



# How to use the Language Learning Roadmap:

1. Read the “YOU CAN DO” column and find the level you’re at.
2. Read “YOU NEED TO DO” and “YOU ARE LEARNING” for your level.
3. Read also “YOU CAN DO” for the next level to know what you’ll be able to do. Having a small clear goal will help your motivation.

The numbers given in this guide are general estimations. In particular the number of hours of input. There are individual differences in the pace at which people acquire a language. The understandability and quality of the input you receive can also have a big impact on your pace of learning. **If you speak a closely related language** (if you are going from Italian or French to Spanish for example) **you can divide the number of hours by 2**. Also, expect your understanding to be a further 1 or 2 levels above your production ability, and your reading comprehension to be even higher. **If you are learning a language that’s completely unrelated to yours** (going from English to Arabic or Mandarin for example) **you should multiply the number of hours by 2**.

## YOU CAN DO

## YOU NEED TO DO

## YOU ARE LEARNING

### Level 1 Starting from zero

Hours of input: 0  
Known words: ~0

The sounds of the language sound weird to your ears. You can’t tell many of those sounds apart from each other. When hearing the language, it’s hard for you to know when one word ends and when the next one begins. Even when you guess what a sentence means, many times you can’t guess at the meaning of the different parts. You can’t say any words and be confident that a native speaker would understand you.

**Listen A LOT.** The listening needs to be **very comprehensible**. The best materials are classes or videos where the teachers speak in the language, but make it easy to understand by using a lot of drawings, pictures, and gestures. **Crosstalk** is the **most efficient** activity that you can do, if you can find speakers of the language. **Reading is not recommended** until later on, especially if you care about having clear pronunciation. Practicing **writing or speaking is not recommended** yet.

You mostly learn individual **nouns** for **concrete things**: *car, nose, elephant*. Action verbs: *walk, eat, sing*. **Adjectives** for simple emotions and sensations: *happy, scared, cold*. Adjectives for physical properties: *blue, tall, fat, beautiful*. Interjections are the clearest words early on: *Hey! Wow! Hi!* You may learn the numbers early on, but this depends quite a lot on the kind of content you listen to.

### Level 2 You know some common words

Hours of input: 50  
Known words: ~300

You **understand some common words**, even if you are not 100% sure how to pronounce them. You can now guess the meaning of some 2-word sentences, like “go home”, or “eat cake”. There are only a few words that you could produce yourself. For many words, you’re still not sure what sounds they’re made of.

**Listen A LOT.** You are still best served with **Crosstalk** or classes or videos where the teacher(s) speak in a very comprehensible way. However, with a few words under your belt you are better prepared to make the most of that input. Those words will help you understand the rest of the input you are listening to. Reading not recommended yet.

**More verbs**, since nouns help you understand them. Still mostly nouns and verbs for concrete things. Many expressions are learned as a chunk. You don’t know what their parts mean yet. Grammar for **basic sentence order**. Many common function words will remain unclear for a long time.

### Level 3 You can follow topics that are adapted for learners

Hours of input: 150  
Known words: ~1500

You can now understand people if they stay **within certain topics**. They still need to talk to you in a way that’s appropriate for you, but you know many words, and you don’t rely exclusively on visual information. **You still aren’t completely used to the sounds** of the language. You have a good intuition for basic grammar, like sentence order. You can sometimes feel it when other learners make mistakes. It sounds wrong somehow. You can now say quite a few words and that will already be useful when traveling to the country.

**Listen A LOT.** Now you can listen to videos or classes in which the teacher doesn’t use as much visual input, and may even be able to take advantage of really easy audios and podcasts that are catered to learners at your level. **Crosstalk** is still the best way to spend your time. At this level it becomes easier than before to do crosstalk over the internet using video call software, so you won’t need to find native speakers where you live anymore. Reading is still not recommended if you care about your final achievement in pronunciation, but it starts becoming possible to understand lower level graded readers.

Because you are starting to get used to what the language sounds like, and what kinds of sound combinations to expect, you start learning words faster, without needing to hear them so many times. You learn nouns faster and faster. Knowing a decent amount of nouns helps you also learn more **adjectives**. You start learning **more abstract terms** for feelings, appearance, and more abstract verbs: to need, to have to, to be good at, etc. You are now getting used to more complicated grammar faster.

