GoalTodo

How to learn a language: from your first words to real conversations

Learn a new language

40 weeks · Mon, Nov 30 → Sun, Sep 5

Week by week

Tick a box each time you do a session.

Nov 30–Dec 6
Week 1

Sounds and hellos

First words

- [ ] Word cards: make and learn your first 20 words: hello, goodbye, please, thank you, yes, no, sorry, I, you, and your own name and job. Say each aloud, then test yourself: look at your own language, say the new word, and only then turn the card
  15 min
- [ ] Course lesson: the sounds of the language (and its alphabet or script, if it has its own), and how to greet someone
  20 min
- [ ] Listen: play this week's course audio, then play it again and repeat each line out loud
  15 min
- [ ] Speak: say hello, your name, thank you and goodbye out loud, copying the audio. Record yourself once this week, listen back, and keep the recording to compare with later
  10 min

Done when: You can greet someone, say your name and say thank you without looking, and you've recorded yourself once

Sticking point: Some sounds won't exist in your own language and will feel odd. Copy the audio slowly and don't aim for perfect. If your language has a new script, give it two weeks: repeat this week before you move on.

Dec 7–13
Week 2

Numbers and where you're from

First words

- [ ] Word cards: learn 20 new words (40 so far: the numbers 1 to 20, a few countries, and from, live and speak), saying each one aloud. Then test yourself on older cards, naming each before you turn it over
  15 min
- [ ] Course lesson: numbers to 20, and saying where you're from, where you live and what you speak
  20 min
- [ ] Listen: play this week's course audio, then play it again and repeat each line out loud
  15 min
- [ ] Speak: count to 20 out loud, then say where you're from and where you live. Read any numbers you see today, such as prices or bus numbers, aloud in the language
  10 min

Done when: You can count to 20 without help, and say where you're from and where you live

Dec 14–20
Week 3

Asking questions

First words

- [ ] Word cards: learn 20 new words (60 so far: who, what, where, when, how, and the words for your family), saying each one aloud. Then test yourself on older cards, naming each before you turn it over
  15 min
- [ ] Course lesson: asking and answering simple questions about yourself and your family
  20 min
- [ ] Listen: play this week's course audio, then play it again and repeat each line out loud
  15 min
- [ ] Speak: ask yourself five questions out loud (What's your name? Where do you live? Do you have brothers or sisters?) and answer each one
  10 min

Done when: You can ask and answer five questions about yourself and your family out loud, with your notes closed

Sticking point: Getting the word order wrong is normal. Say it anyway, check your course, then say it again.

Dec 21–27
Week 4

Your first real hello

First words

- [ ] Word cards: learn 20 new words (80 so far: everyday things in your home. Stick a note with the word on each one), saying each one aloud. Then test yourself on older cards, naming each before you turn it over
  15 min
- [ ] Course lesson: this, that, there is, and naming the things around you
  20 min
- [ ] Listen: play this week's course audio, then play it again and repeat each line out loud
  15 min
- [ ] Speak: walk round your home and name what you see, out loud, in short sentences
  10 min
- [ ] Conversation: your first one. Introduce yourself to a speaker of the language (a teacher, an exchange partner or a conversation group) and ask them two questions
  10 min

Done when: You've said hello, your name and where you're from to a real person, and asked them a question

Sticking point: Nerves are normal. Say you're a beginner at the start: most people slow down and help. A few sentences is a win.

Dec 28–Jan 3
Week 5

A hundred words

First words

- [ ] Word cards: learn 20 new words (100 so far: food and drink. On Saturday, shuffle all 100 cards and test yourself), saying each one aloud. Then test yourself on older cards, naming each before you turn it over
  15 min
- [ ] Course lesson: food and drink, saying what you'd like, and asking how much something is
  20 min
- [ ] Listen: play this week's course audio, then play it again and repeat each line out loud
  15 min
- [ ] Speak: name what you eat and drink today, out loud, as you go
  10 min
- [ ] Conversation: introduce yourself again, then talk about food you like and don't like
  15 min

Done when: Board step: you know a hundred words. Shuffle all 100 cards, test yourself, and get at least 90 right

Sticking point: Fewer than 90? Keep the missed cards in their own pile and test them every day. Next week is a lighter week, so there's room to catch up.

