

Reactivating Forgotten Languages: How to Catch Up

By Tim Ferriss

How can you possibly maintain fluency in two foreign languages -- let alone five or six -- if the opportunities to use them are months or years apart?

Few topics provoke more anxiety and depression in independent language learners than the prospect of irretrievably losing a hard-learned new language. After you return to your English-dominated homeland, how do you maintain your new-found skills, which might seem to have an expiration date? Having juggled close to a dozen languages and suffered the interference that goes with it, my answer now is simple: *you don't*.

It is easier, and much more time-efficient, to catch up versus keep up.

Why struggle to maintain a foreign tongue in the US, for example, when you most often gain nothing more than bad habits? If you acquire the language in a native environment and attain an intermediate or advanced level of fluency, you can *reactivate* your language skills in four weeks or less when approached methodically. Would you rather spend four hours per week on your new language, only to see it get sick and bloated with a distinctly foreign-sounding twang, or spend two hours per day for 1-3 weeks and be right back at your fluency level from years prior?

Later this week, I will depart for Japan, where I will attend a traditional Japanese wedding and then live with my former host family for a month. The problem? I haven't spoken Japanese in more than seven years.

I began reactivation just over a week ago and can already hold a decent conversation with the Japanese coffee store manager down the street. This is not a testament to my ability, but to the efficacy of a process that begins with massive passive exposure and avoids time-consuming review from square one:

- 1. Days 1-7:** Japanese films with English subtitles for at least two hours each evening for one week.
- 2. Days 3+:** 10-20 pages of dialogue-rich *manga* (Japanese comics that can be ordered in your target-language from comic stores in your target country) for 30 minutes each morning and prior to bed.
- 3. On the plane:** Read a phrasebook in its entirety for active recall practice of common phrases (45 minutes of study alternated with 15 minutes of rest – this takes advantage of what is called the "primacy and recency effect").
- 4. Upon arrival:** Continue with *manga* and grammar reference checks as needed, using an electronic dictionary to reactivate vocabulary from conversation that is familiar but not understood.

5. Weeks 2-3: Thirty to sixty Vis-Ed flashcards daily. This seems like a lot, but most will have been covered in steps 1-3 – using *active recall* (English to Japanese). Vis-Ed (www.vis-ed.com) compiles its sets of flashcards from word frequency lists and includes sample phrases for usage. I begin flashcards after three or four days in-country.

The sooner you decide to *reactivate* languages when needed, instead of maintaining them for an unspecified time in the future, the more leisure time you will have and the less diluted your language abilities will be when you need them.

Don't fear losing languages if you've attained real fluency. They're just in temporary storage with the covers pulled over them.