

Loïs Talagrand

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Just start doing it.

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You're listening to Speaking of Language, a podcast recorded at the Language Resource Center at Cornell University. Each week, we explore a topic related to language pedagogy and second language acquisition.

Sam Lupowitz

This week on Speaking of Language, Lewis Tallagrand recounts his journey from English student with poor conversation skills to an accomplished polyglot with a popular YouTube channel about language learning.

Angelika Kraemer

Welcome to a new episode of Speaking of Language. I'm Angelika Kramer, the director of the Language Resource Center at Cornell University.

Sam Lupowitz

And I'm Sam Lupowitz, the LRC's media manager. We are delighted to welcome Lewis Tallagrand to our podcast today.

Angelika Kraemer

Lewis is a software developer, language learner and avid YouTuber who explores best ways for learning languages on his channel.

Sam Lupowitz

Welcome to Speaking of Language, Loïs.

Loïs Talagrand

Thank you for having me. It's a pleasure.

Angelika Kraemer

So to get us started, please tell us a little bit more about you and your own path with languages.

Loïs Talagrand

Well, you know, I was born and raised in Tahiti, in French Polynesia. So my native language is French. And I started learning English like any kid in the French system of education at about 11 or 12.

But, you know, just in school for about seven years. And I think probably when I was 18 around that, I went to college in Switzerland in the French speaking part. And that's where I started meeting with, you know, a lot of foreign students and a lot of Americans, a lot of Italian speakers.

And I realized that after seven years of learning English, I was absolutely just terrible. I couldn't hold like a basic conversation with people. It was really embarrassing.

I remember a specific incident. I was on a train from, I don't remember where, but I was going to Geneva Airport and there was this British guy, sort of. I remember him being as a little posh, I guess.

He went to some prestigious university in the UK or whatever. And he was talking to me in the train. And in my mind, I was like, what is he talking about?

And yeah, this was just, there are no words to describe this experience. It's embarrassing. It's alarming too, because after seven years of, and I was a good student in school.

Like I did the homework. I did all the steps and I could not have a basic conversation in English. And so I think this was sort of the point where I realized, okay, I need to take this more seriously.

I mean, specifically for English, because as a software developer, I mean, just as a person, as a modern person, you need to understand English. Otherwise, it's pretty much the equivalent of being illiterate, you know, a few hundred years ago. So I took this seriously and then it started me on a journey of learning other languages, starting with Italian.

Because, you know, there are lots of Italian speakers in Switzerland and then Japanese. But yeah, that's sort of my journey with languages. And then I started a YouTube channel about language learning where I interview a lot of academics and researchers in this domain.

So it's been a lot of fun.

Sam Lupowitz

Terrific. Well, that's a perfect segue into our next question. Would love to hear about the origins of your YouTube channel and what can viewers find there?

Loïs Talagrand

Well, so I think, you know, if you look back, probably my first videos, it was nothing fancy. I mean, I was recording with a very bad webcam, just showing my screen and I was telling people, hey, I'm using this website to learn Japanese and it's pretty good and look at the

features. And then, you know, progressively I started doing more, you know, big ideas sort of videos.

And I realized that because I'm interested in health and fitness. And so in this domain, you get a lot of videos and podcasts where, you know, you get scientists. They tell you, well, here's what the research says about, you know, how many sets you have to do for a bench press or stuff like that.

Sam Lupowitz
Sure.

Loïs Talagrand

And I just thought, well, there's no equivalent for language learning. Like I'm learning languages, but it's sort of, you know, I'm trying to guess which methods are working and it shouldn't be that way. So I reached out to some, you know, researchers who were kind enough to come on the show.

I'm thinking specifically of Professor Paul Nation, who apparently is a legend in the vocabulary research. And I had no idea at this point. I just saw some of his papers and I thought, well, this is pretty interesting.

I guess I'll send him an email. And we had a two hour conversation, which now come to think of it, that was just way too long. We should have done one hour because, you know, I mean, I want to be respectful of people's time.

But it was a very interesting two hours for sure. And I've done, I don't know how many interviews, but it's only getting started. I think I've interviewed a lot of people in the field of vocabulary, but I want to expand a little bit and interview some more people.