Jan 4–10
Week 6

Lighter week: your hundred words

First words

- [ ] Word cards: no new words this week. Test yourself on every card so far, and move the ones you miss to the front of the pile
  15 min
- [ ] Course lesson: go back over your first five lessons and redo any exercises you got wrong
  20 min
- [ ] Listen: play the audio from your first five lessons again, repeating along
  15 min
- [ ] Speak: record a one-minute introduction: your name, where you're from, your family, what you like to eat
  10 min
- [ ] Conversation: anything from the last five weeks
  15 min

Done when: You can give a one-minute introduction with your notes closed, and you've recorded it

Jan 11–17
Week 7

Your day

Simple conversations

- [ ] Word cards: learn 20 new words (daily routine: get up, work, eat, sleep, and the times of day), saying each one aloud. Then test yourself on older cards, naming each before you turn it over
  15 min
- [ ] Course lesson: the present tense for everyday actions
  20 min
- [ ] Listen: play this week's course audio, then play it again and repeat each line out loud
  15 min
- [ ] Speak: say what you're doing as you do it: I'm making coffee, I'm going to work
  10 min
- [ ] Conversation: tell your partner about a normal day, and ask about theirs
  15 min

Done when: You can say five things you do on a normal day, in order

Jan 18–24
Week 8

Family and friends

Simple conversations

- [ ] Word cards: learn 20 new words (describing people: old, young, tall, kind, funny, and a few jobs), saying each one aloud. Then test yourself on older cards, naming each before you turn it over
  15 min
- [ ] Course lesson: describing people, and saying what they do
  20 min
- [ ] Listen: play this week's course audio, then play it again and repeat each line out loud
  15 min
- [ ] Speak: look at photos of people you know and describe each one in two sentences
  10 min
- [ ] Conversation: show your partner a photo and describe the people in it
  15 min

Done when: You can describe three people in your life in two sentences each

Jan 25–31
Week 9

What you like

Simple conversations

- [ ] Word cards: learn 20 new words (free time: music, sport, reading, cooking, and like, love, don't like), saying each one aloud. Then test yourself on older cards, naming each before you turn it over
  15 min
- [ ] Course lesson: saying what you like and don't like, and asking someone else
  20 min
- [ ] Listen: play this week's course audio, then play it again and repeat each line out loud
  15 min
- [ ] Speak: say what you like doing and why, and one thing you don't like
  10 min
- [ ] Conversation: find three things you and your partner both like
  15 min

Done when: You can say what you like doing in your free time, and ask someone what they like

Feb 1–7
Week 10

Days, times and plans

Simple conversations

- [ ] Word cards: learn 20 new words (the days of the week, telling the time, today, tomorrow, next week), saying each one aloud. Then test yourself on older cards, naming each before you turn it over
  15 min
- [ ] Course lesson: telling the time, and arranging when to meet
  20 min
- [ ] Listen: play this week's course audio, then play it again and repeat each line out loud
  15 min
- [ ] Speak: say your plans for each day this week out loud, with times
  10 min
- [ ] Conversation: arrange your next conversation in the language: the day, the time and where
  15 min

Done when: You can say what time it is, and arrange a day and time to meet someone

Feb 8–14
Week 11

Shops and prices

Simple conversations

- [ ] Word cards: learn 20 new words (shopping: numbers to 100, sizes, colours, cheap, expensive), saying each one aloud. Then test yourself on older cards, naming each before you turn it over — 15 min
- [ ] Course lesson: buying things and understanding prices — 20 min
- [ ] Listen: play this week's course audio, then play it again and repeat each line out loud — 15 min
- [ ] Speak: read out the prices on a receipt or a shop's website in the language — 10 min
- [ ] Conversation: role-play buying three things in a shop, then swap roles — 15 min

Done when: In a role-play, you can ask for something in a shop, understand the price and pay

Feb 15–21
Week 12

Lighter week: putting it together

Simple conversations

- [ ] Word cards: no new words this week. Test yourself on every card so far, and move the ones you miss to the front of the pile — 15 min
- [ ] Course lesson: redo the exercises you found hardest in weeks 7 to 11 — 20 min
- [ ] Listen: play the audio from weeks 7 to 11 again — 15 min
- [ ] Speak: talk for two minutes about your day, your family and what you like, then record it — 10 min
- [ ] Conversation: anything from the last five weeks — 15 min

Done when: You can talk for two minutes about your day, your family and what you like, with your notes closed

Feb 22–28
Week 13

At a café

Simple conversations

- [ ] Word cards: learn 20 new words (eating out: a table for two, the menu, the bill, and polite requests), saying each one aloud. Then test yourself on older cards, naming each before you turn it over
  15 min
- [ ] Course lesson: ordering food and drink, and asking for the bill
  20 min
- [ ] Listen: play this week's course audio, then play it again and repeat each line out loud
  15 min
- [ ] Speak: read a menu in the language out loud, then order from it as if you were there
  10 min
- [ ] Conversation: role-play a café: one of you orders, the other serves, then swap
  15 min

Done when: In a role-play, you can order something to drink and eat and ask for the bill

Mar 1–7
Week 14

Home and where you live

Simple conversations

- [ ] Word cards: learn 20 new words (rooms, furniture, the town, near, far, next to), saying each one aloud. Then test yourself on older cards, naming each before you turn it over
  15 min
- [ ] Course lesson: describing your home and the area you live in
  20 min
- [ ] Listen: play this week's course audio, then play it again and repeat each line out loud
  15 min
- [ ] Speak: describe your home room by room, then your street and your town
  10 min
- [ ] Conversation: describe where you live, and ask your partner about their home
  15 min

