 2, 3, ... _____*Colors:* red, blue, black, ... _____*Days:* Sunday, Monday, ... _____*Months:* January, February, ... _____*Food:* fish, potatoes, bread, ... _____

Clothes: shirt, pants, skirt, ... _____

Places: station, house, shop, ... _____

Adjectives: big, small, pretty, ... _____

Verbs: go, do, have, eat, ... _____

Grammar

I am eating dinner. _____

I ate dinner. _____

I'm going to eat dinner. _____

I'm not eating dinner. _____

Are you eating dinner? _____

I want to go. _____

I have to go. _____

I can go. _____

Can I go? _____

a big house _____

in the house _____

Monkeys eat bananas. _____

Others

Appendix Two**Mini-Language Guide:** Spanish

If you travel to another country, it's always useful to speak a little of the language. Even if you can't speak fluently, knowing a few basic phrases can make your trip more interesting. If you learn these key phrases before you go, you can communicate at a very basic level in any language.

Basic PhrasesGreetings

Hello	<u>Hola</u>
Goodbye	<u>Adios</u>
Thank you	<u>Gracias</u>
You're welcome	<u>De nada</u>
I'm sorry/Excuse me	<u>Lo siento. /Perdón.</u>

Situational phrases

Where is the bathroom?	<u>Dónde está el baño?</u>
How much is it?	<u>Cuánto es?</u>
I'd like <u>some coffee</u> , please.	<u>Quiero un café, por favor.</u>
Help!	<u>Socorro!</u>

Vocabulary

Numbers: 1, 2, 3,...	<u>uno, dos, tres, cuatro, cinco, seis, siete, ocho, nueve, diez</u>
Colors: red, blue, black,...	<u>rojo, azul, negro, blanco, amarillo, verde, naranja, café, rosa</u>
Days: Sunday, Monday,...	<u>(from Mon.) lunes, martes, miercoles, jueves, viernes, sabado, domingo</u>
Months: January, February,...	<u>enero, febrero, marzo, abril, mayo, junio, julio, agosto, septiembre, octubre, noviembre, diciembre</u>
Food: fish, potatoes, bread,...	<u>pescado, papas, pan, carne, pollo, frutas, verduras, bocadillo, pasteles, agua, jugo, leche, vino</u>

<i>Clothes:</i> shirt, pants, skirt,...	<u><i>camisa, pantalones, falda, chaqueta, zapatos, traje, vestido, suéter, pañuelo, cinturón</i></u>
<i>Places:</i> station, house, shop,...	<u><i>estación, casa, tienda, restaurante, banco, correos, mercado, panadería, quiosco, farmacia, terminal</i></u>
<i>Adjectives:</i> big, small, pretty,...	<u><i>grande, chico/a, lindo/a, feliz, fuerte, gordo, caro barato, rico, bueno, malo, nuevo, viejo</i></u>
<i>Verbs:</i> go, do, have, eat,...	<u><i>ir, hacer, tener, comer, ser, estar, haber, decir, leer, escribir, venir, ver, oír, vivir, tomar</i></u>

Grammar

I am eating dinner.	<u><i>Estoy cenando.</i></u>
I ate dinner.	<u><i>Cené.</i></u>
I'm going to eat dinner.	<u><i>Voy a cenar.</i></u>
I'm not eating dinner.	<u><i>No estoy cenando.</i></u>
Are you eating dinner?	<u><i>Estás cenando?</i></u>
I want to go.	<u><i>Quiero ir.</i></u>
I have to go.	<u><i>Tengo que ir.</i></u>
I can go.	<u><i>Puedo ir.</i></u>
Can I go?	<u><i>Puedo ir?</i></u>
a big house	<u><i>una casa grande</i></u>
in the house	<u><i>en la casa</i></u>
Monkeys eat bananas.	<u><i>Los monos comen plátanos.</i></u>

Others