Angelika Kraemer

Well, and you have had some pretty big names besides, you know, Paul Nation on your channel, which is quite awesome. So Loïs, what have you learned from your conversations and your own exploration of tools and apps for language learning? What is the best way to learn a language as an adult?

Loïs Talagrand

Yeah, the billion dollar question. Well, I think one observation that I have is that if you just ignore all the science and the research, take a look at, you know, influencers. I guess I'm an influencer in a way, but there are people who explicitly on the Internet, they give instructions on how they learn languages and you should do this and you should do that.

And the problem is that you look at, you just watch different videos, you listen to different advice there. You know, everyone has their own version of what works and what doesn't work. And the truth is, I think everything works.

The only two questions that you need to focus on is number one, how time efficient is it? So if you're someone who's really busy, like most of us, you have a job, maybe you have kids and stuff like that. Then if you only have one hour every few days or so, how much of that, like what is the return on this one hour going to be?

And number two, for people who are not so worried about time efficiency, then how, you know, is this efficient enough? But also is this sustainable in the sense that, you know, is it fun? Do you see yourself doing this for multiple years?

Because learning languages, you know, it takes years, even for an English speaker learning, I don't know, French, which is a language that is close enough to English. That is going to take hundreds of hours for sure. So this is sort of my conclusion.

I lean more on the side of I want to be time efficient. And in this case, I've interviewed multiple guests and there, you know, there are lots of activities that you can do for learning languages in a time efficient way. I'm thinking specifically of, you know, my interview with Paul Nation, we talked a lot about flashcards, for example, using active recall to learn vocabulary.

Using the keyword technique, for example, which is a pneumatic sort of technique. So these techniques can be used to speed up the acquisition of vocabulary. And I think vocabulary from, you know, what I've been able, the information I've been able to gather is definitely the most important aspect of language.

Because that's where all of the most of the meaning is vocabulary. If you know the words, then the other stuff is going to in some way just, you know, fall into place. So, yeah, these days, I'm really focused on learning vocabulary and doing so using deliberate learning techniques, which is somewhat controversial.

I know that some researchers are all about, you know, deliberate learning activities, not so good just to, I don't know, input and stuff like that. But I've been I've been having good results using these techniques.

Angelika Kraemer
Yeah, absolutely.

Sam Lupowitz
So are there any pitfalls we should avoid as we embark on learning a new language?

Loïs Talagrand
Well, I think so. The classic sort of pitfall, I think for people, you know, coming out of school, I mean, I'm not really too familiar with the American system of education. But my understanding is that most students have to study a second language.

And most of the time, this is going to be probably Spanish or French or German. I'm not sure this is whether this is mandatory or not. But the my experience, at least in the French system, has been that there is a lot of focus on learning grammar.

And I mean, this is not bad, but just learning things like you have to get it right before you start producing or you start doing things. And I think this approach of just you have to get it really right before you start doing things is very intimidating for a lot of people. They're not encouraged to, you know, start talking and start listening.

I think for a lot of people, you just have to get rid of this way of thinking. And just, you know, it's OK. You can just talk and and make mistakes.

It's OK. Just start. Just start doing it.

And so the second sort of pitfall that I think I talked about it, but you're not focusing on just learning vocabulary enough because vocabulary, in my opinion, and in the opinion of, you know, Paul Nation, Batia Laufer, Norbert Schmidt, I mean, all the vocabulary superstars, this is really going to be the big problem. Like you need to know the words if you don't understand what what is being said to you. I mean, there may be some listening comprehension issues, but most of the time you just don't know the words.

So you need to know the words. That's it.

Angelika Kraemer

Well, that's where we see similarities between first and second language acquisition, I think. Right. Kids make mistakes.

Right. They babble. They don't they don't care if something doesn't make sense.

Lois Talagrand

Yeah.

Angelika Kraemer

And I think we lose that. That that carefree surrounding, you know, the yeah, just I mean, it's as we get older, there's a lot of saving face. And you don't want to sound maybe non-educated if you make mistakes or things like that.

So, yeah, I like that you are suggesting to just jump in and do it. Practice. Make mistakes.

Right.

Lois Talagrand

Yeah. And I think you don't need to necessarily, you know, start talking and make tons of mistakes and stuff like that. But just, you know, talk a little bit.

And, you know, you've studied sort of the vocabulary and some common grammatical patterns. And you can work with that progressively. But you don't need to worry about, you know, people.

