



## Synopsis

Memory is the greatest challenge to learning a foreign language; there are just too many words and too many rules. For every new word we learn, we seem to forget two old ones, making fluency seem out of reach. Fluent Forever tackles this challenge head-on. Starting with pronunciation, you'll learn how to rewire your ears and turn foreign sounds into familiar sounds. And with the help of sophisticated spaced-repetition techniques, you'll be able to memorize hundreds of words a month in minutes every day. This is brain hacking at its most exciting, taking what we know about neuroscience and linguistics and using it to create the most efficient and enjoyable way to learn a foreign language in the spare minutes of your day.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This review comes after I have finished the book as well as explored the author's website. The strong points: 1. an emphasis on starting off with correct pronunciation (he says otherwise you end up learning two languages rather than one). He has very good videos on the mechanics of pronunciation available. He also sells trainers for specific languages. 2. The use of minimal pairs (two words like cat and cut that differ by only one sound). He has a way of using these to train you to actually hear the differences, which can be very tricky in some foreign languages. You have to hear the differences before you can produce them, but understanding how they are produced gives you a leg up. 3. The use of IPA (international phonetic alphabet) to represent the actual sounds. 4. The use of pictures to associate with a new word. This is how you get the concept

associated with the word you are acquiring. It is also how you avoid translation, which impedes thinking in the language.<sup>5</sup> The use of a spaced repetition system (ANKI) to integrate concept, sound, spelling and emotional connection with recall. Tricky issues like gender and grammatical problems are also addressed.<sup>6</sup> Frequency lists are discussed and often provided on his site.<sup>7</sup> Tremendous amount of info on webs resources to practice conversation (and his website also gives info on picking topics).<sup>8</sup> The book is so rich in content that I have probably omitted something significant. OK, nobody is perfect, so what's missing?<sup>1</sup> The pronunciation material should help you master individual words. But an equally, if not more, important part of conversation is called prosody and concerns the rhythm and stress applied to a string of words. Even without knowing a word of French and Italian, you could easily distinguish the difference in rhythm in a typical conversation. If you are singing, the prosody is implied by the music. In conversation, you have no such guide. You will pick this up in conversation (slowly) but can speed this up by learning poetry in the foreign language, because typical poetry emphasizes prosody. You almost can't avoid it.<sup>2</sup> It's not clear how you can take advantage of sequential activities. These are sometimes called Gouin series. A simple example is: I pick up the book; I open the book; I look at a page in the book; I close the book; I put the book down. We are really good at remembering series (it's how we go through most of our day). Sometimes this is called a schema. If we attach the new words to a schema, it's very reinforcing. Perhaps this can be achieved in an anki system?<sup>3</sup> The only truly negative is that much of the material talked about in the book is not yet available on the website. That's hard on the impatient among us!

There are a lot of books and web products lately that are designed to help anyone learn a language, even those of us who gave it a good try for several years in high school and barely came out of it knowing enough to ask how to find a toilet. I think the various methods are probably going to work best for different people, so I'm definitely not going to say anything like "This is the BEST method! Forget all that other stuff!" but I still say that this is an approach that's been carefully thought out, and planned, and the author clearly works extremely hard to make sure that he's explaining himself clearly. There are a few core principles to this approach that it's important to understand<sup>1</sup>. It puts a strong emphasis on sound and pronunciation<sup>2</sup>. It takes an immersion approach (where you attempt to go directly to thinking in the new language and developing associations in it, rather than trying to translate between two languages)<sup>3</sup>. It puts a lot of emphasis on the use of flash cards.<sup>4</sup> You build your own learning materials, rather than using a premade solution. (Except, possibly, for the part where you're learning the sounds). There's a lot of detail on how to do this, though, including

