10 RULES FOR EFFECTIVE HABIT BUILDING

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Language mentoring

Do you know what the difference is between someone
who's managed to learn a language by themselves and someone who has not?

Is it talent? Brain cells? Genetics? No, no, and no.

It's **HABITS**!

Yeah, that's right, **making a habit of regular learning is one of the basic pillars of achieving fluency in a foreign language** and in pretty much any other skill as well, be it playing the piano, programming or dancing.

Without a habit, your learning will only ever be a struggle and you'll constantly find yourself trying to decide whether you can be bothered studying today or not. But with a habit, you'll just switch to autopilot and spare your mental energy for what's actually important: mastering your foreign language!

In this e-book, I'm going to present **10 rules you should keep in mind while developing and maintaining useful habits**, which you'll not only use while learning a language, but also **in any other area of life**.

The main source of inspiration and thoughts presented in this e-book is a book by James Clear called Atomic Habits (which I definitely recommend reading) alongside the contributions of other authors who deal with long-term success in their writings (such as Charles Duhigg, Angela Duckworth, Petr Ludwig and others). I hope this e-book will help you build useful habits (not only in learning) :)

1) Create a Supportive Learning Environment

We always remind our self-learners how incredibly important it is to **spend time with your foreign language every day**. Even if it's just 10 minutes in the morning and 10 minutes in the evening, you have to keep in touch with the language, otherwise you'll never really learn it.

But how can we **develop a habit of learning every day** without forgetting about it and **actually finding the time to learn** while taking care of dozens of other responsibilities? In the first step, we need to create an environment that will support our learning. It's a very simple yet effective trick!

How to do it?

- You could, for example, **put your headphones next to your house keys**, so that you never forget them when you're heading out and you can listen to a podcast during your short walk to the shop or to your bus stop.

- Ladies, **our handbags** hold many treasures, am I right? Well, how about you throw in **a pair of headphones** to always have them at hand? This way, you'll never find yourself sitting on a bus wanting to listen to an audiobook but not being able to.

- Put **a bilingual book on your bedside table** and as soon as you turn off your alarm in the morning, it will be right there. Try reading a couple of pages in the morning instead of scrolling down social networks or reading the news.

2) Combine Learning with Another Regular Activity

Do you know that feeling when you've hyped yourself up for something you want to do regularly, such as a morning run, diet, cold showers, or anything else, and you're telling yourself: "I'll start on Monday!" or "I'll start next month! In January… Once the summer is over…" There's always a good excuse for not starting right now.

In order to avoid this and **stop looking for the perfect time when you'll finally have time to learn Spanish**, integrate learning into another regular activity that you already do. If you **combine language learning with other regular activities** that you barely even pay attention to anymore, **you'll develop a habit** of learning in a very natural way.

My tips:

- A great way to **use the time spent walking with your baby or driving**, or even walking your dog, is to listen to a good and entertaining podcast.

- Put your **Goldlist notebook next to your slippers** and whenever you get back home from work and take your shoes off, put on your slippers and grab your notebook. You'll do one filtration and you're done.

- Stick a **post-it note on your laptop** and wherever you close it, the note will remind you to spend 5 minutes reviewing your vocabulary with Anki. I'm sure you can squeeze this short activity into your lunch break :)

- Cleaning and ironing are not usually among people's favorite activities, but we have to do them regularly anyway. So how about you **listen to a podcast or do ironing while watching your favorite TV series**? It'll go much faster and be more pleasant as well. The whole house will be sparkling clean and you will have done something for your language skills as well.

3) Combine Learning with Something Pleasant

The very first pillar of Language Mentoring says that learning must be fun. If you consider it a boring and tedious activity you have to force yourself to do, you haven't found the right methods and you won't be able to continue learning for much longer.

This is why you should combine learning with pleasant activities and **make it fun and relaxing**!

How about trying some of these?

- While your **children are playing in the park** or the garden, sit on a bench and read a few pages in your book.

- In warm weather, it's easy to **spend time on your balcony**, right? How about you do your Goldlist filtration while enjoying the sun? And in the fall, you can change a summer drink for a cup of hot tea, **snuggle yourself into a blanket and go over your vocabulary**. Apart from spending time in a pleasant way, you'll also move further towards your goal.

- Can you spot the difference between these two sentences? *"Oh, I still have French conversation in the evening…"* and *"In the evening, my friend and I are gonna drink some wine and practice French!"* They're totally different, right? **Chattering away in French with your friend** is definitely a pleasant activity. And even if it's not possible to go to a pub, you can still have your conversation

through a video call, using websites such as Whereby or Zoom. And when I say "chattering away", I am by no means talking about a fluent conversation with no mistakes! Even intermediate students can have a nice talk if their main aim is to practice speaking in foreign languages.