I mean, I can tell you from my experience that I'm sure that you guys in the U.S. have this experience all the time. There are lots of immigrants in the U.S., maybe Spanish speakers and stuff like that when they talk and they make mistakes. I mean, you're not there's nothing to be ashamed of.

You're not judging the person for making mistakes.

Angelika Kraemer

So, yeah. And as also as long as it doesn't stop the flow of communication. Right.

I mean, what difference does it make if every word ending is correct? You know, if every subject verb agreement is correct, as long as you get the point across and you can have a conversation. I mean, it depends on the goals, of course, of the language learner, too.

So you are a software developer by day. Is there any overlap with your programming work and your own language learning? Like, have you developed your own platform for language learning?

Is that something that you are working on or might be working on?

Loïs Talagrand

Well, yeah, actually, after my interview with Professor Paul Nation, I was so inspired by his. What he said that I thought I need to do something about this. And so vocabulary being the I think the main bottleneck for a lot of people, including myself, especially, you know, learning Japanese.

I thought we talked a lot about the importance of frequency in vocabulary. So when you're learning a language, it's important to learn the high frequency vocabulary first. And so I used my skills as a software developer to develop.

It's not really a platform, but I use software. So code to I gathered about a million sentences in Japanese and in other languages as well. And these sentences come from news.

So, you know, that they've been, you know, edited and they're correct. There is definitely a bias towards, you know, vocabulary from economics and politics and so on. But one million sentences, I analyzed them using Python.

So, you know, computer programming to see what the frequency of each word is. I mean, the root of each word. And I built a vocabulary deck.

I call this the Anki core deck because it's compatible with the app called Anki. And so I personally use this this vocabulary deck on a daily basis, you know, ordered by frequency. And there's a lot more information using that I generated using AI, which is great nowadays.

So each flashcard, there's about 10,000 flashcards in the decks. So for multiple languages and you have the word, it's translation, an example sentence, a translation, audio for the word, audio for a sentence, keyword technique, I mean, a bunch of information. And this is really a goldmine for learning vocabulary in multiple languages.

So, yeah, it's been very helpful being a software developer.

Angelika Kraemer
Nice.

Sam Lupowitz
So sort of following along that track, what advice do you have for our listeners who may be interested in starting a YouTube channel of their own?

Loïs Talagrand
Right, YouTube. Well, I never really imagined myself being a YouTuber. I mean, I don't have like a million subscribers or anything, but I have, I think, around 50,000 or so. So I think most people in the language learning community on YouTube, they would recognize my face at least.

I would say that, are you asking this from the standpoint of like YouTube becoming a career or just a hobby?

Sam Lupowitz
Either way, you know, whatever you have to offer.

Loïs Talagrand
I think in terms of, for me, it's sort of, you know, half and half, right? I like doing this, but at the same time, now it's come to the point where, you know, there are sponsorships and stuff like that. So I can make a little bit of money on the side.

I think the important thing is just, I mean, just think of it as being just like a job in the real world. The videos that are going to do well, the channels that are going to do well on YouTube are the channels that offer stuff that is rare and valuable. So you can't just make videos about, you know, things that people have already posted on YouTube and just hope to do great.

You need to do stuff that is rare and valuable. So I think where I got it right, you know, to some extent is there are no, I mean, there were a few interviews of academics in the field of, you know, linguistics before I started, but not so many. And I just made it a thing, like interview people every week or every two weeks and post this on YouTube.

So I think this would be my advice. Just try to find a niche or a niche. I'm not really sure.

And yeah, that's how you become successful. But try to do it, you know, sooner than later because it's becoming more and more competitive for sure.

Angelika Kraemer

Yeah. Do you have any new and exciting future plans for your channel? Anything that is on the horizon that you may want to share with our listeners?

Loïs Talagrand

Well, yes. I don't want to talk too much about the details of this, but so I've been interviewing a lot of people in the field, but I think there is one dimension that is sort of lacking with my videos. It's the actual, you know, look at me, learn a language and here's how I do it.

And here are the results. So I am going to start very soon a sort of an experiment, you know, as a language learner, but also as a full time employee. I'm going to learn a language, which I'm not going to reveal which language it's going to be, but I'm going to learn a language within a limited amount of time.

So I'm thinking specifically of probably three or six months. And I'm not going to spend too much time. So, you know, four hours a day is just impossible.

