

BILL HANDLEY

AUTHOR OF BEST-SELLING *SPEED MATHEMATICS*

# **FAST** *Easy Way*

*to Learn a  
Language*



# Contents

## Preface

## Introduction

### 1: Why learn a language?

Reasons for learning a language

### 2: Preparation

Using your time well

You will be your own teacher

Choosing a language

Setting goals

### 3: Choosing your tools

Recorded language courses

Textbooks

Dictionaries

Phrasebooks

Cassettes, CDs and MP3s

Reading for pleasure

Internet

Radio and television

Flashcards

Notebooks

Studying at school or for an examination

Tools: a summary

## **4: Getting started**

**Learn how to read the language**

**Learning from your textbooks**

**Using the phrasebook**

**Using your notebooks**

**The 80/20 rule**

**Choose your vocabulary**

**Formal or informal**

**Alphabet**

**Bribe yourself**

## **5: Make your own survival course**

## **6: Learning a different alphabet or writing system**

**When the alphabet or writing system is entirely different**

**Transliteration**

**Learn to recite the alphabet**

## **7: Using a dictionary**

## **8: Recorded material**

**Imitate the music of the language**

**Complete language courses**

**Other recorded material**

## **9: Vocabulary**

**The fast way to a huge vocabulary**

**Active learning**

**Other ways to learn vocabulary**

**Learning a language is more than vocabulary**

## **10: Your plan**

**First day**

**Second day**

**Third and fourth days**

**Fifth and sixth days**

**Seventh day**

**Week two**

**Weeks three and four**

**Week five or six**

## **11: Using 'lost' time**

**What is lost time?**

**Taking time from other activities**

**Learning on the job**

## **12: Enjoy light reading**

**Comics**

**Jokes and joke books**

**Books, magazines and newspapers**

**Reading materials on the internet**

## **13: Language classes**

**Formal lessons are a form of self-discipline**

**Getting the most out of your language class**

## *Finding the right language class*

### *14: Meeting people*

*Meeting native speakers*

*Attending functions*

*Making friends*

*Visit the country*

*Get out into your local community*

*Don't worry about making mistakes*

### *15: Grammar*

*The importance of grammar*

*A simple grammar lesson*

*Putting grammar into practice*

### *16: Plan your own immersion program*

*The benefits of immersion days*

*Preparing for an immersion day*

*Suggested plan*

*Immersion-day outings*

*Mini-immersion days*

### *17: What if you just don't feel like it?*

*Your contingency plan*

*Discouragement*

### *18: Using the internet*

*Getting started: using search engines*

**[Language courses on the internet](#)**

**[Online dictionaries](#)**

**[Online reading materials](#)**

**[Web translations](#)**

**[Internet radio](#)**

**[Audio files](#)**

**[Video files](#)**

**[Shopping for language tools online](#)**

**[Language course websites](#)**

**[19: Advice for school and university students](#)**

**[Learning ancient languages](#)**

**[20: Language addicts](#)**

**[21: How to make a comeback](#)**

**[Afterword](#)**

**[Appendix A: Model survival course](#)**

**[Appendix B: Language websites](#)**

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The numbers given in the chapter headers throughout this book are written in the following languages: English, Greek, French, German, Spanish, Russian, Indonesian/Malay and Finnish.

## ***Other books by Bill Handley***

*Teach Your Children Tables*

*Speed Mathematics: Secrets of Lightning Mental Calculation*

*Speed Maths for Kids: Helping Kids Achieve Their Full Potential*

# ***Preface***

I have written this book because I love learning languages. I believe that anyone should be able to learn a language superbly well in a year. You should be speaking the language in your first week of study.

This book is about learning a language the fast, easy way. If you really need to, you should be able to learn almost any language quite well in a month. After just one month, you should be able to travel through the country, ask directions, drive, order meals, book a room and hold simple conversations. I tell in this book how I learnt basic Italian in two weeks without taking time off from my job or spending long hours studying, using a very good language course that taught me the language that I needed. It is possible to learn to speak intelligent and useful sentences in a week. I will show you how you can do it too.

Whatever your reason for learning a new language, whether you want to know enough to survive a weekend in the country or you want to be able to give presentations or negotiate in the language, this book can help you learn it faster and more easily.

