State of Language Learning 2022

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Introduction

Why language learning? Why now?

Despite the advent of real-time translation technology and the continued dominance of English, among other "powerhouse" languages, millions strive to learn a second, third, or even fourth language.

Whether that's for school, work, or pleasure, there's a variety of people looking to communicate with each other across linguistic and geographical barriers.

But desiring to know another language is quite different from the learning process.

This brief report summarizes a small sample of the language learning population to uncover more about who they are, what challenges they face, and their language learning goals in the coming year.

Methodology

How we got here.

This report is a compilation of answers from 356 language learners. Responses were collected and anonymized. The survey was distributed in early January until early March in popular language-learning communities, such as LingQ, Language Facebook groups, and Twitter (#langtwt).

We used the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) as guidance when asked about proficiency.
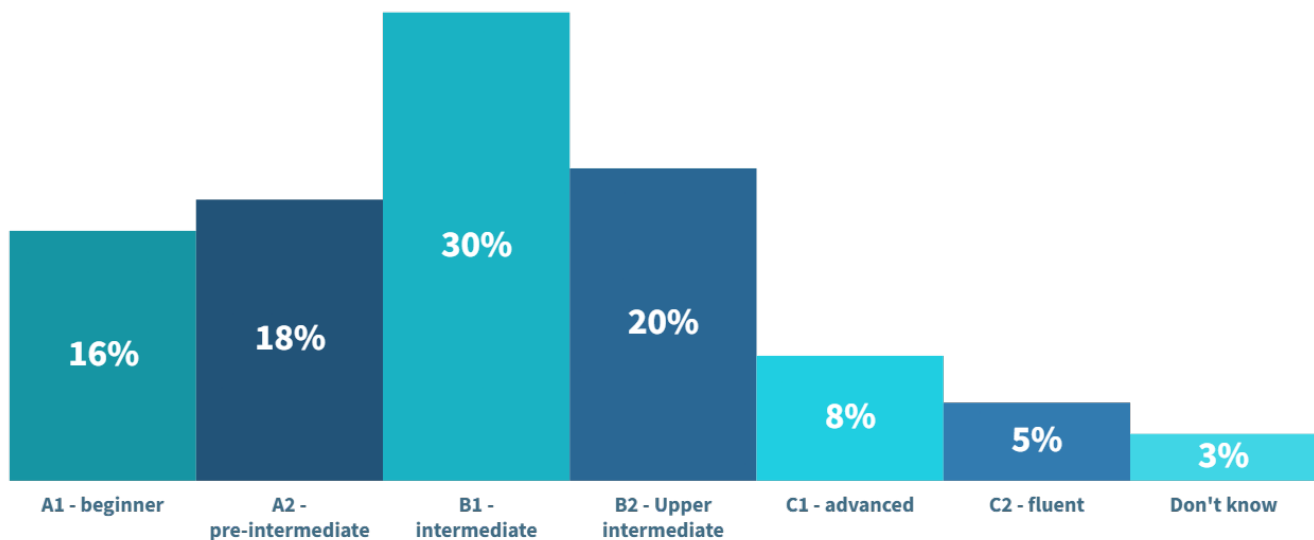
Who is learning?

Demographics

Of the survey respondents, 46% had a college degree, and 37% had some college exposure. A whopping 66% worked full-time, suggesting that most learners in this survey either are not students or are not full-time students.

In 2021, 38% stated that they were studying independently, while 36% said they mixed classroom and independent study. On average, learners reported studying around 14 hours a week.

The majority of respondents said they believed themselves to be an intermediate level in their primary target language.

What is your current language proficiency?

A1 - beginner	A2 - pre-intermediate	B1 - intermediate	B2 - Upper intermediate	C1 - advanced	C2 - fluent	Don't know
16%	18%	30%	20%	8%	5%	3%

Two-thirds of learners had to take a foreign language in either primary or secondary school, or both.

Furthermore, only 17% were heritage speakers. The remaining had no other connection the language except perhaps friends, travel, work, or simply enjoyment.

