How to learn languages with Wikipedia
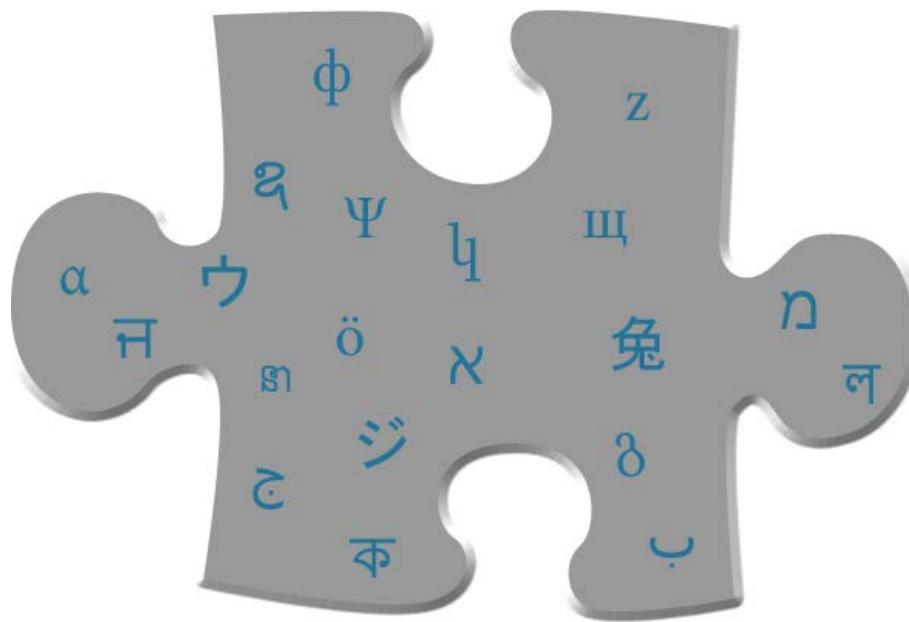
by Daniela Maizner

i simply love languages

http://www.isimplylovelanguages.com

INTRODUCTION

We always hear how important it is to read in your target language when learning languages. But that's easier said than done.

First of all, you have to find the time to read a lot and secondly you need to find suitable texts. The latter was facilitated a lot by the Internet. It offers us a wide range of texts about all kinds of topics in all (?) languages. This wide range makes it even more complicated for us to find suitable material.

Sometimes would love to have a kind of data base where I can easily find texts about topics that are interesting to me, in the language I want and that is convenient to use.

There are such data bases available on the Internet and many people put a lot of effort in collecting texts and providing the technical support to make language learning as easy as possible.

But there is also a large data base available of which I'm sure that everybody of you already used it at least once. It contains a seemingly infinite collection of texts about all topics of interests in many languages.

I'm talking about **Wikipedia,** of course!

Have you ever thought of Wikipedia as a tool for language learning? I admit, for several years I only used it as it is meant to be used: as an easily accessible, all-knowing encyclopaedia.

Even though I realized that Wikipedia is available in several different languages, it took me quite some time until I thought about additional benefits from using this platform.

In fact, I had this epiphany when I had to translate texts into foreign languages for my university classes. Every now then, organizations, names of people or historical events were mentioned which, of course, need to be transferred into the target language properly.

When I was thinking about a way to find out what the Spanish name of emperor Xyz is, I suddenly remembered this small function in each Wikipedia article. On the left side of the page there is always a link list that refers to the very article in other languages.

So when I opened up the German article for emperor XYZ, I could check if an article on the same emperor is also available in, let's say, Spanish. If it was, I just had to follow the link and check his name in this article.

And then suddenly I began to realize how powerful Wikipedia can be as a language learning tool – not only in terms of translations but also as a huge data base for texts.

In this e-book I want to show you how you can use Wikipedia for your personal language learning! The tips described in this method will be as easy is to implement as navigating through Wikipedia itself.

I hope you enjoy reading as much as I did enjoy writing it!

Daniela

In this e-book I collected everything I know about how to use Wikipedia as a language learning tool and it is dedicated to all readers and supporters of my blog.

