
Rapid Language Learning

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A geek is faced with a task of quickly learning French to pass a standardized test. He manages to accomplish it in 10 months, largely in his spare time, and using easily-accessible technology together with cheap or free resources.

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Introduction

I stretch the truth a little when I say that I managed to learn French in just 10 months, but this is an election year, so I don't feel quite as bad about exaggerating in order to put my achievements in a more appealing light. Of course, it takes years of effort and constant practice to learn a foreign language—I do not think even Mensa™ members can claim to be able to learn an unknown language in just one year, and those of them who can, indeed, accomplish such a feat are kept deep underground for brain experiments anyway.

No, what I'm talking about here is learning enough French to pass a standardized test, more specifically *TEF*, or *Test d'Evaluation de Français* [<http://www.fda.ccip.fr/default.asp?metaid=4>]. The reasons why I needed to pass this test are quite simple—I am currently in the process of immigrating to Canada, and the knowledge of both of their official languages gives the applicant a significant boost on the immigration score. I already knew enough English for it not to be a problem, but I had only studied French for one semester in High School, more than 12 years ago, and could only

remember small bits and pieces of what I had learned, mostly the general pronunciation rules, and even some of those incorrectly.

So, realizing that knowing enough French to get decent scores on TEF could have had life-altering effects in my case, I have decided to set out on a quest to learn as much French as I could in one year. I started in August, 2003, and I have taken my exam in May of 2004, getting enough points to qualify as "advanced" in most areas [<http://mricon.com/94669.html>]. This little write-up is a description of my experiences and methods I have used—perhaps they will be useful to someone else with a similar goal in mind.

My background

I should give a fair warning: I believe I have certain predispositions for rapidly learning a foreign language. English is already my second—I have grown up speaking Russian, and I went to a specialized English school where my poor brain was subjected to inhumane atrocities such as having to learn *Oh where, oh where did my puppy go?* and then perform it in public.

I have been learning English ever since I was about 8 years old, though with varying success—I used to be a very mediocre student most of my childhood, but when I turned about 15 there was enough inflow of English media into then-dissolving USSR to put me at the top of my class by the time I graduated High School. I believe it was the immersion into the English-speaking environment that helped me most, next to the realization that knowing how to speak a foreign language could be very advantageous in my future life.

I also have a very good memory. Though far from being photographic, it is nonetheless "pretty damn good." When I was young, I used to drive my older brother mad by reciting the poems back to him after only having heard them repeated a few times—and I'm talking things like Mayakovski's *An Ode to the Soviet Passport*, not some "on a boat with a goat" stuff. What took my brother a lot of effort to learn came nearly naturally to me, which is actually a rather dangerous situation when your brother is 7 years your elder. But even though learning a foreign language requires a lot of memorization, I believe that even people with non-stellar abilities when it comes to remembering foreign words can fare well when using certain memorization methods.

Finally, I am a programmer by day, and in the past 10 years I have had to learn about 15 different programming languages, both simple and complex, so it is probably fair to say that I have developed a set of skills that lets me assemble and disassemble the logical structure of a language with relative ease, be it used to communicate between humans, or to give instructions to a machine.

And, of course, it is useful to remember that I have had a very strong motivation to learn how to read and speak French, since it was a very important part of my Canadian Immigration plan. In your study of a foreign language the motivation will probably be the first requirement. If you have no motivation or desire to learn how to speak something other than your native tongue, you will probably not succeed. Keeping in mind the outcome of the recent presidential elections, who knows—maybe immigrating to Canada or some other francophone country may suddenly be on your radar as well. :)

Question of time

I have a day job. All of what I have achieved in one year was done mostly on nights and weekends, plus during my 3-week trip to visit my parents in Russia, when I spent many evenings reading a book and putting plenty of thumb-grease on my French dictionary. Furthermore, I spent a lot of time slacking during my first half year, which I believe was actually beneficial. What I am trying to say—it is not necessary to cancel your cable and to break up with your girlfriend if you want to rapidly learn a language. In fact, varying activities will help greatly in your memorization, so allow for some R&R. You will certainly dedicate plenty of effort to this task, but if at any time you start feeling like you are burning out, it's time to give it a little slack and go do something else. After all, forgetting what you have learned is one of the required steps in learning, though more on that at a later point.

Other languages

I will talk about how I learned French after already knowing English. In fact, knowing English was a very important asset in this endeavor, since these two languages are similar enough to allow me to take a lot the things I have previously had to learn about English and to re-apply them to French with mostly slight modifications. However, I believe my experience might be equally useful to someone who is learning Spanish, Portuguese, or other Romance language, as they are very similar to French with comparatively small differences in the grammatic and syntactic structure. Learning non-Romance languages will probably require a different approach, but you may still find this document useful.

And above all, this is not a textbook: this is a small treatise on methods. This document alone will not teach you French in one year, but it will hopefully give you a few pointers on how to achieve that goal using the things I have found useful for myself.

The beginning

I believe I managed to pick one of the best ways to learn a language from the very beginning, though this was largely a fluke of my own over-confidence. Being a little Harry Potter crazy, I ordered the French version of the third book from amazon.fr [<http://amazon.fr/exec/obidos/ASIN/2070528189>], thinking that I would be able to quickly learn the basics of the language by using the English original as a reference.

