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INTRODUCTION

Ben: Hello there IELTS students. In this tutorial, I'm going to be speaking with Benny Lewis from *Fluent in Three Months* and yes, you did hear that right. He has been learning languages when he started and getting to fluency within three months. So, thank you for joining us today, Benny. Could you tell us how many languages you've learned in total?

MEET BENNY FROM FLUENT IN 3 MONTHS

Benny: Yes. Thanks so much for having me. So, I have been learning languages now for about 17 years. Before this, I could only speak my mother tongue of English and I did very poorly in

languages in school. So, this has been an entirely adult experience for me to get into languages and I've dabbled in quite a lot.

It's whenever you do multiple languages. It's very hard to give a precise answer of how many you speak because it depends on where the other person's cut-off point for speaking a language is, but on the European Common Framework, for me I understand fluency as the B2 level. I feel like you're truly able to have social equivalency in the language.

You're able to socialize with your friends to a level of ease and for that, I'd say I have a good six or seven languages at that level or higher and then I've got a bunch of others that are at lower levels. If I'm with a patient speaker then I can have decent levels of conversation.

Ben: Got you. Yes, having a patient speaker is so important especially if you're nervous. So, yes. I'm going to go a bit off topic here, but the languages that were easiest for you would you say that those were the kind of like closest to English and then the most difficult ones were probably the furthest away maybe like Chinese or Russian?

Benny: Absolutely not.

Ben: No? Oh.

Benny: Definitely not. The hardest language that I ever learned in my life was Spanish and I've learned some Hungarian. I've learned some Quichuan, that's the Inca language. I've learned Mandarin. I've learned Japanese. I've learned plenty of other languages. The hardest one was Spanish and it's got absolutely nothing to do with conjugations or grammar or whatever. It's basically because it was the first language that I learned.

I had a very bad approach at first and I lacked confidence and I did not speak the language very much. I was mostly studying it. So, it's the language that I learned the slowest and ultimately, I really don't think language- the distance between languages matters that much. If you really care about it, if you're passionate about the language. That's what's going to make it easier.

I'm always reminded of this time I met a Spaniard-- I met this Spaniard who had been learning both French and Japanese and he told me that he found Japanese to be easier than French and at first, I found that confusing because French and Spanish are so much more similar, but he explained that he found French boring and he just didn't care about French.

There's nothing to say about French in itself. It's just his personal experience was he was forced to learn French in school whereas he was passionate about anime and manga and he found Japanese girls to be cute and he had all these other really interesting external motivations that made Japanese a more fascinating language. That made it easier.

FIND YOUR PASSION IN THE LANGUAGE YOU'RE LEARNING

And that for me is what matters most is your passion for the language. You can list all the differences between language families and such. That doesn't really matter because most people are only going to learn like a handful of maybe two or three or just the one language they care about. So, ultimately who cares if it's closer or further linguistically from other languages?

As far as I'm concerned, that doesn't matter. That's a question for theoretical linguists to ponder over. It just does not matter for the individual language learner. You care about one language. That's the easiest language for you because you're going to have the passion for it.

Ben: Yes, yes, yes. I mean my first language was also Spanish, but I don't know. From my personal experience, I found that once I got the formulas sorted for converting or kind of like the shortcuts, I found that that helped me a lot and I know that if I was doing another language, it might not be as easy especially if I got the figures, but with the actual passion, I think the biggest factor for me learning Spanish was exactly like you said.

It's sort of like the external factor is the passion because you cannot have a greater passion than the threat of failing your university course or degree. Just having that pressure kind of equated for me into the passion because for me later as I got deeper into the language, I found that it worked, but what I wanted to mention though was a really interesting point you said. You made progress when you stopped studying the language and practically jumped in and used it. Would that be the correct way to finish?