resources on the web that you can use to help you. Flash cards are the core of the approach he's advocating. I know there are some people who just HATE the experience of using flash cards, so if that's you this is probably not the way to go. The short version of my feeling about this is that if you want a lot of control over your learning process, you're really serious about learning a language, and you like the idea of using techniques that have a lot of scientific and research backing behind them, this book is VERY much worth it. If you know deep down that you're more the type of person who prefers to study with tools that someone else has built for you, you may have a really hard time with the emphasis on building your own flash cards. In that case, you might be better off looking at a copy from a library or borrowing it from a friend or something to get a deeper sense of what's involved before you decide if you want to buy a copy of the book and really commit to trying the system he's proposing. The philosophy here is sort of similar to the "Learn Python The Hard Way" book that's become popular in programming circles. It teaches in a way that can FEEL harder at first than other approaches, but the goal is to ultimately make total learning process a lot easier by not cutting corners and taking shortcuts that could hurt you in the long run. And to add on some more detail on those 4 important issues I brought up above...1. He advocates spending time working on learning sounds early because a) you have to learn pronunciation eventually, and you might as well not spend a few years practicing pronouncing something wrong before going back and trying to fix it, and b) knowing what a word sounds like makes it a lot more memorable. This is something I'd never thought about before I saw his explanations, but it does make a lot of sense to me. I looked it up, and it really is also consistent with how Mormon missionaries are taught (they're constantly sending people overseas, so they have to take the issue of language teaching very seriously).2. Once you're past the sound issues and learning the spelling rules, he advocates only using the language you're learning on the flashcards, including lots of pictures, and really trying to tie words and meanings to things in your life.3. For most people, this is actually a really good thing. He recommends Anki (a piece of software you can run on computers and mobile phones for free - the iPhone mobile app isn't free, but you can use the web interface from iPhone/iPad if you want) which implements what's often called an SRS or Spaced Repetition System. The basic idea is that you can learn most effectively by studying something again just as you were about to forget it. The program attempts to predict when you're going to forget something, so that it gradually increases the wait between practice sessions of the same word. If all of that sounds like gibberish, then I'll just say that it's a really efficient way to learn and study. There's a lot of research and science on his side here. (In fact, some of what he covers also shows up in another book "A Mind for Numbers" that just came out a couple of days ago, that focuses on similar "how to learn" research and tricks

with an emphasis on learning math and science. FYI there's also a "Learning How to Learn" MOOC available through Coursera based on that book.)<sup>4</sup>. This is the one that I think will be a sticking point for a lot of people. The author believes strongly that you should create your own flashcards. Flash cards aren't really intended to be a teaching tool so much as a review tool. So he views the flashcard creation process as when you teach yourself something, and then you have a connection to your flash cards that makes it easier for you to understand what they were meant to remind you of, and to learn the material on them. I think there'll end up being a lot of people who are hesitant to put in the time on creating the flashcards, though, and they'll just want to download premade decks. Anki is a great tool no matter what, but I think it really is very probable that people using pre-made decks for sentences and vocabulary will probably be undermining their progress somewhat. The biggest barrier that I see here is that you have to be willing to take a lot of control over your own learning process, because you're building the materials. This is initially difficult, because it's sort of overwhelming to think... okay, of all the things in the world, what do I want to learn to say? I think that there'll probably be some people who will end up doing better following a lesson plan from some other learning system (like a grammar book or Duolingo or whatever) and using this to strengthen and fill in their learning. Other products: Just FYI, the author held a Kickstarter a while ago to fund work on pronunciation trainers for various languages, and to build useful starter vocabulary lists as well. I'm under the impression that those are going to become available over the next few months for purchase, which could be a useful way to make the pronunciation stage of this plan easier. Edit: I actually have the French Pronunciation Trainer now, since I'd preordered it and it came out a day or two ago. In terms of basic function I can say it seems to work as promised. You get flash cards, the flash cards say words, you tell it whether you knew which word, etc. I can't offer anything about how well it works for teaching you something because 2 days of use is a heck of a long way from a fair test.

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