

Materially speaking ...

If you're new to learning a language, it can be a pretty scary experience. Perhaps you did some German or French at school, and found it bloody difficult, or 'lausig schwer' as they say in Germany? Or sat at home (or in the car, on the train, the plane or wherever) valiantly trying to get through those tape or CD programs which promise 'German in Ten Minutes a Day' or 'Instant Spanish'. And then been disappointed, when phrase book in hand, the waiter doesn't understand you want a glass of water.

Unfortunately, there is no 'instant' solution to learning a language. But there are books, CDs, and computer programs that make it a helluva lot easier! As someone who has absolutely no talent for languages whatsoever (if there is an 'ear' for such things, mine is tone deaf), here's a selection of materials that I have used, which I have found works for the 'language ignoramus' (ie me!)

Getting started

Forget everything else that catches your eye, head straight for **Michel Thomas'** series of language CDs. Even for the most linguistically challenged, this guy is not only unique, but a genius! He focuses on structure, not grammar. And starts with a simple concept, eg 'I want'. Then adds to that 'I want to do or go'. And then 'I want to do or go to XXX'. And 'I want to do or go to XXX next week ... with you ...'. And so it goes on.

Within 8 hours, you have the basic present, future and past tense structures, and are able to have simple conversations with native speakers. And he has the most wonderful way of helping you remember key points. For example, in his German course he has coined the phrase 'weil' (vile) situation. For any English speaker who has learned German, they will be familiar with how difficult the 'vile' situation is (ie the verb goes at the end of a sentence). Similarly in Spanish, he coins the phrase 'go go' verbs which turn into 'ga ga' verbs. Naturally, if you're reading this and have no knowledge (yet) of either language, you are probably thinking I'm a bit ga ga. But trust me, these 'memory phrases' really work when you are a beginner.

But, like all things, these series has its limitations. Unfortunately, there are no texts to accompany the CDs, so if you are a visual learner (ie you need to see the words to

remember them), have a pen and paper handy together with a dictionary, so you can make notes as you go along. Michel Thomas discourages this (and he may well be right) but it is the only way that I have made them work for me.

The **Michel Thomas** series is available in Spanish, German, Italian and French from [www. Amazon.com](http://www.Amazon.com) (around \$60). , whilst excellent for getting started in a language, they have their limitations.

Tip: The 8 CD course (unless you're really not sure whether you want to continue, don't bother with the 2 CD course as you'll end up paying twice for the same material) is supplemented by a two CD 'Vocabulary Builder' program. Well worth investing in (around \$25) but a totally different approach to the previous 8 CD program, which can be a little off putting. You will just need to persevere to get the results! (And as I write this, I am celebrating with a glass of wine at having got to the end of both packs for Spanish!)

Going to the next stage ...

If you're really serious about getting to grips with a new language, and you can't spare the time or the cash to get to a language school, are impatient to progress in the shortest possible time, or want to prepare yourself so you use your time and money at a school as possible, check out the **Pimsleur Method** (available in many languages including German, French, Italian and Spanish). At \$250 a throw (if you live in Europe, order from the US Amazon.com site as, even with import duty, it is cheaper), these 30 hour courses really are the biz. Following a similar structural approach to the Michel Thomas program, over the 30 CDs they go into much more depth. These do come with accompanying written material for the 'visual learner' but for some reason, don't seem to relate to the CDs so best ignored.

Unfortunately, there is a drawback in both of these programs. Whilst they provide a wide variety of vocabulary, for some reason neither give you those all important structures and words. Like how to order a beer. Or ask for a light. Or, indeed, tell some bothersome *Senor* or *Herr* how to 'hau ab!'.

Tip: If you want to make the most of your time and cash: start with a Michel Thomas program (plus the separately sold Michel Thomas Vocabulary Builder) in your chosen language, and jump straight to the Intermediate level of Pimsleur. Not only does it make

you feel good working under the title of 'Intermediate' it will save you repeating the basics again!.

And then, if you're still raring to go with your chosen new language, consider signing up to a language school.

