



How to learn any language in six months: Chris Lonsdale

Have you ever held a question in mind for so long that it becomes part of how you think? Maybe even part of who you are as a person? Well I've had a question in my mind for many, many years and that is: how can you speed up learning? Now, this is an interesting question because if you speed up learning you can spend less time at school. And if you learn really fast, you probably wouldn't have to go to school at all. Now, when I was young, school was sort of okay but I found quite often that school got in the way of learning, so I had this question in mind: how do you learn faster? And this began when I was very, very young, when I was about eleven years old I wrote a letter to researchers in the Soviet Union, asking about hypnopaedia, this is sleep learning, where you get a tape recorder, you put it beside your bed and it turns on in the middle of the night when you're sleeping, and you're supposed to be learning from this. A good idea, unfortunately it doesn't work. But, hypnopaedia did open the doors to research in other areas and we've had incredible discoveries about learning that began with that first question.

I went on from there to become passionate about psychology and I have been involved in psychology in many ways for the rest of my life up until this point. In 1981 I took myself to China and I decided that I was going to be native level in Chinese inside two years. Now, you need to understand that in 1981, everybody thought Chinese was really, really difficult and that a westerner could study for ten years or more and never really get very good at it. And I also went in with a different idea which was: taking all of the conclusions from psychological research up to that point and applying them to the learning process. What was really cool was that in six months I was fluent in Mandarin Chinese and took a little bit longer to get up to native. But I looked around and I saw all of these people from different countries struggling terribly with Chinese, I saw Chinese people struggling terribly to learn English and other languages, and so my question got refined down to: how can you help a normal adult learn a new language quickly, easily and effectively? Now this is a really, really important question in today's world. We have massive challenges with environment we have massive challenges with social dislocation, with wars, all sorts of things going on and if we can't communicate we're really going to have difficulty solving these problems. So we need to be able to speak each other's languages, this is really, really important. The question then is how do you do that. Well, it's actually really easy. You look around for people who can already do it, you look for situations where it's already working and then you identify the principles and apply them. It's called modelling and I've been looking at language learning and modelling language learning for about fifteen to twenty years now. And my conclusion, my observation from this is that any adult can learn a second language to fluency inside six months. Now when I say this, most people think I'm crazy, this is not possible. So let me remind everybody of the history of human progress, it's all about expanding our limits.

In 1950 everybody believed that running one mile in four minutes was impossible and then Roger Bannister did it in 1956 and from there it's got shorter and shorter. 100 years ago everybody believed that heavy stuff doesn't fly. Except it does and we all know this. How does heavy stuff fly? We reorganise the material using principles that we have learned from observing nature, birds in this case. And today we've gone ever further, so you can fly a car. You can buy one of these for a couple hundred thousand US dollars. We now have cars in the world that can fly. And there's a different way to fly that we've learned from squirrels. So all you need to do is copy what a flying squirrel does, build a suit called a wing suit and off you go, you can fly like a squirrel. Now, most people, a lot of people, I wouldn't say everybody but a lot of people think they can't draw. However there are some key principles, five principles that you can apply to learning to draw and you can



actually learn to draw in five days. So, if you draw like this, you learn these principles for five days and apply them and after five days you can draw something like this. Now I know this is true because that was my first drawing and after five days of applying these principles that was what I was able to do. And I looked at this and I went 'wow,' so that's how I look like when I'm concentrating so intensely that my brain is exploding.

So, anybody can learn to draw in five days and in the same way, with the same logic, anybody can learn a second language in six months. How? There are five principles and seven actions. There may be a few more but these are absolutely core. And before I get into those I just want to talk about two myths, dispel two myths. The first is that you need talent. Let me tell you about Zoe. Zoe came from Australia, went to Holland, was trying to learn Dutch, struggling extremely ... a great deal and finally people were saying: 'you're completely useless,' 'you're not talented,' 'give up,' 'you're a waste of time' and she was very, very depressed. And then she came across these five principles, she moved to Brazil and she applied them and within six months she was fluent in Portuguese, so talent doesn't matter. People also think that immersion in a new country is the way to learn a language. But look around Hong Kong, look at all the westerners who've been here for ten years, who don't speak a word of Chinese. Look at all the Chinese living in America, Britain, Australia, Canada have been there ten, twenty year and they don't speak any English. Immersion per se does not work. Why? Because a drowning man cannot learn to swim. When you don't speak a language you're like a baby and if you drop yourself into a context which is all adults talking about stuff over your head, you won't learn.