- How about **enjoying a nice cup of coffee while writing down new vocabulary**, reading a magazine in a foreign language or **completing a page of exercises in a grammar book**? You can even turn it into a little ritual! :)

4) Make Learning as Easy as Possible

Many people tend to start learning full-on and **want to see immediate results in every area**. We start listening to podcasts, reading bilingual books, learning vocabulary, doing grammar exercises, arranging conversation lessons…

If you were to focus on everything at once, your progress would be very slow.

Do you know what learning and pouring wine into a glass have in common?

Imagine that you have a bottle of wine that only lets out individual drops. You'd like to fill 7 glasses with it.

You can keep pouring drops into each of the glasses in turns or you can hold the bottle over a single glass, so that the wine only drips into one.

What will be the result after an hour?

If you've been **dripping wine into all of the glasses, you'll only have a few drops in each one** and you won't be able to enjoy them much. But if you've **concentrated all the drops into a single glass, there will be enough wine in it for a decent sip**.

The same goes for language learning...

... if we focus on all activities at once (which is often the case in schools or language courses), we will only improve a little bit and our progress might barely be noticeable. We will understand a little more, know a few new words, be able to express ourselves a little better. But it will always be just those few drops.

On the other hand, **if we focus on one or two skills** and start developing them systematically every day, even if we only spend 20 minutes per day doing it, **our progress will be much more visible**.

So, what do I recommend?

- If you've **just started learning, choose one priority** you will focus on for let's say the first month. For example, if you want to improve your comprehension in a foreign language, choose reading or listening and incorporate one of them into your daily life.

- If you're already **at home in language learning, choose** (ideally) **3 areas** which you're going to work on. For example, listening, vocabulary and speaking, and spend a little time with them every day.

5) Set the Bar Low at the Beginning

Of course, it would be fantastic if you spent an hour a day with your language, but it's not always possible and we all know it. Don't jump ship just yet! **At the beginning, it's perfectly fine** if you just learn for about **20 or 30 minutes a day**.

If this still sounds like a lot and you can't picture where you could possibly find a free half hour, split it into three 10-minute sessions! You can do 10 minutes in the morning, 10 minutes during your lunch break and 10 minutes in the evening. Trust me, **even a few minutes a day can do wonders** :)

Try doing it like this:

- It's always better listening to a **podcast for 5 minutes** than not listening to it at all!

- You can find many **short, 5 or 10-minute videos on YouTube**. You'll definitely be able to squeeze one into your schedule, even on a busy day.

- While **waiting in a queue** in a shop, **go over your vocabulary** in Anki.

- Or **read just one page from your book** in the evening before going to sleep.

6) Never Skip Two Days in a Row

If you've ever read any motivational books, you may have noticed that a lot of authors who help their readers develop habits and improve their lives recommend this rule. And I can confirm it's a useful one since I've tested it myself!

If you skip one day, you can usually bring yourself to power through yesterday's work the next day and catch up on your learning. However, **if you skip two or more days**, you might tell yourself you'll take a week off and resume your learning next Monday. However, a common outcome of this is that you'll end up skipping a week or two, or even a month, and **perhaps you'll never get back to it at all**.

Even if you're tired and can't be bothered, try overcoming these feelings by remembering these simple tips:

- Watch **5 or 10 minutes of a TV series you're currently watching before going to bed**. It's always better than nothing!

- Or listen to a **podcast for a few minutes while brushing your teeth** in the evening. The important thing is that you do at least something, if you didn't do anything the day before.

- Review at least **5 expressions from your flashcards**. It might not be much, but it still counts. Remember – It's essential you don't skip two days in a row!

7) Make a Note about "Successful Days" in a Sheet/Calendar/App

You'll **love this step and it will also give you extra motivation!** :) If you write down your learning progress in a place where you can see it every day, you'll feel much more motivated, happy and you won't want to skip a day because that would spoil the nice streak of "successful days" in your calendar.

There are several ways you can do that:

- If you're a tech buff, create a **simple sheet**, for example in **Excel** and use it to **write** down how much time you've spent learning. (Those who consider themselves real connoisseurs can even turn these data into fun charts! Remember, the sky's the limit!)

