

THE
PRINCIPLES
OF



LANGUAGE
LEARNING

Simon Forbes

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The Principles of Language Learning



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Preface

This book is a part of Mondecast.



Connecting the world through languages

To find more great books, plus find out how to stay in touch and get a weekly dose of motivation and guidance, come join me at www.mon-decast.com.

FYI, the version you are currently reading is 1.0.0. It was last updated on 2026-01-31.

If you find any errors or just want to reach out, please use my website [contact form](#).

The Principles of Language Learning

Simon Forbes

About me



Hey, I'm Simon, the founder of Mondecast and moderator of the [r/languagelearning community](#) on Reddit.

I'm a long-time language learner, having spent well over a decade learning languages, learning how to learn them, and searching the web for answers to common questions for the community.

Over that time, I've gained a lot of insight into what a beginner needs to know. Mondecast is my project to help share that knowledge with the world.

1 Sample introduction

Welcome to the sample of *The Principles of Language Learning*. Here you will find the intro plus 3 principles. You can get the full version with all the principles from the [Mondecast store](#).

2 Introduction

Welcome to *The Principles of Language Learning*, a how-to for learning languages like the pros.

This book is designed to give you clear guidance on the what and why of language learning. Rather than focus on resources or specific activities, we will be looking at the underlying principles that will help you become a highly successful language learner.

Have you ever had any of the following happen to you?

- Feeling a bit lost about what you should be doing
- Not feeling satisfied with your course
- Feel like the activities you're doing aren't quite working
- Your progress is slowing and you're not sure why
- Your motivation isn't as strong as it used to be

But at the same time, switching it up can be daunting when you aren't sure what's going wrong.

The good news is hundreds of highly skilled language learners have encountered the same issues as you, and through many long sessions of trial-and-error, they have each landed on a unique method that works for them.

But what works for one person might not work for you. Everyone has different aptitudes and preferences. This is where *The Principles of Language Learning* comes in.

When I set out to write *The Language Learner's Handbook*, I wanted to show beginners how they can easily start learning a language themselves. It's more of a how-to, focused on key ideas and resources with only a minimum of theory. This is ideal for beginners, but there is a gap between the advice and activities in the guide and the different goals, aptitudes, life situations, and interests of every learner.

During my research, I frequently encountered similarities between all the most effective language learners. Although their routines, resources, activities, or techniques might be different on the surface, underlying every effective method is the same set of ideas. These ideas are the essence of effective language learning.

2.1 What is a principle?

So what is a language learning principle?

A principle is a fundamental, transferable idea that captures how language learning actually works. It is not a specific technique or method; instead, it is a pattern that explains why certain approaches work and how learners can make progress across different contexts.

They are heavily related, and choosing how to separate and relate them to each other is more art than science.

The Principles of Language Learning is organised into 24 principles. Each principle consists of one key idea (and its application) that will make you into a better language learner, no matter your situation.

Principles are:

- Practical—they contain key ideas that, when applied, will instantly boost your language learning
- General—principles never simply apply to one part of your learning.

- Highly interconnected—some of the principles directly help you apply other principles.

No matter your language, no matter your learning style, principles will let you choose activities and learn effectively.

2.2 How to use this guide

I've done my best to structure the principles in a way that is intuitive and logical, but keep in mind that the nature of principles means they are heavily interconnected.

Each section will introduce a principle, explain its importance, then give you some techniques to apply it to your language learning.

To help you keep it all clear in your head, I will provide a hierarchy. Principles are placed above others that directly support them.

Let's start with the top two. Success in learning can be filtered down to two fundamental ingredients, our first two principles, which we can make into a simple formula:

$$\text{progress} = \text{time spent} \times \text{learning efficiency}$$

That is, success depends on both maximising the amount of time you dedicate to learning your language and learning optimally for your goals.

Every principle is aimed at helping you maximise this formula.