Done when: You can describe your home and your area in five sentences

Mar 8–14
Week 15

Sorry, again please

Simple conversations

- [ ] Word cards: learn 20 new words (the phrases that keep a conversation going: can you say that again, more slowly please, what does this mean, how do you say, I don't understand), saying each one aloud. Then test yourself on older cards, naming each before you turn it over
  15 min
- [ ] Course lesson: asking for help in a conversation, and checking what someone meant
  20 min
- [ ] Listen: play this week's course audio, then play it again and repeat each line out loud
  15 min
- [ ] Speak: practise each phrase until it comes out without thinking
  10 min
- [ ] Conversation: use at least three of the new phrases whenever you get lost, instead of switching to your own language
  20 min

Done when: In your conversation, you used at least three of this week's phrases instead of switching to your own language

Sticking point: This is one of the most useful weeks in the plan. With these phrases, a conversation doesn't stop when you get lost.

Mar 15–21
Week 16

A five-minute conversation

Simple conversations

- [ ] Word cards: no new words this week. Test yourself on every card so far, and move the ones you miss to the front of the pile
  15 min
- [ ] Course lesson: write down ten questions someone might ask you, and answer each one out loud
  20 min
- [ ] Listen: play this week's course audio, then play it again and repeat each line out loud
  15 min
- [ ] Speak: answer your ten questions out loud, in a different order each day
  10 min
- [ ] Conversation: the board step. Talk for five minutes in the language only, about yourself, your family, your day and what you like. Ask your partner to time it
  20 min

Done when: Board step: you've held a five-minute conversation without switching to your own language, using your help phrases when you got stuck

Sticking point: If you dry up, ask your partner a question. Getting them talking gives you time to think, and listening counts too.

Mar 22–28
Week 17

What you did

Everyday language

- [ ] Word cards: learn 20 new words (past time: yesterday, last week, ago, and the verbs you use most), saying each one aloud. Then test yourself on older cards, naming each before you turn it over
  15 min
- [ ] Course lesson: the past tense for things you did
  20 min
- [ ] Listen: play this week's course audio, then play it again and repeat each line out loud
  15 min
- [ ] Speak: each evening, say five things you did today
  10 min
- [ ] Conversation: tell your partner what you did yesterday, and ask about their day
  15 min

Done when: You can say five things you did yesterday

Sticking point: Past forms take a while. Use the few you know well, and learn the rest a little at a time, as you need them.

Mar 29–Apr 4
Week 18

Your weekend, as a story

Everyday language

- [ ] Word cards: learn 20 new words (telling a story: first, then, after that, in the end, and words for feelings), saying each one aloud. Then test yourself on older cards, naming each before you turn it over
  15 min
- [ ] Course lesson: linking sentences into a short story
  20 min
- [ ] Listen: play this week's course audio, then play it again and repeat each line out loud
  15 min
- [ ] Speak: tell the story of last weekend out loud, then record it once this week
  10 min
- [ ] Conversation: tell your partner about your weekend, and ask three questions about theirs
  15 min

Done when: You can tell the story of your weekend in six sentences, using first, then and after that

Apr 5–11
Week 19

Getting around

Everyday language

- [ ] Word cards: learn 20 new words (travel: left, right, straight on, ticket, station, how far), saying each one aloud. Then test yourself on older cards, naming each before you turn it over
  15 min
- [ ] Course lesson: asking the way and buying a ticket
  20 min
- [ ] Listen: play this week's course audio, then play it again and repeat each line out loud
  15 min
- [ ] Speak: describe how you get from your home to work or to the shops, step by step
  10 min
- [ ] Conversation: role-play asking the way on a map, then swap
  15 min

Done when: In a role-play, you can ask the way and follow directions with left, right and straight on

Apr 12–18
Week 20

Lighter week: hear how far you've come

Everyday language

- [ ] Word cards: no new words this week. Test yourself on every card so far, and move the ones you miss to the front of the pile — 15 min
- [ ] Course lesson: redo the exercises you found hardest in weeks 13 to 19 — 20 min
- [ ] Listen: play the audio from weeks 13 to 19 again — 15 min
- [ ] Speak: record a two-minute talk about your last weekend, then play it next to your week 1 recording — 10 min
- [ ] Conversation: anything from the last seven weeks — 15 min

Done when: You've recorded two minutes about your last weekend and listened to it next to your week 1 recording

Apr 19–25
Week 21

Feeling unwell

Everyday language

- [ ] Word cards: learn 20 new words (the body, I feel, it hurts, pharmacy, doctor), saying each one aloud. Then test yourself on older cards, naming each before you turn it over — 15 min
- [ ] Course lesson: saying how you feel and what hurts — 20 min
- [ ] Listen: play this week's course audio, then play it again and repeat each line out loud — 15 min
- [ ] Speak: say how you feel today, from head to toe — 10 min
- [ ] Conversation: role-play asking for help at a pharmacy, then swap — 15 min

