

# How Long Does it Take to Learn a New Language?

By Dr. Sarah Elaine Eaton

How long does it really take to learn a second language? The short answer is, it depends.

Most language teachers will tell you that what you put in, is what you get out of language studies. Companies that sell language learning products or software may claim that their method or materials will guarantee fluency in a certain period of time. Usually, that time frame just happens to correspond to their particular program. Language experts tend to be skeptical of claims that a certain method can guarantee fluency in a short period of time – and with good reason.

The reality is that language acquisition is a complex process that involves communication, grammar, structure, comprehension and language production along with reading, writing, speaking and listening, just to name a few of the simpler aspects of language learning.

John Archibald and a team of researchers at the University of Calgary conducted a study in 2007 that examined a number of questions relating to second language learning. They found that *students who learn other subjects in a foreign language are likely to gain fluency and competence faster*. The method, known as content-based language teaching (CBLT), involves teaching subject matter content such as math, geography and other subjects in a foreign language.

“Students in time-intensive content-based language teaching (CBLT) programs, such as French immersion, are typically able to master complex content material effectively, despite less than native-like proficiency in the language of instruction.

In programs where students have limited second-language proficiency and less time is devoted to second-language learning, the concrete and highly-contextualized content.” (Archibald et al, 2007)

Their work also found that the age at which a person begins to learn a language matters. Children who grow up learning more than one language at home essentially have two mother tongues (Archibald et al., 2007 and Swain, 1972).

For those that don't have the privilege of learning more than one language

from a young age at home, there are other factors.

## The age of the learner

Language learning follows different patterns depending on when you start. Citing a study conducted by Birdsong (1999), Archibald and his team found that: "If second-language acquisition begins at age 5, it follows a different pattern than when second-language acquisition begins at age 25 or at age 15." (Archibald et al., 2007, p. 3).

Notice that the researchers are careful not to judge if one's ability to learn a language becomes better or worse at a certain age. It simply follows a different mental and cognitive pattern.

## Immersion

It also makes a difference if you're learning a minority language or a majority language (Archibald et al, 2007; Cummins and Swain, 1986). For example, if you live in an English-speaking country and you are learning Italian, you are learning a minority language. But if you are an Italian living in England who is learning English, you are learning the language spoken by the majority. If you're submersed in a language, the learning process is different because you're being exposed to the language more for more hours per day, on a consistent basis.

## Language learning in school

A key finding of the research by the University of Calgary team found that students who take foreign language classes at school are unless to receive sufficient exposure to the language to gain deep fluency:

"Learning a second language for 95 hours per year for six years will not lead to functional bilingualism and fluency in the second language. Expectations must be realistic." (Archibald et al., 2007, p. 3)

## Language learning in terms of hours - Apply the "10,000-hour rule"

Though the researchers don't say how they arrived at the number of 95 hours per year, we can figure it out. Let's look:

**4 hours per week of language classes x 12 weeks per semester x 2 semesters per school year  
= 96 hours per year.**

If a student begins learning a language in grade six and continues on through to high school completion in grade 12, that constitutes 6 years of language learning.

## **96 hours per year for 6 years = 576 hours of language instruction**

In his book, *Outliers*, author Malcom Gladwell highlights a study originally published in the Harvard Business review by Ericsson et al. The general premise has become known as the “10,000 hours to become an expert rule”. In the book Gladwell explains the research behind the notion that true expertise is achieved after an individual has invested 10,000 hours in learning or practicing a skill. This may be a sport, a musical instrument or the study of something.

There are many ways to define “fluency”.

**If, for the sake of argument, we consider fluency to be the same as being an “expert” in speaking a language, then a learner may well invest 10,000 hours in their language studies to attain fluency.**

People will shake their heads when they hear that. No one wants to believe it really requires that much work.

Let’s look at some different scenarios:

**Scenario #1:** One 3-hour adult education course per week x 8 weeks = 24 hours

**Scenario #2:** One year of language learning in school = 4 hours per week x 12 weeks x 2 semesters = 96 hours

**Scenario #3:** 1 year of consistent, dedicated self-study (or homework) at 1 hour per day = 365 hours

**Scenario #4:** One year of total immersion in the new language (Assuming that in a 24-hour day, we allow 8 hours for sleeping per day) = 16 hours per day x 365 days = 5840 hours

If we use Gladwell’s of 10,000-hour rule, here’s how long it would take to achieve “expert ability” in a foreign language:

**Scenario #1 – Adult education classes** – 416 courses of 24 hours per course. If you did 2 courses per year, you’d need 208 years to become fluent.

**Scenario #2 – Foreign language studies at school** – 96 hours of classes per year = 104 years to achieve fluency.

**Scenario #3 – Dedicated self-study** – An hour a day, every single day of the year = 365 hours per year = 27 years

**Scenario #4 – Total immersion** – Approximately 2 years

Let’s be clear. This is one very simplified way of looking at language learning. I openly admit that this way of looking at the question may be a bit reductionist. I said at the beginning of this post that language learning is a complex activity. This way of looking at how long it takes to become fluent doesn’t take into account individual differences or abilities, and nor does it address the effectiveness of different language teaching methods. It is

simply one way to answer the question, "How long does it take to learn a new language?"

Some argue that immersion is the "best" way to learn a language. Others argue that there is no one "best" way. It may not be about the methods used, but simply the amount of hours spent learning. Learning can be done in [formal, non-formal and informal contexts](#). Language learning doesn't always take place in the classroom. Trained teachers can offer strategies and guidance that the self-directed learner may not have.

The bottom line is that mastering a foreign language takes time, dedication and hard work, regardless of whether it is done in a classroom or in an immersion setting.

However, the benefits of learning how to speak a second language are certainly worth the effort. The challenges of learning another language are immense. Yet millions have achieved some degree of fluency in at least one other language. Those who achieve true fluency do so because they put in dedicated, consistent effort over a long period of time. Claiming otherwise is tantamount to fraud.

**Instead of asking "How long does it take to become fluent in another language?"  
perhaps a better question is  
*"How do I get my 10,000 hours of study and practice to become fluent in a new language?"***

The answer for most people, in practical terms of every day life, may well like in some combination of formal or non-formal classes, self-study, practice with others in informal contexts and immersion experiences through travel or living abroad.

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Update: March 27, 2011 – This article has now been published as an academic paper. [Download your copy from ERIC](#).

Update: January 2, 2013 – Some of this same content has now been published as a peer-reviewed article in a refereed journal: **Eaton, S. E. (2012). *How will Alberta's second language students ever achieve proficiency? ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines, the CEFR and the "10,000-hour rule" in relation to the Alberta K-12 language-learning context. Notos, 12(2), 2-12.***