

Learning a language: What comes first, vocabulary or grammar?

Contents

Reasons for learning a new language
The two systems of memory
How important is vocabulary in speaking and writing?
Where does grammar fit in?
My top 5 grammar rules
How are foreign languages taught in schools?
All together now
Efficient-est foot forward
References

There are many ways in which learning a language can be one of the most fun, satisfying and rewarding activities you've decided to tackle.

But where should you start?

Daunting as it may seem, if you go about it the right way, you'll find yourself making jokes with new locals in no time.

Reasons for learning a new language

English is currently the most spoken language around the world according to a recent survey by [Statista](#), which states 1500 million of us speak it.

Whether committing to living in a new country, or starting a new job, can be a positive kickstart for a new adventure in learning a new language. With a new partner or new friends or family from abroad, you may want to invest in getting on the same wavelength

as their mother tongue. Or you may simply be chasing a brilliant, brain-stretching hobby that can last a lifetime. Any of these are great reasons to get ahead and grasp the gobbledygook.

And trust me, as someone who embarked on learning German *after* moving to Germany, the best time to do this is as early as possible (before you rely on the decent English spoken by those around you).

Once you've already mastered some important first phrases (*please, I would like a beer, thank you*), how do you get up to speed on the big lingual nuts and bolts?

Let's look at how to grasp the two main pillars of language - **vocabulary** and **grammar**. Time to get from fumbling to fluent with less faff!

The two systems of memory

So, if we have two different areas of language, which one should we learn first?

Research shows us two main ways our memory helps us learn, remember, speak and write a language. These types of memory go hand in hand with these two strands of language we need to learn:

Vocabulary (words, phrases, and even short sentences) is managed by **declarative** memory.

Grammar rules and methods for producing language are managed by **procedural** memory.

But which should come first?

How can we get our brains and tongues to quickly work in harmony?

How important is vocabulary in speaking and writing?

Regularly consulting with linguistics experts and neuroscientists, the clever folks at [Transparent Language](#) explain how our memory works best: the vocab-friendly declarative memory serves us better when it is built up first. We can then draw on a store of vocabulary and small sentences ready waiting for us to build up the procedural memory of grammar.

Lorien Green also backs up why language learners should prioritize this in her [blog](#) covering this topic. She explains that when you have a lot of vocabulary already under your belt, all the other parts of learning a language are less of a struggle. Studies she found even show that the amount of vocabulary known can provide up to a whopping 70% improvement in language skills (it can naturally depend on the language and the skills you're after).

The [University of North Carolina Learning Center](#) also emphasizes learning vocabulary over grammar at the start. In their tips for learning a second language, they suggest that you can quickly get to know a language if you have a lot of vocabulary under your fingers. They also say that knowing a large amount of vocabulary will mean you can learn grammar rules more easily.

On the surface, this seems to make sense. Mostly, people want to get speaking with simple conversation skills. Understanding more individual words should help us earlier in our new language.

Grammar has the potential to hold us back, as we worry about the details of how perfectly our words sit together. Especially when there are new forms of grammar that you have no experience with in English. It can also lead to a feeling you must perfect rules before you can speak, which can even hold up learning vocabulary.

Vocabulary initially seems to be more favorable than grammar when first chatting with foreign speakers.

Where does grammar fit in?

Learning grammar can, however, speed up learning vocabulary. There are plenty of blanket rules that can magic one word into many.

For example, conjugations: without knowing the grammar rule, you would have to learn each verb form as a separate individual word. Fast-tracking by knowing the conjugation rule means you just need to learn a set of endings or transformations that would apply to heaps of verbs you would otherwise need to memorize.

And how would you otherwise ask questions, state reasons, or say you're not interested in paying for that overpriced tourist tat?

Knowing a string of verbs, nouns, and adjectives would be meaningless without being able to put them together to create meaning.

When first attempting to learn German as a second language, I found that I (and others I know) could get away with mixing up a tiny amount of grammar around my vocabulary, such as the genders of some objects. But even if I was making complete sense, it would give me away, leading to a response of "Oh! We can speak English". And then another chance to improve speaking German would disappear, along with the opportunity to get the lowdown on Berlin's club scene.

As we learn more of a language, we find we only want to keep going and know more, and perhaps even become fluent. It only becomes more important to have a good handle on grammar.