Done when: In a role-play, you can say what hurts and ask where the pharmacy is

Apr 26–May 2
Week 22

Weather and small talk

Everyday language

- [ ] Word cards: learn 20 new words (weather, seasons, and easy ways to start a chat), saying each one aloud. Then test yourself on older cards, naming each before you turn it over
  15 min
- [ ] Course lesson: small talk: the weather, the weekend, how someone is
  20 min
- [ ] Listen: play this week's course audio, then play it again and repeat each line out loud
  15 min
- [ ] Speak: each day, say what the weather is like and what you'll do because of it
  10 min
- [ ] Conversation: start with small talk and keep it going for three back-and-forths before you change topic
  15 min

Done when: You can open a chat with small talk and keep it going for three back-and-forths

May 3–9
Week 23

Plans and the future

Everyday language

- [ ] Word cards: learn 20 new words (going to, next month, next year, hope, want, would like), saying each one aloud. Then test yourself on older cards, naming each before you turn it over
  15 min
- [ ] Course lesson: talking about plans and hopes
  20 min
- [ ] Listen: play this week's course audio, then play it again and repeat each line out loud
  15 min
- [ ] Speak: say five things you're going to do next month, and one thing you hope to do one day
  10 min
- [ ] Conversation: ask your partner about their plans for the next holiday or weekend, and share yours
  15 min

Done when: You can say five things you're going to do next month

May 10–16
Week 24

Work and study

Everyday language

- [ ] Word cards: learn 20 new words (your job or studies, your school and training, and what you do each day at work), saying each one aloud. Then test yourself on older cards, naming each before you turn it over
  15 min
- [ ] Course lesson: describing your job, your studies and your education
  20 min
- [ ] Listen: play this week's course audio, then play it again and repeat each line out loud
  15 min
- [ ] Speak: describe your job, or your studies, as if meeting someone new
  10 min
- [ ] Conversation: tell your partner about your work or studies and ask about theirs
  15 min

Done when: You can describe your job (or your studies) and your education in five sentences

May 17–23
Week 25

Reading short texts

Everyday language

- [ ] Word cards: learn 20 new words (from what you read this week: pick words you want, not every new word), saying each one aloud. Then test yourself on older cards, naming each before you turn it over
  15 min
- [ ] Course lesson: reading signs, menus, timetables and short messages
  20 min
- [ ] Listen: play this week's course audio, then play it again and repeat each line out loud
  15 min
- [ ] Read: a book written for learners at your level (a graded reader) or a children's book
  15 min
- [ ] Speak: read a page aloud, then say what happened in your own words
  10 min
- [ ] Conversation: tell your partner about what you read
  15 min

Done when: You've read ten pages of a book for learners or children, and can say what happened

May 24–30
Week 26

Lighter week: a fresh look

Everyday language

- [ ] Word cards: no new words this week. Test yourself on every card so far, and move the ones you miss to the front of the pile — 15 min
- [ ] Course lesson: go back over the course units you've done so far and redo the hardest exercises — 20 min
- [ ] Listen: play the audio of the units you found hardest — 15 min
- [ ] Speak: talk about your plans for next month and your job, then record it — 10 min
- [ ] Conversation: anything from the last six weeks — 15 min

Done when: You can talk about your work and your plans for two minutes, with your notes closed

May 31–Jun 6
Week 27

Short messages

Everyday language

- [ ] Word cards: learn 20 new words (messages: thanks, invitations, sorry I can't, see you), saying each one aloud. Then test yourself on older cards, naming each before you turn it over — 15 min
- [ ] Course lesson: writing short notes, messages and a simple thank-you — 20 min
- [ ] Listen: play this week's course audio, then play it again and repeat each line out loud — 15 min
- [ ] Write: one short message a day in the language: a thank-you, an invitation, a reply — 10 min
- [ ] Conversation: ask your partner to read one of your messages and correct it, then talk about it — 15 min

Done when: You've written five short messages and had a speaker or teacher check one

Jun 7–13
Week 28

Ten minutes, about your life

Everyday language

- [ ] Word cards: learn 20 new words (whatever you were missing in your last conversation), saying each one aloud. Then test yourself on older cards, naming each before you turn it over
  15 min
- [ ] Course lesson: read the A2 level check in the guide and practise the thing you feel least sure of
  20 min
- [ ] Listen: play this week's course audio, then play it again and repeat each line out loud
  15 min
- [ ] Speak: talk about your last weekend, your work and your plans, two minutes each
  10 min
- [ ] Conversation: ten minutes on your weekend, your work and your plans, asking your partner questions too
  20 min

