

My French-Learning Experiences - Language Proficiency

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How long will it take me to speak French fluently?

Unfortunately, the answer to this question is difficult for several reasons:

- There's no universal definition of fluency.
- Every person has a different language-learning potential.

It depends a great deal on where, when, and how one studies.

This article is an attempt to provide you with some information about these issues - the what, when, where, and how of fluency - so that you can determine your own "fluency potential."

What is Fluency? - Language Proficiency

There does not seem to be a universally agreed-upon definition of fluency in the general public. I have heard it described as anything from being able to order food to the language ability of a native speaker. The following table is **my version** of the closest thing there is to an official definition: what linguists and teachers tend to agree are the basic levels of language aptitude.

Novice

(Beginning)

A novice has extremely limited vocabulary and grammar, understands very little of the language when spoken normally, has difficulty making self understood by native speakers, and thus has serious problems in an immersion situation. A novice may be able to order food in a restaurant, buy a train ticket, and find lodging for the night, but only with great difficulty.

Survivor

(Intermediate)

A survivor converses using basic vocabulary (time, date, weather, family, clothes); uses the present, past, and future tenses more or less correctly; and is aware of difficult grammar topics (e.g., subjunctive, relative pronouns), but either uses them incorrectly or awkwardly rearranges sentences in order to avoid them. Still needs to tote a dictionary and/or phrase book around, but can survive in an immersion situation: order food, give and receive directions, take a taxi, etc.

Conversationalist

(Advanced)

A conversationalist has the ability to converse about fairly abstract ideas, state opinions, read newspapers, understand the language when spoken normally (on TV, radio, film, etc.) with slight-to-moderate difficulty. Still has some trouble with specialized vocabulary and complicated grammar, but can reorganize sentences in order to communicate and figure out the majority of new vocabulary within the context.

Debater

(Fluent)

A fluent speaker can participate in extended conversations, understand the language when spoken normally (on TV, radio, film, etc.), figure out meaning of words within context, debate, and use/understand complicated grammatical structures with little or no difficulty. Has good accent and understands dialects with slight-to-moderate difficulty.

Native speaker

(Mother tongue)

Someone who has spoken the language from at least the age of 5 (this age limit is subject to some

debate: I've heard theories that a native speaker can have started learning the language as late as any time up to puberty). In theory, understands essentially everything in the language: all vocabulary, complicated grammatical structures, cultural references, and dialects. Has a native (i.e., invisible, "normal" in his/her region) accent.

Am I Fluent? - Language Proficiency

In order to figure out whether you are fluent in a language, you need to analyze your own language abilities. According to the "official" definition, fluency refers to an ability to converse fluidly and easily. Do you feel comfortable speaking the language? Can you communicate easily with native speakers? Can you read newspapers, listen to the radio, and watch tv? Are you able to understand the gist of the language as it is spoken and written, even if you don't know every single word? Can you understand native speakers from different regions? The more fluent you are, the more of these questions you can answer "yes" to.

Context - A fluent speaker may have some gaps in vocabulary, but is capable of figuring out these terms in context. Likewise he/she can reword sentences in order to describe an object, explain an idea, or get a point across, even if he/she doesn't know the actual terms.

Thinking in the language - Pretty much everyone agrees that this is an important sign of fluency. Thinking in the language means that you understand the words without actually translating them into your native language. For example, non-fluent speakers would hear or read the sentence "J'habite à Paris" and would think to themselves in English.

A fluent speaker wouldn't need to go through that; he/she would intuitively understand "J'habite à Paris" as easily as "I live in Paris." The reverse is also true: when speaking or writing, a fluent speaker doesn't need to construct the sentence in his/her native language and then translate it into the target language - a fluent speaker thinks of what he/she wants to say in the language he/she wants to say it.

Dreams - Many people say that dreaming in the language is an essential indicator of fluency. I personally don't subscribe to this belief, because

- I've only dreamed in French once (13 years after I began to study it) and I've never dreamed in Spanish.
- I know a number of people who have dreamed in a language after only a year or two of study.
- I once had an entire dream in Polish, which I studied for a total of about 12 non-intensive, non-immersion hours.

However, I certainly agree that dreaming in the language of study is a good sign - it shows that the language is being incorporated into your subconscious

Where Should I Learn? - Language Proficiency

If you really want to become fluent the best thing you can do for yourself is live in an immersion situation. Being immersed in the language forces you to find a way to communicate, without resorting to your native language. This is also the best way to learn how to think in the language because in a real immersion situation, you simply don't have time to translate between the languages in your head. You'll learn to think "on the fly" and your language ability will increase exponentially.

Note that simply living in France won't mean that you will magically become fluent. You have to use the language: go shopping, take taxis, negotiate... in other words, talk to people! Only by speaking French can you improve your language ability, no matter where you live and study.

If you can't live in France or another francophone country, the next best way to study is in an immersion class, where the student is surrounded by the language but is not necessarily living in a region where the language is spoken. Because this is artificial, it is not as good as true immersion - the student can still use his native language, which is (ideally) not possible in a true immersion situation.

Another way to get practice is to join the Alliance française.

How Should I Study in Order to Become Fluent? - Language Proficiency

The best and fastest way to learn a language is by immersion.

If immersion is not feasible for you, here are some other options:

Classes - You can learn a lot by taking a class. After two years of classroom study, dedicated students are usually at the intermediate level, and four years should put you at advanced. However, at some point you will need to be immersed in the language in order to perfect your listening skills and pronunciation.

Study - Study every day. The effort you put into learning makes a huge difference. If you practice every day you'll learn and remember a lot more than someone who goes to class once a week but never practices outside of class. Like music, art, dance, and pretty much every other skill, practice makes perfect. Even after you becoming fluent, you will still need to practice - it's unfortunately very easy to lose your language, even if you were once fluent.

Self-study resources - The internet, software, books, and tapes/CDs are tools that can help you learn, but I don't believe that someone can learn a language using only these methods. You can certainly memorize the rules of grammar, verb conjugations, and vocabulary; learn the basics of reading and writing; and master other such "mechanical" functions. But it is essential to talk to people in order to work on your listening skills (different people have different accents and tempos) and speaking skills (to practice your pronunciation and make sure that they can understand you).

When Will I Be Fluent? - Language Proficiency

Language is like any other skill or aptitude: some people are proficient in languages, while others are better at math, science, or music. Everyone has the potential to learn, but the fact is that some people are just more capable of learning language than others.

Generally speaking, the younger you are when you are introduced to the language, the better. Babies are born with an unlimited capacity for learning language, and as they grow up, their minds gradually lose the capability to hear and produce sounds in the languages that they are not exposed to. The earlier a new language is introduced to them, the better their odds of eventually being fluent and having good accents. This does not mean that an adult cannot learn a new language; simply that an adult will have to work harder at it, and it is likely that s/he will never develop a really good accent.

How much and where you study are the factors that you have the most control over, so if you really want to be fluent, you'll need to focus on these. If you live in France, Québec, or another francophone region for a year, you will certainly be advanced, and possibly even fluent towards

the end of that year. If you're not living in a francophone region and not taking an immersion class, the amount of time it will take you is almost impossible to estimate, as it depends on the factors in the "How" section. I would say that someone taking daily classes and studying every day would need 6-8 years to become fluent. Any variations in how many classes and how often/much you study will affect how quickly you become fluent.