

Lýdia Machová, a language mentor, teaches people how they can learn any language by themselves. In this upbeat, inspiring talk, she reveals the secrets of polyglots and shares four principles to help unlock your own hidden language talent — and have fun while doing it.

Here is the full text of her TED talk titled “The Secrets of Learning a New Language”.

Lýdia Machová - TRANSCRIPT

I love learning foreign languages. In fact, I love it so much that I like to learn a new language every two years, currently working on my eighth one.

When people find that out about me, they always ask me, “How do you do that? What’s your secret?”

And to be honest, for many years, my answer would be, “I don’t know. I simply love learning languages.” But people were never happy with that answer.

They wanted to know why they are spending years trying to learn even one language, never achieving fluency, and here I come, learning one language after another. They wanted to know the secret of polyglots, people who speak a lot of languages.

And that made me wonder, too, how do actually other polyglots do it? What do we have in common?

And what is it that enables us to learn languages so much faster than other people?

I decided to meet other people like me and find that out. The best place to meet a lot of polyglots is an event where hundreds of language lovers meet in one place to practice their languages. There are several such polyglot events organized all around the world, and so I decided to go there and ask polyglots about the methods that they use.

And so I met Benny from Ireland, who told me that his method is to start speaking from day one. He learns a few phrases from a travel phrasebook and goes to meet native speakers and starts having conversations with them right away.

He doesn't mind making even 200 mistakes a day, because that's how he learns, based on the feedback. And the best thing is, he doesn't even need to travel a lot today, because you can easily have conversations with native speakers from the comfort of your living room, using websites.

I also met Lucas from Brazil who had a really interesting method to learn Russian. He simply added a hundred random Russian speakers on Skype as friends, and then he opened a chat window with one of them and wrote "Hi" in Russian. And the person replied, "Hi, how are you?" Lucas copied this and put it into a text window with another person, and the person replied, "I'm fine, thank you, and how are you?" Lucas copied this back to the first person, and in this way, he had two strangers have a conversation with each other without knowing about it.

And soon he would start typing himself, because he had so many of these conversations that he figured out how the Russian conversation usually starts. What an ingenious method, right?

And then I met polyglots who always start by imitating sounds of the language, and others who always learn the 500 most frequent words of the language, and yet others who always start by reading about the grammar.

If I asked a hundred different polyglots, I heard a hundred different approaches to learning languages. Everybody seems to have a unique way they learn a language, and yet we all come to the same result of speaking several languages fluently.

And as I was listening to these polyglots telling me about their methods, it suddenly dawned on me: the one thing we all have in common is that we simply found ways to enjoy the language-learning process.

All of these polyglots were talking about language learning as if it was great fun. You should have seen their faces when they were showing me their colorful grammar charts and their carefully handmade flash cards, and their statistics about learning vocabulary using apps, or even how they love to cook based on recipes in a foreign language.

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All of them use different methods, but they always make sure it's something that they personally enjoy. I realized that this is actually how I learn languages myself.

When I was learning Spanish, I was bored with the text in the textbook. I mean, who wants to read about Jose asking about the directions to the train station. Right? I wanted to read "Harry Potter" instead, because that was my favorite book as a child, and I have read it many times.

So I got the Spanish translation of "Harry Potter" and started reading, and sure enough, I didn't understand almost anything at the beginning, but I kept on reading because I loved the book, and by the end of the book, I was able to follow it almost without any problems.

And the same thing happened when I was learning German. I decided to watch "Friends," my favorite sitcom, in German, and again, at the

beginning it was all just gibberish.

I didn't know where one word finished and another one started, but I kept on watching every day because it's "Friends" I can watch it in any language. I love it so much. And after the second or third season, seriously, the dialogue started to make sense. I only realized this after meeting other polyglots.

We are no geniuses and we have no shortcut to learning languages. We simply found ways how to enjoy the process, how to turn language learning from a boring school subject into a pleasant activity which you don't mind doing every day.

If you don't like writing words down on paper, you can always type them in an app. If you don't like listening to boring textbook material, find interesting content on YouTube or in podcasts for any language. If you're a more introverted person and you can't imagine speaking to native speakers right away, you can apply the method of self-talk.

