

An Everyday Language Learner's Guide

# SUSTAINING

**Get Started - Don't Stop**

Dedicated to my mom and dad who have taught me  
to sustain through the good and the bad.

*Sustaining* by Aaron G Myers  
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**The most essential factor is persistence - the determination never to allow your energy or enthusiasm to be dampened by the discouragement that must inevitably come.**

**-James Whitcomb Riley**

Live links throughout the text are highlighted and underlined in **RED**.

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# A Word Before

**Get Started, Don't Stop**

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Language guru Greg Thomson observes that, “if we ignore a whole bunch of problems, the hardest thing about language learning is getting started. The second hardest thing about learning another language is not quitting.” The subject of this small work of encouragement then is the second half of that thought. Not quitting. Keeping at it. Putting in the time. Sustaining. It is probably true about much in life that we see as difficult; those who achieve their goals keep at them. Instant success is an anomaly that we dare not count on.

In my writing I want more than anything else to empower language learners toward success. As I observe, watch, and get to know people who want to learn another language but who have yet to find the success they desire, Thompson’s prognosis seems exactly on the mark.

I don’t think I have met a single person who doesn’t think it is a good idea to learn another language. Everyone

agrees it is important. Everyone is interested, but few get started.

**If you spend even an hour a day, every day on a language (10 minutes here, 15 minutes there) you can reach oral fluency in less than a year.**

-John Fotheringham

Getting started is the subject of a free e-course I created called **The Ten Week Journey**. In it I walk those who are interested in the idea of learning another language into the committed life of the language learner. Getting started is indeed a challenge, but one we can all overcome with a little help.

If you are reading this small booklet though, you have probably already gotten started. The challenge now is to keep going. The dictionary defines **sustain** in this way: to cause to continue or be prolonged for an extended period or without interruption. In order to be successful as a language learner we need to find it in ourselves to continue at it for an extended period of time. We need to sustain.

I want to talk to you today about three important factors that are key in order for you to sustain your language learning for the time needed to achieve your goals. There are probably a lot of different ways to think about these and

probably a lot of other factors that could be added to my list. These are the three things I have identified from my own experience, from my observation of others, and from reading about the subject. The three most important factors to consider for sustaining language learning are:

1. **Motivation**
2. **Commitment**
3. **Attitude**

In the next three sections I hope to help you understand how to foster these so that you can sustain the journey and find success as a language learner.

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# Motivation

**Motivation is the fuel that feeds the language learning lifestyle.**

- John Fotheringham

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I think we all understand the importance of motivation in our lives. We have all experienced times of great motivation. We wake up unfathomably early and put ourselves through significant discomfort to make the fishing trip happen; we drive through the night to be with family for Christmas morning; we forgo our daily dose of Starbucks for months in order to save for the new iPad. Motivation is powerful stuff. But we also know what it feels like to be unmotivated; to not want to get out of bed in the morning; to not want to step out the door for that run; to not want work on that project for work or school. But motivation is the fuel that feeds language learning and we must work to both create more of it and foster what we already have.

One of the great disservices institutional education has done to us is to convince us that learning is by nature tedious, boring, and hard. For the most part, our learning in schools is just that, tedious and boring. It is an unfortunate calamity however that we need not accept. I was a C-student throughout high school, not because I wasn't smart enough but because I was unmotivated. I was of course a teenager and had that going against me, but I now look

back on that time and see that I was unmotivated to do well in school because it was not interesting to me, it seemed unrelated to anything purposeful in life, was not enjoyable, and was not marked by success. Motivation is fueled by many things, but I want to share these four with you today.

## The stuff that fuels motivation:

1. **Interest**
2. **Purpose**
3. **Joy**
4. **Success**

## Interest

As a language learner, your first priority should be to think about learning the language through topics that are of interest to you. If you are a bass fisherman, then you need

to find books, podcasts, television programs, Youtube videos about fishing. If you are a quilter, find magazines in

**You never achieve  
success unless you like  
what you are doing.**

**-Dale Carnegie**

the language about quilting. If you're into fantasy, find The Lord of the Rings movies dubbed in the language you wish to learn. Working to learn something you are not interested in moves quickly into the realm of boring, which crushes motivation and forces us to either press on through sheer will power or to quit.