### Level 4 You can understand a person speaking to you patiently

Hours of input: 300  
Known words: ~3000

You’re at the intermediate level! You can understand a **patient** native speaker. You still miss some words, but the speaker can explain their meaning to you without resorting to translation. You can **understand a range of daily topics** without visual support like drawings or pictures. The sounds of the language are becoming clearer now, and you are getting used to how the sounds are likely to be combined. That helps with retaining new words. If you tried speaking at a store, you could get your point across most of the time, but you still struggle producing even some basic words. Making friends in the language is now possible, but you need to find people who are quite patient, because not everybody will want to make that effort. Depending on your tolerance for getting negative reactions, you may want to wait a bit longer before speaking.

**Listen A LOT.** You can understand videos or classes in which the teacher doesn’t use any visual cues, and can now benefit from listening extensively to **audios and podcasts** for learners everywhere you go, anytime you can. **Crosstalk** is still the best, most efficient way to improve. You can now make friends with whom you communicate only in the target language. While you will learn a lot when listening to people speak to you, **speaking this early will invariably result in hard-to-fix non-native pronunciation, noticeably bad grammar, and poor word usage**. If you really want to start having conversations with people it’s recommended that you don’t try to actively practice grammar or vocabulary, but rather speak in single words or simple sentences that come to mind easily. Reading is still not recommended if you care about your final achievement in pronunciation. By now you could understand slightly more difficult books, but still mostly just graded readers.

Surprisingly, in this phase you learn many **common function words** that are taught right at the beginning of most language courses. These words are used very frequently, but carry very little meaning. For example: the verb “to be” (or equivalent), prepositions (*in, at, on*), conjunctions (*therefore, so, and*), and even some pronouns. Once you become aware of a new word, you’ll encounter it everywhere. At this point you may start **feeling that there are many more words that you don’t know than words you do know**. The exposure to less controlled speech allows you to notice many new words. Don’t worry, you’ll eventually also acquire those words the same way you acquired all the words you have learned until now. By this point you are full on acquiring all kinds of vocabulary, both concrete and abstract.

### Level 5 You can understand native speakers speaking to you normally

Hours of input: 300  
Known words: ~3000

You can understand people well when they speak directly to you. They **won’t need to adapt their speech for you**. Understanding a conversation between native speakers is still hard. You’ll almost understand TV programs in the language, because you understand so many of the words, but they are still hard enough to leave you frustrated or bored. **Conversation can be tiresome**, and if you try to speak you can feel a bit like a child, since it will be hard to express abstract concepts and complex thoughts. You understand most of the words used during daily conversation, but you still can’t use many yourself. If you try to speak the language, it will feel like you are missing many important words. However, you can, often, already speak with the correct intonation patterns of the language, without knowing why, and even make a distinction between similar sounds in the language when you say them out loud.

**Listen A LOT.** You’ll be able to understand more advanced materials for learners. Listen to **audios and podcasts** daily if you want to learn fast. **Crosstalk** is still as good as always. You may start feeling you are not getting much out of getting input about daily life topics. Try getting input about new topics. **Easier TV programs and cartoons** should be accessible too. The purists who want to get really close to a native speaker and get a really good accent may still want to hold off on speaking and reading for a little more, but if you do start speaking and reading it’s not a big deal by this point. You’ll still end up with better pronunciation and fluency than the vast majority of learners. If you want to start reading, by this point you’ll be able to understand books targeted at children of lower grade levels, and you can skip over graded readers. If you start reading, try setting every gadget you own (PC, phone, Google and Facebook settings, etc.) to the target language, and following speakers of the language on social media.

This level can **feel frustratingly similar to the previous one**. You will still feel that there are many more words that you don’t know than words you do know. You’ll now feel many more instances of finally understanding that word that you have been hearing since forever. It may feel like these words are infinite, but no! Continue doing what you are doing and you’ll little by little fill in all the missing gaps. For some words, you’ll even wonder why you hadn’t learned such a basic word yet. Learning abstract words (*democracy, absence, patience*) will be your bread and butter, as will be learning more and more grammatical connectors. At this level you’ll **mostly finish up the grammar** and the different sentence types. While still not being able to make the most complex sentences yourself, you’ll become able to understand almost every type of sentence.