Benny: Yes, absolutely because-- I tried a lot of things when I got into Spanish. I tried reading *El Señor de los Anillos* (*The Lord of the Rings*) cover to cover and I only made it to page 2. It took me two weeks to get there. That didn't help. I tried studying the dictionary. That was obviously a terrible idea. I tried a group class where the teacher was kind of talking at everybody and I was the worst person in the class whereas now I run a successful business on learning languages.

YOUR APPROACH IS IMPORTANT

So, up until that point, I thought I was just a naturally bad language learner, but that's not what it was. It was the approach that I was taking and everything changed dramatically overnight once I took a very different approach of speaking the language from day one making that my new

project. I'm going to speak it every day. I'm going to make mistakes and studying is secondary. Studying was only there to support the speaking focus that I would have during my project.

Ben: This is going to be absolutely gold. This is going to be invaluable because on the IELTS Podcast we've got thousands and thousands and thousands of Chinese listeners and I know that they struggle with making-- I think it's this concept in Asia about losing face, about not committing errors and I totally agree with you, Benny.

THERE ARE TWO TYPES OF LEARNERS

From my experience, there are kind of two types of learners. The perfectionists. They'll study the grammar and they're so scared of making mistakes and then the other school which kind of don't mind making mistakes because they are actually speaking the language. So, in your case once you started like almost allowing yourself to make mistakes and speaking, that's when you got traction. Is that right?

Benny: Yes, that's when everything really changed. It's not a case of where magically it became easy. I don't think-- like we're always striving to find the easiest way to learn a language, but I don't think that's necessarily the best use of energy. It was still a struggle and if anything the fact that I embraced making mistakes meant that I would sound like Tarzan or a caveman when I was

speaking and this can be a little bit anxiety-inducing because you're hyper aware of the fact that you do not sound extremely intelligent as you speak, but this is just a natural part of the process.

It's a part of the process that all children go through whenever they learn a language and I know it can cause a lot of anxiety, but ultimately, in doing this over the span of 17 years with different languages, it's never-- the anxiety source has always, always been internal, never external. There has never been people who have truly judged me and put me down for making those mistakes.

So, for instance to speak to all of your Asian listeners, I have learned Asian languages. I've learned the likes of Mandarin and when I was learning Mandarin, I would speak it really, really poorly. I would mess up my tones. I would forget words. I would use incorrect words all the time, but you know what? They would patiently listen and they would try to guess what I'm saying and they would usually get the gist and the conversation would progress.

And I put this to those Asian listeners. If you met a white guy like me who was trying to learn Mandarin and he was not speaking it very well, would you say you're such an idiot? How dare you? You're such a moron. Why are you getting your tones wrong? Of course not. You would be patient with them. You would be helpful to them because you can see that they're struggling and this happens both ways.

When people see that you are putting the effort in to learning their mother tongue, they're going to be patient with you and they're going to understand mistakes are a natural part of this process. So, embracing that has meant that I've got my momentum. It doesn't mean I'm going to speak with mistakes forever, but it means that I'm able to get that initial momentum to get my progress skyrocketed.

Ben: Absolutely, yes. That is great advice there and getting momentum I just want to emphasize this because this is like when you're learning a language, momentum is so crucial as we've said in previous episodes. Like repetition is the mother of all learning, but getting started and getting traction also will take you a very, very, very long way. So, Benny, before-- I just want to rewind a few minutes back. You said that it wasn't until you started speaking that you really got some traction with the language. How did you sort of like get speaking? It sounds kind of silly, but what steps did you take?

Benny: Well, at the time I was living in Spain, but since then I've discovered you don't have to be living in the country. It's just genuine face-to-face opportunities to speak the language. Nowadays, what I tend to do is book myself calls on Zoom with native speakers and it can be very affordable if you're making sure you're finding speakers who don't live in expensive parts of the world. And just by forcing myself to have that appointment with somebody I have to speak.

And I have a very simple rule. In these Zoom lessons that I have I'm not allowed to use English; my mother tongue. I have to use their language the entire time. And if you have that simple rule like there's so many things to think about in language learning. If you have that one simple rule you're going to try to say stuff. Obviously, you may want to say something very complex, but you're going to force yourself to work around the problem.