This e-book is available free of charge and as a gift for subscribers of my blog. I kindly ask you not to re-distribute this e-book to any other person. If you would like to share the information with others please feel free to direct them to

http://www.isimplylovelanguages.com

WIKIPEDIA & LANGUAGES

I assume that you all know Wikipedia at this point, therefore I will skip a general introduction and jump straight into some interesting facts.

Note: If you want to go straight to the practical tips, you might want to skip this chapter.

Note: All numbers are taken from Wikipedia, of course.

Wikipedia is currently available in 287 language versions (time of writing July 2014). Each language version works independently, this means that for example, the Italian version is not a translated version of the English version but an autonomous Wikipedia. And this means that articles in Italian often look different to the one in English – they could be longer or shorter and contain or skip information. An article about a topic that is closely related to the language might contain more details in this language than in another one.

Languages available

Don't worry, I won't list all 287 languages available on Wikipedia here and I assume that by the time you are reading this e-book the number will have already increased. If you are interested in the detailed list you can find it *here*.

I'm pretty sure that there is a Wikipedia version available for all the languages you would like to learn. Even if you learn a language that is considered as "small", like for example Luxembourgish, you have access to more than 40,000 articles in this language on lb.wikipedia.org. I guess that's more than we will ever manage to read.

Even if you are interested in regional variations or dialects of a language, Wikipedia offers a wide range of texts and, without being

able to proof it, I would say that for some dialects you won't find any larger text base on the whole Internet.

If you are interested in smaller Germanic languages I highly recommend reading Wikipedia in *Bairisch* (Bavarian) or *Alemannisch* (Alemannic German, spoken e.g. in Switzerland). These sites are really well composed.

There are also some Wikipedias available for smaller Slavic languages, like *Silesian* (spoken in Poland) or *Lower Sorbian* (mainly spoken in Eastern Germany).

So I'm convinced you will find the language you like!

Ranking of languages

Wikipedia provides statistics about how many articles are available per language version and it's quite interesting to read and compare this list with the list of the most-spoken languages worldwide.

Stats as per July 5th, 2014:

Rank	Language	Number of articles
1	English	4,548,329
2	Dutch	1,781,805
3	German	1,732,964
4	Swedish	1,680,711
5	French	1,521,665
6	Italian	1,133,906
7	Russian	1,126,051
8	Spanish	1,110,523
9	Vietnamese	1,104,418
10	Waray-Waray	1,073,694

(Source: http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Sprachen), modified layout

I know that your first question is: What is Waray-Waray and where is it spoken? It is language spoke on the Philippines and *here* you can find more information about it. But I will come back to Waray-Waray very soon.

When we compare this list with the most-spoken languages worldwide, it becomes obvious that the trends do not match. With more than 1.2 billion native speakers, Mandarin Chinese is the most-spoken language in the world. On the stats site, it's listed in the category 500,000 – 999,999 articles, so it ranges among the TOP 15 languages. But when comparing this to a relatively small language like Dutch, which is spoken by about 26 million people, it seems like the Dutch-speaking Wikipedia is far more active.

Automated generation of articles

According to Wikipedia, the various language versions consist of both manually and automatically written articles. And the latter is one reason why there are so many articles available for some languages.

Let's get back to the language of Waray-Waray. The German version of the article about the Waray-Waray-Wikipedia states that the majority of entries published in 2013 were generated automatically. Many of them contain information for less than 200 Byte and some articles are even spam.

In July 2014, the *Wall Street Journal* published an article about a Swedish professor who is able to create about 10,000 Wikipedia articles per day using a certain software.

As interesting as this information may be, it should remind us about the fact that not all articles available on Wikipedia might be 100 % perfect – also from the linguistic perspective.

ADVANTAGES OF USING WIKIPEDIA FOR LANGUAGE LEARNING

No costs

You can use Wikipedia free of charge – in every language, 24/7 and as long and as often as you want. This is a great advantage because, depending on your target language, it can be rather expensive to get suitable (printed) texts.

