

Language learning software

Language Labs French

Learn French with Asterix

Learn to Speak French

Q Steps French

RealTime French

Speak Fluent French

Talk Now! Learn French

The French Experience

Think & Talk French

Travel Talk French



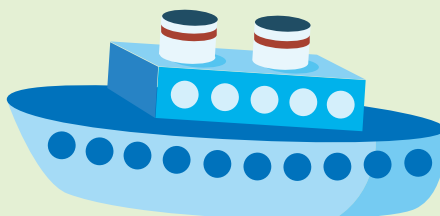
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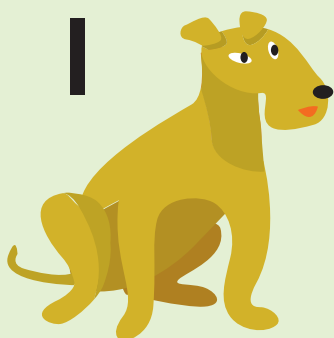
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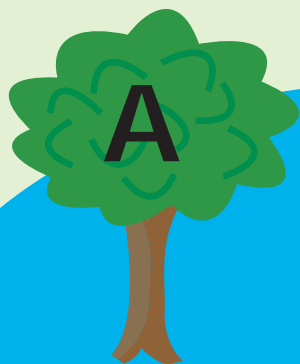


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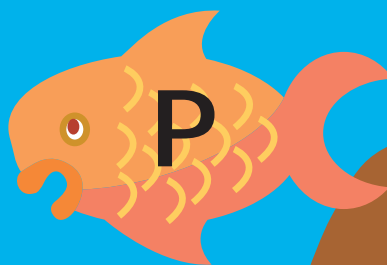
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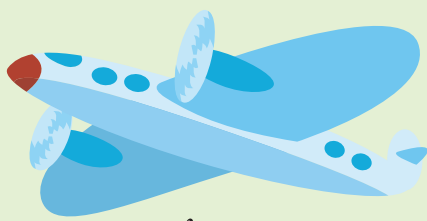


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LEARN THE LINGO

Don't just shout louder, learn to speak the lingo! Learning a foreign language can be daunting, but we look at some software packages that can help

If the quizmaster on *Family Fortunes* asked you to name 10 things that the British are bad at, chances are that speaking foreign languages would be somewhere on that list and, quite likely, would score top points for a lucky contestant. Who hasn't witnessed the scene of a frustrated Brit, gesticulating as though his Equity card depended on it, adding on Os and As to the end of random words and, when all else fails, simply shouting?

No doubt about it, our European cousins are ahead of the game when it comes to learning a foreign language, with many of them speaking English fluently and confidently when they visit our country. Even basic language skills, though, can be a valuable asset when you're abroad – how else are you to know if you are given the correct change from a taxi fare, or how to follow directions to an out-of-the-way beauty spot?

If you're wondering how to get to grips with a foreign language, be it for business or holidays, then your PC, along with a good multimedia program, is one place to turn for help. You don't need to struggle out on a cold, dark winter evening and your 'teacher' will never lose patience with you. It's also a livelier method than learning from a book, probably with the added benefit of hearing the language spoken correctly.

Choosing a program can be confusing, with a huge range of languages (how do you fancy learning Klingon?) on offer from a variety of manufacturers. To help you out, here's our guide to what to look for.

We've concentrated on French, but the principles remain the same, whatever the language. *Bonne chance!*

Why are you learning?

Before you buy a program, you must be very clear about why you are learning the foreign language. Do you need some key words to help you out on holiday, or do you want to extend the skills you already have so that you can talk confidently to business contacts? Perhaps you want to encourage a teenager to improve their chance of a good GCSE grade? Whatever your purpose, it's essential that you know what it is when you go out to buy, so that you choose something appropriate for your needs.

Some packages are the equivalent of a phrase book – EuroTalk's Talk Now, for instance, covers basic words and phrases that you're likely to need when travelling, be it for business or pleasure. To improve existing conversational skills, you will need something more in-depth, such as Real-Time French from MacMillan, or the Learning Company's Travel Talk French. These assume a certain level of knowledge, and reinforce it with the use of practical situations as well as introducing a fair amount of new material.

If you want to back up exam work, you should be looking for something more formal, which covers a look at grammar and the written language. Younger students (or simply the young at heart) could benefit from the Asterix program, which supports work from Key Stage 3/NVQ 1 through to the final year of A level. Alternatively, the BBC French Experience, accompanying the television series, supports work up to GCSE level while the Learning Company's Learn to Speak French combines conversation with traditional grammatical exercises for an all-round approach.

You may also wish to learn something about a country's



culture, especially if you plan to visit. Again, the French Experience has a lot to offer, with plenty of background material. Likewise, RealTime French seamlessly presents interesting information about France in its videos.

