HOW LONG DOES IT TAKE TO LEARN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE?

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Learning a language takes significant effort over a sustained period. Everyone connected with language learning – from learners, teachers, school managers and departments of education – is looking for ways to do this as efficiently as possible. But underlying those efforts is the basic question 'how long should it take to learn a language?'

At Cambridge, we are often asked this question by people responsible for designing language programmes – either within an institution such as a school or university, or for a national curriculum. This paper summarises some of the research in this area and the experience that we have built up over many decades of working in English language teaching.

In the first part of the paper, we address the reasons why the answer to the question is so variable. What are the factors that impact on the length of time needed to learn a language?
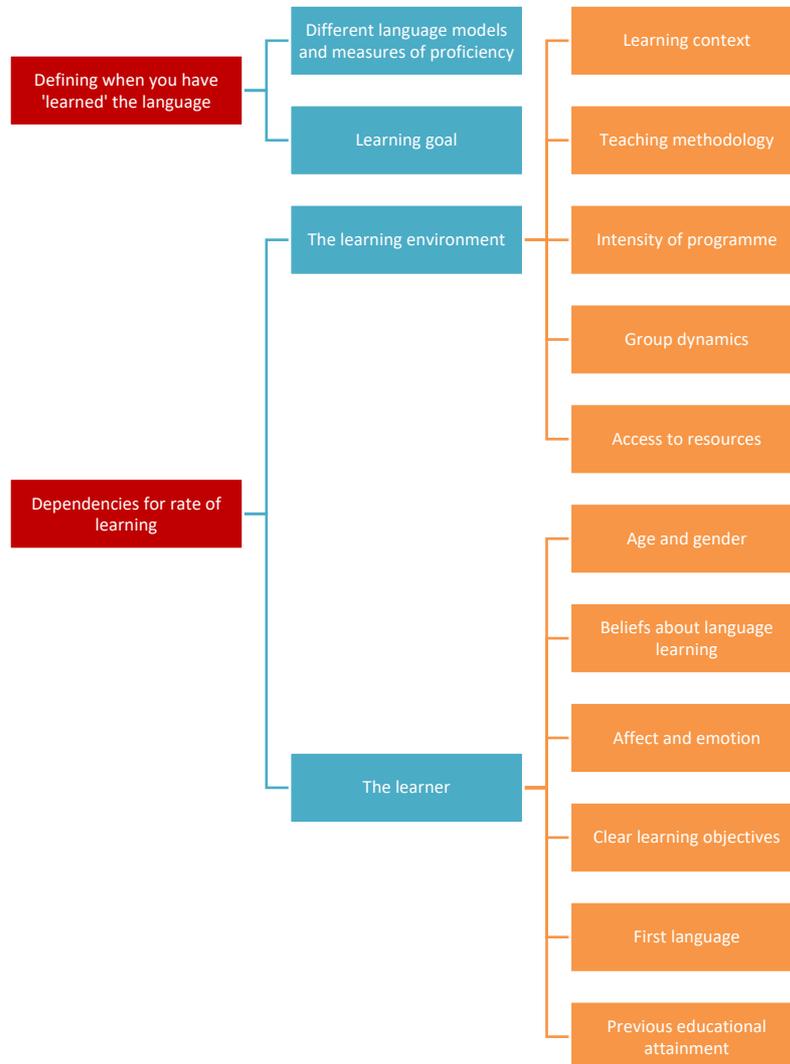
In the second part, we summarise the guidance we would give to people who ask the question.

One of the main points of the paper is to explain that the answer to the question depends on your context. So, it is important not to take the examples given out of their context without careful thought.

FACTORS AFFECTING THE TIME NEEDED TO LEARN A LANGUAGE

The diagram below summarises some of the key issues and dependencies – which we investigate in more detail in the paper[1].

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Defining when you have          ── Different language models
'learned' the language             and measures of proficiency
                                ── Learning goal


                                ── Learning context

                                ── Teaching methodology

The learning environment        ── Intensity of programme

                                ── Group dynamics

                                ── Access to resources
Dependencies for rate of
learning
                                ── Age and gender

                                ── Beliefs about language
                                   learning

                                ── Affect and emotion

The learner                     ── Clear learning objectives

                                ── First language

                                ── Previous educational
                                   attainment
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[1] This paper draws significantly on a report produced by Dr Christine Muir and Dr Leigh Clark, from the University of Nottingham, UK.

WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY 'BEING ABLE TO USE A LANGUAGE'?