Every topic available

There is hardly any topic of interest that has no article in Wikipedia – at least not in the English version. And in many other languages the same will be the case.

Many languages available

As stated in the prior chapter, Wikipedia is available in nearly 300 different languages, including constructed languages and regional variations.

Switching languages is easy

For each article you can find an overview of the languages the article is available in the left navigation column. So if you want to know how a certain thing is called in you language you can follow the link to your language and check.

This also makes it easy for you to read about one topic in different languages. So if for example you read something interesting in your native language, you can then easily switch to a language you're learning and read about the topic again. Since you already you know most of what will be written in the article it will be easier for you to understand it in the foreign language as well.

Encyclopaedia included

Wikipedia makes it very easy to look up the meaning of a specific word or read more about a specific topic by following the relevant links. If there is a word mentioned you don't know you can follow the link and check what it means. If you still need a translation you can benefit from the next advantage.

Reference for further reading

In good articles you usually find a collection of useful links related to this topic, for example websites or relevant newspaper articles. So if you are interested in this topic you may find some links that lead you external sites – often written in the same language as the article itself.

Images & tables facilitate text comprehension

Every article is usually combined with at least one picture or a map. Often you can find a table that summarizes the most important facts on the right side. Images and tables can help you understand the text better.

Easy conversion of text

With the create-a-book/print-as-pdf-function you can easily create pdfs that have a clear layout out of the articles. Those who prefer to read and work on paper can print out the article but it is also very easy to transfer the document to an e-reader. At the end of this book you can find a detailed manual about how to use this pdf-function.

DISADVANTAGES OF USING WIKIPEDIA FOR LANGUAGE LEARNING

As every tool, Wikipedia is not perfect and there are some disadvantages about using it for language learning that shouldn't be neglected.

No editorial

As far as I know, there is now standardized editorial, which means that during the publication or editing process of an article nobody verifies the linguistic correctness.

I'm sure that most spelling or grammar mistakes will be corrected by other users once they find them but we can't rely 100 % on the linguistic correctness of the articles.

We should also bear in mind that everybody can participate in every language. So if I, with my poor knowledge of Polish, decided to translate an article into Polish nobody could prevent me from doing so. We shouldn't expect that all articles were written by native speakers.

No integrated dictionary

Although you can often follow links to nouns you don't understand Wikipedia offers no integrated dictionary that could tell you, for example, the meaning of a verb.

Alternatively, you could work with browser extensions which offer you an explanation or translation when you come across a word or you could open up a second tab with a dictionary.

Sophisticated terms

Depending on your topic the text could be full of highly sophisticated terms. This can be discouraging for beginners. But just remember that many specialised topics work with a certain kind of vocabulary.

No information about the language

Wikipedia is not a course book and it's not designed for language learners. Therefore it doesn't offer additional information such as grammar explanations or the usage of a word. You are reading material that is written for native speakers.

But it's always possible to save or print out the text, work with it and take some time to look up relevant information about the language.

HOW TO FIND TEXTS ON WIKIPEDIA

Obviously, it's not so easy to find a suitable text in a data base of maybe more than 100,000 or even one million articles. So here are a few tips on how to find some interesting and good texts.

Search for your texts related to hobby

Look up words that are related to your hobby. This not only helps you to find articles related to your personal interest but also boosts your vocabulary in this specific field.

If, for your example, your hobby is cooking, why not check your favourite ingredients, herbs, etc.? An article about *rosemary* is available in more than 50 languages. The article about my favourite Greek dish, *Gyros*, is available in about 20 languages.

If you like football you can look up your favourite teams and players, the technical details of stadiums and of course all the rules and the history of important tournaments.

Search for texts related to your language

When learning a language it's also important to learn at least a little bit about the countries the language is spoken in, the history, important people etc.

As a start you could open the article about the respective country. For example, the *Mandarin article about the People's Republic of China* is pretty long and although I don't understand Mandarin I assume it offers you a lot of basic information about the country in your target language.

I once made an e-book filled with articles about all the countries where Portuguese is spoken. If you want to know how to do that, there is a whole section dedicated to it at the end of this book.