That didn't work quite as I had hoped. The reason why this didn't work was largely because reading free text requires some basic knowledge of the language's grammatical and syntactic structure in order to be able to proceed down that path, if only because a lot of dictionaries do not provide references for conjugated verbs. The situation is aggravated by the fact that some of the more common French verbs have more shapes than your standard Rorschach test, some having nothing to do with its form in the infinitive. Particular offenders are *être* and *avoir*, who, to give an example, change to *fut* and *eut* respectively in *Passé Simple*, the verbal tense you are particularly likely to meet in the literary form of written French.

So, realizing that I was going nowhere fast, I have put aside my copy of *Le Prisonnier d'Azkaban*, and picked up *Schaum's Outline of French Grammar* [<http://amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0070138877>], which I have found indispensable in my studies of French. Having covered the first few chapters, which dealt with the absolute basics of the language, such as pronouns, adjectives, and the more common cases of verbal conjugation—*Passé Composé*, *Passé Simple*, *Imparfait*, *Futur Indicatif*, and *Le Conditional*—I was able to return to meticulously going through the chapters of the book, this time with far more success.

Now, when I say that I went through *Schaum's*, I must mention that I actually only skimmed the explanations, without doing any of the exercises. At that point I was really only interested in knowing how to decipher the language, while most study guides will concentrate immediately on both how to consume, and on how to produce, which is a task far more complicated than simple reading. I don't think it's a very helpful strategy, as the complexities will drive you completely insane and you will quickly become frustrated with how many things you have to learn in order to be able to correctly synthesize a simple sentence in a foreign language. I suggest you do like me and first learn how to understand written language, leaving the frustrating parts for later. At least that's what worked for me—I was able to read the French translation of *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* after only 4 months of efforts [<http://mricon.com/58704.html>], and after that, during my 3-week vacation visiting my parents in Russia, I was able to swallow all 1400 pages of *Le Comte de Monte-Cristo*, dedicating to this monumental task the fabled long Russian winter evenings (1 [<http://mricon.com/63960.html>]-2 [<http://mricon.com/68830.html>]).

Learning how to read

So, the first steps you will need to accomplish when learning how to read French is to familiarize yourself with the very basics of the French grammatic structure. Don't bother memorizing which ending goes with which verbal tense—your goal is to build your language recognition skills and your vocabulary. Pick a book that you already know well, preferably a kids' book written in a language that isn't too complex, and have the English version by your side. I have picked Harry Potter, and I believe that it is an excellent choice for anyone. It's fun to read, and you have probably read it anyway—no need to pretend that you haven't. Don't pick an advanced text. It is important to feel like you're making progress, and a complicated text will just frustrate you. Trust me, even with a kids' book you will already have

enough difficulties, so no need to complicate things by trying to tackle *Les Misérables* from the get-go. Above all, stay away from texts you will find on the Internets, unless it's a transcript of a valid literary work. Most Internet-posting French people can't spell even if their life depended on it, and at this point it is very important for you to remember the word shapes visually: it won't do you any good if you remember them wrongly.

Your initial progress will be very slow, and the following two online resources will come in very handy: Google language tools [http://www.google.com/language_tools], and wordreference.com [<http://www.wordreference.com/>] French dictionary (though they have stopped providing transcriptions since I last actively used them, which is a pity). While all automatic computer translations suck if you need to translate genuine foreign text into something resembling sane English, this flaw will actually work to your advantage when learning to read French (unless Google ends up being just plain wrong [<http://mricon.com/75689.html>]). Whenever you come across a sentence of which you are unable to make heads or tails, typing it in and getting a Googlified translation will give you a very crude word-for-word representation of the phrase in English. With that, you should be able to figure out what each word in the original sentence does and how they all align together in order to form the phrase in question, which in turn trains your brain to learn and recognize this structure in the future. You can also use wordreference.com French dictionary to look up words, if only because they will actually try to guess what it is that you were trying to look up, and they even have most weird conjugation forms pointing back to the verbs in their infinitive. This is useful for such verbal freaks like *su* and *pu*, whose relationship to *savoir* and *pouvoir* is not immediately obvious. Do not hover too long over phrases you cannot grok, though. Try your best and then move along.

I will stress again that it is not important at this point to remember which tense the verbs are actually in. If the text you are reading in French is familiar to you, it is enough to know that *pu*, *peux*, *pouvait*, *pourrait*, *puisse*, etc are all the same word which means "to be able to," and your brain will manage to figure out the rest relying mostly on your existing memory of the transpiring events and the contextual information surrounding the verb in question. After a little while you will be able to figure out on your own that *peux*, *peut*, *peuvent*, *puisse*, etc are all in some form of the present tense, *pouvais*, *pouvaient*, *pu*, *pue*, etc are all in some form of a past tense (of which there are way too many), and the rest are some form of future or conditional. That is enough to know what is going on to read both familiar and new texts. Most human languages are semantically overloaded.

According to my journal, I was able to read 2-3 pages an hour [<http://mricon.com/45603.html>] after a few weeks of meticulously hitting Google, Wordreference, and the English version of the book, but eventually it stopped resembling the work of an archaeologist who has to look up every pictogram of the writing, and became more like a puzzle where you have lots and lots of unknowns, but you have the general idea of the rules involved. At that point, when I came across an unknown word, I was able to figure out its neutral form, which was easy enough to look up in a dictionary. If it was a tricky one, well, then I used Google to aid me with finding out the infinitive, from where the usual methods took over.