In this survey, 82% of respondents reside in the United States. Learners were also polled from:

- Pakistan
- Australia
- UK
- China
- France
- India
- Greece
- Italy

- El Salvador
- Slovakia
- Nigeria
- Luxembourg
- Germany
- Canada
- Singapore
- South Africa

- Turkey
- Ukraine
- Kenya
- Croatia
- Czech Republic
- Bulgaria
- Finland
- Israel

Given that most learners who responded were from the United States, the most common native language was also English, at 82%. Native Chinese, German, Italian, French and Spanish speakers made up the bulk of the remainder. Other native languages included:

- Ukrainian
- Tagalog
- Greek
- Slovak
- Yoruba
- Urdu

- Hungarian
- Dutch
- Russian
- Czech
- Swedish

- Swahili
- Croatian
- Bulgarian
- Marathi
- Hindi

About 2% already speak more than one language natively.

Top Challenges

Common obstacles learners shared

Understanding the common trends that current learners face provide us with two primary advantages:

1. Understanding what kinds of materials to use.
2. Learning how to structure attainable goals better.

The top five reoccurring challenges learners face today provide significant insight into what the industry is still lacking.

1. Meeting natives

The number one obstacle for language learners is finding a native speaker to practice with. This can be due to several factors. A learner might live too far away from target language communities. They may not have the time to commute to target language groups or money to hire a native language tutor.

For beginner students, usually within the A1-A2 levels of CEFR, finding a native speaker can be particularly difficult. And this is normal, as learners at this level typically lack the exposure to in-depth vocabulary and grammar for prolonged, meaningful conversation with natives.

Tandem and language exchange apps exist—in fact, 69% of learners say they engage in exchanges with native speakers. However, unstructured exchanges are typically difficult to sustain. Furthermore, it's common for users to be overwhelmed with unsolicited flirting, no-show partners, and other issues.

Hobby-specific forums and social media may be better suited to fostering output with native speakers. However, these activities often require a higher level.

## 2. Speaking and writing – nearly equal difficulty

While a significant amount of research and marketing campaigns focus on fostering speaking skills, but respondents considered both output skills to be nearly equal in terms of difficulty.

What areas of learning are most difficult? (select all that apply)

26%	44%	20%	43%	33%	13%
Listening	Speaking	Reading	Writing	Grammar	Learning Vocabulary
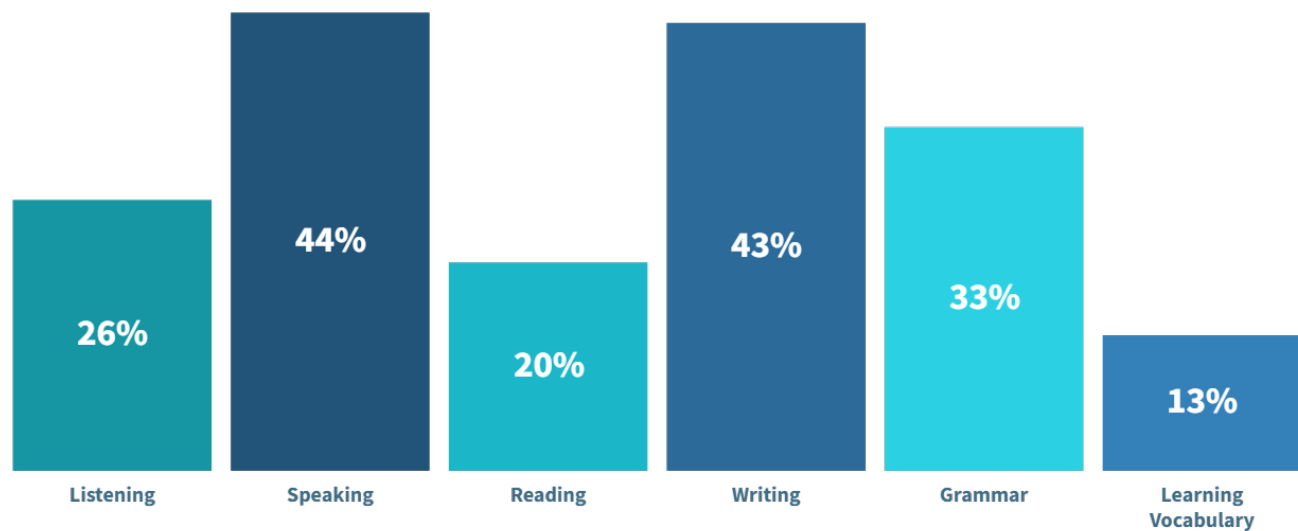
However, when asked how comfortable a particular task is to complete, speaking ranked "easier" than writing:

What areas of learning are you comfortable with? (Select all that apply)

