Ever onward! How to improve your advanced language skills

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Introduction

- Many people here will not have problems getting a basic working knowledge of a language. But what about improving at an advanced level?
- The nature of the challenge:
  - progress less visible (non-linear, diminishing marginal returns; inverted funnel/reverse bullseye).
  - you may be harder on yourself;
  - all skills - esp if doing exam; BUT
  - you have a huge base already, thrill of “real” usage, interesting, rewarding.
- Half of you have already done this at least with English.

What is advanced? CEFR levels (overview)

B2: main ideas of complex text, incl. technical discussions in your field of specialisation; regular interaction with native speakers without strain; produce detailed text on wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue.

C1: wide range of demanding, longer clauses, implicit meaning, express ideas spontaneously without searching for expressions; use language flexibly and effectively for social, academic and professional purposes; produce detailed text on complex subjects.

C2: with ease virtually everything heard or read; summarize information from different spoken and written sources, reconstructing arguments and accounts; express self spontaneously, very fluently and precisely, finer shades of meaning even in the most complex situations. ….and beyond the Cs.

Article Talk

Common European Framework of Reference fc

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

"CEFR" redirects here. For the Chinese nuclear reactor, see China Experimental Fast Reacto

The **Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Ass** (compared to the German abbreviations GeR or GeRS, the French abbreviation CECR, the Italia achievements of learners of foreign languages across Europe and, increasingly, in other countrie project "Language Learning for European Citizenship" between 1989 and 1996. Its main aim is t all languages in Europe. In November 2001, a European Union Council Resolution recommende The six reference levels (see below) are becoming widely accepted as the European standard fc

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How much time? The hare or the tortoise?

- Timescale - hour estimates vary for the language:
  - B1 350-400 (TRKI 600)
  - B2 500-600 (TRKI 1100)
  - C1 700-900 (TRKI 1300)
  - C2 1000-1200 (TRKI 1450)
- Not sure how these help in practice, unless you're paying for classes. Cf: *ab initio* at university/intensive FSI programmes.
- Attitude: 80/20 "hacking" or "master of a craft"? Not just blind "time" in the game, but what you're doing with it. But yes, a lot of time!
- Why rush if you don't have to? Savour the journey.

My skewed back history and recent experiences

- Russian: self-taught. Loads of speaking, listening and reading. Little experience in written composition. About six years in total in Russia.
- German: self-taught. Goethe Institut residential intermediate course. About three and a half years in total in Germany. Loads of speaking and listening. A little less reading, no writing. Very little written composition.
- In comfort zone. On a “wonky plateau” - writing the weakness.
- Last year, this year: gone back to active attempts to improve. TRKI B2; Goethe Institut C1.

Some things I’ve noticed from my story

- Resuming after a longish break:
  - once you get to a certain level, you don’t forget structures, if you’ve done deep learning, building up solid experience.
  - active vocabulary may temporarily shrink but more passive knowledge remains and can quickly be reactivated. With lesser-used words, noun “classification” remains in memory (e.g. “I know it’s a type of tree/a type of fish….not sure which”).
- At advanced level: some of the beginners problems with a given language go away, others remain. For me…..

For me….plus ça change...

- German:
  - sot much easier: word order/sentence structure
  - still harder: gender, plurals, adjectival agreement, mixing up vowels e.g. Xdas GesmeckX = der Gesmack.
- Russian:
  - got much easier - cases
  - still harder - verbal conjugation and aspects, verbs of motion. Mobile stress.
- Pronunciation challenges remain the same in both languages.

What should you be doing?

- You need to develop all four skills….we'll look at all four.
- You need focussed practice on structure/grammar, including back to basics to "take your game apart".
- First, arm yourself with the right materials. Let's see!

Textbooks

- You’re not too big for one!
  - objective system;
  - forced variety;
  - objectivity;
  - grammar/structures/vocab across the four skills.
- Titles are thinner on the ground at this level (check what authors mean by “advanced”).
- Try to get a book with exercises with answers/audio….and actively make your own.

Using exams

- Pre-exam assessments.
- Exam plusses:
  - a motivational target;
  - objective yardstick “nowhere to hide”;
  - maybe useful “in the market”.
- Exam minuses:
  - artificial context/working to the exam?
  - do you need all four skills?

Grammar books

- Have a standard reference work.
- Ideally: with self-test questions included (or separate workbook) with answers, e.g. Wade's *A Comprehensive Russian Grammar*. Hammer's *German Grammar and Usage* etc.
- Reference works in your target language: "Duden" etc.

Vocabulary tools and tasks

- For TRKI 3: 12,000 (7,000 of which in active vocabulary).
- Advanced collections, e.g. CUP “Using Russian Vocabulary”, “Using German Vocabulary”. Other advanced published lists (Routledge “Frequency Dictionaries”). Do you find them useful?
- “Roots and branches” approach to Russian.
- Native dictionaries.
- Note new words…..spaced recall repetition, Gold List method...and try to activate.
- Fine distinctions in meaning become important.

Vocabulary….those not so advanced moments

- How could I have got this far without…. “Holly” (die Stechpalme), “hard shoulder” (der Seitenstreifen).