- If you prefer the good old pen and paper, **draw a table on a sheet of paper** with days of the month and write down minutes spent with learning or just check the boxes representing your daily plan. (In our team, we're obsessed with colored pens, markers and washi tapes, so we're always ready to decorate our tables. If you're also a creative critter like us, use it! And feel free to involve your kids as well :)

- There are plenty of **mobile apps for habit tracking**, just Google "habit tracker app" and you'll get dozens of results. Among the most popular are [Daylio](), [Habitica](), [Productive](), and [Simple Habit Tracker]().

8) If Possible, Get it Done in the Morning

We're all different – some of us are early birds, some are night owls – but the fact is, **we all have more energy during the first half of the day**. If you do your learning in the morning, you'll feel great about it all day and you'll never find yourself in a situation where you can't finish your daily learning plan because something unexpected has got into your way.

Do you feel like you won't be able to include learning in your morning activities?

Try it like this:

- **On your way to work, listen to a podcast**. You'll use the commuting time efficiently and learn something at the same time. In the evening, when you're traveling back home and you're tired after a long day at work, treat yourself with some good music instead. (In case you work from home, how about you set a "foreign language only" rule at the breakfast table and speak to your family in Spanish or German or any language you're learning? You can involve the kids and turn this into a pleasant family morning ritual :))

- Need to walk the dog in the morning? You've already learned in Step 1 that you should put headphones next to your house keys (or the dog lead) and **off you go – with the dog on the lead and a podcast in your ears** (even if it's just a short walk around the neighborhood)!

- Not many people start their day without a morning coffee or tea. How about writing **a few sentences in your diary in French** or making a **to-do list in Italian** in between comforting sips of your drink of choice?

- If you manage to steal **10-15 minutes for yourself before going to work**, read **a few pages of your book** or **one article** on your favorite blog.

9) Regularity (not Perfection) is Key

Practice makes perfect! I've already hinted this in a few of the tips, but let's talk about it a bit more in detail now. At the beginning of our learning, we usually make a learning plan and we try to stick to every single bit of it and give it all we can. But then, the reality of life strikes and we're faced with sick kids or partners, cleaning, exhaustion after a long day at work, and no time for learning. Sounds familiar? No worries!

It's OK if you don't manage to stick to your plan 100% and make things perfect. **Regularity is key!** As I've already mentioned, try not to skip two days in a row, even if you can only spend 5 or 10 minutes learning on a given day.

Even if you're left with no energy for learning, there are still plenty of things you can do:

- You don't have to properly review your vocabulary and come up with example sentences, but try to at least read through the words you should be reviewing.

- If you don't have time for writing down 10 new expressions from a TV series, just watch it and enjoy it instead!

- If you can't complete your whole **Goldlist, try doing at least a half** and finish the rest tomorrow.
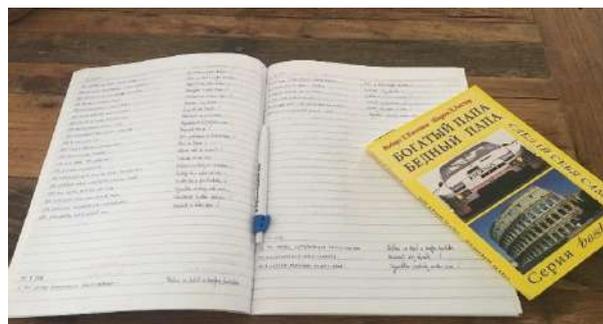
10) Join a Community of People for Whom Habits Are Just a Normal Part of Life

When you join a group of people who are on the same boat as you, trying to learn a foreign language and coming across similar obstacles, you'll feel much better. These people can **understand, motivate, inspire and help you** and you **won't feel like you're in it alone**.

In Language Mentoring, we're trying to build such a community of self-learners, in which people give each other advice and support. We do it through social networks, **come up with various courses and challenges, so that you can learn as part of the community** and not struggle on your own. Follow our Facebook and Instagram if you don't want to miss any new things which we're working on for you! :)

Let´s Start Learning!

So, the next time you're asking yourself whether you can be bothered learning today or not, try to remember at least one of the things I've mentioned in this e-book and make it part of your daily life.

You'll see that a previously boring task will suddenly become something completely natural, you'll switch to autopilot and feel great about yourself because you've managed to triumph over your natural inertia. Once you make a habit of learning, you won't have to force yourself to do grammar exercises or review vocabulary anymore.

Begin step-by-step, split learning time into a few short chunks, spend time with a single priority at the beginning and combine learning with pleasant and regular activities. And remember – even 10 minutes a day is better than nothing! Give it time and it will all work out!

If you have any questions, don't hesitate to contact us!

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I wish you the best of luck!

Lýdia Machová and the Language Mentoring team