I'm just going to replicate sort of the schedule of a normal person. And I'm going to document this journey and we'll see what kinds of results I have at the end of it. And I'll show people that, well, by applying this advice that I got from all the interviews, you can get pretty good results.

I'm very confident that I can do this. Not because I'm some sort of genius or whatever, because it's just because, you know, in the past I've learned languages. I've learned from my mistakes.

And I think it's very realistic in three to six months for a language that is not too far from English or French. You can get to a pretty good conversational level.

Angelika Kraemer

Nice. Well, we are on standby to see what that language is, what the process is, and especially what the results are going to be. That's cool.

Loïs Talagrand

Pretty exciting.

Sam Lupowitz

Yeah. So you're mentioning you have a surprise mystery language queued up that you're going to be attempting to learn next. And you've mentioned you've learned Italian and Japanese in addition to English.

Any other languages that you're interested in learning? What's on the wish list, obviously, without spoiling the next one you have queued up?

Loïs Talagrand

Well, so actually the next one I'm thinking about was not necessarily on my wish list. But for different reasons, that's what I'm going to choose. But on my wish list, I mean, I don't know.

I think if you'd asked me this question five years ago, I would have put like half of the languages on the list. But now, I don't know. I think, you know, learning Japanese has been a humbling experience.

Because, I mean, between learning English or Italian and learning Asian languages, it's just a different ballgame for sure. I don't know about you guys, but I've been watching Squid Game, which is pretty cool. I mean, season one, season two, and probably season three soon.

And I just thought that it's so cool. Like the Korean, you know, soundtrack just sounds so cool. So maybe Korean.

But then again, I mean, yeah, I have so much more work with my Japanese. I can have fluent conversations. But then there are topics and things that I'm not functional in at all.

So we'll see. Maybe Korean, but maybe in a few decades. We'll see.

Angelika Kraemer

There you go. It's good to be aspirational. And it's good to have goals that will take you, you know, across the next few decades.

I like that.

Loïs Talagrand

Sure, yeah. We got time.

Angelika Kraemer

Loïs, where can our listeners learn more about you and your work?

Loïs Talagrand

Well, for sure, my YouTube channel. So you just type Loïs Telegram on YouTube and you'll find me. I also have my website, loistelegram.com.

There's not much on there right now. But as soon as I'm done with the challenge I talked about, then there's going to be a lot more content. And you can also find me on any podcast platform, specifically Spotify and Apple Podcast.

Angelika Kraemer

Awesome. Great.

Sam Lupowitz

Fantastic. Well, Loïs, it's been great hearing about everything that you're up to. We'd really appreciate your time.

But before we sign off, we'd like to ask you for a word in a language you love are learning, want to learn, whatever it may be, that feels good to say. What's that word?

Loïs Talagrand

Well, actually, I remember that this was, you know, I needed to think of a word. Last night I was taking out the garbage. And so I was not really sure of what kind of word to pick.

And I thought I wanted to pick something that was a little bit, you know, that had some style, I guess. And I thought of a Tahitian word, actually, that I always thought it was pretty, it's pretty wonderful. It's called, it's the word mana.

I don't know if you're aware of it. I think some people in Hawaii know what it is. It's a Polynesian word, but Tahitian people use it a lot.

So mana is sort of, it's a word that, as they say, it gets lost in translation, I guess. In Polynesia, mana is sort of the energy, the power, not necessarily of people. But, you know, in Polynesian theology, you have, there's energy in the land, in the sea, in objects and stuff like that.

So I just think it's a wonderful word.

Angelika Kraemer

That's awesome. I like that. Yeah, that's great.

Well, Loïs, we wish you all the best for your upcoming language learning journey. And we're super excited to see how that all pans out. And thank you so much for speaking of language with us today.

Sam Lupowitz

Thank you. It was a pleasure. Join us next week to hear about the wonders of the Cornell Botanic Gardens and what plants have to do with languages and cultures.

Angelika Kraemer

Until then, Auf Wiederhören!

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The Language Resource Center is located on the ground floor of Stimson Hall on Cornell's main campus in Ithaca, New York. Check us out on the web at lrc.cornell.edu. And follow Cornell LRC on Facebook, Instagram, and Blue Sky.

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Sam Lupowitz

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