



Why Language Classes Don't Work: How to Cut Classes and Double Your Learning Rate

I am an admitted language-addict, and from Japanese at age 15 to Spanish at 28, I have managed to achieve spoken and written fluency in six foreign languages. From the academic environment of Princeton University to the disappointing results observed as a curriculum designer at Berlitz International, I have sought to answer the question to a simple question: why do most language classes simply not work?

After testing the waters with more than a dozen languages, I have identified several cardinal sins that, when fixed, can easily cut the time to fluency by 50-80%:

1. Teachers are viewed as saviors when materials are actually the determining factor. Teachers are merely conduits for the material. By analogy, it is better to have a decent cook with excellent easy-to-follow recipe than a great cook with terrible recipe. It is the material that will restrict or elevate the teacher, and a good teacher forced to follow bad material will hinder, not hasten, learning progress. I don't sit in on classes or otherwise consider a school until I've reviewed both hand-out materials and text books. Judge materials before you judge teachers, and no matter what, do not begin with classes or texts that solely use the target language (e.g., Spanish textbooks in Spanish). This approach reflects a school's laziness and willingness to hire monolingual teachers, not the result of their search for the ideal method.

2. Classes move as slowly as the slowest student. Seek a school with daily homework assignments that eliminate—effectively fire—students from the class who don't perform. The school should have a strict curriculum that doesn't bend for a minority of the class who can't cope. Downgrading students is only possible in larger schools with at least five proficiency levels for separate classes—beginner, intermediate, and advanced is woefully inadequate. Students can only be moved if the jumps between classes are relatively small and there are a sufficient number of students at each level for the school to justify paying separate teachers. At the Hartnackschule in Berlin, Germany, where I studied for 10 weeks after evaluating a dozen schools, there are at least 20 different skill levels (<http://www.hartnackschule-berlin.de/daf-kurse.php>).

3. Conversation can be learned but not taught. Somewhat like riding a bike, though unfortunately not as permanent, language fluency is more dependent on practicing the right things than learning the right things. The rules (grammar) can be learned through materials and classes, but the necessary tools (vocabulary and idiomatic usage) will come from independent study and practice in a native environment. I achieved fluency in German in 10 weeks using a combination of grammatical practice at the Hartnackschule (four hours daily for the first month, two hours daily for the second) and daily two-person language exchanges with students of English. Grammar can be learned with writing exercises in a class of 20, whereas "conversation" cannot be learned in anything but a realistic one-on-one environment

where your brain is forced to adapt to normal speed and adopt coping mechanisms such as delaying tactics ("in other words," "let me think for a second," etc.). Separate grammar from conversation practice. I recommend choosing one school for grammar and several native books or comics to identify sticking points, which are then discussed in one-one-one language exchanges, where your partner provides examples of usage but does not have to explain rules.

4. Teachers are often prescriptive instead of descriptive. Many teachers take it upon themselves to be arbiters of taste and linguistic conservationists, refusing to explain slang and insisting on correct but essentially unused grammatical constructions (e.g., "with whom were you speaking?" versus "who were you speaking to?"). Progress will be faster when you find a teacher who describes, rather than prescribes, usage. They should be able and willing to explain, for example, how Konjunktiv I is generally used in place of Konjunktiv II in German, even though it is technically incorrect. They should also be able to save you time by explaining what to practice based on actual frequency of use, not inclusion in a grammar text. For example, the simple past is almost always used in place of the perfect tense in Argentina, but some teachers still spend equal time on both. To avoid those who act as defenders of language purity, it is often easier to target 20-30-year old teachers and those who are good at teaching inductively (providing examples to explain principles) vs. deductively (providing rules that allow you to create examples). Ask teachers to explain a few common colloquial grammatical constructions before signing up, and walk out the door if they balk.

In conclusion—the learner is the problem

The above sins certainly inhibit the speed of learning, but the principal problem is the learner his or herself, who—more often than not—uses classes as a substitute for, and not supplement to, real ego-crushing interaction. Classes are easily used to infinitely postpone making the thousands of mistakes necessary to achieve fluency. In boxing, they say "everyone has a plan until they get punched in the face." Well, in language learning, we could just as easily say that "everyone thinks they're fluent until they speak to a real native."

Don't waste time learning more than a handful of conjugations for primarily first-person singular ("I") and second-person singular ("you") in the past, present, and future tenses, along with common phrases that illustrate them. Throw in a few auxiliaries ("I/you want to [verb]", "I/you need to [verb]", "I/you like to [verb]", etc.) and jump on a plane before learning any more. Once you land, you do not need more than two months of formal classes in-country, and remember that, like training wheels, the goal is get off of them as quickly as possible. Don't go to classes because you have no social network outside of class, or because you want the illusion of progress with a forgiving teacher who lets you make mistakes. If you are taking classes because they are enjoyable, fine, but understand that you are better off spending time elsewhere.

Make it your goal to make mistakes as often as possible in uncontrolled environments. Explicitly ask friends to correct you and reward them with thanks and praise when they catch you, particularly the small understandable mistakes. I was able to pass the Certificado de Espanol Avanzado, the most difficult Spanish certification test in South America, in eight weeks, which is said to require near-native fluency and years of immersion. How? By following the above fixes and making more mistakes in eight weeks than most make in eight years.

"An expert is a person who has made all the mistakes which can be made in a very narrow field," or so said Physicist Niels Bohr. Luckily, you don't need to be a rocket scientist to use his advice. Choose schools carefully and then, once they've served their purpose, abandon them. The real world is where mistakes are made, weaknesses are found, and fluency is achieved.