At that point most of your effort will go into word memorization. People usually claim that this is the most difficult part about learning a language. They lie. Learning words is actually quite simple, since the difficult part is figuring out the semantic rules that govern the transformations that each word undergoes when forming a sentence, and its relationship with the surrounding linguistic structures. The system I used to train my vocabulary was old as dirt, but it works—flip cards.

You take a set of blank cards (they sell those in most bookstores, but you can make your own with a sheet of notebook paper, some folding, a few operations with a pen-knife, and some Elmer's glue on one side to make it work like a simple makeshift "book"), you write the word on one side, and the translation on the other. The same applies to phrases. Since all French nouns have "gender" that oftentimes doesn't correspond in any way to the word itself (why is "a beard" female, while "a breast" male?), you will have to learn the gender of most nouns as you go. Suck it up. While it's true that at this point you are concentrating on reading and not on writing, it will help you a lot further down the road if you start remembering noun genders right from the start. After a little while you will get a "hang" of whether a noun sounds like a masculine or feminine, but don't rely on that too much, unless it's a "tion." You will be frequently unpleasantly surprised.

Pronunciation is easy

Before you get into flip-cards, though, dedicate one evening to learning the general pronunciation guidelines. Don't worry, covering the basics will not take much time at all—French is surprisingly consistent about its pronunciation rules, as opposed to English, where such phrases as "the door was made of lead to keep the wind from winding up in the room" are actually impossible to read out loud without knowing the meaning of many of its words first. With French, it's enough to know the basic rules to be able to tackle even such monstrosities as "*bourgeoisie*," "*mademoiselle*," and "*fauteuil*." Still, there are exceptions, mostly short common words ending in consonants that by all rules should be omitted, like "*tous*," so keep a dictionary handy, and if you don't yet know the system used by linguists to represent sounds—learn it. The correct pronunciation is usually given in the dictionary next to each word in thin square brackets.

The difficult part about French pronunciation is the effect called "liaison," which occurs when the consonant of the last word is succeeded by a vowel or a silent "h" of the next, in which case the usually-omitted consonant will be actually sounded, though slightly modified. This effect is responsible for "*vous*" (pronounced "vo") and "*êtes*" (pronounced "ette") becoming "voozette" when they are together in that order. However, don't sweat liaison too much—it will come naturally to you later on when you get into the speaking exercises. Besides, it is not integral to being able to successfully communicate—Francophones will have no trouble understanding you even if you omit all joining z's and t's. You'll tackle those later, largely unconsciously.

Oh, and "*ent*'s" just suck. I mean the verbal endings for third person plural, which look like an "ent," act like an "ent," but aren't pronounced, unless in liaison, and even then only the "t" is sounded. Next time you watch *Amélie*, look out for "*Les poules couvent souvent au couvent*" in the beginning of the movie and revel in the fact that millions of poor francophone children have to go through this crap, too. If you read your book out loud, which is not such a bad idea, pay attention to the "ents," and make sure that you only pronounce those that aren't verbal endings. If it's a verb, and it ends with an "ent," it's silent, and every time you say it, god kills a kitten.

So, once you have the basics of pronunciation down, take a flip-card, and write the French word on one side like so: "*la barbe*" or "*le sein*," then flip it over and write the English translation on the other side: "beard" and "breast." I have found that using "*le*" and "*la*" was more memorable for me than using "*un*" and "*une*" for whatever reason, except for nouns beginning with a vowel. Your case may be different. If the word has uncommon pronunciation rules, write its transcription on the French side as well, to help you remember. When you have about 30 of these cards, make a stack. Your goal is to learn each of these words, but do it in a smart and cunning manner that would require fewer repetitions than most people actually believe is necessary.

Flip-card strategy

The main trick is knowing how our memory works, and knowing that forgetting is just as important as learning, as absurd as that statement sounds. First of all, you will need to tie the word you are trying to learn into its meaning by any means possible, and you can do so by using the method of making vivid far-fetched associations. This is best illustrated with a few examples. Let's take our beard—"*la barbe*"—and go with it. You will need to remember that it's feminine, and that it means "a beard." Now, recall the scene from *Coming to America* with Eddie Murphy, with its colorful chatty barber, played by Mr. Murphy himself. Now, imagine a large bearded woman entering that barber shop, asking for a trim, and how everyone would react to that situation. Your goal is to make this mental scene as memorable as possible—unique bizarre situations work best for the purpose of semantic associations.

Often, this will not be quite as easy as "a barber" and "*la barbe*," and I will be the first to admit that I have not been able to use this technique to remember all words that I have come across. However, with a bit of effort, you will be able to use it to remember most of your vocabulary.

Let's try with a more difficult one—"*trapu*" which means "stout, of short height." I actually used a Russian word to remember this one, imagining a short and stout member of our computing team running up and down an aircraft emergency landing slide (called in Russian a "*trap*") in a state of intense agitation (the person, not the slide). In English, a "trap" means something else, but it's still a word, so you can feel free to imagine the same short stout member of our computing team as the admiral of the rebels in *Star Wars*, shouting "it's a trap!" However, since you are unlikely to be familiar with our computing team, you can feel free to come up with your own short, stout, and agitated replacements to better suit your purposes.

