

How Babbel Gets You Speaking a New Language

Miriam Plieninger has led Babbel's Didactics department since 2009. Currently more than 150 full-time and freelance employees create learning content and features for our 14 learning languages and 9 display languages. Here Miriam describes how the unique teaching method she and her colleagues developed enables anyone to learn a new language effectively.

Babbel is committed to successful language learning outcomes. Success means that our learners can apply the language skills they've gained with our app in real life. That they can comprehend and express themselves. That they enjoy feeling competent in a second language – and not just at an advanced level, but even after their first few lessons.

An example of real-world language skills: While traveling, you need to order something in a café or restaurant. You can formulate this in varying levels of detail, depending on how advanced your language skills are. But whether you say “Coffee, please,” or “I'd like a coffee, please,” or “Could I please have a small coffee with soy milk and a spoonful of brown sugar” – the act of making yourself understood in another language is a success, and that's a great feeling. Addressing someone in their own native language almost always opens doors, and conversations might develop at a basic level in your second language, a mix of your native and second languages, or a lingua franca.

To achieve this quickly and efficiently, Babbel teaches practical language skills you can put to use in everyday life, starting from the complete beginner's level. When creating each course we adapt the descriptions of functional language skills (reading, writing, speaking, listening) listed in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and apply these to realistic situations, appropriate for each proficiency level.

Focusing on practical communicative skills, we introduce grammar and vocabulary in the context of everyday situations. For example, to politely order coffee, you would say “please” as well as a conditional verb (like “could” or “would”). Learners don't have to understand the entire grammatical concept of conditional verbs to master ordering coffee, just a small part of it. And this practical part is what learners focus on at the beginner's level. Babbel introduces grammar and vocabulary implicitly through situational dialogues and then explains the usage afterward through practical examples. Anyone who wants a deeper dive can, of course, do that with dedicated grammar-focused lessons.

Authenticity and Diversity

At Babbel over 150 linguists and language teachers design and optimize our content to develop language skills while instilling relevant cultural knowledge. Babbel's dialogues, vocabulary and exercises are recorded by native speakers with a diverse mix of real-world accents and pronunciation so that learners hear their new language how it is actually spoken. Similarly, the images accompanying each new word or phrase also accurately depict the environment and cultural context where each of Babbel's 14 learning languages are spoken.

Authentic pictures create emotional connections to the material, and our emotions support how learning content is processed cognitively. ¹ Seeing where the language you're learning is spoken and people who are similar to you using it enhances our content's relevance. And the more relevant information is, the more likely it is stored and encoded in the brain. ^{2,3}

Speaking a foreign language involves mastering the correct expressions and formulations as well as gaining cultural competence in a new context. This might include, for example, knowing how and when it's appropriate to tip, where to purchase bus tickets, or when and why people meet for a meal. In Italy, for example, what's served as an *aperitivo* in the early evening is completely different than the traditional Swedish coffee break for *fika*. To empower our learners to have authentic experience of a new culture and get around easily, Babbel expands on relevant cultural information alongside the requisite language skills.

Grounded in linguistic theory

Learning should be fun and feasible even when you have a full schedule. Those who regularly study and revise for short time periods usually progress more quickly than people who learn intensively but less often⁴. That's why Babbel offers lessons that can be completed in 15 minutes on average. When introducing new concepts and vocabulary, we use two established pedagogical methods:

1) Instead of individual words, we often teach 'chunks': short phrases with words embedded in a usage example⁵. Teaching chunks allows learners to use new vocabulary quickly, and it introduces words in their correct grammatical form without learners having to understand the entire grammatical framework.

2) In cognitive science, it's been proven that +/-7 new items can be processed and transferred to short-term memory at once. More than that leads to mental overload, which blocks information processing and memory.

Short lessons that integrate easily into your daily routine, personal relevance and an emotional connection to the learning content are essential building blocks of our method. To ensure that language, grammar and vocabulary knowledge accumulate in a way that makes sense, we tailor the progression of every course to what's essential at the learner's current level of proficiency. Repeating motifs are found throughout the different levels, which build up communicative skills step by step, along with the requisite knowledge of grammar,

¹ Macintyre, P., & Gregersen, T. (2012). Emotions that facilitate language learning: The positive-broadening power of the imagination. *Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching*, 2(2), 193–213. DOI:10.14746/ssllt.2012.2.2.4

² Swain, M. (2013). The inseparability of cognition and emotion in second language learning. *Language Teaching*, 46, 1–13. DOI: 10.1017/S0261444811000486

³ Nižegorodcew, A. (2007). *Input for instructed L2 learners: The relevance of relevance*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

⁴ Baddeley, A. D. (1999). *Essentials of Human Memory*. Hove: Psychology Press.

⁵ Ellis, N.C. (2003). Constructions, chunking and connectionism: the emergence of second language structure. In C. J. Doughty & M. H. Long (Eds.), *The handbook of second language acquisition*. Oxford: Blackwell.

vocabulary and pronunciation. Babbel's progressive courses strike a balance between teaching new input and a diverse range of review activities.

Babbel's Review Manager uses the empirically proven method "Spaced Repetition"^{6,7} to transfer vocabulary from short-term to the long-term memory – helping learners recall and use words. New words learned on the app are added automatically to the Review Manager, and tested at increasing time intervals adapted to learners' confidence with the material.

Tailored for Each Language Combination

Babbel currently enables you to learn 14 languages via 9 display languages. We develop our learning content and progression specifically for each possible combination of learning and display language. A native Spanish speaker learns Italian differently from an English speaker because of the close relationship between these languages. Likewise, German native speakers need more explanation for Polish grammar than for Dutch grammar. That's why we tailor every course to the unique combination of languages.

Empirically Proven

Multiple academic studies show that you can learn effectively and successfully with Babbel: Your language skills increase and you can use your new language to communicate^{8,9,10}. A comprehensive study by the City University of New York on the efficacy of the Babbel Spanish courses showed that absolute beginners achieved the level of one college semester after 15 hours of learning Spanish¹¹. In another study with Michigan State University, the participants improved their speaking skills after three months with Babbel¹².

While we're proud of what we've already achieved, we are always evolving and improving. That's why we're currently working on more sophisticated uses of computational linguistics and new technologies to make learning with Babbel even more communicative, authentic and personal.

⁶ Goossens, N. A., Camp, G., Verkoeijen, P. P., Tabbers, H. K., & Zwaan, R. A. (2012). *Spreading the Words: A Spacing Effect in Vocabulary Learning*. *PsycEXTRA Dataset*. DOI:10.1037/e502412013-946

⁷ Miles, S. & Kwon, C. J. (2008). Benefits of Using CALL Vocabulary Programs to Provide Systematic Word Recycling. *English Teaching*, 63(1), 199–216. DOI:10.15858/engtea.63.1.200803.199

⁸ Bradley, L., Vigmo, S., & Al-Sabbagh, K. (2018). Mobile language learning for integration – A case study of Babbel as a complementary tool.

⁹ Vesselinov, R. & Grego, J. (2016). The Babbel Efficacy Study. <http://comparelanguageapps.com/documentation/Babbel2016study.pdf>

¹⁰ Loewen, S., Isbell, D. & Sporn, Z. (2018). Learning Spanish with Babbel. https://press.babbel.com/en/downloads/studies_research/

¹¹ Vesselinov, R. & Grego, J. (2016). The Babbel Efficacy Study.

¹² Loewen, S., Isbell, D. & Sporn, Z. (2018). Learning Spanish with Babbel.