We can organise everything into a tree diagram:

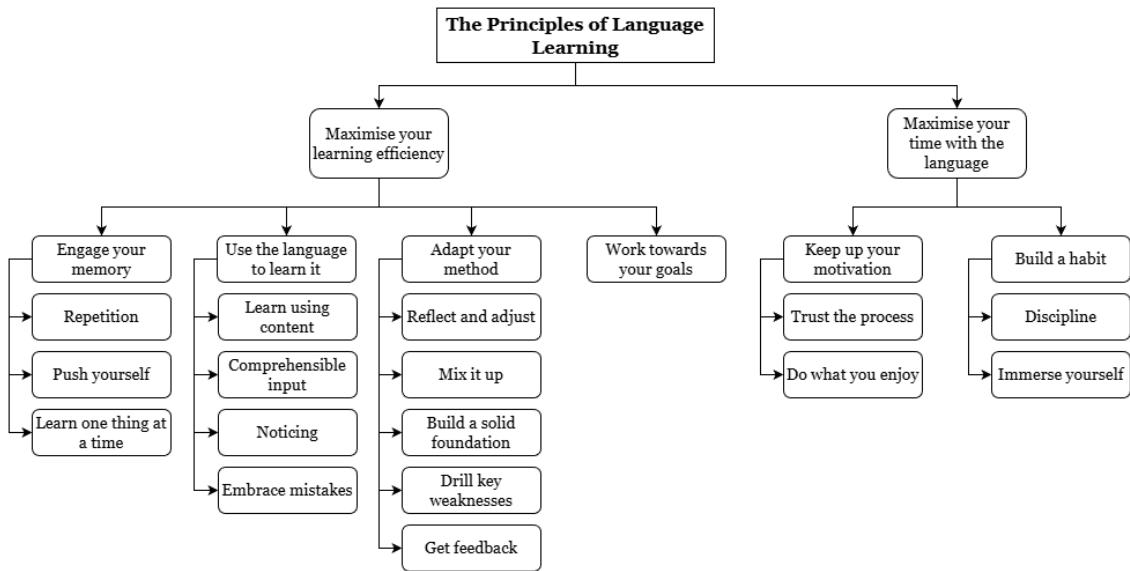


Figure 2.1: I know what you're thinking, I should have become an artist.

Here they are with links to each:

- Maximise your learning efficiency—(not included)
 - Engage your memory—Chapter 3
 - * Repetition—(not included)
 - * Push yourself—(not included)
 - * Learn one thing at a time—(not included)
 - Use the language to learn it—(not included)
 - * Learn using content—(not included)
 - * Comprehensible input—(not included)
 - * Noticing—(not included)
 - * Embrace mistakes—(not included)
 - Adapt your method—(not included)
 - * Reflect and adjust—(not included)
 - * Mix it up—(not included)
 - * Build a solid foundation—(not included)
 - * Drill key weaknesses—(not included)

- * Get feedback—Chapter 4
- Work towards your goals—(not included)
- Maximise your time with the language—(not included)
 - Keep up your motivation—(not included)
 - * Trust the process—(not included)
 - * Do what you enjoy—(not included)
 - Build a habit—Chapter 5
 - * Discipline—(not included)
 - * Immerse yourself—(not included)

The principles are ordered according to the above structure, but that is not necessarily the order that is right for you. Maybe you have a specific weakness, or maybe something piques your curiosity.

You can take the book in order, or you can use the links and explore something that feels right for you. The choice is yours.

If you ever need a reminder, you can find a one-sentence summary of each principle in the conclusion (not included).

3 Engage your memory

Your memory is the single most powerful tool in your learning arsenal.

A very common story learners often tell themselves is that they have a bad memory. Fortunately, it can't be the case that that so many learners have a below-average memory, else that just becomes the average.

It is far more likely that your memory is just average, and the average memory can be a difficult thing to use effectively. Learning and memorisation are hard. Our brains simply aren't designed to read something once and never discard it.

Learning only really happens quickly in specific circumstances, and the good news is we can shape our surroundings to create these circumstances, thereby "improving" our memory. **Memory comes down to technique, not talent.**

So, when you're struggling to remember something, there is an environmental reason for it. Instead of beating yourself up, focus on you can shape your learning to activate the memory-forming circuits in your brain.

To understand how to use your memory best, you must first understand the difference between review and recall.