Let's take a tough one—"apprivoiser" which means "to tame, to domesticate." Nothing comes immediately to mind, so feel free to reach out into the bizarre. I would break it up into "apron" and "visor," and since it has to do with taming, I would imagine a large undomesticated animal, like a baboon, being ordered around by a circus trainer wearing an apron and a visor. Or, alternatively, a more catching scene would be a baboon in an apron throwing poop at that trainer, who has to wear one of those plastic visors so it doesn't get into his face. Your goal is to actually make the association far-fetched, bizarre, and vivid, since these are far more likely to stick in your head for longer than the thirty minutes after you put down your flip-cards. Feel free to be crude and inappropriate, if that helps you. The way I actually managed to remember that "*erreur*" is feminine, while "*problème*" is masculine was by pretending that "women make mistakes, which just creates problems for us men." Before you start throwing poop at me for being sexist, I must say that I fully agree with you, and that I actually don't think that way, but the goal here is to remember the vocabulary, and not to be PC. My "keepsake" did its trick, largely because it was a scandalous thought in itself. In creating your association, feel free to break away from the ordinary. It will only help.

With each card, read the word out loud (or out quiet—the important part is actually moving the parts of your speech apparatus to create the muscle memory), with any and all qualifiers attached to it, such as "*la*" or "*le*," and create a vivid mental association that would help you to tie this word to its meaning. Don't worry, the associations won't get in the way later on—think of them as training wheels on a bike: while they are annoying and uncool, they teach you how to keep your balance, so that eventually you are able to go downhill and fall into mud on your very own. Associations are just a first-step glue to make it stick to your brain—when you use these words later on in your speech, the process used to recall them will not involve the associations you create, so they will just fade away. Except the baboon—he'll remain with you forever.

I said: forget it!

Go over your stack of cards until you remember each one of them without having to flip-flop over to the "cheater side." Now put them down and try to forget everything that you have learned. No, I'm serious—put those things away until the next day and do not think any more about the words and phrases which you have just spent time memorizing. The best way to remember something is to forget and relearn it several times over. Most language-learning resources will suggest going over the flip-cards as often as possible, whenever you have a minute, but that actually defeats the purpose. When about 24 hours have passed and you have forgotten everything that you have learned from that stack, pick it up again, and go through the cards one after another. If you can't remember any of them, it's actually a good thing. Look at the French version, try to remember its English translation by attempting to recreate your associative keepsakes. Don't over-exert yourself, though, and if you can't remember it after a few seconds of trying, just flip the damn thing over, read the translation, smack yourself on the forehead, recall and renew the association you have used to remember the word, and move over to the next one. Go over them several times until you can recall what each word means without peeking at the English side, and then put that stack away for about 3 days.

As far as I can tell, the best is to repeat what you have learned at these intervals: after 1 day, after 3 days, after 1 week, after 2 weeks, and then again after 2 more weeks, and by this I mean wait one day, relearn, wait three days, relearn, wait a week, relearn, etc.—the intervals start from the last time you touched the cards, not from the initial memorization. This works with any sort of drilling: I used the same technique when doing written exercises with same results—I was usually able to remember whatever it was I was trying to learn after re-doing the exercise several times over, observing the timing rules I've outlined above. I understand that this is the method that Pimsleur uses, too, but I've never actually used any of their products, so I can only judge from the blurbs on the backs of their cassette-tape audiobooks I looked at while in Barnes and Noble.

The intervals are not set in stone, and if you manage to miss a day or two, particularly during the latter repeats, it won't be the end of the world. Just pick it up a couple of days later and don't worry about it too much. I think the crucial are the first three intervals, though I only have my experience and intuition to back me up.

It will also help, especially in the early stages of your reading, to go back to the pages you have already read, just to refresh the phraseology and to see the vocabulary you are learning in its natural habitat. Something you shouldn't do, though, is write the translations in the text above the words, or in fact anywhere on the page. You will just cheat

yourself this way, since you will make no mental effort to recall the meaning of the word when going over it again, and the necessary mental connections will therefore remain unengaged.

Then what?

According to my journal, I was able to start reading rapidly by November [<http://mricon.com/58704.html>], which, having started in August, puts me at about 4 months of effort. Not bad, especially considering that I wasn't trying particularly hard at the time. That was not to start until January, when I had realized that even though I have really progressed in my reading skills, I was still a near-complete zero when it came to understanding spoken French, or aligning two words together in a sane manner to make a sentence. However, now that you have started reading, this is something that you should never stop doing, if only a few pages each day, taking on more and more difficult books to enrich your vocabulary. Whenever you pick up a new book, especially if it's by a different author, you will notice a significant increase in the amount of unknown words you encounter, since each writer has their own favorite lexicon they prefer to use. During the first few chapters you will be putting plenty of mileage on your dictionary, but eventually this should drop off to normal levels as you familiarize yourself with that particular author's style.