46%	36%	64%	31%	28%	41%
Listening	Speaking	Reading	Writing	Grammar	Learning vocabulary
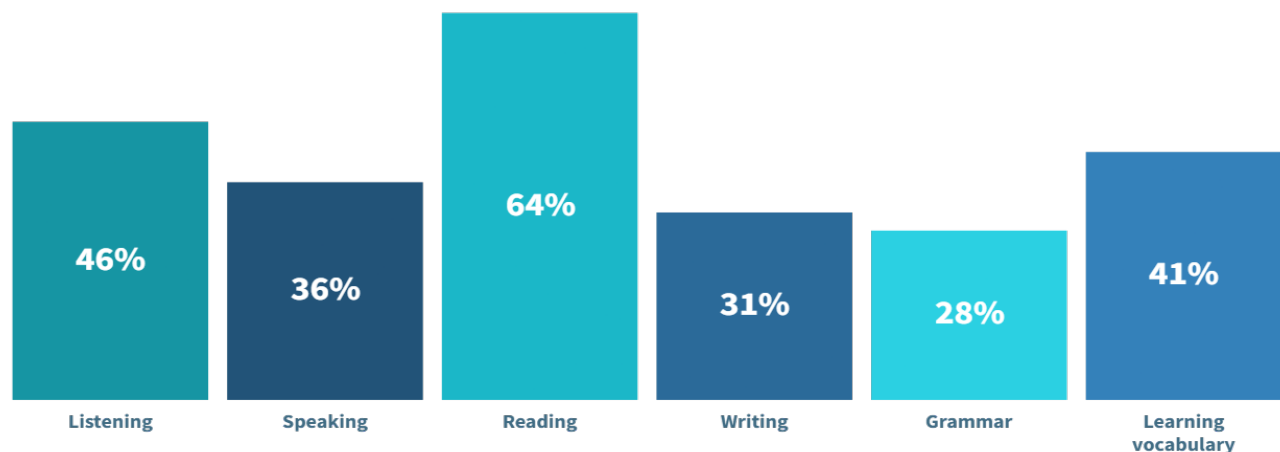
Interestingly, learning vocabulary was considered the least challenging, despite most applications being geared towards flashcards and vocabulary memorization.

However, for decades, it's been known that output activities, such as speaking and writing, tend to take longer to develop.

> **"Children are usually allowed to go through a 'silent period', during which they build up acquired competence through active listening. Several scholars have suggested that providing such a silent period for all performers in second language acquisition would be beneficial."**
> **Stephen Krashen, 1981**

There are several thoughts as to *how* learners can overcome this difficulty, including increased input through reading and listening and an emphasis on casual communication.

3. Reaching desired proficiency

Language proficiency or fluency is a rather fluid term. What one person considers "proficient" typically changes based on what they want to do in that language.

When asked whether they had taken language proficiency exams, 30% said they had taken an exam, but they either didn't like their result or planned to retake the test. In addition, 25% said they were satisfied with their results, and 16% had no interest.

At the same time, several learners commented that their biggest regret was their proficiency level. Others wished they had started sooner or had a better grasp of the language to experience international travel.

Despite the many frameworks to gauge proficiency, learners may struggle with aligning these guidelines with their goals and materials.

4. No time or not enough time to study

It takes time to learn anything, but it's incredibly crucial for a language. Learners need time to read, listen, speak, write, and review vocabulary. They need time to revisit old concepts and words, to explore the language in its native setting.

However, most language learners said that insufficient time was a significant obstacle. Some described it as "difficult to learn quickly."

Although there is considerable flexibility, how quickly it takes to learn a language has been studied and evaluated. Generally, the closer a target language is to your native language, the less time it should take to learn.

Learners have other obligations, such as family, school, work, chores, and other activities that can't be missed.

How are they learning?

Tools of the trade

Overwhelmingly, language learners rely on online lessons (57%) and self-study (45%). Meanwhile, only 19% stated they are learning via classroom. The ongoing pandemic undoubtedly elevated these numbers, but with increasingly accessible online resources, this form of study is likely to stay.

Additionally, 49% meet with a native-speaking tutor. Websites are the most popular material type (68%), followed by smartphone apps like Duolingo (56%).

What materials do you use?

