

I'm Janina Klimas—teacher, linguist, and author. I've been teaching languages for over 20 years on three different continents, and I speak six languages to different levels of fluency. I always like to emphasize that part: I'm **not** equally strong in all of them. That's normal, and it's important for you to remember that language skill exists on a spectrum, not as a perfect, all-or-nothing "fluent / not fluent" label.

I hold a BA in Theatre Arts and Foreign Languages and an MA in the Teaching of Languages. I'm certified to teach:

- Spanish
- French
- English
- Drama
- Speech
- Language immersion (K-8)
- Reading

I've led workshops for teachers online and at events like the **BETT Show in London**, the **ACTFL annual convention**, the **Polyglot Conference**, and **Language Show Live**, and in schools across Europe and the US. My work has been featured in *The Language Educator*, *Fluent in 3 Months*, and on podcasts such as *Breakthrough Success* and *Side Hustle School*.

Step 1: Ask Yourself - Where Are You Now?

The first step is honest self-assessment.

Imagine a path made of speech bubbles, starting with tiny ones at the top and growing into a large one at the bottom:

- **Words**
- **Phrases**
- **Sentences**
- **Connected sentences**
- **Paragraphs**
- **Extended speech**

We all move through these stages. No one jumps from knowing nothing to extended speech.

So ask yourself:

- Are you at the **word** stage?
- Are you forming **phrases**?
- Can you create **sentences** or even **paragraphs**?

If you're just getting started, you might honestly say, "I'm not even at words yet." That's okay. The smaller the speech bubble, the less you can say—for now. Your goal is simply to move from one bubble to the next.

Step 2: Decide – Where Do You Want to Be?

Next, identify your **short-term** and **long-term** goals.

Look at those speech bubbles again and ask:

- What's my goal for the next few months?
- What's my "big picture" goal for this language?

Many people who describe themselves as "fluent" are somewhere in that **solid intermediate range**:

- They can **create with language**
- They can make **sentences** and turn them into **paragraphs**
- They can handle everyday situations with some ease

You may not need (or want) to reach native-like extended speech. If your goal is travel, conversation, or work, an upper-intermediate level may be more than enough.

The key is to **choose your destination** on the path so you can plan your journey.

Step 3: Be Realistic About Time

Now ask: **How much time do I have, and how will I use it?**

The Foreign Service Institute (FSI) groups languages by how long they typically take English speakers to reach working proficiency:

- **Category 1:** Languages similar to English (e.g., Spanish, French)

- **Category 2-3:** Languages that are somewhat or significantly different (e.g., German, Russian, Greek)
- **Category 4:** Very different languages (e.g., Arabic, Korean, Chinese)

Category 1 languages might take a few hundred hours to reach a solid B2/C1 level. Category 3 or 4 languages can take **three to four times as many hours** to reach the same point.

FSI students are usually:

- Highly motivated
- Studying full-time
- Often experienced language learners

Most of us are not in that situation. We have jobs, families, responsibilities, and the need to rest. So instead of trying to recreate their schedule, we work with **what we actually have**.

Find Your “Natural” Chunks of Time

Ask: *Where do small pockets of time already exist in my day?*

For example:

- Commuting
- Walking
- Cleaning
- Waiting in line
- Having a cup of coffee

These are perfect moments for **audio-based learning**—podcasts, audio courses, or audio flashcards. They might not be your “ideal” language activity, but they work because they are **sustainable**.

If you only choose activities that don’t fit your life, you’ll quit.
If you design your routine around your real life, you’ll keep going.

Step 4: Understand the Basics of Language Acquisition

To learn effectively, it helps to understand what's happening behind the scenes.

Dr. Stephen Krashen's theory of second language acquisition talks about **learning** and **acquisition**:

- **Language learning** – all the **deliberate** things you do:
 - Grammar exercises
 - Vocabulary lists
 - Drills
 - Studying rules
- These can feel artificial, but they build awareness and accuracy.
- **Language acquisition** – what happens when you **understand meaningful messages**:
 - Watching a series in your target language
 - Reading something you enjoy
 - Talking to someone and understanding them
 - Listening to content slightly above your current level

I call combining these two the **perfect marriage**.

You need **deliberate learning** (to systematize and organize language) and **natural acquisition** (to internalize it). Used together, they speed up your progress dramatically.

Step 5: Use Reading and Input Strategically

One of the most powerful tools for language learning is **reading**, supported by lots of comprehensible input.

In first language literacy instruction, we often aim for texts where learners understand about **89-94%** of the words—enough to learn, but not so hard that they're constantly frustrated.

In a new language, your comprehension won't be that high at first—and that's okay. What matters is that you:

- Choose content that interests you
- Use strategies to stay engaged and keep learning

Some ideas:

- **Actively read:** highlight, write in the margins, re-read, and summarize.
- Turn new words into your own **vocabulary list or flashcards**.
- Use tools like browser extensions and graded readers to make texts more accessible.

Over time, this input:

- Expands your vocabulary
- Teaches grammar in context
- Makes language patterns feel natural

Reading doesn't need to be academic. Magazines, blogs, gossip sites, recipes, subtitles, social media—if it holds your attention, it's useful.

Step 6: Make a Plan You Actually Enjoy

Now it's time to create a **real plan** for your learning—one that's based on:

- Your **current level**
- Your **goals**
- Your **available time**
- What genuinely **brings you joy**

A few principles:

1. Build Around Your Life

For many people, like me, commuting is prime language time. For you, it might be:

- Early morning before everyone wakes up
- Lunch breaks
- Late evenings with Netflix

2. Use Variety

Doing the same app indefinitely can keep you in a routine, but if you're bored, you'll stop. Mix things up:

- Audio courses (Pimsleur-style, podcasts)
- Online tutors (italki, etc.)
- Reading (ebooks, blogs, news, magazines)
- Streaming shows and films
- Music and lyrics
- Language exchange conversations

I like to change my routine in **five-week blocks**. Every five weeks, I switch something:

- More reading for one block
- More speaking practice the next
- A binge-watching / Netflix focus another

That way, it stays fresh, motivating, and fun.

Step 7: Get Communicating (and Then Repeat)

To truly grow, you must **use** the language.

ACTFL describes three modes of communication:

1. **Interpretive** – understanding what you read and hear
2. **Presentational** – what you produce for an audience (a speech, a journal entry, a video)
3. **Interpersonal** – two-way interaction (a conversation, chat, voice messages)

A simple example with a tutor:

- **Interpretive:** You read an article before your lesson.
- **Presentational:** You write a short summary in your journal.
- **Interpersonal:** You discuss the article with your tutor in your lesson.

My personal “rule of thumb”:

- We have **two ears and one mouth** → listen twice as much as you speak.
- We have **two eyes and one brain** → read twice as much as you think and write.

Then, after about five weeks, you:

1. Go back to **Step 1**
2. Reassess your skills and goals
3. Adjust your plan
4. Repeat the cycle

That's how you build steady, sustainable progress.

Turn your daily life into your language classroom, one step (and one five-week block) at a time.

<https://real-life-language.kit.com/82ccd204c8>