## Purpose

No one likes busy work and no one enjoys a job in which they find no purpose. Erwin McManus wrote, "The life that is most powerfully lived is the one that finds passionate urgency fueled by a sense of destiny." If you do not have a purpose, a destiny on your horizon for learning the language, you will soon lose motivation. Thankfully, finding purpose in language learning is pretty easy. The thing you may need to do is to take a bit of time to think about and define more clearly just what your purpose is. What is the reason you are learning it? What will you gain

**Hard work is a prison sentence only if it does not have meaning.**

-Malcolm Gladwell

from it? What will others, your family, your kids, the native speakers of the language, gain from your knowledge of the language? **Find the reason. Find the purpose.**

# Joy

We tend to want to keep doing things that we enjoy. It's the reason why kids are always asking for "one more minute" and why we sometimes stay up way too late reading a great novel. Lack of enjoyment can quickly make even the most interesting, purpose filled, and rewarding activities a drudgery that we soon quit. We have all been there; the trip we've planned for and looked forward to for months, ruined by horrible weather or bad company. Finding ways to keep language learning enjoyable is an important part of fostering and creating motivation.

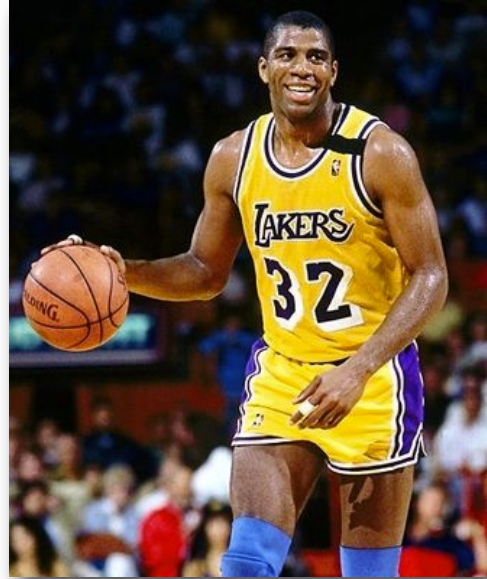
**I was often able to use my languages, and benefit from them. In learning my languages, I was able to do what the French call "joindre l'utile à l'agréable", in other words combine usefulness and pleasure.**

-Steve Kaufmann

# Success

Success breeds success. A little success early on will help us to gain momentum as our motivation increases. Finding ways to make sure you are succeeding, early on in

language learning, is an important task that all beginning language learners must take seriously. An occasional set back can act as a kick in the pants to get us going and remind us of the effort we need to put forth to succeed. I remember reading the Los Angeles Laker great, Magic Johnson's biography as a kid. In it he remembers back to the playground and how he divided playing time between games with kids way better than himself, with kids at his level, and with kids he knew he could destroy. Playing with the better kids kept him from getting complacent. Playing with kids his own level allowed him to hone his skills. Playing with the younger kids taught him how to dominate and to have confidence. Magic knew the power of success, so he made sure it was a part of his routine. Of course for Magic, the kids he dominated were all two years older than him!



As language learners we need to proactively create opportunities for success. We need to choose activities that we know we can dominate. This is different for all of us, but if success breeds success, it is imperative.

How do we do this “dominating” as language learners though? I have a few suggestions:

- Create a growing collection of recordings that you understand and enjoy. You should really understand everything in them. These could be kids stories or your own corrected and recorded journals.
- Reread a favorite book with which you are familiar.
- Re-watch a favorite movie. Spend Saturday mornings watching Dora the Explorer or other children's cartoons in the native language.
- Visit with the one native speaker with whom you have had the most fulfilling and successful conversations.