37%	56%	68%	46%	3%
Textbook	Smartphone Apps (Duolingo, etc)	Websites	News, books, movies, etc.	Other
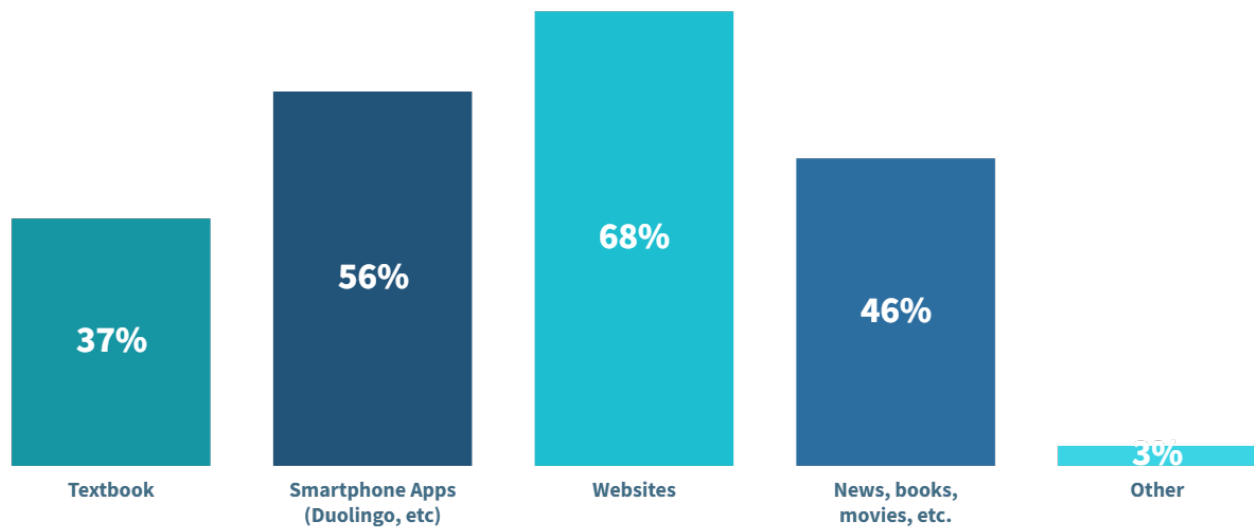
69% of learners participate in language exchanges, either written or verbal, and 48% use their target language outside of their general study time.
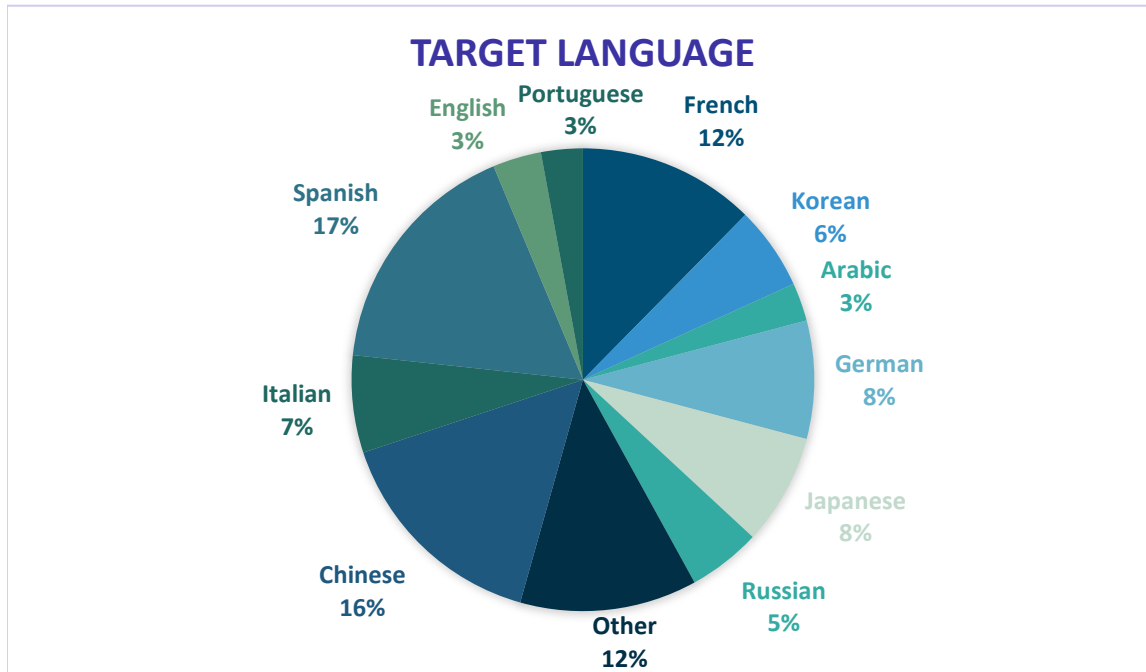
Study groups are also reasonably common. 58% belong to a language learning group or community, including:

- Professional groups with work colleagues
- Target culture groups
- None-language specific platforms: Tumblr, Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, Discord
- Language-specific platforms: Italki, Duolingo, LingQ

These groups do not always focus directly on improving language skills. In fact, many said that these groups help them remain motivated.

