

how long does it take to learn a language? realistic timelines from aelo swiss academy instructors

Every new term at AELO Swiss Academy starts the same way. During the placement chat, someone leans forward with a coffee and asks the question we hear more than any other: how long until I actually speak this language? We love that question, and we understand why people brace for the answer, because the honest version starts with "it depends". So instead of hiding behind that phrase, we want to hand you the exact numbers our instructors use every week, the timelines we have watched play out with hundreds of students in Zurich, Lausanne, Geneva, and online, and the trade-offs that never make it onto the brochure. By the end, you should be able to sketch your own realistic timeline on a napkin. Honestly, that napkin will be more useful than most app store promises.

the one-paragraph answer

If you are a native English speaker learning a "close" language such as French, Spanish, or Italian, a genuine conversational level, what the CEFR scale calls B1, typically takes 350 to 400 guided hours. At a steady 45 minutes a day, that lands around 18 to 20 months. Double your daily commitment and you can compress it to roughly 7 or 8 months. German asks for more: the classic Foreign Service Institute estimates put it near 900 class hours for professional working proficiency, so comfortable B1 usually arrives a few months later than in French or Spanish. Mandarin, Japanese, Arabic, and Korean sit in another league entirely, around 2,200 class hours to that same professional bar. Those figures look intimidating written down, and here is the part that excites us: they are remarkably predictable. Once you realize the currency is hours, you stop asking "how long?" and start asking "how many hours am I willing to invest, and how do I keep them enjoyable?" That second question has an answer you actually control.

why we think in hours, not months

Months are a terrible unit for language learning because a "month of studying" can mean anything from three hours of total effort to sixty. We have had students announce they studied Spanish "for a year", then gently reveal that their entire year contained perhaps 25 hours of real contact with the language. At that rate, the published hour estimates translate into decades, not months, and no wonder the student felt broken. Hours tell the truth. When students log genuine contact time, the Foreign Service Institute patterns hold with almost boring reliability: roughly 600 to 750 class hours for Category I languages like French, Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese, about 900 for German, somewhere north of 1,100 for languages like Russian, Greek, or Hindi, and around 2,200 for the Category IV giants.

One nuance matters here. Those FSI figures come from small classes with professional teachers, five to six hours a day, and highly motivated diplomats. Few of us can replicate that setup. In our experience, self-study hours are worth less than guided hours unless you are unusually disciplined, because it is easy to spend forty minutes passively drifting through content and call it study. We tell students to count guided hours as lessons plus structured review, and to budget more total time if they are going it alone. Not double, but more.

the map we give every new student

| level | what it feels like | typical cumulative guided hours | at 45 minutes a day |

|---|---|---|---|

| a1 | survival: introduce yourself, order, ask prices | 80 to 100 | around 4 months |

| a2 | routines: past and future, appointments, small talk | 180 to 200 | 9 to 10 months |

| b1 | the threshold: real conversations, opinions, travel | 350 to 400 | 18 to 20 months |

| b2 | independence: meetings, nuance, jokes that land | 550 to 650 | about 2.5 to 3 years |

| c1 | comfort: films without subtitles, debate, irony | 800 to 1,000 | 4 years and beyond |

A few notes on reading this table. The hours assume a Category I language with decent study quality. Add roughly a third for German, and multiply by about three for Mandarin, Japanese, Arabic, or Korean. The daily figure also assumes those 45 minutes are real minutes, phone face down, with some structured review included, not



not passive noise while you scroll. Passive exposure is [AELO](#) wonderful and we encourage podcasts on every commute, but the numbers above assume at least half of your daily time goes to producing the language or working with a teacher. If most of your minutes turn out to be passive, stretch the estimate by about a quarter. If you add two real conversations a week, you can often pull the timeline in by a couple of months. Small levers, big effects.

what actually bends the curve

Three forces move those numbers more than any app ever will, and we watch all three at AELO Swiss Academy every single term.

The first is prior language experience. A second language teaches you how to learn a third: you already know how to tolerate ambiguity, how to mine a text for patterns, how to accept sounding silly in front of strangers. A Brazilian engineer who joined us for Spanish reached a confident B2 in five months, roughly half the standard estimate, because Portuguese had already built most of the bridge. Monolinguals, by contrast, spend their first two or three months learning how to study at all, which is completely normal and completely forgivable. Just budget for it.

