

15 Language Learning Resources at Your Fingertips from

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If you've been learning languages for a while, you know that attaining proficiency in a foreign language requires considerable practice. What can you do to practice your language skills? Other speakers of the language you're learning may be a continent away or they may be right in your own community. Either way, there are a multitude of resources available to today's language learners.

Language proficiency consists of a variety of skills -- the ability to speak, comprehend, read, and write -- and each of these requires a subset of passive or active abilities: knowledge of vocabulary, the command of grammatical structures, understanding of cultural contexts in which language appears. For this reason, it is helpful to practice language in various ways. Besides, none of these skills exist in isolation. Practicing and improving your ability in one set of skills can also promote your language learning in the other areas.

1. Find a pen pal

Modern technologies have undeniably brought the world closer together. Years ago penpals communicated primarily through letter writing (hence *pen pal*!). Today there are many more alternatives which are much faster than snail mail and are still cheap or even free, including e-mail, fax, text chat or voice chat, text messaging, or video conferencing via the Internet. They don't even require a pen.

Finding a foreign language pen pal is easy. Many online services exist that will allow you to file a pen pal request or search databases for pen pals suitable to your language needs, age, and interests. You can find a partner for nearly every language, even those that are less commonly taught. The [eTandem](#) service allows you to register online and will actively match you based on your application with a suitable partner. At [Mylanguageexchange.com](#), you can locate your own pen pal. The site gives you the opportunity to post a request for a pen pal or to search other requests by language and several other limiting criteria. [Polyglot](#) and [Language Buddy](#) both allow you to search for a language partner by language. Potential pen pals may also be lurking in our [Foreign Language Forum](#) here at Vistawide. All of these services are **free**.

2. Rent and watch a foreign film

Visit your local movie rental store and browse the foreign film section. Most films will be in the foreign language with English subtitles. If you're choosing a video rather than a DVD, be sure that the film is not dubbed, but rather in the original language with subtitles. Some university libraries have foreign videos that you can check out. Another alternative is to join an online DVD subscription service. [Netflix](#) has **over 3500 foreign films** available for rent -- by far more than any other rental service. If you prefer to download movies online, you will find a handful of foreign films at [MovieLink](#).

Especially if you are a beginning language learner, you will likely not understand much of the language in the movie. Native speakers talk rapidly, use slang, and often speak in accents or local dialects. Nonetheless, watching a foreign language film is a fantastic way to attune your ear to the sounds of the language. You'll probably notice that by the end of the film, you're able to understand bits and pieces of what you hear. Gather your friends together, make some popcorn, sit back and enjoy the trip!

3. Read or watch foreign news online

The Internet gives web users access to 100s of international news sources within seconds. The [Internet Public Library](#) provides links to online newspapers in over 150 countries and [Broadcast-Live](#) provides a list of television stations with streaming video.

Reading a foreign language newspaper or watching a video broadcast from another country is a great way to hone your language skills and familiarize yourself with an area where it's spoken. You can pick up vocabulary pertaining to current events and become exposed to different perspectives on those events. And you can become aware of local issues of importance to the readers or viewers of that particular news source.

After you have gone through the news stories once, read up on international events in your own language to fill in the details that you missed. Then go back and read or view the news reports again. The second, or third, or even the fourth time around, you will understand successively more.

4. Find native speakers in your community

You might be surprised to find that there is an individual or family or even a whole community of native speakers where you live. Visit a language department or the international programs office at a local college or university and ask if there are any foreign students who speak the language you're learning. These students are often far away from home and will appreciate establishing lasting and meaningful contacts during their stay. Plan activities together, take turns cooking meals traditional to your respective countries, or even invite them to spend holidays with your family. They will also be pleased to meet people who show a genuine interest in getting to know them and their culture.

Beyond the university, you could place an ad in the local newspaper expressing a desire to practice your language skills. You might offer to teach your own language in return. Often you need only find one native speaker to open up the floodgates. They usually know where the others are lurking and how to contact them.