Done when: You've talked for ten minutes about your weekend, your work and your plans, and asked your partner questions too

Jun 14–20
Week 29

Learner audio at real speed

Listening for real

- [ ] Word cards: learn 20 new words (from what you listen to this week), saying each one aloud. Then test yourself on older cards, naming each before you turn it over
  15 min
- [ ] Course lesson: keep going with the next unit of your course
  20 min
- [ ] Listen: podcasts or slow news made for learners of your language (many public broadcasters have them). Listen once without stopping, then again with the transcript if there is one
  20 min
- [ ] Speak: after each episode, say in one or two sentences what it was about
  10 min
- [ ] Conversation: tell your partner about one episode
  15 min

Done when: You've listened to five learner episodes and can say the topic of each in a sentence

Sticking point: Real speed feels too fast at first. Listening to the same episode twice is fine, and better than new ones you can't follow.

Jun 21–27
Week 30

A show, with subtitles in the language

Listening for real

- [ ] Word cards: learn 20 new words (ten from the show, ten from your course), saying each one aloud. Then test yourself on older cards, naming each before you turn it over
  15 min
- [ ] Course lesson: keep going with your course
  20 min
- [ ] Listen: choose a show made for learners, or a children's show in the language. Watch an episode with subtitles in the language, not your own
  25 min
- [ ] Speak: say what happened in each episode in three sentences
  10 min
- [ ] Conversation: tell your partner about the show and ask what they'd recommend
  15 min

Done when: You've watched two episodes with subtitles in the language and made cards for ten words from them

Sticking point: Children's shows speak slowly and clearly and use everyday words, which is exactly what you need now.

Jun 28–Jul 4
Week 31

Saying why

Listening for real

- [ ] Word cards: learn 20 new words (because, I think, in my opinion, I agree, I'm not sure), saying each one aloud. Then test yourself on older cards, naming each before you turn it over
  15 min
- [ ] Course lesson: giving opinions and simple reasons
  20 min
- [ ] Listen: another episode of your show, with subtitles in the language
  25 min
- [ ] Speak: give your opinion on three things today (a meal, a show, the weather) and say why
  10 min
- [ ] Conversation: pick a topic you both care about and give your opinions, with reasons
  15 min

Done when: You can give your opinion on three things and say why, using because

Jul 5–11
Week 32

Lighter week: watch it again

Listening for real

- [ ] Word cards: no new words this week. Test yourself on every card so far, and move the ones you miss to the front of the pile
  15 min
- [ ] Course lesson: redo the course exercises you found hardest lately
  20 min
- [ ] Listen: rewatch an episode you've already seen, with subtitles in the language
  25 min
- [ ] Speak: say what happened in the episode you rewatched
  10 min
- [ ] Conversation: anything you like
  15 min

Done when: You've rewatched an episode with subtitles in the language and understood more than the first time

Jul 12–18
Week 33

Five minutes without subtitles

Listening for real

- [ ] Word cards: learn 20 new words (from your show), saying each one aloud. Then test yourself on older cards, naming each before you turn it over
  15 min
- [ ] Course lesson: keep going with your course
  20 min
- [ ] Listen: watch a new episode with subtitles in the language, then watch its first five minutes again with no subtitles
  30 min
- [ ] Speak: say what happened in those five minutes
  10 min
- [ ] Conversation: tell your partner what you've been watching
  15 min

Done when: You've watched five minutes without subtitles and could follow what was happening

Jul 19–25
Week 34

Telling the story of an episode

Listening for real

- [ ] Word cards: learn 20 new words (words for stories: happens, finds, decides, at first, suddenly), saying each one aloud. Then test yourself on older cards, naming each before you turn it over
  15 min
- [ ] Course lesson: telling a story in the past
  20 min
- [ ] Listen: a new episode with subtitles in the language
  25 min
- [ ] Speak: tell the plot of an episode out loud, start to finish, then record it once
  10 min
- [ ] Conversation: tell your partner the story of an episode
  15 min

Done when: You can tell the story of an episode in eight sentences, out loud

Jul 26–Aug 1
Week 35

Half an episode without subtitles

Listening for real

- [ ] Word cards: learn 20 new words (from your show), saying each one aloud. Then test yourself on older cards, naming each before you turn it over
  15 min
- [ ] Course lesson: keep going with your course
  20 min
- [ ] Listen: a new episode: watch the first half with no subtitles, then check it with subtitles in the language
  30 min
- [ ] Speak: before you check, say what you think happened
  10 min
- [ ] Conversation: tell your partner what happened, and what you missed
  15 min

Done when: You've watched half an episode without subtitles, then checked, and you'd followed the main story

Aug 2–8
Week 36

Watch a show without subtitles

Listening for real

- [ ] Word cards: no new words. Test yourself on all your cards from your show
  15 min
- [ ] Course lesson: keep going with your course
  20 min
- [ ] Listen: the board step: a whole episode you haven't seen, of a show for learners or children, with no subtitles. Watch it twice this week if you like
  30 min
- [ ] Speak: tell the main story of the episode in five sentences
  10 min
- [ ] Conversation: tell your partner the story of the episode
  15 min

Done when: Board step: you've watched a whole episode of a show for learners or children without subtitles, and can tell its main story in five sentences

Sticking point: You won't catch every line, and you don't need to: the aim is the main story. Films and dramas for adults come later. See How long it really takes, in the guide.

