

Learn a Language by Reading: the evidence-based method

Six short chapters on why reading real books is the most research-backed way for adults to acquire a language — and how bilingual editions make it possible from day one.

6 chapters

Research-backed

Practical rules



Bilingual Pages

Read books in two languages

Six ideas that change how you learn

Each chapter is one core idea from second-language acquisition research, condensed to a page. Read them in order — they build on each other.

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Comprehensible input, explained

If you have ever felt that grinding flashcards leaves you unable to read a paragraph in your target language, you have already met the problem Stephen Krashen tried to solve. His answer — comprehensible input — is the single most important idea in modern language acquisition research, and it is also the simplest.

Comprehensible input is language — spoken or written — that you can understand the gist of, even if some of the words or grammar are new. That's it.

Stephen Krashen is a professor emeritus at the University of Southern California. In a series of books and papers in the 1980s — most notably *The Input Hypothesis* (1985) — he proposed five hypotheses about second-language acquisition.

1. Start with graded readers at your level. Penguin Active Reading, Cambridge English Readers, and similar series provide books written or adapted to specific CEFR levels (A1–C1).
2. Move to bilingual editions of real literature as soon as you can. Side-by-side translations let you read material above your level — the translation becomes the comprehension bridge.
3. Re-read instead of pushing forward. Re-reading a book at your level cements vocabulary far more efficiently than fighting through a harder one.
4. Use audio together with text when you can. Listening alone is harder to keep comprehensible because you can't slow down.

Krashen's formulation

"We acquire language in only one way: when we understand messages." — Stephen Krashen, 1985. Forty years later this is still the most defensible single sentence in second-language acquisition research.

The extensive reading method

Extensive reading is the practice of reading large quantities of text in your target language at a level you can mostly understand, for pleasure rather than study. Among methods of foreign language acquisition, it has more empirical support than almost any other. This is what it is, why it works, and how to actually do it as a busy adult.

Reading in a foreign language splits into two roughly opposite approaches. Intensive reading is what most language classrooms do: a short, difficult passage analysed word by word, with grammar exercises and vocabulary lists.

Both have their place. Intensive reading is good for forensic study of structure. But the body of research that has accumulated since the 1980s suggests that extensive reading is the much bigger lever for actual acquisition — vocabulary, reading speed, compreh...

1. Read at a level where you understand 95–98% of the words. If you have to stop more than once or twice per page, the book is too hard.
2. Read large amounts. Volume is the active ingredient. Day and Bamford recommended at least a book a week at peak; modern researchers usually shorthand the goal as one million words per year p...
3. Read for pleasure. The book has to be one you actually want to finish. If you wouldn't pick it up in your first language, you won't finish it in your second.

Fact

The 95% rule is not arbitrary. Below 95% known vocabulary, comprehension collapses sharply and learners stop being able to infer meaning from context. The 95–98% sweet spot is where you understand enough to follow the story and have just enough unknown words to actually learn from.



Unknown word? Just tap it

In the Bilingual Pages app the translation appears right inside the text: tap a word and keep reading. No dictionaries, no app-switching.



The i+1 principle, in practice

If you have ever picked up a foreign-language book that felt either insultingly easy or completely impenetrable, you have already met the problem Stephen Krashen tried to solve. His proposal — that input should sit just slightly above your current level, what he called "i+1" — is the most useful single rule for choosing what to read.

In Krashen's shorthand, i is your current competence in the language — everything you can already understand without effort. The +1 is the next small increment beyond that: a few new words, a slightly more complex sentence structure, an unfamiliar tense.

A book where you understand every word is a book that has nothing new to teach you. Reading it still has value — you reinforce vocabulary, train reading speed, build confidence — but vocabulary growth depends on encountering unknown words, and there are none t...

1. Read three or four books at your current i+1 level. Vocabulary stabilises; reading speed grows; comprehension stops feeling like work.
2. Try a book one notch harder. If the 95–98% rule still holds, that is your new i+1.
3. If it doesn't hold, drop back and read one more book at the previous level. Don't force the jump.
4. Recalibrate every 4–6 books. Levels are sticky — you stop noticing the gap because you adapted.

The 95–98% rule

The empirical version of i+1 that researchers usually quote: a text is at the right level when you know 95–98% of the running words. Below 95%, comprehension collapses. Above 98%, you stop acquiring anything new. The narrow window is the whole point.

Free voluntary reading

Of all the language-acquisition methods Stephen Krashen has championed over the years, free voluntary reading is the one with the strongest evidence and the lowest barrier to entry. It is exactly what it sounds like: reading what you want, in your target language, without a curriculum, without comprehension questions, without obligation.

Free voluntary reading — FVR for short — is reading you do because you want to, not because you have to. You choose the book. You read at your own pace. You stop if you don't like it. No one tests you on it. No one assigns you the next one.