So, what are the five principles that you need to pay attention to? First: four words, attention, meaning, relevance and memory, and these interconnect in very important ways. Especially when you're talking about learning. Come with me on a journey through a forest. You go on a walk through a forest and you see something like this. Little marks on a tree, maybe you pay attention, maybe you don't. You go another fifty metres and you see this. You should be paying attention. Another fifty metres, if you haven't been paying attention, you see this. And at this point, you're paying attention. And you've just learned that this is important, it's relevant because it means this, and anything that is related, any information related to your survival is stuff that you're going to pay attention to and therefore you're going to remember it. If it's related to your personal goals then you're going to pay attention to it, if it's relevant you're going to remember it.

So, the first rule, the first principle for learning a language is focus on language content that is relevant to you. Which brings us to tools. We master tools by using tools and we learn tools the fastest when they are relevant to us. So let me share a story. A keyboard is a tool. Typing Chinese a certain way, there are methods for this. That's a tool. I had a colleague many years ago who went to night school; Tuesday night, Thursday night, two hours each night, practicing at home, she spent nine months, and she did not learn to type Chinese. And one night we had a crisis. We had forty-eight hours to deliver a training manual in Chinese. And she got the job, and I can guarantee you in forty-eight hours, she learned to type Chinese because it was relevant, it was meaningful, it was important, she was using a tool to create value. So the second tool for learning a language is to use your language as a tool to communicate right from day one. As a kid does. When I first arrived in China I didn't speak a word of Chinese, and on my second week I got to take a train ride overnight. I spent eight hours sitting in the dining care talking to one of the guards on the train, he took an interest in me for some reason, and we just chatted all night in Chinese and he was drawing pictures and making movements with his hands and facial expressions and piece by piece by piece I understood more and more. But what was really cool, was two weeks later, when people were talking Chinese around me, I was understanding some of this and I hadn't even made any effort to learn that. What had happened, I'd absorbed it that night on the train, which brings us to the third



principle. When you first understand the message, then you will acquire the language unconsciously. And this is really, really well documented now, it's something called comprehensible input and there's twenty or thirty years of research on this, Stephen Krashen, a leader in the field has published all sorts of these different studies and this is just from one of them. The purple bars show the scores on different tests for language. The purple people were people who had learned by grammar and formal study, the green ones are the ones who learned by comprehensible input. So, comprehension works. Comprehension is key and language learning is not about accumulating lots of knowledge. In many, many ways it's about physiological training. A woman I know from Taiwan did great at English at school, she got A grades all the way through, went through college, A grades, went to the US and found she couldn't understand what people were saying. And people started asking her: 'Are you deaf?' And she was. English deaf. Because we have filters in our brain that filter in the sounds that we are familiar with and they filter out the sounds of languages we're not. And if you can't hear it, you won't understand it and if you can't understand it, you're not going to learn it. So you actually have to be able to hear these sounds. And there are ways to do that but it's physiological training. Speaking takes muscle. You've got forty-three muscles in your face, you have to coordinate those in a way that you make sounds that other people will understand. If you've ever done a new sport for a couple of days, and you know how your body feels? It hurts. If your face is hurting you're doing it right.

And the final principle is state. Psycho-physiological state. If you're sad, angry, worried, upset, you're not going to learn. Period. If you're happy, relaxed, in an Alpha brain state, curious, you're going to learn really quickly, and very specifically you need to be tolerant of ambiguity. If you're one of those people who needs to understand 100% every word you're hearing, you will go nuts, because you'll be incredibly upset all the time, because you're not perfect. If you're comfortable with getting some, not getting some, just paying attention to what you do understand, you're going to be fine, you'll be relaxed and you'll be learning quickly. So based on those five principles, what are the seven actions that you need to take?