5. Join or start a conversation group

Another way to connect with others who share your language interest is to join a local conversation group. Ask at local colleges and universities if such groups already exist. If not, start one of your own! Advertise at colleges and place a public announcement in the newspaper noting the date, time, and place of the first meeting. If at first you have no takers, don't dismay. The information takes some time to disseminate and reach the right people. Establish a fixed meeting time and place, say, each Tuesday at 6:00pm or the first Wednesday of every month at 5:00pm, and you are likely to eventually attract some participants.

6. Visit an ethnic restaurant

An ethnic restaurant is not only a place to enjoy some traditional cuisine, but it's also a place to connect with native speakers and find out what related events are going on in your region. Check the [Yellow Pages](#) under Restaurants in your area. If you are willing to travel, check the closest metropolitan area near you. Larger cities are more likely to host a variety of ethnic cuisines and populations.

7. Find a book or magazine in your library

University and college libraries, more so than local libraries, are likely to have a wide range of foreign language materials in their collections. Visit the periodicals section and ask the librarian there to point you to the magazines and newspapers in the language you are seeking. Language and literature books are located in the P-PZ stacks. Depending on the language, you may find foreign language books in other disciplines as well, such as history, education, sociology, art, and others. If the library has a children or elementary education section, check for children's books in the foreign language.

While ample foreign language stories and periodicals are available online, nothing compares with the experience of holding the item in your hands. Print editions have many features that online versions typically don't or can't have. If you find [foreign language books](#) or [magazines](#) you especially like, you can order your own copies.

8. Use a foreign language search engine to explore your interests

Choose one of your favorite hobbies or subject area of interest, a type of music you like, a particular lifestyle choice, or an international event. Then find sites on that topic in the language you're learning. Use [Google language tools](#) to search the web in specific languages or countries or use one of over 100 Google portals located in other countries. Or change the [AltaVista](#) search settings to the language or country of your choice.

Finding a site on a topic with which you are already familiar is a great way to promote your language skills. You will surely recognize some vocabulary and will learn many new topic-related words. You might even find your new favorite website on your particular hobby. The site might even offer a chance to communicate with others who share your interest in it -- in the foreign language. Such sites allow you to learn to negotiate a topic with which you're familiar, to gain new perspectives on that topic, and to connect with other people around the world who share your interest.

9. Join a foreign language discussion board

A foreign language discussion board is a place to connect with native speakers as well as others around globe who share your interest in a particular language. It is different from a discussion board for native speakers by native speakers because it embraces your role as a language learner. You can read about or participate in discussions about language and culture, and you can try out your language skills or ask

language questions. A discussion board is also a fantastic place to find a foreign language pen pal.

Our [Vistawide Foreign Language Forum](#) provides such a resource for our visitors. A few other excellent comprehensive language boards exist. [PhraseBase](#) and [Unilang](#) have specific forums on dozens of languages as well as some interesting general language threads. [Polyglot Forum](#) includes 9 different languages. [ShiaChat](#) is a Muslim community site with multilingual forums, including Arabic, Farsi, Urdu, and a smattering of other languages. At the [How to learn any language forum](#), you can engage in lively discussions about learning languages and get your language questions answered.

In addition to the general language forums, there are several language-specific discussion boards: [Russian](#), [German](#), [French](#), [Spanish](#), [Italian](#), [ESL](#), another [ESL](#) board, [Persian](#), [Japanese](#), [Chinese](#), and [Thai](#). Many of these boards include discussion threads on the customs and culture where the target language is spoken as well.

10. Visit a foreign language chat room

Visiting a foreign language chat room provides a more immediate opportunity to practice your language skills than a bulletin board, because a chat room engages speakers in synchronous or live communication.

There are free text chat and, increasingly, also voice chat sites available for language learners. Text chat rooms exist for learners and speakers of [ESL](#), [Spanish](#), [Italian](#), [French](#), [German](#), [Japanese](#), [Thai](#), [Cantonese](#), [Arabic](#), and [Persian](#), among others. There are voice chat rooms for [Greek](#) and [Cambodian](#).

Some general language sites help you find chat partners and/or provide a venue for live communication. The [Language Trade](#) facilitates voice chat with a native speaker at no charge. [UniLang Chatbox](#) is a place you can meet others interested in languages, or where a prearranged online language encounter could be held.