You can talk to yourself in the comfort of your room, describing your plans for the weekend, how your day has been, or even take a random picture from your phone and describe the picture to your imaginary friend. This is how polyglots learn languages, and the best news is, it's available to anyone who is willing to take the learning into their own hands.

So meeting other polyglots helped me realize that it is really crucial to find enjoyment in the process of learning languages, but also that joy in itself is not enough. If you want to achieve fluency in a foreign language, you'll also need to apply three more principles.

First of all, you'll need effective methods. If you try to memorize a list of words for a test tomorrow, the words will be stored in your short-term memory and you'll forget them after a few days. If you, however, want to

keep words long term, you need to revise them in the course of a few days repeatedly using the so-called space repetition. You can use apps which are based on this system such as Anki or Memrise, or you can write lists of word in a notebook using the Goldlist method, which is also very popular with many polyglots.

If you're not sure which methods are effective and what is available out there, just check out polyglots' YouTube channels and websites and get inspiration from them. If it works for them, it will most probably work for you too.

The third principle to follow is to create a system in your learning. We're all very busy and no one really has time to learn a language today. But we can create that time if we just plan a bit ahead. Can you wake up 15 minutes earlier than you normally do? That would be the perfect time to revise some vocabulary.

Can you listen to a podcast on your way to work while driving? Well, that would be great to get some listening experience.

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There are so many things we can do without even planning that extra time, such as listening to podcasts on our way to work or doing our household chores. The important thing is to create a plan in the learning "I will practice speaking every Tuesday and Thursday with a friend for 20 minutes. I will listen to a YouTube video while having breakfast."

If you create a system in your learning, you don't need to find that extra time, because it will become a part of your everyday life.

And finally, if you want to learn a language fluently, you need also a bit of patience. It's not possible to learn a language within two months, but it's

definitely possible to make a visible improvement in two months, if you learn in small chunks every day in a way that you enjoy. And there is nothing that motivates us more than our own success.

I vividly remember the moment when I understood the first joke in German when watching “Friends.” I was so happy and motivated that I just kept on watching that day two more episodes, and as I kept watching, I had more and more of those moments of understanding, these little victories, and step by step, I got to a level where I could use the language freely and fluently to express anything.

This is a wonderful feeling. I can’t get enough of that feeling, and that’s why I learn a language every two years. So this is the whole polyglot secret.

Find effective methods which you can use systematically over the period of some time in a way which you enjoy, and this is how polyglots learn languages within months, not years.

Now, some of you may be thinking, “That’s all very nice to enjoy language learning, but isn’t the real secret that you polyglots are just super talented and most of us aren’t?”

Well, there’s one thing I haven’t told you about Benny and Lucas.

Benny had 11 years of Irish Gaelic and five years of German at school. He couldn’t speak them at all when graduating. Up to the age of 21, he thought he didn’t have the language gene and he could not speak another language.

Then he started to look for his way of learning languages, which was speaking to native speakers and getting feedback from them, and today Benny can easily have a conversation in 10 languages.

Lucas tried to learn English at school for 10 years. He was one of the worst students in class. His friends even made fun of him and gave him a Russian textbook as a joke because they thought he would never learn that language, or any language.

And then Lucas started to experiment with methods, looking for his own way to learn, for example, by having Skype chat conversations with strangers. And after just 10 years, Lucas is able to speak 11 languages fluently. Does that sound like a miracle? Well, I see such miracles every single day.

As a language mentor, I help people learn languages by themselves, and I see this every day. People struggle with language learning for five, 10, even 20 years, and then they suddenly take their learning into their own hands, start using materials which they enjoy, more effective methods, or they start tracking their learning so that they can appreciate their own progress, and that's when suddenly they magically find the language talent that they were missing all their lives.

So if you've also tried to learn a language and you gave up, thinking it's too difficult or you don't have the language talent, give it another try. Maybe you're also just one enjoyable method away from learning that language fluently.

Maybe you're just one method away from becoming a polyglot.

Thank you.

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