

## Q. How Long Does It Take to Learn a Language?

by Jeff Gregory

A. This question is sort of like asking, “How long will it take me to learn to play the guitar?” Everything depends on you - how much time you’re willing to put in practicing. Likewise, with language acquisition, how fast you learn a new language depends on how much exposure you have to the target language and how hard you’re willing to work to learn the language.

I will illustrate this by giving a couple of examples from my own experience. In 1995 I had the opportunity to go to Laos (on the western border of Viet Nam) with one of my Laotian refugee friends and accompany him as he visited his family on the border of Thailand and Laos, next to the famous Mekong River.



Mekong River

I carried my little Laotian grammar book with me and would study it as I traveled around Laos. I also carried a little notebook and wrote down Laotian words all during the day. I was picking up the language very rapidly because I was immersed in the cultural-linguistic environment. I think that in that

situation I could have become reasonably fluent in three months. fluent in three months.

But to give you a view from another angle, back in the late 80’s I decided to re-learn the Spanish I had forgotten from my high school and college courses. So I took several college courses at a local university, and re-learned enough Spanish so that I was able to get a job with the Dallas Public Schools as a bilingual elementary school teacher.

This is 2008, of course, and I am still in the process of slowly improving my ability to communicate in Spanish. The problem is I don’t practice it enough; I don’t expose myself enough to the language. This is a common problem – whether a person is learning English or Spanish or French. A person has to put themselves in a situation where they are forced to use the language.

So, this is a long answer to the original question. But two keys, as I see it that determine the rate of language acquisition are:

- 1) ***the degree of language immersion*** a person is exposed to
- 2) ***how hard a person works.***

One of the advantages of our language learning software here in the World Languages Lab is that it ***replicates an immersion experience.*** When you put on the head phones you can hear, read, write, and speak your target language. **The rest is up to you!**