11. Plan a trip

Plan a trip to a country or region where the language is spoken. Not only will you get the chance to practice your language skills, but you'll also get to experience the culture and customs first-hand, from simple human interactions to eating habits, from daily routines to architecture.

While traveling to a place where the native language is a dominant and official language allows you to surround yourself with the language and culture, you might be surprised to find immersion opportunities closer to home. If you're learning French and cannot plan a trip to Europe or Africa, you still might be able to travel to Quebec. If you're learning Persian and a trip to Iran is not feasible, try visiting Los Angeles County, where more than a million Persian-speakers reside. Are you learning Chinese, but can't afford a trip to China? Try visiting one of the many Chinatown quarters of large American cities, such as New York or San Francisco. Such large cities often have ethnic quarters where you can immerse yourself the language and the culture of the people who speak it.

12. Study abroad

The absolute best way to get to know a language and culture like a native speaker is to live like one. [Studying abroad](#) for a semester or, even better, for a year allows you to be fully immersed in the target cultural and linguistic environment. You can get to know the ins-and-outs of daily life, learn first-hand how to negotiate common situations (shopping, taking the bus, mailing a letter, ordering at a restaurant, etc.), and gain an insider's perspective on the educational system. There are a myriad of possibilities, from short-term or summer study to year-long programs. If a formal study program won't work for you, you might choose instead to work abroad in an internship or work program. See our [career resources](#) pages for tips and ideas.

There are many common myths about studying abroad, and many people believe that it's not an option for them. It's not as hard as you might think! Check out our [study abroad](#) pages for tips and information. Whatever your situation, there is a way you can make your dream of living and studying in another country a reality.

13. Explore a foreign language magazine

If the offerings at your local library don't satisfy your thirst for exposure to foreign language media, there are other ways to access foreign language magazines. [Allyoucanread.com](#) lists the top ten magazines (and top ten newspapers) in dozens of countries and provides links to the most recent online editions. There are innumerable foreign language magazines on specialty topics, from business to geography, from skiing to child-rearing. Here are some links to a variety of magazines in [French](#) and to several in [German](#). You can search the web for foreign language magazines on specialty topics.

Alternatively, you could [subscribe to your very own foreign magazine](#). Some magazines can be read online, but a print version offers unique advantages. You can find advertisements for familiar products but perhaps displayed in an unfamiliar way. You'll see advertisements for cultural products you've never seen before. Flipping through the print edition allows you to become acquainted with cultural peculiarities. Finding [foreign language magazines](#) in your field of interest is an excellent way to expand your ability to converse about something that you hold dear.

14. Locate heritage events in your area

Universities typically have international student clubs on campus that represent various ethnic backgrounds and cultures. Arab, Caribbean, Hindu, Iranian, Latino, Polish, Turkish, Ukrainian, and so many other student organizations abound on university campuses. Many such groups regularly organize campus events that raise awareness and appreciation of their respective cultures.

In addition, many communities have heritage groups beyond the university that preserve and teach others about the traditions of their homeland. Members are often immigrants or first-, second-, or third-generation descendants of immigrants. The groups usually meet on a regular basis. They plan and sponsor special events that honor folk traditions, such as regional dances and costumes, observe important holidays and celebrations, such as German Oktoberfest, Chinese and Iranian New Year, and region-specific Christmas customs. These groups sometimes arrange festivals and dinners, they offer language classes, and organize

get-togethers of various kinds.

Both community and university heritage groups provide venues for establishing cultural contacts and practicing your language skills.

15. Listen to foreign language music

Ever have the experience of not remembering what you ate for breakfast, but being able to recall the lyrics of a song you last heard 10 years ago? Music is an excellent memory aid for language learners. Hearing and learning sung lyrics can improve vocabulary and pronunciation and can reinforce proper use of structures.

You can browse our compilations of [German language music](#) and [Spanish language music](#), search for CDs of international music at amazon.com or alibris.com, or you can listen to live audio from international radio broadcasts. [Mike's Radio World](#) and [Radio Locator](#) list radio stations around the world with free streaming audio.

As you can see, there are ample opportunities to practice your language skills, and most are free. Take advantage of them and nurture your skills, and you will see your language proficiency grow.