And one of the biggest light bulb moments that went off for me while I was learning Spanish was I was still feeling very shy and not necessarily ready to use the language and then the strangest thing happened. I bought an electric toothbrush and it broke and I was very angry because I was very poor at the time. I couldn't really afford to buy a new one. So, I stormed into the supermarket where I bought it and I was ready to get angry and I'll ask for a refund, but I realized as I approached the clerk that I didn't know how to say toothbrush in Spanish. I didn't know how to say refund. I didn't even know how to say broken.

And I was presented with this situation and yet, I still wanted to achieve a goal and I think this made the light bulb moment for me there was that to be able to communicate in a language, I did not need to do it perfectly. I didn't need to have this academic understanding of the language. I just needed to be able to convey what I wanted to say. So, I used the choppy words that I kind of knew. I said tooth machine bad. Money round trip and essentially that's what I said in Spanish.

And it made very little sense. It was very illogical, but the context and the situation meant that they understood exactly what I meant and I got my money back and to this day, that will always emphasize to me if I was able to get my money back without knowing the words for refund and broken then maybe there's something to using a language before you're theoretically ready.

Ben: Genius. Yes, absolutely. I very much agree with you there. Can you just tell us about your pain you had when you were starting out with Spanish? It must have been quite frustrating for you and I'm just mentioning this because I want the listeners to know like Benny here is a polyglot. B2 level fluent in over how many languages did you say? 12 was it?

Benny: I've definitely dabbled in dozens of languages, but I would say six languages at the B2 or higher and another six maybe at A2 or B1.

Ben: Okay. So, yes. I mean six languages at B2 level-- at fluent level. So, I want you to listen just to like you're not alone here when you're learning English. That this guy six languages at a fluent level. I just want all of us just to listen to this. How did you start off with Spanish? How was it? How did it feel like when you were not getting or not making that much progress?

Benny: Yes, because as a beginner you can't really feel the progress when you compare yourself to a native speaker and I think we get into language learning we tend to have the end goal in our mind too much. We tend to be thinking I want to be able to have philosophical debates in the

language or I want to be able to work as an electronic engineer in the language, whatever it might be and that can be very demotivating because even after you've put a lot of very serious effort into the language a month or two later, you are very far from achieving those goals.

So, it was very frustrating for me because I was at the time living in Spain and I wanted to have Spanish friends. I wanted to experience Spanish culture, but it required me to accept the frustrations in this process, accept that the person might speak back to me and I hear nothing but noise. I just hear gobbledygook or incomprehensible sounds and I had to accept that.

Instead of deciding I don't speak Spanish. I can't understand this language until I understand absolutely everything they say back to me. I had to embrace imperfection. Like you said before, perfectionism is one of the biggest enemies of language learners. When you embrace imperfection then it means that with something like I just said with comprehension, I would hear somebody say all of these words back to me and I wouldn't try to understand the entire sentence. I would try to see which words do I understand and what can I extrapolate from that?

So, if somebody replied to me or they came up to me and they said blah blah blah blah dinner blah blah blah tomorrow then the majority of that sentence was incomprehensible to me, but I can extrapolate that maybe it's likely they're inviting me to dinner tomorrow. I might be

wrong, but you know what? If I'm wrong, the earth won't open up and swallow me whole and I won't die.

You really have to stop-- you have to play down the drama of the situation. It's okay to be wrong and it's great to say oh, I'm a polyglot. I speak these languages, but ultimately I have been wrong thousands and thousands and thousands of times over these years and that's okay. The world hasn't ended. I've just had the opportunity to learn from that experience and maybe be slightly less wrong the next day. And that is one of the most important lessons you have to take is you're not trying to be perfect. You're just trying to be slightly less wrong each day.

Ben: Absolutely fantastic advice there. Yes and I wonder if-- have you ever turned up at somebody's house for dinner and it was the totally wrong-- you got the totally wrong end of the stick?