At this point you should start spending a little more time with phrases you cannot figure out. What has helped me, and what will undoubtedly help you, is to subscribe to a French-learning mailing list, but be careful to choose the one where it is allowed to use English to ask your questions. One of the first mistakes I made was to ask a question about a phrase I had troubles with in a French-language newsgroup, and though people have been polite and helpful answering it, they also made it pretty clear that next time I should address them in the proper tongue, or suffer the consequences. In my studies, I have used French-English Tutor list on groups.yahoo.com [<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/FrenchEnglishTutor/>], and I would recommend it to you as well—the traffic is low, and people are very helpful if you ask good questions.

Keep using those flip-cards, too, but also concentrate more on phrases and idiomatic expressions, since they will be crucial to understanding spoken speech. Also, don't throw away the old card stacks, even if you remember all the words off of them, as if they had been burned onto your retinas. In the next section you will start going through them backwards: from English to French.

Speak now, or forever hold your pee

With reading under the belt, it's time to progress onto the menial labor. The goal now is to learn how to understand spoken French, and to learn how to generate some of your own. This will require decidedly more effort than reading. All three things—listening, speaking, and writing, can and should be done at the same time, since at this point it makes no sense to separate the effort.

Writing French

There is no reason to be in denial over it. As you have most certainly figured out on your own by now, French grammar is hard. It will probably be a bit of a solace to you to also know that it's still easier than Greek, Latin or Russian, but I doubt you'll find much respite in that little piece of trivia. What might be an encouraging thought, though, is to realize that since you're learning French as an adult, starting from its written version, you are less likely to trouble with the grammar than most French kids, who have to learn it after first learning the spoken language. It's a fact that quite a large number of French themselves have long since given up on trying to figure out how to write correctly in their own language, and a lot of times just make up something as they go, which is why I have advised you to stay away from things you find on the Internet, especially from IRC channels [<http://mricon.com/89484.html>], unless there is a grammar-nazi hanging around in the same chat-room as you (hi, Anvil). :)

What has helped me tremendously was the same *Schaum's Outline of French Grammar* book, though this time I actually started doing all exercises tediously, still observing the same memorization intervals of which I have spoken earlier. Make sure that you make no marks in the book, and come back to redo each exercise, even if you are confident

that you remember it well. Your goal is to train your visual memory, plus just writing out simple example sentences will do you lots and lots of good, since it will help you memorize sentence structures and correct word sequences.

French has a lot of exceptions that require learning, and I'm afraid that there is no way around them other than just sucking it up and learning them. Repeating the exercises should help tremendously, but it is also helpful to remember that the absolutely silly ones [<http://mricon.com/72296.html>] nobody observes anyway, unless you are in the publishing business, for which purpose they keep bespectacled proofreaders at all French newspapers and printing houses. They are likely to be the only ones to catch that there should be a double-dot on top of the "e" in "*une voix aiguë*," and that subjunctive mood only applies to phrases with "*avant que*" and not "*après que*."

Also, if at any time the description says "only used in literary French," just skip that part entirely if you are pressed for time. It's nice and all that there are verbal tenses which are only used in writing, such as *Passé Simple* and its subjunctive freak friends, but seeing as you are not likely to ever write a single sentence in it, it's not worth spending any time over. That is, of course, unless you become a prolific French writer, but in that case I would sincerely hope that you wouldn't still be relying on *Schaum's Outline of French Grammar* as your sole source of grammatical knowledge.

The goodness of long commutes

I live a few miles away from work, and it usually takes me about an hour to get there in the morning, and the same amount of time to get back in the evening, since I commute on foot. This habit of mine gave me 2 perfect hours each weekday to devote to listening and speaking exercises, and this is something you will also need to find in your day. It's not the goal of this document to extol the virtues of walking on a daily basis, but I'll do it anyway, since it's an excellent way to spend your time, combining something useful with something healthy. If you have long car commutes, you can do these exercises in the car as well, but your concentration will suffer, since you will actually need to arrive at your destination in one piece and not kill anyone along the way. Seeing as language exercises require quite a bit of intensive mental work, I'm not sure it's a safe bet. Perhaps you can do them while walking in your neighborhood park after work, or you may just allot for this purpose that special time of your day usually spent swinging in the hammock sipping beer. Whatever you do, you will need that hour-a-day for your listening and speaking exercises, so you will need to find a way to squeeze it in.

I've tried several audio products, but the vast majority of them is greatly lacking when it comes to actually learning the language and not memorizing a few broken phrases for your next vacation. However, after making several disappointing purchases, I managed to stumble across *Barron's Mastering French Level 1* [<http://amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0764175998>] and it's been wonderful, even if somewhat lacking in sound quality. It's a little on the expensive side, especially when bought at a retail store without the wonderful amazon discounts, but I've not yet come across an audio product that would be as effective as this one.

To put it simply, this is a set of repetitive drills, and at first it may seem like a pretty useless way of trying to learn French, but teaching the language basics is not the purpose of that tool anyway. It sets out to do two things—tune your listening skills to understand spoken French, and teach your speech apparatus to produce the sound sequences needed to speak this language, and it's no small task, considering that the phonetic palette of French is significantly different from that of English.