The question of how long it takes to learn a second/foreign language (L2) is not a simple one to answer, partly because there are no accepted definitions of what a learner needs to be able to do to 'have learned a language' (see e.g. Christian, 1996). The notion of a singular native speaker model for language learning has been debunked (e.g. Cook, 1999), and our understanding of what it means to know a language and our goals for language learning are expanding, with new frameworks being introduced such as those of multi-competence (Cook & Wei, 2016).

Learners will likewise learn the four language skills – speaking, listening, reading, writing – at different rates, something especially true for specific subgroups, such as heritage language learners (usually children learning a minority language at home because of their family origins) whose language proficiency may develop more in speaking/listening than reading/writing. In addition to these four basic skills, described as 'language activities' in the CEFR (Council of Europe 2001), being able to communicate requires other types of competence: **linguistic** competence (grammar, vocabulary, phonology), **sociolinguistic** competence (register, politeness, etc.), **pragmatic** competence (functions, discourse, cohesion, etc.). A learner may reach a target level of any of these dimensions at different stages – e.g. becoming familiar with a good range of A2 level vocabulary – while not yet making adequate progress in other dimensions – e.g. being able to initiate a conversation in an appropriately polite manner.

HOW DO YOU DEFINE LEVELS OF PROFICIENCY?

Multiple benchmarks/statements of language proficiency exist and are in common use around the world. Among the most well known are the **Common European Framework of Reference** (CEFR)[2]; the **American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages** (ACTFL) Proficiency Guidelines[3]; the **Interagency Language Roundtable** level descriptions for competence in intercultural communication (ILR; used predominantly in US governmental settings)[4]. Specific levels and breakdown of each of these frameworks are given in Table 1 below.

CEFR	ACTFL	ILR
A = Basic User	**Novice Low**	**Level 0** (no competence)
B = Independent User	**Novice Mid**	**Level 0+** (memorized competence)
C = Proficient User	**Novice High**	**Level 1** (elementary competence)
	Intermediate Low	**Level 2** (limited working competence)
Leading to *6 levels*:	**Intermediate Mid**	
A1 (Breakthrough)	**Intermediate High**	**Level 3** (professional competence)
A2 (Waystage)	**Advanced Low**	**Level 4** (advanced professional competence)
B1 (Threshold)	**Advanced Mid**	
B2 (Vantage)	**Advanced High**	**Level 5** (superior professional competence)
C1 (Effective Operational Proficiency)	**Superior**	
C2 (Mastery)	**Distinguished**	

Table 1: Summary of scales from three language proficiency benchmarks (1)

For many people, levels are defined in terms of internationally-recognised exams such as the International English Language Testing System (IELTS)[5], and the Business Language Testing Service (BULATS)[6]. Various projects have mapped these exams to the level frameworks, and mapped the level frameworks to each other – but the proliferation of different frameworks and level descriptions makes it more difficult to communicate efficiently about levels of language proficiency. If it is claimed that a person can learn 'basic fluency' in 300 hours, which CEFR level do they have in mind? Without being explicit about recognised standards, it is difficult to understand such claims.

WHAT IS YOUR LEARNING GOAL?

A key challenge with defining when someone has learned a language is to be clear about what their learning objective is. Is their goal to be able to use the language for travel, for social conversation, for conducting business discussions, for writing academic papers, for finding out information from the internet? Each of these goals indicates a different configuration of requirements in terms of the necessary level of achievement in different facets of language proficiency.

For each learner, it is necessary to define what their learning goal is from a functional point of view (what do they want to be able to do?) and then to define that in linguistic terms (what levels of proficiency do they need on each facet of language ability?).

DEPENDENCIES FOR RATE OF LEARNING

After clarifying what the target is for the language learner, it is still difficult to estimate how long it will take for them to reach it. This is because there are so many variables and dependencies in the language learning process. We have summarised a number of key dependencies - but not a comprehensive list – and noted research that indicates how they impact on language learning rates. These dependencies have been divided into two main groups: the **learning environment** and the **learner**.

THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

LEARNING CONTEXT

- Speed of language acquisition will vary significantly depending on the context of learning, from classes at school or in private language schools, through to immersion or Content and Language Integrated Learning environments (CLIL; see e.g. Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2009). Rate of acquisition will likewise be impacted by whether the language is being learned as a second/foreign language (i.e., whether it is being learned in a country when the L2 is spoken outside of the classroom/not). Two key differences between these environments are the amount of input learners are exposed to (see e.g. Gass et al. (1998) for an overview of the role of input and interaction in SLA), and the number of hours tuition received/time devoted to study per week.