The second force is intensity, and here the mathematics are almost stubbornly fair. Three hundred fifty hours is three hundred fifty hours; the only real question is the shape you pour them into. At 45 minutes a day, B1 French is a two-year project. At 25 hours a week, it is a three-and-a-half-month sprint, which is exactly what our summer

intensive cohorts attempt, and most of them make it. The students who crash in sprints are almost never short on talent. They skipped sleep, or they tried to sprint with no teacher and drowned in uncorrected errors. If you compress, compress with support.

The third force is immersion with the door actually open. Living in the country is worth a great deal, but only for people who step outside their bubble. Two of our students moved to Geneva the same month, both aiming for B1 French. One joined a volleyball club and a choir within two weeks. The other worked on an English-speaking team and went home to English-language streaming every evening. Nine months later the gap between them was nearly two full CEFR levels, and the volleyball player was complaining, delightedly, that she now got the jokes at choir practice. Switzerland adds its own twist: in Zurich you can happily survive for years on English alone, so the country will not push you unless you push yourself. In Lausanne or Geneva the pressure is gentler but very real, and our instructors there build it into every study plan from week one.

the plateau nobody warns you about

Somewhere between B1 and B2, almost every learner hits a stretch where progress seems to stop dead. We call it the B1 plateau, and we warn students about it on day one, because knowing it is coming removes most of its power. Here is what happens: at B1 you can survive everywhere. The bank, the doctor, the landlord, the dinner party, all of it. The urgency drains away exactly as the language gets harder, because the remaining gains hide inside grammar and nuance instead of shiny new vocabulary you can show off at parties.

One of our German students, Marco, sat at B1 for over a year and was convinced he had hit his ceiling. Then we recorded him talking for five minutes and played it back. Every past tense came out with the wrong auxiliary, the same error, hundreds of times, completely invisible to him. Six weeks of targeted correction did more for his German than the previous six months of extra input. That is the plateau in miniature: the fix is rarely more hours, it is sharper hours, with recordings, an error notebook, and someone kind enough to correct you honestly. When students at AELO Swiss Academy tell us they feel stuck, our first move is not to assign more material. It is to make their current output visible so the stuck parts can finally be named.

what 45 real minutes look like

Students often ask us to describe an honest daily session, so here is the version our instructors hand out on printed cards, the one that keeps the table above truthful:

- ten minutes reviewing yesterday's new words, out loud, with audio
- twenty minutes of new material with a teacher or a structured course
- ten minutes of production: three written sentences or two minutes talking to yourself about your day
- five minutes of natural-speed listening, even if half of it escapes you
- one tick on a calendar, because tracking is what turns minutes into a habit

Ninety seconds of review at breakfast, a proper lesson at lunch, a tiny burst of output in the evening: that rhythm beats a heroic three-hour Sunday marathon every single time, and it survives sick kids, deadlines, and tax season.

honest edge cases

Age comes up constantly, usually as a worry, so let us say what we actually observe. Adults learn grammar and vocabulary faster than children, because they study deliberately while children mostly soak. The one clear childhood advantage is accent, which is why we push pronunciation work into the first months rather than

leaving it for later, when bad habits have hardened. Our oldest student to reach B2 German started at 66 and got there in three years, laughing the whole way.

Learners with dyslexia or attention differences often move more slowly through reading-heavy material but thrive with audio-first methods. We typically add 20 to 30 percent to the time estimate, not a new goal. Heritage speakers run the other direction: a Chilean student who grew up hearing Spanish at home went from rusty to C1 in under five months, because the foundation was already standing, just overgrown with weeds.

And then there is the deadline group, the people who need B1 German by March for a work permit or a fide test date in French. For them we plan backwards from the exam, and the arithmetic is sobering but doable: a firm B1 needs roughly 350 guided hours, so a six-month runway means about 15 hours a week, every week, no fantasy math. People do it. It helps enormously to know the real number before you promise anyone a date.

your napkin plan

Pick your language, find its category, and treat the hour total as a budget rather than a verdict. Divide by the minutes you can genuinely protect on a bad week, not a perfect one. Add a cushion for the plateau, because it will visit you. Schedule one human conversation every week from the very first month, since speaking is a skill, not a reward you unlock later. That is the entire method, and it fits on the napkin we promised at the start.

These timelines are not gatekeeping. They are the same estimates our instructors at AELO Swiss Academy write on whiteboards during first sessions, and once a student sees the arithmetic, the anxiety usually turns into something far better: a plan with a finish line you can actually see. We would love to help you draw yours. The coffee is on us.