If you do buy this wonderful product, I suggest that you read the booklet before actually listening to each lesson, otherwise you will be pretty lost, as things progress quickly. It is also beneficial if you do the exercises following the same memorization intervals that I have outlined earlier, but as each unit takes about an hour to complete, you may or may not be able to stick to the routine. In any case, don't fret too much. The memorization schedule is approximate anyway, and I expect that you will eventually come up with intervals that are better suited for you than the ones I proposed.

There is also *Barron's Mastering French Level 2* [<http://amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0812079183>], but I have not tried it, since at the time of writing it still only exists as audio tapes, not CDs. It is my credo not to buy anything I can't easily rip and back up.

Enter Netflix

Once you are done with Barron's (and it will take you a while), you can go on to the next stage in training your auidial recognition skills—actually listening to some live French. At first, I bought an audio version of the same tried-and-true *Harry Potter et le Prisonnier d'Azkaban*, read by Bernard Giraudeau from amazon.fr [<http://amazon.fr/exec/obidos/ASIN/B000077VN8>]. However, although it was very enjoyable, it ultimately isn't the best thing to do to learn spoken French, and I would equally recommend staying away from all other French audiobooks (at least as long as the purpose is to learn the language), since they tend to be low on dialog and rich on *Passé Simple*. Books sound pretty and captivating when read out loud, but rather useless for learning how to speak French, since nobody other than huge snobs ever use literary tenses in conversation.

Then, entirely by accident, I stumbled across [<http://mricon.com/74934.html>] a set of Joss Whedon's *Firefly* DVDs, and noticed that they had a French soundtrack. After watching them first in English, then in French, I realized that I may have found a very useful resource for learning conversational French, which had an added benefit of not being mind-numbingly dull. With each DVD, after watching an episode first in English, then in French, I would rip the French soundtrack (with transcode [<http://freshmeat.net/projects/transcode/>]), and copy it onto my portable player. Then, during my daily commutes, I would listen to it over and over again, almost how kids ask to be read the same story night after night after night (see "*Hamster Huey and the Gooley Kablooy!*" and *Early Parental Schizophrenia*, by Watterson *et al*). Believe me, *Serenity* never gets old, and unlike those poor parents, my player never gets exasperated from having to play the same thing many times over. The only trouble with *Firefly* is knowing where French stops and broken Chinese starts.

I didn't limit myself to *Firefly*—I have a Netflix [<http://www.netflix.com/>] account, and they have a very decent selection of French movies. With some of them I did the same thing—copied the soundtrack onto my player in order to listen to it during my walks. My favorites were *Le Château de Ma Mère* [<http://netflix.com/MovieDisplay?movieid=60030310>], *Le Fabuleux Destin d'Amélie Poulain* [<http://netflix.com/MovieDisplay?movieid=60022048>], and *Cyrano de Bergerac* [<http://netflix.com/MovieDisplay?movieid=60011695>], though the latter mostly because I'm a sucker for classical literature. As far as conversational language goes, it's rather useless, unless you ever plan to spar with a bunch of musketeers on the streets of Paris, all while speaking in perfectly rhymed 16th century French. Though, admittedly, it can come in handy if you are ever presented with a task of having to swoon a particularly snobbish French girl (hey, you never know!).

So, to recap my recommendations—use soundtracks copied from video materials to train yourself to recognize spoken French. At first, I would advise to use things dubbed from English, since dubbed tracks tend to be clearer than original French, plus they blend less with background noises, making it easier to discern the speech. Look on Netflix, find a TV-series that is one of your favorites, and see if they list French among the languages available. Try not to go too Sci-Fi, though, as it's unlikely that knowing how to say "attempting to reverse the polarity!" in French will ever do you good on the test or in real life (Klingons *hate* French). I'd say try *Friends* or *Frasier*, or something similar that has lots of common-day situational dialogs. Then, once you're comfortable with dubbed material, proceed to native French movies, to accustom yourself to live spoken language in its natural habitat.

For dubbed movies, watch it first in English, then in French with English subtitles, then copy the soundtrack and listen to it as much as you can, until you turn blue and start throwing up. I've found that French subtitles, if they are available, are generally not useful, since they rarely correspond to what is actually said, and thus are only disorienting. For movies made in French, watch it first with English subtitles until you are familiar with the plot, then watch it without subtitles. When you are confident that you can follow what is going on, copy the soundtrack and listen to it several times to familiarize yourself with the verbal constructs. As I have mentioned, I used transcode to rip the soundtrack, and then encoded the resulting wavs into oggs. I wrote a very dirty shell script [<http://mricon.com/83853.html>] to accomplish this, but if you live in Windows-land, you can probably find something that would do it for you, if you google hard enough.

Other audio materials

There are two other resources that I used to learn spoken French: songs and talk-radio. Songs I would recommend any time, especially since finding lyrics on the Internet is relatively simple. Talk-radio isn't quite as useful, if only because if you are listening to it live, you will get hopelessly lost, unless you're doing it late in the game when your listening skills are already pretty sharp. French radio hosts tend to speak rapidly, and if you add to that the distortions that come from studio microphones and especially from low-bandwidth streaming audio transmissions, this is not a method of learning that I would recommend to anyone. The only time I found internet radio useful was when I was learning the Québec accent [<http://mricon.com/114635.html>], and that was after I was already comfortable with spoken European French.