And back at school

Whilst both of the programs I have mentioned give you an introduction to the language, get you using it at an early stage and provide a head start if and when you decide to go further with your chosen language, they are no substitute for taking lessons, interacting with other students, and indeed coercing with native speakers.

And now is when it comes a bit scary. Points to look out for when choosing a language school require a whole article in themselves (see next time) but suffice to say now, only choose a school where the teaching is in the target language (i.e. if you are learning French, you should be taught in French). How can you learn in a language you don't (yet) understand you may well ask.

I too was sceptical when I started to learn German last year. But it works. But only if you have chosen a good school, regardless whether it is an adult education center or a language school of your target language, if it is any good, it will teach in that language. Even to beginners.

But regardless of where or what type of classes you take, once you graduate from the CDS, that dreadful 'G' word – in this instance referring to Grammar will rear its ugly head.

Given the almost inbuilt fear (or indeed boredom) when people encounter the G word, here are a few recommendations for resources and materials I have found useful.

Coming to terms with the G word

First of all, be positive. If you had a bad experience at school – or indeed no grammar experience (see below) – then put it to the back of your mind. Why? Because as the

backbone and lifeblood of any language, Grammar can actually be quite interesting and fun. Yes, you read write! Grammar can be interesting and fun (try this as a mantra for a few weeks and you might get to believe me!).

In the meantime, if you were brought up in the English or American school system in the last 20-25 years or so, it is possible, likely or even probable you will face a challenge additional to that of learning the new language and its supporting grammar..

That challenge being: understanding your own language's grammar. With the focus generally in the US and UK on teaching a student to have 'free expression' in the English language, many educational systems have avoided teaching this subject. So whilst the difference between a noun and an adjective is clear to most people (although perhaps it gets a little more shaky with adverbs), many educational systems in the UK and US have avoided introducing topics such as dative and genitive (the latter being to do with possession not parts of the body!), intransitive and transitive verbs, or even more importantly, what a direct or indirect object is and how it behaves with the verb.

Unfortunately, understanding the concepts of these terms is vital. As a product of both the UK and US/Canadian school systems, when I started German last year, my biggest problem wasn't with the learning of German (although that was difficult enough!). It was the fact that I had never been taught grammar in my own language. So, for those who have been failed by their educational systems (which seems to be primarily in the UK/US), help is at hand.

Getting to Grips with the G Word

The solution being a series of books (one for many of the most popular languages) called **Practice in German/Spanish/French Grammar** (publisher: Nelson Thorne). These individual books provide very clear examples of how sentences and language structures work both within in the English and the foreign language. They are clear and concise, and really help.

Whatever type of language school you are attending, you will need a grammar book, even if the school says they provide all materials - there will always be instances when you find yourself lost with a certain type of structure, and it's good to be able to look it up after the teacher has gone home (but you're stuck doing your homework).

There are of course hundreds, if not thousands of grammar books on the market for each language. Two that I – and other co-learners have found useful - are the **Longman series 'help yourself'** and the **Collins Gem Grammar guides**. The former is a slim book, but is extremely clear in both layout, indexing (often a nightmare with grammar materials) and with lots of exercises to test out your newfound knowledge.

The **Collins Gem Grammar** guides are exactly what their title suggests, a gem. Small enough to pack into a breast/fleece pocket or purse/handbag, the left hand page provides the grammar points and explanations, and the right hand side examples in the target language (with English translations underneath). So forget lugging around heavy tomes, if you need a handy look up guide, this is the series to look out for. They are available for many languages, including German, Spanish, English and French, and have accompanying volumes of verb tables and dictionaries.

But if you want to go the whole hog, I don't think you can beat **Hammer's German Grammar and Usage by Durrel** (publisher: NTC Publishing Group – there are equivalents for other languages), but is really targeted purely at the grammar enthusiast (or even compulsive), but as a minimum, it's a good replacement for sleeping tablets and wedges doors open quite effectively.

A word (or ten) a day, really does pay

The most used item of your 'language kit' will be a dictionary. Everyone has their own idea of what a good dictionary should be, and as such is a personal choice. However a couple of tips:

- ? Even if you are just starting out in learning a language, avoid the 'easy' learner type dictionaries (eg Collins, Oxford or Longman). These tend to be quite expensive, perhaps with pictures and so on, and you will outgrow these very quickly.