Benny: Yes. So, for example when I was learning German and I was in Germany and I was having a conversation with a female friend of mine. I wanted to say to her-- because I'm on YouTube. I make lots of videos. I wanted to say to her that I made a video. I look really cool. You want to come into my house to see it? And I didn't realize that the mistakes I made I actually said I'm horny and I want you to-- and I said apparently a very graphic sexual thing and

it was-- so like this is one of the most embarrassing situations you could imagine and someone might imagine they'd be petrified.

It's one of the reasons you should never try to speak when you're not ready, but you know what? She knew from the context. She knew I wasn't flirting with her. She knew I was obviously not trying to say these things and she laughed and she said you really don't want to say that because that means this and she explained it to me and it became a funny story.

YOU'LL HAVE CONFUSING MOMENTS AND THAT'S FINE

So, yes. You will have confusing moments and that's fine. It's a part of the process and you will survive them and I'm glad that even though I made those mistakes and I said this ridiculous thing to her, I'm still glad that I had that experience because I will remember for the rest of my life much, much better from that exchange than I ever would if I had just seen the words in a book somewhere.

Ben: That is so true. I've got a few examples from learning Spanish especially playing football when I wanted to say that the ball didn't touch me, but I ended up shouting across the pitch like I don't touch myself to everybody and just shouting that across and it's from-- yes like you, for the

rest of my life and I now know very, very clearly the difference in Spanish of those two sentences and what to say and what not to say.

So, Benny, I wanted to ask you about speaking and improving confidence. Maybe even if you've got any advice with regards to exam settings, maybe not, but speaking in general. I'd love to hear your advice on that especially when it comes to building confidence.

Benny: Yes. So, I've taken my fair share of language exams. Like I said, I follow the European Common Framework, so I've taken a C2 exam that I was able to pass in Spanish and I've taken a bunch of B2 exams as well and ultimately, the great thing about the spoken part in those exams is that is the one part that you can absolutely make it through it by relying more on the kind of things I'm talking about where communication is the goal because in the spoken sections if you mis-conjugate a few verbs, yes maybe they might mark that down a little bit, but the goal is actually are you able to maintain this conversation?

So, you just need a lot of practice for that and I've always done very well in the oral parts of these exams even though I know for a fact that my spoken level was not perfect. I was making a few mistakes. My pronunciation maybe was a little off, but that's okay because I was able to have a complex discussion with the oral examiner.

When it comes to everything else, my philosophy in language learning differs from some people in that I genuinely try to take a step back from the likes of grammar and academic approaches to a language as a beginner. It doesn't mean I say burn your grammar books. I'm definitely not like that, but I do believe that as a beginner if you imagine how children learn a language, you need to learn similar to them. It needs to be a part of your social existence and that means that you need to interact with human beings in the language and make mistakes and everything, but then as an intermediate level learner this is when I do embrace the more traditional learning approaches and I will open a big heavy grammar book and study it. And I've been able to pass exams well thanks to that because I've switched the order around a bit.

And when I took German in school, we did it the opposite way. We had a lot of grammar and a lot of like less interesting, less relevant things to how I would see the language and the language was boring for me. Like I said, I've had hilarious and funny moments in German as an adult, but it's because I focused on speaking first and when you do that, you get enough momentum that then the grammar has a useful place in your life.

So, I found grammar in German to be very boring in school, but when I returned to it I was about 25 years old and I focused on speaking first. Then when I opened the grammar book and I would read an explanation that I previously found boring, I would be on the edge of my seat and I'd be

reading it and I think so that's why they say it that way and it would just be like a giant light bulb went off in my head because I would have the context. I'd have so much momentum in the language that I'd have something to attach all of these things to.

And because I've been able to have this emotional attachment to make the grammar more relevant, it is tied into my exams and obviously you can't be like an adventurous world traveler mentality when it comes to passing an exam, but you can take that initial passion and it will help you to be more studious at the right time and that's how I've ultimately been able to do well in my exams. I would never pass a grammar exam in the first months, but I would pass a grammar exam after I've had experience speaking the language to then care to study about the grammar.