However, something that I haven't done, but which could be useful to those who want to try it, is to find a French popular music station and rip the shoutcast stream with streamripper [<http://streamripper.sourceforge.net/>]. Once you have enough songs, you can look up the lyrics for them using Google, and liven up your commutes with something other than just spoken word. Songs are useful because they are easy to remember and sing along, which in turn trains your brain to recognize popular verbal memes. I wish I had thought of that myself at the time, since I was limited to a compilation of Joe Dassin's top hits, a CD of Patricia Kaas, and that song from Enigma that goes "*Sade, dis-moi.*"

Real People

So, you are nearing the completion of your Schaum's *Outline*, you are able to pick up most French dialog in the movies, even without watching them first in English, and your French R's are like your French kisses—long, sloppy, and with plenty of tongue action. However, when you try to put two words together, you still stumble and come to a grinding halt even when trying to put together simplest sentences. That's because no matter how much time you spend with your player and your written exercises, there is no substitute for actually speaking the language in a live face-to-face conversation. For that, of course, you will need to find some live French people.

The best way to find a French person willing to converse with you on a variety of subjects is to be a rich, handsome, Ferrari-driving stud with a chest of drawers and abs of steel. Stunning looks, expensive clothes, and deep pockets will guarantee plenty of opportunity to work on your oral French. Anyone not meeting these parameters, however, will have to settle for french.meetup.com [<http://french.meetup.com/>]. There is a good possibility that you will be able to find a number of people equally interested in learning French who live near you, and attending their meetings will help you hook up with other souls in a similar quandary. Once a month is definitely not enough to produce any sort of useful results—you will need to be speaking on a far more regular basis than that, like several times a week. Using meetup.com you should be able to find enough people nearby who would be interested in meeting more often, though be prepared to offer something in return, like to buy them dinner, or to help them with their English. I was lucky enough to have several francophones working with me, who have graciously agreed to meet for lunch on a regular basis to talk about things and to tolerate my attempts at broken French, frequently interrupted by long segues into English.

If you are unable to find anyone living near you who is a fluent speaker of French and who is also willing to subject themselves to the torture of hearing you speak, you can always try teleconferencing using IP telephony. The subject of teleconferencing frequently shows up on the French-English Tutor list, to which I subscribe, so there are plenty of people out there who are into this sort of thing. Your best option is to find someone interested in learning English who is looking for someone interested in learning French, so you can allocate part of your conference to speaking one language, and part to speaking the other. Watch out for time zones, though—it's going to be a significant hindrance, next to the fact that, well, teleconferencing sucks.

Don't limit yourself to just speaking French, though—you will also need to write it. A lot. Since you have more time to look up words and check noun genders, you may find writing easier than speaking, but it can be deceptive, since there are fewer rules you need to observe when speaking. After all, *parler, parlez, parlé, parlée, parlais, parlait, and parlaient* are all pronounced the same (by the vast majority of French, though technically there are differences). If you blog, try blogging in French. Alternatively, you may find a discussion group that is willing to tolerate your linguistic gaffes if you have something insightful or informative to bring to the table. In the latter case, I suggest you add this to your signature: "If you see an error in my French, I would appreciate it if you correct me in a private email," since most people will just politely cringe and ignore your mistakes. However, it is also important to remember that people who

try to correct you can also be just plain wrong [<https://lists.dulug.duke.edu/pipermail/yum/2004-June/004573.html>] themselves, so remember to double-check, unless it's someone you trust. The more you write, the better you will be at speaking, too, since the language-creation process is similar for both activities.

Something that will come in very handily for writing French is a verb conjugator. If you are using Un*x, there is an excellent one for Gnome called *Verbiste* [<http://sarrazip.com/dev/verbiste.html>], and if you are on a Windows box, you can get one from Verbix [<http://www.verbix.com/>], or just use their online conjugator, though it is regularly non-functioning closer to the end of the month when they run out of bandwidth.

Another neat trick you can use when writing, which is especially handy when struggling with word order and those tricky ever-changing prepositions, is to use quoted Google queries to see which version gets more hits. For example, let's say that you're unsure whether you should write "*j'ai essayé à faire*" or "*j'ai essayé de faire*." Go to google.fr and search for both phrases: you will find out that using "à" you get only 4 hits [<http://google.fr/search?q=%22j'ai+essay%C3%A9+%C3%A0+faire%22>], while using "de" you get over 20 thousand [<http://google.fr/search?q=%22j'ai+essay%C3%A9+de+faire%22>]. It becomes quite clear which version is the correct one.

After the Basics

If you have followed all of the above, you should be somewhere near the same point where I am right now. It's only been a year and a few months since I have started to learn French: I can read the text of any level without much difficulty, still normally keeping a dictionary handy, and I can express myself in writing with relative ease. Though I still do make plenty of errors in my writing, they are usually minor semantic ones, not grammatic—as in English or any other language, there are plenty of small things that just don't have a specific rule and have to be learned the hard way, like prepositions (something is *on* TV, *in* a tree, *at* a party, etc). I can understand most spoken French, unless the speaker has a heavy accent, and I can talk on most subjects, though I've not had quite as much practice with that as I would have liked to. But I'm moving to Montréal soon, anyway, so that is to come.