### Level 6 You are comfortable with daily conversation

Hours of input: 1000  
Known words: ~7000

You can really **have fun** with the language at this point. You are **conversationally fluent** for daily purposes of living in the country and you can get by at the bank, at the hospital, at the post office, or looking for an apartment to rent. In spite of that odd word that is not quite there when you need it, you can **always manage to get your point across** in one way or another, and by now you are already **making complex longer phrases**. At this level, for the first time, you start feeling like you are actually thinking about what you want to say, and not about how you want to say it, even though you may fall back on thinking about how you say things, especially in stressful situations or when feeling self-conscious. Using humor in the language is much easier now. You can **understand TV shows** about daily life quite well (80 to 90%). Shows about families, friends, etc. Unscripted shows will usually also be easier to understand than scripted shows, as long as they are not too chaotic or rely too much on cultural knowledge. Thrillers and other genres will still be hard.

**Listen and read A LOT.** It’s also a good idea to get **massive input** in authentic media, be it **TV, podcasts, radio, movies**, etc. If you can’t find a lot of easy media in the target language, you may find that videos and audios for learners are still more efficient for acquiring new vocabulary until you get a bit better. If your target language has many common words with a language you already know you may be able to understand quite well things like TED talks and university lectures. **Lots of reading** is also recommended if you want to be literate and if you care about reading. You’ll still want to read books that are targeted at elementary school children, although maybe you don’t need to stick to the lower grades. **Nonfiction will often be much easier** to understand than fiction. By this point, speaking and reading are completely unrestricted, and it’s really encouraged to make **friends in the language**. If you live in the country, join as many social activities as you can. Live in a shared apartment, go to bars, join dance classes, a sports team, anything! Set your PC, phone, and all your online profiles to your target language. Make a list of daily things you do in your own language, and find alternatives to do them in your target language.

You may find the odd common word that you haven’t learned yet, but by now your known vocabulary pretty much covers everything that you will usually want to say during everyday conversation. If you make friends and have real conversations, or watch certain TV shows, you will now be learning a lot of **slang**. By now, your knowledge will cover most sentence structures and grammatical words, so you will rarely learn these anymore, unless they are specific to certain registers of the language. You will mostly **learn specific vocabulary used in formal speech or in writing**. Most words that you learn now will be words that are used in more formal registers of speech like in the news, words used in formal writing, literary writing, or technical terms used in the specific fields that you are interested in: politics, technology, science, or 13th century woodblock prints. If your language doesn’t share a lot of its specialized vocabulary with your new language, you may still have to work on this for a long while.

### Level 7 You are comfortable with daily conversation

Hours of input: 1500  
Known words: ~12000

You can **understand more formal speech and writing**: newspapers, novels, or technical texts in your field, **without effort**. You can understand **any kind of TV show** or movie, be it scripted or unscripted. By this point you also have a good grasp of the country’s pop culture and you understand many of the cultural references in TV shows. You **speak fluently and effortlessly**, and you **feel in control** of the language. You may still make some mistakes, or miss a specific word, but it doesn’t hinder you from being an effective member of society.

**Listen and read A LOT.** Add variety to what you read and listen to. By this point it’s easy to find media in the target language that you understand very well, but it’s also **easy to get comfortable and not seek new challenges**. If you want to continue improving, **simply do things that you have never done before**. Try reading a book by a new author, try watching a show about a topic that you’re unfamiliar with (about space, about the Middle Ages, about lawyers, etc.). If you live in the country, **try joining activities that are new to you**: a sports team, an improv group, comedy nights, etc.

You will continue learning **slang**, and learning about the culture, and that will allow you to understand more and more cultural references. You can explore **other regional dialects** of the language, ancient literary versions of the language, or vocabulary in other **technical or scientific fields** that you may want to learn about. You will still encounter **new idioms and proverbs**, but they will almost always be clear from the context. And of course, you can start learning your next language!