Some of these may seem boring. Magic may have also been bored at times out there, effortlessly driving the lane for two more points. But every time he drove the lane he increased both his confidence and his abilities. He was preparing himself for the next level, for the next game with the big kids. Creating intentional times of success then will help prepare you for the big game of a language speaker's life in the community of native speakers.

**We need to have a dream we are pursuing  
and at the same time experience enough  
of that dream to keep us inspired.**

-Erwin McManus

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# Commitment

Constant dripping hollows out a stone. - Lucretius

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Commitment is an intimidating topic. Most of us, if we are honest with ourselves, aren't all that committed to anything. We're not committed in the sense that the quotation above represents. Commitment is Michael Jordan. Commitment is that crazy **Dean**



**Karnazas** guy who runs three marathons in a row just for fun. Commitment is writer and change agent **Seth Godin**, writing a blog post every day, every single day, for years. Commitment is something that the vast majority of us don't

**The interested person will  
do what is convenient.  
The committed person  
will do whatever it takes.**

-John Assaraf

have a lot of, at least not for language learning. We are interested of course, but anyone observing our lives would be hard pressed to find real proof that we are truly committed to do whatever it takes.

But is that it? Should we just throw up our hands and toss in the towel? If we are not committed enough to do

what it takes, are we just out of luck? Thankfully no, we are not out of luck. There is hope.

Before I go on to the hope though, I do want to let you know that in order to be successful in learning another language, you will need to be committed. Maybe not Michael Jordan committed, but if you are not committed, you won't learn another language.

I want to let you in on a little secret. Seth Godin was not born committed. Dean Karnazas was not born committed. By his own reckoning, Dean was once a couch potato compared to what he is today. He was someone who had interest in running, who became a runner, a committed runner. It didn't happen over night, but was a transformation that took place over time, as it does in so many stories of commitment. I suspect that it has happened to you as well. Make a quick scan of your life. What would you say that you are committed to today, that you were not committed to as a kid? I can think of a few for myself:

- my wife
- my kids
- my faith
- brushing my teeth and more recently, flossing
- exercising for my health
- helping others learn language

In all of these examples, except for my kids, I was first interested but my interest later became commitment. There are a few things we are born committed too. In the case of my kids, they were born and I was committed to them. As another example of this, those born in Chicago may have no real choice in being a Bears fan, they just are. It's in the blood. This sort of unchosen commitment is rare though.

Before I met my wife, I was not interested in her. I was interested in the idea of a wife, but not her. I didn't even know she existed. Shortly after I met her though, I was interested and my interest quickly moved to commitment as I spent more time with her. All I did was spend time with her and my commitment grew and it continues to grow.

On the other hand, my six year old son is in no way committed to brushing his teeth, yet. This doesn't bother me though, because every adult I know is committed to brushing their teeth. At some point in time over the next few years, I am quite sure my son will become a committed teeth brusher as well.

I share these two examples to highlight how we move from being interested to being committed, but also to highlight the two different ways that commitment happens. Some happen very naturally, like my commitment to my wife. It was a self perpetuating process. I was interested so I spent time with her. This time spent, increased my interest and so I spent more time with her. Commitment came out of a natural growth in our relationship and I didn't have to

work at it too hard. Not that marriage doesn't require a lot of work, nurturing, and tender loving care. At the beginning though, I couldn't help myself.

My son on the other hand has little interest in brushing his teeth. It is like pulling teeth to get him in there to actually brush them. Our job as mom and dad though is to help him form healthy habits in life, teeth brushing included, so we make him brush his teeth each night and each morning. We educate him too, warning of tooth decay and telling terrifying stories of long needles and the dentist drill, but in the end the thing that works best is just making him do it. We are helping him form a habit.

If you do something long enough, even something against your will, it will form a habit that is hard to break. Our struggles at getting teeth brushed have gotten progressively easier as he has begun to form the habit. And a habit is just another form of commitment.