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[5] https://www.ielts.org/about-the-test/how-ielts-is-scored
[6] http://www.bulats.org/computer-based-tests/results

- In a study of students on intensive English language courses in Australia and their band score gains on IELTS (Elder and O'Loughlin 2003), they found that accommodation arrangements for the students correlated more highly with score gains than other factors such as motivation or learning strategies. Surprisingly, students who stayed with one home stay were more likely to have limited opportunities for practice, compared with those who moved between different places and arrangements.

TEACHING METHODOLOGY

- Different teaching methodologies will not only impact on the type and range of teaching materials given to students, but the speed and emphasis on discrete aspects of language that will be acquired. More traditional grammar translation approaches favour a focus on accuracy over meaning, while more communicative approaches aim to cater simultaneously to multiple aspects of students' communicative competence (Celce-Murcia et al., 1995), and emphasising communication over accuracy (a 'principled communicative approach', see Arnold et al., 2015). Another factor is the impact of the teacher: beyond their pedagogical approach, there are issues of engagement with the learners, their responsiveness to their students, their ability to motivate learners, to give effective feedback, etc.

INTENSITY OF PROGRAMME

- From the work of Ebbinghaus, the notion of the **forgetting curve** has been researched through activities requiring memory skills (as language learning does). Research into spaced repetition and active recall has indicated how infrequent review of knowledge and skills leads to an accelerating decline of ability. Language learning programmes that, for example, involve just 2 hours a week, with minimal self-study between, and lengthy holiday periods between terms, are less effective than more intensive programmes.

GROUP DYNAMICS

- **Group dynamics** are an under-exploited aspect within the field of second language learning, especially considering their importance within language classroom settings: positive or negative classroom dynamics are able to either significantly enhance or entirely derail language learning opportunities (Ehrman & Dörnyei, 1998; Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003).

ACCESS TO USEFUL RESOURCES FOR LANGUAGE LEARNING

- **Access to resources** which provide comprehensible input and the motivation to learn is a significant factor in language learning, and this access is increasingly determined by access to technology and the internet. In addition, the effective grading of language in learning materials, the instructional design of materials and the ability to engage learners in meaningful language learning activities are all aspects of learning resources and materials that can impact on their rate of learning.

THE LEARNER

AGE AND GENDER

- Factors including age (both in terms of age of starting to learn a language and differences in the rate of learning at different ages e.g. Krashen et al., 1978), gender (including the social acceptability of

different languages for different genders, see e.g. Kissau, 2006) and other individual difference variables will each impact on a learner's rate of acquisition of a language (including language aptitude, language learning styles and strategies, motivation and personality (see e.g. Dörnyei, 2006 for an overview).

BELIEFS ABOUT LANGUAGE AND THE NATURE OF LANGUAGE LEARNING

- The learner's beliefs about language learning – whether conscious or subconscious – will strongly affect the learning process and the learning strategies students believe to be effective. This may be in general terms (e.g. 'I need to be confident about my accuracy before I try to say anything in public') and for the specific language in question (e.g., 'I believe Mandarin Chinese is very difficult so I don't think there's much point me spending time trying to study on my own outside of class time'). This may positively or negatively affect the speed of acquisition dependant on the beliefs held. The sociocultural status and vitality of the language itself may also impact on a student's willingness to devote time to and their attitudes and motivation to study the language (see also individual differences above).

AFFECT AND EMOTION

- The impact of language learning anxiety and other affective concepts related to emotion in language learning are receiving increasing amounts of research interest (e.g. Imai, 2010; MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012), including research into the impact of positive psychology on second language acquisition (MacIntyre et al., 2016).

CLEAR LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Research into second language learning motivation (Dörnyei, 2009) has recently highlighted the importance of how learners see themselves – or their 'possible self' (Markus & Nurius, 1986). This research has emphasised the importance of having not only a goal, but a goal that can be vividly visualised and experienced, and the importance of this in being able to support extended periods of motivated engagement with language study (see e.g. Dörnyei & Kubanyiova, 2014). The relevance of this to learning rates is that learners with a clearer vision of themselves using the language outside the classroom are likely to learn at a faster rate than those without one.

FIRST LANGUAGE

- The greater number and extent of differences between the learner's first language and the target language to be learned, the more difficult the learning task is, and the longer it is going to take. Those differences can range from script, phonology, syntax, lexis (esp. extent of cognates between languages), pragmatic features of the language, etc. The US government uses four categories of languages in terms of their 'distance' from English to estimate the number of class hours needed to reach a 'professional' level (Level 3 on the ILR scale, which is approximately similar to C1 on the CEFR). See Appendix 1 for details of this. There is some indication that the impact of L1 linguistic distance is much stronger at elementary levels than at advanced levels (Watt and Lake 2004).