What are they learning?

Target Languages

TARGET LANGUAGE

Spanish 17%
English 3%
Portuguese 3%
French 12%
Korean 6%
Arabic 3%
German 8%
Japanese 8%
Russian 5%
Other 12%
Chinese 16%
Italian 7%

Other languages also include:

- Thai
- BSL
- Swedish
- ASL
- Modern Greek
- Dard
- Polish
- Esperanto
- Ancient Greek

- Norwegian
- Persian
- Turkish
- Bangla
- Croatian
- Afrikaans
- Vietnamese
- Dutch

- Indonesian
- Caucasic
- Quechua
- Latin
- Romanian
- Catalan
- Hebrew

Approximately 15% of respondents are learning more than one language.

Language Learning Trends

Language apps have come and gone. There are dozens of flashcard and vocabulary building apps, expensive textbooks, and several other niche learning solutions catering to every student type. When we put all of the information together from the survey, here is what we've learned.

1. Websites, not apps, dominate

Not every language learning tool necessarily needs an app. Websites provide several functionalities that an app does not, such as in-depth grammar explanations, various activities, forums, and other actions. Many online courses also take place on websites, and with more and more sites becoming "mobile friendly," apps can be an unnecessary expense.

For learners, many websites are coming out with additional capabilities. While Readlang and LingQ have been around a while, there are sites like Toucan, Netflix or YouTube subtitle extractors, and other multimedia players.

However, all materials still can only focus on input skills – reading, listening, vocabulary and grammar.

However, at the end of the day, the multimedia and ease-of-use of websites are likely to continue.

2. The search for output opportunities

A primary regret for learners is that they didn't have a chance to make friends with a native speaker or use the language conversationally. Additionally, we've seen that writing and speaking continue to be the most challenging aspects of language learning.

Some sites like Italki provide writing aids. However, apps like the long-form penpal app Slowly and language exchange HelloTalk may provide better output practice—give you

can find a partner. HelloTalk, for example, allows for audio input, so learners can record themselves and ask for corrections.

Language-specific discords or target-language live streams can provide additional output practice for B1+ level learners, both through websites and apps.

Some applications attempt to simulate output situations through chatbots, such as Ling. But this also focuses primarily on writing, not speaking. Rosetta Stone also has a "Milestone" feature at the end of every module that simulates a conversation. In this case, they can often reference computer answers to figure out the appropriate question or response. While this can be useful, it still mirrors a test rather than a spontaneous conversation.

3. Goal setting to grow

A whopping 82% of language learners also set goals. But many learners said that goal setting was their #1 priority for the coming year.

Despite the proficiency levels set by official frameworks, there is often a disconnect on how to achieve them.

Many materials attempt to use frameworks by boasting about the number of words in each language level or how many grammar topics are covered. However, learners are often left with few materials for self-evaluation outside of their applications.

Learners might benefit from finding a way to track their progress, independent from certain platforms. This can include tracking hours and activities, keeping a journal, or using another metric to establish proficiency.

They may also decide whether they want to be gauged by a traditional proficiency test or through a set of custom tasks they want to be able to accomplish. For example, a business person might want to explain a product in Chinese, while an expat in Germany might want to be able to ask for repairs from their landlord.

4. Benefits outweigh the regrets

There were a number of regrets about language learning. Not having enough time. Not making friends. Not starting sooner. But there were many, many more benefits.

Some of their biggest "wins" from learning a language have been:

- Getting better customer service
- Being warmly received by locals
- Expanding their horizons
- Making friends
- Studying etymology
- Connection with their heritage
- Access to more information
- Sense of achievement
- Learned more about themselves
- Job opportunities
- A new hobby

The Linguist Magazine

About Us

The Linguist Magazine aims to connect language and heritage with cultural content. While our words reflect our histories, we learn far more through relevant context. Officially launched in December, 2021, the *Linguist Magazine* currently provides articles on language learning, travel, living abroad, and other cultural topics.