

CHING'S GUIDE TO LEARNING FOREIGN LANGUAGES

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Ching

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INTRO TO LEARNING FOREIGN LANGUAGES

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I might not be the most fluent polyglot out there, but I speak English, Mandarin and Cantonese with adequate proficiency and over the years, I have taken lessons on Korean, Japanese, French, German, Malay and Thai.

What I have learnt from these lessons is not just the ability to understand (with varying proficiency) another foreign language, but that there are different ways to look at the world despite how similar cultures could often be, and that there are different ways to live our lives.

Many think it is because I have the aptitude for learning languages that I pick up new languages easily, but I think otherwise. For one, growing up speaking in three languages (from two language families) on a daily basis certainly helped, though in ways I find difficult to clearly define.

Perhaps it is that Cantonese has 9 sounds and 6 tones, or that English is a stress-timed language. Or maybe it is learning these languages by mimicking and repetition, rather than by learning the linguistics of them. Or it could be the fact that some vocabularies sound similar across languages in the same family. It could also possibly be that I know enough sounds and tones to make mnemonics work for me. Ultimately, I think it is a combination of many factors.

Rather than focusing on aptitude, I prefer to think we have to like a language before we can master it. But do we like a language first, or does exposure to the language cause us to like it?

In psychology, there is something called the mere-exposure effect, a phenomenon where people like something just because of exposure to that particular thing. That means that the more we are exposed to a language, the more likely we are to fall in love with the language, and the more we like a language, the easier it becomes to learn it!

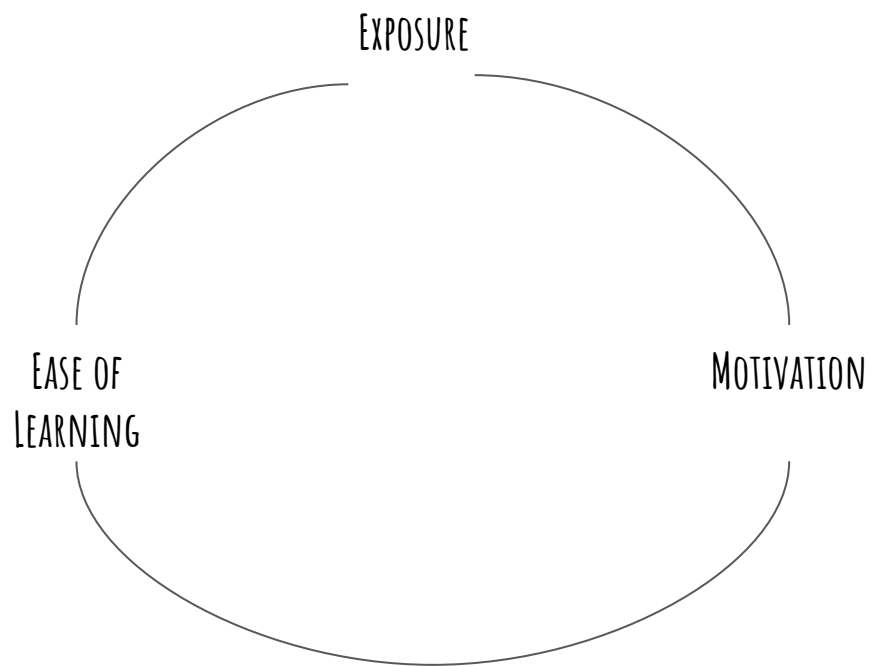
I guess that is also the reason why I grew up being stronger in Chinese, only to end up preferring English to Chinese. English is the official working language in Singapore, which means that on any day, I am exposed to the English language more than I am to the Chinese language.

Before I started school, Cantonese was the only language I was really exposed to and was most comfortable with. However, after ten years of compulsory education, English gradually became my strongest language and the language that I express myself best in. Although I grew up being made fun of for my poor English, I ended up graduating with a degree in English.

Since my university years, I have tried to pick up 6 foreign languages, but I can only effectively communicate in one of them and that is Korean. Even then, there is still so much more for me to learn before I can even get close to speaking like a native speaker. 15 months of Korean language studies in [Yonsei University Korean Language Institute \(KLI\)](#) is decent but definitely not enough.