Listening to real-life language

When we learn our own language, we do so by hearing it all around us – we certainly understand a good deal before we start to speak. When it comes to learning a new language, it makes sense to follow the same pattern, of hearing and associating and then imitating and refining. This is where multimedia programs come into their own, with the capacity to store sound files. A good program will make use of a variety of native speakers so that you can hear proper pronunciation and inflections – this is essential if you are going to imitate successfully.

These days, every language program does offer some sound files, nearly all of these from native speakers. Even the simplest packages – Language Labs from Europress and EuroTalk's Talk Now! – use at least two native speakers, to give you a broad experience of the spoken word. The Asterix program, with its riot of characters, is an ideal ground for hearing language spoken by every section of the community – the young and the old, male and female. All the programs from

The Learning Company make use of real dialogue, so you learn to understand the natural exchange of language. RealTime French has some excellent conversations, spoken slowly and carefully, which makes them easy to follow, but does not prepare you for the fast pace you're likely to encounter abroad.

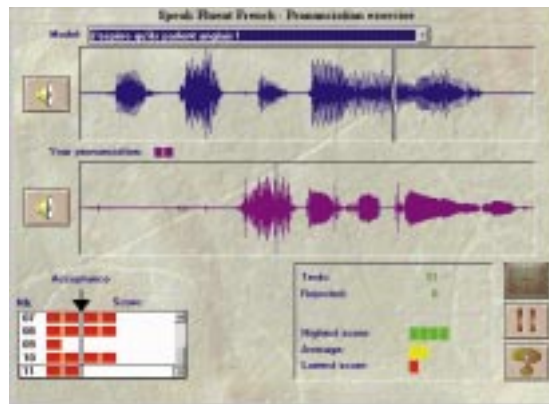
Hearing yourself speak

Of course, there's more to learning a language than hearing it spoken – you have to utter the words yourself. This is probably the biggest stumbling block for the reserved British, who are often worried that they will look and sound ridiculous if they attempt to mimic the inflections and accent of a language like French. What's needed here is plenty of practice and encouragement, along with correction, to achieve the ideal of being mistaken for a native.

Multimedia programs have gone a long way to make this dream a reality, with many programs allowing you to listen to speech and then to record yourself imitating it. Again, both Language Labs and Talk Now include this facility, as does Asterix and RealTime French. You can then play back your recording, to see how it compares with the real thing.

Some programs have a more sophisticated facility, called speech recognition. As its name suggests, this recognises your speech and responds to it in some way. In the Speak Fluent series, you speak to the computer, using one from a number of cued responses. The conversation then branches, according to which response you use, always supposing it recognises your response. Speak Fluent also allows you to practise saying some phrases and shows you a visual interpretation of your speech compared to the original. This is supposed to help, but you can fool the program with nonsense words, correctly emphasised – and it is hard to correct poor pronunciation in this way.

Think & Talk French, from the Learning Company, is more helpful, with an encouraging indicator showing how close to 'native speaker' your efforts are. Oddly enough, Learn to Speak French, also from the Learning Company, had several glitches, happily accepting 'franglais' as a correct pronunciation of



Top: Speak Fluent French lets you practise your pronunciation on your PC.

Above: Video clips help make learning fun in The French Experience.

'français', while rejecting some correctly spoken phrases.

Testing, testing

If you want to learn, you need to know how much you've improved, and that means doing some form of assessment, be it a formal grammar exercise or an entertaining game. A good package will praise progress and yet not be too harsh on failure and, in fact, this lesson is one that's been well-learned by all the software manufacturers. Every program includes some fun exercises – notably the splendid quizzes in Asterix, and the remarkably gruesome hangman in Speak Fluent. For recording your progress, The French Experience stands out as being particularly useful, with its Study Tracker.

How you learn

While what you learn is of paramount importance, how you learn it is also highly significant. This covers the way in which material is presented to you – is it coherent and well-organised, or is it apparently in a random jumble? Is the presentation lively and interesting, or is it dull? Is it motivating, with rewards for

Top of the pops

The top foreign languages studied at GCSE level are:

	Language	Number of entries
1	French	22,000
2	German	8,000
3	Urdu	3,800
4	Spanish	3,700
5	Bengali	2,400
6	Italian	2,200
7	Turkish	810
8	Russian	750
8	Modern Greek	750
10	Portuguese	500

French, not surprisingly, is top of the pops when it comes to learning a foreign language at school. German, its closest rival, is far behind in the popularity stakes and, by comparison, only a handful of students take up any other language. No wonder we struggle when we go on holiday!