Aug 9–15
Week 37

Talking with native speakers

Real conversations

- [ ] Word cards: learn 20 new words (from your conversations this week), saying each one aloud. Then test yourself on older cards, naming each before you turn it over
  15 min
- [ ] Course lesson: keep going with your course
  20 min
- [ ] Listen: an episode of your show, or a learner podcast
  20 min
- [ ] Speak: before each exchange, say three things you want to talk about
  10 min
- [ ] Language exchange with a native speaker: half the time in their language, half in yours
  30 min

Done when: You've had two exchange sessions and spoken the language for at least 15 minutes in each

Sticking point: If it's awkward at first, that's normal. It gets easier by the second or third time with the same person.

Aug 16–22
Week 38

Things worth talking about

Real conversations

- [ ] Word cards: learn 20 new words (for topics you care about: your town, travel, food, the news), saying each one aloud. Then test yourself on older cards, naming each before you turn it over
  15 min
- [ ] Course lesson: keep going with your course
  20 min
- [ ] Listen: an episode of your show, or a learner podcast
  20 min
- [ ] Speak: write ten questions you'd like to ask a native speaker, and practise asking them
  10 min
- [ ] Language exchange with a native speaker, using some of your questions
  30 min

Done when: You have ten questions you'd like to ask a native speaker, and you've asked five of them

Aug 23–29
Week 39

Fifteen minutes

Real conversations

- [ ] Word cards: learn 20 new words (whatever you reached for and didn't have last week), saying each one aloud. Then test yourself on older cards, naming each before you turn it over
  15 min
- [ ] Course lesson: go back over your help phrases from week 15, and the past and future
  20 min
- [ ] Listen: an episode of your show, or a learner podcast
  20 min
- [ ] Speak: talk for five minutes on one topic without stopping, then record it once
  10 min
- [ ] Conversation in the language with an exchange partner or teacher, aiming for fifteen minutes without switching
  30 min

Done when: You've kept a conversation going in the language for fifteen minutes with an exchange partner or teacher

Aug 30–Sep 5
Week 40

A real conversation with a native speaker

Real conversations

- [ ] Word cards: no new words. Test yourself on your cards from the last three weeks
  15 min
- [ ] Listen: an episode of your show, or a learner podcast
  20 min
- [ ] Speak: go over your ten questions and the help phrases, out loud
  10 min
- [ ] The board step: a real conversation with a native speaker, not a lesson, about things you're both interested in. Stay in the language
  15 min or more

Done when: Board step: you've had a real conversation of at least fifteen minutes with a native speaker, mostly in the language, about things you both care about

Sticking point: You'll still ask them to repeat things, and that's fine. Being understood, and understanding most of what they say, is the goal.

How the plan works

About an hour a day, six days a week, with one day off. Each day has four short parts:

▪ Word cards (15 minutes). About 20 new words a week. Test yourself before you turn each card over, and keep going back to older cards, not just this week's. Testing yourself is called retrieval practice, and coming back to the same words over days and weeks is spaced practice. University teaching centres describe both as well supported by research: Washington University in St. Louis gives flashcards as the classic example of retrieval practice, and UC San Diego explains that several sessions spread over time beat one long session of the same length.

▪ A course lesson (20 minutes, most days). Use any beginners' course in your language, from a book with audio or a free course (see Free help). The course gives you the grammar in order; the plan tells you what to practise and when to move on.

▪ Listening (15 minutes). Course audio first, then learner podcasts, then shows.

▪ Speaking (10 minutes, plus a conversation on Saturdays from week 4). Out loud, from day one. Teachers at the SOAS Language Centre in London advise starting to speak from the first day and getting real conversation practice early.

Each week has a "done when". Tick it, then move on. If you can't yet, repeat the week. Lighter weeks come every five or six weeks: no new words, just review. A shorter plan leaves some of them out, along with a few weeks that later weeks don't build on.

It works for any language. The topics are the ones every beginners' course covers, in roughly the same order. Follow your course where it differs.

How long it really takes

This plan is about 200 to 230 hours of practice (roughly an hour a day, six days a week, for 40 weeks). Here's what that honestly buys.

▪ Cambridge English (part of the University of Cambridge) estimates about 200 guided learning hours to move up one level of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), the scale most language courses use. From complete beginner, its guide is about 90 to 100 hours for A1, 180 to 200 for A2, 350 to

400 for B1 and 500 to 600 for B2. Those figures are for learning English with lessons and supervised study, so treat them as a rough guide.