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# ***Introduction***

I was already fascinated by the idea of learning and speaking a foreign language before I began school. I thought that learning a foreign language would be like learning a secret code. I would be able to understand talk that none of my friends or family could decipher. I could use a special language that no one else knew, or have secret conversations with someone who spoke the language. I persuaded two girls who lived next door to teach me French after they came home from school every afternoon. They enjoyed playing teacher and willingly cooperated. They would give me written notes with the numbers and days of the week written down. I was too young to read but that didn't matter — I asked my father to read what they had written. However, his pronunciation was nothing like what the girls had told me. I remember I kept telling him he was wrong and he kept telling me that he was reading what they had written.

When I was about six or seven years old, my father took a special training course related to his work. His method of consolidating what he had learnt was to come home and teach me his summary of the training program for that day after our evening meal. Although I was so young I still understood most of what he told me. (Or I thought I did.) One evening he came home and told me he had attended a special lecture on how to learn effectively. He explained that you have to link new information to information you already know. If the connection is strange, crazy or even a bit risqué, all the better. I never forgot this, and used this basic strategy all through school and college — especially for cramming before exams. I have applied it to study in general and also to learning a foreign language vocabulary. Using this method, my students have memorised more than

a hundred words and their meanings inside an hour. I will introduce you to this approach in this book.

Incidentally, my father asked me where I got the idea for my study methods. I told him he had taught me when I was six years old. He said he remembered the course and teaching me at night, but he couldn't remember anything about the lecture on study methods (or even doing it) and said he had never used any of the methods himself.

I couldn't wait to start high school when I would begin to learn French in earnest. The idea of school had never been so exciting. It was a huge disappointment. No one in the school — even those who finished their final year with top marks in French — could actually hold a conversation in the language. We weren't taught to speak the language; we even had trouble reading it. Everyone complained about having to learn French. I was ashamed to admit I actually enjoyed it, though at the same time I was disappointed with the lack of progress.

It was hard to become enthusiastic about the French lessons. They began with grammar and conjugations of verbs — not much spoken language. The lessons seemed designed not only to result in failure, but also to engender dislike, if not hatred, for the subject. Still, French was my consistently best subject.

When I left school I bought some phonograph records that taught French and attended an evening class at my own expense. My progress was a hundred times faster than it had been in high school classes. We actually spoke the language; we studied the spoken language or dialogue rather than narrative. We used an Assimil course book as our textbook.

During this time I found an Assimil German language course in a second-hand record store. They were selling it cheaply because they didn't have the textbook for the course, just the audio material. I knew I could buy the book

from my language school so I bought the records and then I bought the textbook from my school. I was speaking reasonable German inside two months. I had friends who spoke German so I tried my new skills out on them. They couldn't believe their Australian friend was speaking German.

In the meantime I had discovered a very cheap Russian course. I saw it in a shop window as I was walking past and couldn't resist it. At first I thought they must have made a mistake with the price — it was so cheap. I realised that the price was subsidised by the Russian government but that didn't matter; here was a genuine language course that I could use. I began to learn Russian. My progress was slower than with German, but I was speaking the language.

My wife and I booked a passage for Europe with Germany as our destination, so I was highly motivated to improve my German. I learnt German from my records (I had now recorded them on to cassette tapes) for six months and this was sufficient to get by quite well in Germany.

Two weeks before we left Australia I bought a course called *Italian for Travellers*. We were travelling on an Italian cruise liner to Europe so I thought Italian would help. The course was very cheap and contained cardboard recordings of the text. I copied them to cassette tape so they would last the distance and began learning. The program was called the Lewis Robins Reinforced Learning Method and I thought it was great. I practised what I learnt on my Italian friends and I was pleased that I had learnt so much so quickly and so easily. I was so pleased with the course that I bought the French, German and Russian versions as well. I think they cost \$3.20 each at the time. They also had a *Spanish for Travellers* course but I wasn't interested in learning Spanish back then. I have regretted not buying it ever since. Each course began by teaching the words and phrases that would do the most good and give the learner the greatest

flexibility in speaking the language. The sentences were spoken in context — they weren't just random phrases the authors thought would be useful. The importance of this approach is discussed in chapter 4. I have since incorporated the reinforced learning methods into my strategies for other areas of learning and teaching.

On the ship, our table waiter spoke little English and no one else spoke Italian, so I was nominated to be interpreter for the table. Our waiter took delight in helping me improve my Italian. He always brought me extra servings at meal times and looked after me, so my study of Italian paid off.