**We are what we repeatedly do, excellence then is not an act, but a habit.**

-Aristotle

In the end you will need to be committed to learning the language in order to actually accomplish your goal. Learning another language will not just happen. Wishful thinking will not be enough. Where we were once interested, we need to develop a strong commitment to achieve the goal. Thankfully, as we have seen above,

commitment can be developed. We will not be fully committed right away, but by taking deliberate and focused steps, we can begin to move from “interested” to “committed”. Our goal then should be to take consistent, small steps toward being more committed.

“Committed”, as a word, is not measurable. To say that we need to be “committed” then is not something that any of us can wrap our minds around. How committed do we need to be? Michael Jordan committed?

Understanding this dilemma, I feel it would be a great disservice to just tell you that you need to be “committed”. What I will tell you, however, is that you need to be working to move yourself from the point of being interested to the point of being more committed. You need to do this a little bit every day. The goal, then, is not to be somehow magically and amazingly committed; but instead to be a bit more committed with each new day. This is a goal to which we can all aspire.



We move from the point of being interested to that of being more committed in the same way that I became more committed to my wife; and in the way that my son is becoming more committed to brushing his teeth. We do this by spending time with the language, the people who

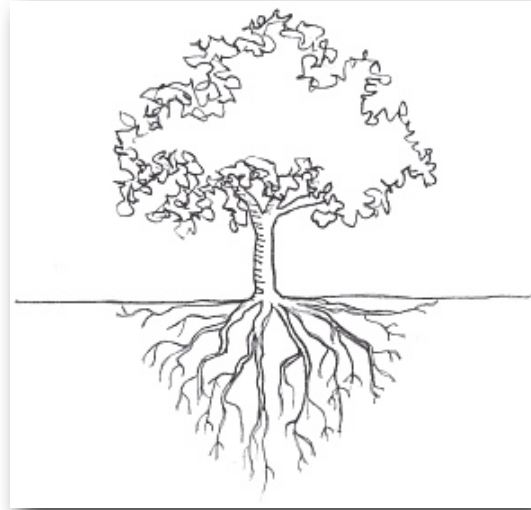
Speak it, and by forming habits that keep us spending time with the language and the people who speak it.

Above all else, I need you to believe that you can develop the commitment needed to be a successful language learner; that you can leave the valley of interest and take small steps daily to climb the mountain of commitment. Then you will be able to take in the view from the top.

Before I move on to talk about our last factor, I need to give you a warning about commitment. Like motivation, commitment can wane, especially in the beginning. If I look back to the list of things I am now committed to, one thing has disappeared in the last few years and it's my commitment to simple living. While living in rural South Dakota, my wife and I were committed to a simple life, living with less, conserving resources, recycling and living somewhat outside of the mainstream of the materialism we saw around us. We chose not to have a TV, cell phones or a computer. We walked or rode a bike to the grocery store when others drove. But then we moved to Istanbul, a metropolitan city of nearly 15 million. In a new culture, a new language and with a new set of friends around us, the commitment faded. We watched it fade in fact; lamenting the loss, but seemingly unable to do much about it.

**To climb steep hills  
requires a slow  
pace at first.**  
-Shakespeare

Commitment is like a tree whose roots go deep with time. At a certain point, these roots are deep enough for the tree to no longer be shaken. Michael Jordan tried to retire from basketball and only lasted a year before he had to come back. The roots were too deep to stay away. If you are a reader of blogs, you see this happen all the time. A new blogger comes on line, full of vigor and energy and five blog posts a week. A year later, they are nowhere to be found. But imagine someone like Seth Godin or [Leo Babauta](#) discontinuing their blogs. It's inconceivable. The roots are too deep.



So the warning is this. If the roots are not deep enough, your commitment is in danger of fading. Roots only go deep with consistency and time. Like a tree, nourishment and the right soil will speed the rate at which the roots grow. So put the things in your life that are going to nourish commitment. Fill your library with movies in the language your learning. Load up your ipod with music in the language. Buy a plane ticket! But also like a tree, bad stuff can stunt growth. Beware of this stuff. Get it out. Cancel the cable TV if you're spending too much time with Prison Break. Purge things from your life that threaten your commitment. Think about these things as you take

consistent steps toward growing your commitment to learning the language.