So, I'm sorry guys - through experience, I can tell you there is plenty of grammar that you will need to use in even basic sentences.

My top 5 grammar rules

Here are my top 5 grammar must-haves I found most important when learning a new language:

- The **why, where, and how** of it all. *Because* basic words *in* sentences *for* meaning like *because, in, on, under, and and* (and many more) are vital to understanding. Trying speak no prepositions futile.
- **Past, present, and future tenses** - let's face it, we've always needed to know these as much as we will always need to know the time. Unless you're binging a box set of '24'.
- Asking **questions** or giving **commands** - from a supermarket shop to an emergency, these forms of communication are necessary.
- When something is **not** all that it seems - can you get by if you can't say you do *not* want something?
- **Relationships** - if something is *with* or *owned by* another thing or person, that can be important to know.

This is, of course, very much just the beginning. Oh yes!

And if you are aiming to eventually work in a foreign language, you will want to get those building blocks of grammar correct from the start. Otherwise, bad impressions and mistakes can be costly in your job.

How are foreign languages taught in education?

In foreign language education in schools, there has been a tradition of teaching grammar first before vocabulary, so that the building blocks of language are first built.

However, this isn't necessarily the best system – it can be difficult for students to grasp when there is nothing to base these initial grammar rules on.

In his book, [Professor Widdowson](#) recommends turning this on its head and starting with learning vocabulary. Then it is possible to see how words should be adapted through grammar rules to create sentence structures and meaning.

This is also the most effective way to gain quick success in reading a new language according to a [review of the Current Research on Vocabulary Instruction](#) written by six different authors.

All together now

However, what if we take away the schoolbooks and look at how children's initial productive vocabularies and grammar naturally develop in the first years?

A 2017 [study](#) by Erika Hoff, Jamie Quinn, and David Giguere asked this very question, researching how children develop in these two areas of language. They found that in fact, both their vocabulary and grammar developed at the same time.

The National Center for Biotechnology Information also explains in their [well-researched article](#) that success in learning grammar does not necessarily depend on how much vocabulary has been learned. And this also applies the other way around: being able to acquire vocabulary does not depend on how much grammar is already known.

Indeed, both **can** be learned simultaneously without slowing down either of them - a sure reason this is our most instinctive way to learn a language. If efficiency is your aim, then this is how to play your language game.

Efficient-est foot forward

While vocabulary may just have the upper hand over grammar in the pecking order, the most efficient way to learn a language is through learning grammar and vocabulary **at the same time**.

Having some common words to hand to try out new grammar rules will help make sense of them quickly, successfully pairing up your memory styles.

You could pick the top 10 words you would want to use in a conversation with a neighbor. And then why not get ahead with my top 5 grammar rules?

Now time to whizz through the words for *tanning oil*, *cocktail umbrella* along with all the in-between grammar, as you slowly sip that sangria in the Spanish sun...

References

Butler, S., Urrutia, K., Buenger, A., Gonzalez, N., Hunt, M., & Eisenhart, C. (2010). (Developed by the National Reading Technical Assistance Center, RMC Research Corporation). [A review of the Current Research on Vocabulary Instruction](#)

Frederick, N. (2015) [The Professional Importance of Grammar and How it Should be Taught](#). The PIT Journal.

Green, L. (2013). [Why Language Learners Should Prioritize Declarative Memory](#)

Hoff, E., Quinn, J.M., & Giguere, D. (2017). [What Explains the Correlation Between Growth in Vocabulary and Grammar? New Evidence From Latent Change Score Analyses of Simultaneous Bilingual Development](#).

Murphey, T. (1998). Language hungry!: An introduction to language learning fun and self-esteem. Macmillan Languagehouse.

Praise, S., K. Meenakshi. (2014). International Journal of Research Studies in Language Learning. [Importance of grammar in communication](#).

Rebuschat, P. & Monaghan, P. (2021). [Learning vocabulary and grammar from cross-situational statistics](#).

State of Victoria (Department of Education and Training) (2018). [Grammar in early childhood](#)

Szmigiera, M. (2022). [The most spoken languages worldwide in 2022](#)

The Learning Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. [Key Principles of language learning.](#)

Transparent.com. [Our Methodology.](#)

Widdowson, H. G. (1990). Aspects of Language Teaching. Oxford. University Press.