- ? Equally, in the beginning, it is not worth going out and buying the doorstopper of a dictionary. First, because it will be a pain to carry around and second, these tend to include numerous technical entries (do you really need to know how each word scores on the corpora scale?) and are, as such, very confusing to use.

- ? Look for a dictionary which is well laid out, with type big enough to read easily, and which within the entries, incorporates phrases and helpful hints. Sections on verb conjugations and basic info such as days, months, time etc are also helpful. And most importantly, choose a dictionary which is easy to carry around.

Dictionaries in the 21st Century

But of course nowadays, dictionaries do not have to be paper based. There is a myriad of electronic dictionaries on the market, for the PC, hand held (Palm or Windows CE) or indeed dedicated 'translation' units. And many offer on their web sites 'free' downloads or other enticing offers.

Enter into this area at your peril. And here speaks someone who has wasted a lot of money – and more importantly time - in trying to find a dictionary for my Palm and/or computer. With web downloaded dictionaries, it is rare you have the opportunity to really see how a dictionary is structured, laid out and so on. And, unless anyone can tell me different, there appears to be no adequate dictionary for handhelds.

However, as I have travelled this tortuous journey to find the ultimate electronic alternative to books, I have come across – and use every day – two specific electronic media solutions :

- ? **Oxford Duden Pop Up series (available from www.ifinger.com)**. To date, I have only used the German version although am now about to embark with the Spanish version. Once you have navigated your way through the tortuous download and installation process (make sure you have plenty of time and patience to hand, and perhaps a stress ball to squeeze/kick rather than your faithful computer), it is actually an indispensable tool, particularly if you are writing emails, essays or other material in a foreign language. The program runs in the background of whatever word processing or web package you are using, and you just type in the word you want the translation for, and up it pops (hence its name) , along with the 'case' of the word if a verb and useful associated phrases. It also claims that it translates individual words or phrases on a web page if you hold the cursor over the required word, but I have not been able to get this facility to work.

Whilst indispensable, it also comes with flaws. First, it can interfere with the operation of Microsoft Explorer, so ensure you turn the dictionary off before going on a surfing expedition. Second, it is not very intelligent. For instance, if you type in a German word without the umlaut, or a Spanish word without the stress accent, it does not recognise it, which not only makes you question the software capability (which whilst obviously dated does in the main work effectively) can be a real pain if you are not working with a foreign language keyboard. However, it is very convenient directly on the computer whilst you're working in a different language.

- ? A much better 'electronic' option if you're feeling flush is **the Franklin Bookman II Professor Plus (www.franklin.com)**. This little unit is outstanding. Consisting of a dictionary of 1.2 million entries (yes, that's right!) , full verb conjugations and specific grammar solutions (eg in the German version, full adjective endings, which for anyone who has ever come across these little darlings, will know how important these are) plus integrated phrases with vocab entries and loads of other features.

And if you get bored at an airport or on a journey one day, there are a host of games (eg Hangman, Word Train and the such like) in your chosen language to play with which has two main advantages. First, naturally the learning on the move opportunity. But secondly, it makes you look real cool in the airline or railroad lounge, playing with such a device – all the youngsters thing you have a new Gameboy!

Seriously though, a further real benefit is the fact that the information for each language is contained on a removable disk at the back of the unit. So in theory, one can purchase the unit with one language and buy additional disks for other languages (approximately 20 Euro) . That's the theory, and indeed the cards do exist. But try contacting Franklin to buy them, and one is met with a wall of silence. The product might be great, but their customer service is non existent.

However, at the size of two credit cards (length and depth) it is a fantastic product, and dispenses with the need to carry around dictionaries, grammar and other materials.

However, this knowledge and convenience comes at a price. Around 117 Euro/US\$ to be exact. But to be honest, is worth every cent, a view shared by other co-learners who have bought it. If you decide to buy it, make sure you buy only the model listed as the others are targeted at people who only want the stock phrases for 'wo ist die Toilette' – useful though the phrase is, one gets passed that fairly quickly!