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# Attitude

**Nothing can stop the man with the right mental attitude from achieving his goal; nothing on earth can help the man with the wrong mental attitude.**

- Thomas Jefferson

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At this point I realize that I am in danger of sounding like a bad episode of Oprah. I have no desire though to sound like a touchy feely, self-help guru who massages your emotions while feeding you a line about overcoming adversity with positive thoughts. So I want to shoot straight with you.

There is no getting around the fact that learning another language will take hard work, discipline, time on task and the right attitude. Jefferson is correct; the right mental attitude is the key to achieving our goal of learning another language. I think we can all easily agree on this. We understand the importance of our attitude because we see it play out every day; at school, in board meetings, as parents, and in traffic. Sometimes it is our attitude and often it is another person's attitude; but the fact remains that our attitude towards an event or activity do more than

**In language learning, it is attitude, not aptitude, that determines success.**

-Steve Kaufmann

perhaps any other thing we do, either positively or negatively affecting the outcome. Language learning is no different.

If the right attitude is important, if a positive attitude will help us achieve our goals, how do we foster and/or create that attitude so that we can be successful language learners? Some of us need to think about this more than others of course. We have expressions like seeing the glass half full or half empty, because we have different dispositions and personalities. For some, a positive attitude is just part of who they are. I am confident though, that no matter what your disposition or make up is, if you are choosing on your own accord to study another language then you are at least starting with the right attitude. I want to offer a few ideas about how to foster and protect this positive attitude over the next few pages.

## **Expectations and Reality**

Imagine you are wearing a rubber band around your wrist. If you were to pull it one inch away from your wrist and let it snap you, it might hurt a bit. If however you pulled it four, five, or six inches away and let it snap, the pain would significantly

**In order to learn a language, you're going to make a million mistakes. So get started!**  
-Dwight Gradin

increase. The distance you pull it away from your wrist then is directly related to the intensity of the pain you will feel when it snaps. In the same way, the further our expectations are from reality, the greater the pain will be when the snap occurs.

As language learners then, the more we can reduce the snaps of unmet expectations, the better our attitude towards language learning will fare. Listening to others who have gone before you can be an important preventative measure that you can take to protect your attitude.

## **Some Days are Going to Stink**

Along those lines, I want to tell you upfront that some days are going to stink. You will think you've forgotten everything you have learned up to that point. You will open a book and it will all look Greek - even though it's Russian. The native speaker you so often converse easily with will tell you that they think you have regressed. If they are from a more straight talking culture, they may just tell you that you stink. These days will come. It's inevitable. But they will also pass and you need to let them go. Let them go quickly and move on. They do not signal failure. They are just part of the journey.

# Guard Your Emotional Health

I like to think that I'm rational. When I am honest with myself however, I realize that I am every bit as emotional as I am rational. My attitude rides heavily on my emotional state, so when I have a day like the one mentioned above, my emotions get pummeled and often drag my attitude into the ring with them.

For this reason it is important that you guard your emotional health as a language learner. You need to be aware of how you're doing. You need to understand what you need. It is a fine line between being challenged and being destroyed. We need to be challenged, of course, lest we lapse into complacency; but we dare not be destroyed.

**The opportunity to step up and to fail (and then to fail again, and to fail again) and to continue failing until we succeed is greater now than it has ever been.**

-Seth Godin

## Check Your Ego at the Door

Language learning is no place for pride. Bringing our egos and our pride into language learning will do one of two things. It will severely limit us as we stay away from anything that might bruise our pride, which is just about everything. It can also destroy our attitude as our egos take a beating.

The alternative then is to check our egos at the door. Epictetus reminds us that “if you want to improve, be content to be thought foolish and stupid.” A piece of advice I received before moving to Turkey was:

***You need to get comfortable with the idea that you are going to be the town clown.***

By checking your ego at the door and getting used to the idea of being the town clown, we can remove much of the emotional pain that a bruised ego can dish out.