PREVIOUS EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

- We need to be careful of attributing too much weight to linguistic distance from the L1. A study in Canada (Watt and Lake 2004) found that previous educational attainment among migrants to Canada

correlated higher with overall achievement in learning English than other factors such as L1. Various studies (e.g. Cardegas-Hagan 2007 and Ford 2005) have shown that phonological awareness or letter name and sound knowledge correlate with higher levels of literacy in an L2 as well as in their L1. It may also be reasonable to expect a link between the development of general learning skills (e.g. memory and analysis skills) and language learning skills.

SO, HOW LONG DOES IT TAKE TO LEARN A LANGUAGE?

Given all the issues around defining what it means to 'learn a language' and all the dependencies that impact on the rate of learning, can we say anything useful about how long it takes to learn a language?

COUNTING HOURS

First we need to point out that there are different ways of accounting for time spent learning. Institutions tend to focus on the number of classroom hours, as that is what impacts on their resource planning. However, a key part of learning is the time spent by the learner in self-study mode. This might be guided (i.e. following directions given by the teacher) or unguided (i.e. additional learning not set by the teacher – either because the learner is self-motivated or because they are practising using English for personal or work reasons). In the figures below, we are focusing on a combination of classroom plus guided self-study ('Guided Learning Hours' referring to that combination). Clearly, students who engage in significant amounts of additional unguided self-study should progress faster.

RATE OF LEARNING AT DIFFERENT LEVELS

The rate of learning appears to vary across levels as a result of two main factors:

a) at lower levels, it requires less of an improvement in language development to impact on communicative ability. For example, learning 100 additional words at A1 level has more of an impact on a learner's ability to communicate than learning 100 additional words at C1 level. This leads the familiar 'plateau' at intermediate level, where learners feel they are no longer making the progress they used to make at elementary levels.

b) at higher levels, learners are more able to take their own initiative in developing their language skills. They can make use of unadapted language – e.g. on the internet – in an unaided way. They are more confident about communicating with others in the target language, providing them with additional practice and input.

The result of these two factors appears to be that lower level learners need fewer hours of study to progress up the CEFR levels, but higher level learners need a smaller proportion of their language learning hours to be in the classroom or teacher-directed.

Learning hours includes hours in a classroom, guided self-study (e.g. homework) or additional learning activity initiated by the learner.

HOW MANY HOURS IN A LANGUAGE COURSE-BOOK?

Publishers of English language course-books normally refer to number of classroom hours plus guided self-study when describing how many hours a course takes to complete. As they will also include a quantity of optional supplementary material, the number of hours for a course can be quite flexible. In general, courses tend to include similar amounts of content at different levels because of the factors described in the previous section (e.g. that higher level learners spend an increasing amount of time learning language outside the coursebook).

ACCELERATED LEARNING PROGRAMMES

In this paper, we are attempting to gather information on typical language learning programmes. There are a number of people and programmes making claims about accelerated learning, usually on an anecdotal basis but sometimes backing those claims up with data from learners they have worked with. While we are very interested in what can be learned from such examples, and what could be transferred to other language programmes around the world, our view is that substantially more research needs to be done before we can start using reduced programme lengths into consideration when advising institutions on how much time their students need to progress each level.

THREE EXAMPLES

Here at Cambridge University Press, we have drafted three examples of learning rates against the CEFR scale – i.e. allowing for people to define their target level of English for themselves. These figures are based on a) our experience of developing courses that work for schools and colleges around the world, b) the views of a number of experienced professionals in the ELT field, c) reference to other sources such as the ALTE guidelines and research such as Elder and O'Loughlin 2003. But they have not been validated through empirical research. The three examples are not intended to capture the most common contexts, but to be illustrative of how contextual differences can impact on learning rates.

We have given the information in four columns:

1. the number of hours needed to complete that level starting from the level below.
2. the cumulative number of hours to complete that level from beginner.
3. how many weeks you would need to study English to complete that level, if you have two hours of class and two hours of homework each week.
4. How many extra hours of study will you need to do each week if you want to complete the level in one year (assuming 35 weeks with 2 hours class and 2 hours homework per week).

EXAMPLE 1   ADULT LEARNERS, IN A POSITIVE LEARNING CONTEXT

Adult learner, whose L1 uses the same script as English, with good levels of motivation and access to good learning resources and well-trained teachers.

	Guided learning hours to achieve each level from the level below	Cumulative number of GLHs achieve level from beginner	Number of weeks to achieve level from the level below, if following a programme of 2 hours in class plus 2 hours homework each week	Number of **additional** hours of learning a week needed to complete the level in 35 weeks
C2	300-400	1030-1450	75-100	5-7
C1	200-300	730-1050	50-75	2-5
B2	180-260	530-750	45-65	1-3
B1	160-240	350-490	40-60	1-3
A2	100-150	190-250	25-38	0
A1	90-100	90-100	23-25	0

EXAMPLE 2   SECONDARY, IN A MORE MIXED CONTEXT

Teenagers with reasonable or basic access to resources and good teaching, and with low levels of motivation.