If I had to pick another foreign language that I remember best, that would have to be Japanese. For one, it is very similar to Korean and Chinese, and it is also the language I took most classes in, second to Korean. I also try to watch Japanese dramas and movies every now and then just to see how much I can remember.

I find myself picking up foreign languages with differing ease, and I think this has something to do with motivation and exposure to the language and culture. Exposure helped me to learn the Korean language with greater ease than the other languages, and which in turn helped me to learn with more motivation by increasing my exposure to more mediums that can help me learn the language. In short, it is a sweet cycle.



EXAMPLE

I was first exposed to the Korean language and culture on my first trip to Seoul in 2003. Back then, there were few language schools in Singapore offering the Korean language, and there were very few online resources teaching Korean. Exposure and motivation to learn the language was minimal.

From 2005 or 2006 onwards, Hallyu took over the scene with Korean drama and K-Pop. Exposure to the language increased and so did my motivation to learn the language. Even though I did not attend lessons, I found it easy to pick out words from the dramas.

A few years later, I took what was my first Korean language course in university. There were more online resources than before, with [ITMIK](#) being the most prominent. But this was also the period when I lost interest in soapy Korean dramas, so my exposure to Korean was low and so was my motivation to learn the language.

In 2015, I took learning Korean more seriously and finally started lessons at Yonsei University KLI. As I got better, it got easier to read articles and watch dramas, and I could also speak with Koreans. These in turn exposed me to more ways to learning the language and ultimately increased my confidence and motivation to do better at the language.

So it seems, I do not have any secret tips to learning foreign languages.

Or, do I?

WHY LEARN FOREIGN LANGUAGES

WHY LEARN FOREIGN LANGUAGES?

There are many researches on how learning a second or third language at a young age could help in other aspects of life, but that aside, I personally think being able to speak in at least two languages helps in widening our perspectives. Knowing a second language gives us access to more literature, allows us to understand the world from another culture and it also widens our social network.

Only good things can happen from knowing a second language. No matter how bad they fare at their mother tongues, I have never heard of anyone from Singapore who thinks learning our mother tongues in school ruined our lives. It is mostly doing badly at the graded examinations that scares students.

As aforementioned, exposure to the language affects the motivation and ease of learning the language. Many who do poorly at their mother tongue come from English-speaking families, and likewise, some of those who come from families who speak their mother tongues at home fear the English language.

Interestingly, I have friends who fare badly at their mother tongues but do fairly well in some other foreign languages. They are motivated and find it easier than learning their mother tongues. They never thought they had the aptitude for learning languages because they were always doing badly at their mother tongues.

Unlike mother tongue lessons, they were not made to study the foreign languages; they had a choice, and they picked foreign languages that they might not be ethnically related to, but that they enjoyed learning.

So why learn foreign languages?

Learn because you want to.

HOW TO LEARN FOREIGN LANGUAGES

HOW TO LEARN FOREIGN LANGUAGES

So it seems I do not have any secret tips to learning foreign languages, nor do I believe that it is purely because I have the aptitude for languages that allows me to speak a second or third language, although to a certain extent it does help.

Some people do well in mathematics and science, others arts, and some others, languages. But that is not to say that talent alone is enough; knowing what works for you, whether self-studying or taking classes, is just as important to bring out the best in you or to make up for the lack of aptitude.

SELF-STUDY OR TAKING CLASSES?

I am an advocate of taking classes that are worth what you are paying for, or that provides added value because firstly, I enjoy having some sort of structure set for me, and secondly, it is definitely a quicker way to learn since there is a teacher whom you can approach at any time.

Self-study might seem cheaper than taking up classes, but if you are addicted to buying books to make up for the lack of practice that you would get during lessons, the cost of books might actually work out to be the same as the price of your course, if not more expensive.

Find out what works best for you, then stick to it.

One of the biggest problems with taking classes is that the course might not match your learning speed or style. You might prefer learning how to read and write first. Or maybe the curriculum focuses more on academic language while you prefer learning the colloquial language.

It is not always possible to find a perfect school or teacher, but you can use the knowledge you have learnt to help yourself learn better or to learn what you really want to learn. I believe the best way to learn a language is to attend classes (at least the basics) and then either self-study or immerse yourself in the culture and language by flying over to the country whose language you are learning.