Number one: listen a lot. I call it Brain Soaking. You put yourself in a context where you're hearing tons and tons of a language and it doesn't matter if you understand it or not. You're listening to the rhythms, you're listening to things that repeat, you're listening to things that stand out. So, just soak your brain in this.

The second action: is that you get the meaning first, even before you get the words. You go "Well how do I do that, I don't know the words?" Well, you understand what these different postures mean. Human communication is body language in many, many ways, so much body language. From body language you can understand a lot of communication, therefore, you're understanding, you're acquiring through comprehensible input. And you can also use patterns that you already know. If you're a Chinese speaker of Mandarin and Cantonese and you go Vietnam, you will understand 60% of what they say to you in daily conversation, because Vietnamese is about 30% Mandarin, 30% Cantonese.

The third action: start mixing. You probably have never thought of this but if you've got ten verbs, ten nouns and ten adjectives you can say one thousand different things. Language is a creative process. What do babies do? Okay: Me. Bat(h). Now. Okay, that's how they communicate. So start mixing, get creative, have fun with it, it doesn't have to be perfect, it just has to work. And when you're doing this you focus on the core. What does that mean? Well with every language there is high frequency content. In English, 1000 words covers 85% of anything you're ever going to say in daily communication. 3000 words gives you 98% of anything you're going to say in daily conversation. You got 3000 words, you're speaking the language. The rest is icing on the cake. And



when you're just beginning with a new language start with the tool box. Week number one in your new language you say things like: 'how do you say that?' 'I don't understand,' 'repeat that please,' 'what does that mean,' all in your target language. You're using it as a tool, making it useful to you, it's relevant to learn other things about the language. By week two that you should be saying things like: 'me,' 'this,' 'you,' 'that,' 'give,' you know, 'hot,' simple pronouns, simple nouns, simple verbs, simple adjectives, communicating like a baby. And by the third or fourth week, you're getting into what I call glue words. 'Although,' 'but,' 'therefore,' these are logical transformers that tie bits of a language together, allowing you to make more complex meaning. At that point you're talking. And when you're doing that, you should get yourself a language parent. If you look at how children and parents interact, you'll understand what this means. When a child is speaking, it'll be using simple words, simple combinations, sometimes quite strange, sometimes very strange pronunciation and other people from outside the family don't understand it. But the parents do. And so the kid has a safe environment, gets confidence. The parents talk to the children with body language and with simple language they know the child understands. So we have a comprehensible input environment that's safe, we know it works otherwise none of you would speak your mother tongue. So you get yourself a language parent, who's somebody interested in you as a person who will communicate with you essentially as an equal, but pay attention to help you understand the message. There are four rules of a language parent. Spouses by the way are not very good at this, okay? But the four rules are, first of all, they will work hard to understand what you mean even when you're way off beat. Secondly, they will never correct your mistakes. Thirdly they will feedback their understanding of what you are saying so you can respond appropriately and get that feedback and then they will use words that you know.

The sixth thing you have to do, is copy the face. You got to get the muscles working right, so you can sound in a way that people will understand you. There's a couple of things you do. One is that you hear how it feels, and feel how it sounds which means you have a feedback loop operating in your face, but ideally, if you can look at a native speaker and just observe how they use their face, let your unconscious mind absorb the rules, then you're going to be able to pick it up. And if you can't get a native speaker to look at, you can use stuff like this: [slides].

And the final idea here, the final action you need to take is something that I call "direct connect." What does this mean? Well most people learning a second language sort of take the mother tongue words and take the target words and go over them again and again in their mind to try and remember them. Really inefficient. What you need to do is realise that everything you know is an image inside your mind, it's feelings, if you talk about fire you can smell the smoke you can hear the crackling, you can see the flames. So what you do, is you go into that imagery and all of that memory and you come out with another pathway. So I call it 'same box, different path.' You come out of that pathway, you build it over time you become more and more skilled at just connecting the new sounds to those images that you already have, into that internal representation. And over time you even become naturally good at that process, that becomes unconscious.

So, there are five principles that you need to work with, seven actions, if you do any of them, you're going to improve. And remember these are things under your control as the learner. Do them all and you're going to be fluent in a second language in six months.

Thank you.