

# Learning a language

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I am having the pleasure of learning a third language, Indonesian. This is a creole with lots of Arabic and some Chinese, Portugese, English, Pidgin, Latin, and who knows what else. The grammar is simple, regular, and unambiguous, with virtually every word always a noun, verb, adjective, etc. so the complex grammar of English is unneeded. The Latin alphabet is used and spelling is almost completely phonetic. The only non-Western sound is the glottal stop. Idioms are very rare.

I am renting a room in a homestay where a three-year-old girl lives and am learning the language much faster than her. I can also compare my skill with myself at age seven when I lived for one year in Bavaria. I'd say I learned German more quickly and better, but the difference is not all that marked.

In defense of three-year-old girls, it is surely much easier to learn a language if one can read and write as oppose to simply overhearing full-speed conversation. I've never noticed anyone teaching her to speak.

I got nowhere for two months until I realized I could not memorize sounds and did much better with written words. Even back when I was seven one of the best tools for learning was comic books. I had to sit down and brute force memorize using flash cards. Now that I have a good start memorizing words by sounds is much easier. Perhaps the brain rejects something quite unfamiliar as "not a word". It is much easier to learn words similar to what is known.

I also teach English here. Many people learn English in school starting with middle school. The emphasis is on reading and writing, so while many can do that quite well often they cannot speak a single sentence without the aid of paper. Europeans often can speak English almost as well as a native speaker. When I asked why I was told that English language shows were on television with subtitles so they had heard the language all their lives.

One of the best English speakers I have met had never studied the subject in school. He did not know the grammar and simply read a good deal and practiced conversation whenever possible. I think it is

quite possible that knowledge of grammar is an impediment to learning. There is no question that the most important thing in learning to speak is practice.

I've been told that Indonesian has "no grammar", that it is monotone, and that syllables are not accented, none of which is true. All these shows is that cultural conditioning can render one partially deaf. Or perhaps having studied music all my life improved my ear. I also do better than most with the accent, but this is purely mechanical. Most adult westerners do not realize they should move the tongue back in the mouth about half an inch.

Another odd thing is the difficulty everyone has with ending a word with 's' for plural. It is such a simple rule, and plenty of Indonesian words end with 's'. More complicated rules such as the tenses of "to be" are learned more easily.

Another thing I've noticed in the writing of Balinese people is their ability to construct grammatically correct sentences that nevertheless seem quite alien. I'm convinced that people do not learn language in a logical way. They may infer some rules, but mostly it is "when I want to do this I say that". Grammatically correct phrases and sentences are memorized for the most part. For that matter, English has plenty of idioms that made no literal sense at all. In other words, language is built by imitation, memorization and building on what one knows, not by using rules to define the space of possible sentences then choosing the best sentence from that space. Such a space is far too large. I've also realized how repetitions everyday life tends to be and how little one needs to be quite fluent. Reading the newspaper is a whole 'nother matter.