Whether you self-study or take classes, the four most important things that will help you in learning a foreign language are:

1. Motivation
2. Dedication
3. Dedication > Motivation
4. Learning Style

1. MOTIVATION

You should learn a foreign language because you want to (regardless of what the reason is for wanting to learn it) and that is your motivation. Without motivation, you will find it hard to continue with it in the long term.

Learning a foreign language requires dedication, and dedication without motivation makes it a chore.

2. DEDICATION

Learning a new language requires time and effort, as with learning anything. Make a schedule and follow it religiously. Do not allow yourself to give excuses.

If you are not one to have enough self-discipline to be able to study on your own, join a class.

3. DEDICATION > MOTIVATION

At a certain stage of language learning, you might find yourself in a slump and feeling very unmotivated. This is natural, especially when you have mastered the basics and suddenly it seems like you are facing a huge mountain.

This is when you need to keep moving on, whether you are motivated or not. Once you have reached the peak, everything will feel easy again. And once you have mastered most grammar structures, it is mainly just about building up your vocabulary by reading widely, or by watching Korean programmes.

LEARNING STYLES

WHAT IS YOUR LEARNING STYLE?

Essentially, there are three types of language learners:

1. Visual
2. Auditory
3. Kinesthetic

Note that you might also be a mixture of two types, or all three (like myself).

1. VISUAL LEARNER

If you are a visual learner, note-taking is a very important skill to have. Find an organised way to take down your notes, and create a system to index and group information together. You might want to create lists to group similar vocabulary together, but based on what I have learnt during a psychology class, it is better to keep vocabulary lists random because that is how real life and memory works.

Colours are also good for memory, but keep it to no more than three colours.

If the new language has a different writing script on its own, master writing the script first before delving into studying the language. This makes it easier for you to visualise and remember the sounds of the new language.

To build up vocabulary, you might prefer reading books to other mediums such as watching dramas or movies. The problem with this is that sometimes you might recognise a word but find yourself struggling to pronounce it. Make use of available resources and check the pronunciation online.

2. AUDITORY LEARNER

As an auditory learner, note-taking might mean recording the lessons (which is not always feasible due to intellectual property rights), or listening to pre-recorded audio lessons.

Auditory learners would enjoy listening to music, as well as watching dramas and movies to build up their knowledge of the new language.

3. KINESTHETIC LEARNER

Hands-on learners, or kinesthetic learners, learn best when they are actually doing something. In the case of language learning, this could mean conversing with people, practising creative writing, or perhaps playing word games; anything but sitting down and passively listening and reading.

GRAMMAR OR VOCABULARY

WHICH IS MORE IMPORTANT: GRAMMAR OR VOCABULARY?

Personally, I think good grammar and basic vocabulary provides more clarity than bad grammar and flamboyant vocabulary, though sometimes using the right vocabulary means you can finish off a sentence more succinctly.

Example: It is designed to impress. / It is ostentatious.

(Both mean almost the same thing, although 'ostentatious' might bear a negative connotation.)

For beginners, focus first on good grammar and clarity in your sentences, then build on the vocabulary, which is a never-ending learning journey even for native speakers.

Example: He is coming over. / He come over.

(Without accurate grammar structure, the meaning of the second sentence is ambiguous.)

WHERE TO START

WHERE TO START

If you are wondering if you should pick up a foreign language or if there is any value in it at all especially now that English is a global language, start now and think later. Sometimes, you can only find out the value of (or the lack of) something after you have tried it.

Find a good language school and if that is not an option, technology has made a lot of resources online for free! For Singaporeans, you can make use of the SkillsFuture credits to enroll in a language school.

Living in the country of the foreign language that you are learning may not financially possible for everyone, but you can always expose yourself to the language you are interested in by watching dramas and movies, and by listening to music and reading widely. I have heard of interpreters who never took any lessons but learnt their Korean by binging on Korean programmes so I guess nothing is impossible.

Online shopping has also made purchasing books in foreign languages more convenient, and the Internet has definitely made it easier for us to watch dramas and movies not available in our countries.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ching is a photographer and language specialist who graduated from Nanyang Technological University (NTU) with a Bachelor of Arts in English. She is passionate about language learning and has tried to learn over five foreign languages.

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谢谢。MERCİ.

多謝。DANKE SEHR.

감사합니다. TERIMA KASIH.

ありがとうございます。

ขอบคุณค่ะ. THANK YOU.