▪ The US Foreign Service Institute, which trains diplomats full time, groups languages by how long English speakers take to reach a professional working level: 24 to 30 weeks (600 to 750 class hours) for languages close to English, such as Spanish, French, Italian, Portuguese and Dutch; about 36 weeks for German, Indonesian, Malay and Swahili; about 44 weeks for a long list of "hard" languages, including Russian, Polish, Greek, Hindi, Turkish and Vietnamese; and 88 weeks (2,200 class hours) for Arabic, Mandarin, Cantonese, Japanese and Korean. It says the real time varies with your ability, the languages you already know, and your time in class.

For a language close to your own, 40 weeks takes you to about A2: simple conversations about everyday life, and shows made for learners or children. That's what the plan's "watch a show without subtitles" means. Films and dramas for adults without subtitles are around B2 on the CEFR scale ("I can understand the majority of films in standard dialect"): nearer 500 to 600 hours, or about two years at this pace. Keep going after the plan and you'll get there.

For a harder language, going by the Foreign Service Institute's weeks, expect the same steps to take about one and a half times as long for its "hard" group and about three times as long for Arabic, Chinese, Japanese or Korean. In 40 weeks you'll most likely reach the hundred words and the five-minute conversation and be well into everyday language. Choose a later date on the plan page, repeat weeks whenever you need to, and keep the steps in the same order. These figures assume English is your first language: whatever yours is, a language close to it comes faster.

Which level to pick

▪ Starting from zero: you've never studied the language, or only know a few words. 40 weeks.

▪ I learned some at school: you studied it for a year or two, can still read it, and some words come back when you hear them, but you can't hold a conversation. 28 weeks.

If you're between the two, start with "I learned some at school". Its first week shows you what's still there, and if it's very little, switch to the first level. If you can already hold a five-minute conversation, start the first level at week 17, or the second at week 11.

Level checks

Most courses and tests use the CEFR levels, from A1 (beginner) to C2. Here's what the first ones mean, based on the Council of Europe's descriptions, and where they fall in this plan.

▪ A1, around week 16 (or week 10 if you learned some at school): you can understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases, introduce yourself, and ask and answer simple questions about where you live and people you know. You can talk in a simple way if the other person speaks slowly and clearly and is ready to help.

▪ A2, around the end of the plan for a language close to your own: you can manage simple, routine tasks that need a simple, direct exchange of information, and describe your background, your surroundings and your immediate needs. You can handle very short social exchanges, even if you can't usually understand enough to keep the conversation going yourself.

▪ B1, the next goal after the plan: you can understand the main points of clear, standard speech on familiar things, and the main point of many radio or TV programmes when people speak relatively slowly and clearly. You can join a conversation on familiar topics without preparing.

Week 28 of the first level (week 18 of the second) asks you to read the A2 check and practise what you're least sure of.

Before you start

▪ Choose one language and stay with it for the whole plan. Pick one you'll use: for family, travel, work, or shows you love. Learning through things that interest you sticks better than dull lists.

▪ Find a course with audio: a beginners' book from the library or a free online course from a university or government (see Free help). One course, followed in order, is enough.

▪ Make word cards. Paper cards work well: the word on one side, your own language and a short example sentence on the other. Any free flashcard program that spaces out your reviews works too.

▪ Find someone to talk to by week 4: a teacher, a language exchange partner (you help with your language, they help with theirs), or a conversation group. A partner who speaks the language natively is best from week 37.

▪ Pick your times. An hour a day can be split: cards on the bus, the lesson at lunch, listening while you cook.

Practice menu

When a slot gets stale, swap in something else from the same row.

▪ Words: say the word before you turn the card; use it in a sentence of your own; sort your cards into three piles (don't know, shaky, know) and test the shaky ones daily and the known ones weekly; label things in your home with sticky notes.

▪ Listening: shadowing (play a line, pause, copy it with the same rhythm); songs with the lyrics in front of you; learner podcasts; slow news; children's shows; an episode you've seen before.

▪ Speaking: talk through what you're doing as you do it; describe photos; read a page aloud; record yourself and compare with an older recording; copy a scene from a show line by line.

▪ Reading and writing: books for learners (graded readers) and children's books; write your to-do list or a three-line diary in the language.

▪ Brain dump: close everything and write down all you can remember about this week's topic. Then check what you missed.

Free help

You don't need to pay for anything to follow this plan.

▪ Your public library. Many libraries lend course books with audio, graded readers and children's books in other languages, and some give card holders free online language courses. Some run conversation groups. Ask at the desk.

▪ Free courses from universities and governments. Many universities publish free beginners' courses and audio online, and some governments offer free courses in their language, especially for newcomers. Look for a university or government web address.