Making language electric(ronically)

There are numerous free resources on the web if you want easily accessible, free, language practice. Here I concentrate on the German, but all have other language parallel sites. Too numerous to mention all, here are a few favorites:

- ? www.aboutgerman.com is stuff packed with resources such as online tests, German articles, chat rooms etc. Seemingly moderated by someone called Heidi, who appears never to sleep, the beauty of the site is that if you converse with others, she will help you with your German. It's also a great place to find pen pals – or e-pals to be specific – if you want to strike up some practice opportunities within and outside of the country of your target language. Just register, put up a note asking for pen pals, and your inbox will be full very quickly.

In addition to the interactive elements of the site, a lot of the information, articles and correspondence is in English, so great for beginners. Just be aware of one flaw to this site. Once you have registered, you will be inundated with 'about ...' emails on other topics. But worth the effort of delisting yourself from other lists in order to be able to use About German site. .

- ? With internet access, you can of course listen to almost any radio station in the world (or at least, those that do live streaming) which is a rich, convenient and cheap source (unless you have access charges in the UK) for listening comprehension.

As an example, www.dradio.de is a brilliant internet radio streaming site. Broadcasting out of Berlin, one can tune in at anytime and listen to a real good mix of programming via the internet (although if you're not into funk, make sure you click the box below that option which is more speech and slightly less exerting

music). They also have on line transcripts of every interview and programme broadcast, which is great for reading practice (some even have the audio, so if you are, like me, aurally challenged, great opportunity to listen to the text, and read it as it is spoken.). Even better, as most presenters have a Berlin accent, real easy to understand (and no doubt will now get inundated with people with alternative views!).

- ? Talking of broadcasting, if you have satellite TV, try and find Deutsche Welle (www.dwelle.de) which is appropriate for anyone learning German, Spanish or French. Broadcasting primarily news in five languages, German, Spanish French and English, it's a really good way to hear the news in your own language, and then listen later to the German, Spanish or French version. Their reportage is sound too, not just in language terms but in partiality too.

- ? Finally, on the new media front, if you want some good target language listening, comprehension and writing practice check out www.champs-elysees.com. For around a 100 Euro per year subscription fee to 'Schau Ins Land' (or the French, Spanish equivalent), you get a CD sent to you every month with topical interviews from the main media, together with transcripts, vocabulary trainers and, for a few more cents, worksheets. Each CD lasts around 90 minutes, and really does cover a wide range of topical subjects. Available in French, Spanish and German, if you're not able to take lessons/not using the language on a regular basis, a fairly good alternative or substitute for the intermediate+ language student.

A few closing words

Finally, here's a few other tips if you want to keep in touch with your chosen language or languages:

Unless you are a complete beginner, it is never too early to try to read a **newspaper or magazine**. Starting with being able to read the headlines, and then moving on to the summary first paragraphs, and then through the main body of the article as you develop your reading skills, it is a good and cheap way to consolidate and expand your learning to date. (Even cheaper if you log on to your chosen media's web site).

But if you are new to the language, don't go for the top end of the market. As an example, if you are learning German, Bild (a sort of equivalent to the Sun/Star in England or New York Post/Enquirer in the US) is a good newspaper to start with as its language is simple, lots of pictures to help you get the gist/context, and repetitive day after day with the same themes (a little boring perhaps, particularly if you aren't into which actress is sleeping with which actor or actress) but the repetitiveness really helps the vocab building. Naturally, in every country, these 'low end' newspapers exist, and as you progress with your language, so your reading matter will change

Another possibility is to seek out '**two language books**'. Essentially, these have the mother tongue language on the left hand side (say, English) and the learning language on the other side. Available in many languages (eg French/German, English/Spanish) they really are very good, and usually cover fairly classical literature (eg Hardy, Austen and other national 'classic author' equivalents). Quite difficult to track down outside the country of the target language, so if you're visiting Germany, France or wherever and see them (usually in good bookstores)... buy a stock!

Finally, it goes without saying, that with the web there is so much information out there in whatever language you are learning, there's every opportunity for both aural and reading practice. But whatever materials you decide to use, have fun!