On arrival in Germany I visited the local library to read books on electronics in German to learn the vocabulary. I filled my notebook with the technical terms I thought I would need. I applied for a position with an international electronics firm and landed a job translating a technical English text into German. It was very hard work requiring long concentration, but I was able to do it and greatly improve my vocabulary. I translated the text (with the help of a technical dictionary) for a German engineer and he improved my translation into good German. This was the most intensive language course I have ever undertaken.

I worked for a company, designing and servicing language laboratories, and it was a dream job. The electronics was mainly logical thinking and problem solving, which I enjoyed immensely. I was paid to travel and I loved working with equipment to learn languages.

While we were in Europe I discovered I could learn Dutch, Swedish and Russian via short-wave radio, so I immediately wrote away to the stations for the free textbooks that went with the programs. I received a free phonograph record to go with the Dutch textbook and paid for a set of long-play records to go with the Swedish textbook. In my job, I was often away from home for several days at a time, visiting schools to work with their language laboratories, so

evenings I would often ask if there were any foreign-language classes in the school that I could attend, and often sat in on Russian, French or Spanish classes of an evening.

Living in Europe gave me my first experience of conversing with someone in a language that neither of us spoke as our mother tongue. It was exciting for me, but for Europeans it is an everyday occurrence. We had very close friends in Poland, but we could only converse with them in German. I bought some excellent Polish courses in Poland, so that was the beginning of yet another language. One of my German friends criticised me for learning so many languages. 'You will never be completely fluent in any if you are going to learn so many. Wait until your German is perfect.' I thought about it, and I continued my studies.

I found in many countries that it was essential to speak the local language when travelling, because for many people, that is their only language. It should never be assumed that others will speak English.

I was driving on a freeway in Poland when a police officer flagged me down.

'You are fined 200 zloty,' he said.

'Why?' I asked.

'I can only tell you in Polish,' he said. 'Can you understand Polish?'

'No,' I said. 'Do you speak German?'

'No.'

'Do you speak Russian?'

'No, but I can tell you in French. Do you speak French?'

I said I did.

He told me, 'You were driving in the wrong lane. You were in the overtaking lane but you weren't overtaking anyone. That is a 200 zloty fine.'

I told him the slow lane was full of potholes and I was merely driving around them. It doesn't matter, he told me.

The fine is 200 zloty. In western currency 200 zloty wasn't worth much, but he then fined an East German driver for the same offence and it took most of his holiday savings.

I worked for a year as an English teacher in a middle school and enjoyed the experience. I developed methods for teaching German children to pronounce English words without a German accent. I remember as a small child, sitting in my backyard near our side gate, experimenting with diphthongs. (A diphthong is a combination of vowel sounds pronounced as one syllable, as in 'boy', 'say' and 'loud'.) If I slowed down saying the diphthong I found the sound broke up into two vowel sounds. I would say the word 'day' very slowly. It would come out 'd-ah-ee'. The 'a' sound was like 'ah', which is the Australian pronunciation. All of this helped when I was teaching English. I used the method I discovered as a toddler of breaking diphthong sounds down to their components and taught them to the students as separate sounds rather than as a single sound as is the usual practice. I found this was highly successful. I told the German students the word 'day' is pronounced 'd-eh-i'. My own accent underwent change, as I had to teach Standard British English pronunciation. When I returned to Australia my brothers said I 'spoke like a foreigner'.

After we returned to Australia I enrolled as a student teacher. I thought it would be a good opportunity to put some of my methods of learning and teaching mathematics into practice. I have always felt I cheated my way through teachers' college because I based my assignments on the learning and teaching methods I had already developed. I felt I only put in half the effort of the other students in my class, but the effort had been made years before. The lecturers encouraged me to develop my methods further.

When I was given the opportunity to teach my learning and teaching strategies in other countries I was delighted. I spent some time in Canada and then I was invited to take

part in a United States government program that was exploring ways of teaching to produce exceptional students. After my first mathematics book was published I was invited to teach my methods in Singapore. This aroused my interest in learning Chinese and Malay. When I was invited to conduct training programs in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, I jumped at the chance. I bought books and tapes to learn Malay. While I was in Malaysia teaching my mathematics methods I was learning Malay as fast as I could.

I have since downloaded a course in basic Malay from the internet and now use that as a basis, along with two cheap courses teaching Malay and newspapers and some children's magazines which I brought back with me from Singapore.