	Guided learning hours to get to each level from the level below	Cumulative number of GLHs to get to level from beginner	Number of weeks to reach level from the level below, if following a programme of 3 hours in class plus 2 hours homework each week	Number of **additional** hours of learning a week needed to complete the level in 35 weeks
B2	220-270	750-950	44-54	1-3
B1	200-250	530-680	40-50	1-2
A2	180-230	330-430	36-46	0-2
A1	150-200	150-200	30-40	0-1

EXAMPLE 3   PRIMARY, IN A MORE CHALLENGING CONTEXT

Primary school children in EFL contexts, whose L1 has a different script to English, with access to good resources but with a general teacher (not an English teaching specialist).

	Guided learning hours to get to each level from the level below	Cumulative number of GLHs to get to level from beginner	Number of weeks to reach level from the level below, if following a programme of 2 hours in the class plus 0.5 hours homework each week	Number of **additional** hours of learning a week needed to complete the level in 35 weeks
B1	240-300	780-980	80-100	4-6
A2	200-240	540-680	67-80	3-4
A1	180-240	340-440	60-80	2-4
Pre-A1	160-200	160-200	53-67	2-3

IELTS INTENSIVE COURSES

Another interesting perspective on this comes from Elder and O'Loughlin 2003, who researched IELTS band score gains for students in Australia and New Zealand on intensive English language courses. These are generally highly motivated learners, in an English-rich environment, on a full-time course, with competent teachers and good materials. The research indicated that the students were generally moving up half an IELTS band after 10-12 weeks of intensive study (200-240 hours of instruction), with slightly more than half a band on listening skills. This is fairly consistent with language course providers' advice (e.g. St George's London http://www.stgeorges.co.uk/blog/academic-english/how-long-does-it-take-to-go-up-1-ielts-band-score) who advise 6 weeks to 3 months for half a band, and 6 months to one year for a full band – for similar intensive in-country courses. IELTS bands are narrower than CEFR levels at higher levels (B2-C2), though it is difficult to match them up at lower levels (below B1).

CONCLUSION

There is no single answer to the question 'How long does it take to learn a language?' However, we can identify key parameters to look at in order to reach an answer that is meaningful in particular situations. If the aspects of the learning environment and the learner can be evaluated as well as the definition of level and type of skill needs to be acquired, then it becomes possible to make a reasonable estimate.

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The Federal Government of the United States provides approximations of the time it takes to reach "Professional Competence" (Level 3 on the ILR scale). These guidelines (see below) are split between different categories, according to the level of difficulty a native English speaker will encounter in learning them. While the projected class hours are provided, learners enrolling on such courses are also provided with additional work to complete in their own time.

Category I: Languages closely related to English (23-24 weeks; 575–600 class hours)

Afrikaans, Catalan, Danish, Dutch, French, Galician, Italian, Norwegian, Portuguese, Romanian, Spanish, Swedish

Category II: Languages with significant linguistic and/or cultural differences from English (44 weeks; 1100 class hours)

Albanian, Amharic, Armenian, Azerbaijani, Belarusian, Bengali, Bosnian, Bulgarian, Burmese, Cebuano, Croatian, Czech, Dzongkha, Estonian, Finnish, Georgian, Greek
Gujarati, Hebrew, Hindi, Hungarian, Icelandic, Ilocano, Irish, Kannada, Kazakh, Kurdish, Kyrgyz, Khmer, Lao, Latvian, Lithuanian, Macedonian, Marathi, Mongolian, Nepali, Pashto, Persian (Dari, Farsi, Tajik), Polish, Punjabi, Russian, Serbian, Sinhalese, Slovak, Slovenian, Somali, Tagalog, Tamil, Tanchangya, Telugu, Tetum, Thai, Turkish, Turkmen,
Ukrainian, Urdu, Uzbek, Vietnamese, Xhosa, Zulu

Category III: Languages which are quite difficult for native English speakers (88 weeks; 2200 class hours, plus about half that time preferably spent studying in-country)

Arabic, Cantonese, Japanese, Korean, Mandarin, Taiwanese (Hokkien Min Nan), Wu

Other languages: 30–36 weeks (750–900 class hours)

German (30 weeks / 750 class hours)
Indonesian, Javanese, Jumieka, Malay, Swahili (36 weeks / 900 class hours)