Every country and every culture has its typical customs and habits. You can find everything about them on Wikipedia. For example, the Swedish article about *midsommar* provides you a lot of information about this famous event in Sweden and gives you the relevant words. When learning Swedish and maybe travelling to Sweden, *midsommar* is a topic that is likely to come up in the future.

You can even read about your language in the foreign language. For example, there is a very detailed (and well-rated) *article about Esperanto available in Esperanto*.

Featured articles

When you open the main page of each language version you find some featured for articles. You can open the main page by using the language code +.wikipedia.org

Examples: *fr.wikipedia.org*
                    it.wikipedia.org

You can also find the main page when you are in an article in the respective language and click on the Wikipedia logo in the upper left corner.

The featured article changes regularly so you can just dive into a random topic spontaneously.

There are also sections where you can find articles about topics that are currently featured in the global news or about important events that happened on the same day in the past.

HOW TO USE WIKIPEDIA FOR LANGUAGE LEARNING

Plain text work

As simple as it may sound, you can use the texts and READ them. Use them as all other texts you read in a foreign language. Highlight special words and phrases, add comments and translations, draw on it etc. Just do what you enjoy doing with a text. The easiest way to do so is to save the article as a PDF or print it out with the print/export-function.

Preparing for a specific topic

In its original sense, Wikipedia is a knowledge source and it's a good place to find information about all kinds of topics. You can make use of these for your language studies.

Let's say, you're supposed to write something about your home country; either because your teacher asks you to do so or because you want it to be checked by a language learning partner etc. You can find all relevant information in your target language.

For example, I once had to prepare a short talk on the Republic of Chechnya in Russian for one of my classes. The first step was to open the *Russian Wikipedia article* of Chechnya. After I found some first important pieces of information, I did a more in-depth research and read more about specific events etc. By reading all this in Russian, I already had all the vocabulary in hand and I didn't have to use the dictionary that often.

Boost your vocabulary

You can use Wikipedia for targeted Vocabulary research. As I explained in the introduction, I often use Wikipedia to find the correct proper names in another language.

But you can also do very specific vocabulary research, for example within the field of medical terms. You can open the article about a *common cold* and find all relevant words One of the first chapters gives you the words for all the symptoms: cough, runny nose, nasal congestion, sore throat, muscle ache etc. You can find them all in the same sentence!

HOW TO CONVERT TEXTS FROM WIKIPEDIA

Of course we can read articles directly on our computer screen or mobile device. But reading from a computer screen can be very tiring and not everybody likes it. Especially, when your level of the language is not very high yet, reading a website can be very exhausting.

Many of us also prefer to work with printed texts because it's easier to make notes, write down translations, etc. Doing something with your hands, using a real pen and proper paper can be a sensual experience that helps us to process the material more easily.

Wikipedia offers us the possibility to convert the articles into a nicely-formatted pdf document that makes reading easier. But you can not only save individual articles, put them on your e-reader or print them out, but you can also create something like books by putting some articles together.

In case you don't know this function yet, the following pages you will find a step-by-step manual how to it.

Note: The screen shots are taken from the English Wikipedia but please consider that when you download articles in another language, also the language of the menu changes. But the layout is always the same, so you should be able to find your way :)

How to open the print/export-function
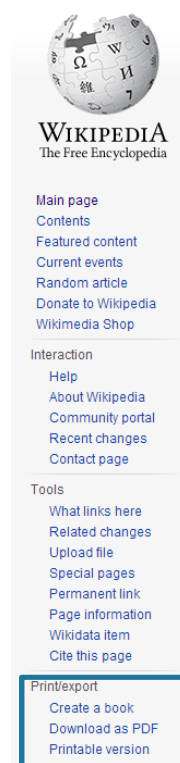
You can find the print/export function in the column on the left side. If you don't understand the language well, just count the lines: the third grey sub header is the print/export function.

Now you have three options:

- Create a book
- Download as PDF
- Printable version

The option "Printable version" is very easy to explain: this link opens a text only version of the article and you just have to use the print function and there you go. But I have to mention that the format provided in this function is not as nice as the PDF format.