3.1 Review versus recall

Review is when you read over something to be reminded of an answer. Think of reviewing grammar or looking up a word.

Recall is using your memory. Instead of simply checking a resource, you spend some time thinking and eventually remember what that word or form means.

The first key ideas of this principle is that **you should be trying to maximise your use of recall**. The more you do this, the better your retention will be. Just 1 minute of active recall is more effective than 10 minutes of review.

To do this try to actively recall the meaning of words and forms you encounter in your content. Don't let yourself immediately turn to a dictionary or grammar resource, spend some time trying to recollect before you look it up again.

If you do need to look something up, try to find partial information so that you can prompt yourself to recall the rest of answer.

Flashcards are a good example of this principle in action as they force you to attempt to recall a word's definition before you can see the answer.

Often you will struggle to recall the meaning of a word or form and will be forced to look it up. This is perfectly natural and very common, so don't beat yourself up if you do have to do it.

3.1.1 Passive learning

Active recall can be contrasted with passive learning, where you allow knowledge to come to you in a passive way without actively straining to decode meaning or recall a concept. For example, relaxing and watching a TV show or looking up a word.

While passive activities such as simply watching a show are generally much more enjoyable and easier to do in large amounts, active recall is more efficient in terms of progress per hour spent. Active learning by using your content for focused study will let you gain new knowledge faster.¹

3.2 Improving your memory

Now that you are hopefully ready to approach your learning with active recall in mind, lets look at what to do when you are actively recalling something.

Learning something that has no obvious relevance to your life, you haven't needed to use, and has no relation to anything else is very difficult. This is because it is primarily subconscious processes that mark something as important and enable us to remember something.

Conversely, when you are genuinely curious, interested, something has emotional salience, or it is very important or useful to you, you will find yourself recalling it much more easily.

Learning something completely new without this connection constitutes a mental "hurdle". It is basically pure memorisation. This is very difficult to do. You will notice a high degree of mental resistance, meaning it seems hard to get it to stick in your memory.

Here we will look at a few techniques to engage your memory effectively and break down this mental hurdle.

These first four focus on harnessing your emotions:

¹At the same time, learning a language takes enormous amounts of input and there is no way to realistically expose yourself to all the forms and words you need without large amounts of passive learning. If you're feeling unmotivated or tired, don't feel bad for just using content passively. You may find it better to use more difficult resources for active learning and easier ones for passive learning.

Find personal connection—Your brain prioritises information that feels relevant to you. Try to create a connection to the word so that it becomes personally meaningful to you. You can do this by trying to recall an experience or something you care about and connect it to the word. For example, you might spend some time dwelling on how a word might help you to achieve your goal.

Cultivate curiosity—Stay curious and interested in the words and forms you encounter. To help with this, you might like to treat every new word as a puzzle: ask why it's formed this way, where it comes from, and how it's used differently from your native language. Try to feel genuine curiosity about these facets.

Create stories. To do this, invent small scenes using the target word or form. As much as you can, try to insert humour, conflict, embarrassment, or achievement into these scenes. Vivid or emotional thoughts create stronger recall.

Harness your emotions—Strong emotions, particularly negative ones, can have a strong impact on learning. The more emotionally salient something is, the more like you are to remember it. To do this, you can try like components of your language to aspects of your life you have a strong emotional connection to. You can do this with mental imagery or finding a way to use the feature of the language near or with the emotionally salient thing.

If you're struggling with something you repeatedly get wrong, you can harness negative emotion by turning your difficulties into a personal mission. Let yourself feel the emotion while you're concentrating on recall, but don't forget to let the emotion go after. Negative emotions can become detrimental to learning if they hurt your motivation.

The next four ideas focus on building associations:

Get repetition—Seeing something repeatedly, ideally in different contexts, sends a signal to your brain that something is important to remember. For more on this, see the principle *Repetition*.

Use context—Languages are interconnected; words link to other words, grammar is used in specific contexts. Use content to see how the language is used in context and it will help your brain tie it all together.

Pay attention to logical connections—Words often share roots or affixes in common with other words you know which you can use as prompt to help you remember.