Krashen has been arguing for FVR as the centrepiece of literacy and language acquisition since the 1980s. In *The Power of Reading* (2004) he gathered the evidence: across dozens of studies, learners who did FVR consistently outperformed learners who did equivalent...

1. Bilingual editions of real literature. The translation makes material above your monolingual level accessible, which lets you read books you actually want to read at any competence level.
2. Tap-to-translate readers with imported EPUBs. The same effect for any book you already own or can find.
3. Read in a genre you read voluntarily in your first language. If you read crime novels in English, read crime novels in Spanish.
4. Re-read books you loved as a teenager. Familiarity with the plot reduces the comprehension burden.

Krashen's core claim

"In study after study, when FVR is compared with traditional instruction, FVR comes out as good or better — and it works for monolinguals, bilinguals, and second-language learners alike." — Stephen Krashen, *The Power of Reading* (2004).

Reading above your level

There is a long-running argument in language teaching about whether learners should read at their current level or push above it. The honest answer is: both, but in carefully different ways. Reading far above your level alone produces almost nothing.

Most language-learning advice says to read at your level, never above it. The 95–98% rule that comes out of extensive-reading research backs this up: comprehension collapses below 95% known vocabulary, and you stop acquiring efficiently.

But it is incomplete because monolingual reading isn't the only option for adults. With a translation visible side by side, or with tap-to-translate available, the comprehension cliff moves.

1. Use the translation as a safety net, not a crutch. Try to read each sentence in the target language first. Glance at the translation only when needed.
2. Pick books one level above your current level, not three. The bigger the gap, the worse the acquisition-per-minute ratio.
3. Re-read the first chapter. Reading the same chapter twice cements vocabulary far more efficiently than fighting through twice as much new material once. Re-reading is underrated.

Fact

The empirical effect of reading with translation support has been studied directly. Learners reading bilingual texts at one to two CEFR levels above their monolingual level acquire vocabulary at comparable or faster rates than learners reading at-level monolingually, with the added benefit of broad...



Not sure about your level?

bilingualpages.com has a free 5-minute language level test (A1–C2) — and the Word Hop game to lock in vocabulary while playing.



Bilingual reading vs flashcards

Flashcards with spaced repetition (Anki, Memrise, Quizlet) are the most popular self-study tool in language learning. Bilingual reading with tap-to-translate is the most established research-backed alternative. They are not opposites — but they are not equivalent either.

The first thing to understand is that "vocabulary" is not one skill. A word can be known in several different ways, and the two methods target different ones.

A typical flashcard pair (word → definition or L1 translation) trains you to retrieve a meaning when shown the form, or vice versa. This is fast and measurable: you can drill 50 words an hour and pass a recall test on them the next day.

1. Beginner stage (A0 → A2): heavy flashcards on a frequency list (the most common 1,000–2,000 words) to reach the reading-ready threshold quickly. 15–20 minutes a day for 6–10 weeks.
2. Intermediate stage (A2 → B2): pivot mostly to reading. Use a tap-to-translate reader or bilingual editions.
3. Advanced stage (B2 → C1): reading is the dominant input. Flashcards drop to maintenance — under five minutes a day or removed entirely.

Nation's four word-knowledge categories

Paul Nation distinguishes four kinds of vocabulary knowledge: form, meaning, use (grammatical and collocational), and breadth (how many different contexts). Flashcards train (1) and weakly (2). Reading trains (2), (3) and (4).

Common questions

What does comprehensible input mean in simple terms?

Comprehensible input is language you can mostly understand, even if a few words or grammar points are new. The idea, introduced by Stephen Krashen, is that this kind of "mostly understood" input is what actually moves a learner forward — more than memorising words or studying grammar rules.

Is comprehensible input enough to learn a language?

It is the largest single ingredient, but probably not the only one. Most current researchers think input is necessary and dominant but that some explicit instruction and active practice — especially speaking and writing — also help. Reading gives you the raw material; production turns it into fluent skill.

How much comprehensible input do I need?

There is no exact number, but the rough ballpark from extensive reading studies is that getting from a complete beginner to confident reading of unsimplified literature takes on the order of one million words of input — roughly 10–15 full novels at intermediate level.

Can I use translations as comprehensible input?

Yes, and that is in fact one of the most practical ways for adults to access comprehensible input from real literature. Side-by-side bilingual editions and tap-to-translate readers let you understand material that would otherwise be far above your level, which makes high-quality input accessible from day one.



Bilingual Pages

Put the method to work tonight

Bilingual Pages is the app for reading bilingual books: original and translation side by side, tap-to-translate, your own EPUBs, offline reading.

- ✓ Tap-to-translate — right inside the text
- ✓ Original and translation side by side
- ✓ Import your own EPUB books
- ✓ Works offline
- ✓ Start free: several books are waiting



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