It is important not to stop at this point, even though you may want to take a small break and do something else for a while, especially if you have been doing this to pass a test. If you stop for too long, you *will* forget, and all your hard efforts would be for nothing. I know, it may seem to you that knowing French is useless asset, unless you plan on living in Québec or in France, but you never know what life may throw your way. Besides, refreshing your knowledge from time to time would be much easier than forgetting it all and having to start from near-zero if ever you end up in a situation where knowledge of French is beneficial. Besides, if you know one Romance language, others are much easier to master.

I cannot really say much about advanced French, since it's beyond the scope of this document, and since I'm not yet "there" myself. Judging from my past experience with learning English, the best thing to do after you are at the intermediate level is to fully immerse yourself in the language environment, which of course in case of French is best achieved by moving to a francophone country. However, if it's not a viable possibility for you, this modern world we live in still provides lots of opportunities for linguistic immersion through such things as readily available French movies, French literature, a multitude of French radio stations, weblogs, and all other things that reside in the .fr top-level domain. There are several fascinating francophone cultures to explore, each with its own very unique specifics and idiosyncrasies. There are things about every one of them that simply cannot be translated without losing a large part of its cultural identity.

One never truly stops learning a language—I've been studying English for the past 20 years, and still I make mistakes, and still I come across things of which I have never heard before. It is said that the mark of a true *savant*, at least in terms of linguistic prowess, is the ability to *think* in a foreign language—a very unique and rewarding skill (which also happens to be highly prized by intelligence agencies worldwide). I would also add that the ability to speak and think in a foreign language brings with it an important insight into other cultural backgrounds. With this understanding comes...

Ah, screw it, who am I kidding. Knowing a foreign language makes you look like a genius in the eyes of your peers, plus some chicks dig it when you recite French poetry to them. There, end of story. Now go learn it!

Appendix: A few practical notes

This section provides a few forays into things not directly related to learning French, but which might be useful to you if you are immigrating to Canada.

Taking the TEF

If you are learning French in order to take the TEF, be it for immigration purposes, or to find a job in a francophone country, at this point you should do quite well. I scored as "*supérieur*" in most categories, and that's only after 10 months of studies. If you are immigrating, and you marked English as your first language, remember that you only have to score as "*intermédiaire*" [<http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/skilled/qual-3.html>] for maximum possible immigration points.

I would also advise to go ahead and buy the stupid preparation guide, even though it's a complete ripoff [<http://mricon.com/83170.html>]. Try looking on Ebay first, to see if anyone is selling it, and if you're unlucky, then buy it from the place where you're planning on taking the test. Compared to the price of the test, at \$95 it's almost a rounding error anyway.

Do the preparatory exercises from the book and from the tapes, and then take the sample test to gauge your performance. Make sure that you allow for the fact that you will probably score lower on the actual test, since you will be nervous, and that the tape recorder will probably be manufactured in 1970s, with its reading heads last cleaned when Michael Jackson was still on his second nose. You will not be able to score the writing part of the test, but do it anyway and send it off to your helpful mailing list friends for checking, then judge the results accordingly.

You shouldn't do badly, at least not if you have been working assiduously. Even if you don't manage to score high enough to qualify as "mediocre," it still won't hurt to have a few additional points. As much as I would like to think that I am special—and I seriously doubt that I am—if I could do it, being a slacker extraordinaire, you can do it, too.

Québec

If you have visited Québec, you probably already know that there is a vast conspiracy among all travel guide publishers, since they will all tell you with a straight face that French is the predominant spoken language in that province. However, if you have been there, you know that it's a bold-faced lie. Their written language may look like French, but whatever it is that they use to communicate cannot possibly be the same language you have studied so hard, since it's impossible to understand a word of it.

The difference between the "international" flavor of French and that of its Québec variety is similar to that between the accent employed by the anchors on BBC and the rural "drawl" one can encounter in the Southern part of the United States. When I first came to the US, I found myself in suburban Atlanta for a few days, and for a while I was convinced that the guy with whom I was staying had a speech impediment, since I couldn't understand a word he was saying. It wasn't until a few days later that I realized that the disease was apparently of pandemic proportions. Just like the "Southern talk," the Québec accent has its own inflections, its own pronunciation rules, and its own names for many items of every-day use, many borrowed directly from their anglophone neighbors.

There are no particular methods or strategies for studying *l'accent québécois* other than just letting it "sink" together with other unique things about the culture of the province of Québec. If you are from the US, be prepared for such culture shocks as encountering a Chinese person who speaks English with a French accent, or hearing the unmistakable sounds of country music, except sung entirely *en français*. Listening to a Québec radio station [<http://comfm.com/live/radio/>] will help, but only if you are already good at understanding French as spoken in France. There are also several decent movies released by local studios, specifically *Québec-Montréal* [<http://amazon.ca/exec/obidos/ASIN/B000071KOE>], which is available on DVD for soundtrack ripping (not on Netflix, though). The movie is rich in very colorful dialog, which is well-peppered with unique local expletives, most apparently stemming from various types of religious architecture.

Even if you aren't interested in immigrating, Québec is certainly worth a visit because of its very unique place in the history of North America, and its very distinct surviving culture; and if you are indeed interested in switching citizenships, Québec is considered among the more liberal provinces of Canada. Montréal is a very unique city largely due to its complete bilingualism, and the rest of Québec is not called "*la Belle Province*" for nothing.