Use mnemonics—These are a useful technique for associating words to concepts you are already familiar with. More information on how to use them is in *The Language Learner's Handbook*.

You now have a range of tools under your belt for engaging your memory and improving retention. Unfortunately, you're probably not going to remember everything after reading it once, it's probably not salient enough for you yet! Next time you find yourself struggling to remember, you can always come back to this chapter for a review.

4 Get feedback

Feedback is the process of getting corrections from others to help you identify mistakes and errors you might not notice yourself.

While your language should get better with time on its own, it is helpful to have someone point out any mistakes you are repeatedly making.

Feedback is useful for a few reasons:

- It makes you aware of blind spots that you might not detect through self-study.
- It helps prevent fossilised errors by catching and correcting them early.
- It reinforces correct patterns by contrasting them with your incorrect ones.
- It helps you focus your effort using the 80/20 rule to identify and fix the 20% of mistakes that cause 80% of your problems.
- It keeps you actively engaged and reflective about your learning rather than passively consuming input.

Without feedback, you risk your errors becoming fossilised. This is where you repeat an error often enough it begins to sound natural to you and it becomes a part of the way you speak. These errors then become a sticky and unwelcome feature of your speech or writing. Fossilised errors can be particularly hard to get rid of.

Feedback lets you catch these errors early, before they become fossilised.

You're unlikely to fix things straight away, but becoming aware of them will help you notice how native speakers use the language differently to you, and the extra attention you will pay to the error will reduce the chance you will make it again.

A key benefit of output-based activities is the ability to get feedback, so keep that in mind when you use them.

4.1 How to get feedback

You have three good options for collecting feedback:

1. Use personal tutors
2. Request feedback from a conversation partner
3. Use online feedback platforms

Each has advantages and disadvantages.

4.1.1 Use personal tutors

Paid tutors are the priciest option, but are very effective. A good tutor should be able to spend time with you and identify the most important errors you are making, correcting those first and providing you with opportunities to practise the correct usage.

AI tutors can give feedback too; however, their conclusions should be double-checked, especially for languages with less of a footprint on the internet.

4.1.2 Request feedback from a conversation partner

Feedback can come from anyone who is speaking to you in the target language.

This can be notably less effective than a tutor. The reason for this is that people you speak to usually aren't paying attention to the errors you may be making, nor will they necessarily have the expertise to provide correction.

Despite this, conversation partners can sometimes provide corrections in a way you can use as a prompt to hunt for what you might be doing wrong. The best way is usually to make it clear you are happy to be corrected and appreciate it when they do so. You may even wish to pause to ask if there was anything in the last few things you said that stood out to them.

Beware, not everyone will necessarily want to correct you as much as you might prefer. It's generally best not to push people if you want to keep them happily speaking to you. Practice is still very useful.

4.1.3 Use a feedback or correction website

Resources such as [LangCorrect](#) and [Journaly](#) are designed to let you submit feedback to be reviewed by others. Using these for free will require that you in turn help others by providing correction for them. In return, you can access to a pool of native speakers that can help you discover errors and mistakes.

4.2 Create feedback loops

You can get feedback on your own output by recording yourself or writing something down. Then, either send this for correction or compare it to native-speaker material.

With your corrected output, you can then try the same thing again, incorporating the feedback you have received. This ensures you quickly solidify what you have learned.

This becomes a loop: make mistakes, get feedback, adjust, repeat.

To help track and monitor areas that need improvement, you can record these errors in a log or notebook. Over time, revisiting old material and notes will help reinforce your learning and check improvement.

4.3 Common pitfalls

In the principle *Reflect and adjust*, we look at the 80–20 rule and how it can be applied to language learning. This same idea can be applied to your mistakes.

Until you're a highly advanced learner, provided you are pushing yourself appropriately, you're going to be making mistakes regularly. It won't be realistic (or desirable) to address all of these mistakes every time.

Instead, use your feedback to **focus on the top 20% of mistakes** that are having the biggest impact on achieving your goal.

