Language. It's a pretty cool thing, quite useful. I can still remember back when I was a toddler, about 2 years old learning my first language, English. My Mom taught me how the order in English is subject verb object, and helped me make flashcards so I could memorize vocabulary and helped me for hours and hours to get the different verb tenses right.

Fast forward several years and In college I came over to Japan on a foreign exchange program where I would learn another language. About two years after arriving in the country, I took and passed the highest level of the Japanese Language Proficiency Test. To be fair, I did live in the country, but the concepts I'll discuss in this video will be effective even if you don't have access to native speakers.

Lately there are all kinds of great resources and techniques on language learning. In particular, spaced-repetition system-based virtual flashcard programs like Anki are popular and very useful, but… is that really the most efficient way to sink language into our brains so it can be used on the fly?

After all, how many parents have to give their child a deck of flashcards for review to help their kids reach fluency in their mother tongue? Of course I was kidding earlier and I learned English through magic like every other baby.

In this video I'd like to discuss four simple but not often discussed points that I think are important when it comes to language learning.

The four points are:
1) Acquiring language efficiently through context
2) Maximize input
3) Practice your listening and pronunciation at the same time
4) Make sure the experience of learning is positive

First allow me to take a moment to demonstrate something, so just listen for now. If you already speak Japanese, it might be harder to get my point but hopefully you'll still see what I mean.

今日はティムを紹介しよう。ティムは猫じゃなくて、カエルじゃなくて、人だ。人の体は色んな部分がある。例えば　頭、胸、腕、足ある。

Just listening to me, how much Japanese did you learn from this? Maybe 0%. What if I repeated it or spoke slower, would you learn more Japanese? Most likely not. Let's try it one more time, but pay attention to the screen.

ティムを紹介しよう。ティムは猫じゃなくて、カエルじゃなくて、人だ。人の体は色んな部分がある。例えば　頭、胸、腕、足がある。虫じゃないから目は六つとかじゃなくて二つがある。腕も二つ、足も二つ、耳も二つある。

How about now, maybe 10%, 20% or even just one word? Not a super high amount, but this is the simple difference between acquiring language and not. What I'm trying to demonstrate is the concept of comprehensible input, as did second language acquisition scholar Stephen Krashen did in this lecture of his. He sums up language learning with this : "We acquire

"

What does this mean?

In the 1970s and 80s Krashen put forward a group of hypotheses about language learning. The first claim of his we'll look at is that there is acquisition and learning and Krashen says improvement in language ability is only dependent on acquisition and not learning.

The difference between **acquisition** and **learning** is tricky but it's kind of like the difference between getting a joke and having someone explain the precise reasons why that joke should be funny. For example, a horse walks into a bar and the bartender says...*why the long face*? Or a whale walks into a bar and the whale says "[Woo...oooo...woooo](#)".

If you thought this was funny, you didn't have to consciously work out *why* it was funny. the processing was done on a subconscious level. In Krashen's book [Principles and Practice in Second Language acquisition](#), he says "*Acquisition of language is a natural, intuitive, and subconscious process of which individuals need not be aware.*"

Similarly, you can **learn** words by having someone tell you "The Japanese word for Persimmon is *kaki*." On the other hand, what's necessary for **acquisition** is sufficient comprehensible input. Something like this: りんごを食べる。So, even though you might not know any of the words I just said, you could comprehend the pictures I supplied, and based on that context, you could acquire the meaning of りんご and 食べる。You might need some repetition to distinguish the phonemes, but this is the idea. Then, based on the one I just showed you: りんごを食べる, when I provide you with another example, 「ビールを飲む」 you may have deduced something about Japanese grammar as well. That's right, the verb comes at the end.

The point is, you have this massive pattern recognition device jammed into your head and when you understand the meaning of the message, your brain will naturally pick out vocabulary and deconstruct grammar patterns based on the context - and this is not something you actively and consciously perform.

We often think of babies as being super language vacuums, but your brain has the same pattern recognition capabilities. A baby can deduce that ball means a bouncy rubber sphere because that's what her Mom was holding when she said "*Do you wanna play with the <u>ball?</u>*" But, you can also deduce what *kane* means just from watching these two scenes. [金あるから！ and 金ねぇー！ *scene from Kekkon Dekinai Otoko*]

This leads me to one of the most helpful things - simply watching television series without English subtitles with focused attention even though I couldn't understand most of it.

A bit later on, I tried my hand at plenty of books and refrained from looking up every word.

This is a really simple but important concept, how many new words, phrases and grammar structures can you feed your brain when you're looking up every word as you read a book? You'd take half an hour to get through a page. For the same amount of time, a television show can blast you with far more words, phrases and grammar. A book can too if you're not so trigger happy with the dictionary. And it might not feel like it, but these bits of cloudy information can stick in your head at the subconscious level just waiting for the right context to reveal their meaning.

Engineering Professor Barbara Oakley explains here that we have two modes of thinking - the focused mode and the diffuse mode. The focused mode is where you're racking your brain trying to use your focused

awareness to figure something out, whether it be a math problem or what's going on in a TV show in a foreign language. The diffuse mode works in the background where you're relaxed and not straining on one thing, it can see the big picture and make connections.

This is thought to be why people so often get ideas in the shower - you're relaxed, probably not focused on anything in particular, so your subconscious starts turning its pattern recognition gears to give you insights your conscious mind couldn't see.

You might not have any luck picking up many words or phrases while watching or reading something, but when you go off and do something else, your brain relaxes into the much more flexible diffuse mode and uses its powers of pattern recognition to piece out some meaning from the heaps of language information you were just exposed to.

