

Everything you need to know before meeting with your new language teacher (part 2)

In part two of this two-part post, Fathom co-founder, Kevin McRobb discusses how to get the best results from your new language course. Part one can be found [here](#).



So you've [psyched yourself up](#) for the first meeting, and you're chomping at the bit to get started. This begs the question: what's next? This post will give you an outline of what your new teacher might expect from you in the coming semester.

One oft-overlooked question which can give tremendous insight to a language teacher is simply:

“Why are you here?”.

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Sounds simple, right? In fact, there are as many answers to this as there are of you reading this. That being said, there are some bigger themes that present themselves again and again when we ask the question.

Some of the most common responses are work-related. You might tell us that you have joined — or intend to join — a new company; that your role has changed; that you have found yourself in at the deep end of an international team and need to level up your skills. Some of you might tell us that you're out of practice; that you haven't had a language lesson since high school, and you've decided that it's time to refresh your skills. All of us — including your teachers — have been in the same boat at some point in our lives.

Now that we've established what pushed you to enrol for the language lessons, it's time to delve deeper and set expectations for the course. The next question is even more challenging:

“What do you hope to achieve by having these lessons?”

Many students automatically say:

“I want to be *fluent* in English.”

A very noble intention indeed.

“But how are we going to achieve that in the next ten lessons?”

“...umm.”

Experience in the classroom tells us that many of these language learners know exactly *what* they want to achieve, but struggle to describe precisely *how* it's going to happen. The good news is that language teachers can help! This is where the principle of goal-setting comes into play.

Small changes, big results



Students and teachers alike need to know how success looks and feels. Targets must be set realistically, pursued rigorously and assessed regularly.

If you struggle with understanding phone conversations, we might agree that we want you to lead a teleconference at work within six weeks. Your teacher will then establish strategies to succeed in that goal. He/she will introduce the specific vocabulary you need and the structures you will use to understand and be understood on the phone. You and the teacher will then use the interim period to develop that language, gradually building your confidence, and working relentlessly towards that specific goal. We might even agree to have a language lesson via video-conferencing to make you comfortable with communicating in that exact manner.

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When we achieve success in teleconferencing, we then work with you to establish your next target. And so it continues until we achieve your mission: fluency in English.

Outside of the lessons, we'll expect you to be taking baby steps towards your goal too. If you have a query about an ongoing project, call your colleague in Sweden rather than sending a rambling email. Fancy a city break next weekend? Call the hotel directly and book your room on the phone.

Language success cannot and will not happen overnight. Rather, we at Fathom advocate consistent and incremental change. The only sure-fire way to become competent in *any* skill is to practise, practise and practise some more.

Perfect Practice

Time is perhaps the most precious thing we have. For that reason, it is crucially important that you occupy your time — including that which you spend learning a foreign language — as efficiently as you possibly can.

Establishing good habits from the outset is key to ensuring progress. I normally recommend that my students spend just twenty minutes practising every day, at a time in which they feel most productive. I prefer to practise skills in the mid-morning – between 10:00 and 12:00, as these are the hours my mind seems to work at the peak of its powers. Twenty minutes allows your focus to stay razor sharp for the whole duration of your practice session.

This practice can take the form of active skill-building – speaking to a friend, writing on an online forum or completing a grammar exercise; or passive skill-building – reading an article, watching your favourite TV show or listening to the radio in English.

Daily practice does *not* have to be dull and monotonous! The easiest way to keep yourself motivated is by using English to complement your existing interests. Do you like online video games? Play on the American server. Are you a news addict? Get your fill from the BBC. Do you enjoy spending your Friday nights socialising? Do it in the tourist quarter.

If you strictly adhere to the twenty minute rule, you will spend more than 120 hours a year with foreign language on top of your regular lessons. You can even do it on your [daily commute](#) to work!

However, simply putting in the hours is not the entire story. Practising effectively is much more challenging than that. Language students need result-oriented goals. Rather than agreeing that we should practise [conditionals](#) for three lessons, it is more useful to establish that we must practise them until you're able to produce the first, second and third conditional correctly and on demand. Upon each unsuccessful attempt, we need to deconstruct what wasn't correct, why you made that specific mistake, and how it can be eradicated on the next attempt.

Use your teacher as a sounding board

The lessons should act as a 'safe space' so to speak, for you to experiment and test your ideas in a low-stakes environment. No matter how comical the mistake, you can be sure that we've heard it before. Throw caution to the wind and express yourself in the classroom – you will feel the results faster and more painlessly.

When I hear a mistake in the classroom, I tend not to correct it directly. I prefer firstly to highlight that a mistake has been made. You then have an opportunity to recognise that something didn't sound right. I then ask you to tell me in which part of the sentence specifically the mistake has been made. Following that, I introduce — or reintroduce — the name of the correct structure: present perfect, second conditional, or passive voice for example, and request that *you correct yourself*. The reasoning behind all of this is to encourage you to practise deliberately rather than mindlessly, constantly analysing the root of your language errors and discovering how they apply to similar sentences.

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A perfect marriage

Make no mistake, it is simply not enough to turn up to a language lesson for 60 or 120 minutes a week, and expect rapid progress. We see language success as a symbiosis between the work you do in the classroom and the work you do beyond it. If you're able to combine the two smoothly, you will find yourself well along the path to the fluency you desire!

What has worked best for you outside of the classroom? Share it with your fellow readers in the comments!