One of my earlier books, *Speed Mathematics*, has now been translated into Indonesian, so I will have to learn Indonesian as well to read it. I am keen to find out if the translation is better than the original. Indonesian is almost the same as Malay, so I get two languages for the effort of learning one.

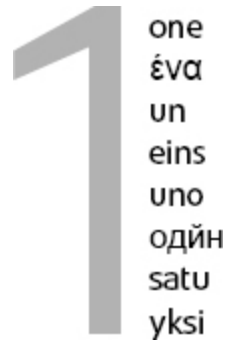
My knowledge of Chinese is still hovering around nil but I am able to wish others a happy new year in Chinese. I learnt this from a *Dennis The Menace* comic. According to Dennis the Menace, the greeting is *gung hay fat choy*. People understood me when I first tried this out, but they told me I was saying it in Cantonese. I should speak in Mandarin, they said, so they taught me the Mandarin equivalent, *gong xi fa cai*, pronounced 'gong see fah chigh'. My knowledge of Mandarin is still very basic but I can observe the formalities.

I enjoy learning languages with strange alphabets. That is partly how I developed my strategies for teaching reading and literacy. When you learn a language like Russian, Greek, Hebrew or Arabic, you have to sound out every word. It can be discouraging at first but it isn't long before you develop a 'sight vocabulary' — a body of words you recognise

immediately, without effort. All of my children are voracious readers. Now my grandchildren are avid readers, too, reading years ahead of their age level — they have all benefited from my methods.

I currently speak and understand about fifteen languages. This sounds rather a lot, but this figure is a little misleading: if you learn Malay, you can understand Indonesian; if you know Dutch you can understand Afrikaans, and so on. I understand some languages quite well and I would say I am fluent in them. With other languages I can get by and read articles in a newspaper or on the internet. I have done public speaking in German and French (and taught in a German school) and could probably speak in public from notes in several other languages. Using the methods described in this book, you will be able to master foreign languages, too.

Language learning should be an adventure and certainly should be fun. To quote Captain Jean-Luc Picard of the *Star Trek: The Next Generation* television series, 'We can make it so.'



## ***Why learn a language?***

For me, learning a language is a way to really get to know a people. I enjoy sitting on a bus in a foreign country conversing with strangers in their own language. I am part of their environment, not just an observer. I remember sitting in a streetcar in Poland discussing politics with my fellow travellers and thinking, *I am getting first hand insight into the way Polish people think*. Sitting at the table with East Germans in their homes discussing religion and politics provided some of my great memories of the country. I think of the picnics I was invited to and the time I spent with families while we lived in Europe and I realise that this could never have happened if we hadn't spoken the language of our host country.

Learning someone's language is an act of friendship. It gives you insight into how they think. There is a thrill that comes with your first successful attempt to converse with someone in their own language; when you first discover you are thinking in their language.

It is different visiting a country when you understand the language. It is much more exciting to ask directions in the language, shop in the language, take a train or bus, book a hotel room, order a meal. And the knowledge of the language required for this is fairly basic.

One of the first sentences I learn in any language is, 'Excuse me. Do you speak . . . ?' and then I learn the words for the languages I feel confident with. This helps when I get out of my depth: if an answer is complicated, or if someone replies by asking me something I don't understand.

In your own country, you will make friends among people who are flattered you are making the attempt to learn their language.

## **Reasons for learning a language**

Most people who learn a language have compelling and urgent reasons for doing so. Usually it is for business reasons — we have to travel and we want to be able to communicate. It could be that you deal with people or companies who do business in a foreign tongue. It will help if you speak the language of your supplier or your head office. Maybe all the manuals are written in Swedish or Korean; it will help if you can read them.

Maybe you are travelling to a holiday destination where people speak a different language. You will gain far more from the experience if you can speak at least some of the language.

Or you may have romantic reasons for learning the language — a marriage or a relationship. Perhaps speaking Vietnamese or Italian will help you to understand your spouse and your spouse's family better. The language will introduce you to their culture.

Maybe you are studying or researching a topic on which most of the information is published in a foreign language. It will certainly help if you can go to the original sources. If you are studying overseas, you need a good knowledge of the language. (Although I do remember migrants to Australia arriving when I was a boy and they spoke no English — many of them were in my class at school and soon passed