(Figures from University of London GCSE Examination Board)

Language learning software



Language learning software compared

	Language Labs French	Learn French with Asterix	Learn to Speak French	Q Steps French	RealTime French
Price	£19.99	£29.99	£49.99	£19.99	£29.99
Minimum requirements	486DX, 4Mb of hard disk space, SVGA, 4Mb of RAM, CD-ROM drive, sound card, Win 3.1/95	486, 8Mb of RAM, VGA, sound card, CD-ROM drive, microphone, Win 3.1/95	486DX, hard drive, 4Mb of RAM, SVGA, 2x CD-ROM drive, sound card, microphone, Win 3.1/95	486DX, 4Mb of hard disk space, 8Mb of RAM, SVGA, 2x CD-ROM drive, Win 3.1/95	486SX, 4Mb of RAM, SVGA, 2x CD-ROM drive, sound card, microphone, mouse, Win 3.1/95
Level	Beginner	Improver/A Level	Beginners/Improvers	Children 5-10	Improvers
Native speakers	●	●	●	●	●
Topic-based	○	○	●	●	●
Speech recording and playback	●	●	●	○	●
Speech recognition	○	○	●	○	○
Grammar tuition	○	●	●	○	●
Writing exercises	○	○	●	○	○
Progress reports/awards	○	●	●	○	●
Other languages available	Russian, Chinese, Italian, Japanese	Spanish, German, Latin, Italian, English	None	None	Spanish
Notes			Work book included		Targeted at young adults
Ease of use	★★★	★★★	★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Presentation	★★★	★★★★★	★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Overall	★★★	★★★★★	★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★
Manufacturer	Europress	EuroTalk	The Learning Company	MacMillan Interactive	MacMillan Interactive
Telephone	01625 859333	0800 0182551	0181 246 4002	01256 302699	01256 302699

○ No ● Yes

★ = Poor ★★ = Below average ★★★ = Average ★★★★ = Good ★★★★★ = Excellent

New versus old

There's no doubt that multimedia programs have brought a new dimension to language teaching and learning – but are they better than traditional methods?

Dr Paul Coggle, senior lecturer in the School of European Culture and Languages at the University of Kent, is enthusiastic about the new technology, and has been using (and developing) multimedia packages for some years. 'In language learning, you need someone to respond to you all the time – language is, by nature, highly interactive. The advantage of multimedia programs in the classroom is that they can keep each individual learner challenged, and this level of concentration is essential to maintain progress.'

While happy to embrace the benefits of new technology, though, Paul says that there is still a long way to go before CD-ROMs could replace teachers. 'We are getting close to real-life situations with the use of video and speech-recognition technology. However, there isn't yet a program that gets you to respond in a way that can be corrected – for that, you still need a teacher.'

successes and tempting you to keep returning to learn more? All these factors are crucial, because you need to have clear learning goals in order to learn successfully. And, while there has to be an element of determination on your part to keep practising your new skills, this can be helped enormously if the package is nicely presented and is fun to use.

As far as presentation and organisation are concerned, two of the nicest packages are Talk Now! and the French Experience. Talk Now! has a topic wheel, allowing you to study subjects such as Countries, Food and Shopping. Everything is neat, colourful and entertaining and you'll find you just can't drag



Speak Fluently French	Talk Now! Learn French	The French Experience	Think & Talk French	Travel Talk French
£19.95	£24.99	£44.99	£39.99	£39.99
486, 20Mb hard disk, 8Mb of RAM, sound card, 2x CD-ROM drive, VGA, microphone, Win 3.1/95	486, 8Mb of RAM, VGA, CD-ROM drive, sound card, microphone, Win 3.1/95	486DX2, 8Mb of RAM, SVGA, 2x CD-ROM drive, microphone, sound card, Win 3.1/95	486, 4Mb of RAM, SVGA, 2x CD-ROM drive, sound card, microphone, Win 3.1/95	486DX2, hard drive, 8Mb of RAM, SVGA, 2x CD-ROM drive, sound card, microphone, Win 3.1/95
Improvers	Beginners	Beginners/Improvers	Beginners/Improvers	Beginners
●	●	●	●	●
●	●	●	●	●
●	●	●	●	●
●	○	○	●	●
○	○	●	○	●
○	○	○	●	○
●	●	●	●	●
English, Spanish, German	Italian, Greek, American, Irish, Zulu & many others	None	Spanish, Italian, German	Spanish
Microphone pack available		Microphone included		Phrase book included
★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★
★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★
★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★
★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★
GSP	EuroTalk	BBC Multimedia	The Learning Company	The Learning Company
01480 496 666	0800 0182551	01483 268 888	0181 246 4002	0181 246 4002

yourself away – in short, you can't stop yourself learning. Similarly, the French Experience has sensible, topic-based chapters, so that you can learn vocabulary and phrases around a given subject. Another nice program, designed especially for young children, is Q Steps from MacMillan. This has a number of 'houses' you can visit, where you can learn popular, topic-based material such as numbers, colours and the family.

By contrast, Language Labs merely has 'Lessons' that give no clue as to their topic, whether from their title or from their content. The interface is tricky to handle and here you may feel that it is hard work to learn new vocabulary.



It's difficult to pull out a Best Buy from this array of impressive technology, not least because the packages have different aims and are suited to different needs. We settled in the end on a package that really excelled in its class – Learn French in the Talk Now! series.



Just about every package has something to recommend it, so again it's difficult to make this award. However, the French Experience from the BBC is beautifully presented, as well as

offering excellent value for money, and Think & Talk French is also such a substantial package that it merits recognition – both these products get our Recommended award. Sheila Hill