Second, **don't let the search for feedback become an over-reliance on others**. You have the ability to improve on your own with enough input and practice, so a lack of feedback opportunities should not become an excuse to not study.

Finally, make sure you **apply the feedback you receive**. Feedback that is simply set aside and not acted upon will have little impact. To do this, make sure you are deliberately practising corrected forms in later study sessions.

To conclude this principle, feedback is a great tool to turn general practice into directed improvement. Mistakes and errors are a natural part of learning, but it is feedback that will help turn them into language learning opportunities. Make sure you seek out and act on feedback wherever possible.

5 Build a habit

As I mentioned in the principle *Trust the process*, language learning is a long-term game. Habit is one of the best tools in your arsenal to ensure you make progress over this time period.

Small, daily effort is more effective than rare bursts. Leaving your learning for the weekend or trying to cram everything into one session places proportionally more burden on yourself to learn and stay disciplined, and large gaps will make it difficult to retain what you learn.

The first step to doing this is to commit to a habit of regular daily study.

For help doing this, we can use the *habit loop*.

5.1 The habit loop

The habit loop is a framework of how learners form and maintain habits, following the process of cue → routine → reward.

Let's look at each in turn to discover how it can help your language learning.

5.1.1 The cue

A common learner mistake is to treat language study sessions like a chore without a set timetable. Every moment considering whether you should study or not drains your willpower and reduces the amount of time you are likely to study.

Instead, rely on a cue to trigger your study habit. With this, beginning your study routine won't take as much willpower or effort.

A good cue is stable, visible, and doesn't rely on your motivation.

Here are some examples of cues:

- Time-based: every day at 9:00 PM
- Location-based: Study as soon as you sit at your desk after dinner
- Object: When you open my browser, your homepage is set to your online course
- Action: Study 10 minutes of vocab after after getting up in the morning

With a good cue, your automatic process should be to begin studying without you having to think about it. If you have to ask yourself "*should I study or should I do something else?*", it takes mental effort to force yourself to study that will wear you down over time.

Instead, your default should be this period is dedicated to study. If you want to use that time for something else, you need to find a valid and specific reason.

I recommend you commit to a specific time each day which will be dedicated to language learning.

The optimal time for this differs from person to person. The best time for many people is first thing in the morning, while they are still fresh and probably don't have anything else scheduled.

5.1.2 The routine

The ideal routine is:

- Specific
- Short enough that you won't skip it
- Repeatable every day

If you haven't read it, *The Language Learner's Handbook* covers how to build a routine in more depth.

I mentioned that you should be targeting an hour per day. For many people this isn't realistic, and as a result doesn't work as an effective routine. Instead, focus on what you can realistically achieve.

At the very least, the start of the routine should be too small to fail. For you, that could mean 1 minute or it could mean 10 minutes. Aim to do more, but even if you only do the small thing, you have kept your habit.

If you do happen to miss a day, don't sweat it. There's no harm to missing one day then picking back up again the next. It happens. The important thing is not to let that become a reason to let your learning fall off.

Try not to take long breaks from learning. Once you break the regular habit, it will become much harder to pick it back up again. Are you ever so busy that you truly can't find 5 minutes?

5.1.3 The reward

If the brain doesn't associate a reward with the action, it won't become a habit. The best rewards are immediate, which poses a challenge for such a long-term hobby.

The way different people prefer to get rewards differs. It will be worth thinking about which kinds of rewards work for you. Consider these:

- Progress rewards: streak counters, points, or counts of things such as “words known”.
- Pleasure rewards: doing something you enjoy.
- Completion satisfaction: ticking off tasks.
- Social reward: sharing progress with others.
- Future identity reinforcement: reinforcing your sense of yourself as a language learner.

The reward doesn't have to be big, it just needs to make the brain register success.

Once you have an idea of what kind of rewards you like, make sure you reward yourself after (and only after) meeting your learning goals.

5.2 Building your habit

With repeated use of cue → routine → reward, language learning will move from being a chore to a regular habit. Every time you respond to the cue with the desired response, you are reinforcing that habit and making it easier to do next time.

Eventually, your language learning habit will become automatic and you will see stronger, more consistent progress in your language.