

Talking Italian

Is it possible to learn a language in just one day? Always up for a challenge, Tom Atkinson unlocked his inner linguist..

Yoga, painting and the ukelele – just three of the many things that have been headline acts on my past New Year resolution lists only to fall by the wayside having been unlearned or just plain unloved. So the chance to learn a language in just one day with the help of a man described (admittedly by his publicist) as a “genius” seems too good to be true.

Still, Paul Noble, the author of the *Unlocking Language* series of books and audio courses on French, Italian and Spanish, is nothing if not confident of his own, and therefore my, success.

Before we meet, Paul sends a few suggestions to help me get the most out of the day that will be spent learning Italian, my chosen language with him. Does he recommend cramming as much of an Italian dictionary into my head as possible? Listening to Puccini’s greatest hits on loop? Or maybe even consuming vast quantities of pizza and wine?

Sadly, no. What Paul does suggest is a good night’s sleep and the total avoidance of any Italian or other foreign languages before we meet. He even promises that we won’t be writing anything down or trying to remember a single word. Paul’s approach is quickly shaping up to be very much my kind of lesson so, with zero preparation, planning or Puccini, I’m ready to learn.

We meet in the foyer of his publisher, HarperCollins, and, as we’re guided to our classroom for the day, Paul shows himself to be as friendly, approachable and entertaining a genius as you could ever want to meet, even if the label doesn’t sit well with him.

“The Collins people might say ‘he’s a genius’ but no,” he chuckles, “it’s actually just not teaching language in a ridiculous way. That is all it is, just doing it in a sensible way. Why wouldn’t you do things so people understand it? Why wouldn’t you teach them the more useful stuff, rather than the less useful stuff?”

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So what is he referring to exactly?

Well, things like the insistence on breaking languages up into topics such as “my family” or “the beach” and giving people lists of vocabulary to learn by heart. It’s approaches like these that can put people off learning languages for life, a fate that almost befell Paul until he decided to try and teach himself a skill he had long envied.

“I always had the feeling that it would be incredibly cool to be able to speak a foreign language,” he admits. “When we did have any language classes in school, I was never any good. I did history at university but I actually spent most of my time studying language at home by myself.”

Paul confesses that he became “obsessed” with the idea of being able to speak a language and consumed as many different approaches and courses as he possibly could. In doing so, he discovered that traditional ways of learning a language just didn’t suit him and his opinion of some well-known methods (for example, the classic audio courses) simply isn’t possible to print.

“Most language courses are terrible,” he says. “But every so often, you will find a little snippet where they mention a different way to think about it and you’ll think, ‘Oh that’s clever,’ and that is it – seeing what is awful and



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what is not and then reformulating it and fiddling around with different ideas.”

So how does he do it? Well, rather than spending an age learning the nuts and bolts of a foreign language, such as gender and the grammatical terms that we all remember with a groan, Paul’s argument is that if you want to speak a language then you need to do just that.

“If you want a course that makes you better at speaking the language then the course should be making you speak the language,” he argues and, after just five minutes, I have to say that he’s right.

“I’ve prepared the risotto for you,” I find myself cheerily telling him in my best Italian accent (all credit to the *Godfather* movies), going on to sternly question him as to just why he hasn’t prepared the coffee for me. Ten minutes later, I’m asking Paul for a room for two people for two nights and before long, I’m admitting that yes, I would like to eat here this evening, but I simply can’t because I’m busy. Sorry.

It’s a slightly discombobulating experience but here I am, speaking Italian. Importantly, it’s the kind of Italian that might actually be useful rather than leaving you able to tell someone that you’re 42 and have a pet rabbit. This “instant” aspect is the cornerstone of Paul’s method and he says that it’s vital to get people talking – quickly.

“The idea is that once they’ve done a couple of pages they will think, ‘I can do this,’ and that is important,” he says. “It needs to be very quick. You can’t hang about and think, ‘I wonder if this is going to work.’ They need to know immediately.”

Paul also argues that for too long, we’ve simply seen languages in the wrong way and it’s an approach that we need to change.

“On your first driving lesson, did the instructor sit you in a classroom and you learned the theory of the combustion engine?” he asks. “No. What was the first thing they asked you to do? Sit in the seat and try to drive. The reason they do that is that learning to drive is a practical skill. It’s not an academic subject.


“Languages are taught as an academic subject, but they’re not. They are a practical subject and you need to be trained to speak a foreign language, not taught about it. You often go to school and learn about French, but they don’t normally teach you how to use it. Everyone really is gagging to learn to use it, so when you show people how to do that you instantly get the motivation.”

I certainly feel motivated as I bounce around like a turbo-charged Gino D’Acampo saying that I feel like going back to Rome in May but I’m scared of flying, so I’m planning to take the Eurostar. The question now is can I retain any of what I’ve learned here today?

Paul isn’t worried about that, saying that he actually tells students to forget everything when they start. It’s another part of his method – repetition and returning to what you’ve covered to pick it apart and make sense of it so that you can really know what you’re saying.

It feels like being in a dark room and bumping into the unseen furniture. It’s slow and painful to start with, but do it often enough and you’ll remember what you’re hitting your shins on. Paul suggests making it part of your routine by listening to the audio course on your commute or while doing the dishes, committing to a minimum of five minutes a day and no more than half an hour.

The approach is clever and practical and, while it might be stretching the truth to claim mastery of Italian after our session, I do feel like I’ve found a different way to look at learning languages. Suddenly it seems very achievable and the experience of hearing Italian phrases tumble from my lips within minutes of meeting him makes me regard Paul as more of a sorcerer than a genius.

Now all I need is for him to start teaching the ukulele... 

Paul’s Unlocking Language books (Collins, £9.99) and CDs (£15.99) are out now. See Express Bookshop on page 81.