Now I'm not saying that the fastest way to become fluent in a language is to never open a dictionary, but you'll want to invest a majority of your time on *inputting* a bunch of content into your head from media, books or just paying attention to people around you. Earlier we saw that according to Krashen, acquisition, but not learning can trigger improvement in a language.

But, it seems deliberate *"learning"* can trigger language *"acquisition"* - for example let's say you had watched this before: 俺のケーキ食ったろ。 and you knew 俺のケーキ just means "my cake," but for the life of you couldn't figure out what クッタロ means. You were guessing it means steal. Then you **learn** from a textbook or dictionary that 食う is a very casual way to say eat! Then it all clicks, you realize 食った would be the past tense of this verb and you figure 食ったろ must be the same as 食っただろう。Now you've **acquired** a new word and a new colloquialism and put all the pieces together to fully understand what this guy was saying. This is the "Aha!"

moment indicative of new language acquisition - similar to a joke, it just happens at the subconscious level.

Another key to this is watching television without English subtitles - Watching something with subtitles from your native language seems to completely shut down the much more difficult task of trying to decipher a foreign language.

[A study from Barcelona](#) looking at Spanish speakers trying to learn English found that the worst way to learn was by putting Spanish subtitles on - putting subtitles in your native language. This resulted in 0% improvement in their English ability. Watching with no subtitles provided a 7% improvement, but watching the show in English, their target language, with English subtitles provided a 17% improvement.[R2]

You might be thinking how are you ever going to learn anything if you do all this input without any any speaking practice?

This is where another part of Krashen's theory comes in. He says that while speaking may *indirectly* assist in language acquisition it is not necessary. You don't have to even open your mouth to acquire the language. *This was [demonstrated in 1962](#) when E. Lenneberg described the case of a boy who could not speak due to congenital dysarthria. When Lenneberg tested the boy, he found that the child was able to understand spoken English perfectly.*

With that said, ...you should open your mouth at some point. Pronunciation is of course very important. In self-taught polyglot Gabriel Wyner's book "Fluent Forever," he explains that Half of a good accent is simply a matter of timing, because it's far more efficient to get the pronunciation in your early stages so you don't have to go back and correct a bunch of bad habits.

But pronunciation is… hard. Some noises in the language you'll notice you just can't make because you never have before, so you have to build a kind of muscle memoryof how to physically move your mouth to get that sound.

For example, for a while, my niece was having trouble pronouncing a voiceless velar stop and it came out as a voiceless dental stop." This boy can't quite say sɯ (voiceless alveolar fricative), and it comes out more as a tʃɯ (Voiceless postalveolar affricate)
You don't technically have to know linguistic jargon like this, but it sometimes helps to find out what the technical word is for the sound you're trying to pronounce so you can look up things like sample pronunciations and specific tongue placement for what you're having trouble pronouncing.

This brings me to a technique called **Shadowing**: What you do is basically listen to some audio of a native speaker talking and you just mimic their pronunciation and intonation. Not every word - depending on your level it could be two syllables at a time, three at a time or two words at a time and so on. Shadowing is generally thought of as an advanced technique you should use to master intonation and polish up your accent. But, even from Day 1 it can be a super efficient way for improving your pronunciation *and* at the same time your ability to recognize phonemes in *natural* language. That is to hear natural language.

Like most languages people naturally run their speech together like "What are you doing" becomes "W't'ya'doin'" Watch how in this scene, [Abe Hiroshi turns](#) ところがこうやって becomes "tocolocuerte".

So when I had to prepare for the JLPT1 listening part, I would find some audio online -usually a newscast and shadowed it until I got too frustrated to continue. The next day I aimed to hold out and do it a little longer.

I could tell I was making progress on both my listening and pronunciation because 1 it got easier to hear day by day, but 2 the muscles in my mouth

were getting sore, showing me that proper pronunciation takes a lot of mouth muscle engagement that I probably wasn't doing before. And once I could pronounce certain difficult combinations, it's like I could suddenly *hear* them crystal clear.

 A 2015 study from Japan looking at two groups of English learners found that indeed, shadowing made a statistically significant improvement in phoneme perception for both groups. Look in the description for some tips on shadowing so you can get more out of it without frustrating yourself into hating the language.

This brings me to the last point.

~~What Krashen said again was "~~We acquire language in one way and only one way - when we get comprehensible input in a low anxiety environment.~~"~~
~~This is also called the The affective filter hypothesis. It says that learners'~~ ~~"*ability to acquire language is constrained if they are experiencing negative emotions such as fear or embarrassment.*"~~

~~I think this is why it's rather difficult to acquire language in a classroom setting. I took 4 years of Spanish in High School and I can First of you're acquiring, you are learning, you are consciously commit some word or phrase to memory. Then, there's a lot of focus on output, and as Krashen suggests output doesn't directly contribute to language acquisition, acquisition is done through input. And lastly, you're at risk for embarrassment whenever when you're called on to provide the right pronunciation or translation what have you. And depending on how difficult the class is, you may be fearful of a negative grade.~~

~~That's it for now, just 4 simple things:~~
~~1) Learn from context - This is how you acquire language.~~
~~2) Load up on the input - Spend plenty of time~~

3) Practice listening to natural speech and practice pronunciation at the same time
4) Make sure the experience of learning the language is positive

That's it - Three things. Focus on learning from context, Load up on the input and use the same source to practice your pronunciation and listening to natural speech.

 I realize this still leaves many questions regarding language learning and that this there's tons of useful techniques and approaches for learning a language that I haven't addressed. So please leave a comment if you have any questions and and check the description for more information .