

If you could have any superpower in the world, what would it be? I'd choose the ability to fluently read, write and speak every single language in the world. But keeping all of them in my head might make my brain explode. So for now I'll just have to learn them one at a time, with the guidance of some great books.

The first is *Limitless*, which explores how learning anything requires a combination of mindset, motivation and methods. Indeed, the many practical tips in the section *Fluent Forever* – from spaced repetition to memory games, all of which helped its author learn German in just 14 weeks – the biggest is to have a reason to learn in the first place.

What language you choose and why could be out of your control, as it is for the many immigrants that end up speaking a local language fluently in order to serve customers. My experiences with Spanish since I moved from Cape Town to Barcelona have been interesting.

Initially, I just wanted to expand my mind, something Steven Pinker explores in *The Stuff of Thought* when he talks about how language can change the way we think. (For more on how language impacts the way we perceive ourselves and the world, *How Language Works* and *Through the Language Glass* are worth a read.) In the process, I became fascinated by Spanish phrasings like "I have fear" instead of "I am afraid" or "I have 37 years" instead of "I am 37 years old", which make emotions and age seem less permanent and all-encompassing.

But my motivation became more concrete as I planned my move to Spain and am now preparing for the language exam required for prospective citizens. Whether my goals beyond that are to express my deepest feelings or just to understand the dialogue in a fast-paced comedy at the theatre are unclear and will have to be more concrete if I want to progress. Indeed, as I learnt from studying the piano throughout school and university, without a reason to keep up your skills, they fade away.

Cultural input

Of course, keeping those skills active is another challenge. That's where the idea of immersion comes in. Even though *The Language Instinct* emphasises childhood as a critical period, it also makes the point that we're all born with an innate ability to learn at any age. The trick is to figure out how and when we do so, whether it's by reading books, listening to music, or something else. (Bonus tips: change the language setting on your smartphone and watch TV with subtitles in your new language so that you can continue practising in an easy way.)

For example, as much as I still refuse to watch dubbed movies, which means that my only option for the cinema is to go to

Tips of the tongue

There are a number of resources for anyone wanting to learn a new language





the obscure timeslots they have for screenings in English, foreign children's shows and news broadcasts are ideal tools because the vocabulary is simple for the former while the speech is slow and clear for the latter – two things that don't often go together when locals open their mouths. I've also been practising with native speakers, who are happy to text me in perfect Spanish if I reply in perfect English. (If you're interested to know why it's so much harder to learn a 'mixed' language like English compared to a 'purer' one like Spanish, *The Mother Tongue* is a wonderful read.)

And yet, as much as I want to master perfect grammar through our WhatsApp chats, this isn't necessary. The book *Txtng* makes a compelling case for why so-called 'text speak' isn't the death of language that many language teachers believe. Instead, it's opening up new ways for us to express ourselves. Similarly, the book *Because Internet* explains how electronic messaging isn't as constraining as we think. If anything, there's value as long as we're understood.

Connect through communication

This makes sense because the whole point of learning a language is (or at least should be) to communicate with others. According to *The First Word*, it's why we developed language in the first place. It's also why *Fluent in Three Months* advises you to speak from the start and get conversational before worrying about grammar and other rules. Fortunately, Barcelona is ideal for that purpose thanks to the ubiquitous presence of so-called 'language exchange events'. These are

social gatherings where different people from around the world come together, wear name tags indicating what languages they speak and/or would like to practise, and then proceed to learn from each other over a few too many drinks.

Initially, I found these to be hit or miss, never mind how well attended they are. Sometimes the last thing you want to do after a long day is to be in a loud venue, unsuccessfully trying to conjugate verbs when your brain is begging for a break. Also, if you're talking to someone who's also learning the language, you might end up reinforcing each other's mistakes or, if you're talking to a local, find yourself chatting with someone who'd rather not interrupt the flow of the conversation just to tell you the many ways you're wrong.

And yet, when I come back to the idea that language is about communication, I realise that there's still value in trying, no matter how 'imperfect' it might be. Yes, it's easy to get by with just English in a touristy city like Barcelona, which is why so many expats still cling to it even after being in the country for several years. But if you want to fully integrate and embrace the culture, you have to speak Spanish (also known as Castilian to distinguish it from other languages in Spain). As long as you're making an effort, that's the greatest superpower of all.

Text | Eugene Yiga Photography | Roman Samborskyi

For more information, go to eugeneyiga.com.