It is extremely important to protect ourselves from developing a bad attitude toward language learning. There may be no more powerful or destructive force than our own attitudes. Keep yours healthy. For as Sally Kempton has pointed out, “It is hard to fight an enemy who has outposts in your head.”

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# A Closing Word

**You are the most important factor on your language learning journey.**

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So those are my thoughts on how to sustain the effort that is required to learn another language. Much of what I have written applies to a lot of what is important to us in life and so I hope it has been an encouraging read on a number of different levels. I don't, in any way, assume that I have written anything new here. I have merely offered my slant on a topic that I believe is important; a slant built on my own experiences and observations. And in doing that, I hope that you will sustain the journey and keep on the road to learning another language.

**It's up to you.**

**Now keep going.**

**We all have possibilities we don't know about. We can do things we don't even dream we can do.**

-Dale Carnegie

# Spread the Word

If Sustaining has somehow been an encouragement to you and you feel it may be an encouragement to others, you can spread the word in a number of ways:

**Twitter Facebook Comment**

**(feel free to just email it to friends as well)**

## The Everyday Language Learner

Hi, my name is Aaron Myers and this short guide is just one part of what I do at my blog, The Everyday Language Learner. My goal in all of my writing and language coaching is to help language learners everywhere be more effective, more efficient, and have more fun on their journey.



If you haven't already, consider joining the EDLL community to receive each week's blog posts, the Monthly Mailer newsletter and as a free gift, *8 Ideas To Maximize Your Language Learning Journey*, a short article I wrote to empower you to be a better language learner.

**JOIN NOW**

I have written a number of other guides as well which you can read more about or purchase at:

**[www.everydaylanguageguides.com](http://www.everydaylanguageguides.com)**

Finally, I want to tell you about [The Ten Week Journey](#). This free e-course was created to help the beginning language learner get started. This ten week series of emails will walk you into both the language of your choice, as well as the mindset of a self-directed language learner.

That's it. Thanks so much for taking the time to read and I hope that *Sustaining* will be a big part of helping you stick with your language learning for the long haul. I would love to hear how it is going, how you are sustaining, and how this guide has helped you along the way.

Blessings on your language learning journey!

*- Aaron Myers*

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# Further Reading

Feed the language learning beast within you!

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I would like to leave you with a few links to articles, blog posts and other resources that might help you continue to think about how you can create, foster and protect your motivation, commitment and attitude toward language learning. I guess I see them as energizers you can come back to when you notice your motivation has slumped or you're questioning your commitment or you're watching your attitude take a turn south. So just bookmark them in the back of your mind and hopefully, when you need them most, they will be helpful.

## Motivation

**Step Over the Edge** by Randy the Yearlyglot

**How to Defeat Burnout and Stay Motivated** by Jeffry Tang

**Be There or Be Square** by Chris at Linguistiko

**Motivation: You Don't Need a Shark, But You Do Need Something** by Andrew at How to Learn Spanish

**Mountain Climbing, Motivation and the Deep Seated Fear of Failure** by Chris Guillebeau

**Get Back Up** by Nick Vujicic (a five minute, must see video)

## Commitment

**Learning Language is Like Having a Pet** by Thomas Hjelm

**How Do You Create Commitment** by Randy the Yearlyglot

**How to Deal with Major Disruptions to Your Routine** by Leo Babauta

**The Power of Gradual** by Ian Newby-Clark

**Jerry Seinfeld's Productivity Secret** by Brad Isaac

**The Habit Change Cheat Sheet: 29 Ways to Successfully Ingrain a Behavior** by Leo Babauta

## Attitude

**Identity and Self Fulfilling Prophecy** by Khatzumoto

**Achieve Your Dreams Despite Pressures of Work and Family** by Leo Babauta

**Ten Things to Turn Negatives into Positives** by Tara Miller

**Forward Motion** by Chris Guillebeau

**Keeping an Open Mind** by Simon Ager