▪ Public broadcasters. Many national broadcasters have free language-learning pages, news in slow or simple language, and children's programmes, which are ideal for the listening weeks.

▪ Conversation groups and exchanges. Language cafés, community centres, cultural centres and university societies often run free meetups, and a language exchange costs nothing.

Common mistakes

▪ Waiting until you feel ready to speak. You won't feel ready. Speak from week 1, and talk to a real person by week 4.

▪ Rereading your cards instead of testing yourself. Looking at the answer feels like learning. Saying it first, then checking, is what makes words stick.

▪ Cramming at the weekend. An hour a day beats six hours on Sunday, even though it's the same time.

▪ Getting stuck on grammar tables. Learn the forms you need to talk about yourself and ask questions; pick up the rest in context, as your course brings it in.

▪ Doing only one kind of practice. A word game is fine as one part of your day, but on its own it leaves out listening and real conversation.

▪ Keeping subtitles in your own language on. You end up reading, not listening. Switch them to the language you're learning, then off.

▪ Switching courses or languages every few weeks. Stay with one.

The real conversation, and after

▪ Choose someone patient: an exchange partner you know, a neighbour, a colleague, a friend of a friend. Tell them you're learning and that you'd like to stay in their language.

▪ Bring your ten questions and your help phrases. Questions keep the other person talking, which is half a conversation.

▪ Don't switch when you get stuck: ask them to repeat, or say it another way.

▪ Afterwards, write down three words you wished you'd had, and add them to your cards.

After week 40, keep your hour a day going and aim for B1: longer shows for learners, then shows with subtitles in the language for native speakers, more conversations, and books written for learners at the next level up. Every conversation now is practice for the next.

If you fall behind

Missed 1 week: Carry on with the current week. Start with your word cards: test yourself on older cards first, as those are the ones that fade.

Missed 2 weeks: Repeat the last week you finished in full, then carry on. If that runs past your date, leave out a lighter week, never the last four weeks.

Missed 4 weeks: Go back two weeks from where you stopped, and test yourself on all your cards before you add new ones. If there are no longer enough weeks, enter a new date on the plan page.

Missed 8 or more weeks: Read the level checks in the guide, find the week that matches what you can do today (try a five-minute conversation to see), and enter a new date on the plan page.

Sources

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`https://web.archive.org/web/20241229203515/https://www.state.gov/foreign-language-training/`
“The following language learning timelines reflect 76 years of experience in teaching languages to U.S. diplomats, and illustrate the time usually required for a student to reach “General Professional Proficiency” in the language, or a score of “Speaking-3/Reading-3” on the Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) scale.”

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“It takes approximately 200 guided learning hours for a language learner to progress from one level of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) to the next.”

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“For example, it takes approximately 700–800 hours to reach C1 from being a complete beginner.”

Cambridge University Press & Assessment (Cambridge English)
https://support.cambridgeenglish.org/hc/en-gb/articles/202838506-Guided-learning-hours
"You may require more or less time and support depending on your own needs."

Institute for Dutch Language Education, University of Amsterdam (Council of Europe CEFR global scale)
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"Can understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at the satisfaction of needs of a concrete type."

Institute for Dutch Language Education, University of Amsterdam (Council of Europe CEFR global scale)
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"Can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters."

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"Can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc."

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https://europass.europa.eu/en/common-european-framework-reference-language-skills
"I can understand the main point of many radio or TV programmes on current affairs or topics of personal or professional interest when the delivery is relatively slow and clear."

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"I can understand the majority of films in standard dialect."

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"I can handle very short social exchanges, even though I can't usually understand enough to keep the conversation going myself."

Center for Teaching and Learning, Washington University in St. Louis
https://ctl.wustl.edu/resources/using-retrieval-practice-to-increase-student-learning/
"Retrieval practice is the strategy of recalling facts, concepts, or events from memory in order to enhance learning."

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"A classic example of retrieval practice is using flashcards as a study tool."

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"Generally speaking, multiple practice sessions over time results in better long-term memory than a single practice session of equivalent duration or an equivalent number of repetitions."

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"Moreover, you should aim to go over course materials more than once."

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"Start speaking the language from day one and remember that imperfections are part of learning."

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https://www.soas.ac.uk/study/blog/how-learn-language-effectively-advice-soas-teachers
“And make sure to gain real conversational practice early on by joining language exchanges or online communities.”

SOAS Language Centre, SOAS University of London
https://www.soas.ac.uk/study/blog/how-learn-language-effectively-advice-soas-teachers
“Be steady in your studies: spend every day (without fail) at least 1 hour learning, and you will succeed.”

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https://today.umd.edu/how-to-make-a-second-language-second-nature
“Don’t get bogged down in conjugating every form of a verb—if you know enough to talk about yourself or ask questions, you can learn more grammar in context.”

University of Maryland (Maryland Today), with the National Foreign Language Center
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“Use the words you’ve learned in conversation.”

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