Ben: Interesting. How can you develop a passion within a language? Because you've done this well over 12 times now I guess. So, do you have a formula for this?

Benny: I mean it has to be relevant to you. So, when I took German in school, it wasn't relevant. I was just seeing a list of rules and as far as I was concerned anyone who-- like German speakers were all robots who thought about the dative case all day long or something and it didn't feel like a very human thing for me, but what changed was I would interact face to face with people and this year especially, I'm interacting every single day face to face via Zoom calls and I have conversations with these people about things.

So, like these days for instance with French, I'm really trying to get a very solid mastery C2 level in my French. So, I'm watching a lot of stand-up comedy and I'm discussing that with my French teacher.

Ben: Wow!

Benny: It's really pushing me and we're having fascinating discussions about things that I didn't know before about cultural references from the '80s in France and I'm learning so much about the language as well as the culture and the culture for me changes the vast majority of your experience in the language.

Like if you're learning something like Japanese, embracing manga and anime and so on is going to change your experience. When I was learning Spanish, taking some dance lessons with a local it changed my experience there and I try to do something that is relevant for that country if I'm able to visit it and if it's a time like now where I can't travel, then I try to expose myself online. I try to watch YouTube videos or I try to-- if you have a Spotify subscription you can change it to show you the top 10 or top 20 or whatever songs in that country. So, I try to listen to the music in the language and I research the lyrics and I see if I can sing along to it.

And these are the kind of things that make the language a real human thing in your mind and I've even done things like the game Among Us has become very popular lately. I started playing that

in Spanish just to give myself this extra little twist. I'll play online games in the language and these human activities are how your passion can really be ignited in the language and you can do that either with the country and in person when it's safe to do so or you can do it through so much online exposure; videos, listening to live streamed radio from the country which you can do for free, music. There's a million ways you can get that exposure and then of course, as often as possible that you are interacting with a real native speaker via Zoom or Skype call.

Ben: Absolutely fantastic advice there. Excellent and now just one or two final questions. The first one I think you've pretty much answered it, but it would be like a quick guide. Do you have some quick instructions for fluency-- to gaining fluency in a second language?

Benny: I would have to say that there are no instructions I can give for beginner to fluency, but to have a dynamic approach. So, the way I get to fluency is very different to the way I start a language. So, there's no one quick solution, but I would say definitely see what is your biggest problem right now and try to work on solving that. And if you're not confident, then your biggest problem is you need to get exposure speaking to people and then you'll get to fluency later on.

Maybe you've got that confidence speaking already, but you're making a lot of mistakes then you dynamically change your approach to focus on improving your grammar and such, but in general I would also say my other big thing is to make many mistakes. I turn mistakes on their head. For

a lot of people mistakes are such a terrible thing. They're the sign that you're failing. You'll get a big red x on your exam. And I turn that around. I actually have a goal to make at least 200 mistakes a day when I'm actively learning a language and this is what I would highly recommend other people do.

Mistakes are your friend. There are your opportunities to learn and they show you're actively using the language. If you wait until you would never make mistakes, you will never ever speak the language. You have to let go of perfectionism and embrace mistakes. Those would be my top tips.

Ben: That is fantastic advice there, Benny and I guess all of this advice can be found in your language guides that you're publishing now. Is that right?

Benny: Oh, yes. I got lots of things online. The simplest is if people go to fluentin3months.com I have a free speak in a week course that I give on my email list and I also have a YouTube channel and Instagram channels that I post language learning tips on and I have actually my own podcast. So, people like hearing my encouraging tips then just do a search for the language hacking podcast and like you mentioned, I also have language hacking books that are for learning specific languages, but while people are in podcast mode just check out my podcast or like I said, the vast majority of all my tips are for free on my blog and my emails.



Ben: Beautiful. All right. Well, thank you very much, Benny. It's been an absolutely fantastic interview.

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