How to download as PDF

When you choose the function "Download as PDF" the conversion to PDF starts automatically. You will see the following information:

Rendering

Please wait while the document is being generated.

Progress: 1%

This page should automatically refresh every few seconds. If this does not work, please press your browser's refresh button.

Once the document is rendered, you get the following message.

Rendering finished

The document file has been generated. Download the file ⬀ to your computer.

Notes:

- Not satisfied with the output? See the help page about books for possibilities to improve it.

When you follow the link "Download the file" the PDF opens in a new tab. The format is very nice and clean. I prefer the PDF version to the "print immediately" option. You can now save or print the file.

Note: You might be surprised about the huge number of pages. Yes, Wikipedia articles can be very long in fact, especially when they have to fit on an A4 sheet.

Before printing you might want to check the last pages: Wikipedia adds all references, external links, sources and the licence at the end of the pdf. If you want to save paper, you can exclude these pages from printing.

How to create a book

The function "Create a book" offers you the possibility to put various articles together into one PDF-file. Then, follow the link you will find the following window.

Book creator

With the *book creator* you can create a book containing wiki pages of your choice. You can export the book in different formats (for example PDF or ODF) or order a printed copy.

Start book creator Cancel

*See Help:Books for more information.*

There is also a description below about how to use the book creator but as soon as you use it in another language it might be more difficult to use.

Once you start the book creator, you will be transferred back to last article you opened but now you will find this menu on top.

Book creator (disable)
⊕ Add this page to your book 📖 Show book (0 pages) 🪄 Suggest pages   ⦿ Help

Open all the articles you want to include into your book and click on "add this page to your book button" in the menu displayed above.

Book creator (disable)
⊖ Remove this page from your book 📖 Show book (1 page) 🪄 Suggest pages
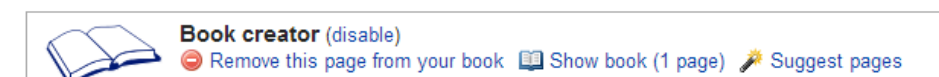
You can check your book "Show book" at any time. I find the "suggest pages" function quite helpful but it does not always suggest the best options. Just give it try.

Once you have finished, you go to "Show book" for the final editing.

Update
Title: [   ]
Subtitle: [   ]
Paper size: A4 ▼
☑ Include a table of contents
Columns: 1 ▼

You can choose a title and the general format of the book. You can also delete the table of content. Sometimes a very short

article consists of many subtitles and then the table of content is unnecessarily long.

In this menu you can sort and organize the content of your book. And now you have to options for the export:

You could order a real book by using a special service offered by Wikipedia. If you follow the link, you will be transferred to the Pedia Press site and find a quote for the price. Of course, this service is not free of charge. I've never tried this service because it's sufficient to simply print out the pdf for me.

Before you download the file you can choose different formats, for example you could also export you book as EPUB. Then you press the download button and your book gets rendered. Depending on the size of you books this could take a bit of time.

Once the document is generated follow the link to your file. You can now save or print your book.

FINAL WORDS

I hope you enjoyed reading this e-book and that you've found a lot of helpful advice.

If you would like to contact me and give feedback to his book or the blog itself, feel free to send me an e-mail:

dani@isimplylovelanguages.com

You can also find me on *Facebook* and *Twitter*!

Thank you very much for taking the time to connect with me!

Author: Daniela Maizner

The entire text is written by the author and is based on information provided by *www.wikipedia.org.*

The views expressed in this e-book are those of the author. All mentioned information, advice or instructions should only regarded as recommendations and no liability and guarantee for success will be assumed. All contents have been carefully checked. Notwithstanding, no guarantee can be undertaken as to the integrity, completeness and topicality of the information.

There is no relationship between Wikipedia and the author and Wikipedia does not erdorse this work.

Photo credits:

Wikipedia Logo – Courtesy: Wikimedia. Wikimedia granted the author a trademark license that allows her to use the logo within   this publication except on the front page.

Front page: Author

Screenshots pdf/book function: taken from the *English Wikipedia*