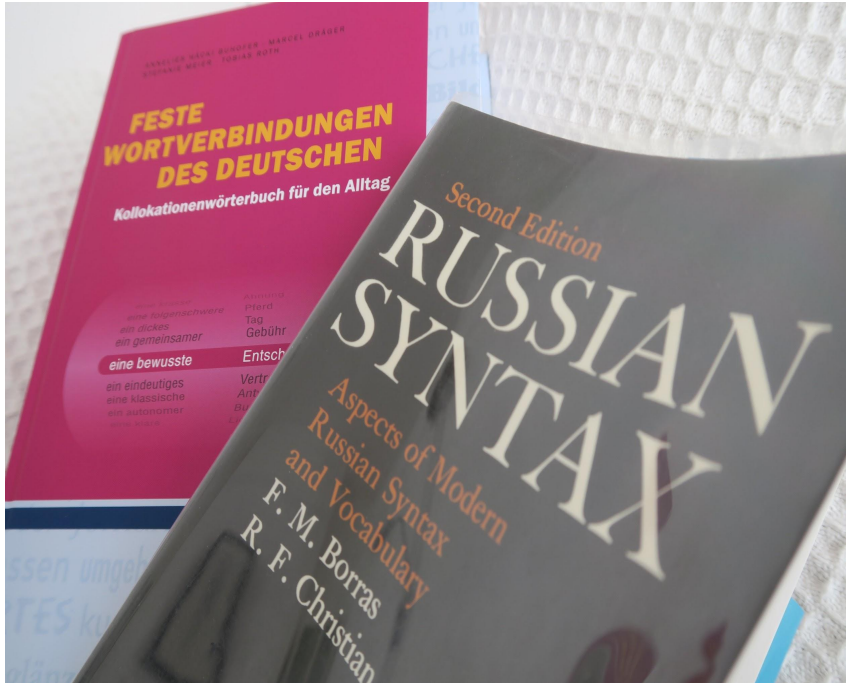
- “Advanced” confidence (“clever mistakes”): you start going off on a creative frolic with compound items …. just because you (think you) can, e.g. Busfahrer > XZugfahrerX - it’s Zugführer.

- Learn the specialist vocab to talk about what you’re doing grammatical terms, words like “punctuation” (die Interpunktion).

Set expressions and patterns

- Collocations (“chunking”) even more important at this level for fluency and to sound natural. It’s not just about getting your message across in a rough and ready way any more.

- So, learn set phrases: “evaporate into thin air” (sich in Luft auflösen); prospects of agreement “disappearing across the horizon”/“further away than ever” (eine Einigung rückt in immer weitere Ferne).



Using teachers

- Choose native speakers!
- Take responsibility!
    - If you’re doing an exam, don’t assume your teacher is an expert on it. If not doing an exam: what are you looking for? It won’t be obvious. Guide the teacher.
    - So much to do, so don’t use the teacher for things you can do yourself (looking up points/self correct exercises/reading longer texts).
- For me mainly for speaking practice/writing correction. What about listening and reading with a teacher?

Speaking

- If you're living in the language community, don't be complacent. Lots of routine and casual conversation but are you just getting super fluent at A2 tasks? Can you take new social and professional opportunities to use and develop your language? Specialisms/hobbies?

- Using your teacher: lesson could easily just be casual conversation and this is a temptation if you're short on speaking opportunities BUT: you need to be forced to engage beyond your comfort zone. Textbooks/exams seem to have a stock range of pet topics. If not sitting an exam push yourself forward in areas of use and interest to you at work or in your hobbies/wider life.

- Register? Be aware of differences and practice what you need (For exams: standard language, err towards the formal. Slang not required).

Pronunciation/accent/intonation/tones?

- German - same old problems: ie/ei; Umlauted vowels.

- Russian - same old: soft/hard consonants. The two “i” sounds.

- How do you get better? Rely on your “ear”? Get into phonology? Should you take coaching? Work with audiobooks?

Writing

- Nature of the beast:
  - the hardest skill to develop? (consider your native language experience!).
  - less flexible than speech, mistakes cannot be “smoothed over”.
  - additional rules (punctuation, layout - or not? Texting, Facebook posts…).
- You may have neglected the skill in the past (“wonky plateau”). Practise, practise, practise...with feedback.

Value of translation and of prose composition

- Translation: “traditional” (restrictive, uncreative?)....but….
- Lack of flexibility of the task forced me to deal with finer differences: Felsen/Klippen.
- Free prose composition: more “realistic” usage but you can bypass difficulties (which I see as a negative at this level).
- Keep a journal? Blogging? Social media? Erm….. learn to type!
- Both translation and free composition highlight typical interference from your native language.

Reading

- Make full use of your textbook materials *and then* also read what you want to read anyway. Do you like bilingual texts? Graded “Readers”?
- Factual versus creative?
- Make it interactive: underline (but don’t interrupt your flow), summarise verbally or in writing with your teacher? Write a review?
- Exam tasks and challenges: time pressure, internal logic of the exercise may need practice.

Listening

- An embarrassment of online audio riches.
- Factual/creative? News can get easy (repetitive, limited vocabulary, cues from news in your language). Get out of your comfort zone with the “register” and topics.
- Try and make it interactive - listening with the clipboard, retell to your teacher. Write a summary. Podcasts great for this?
- Exam tasks and challenges: summarising information in telegraphic style/multi choice answers….speed of recordings and limited time, may only be played once or twice.

Beyond the Cs

- Literature collections and poetry. Online too.
- Dictionaries for specialist domains, idioms, proverbs, slang, “geflügelte Worte”.
- Iconic texts (e.g. bible, classics, children’s literature)
- Guides to the culture.
- Translators and interpreters as “omniscient ignorants” (like journalists). Read encyclopedias! The whole newspaper! Print off Wikipedia pages. Specialisation.
- Doing more and more in your L2 - hobbies, holidays, online groups.

Thanks for listening….now...let's discuss!

Let's discuss

Do stay in touch!

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