

The easiest Indian language to learn: nine languages compared

Difficulty is for an English speaker with no family language. For a child abroad, the easiest language is always the one spoken at home.

Language	Speakers	Script	Grammar	Learner material	Difficulty
Hindi	600 m	Devanagari, phonetic, 2-3 weeks to read	SOV; two genders; postpositions	The most of any	Easiest
Urdu	230 m	Perso-Arabic, right to left	Same speech as Hindi	Good	Easy to speak; script adds months
Punjabi	125 m	Gurmukhi, phonetic	Hindi-like, with three tones	Fair (UK, Canada)	Easy after Hindi
Gujarati	60 m	Devanagari cousin	Hindi-like, fewer irregularities	Fair (UK, US, E. Africa)	Easy after Hindi
Marathi	95 m	Devanagari	Three genders; more verb forms	Limited	Moderate
Bengali	270 m	Bengali, 50 characters	No gender; honorific verb levels	Fair	Moderate
Tamil	85 m	247 combinations	Dravidian, suffix chains; formal vs spoken	Good (SG, LK)	Harder
Telugu	95 m	Telugu, 56 characters	Dravidian, agglutinative	Limited	Harder
Kannada	60 m	Close to Telugu's	Dravidian	Limited	Harder
Malayalam	38 m	The most characters	Dravidian, most inflected	Limited	Hardest

US Foreign Service estimate: Hindi, Urdu, Bengali, Punjabi, Tamil and Telugu all about 1,100 class hours to professional proficiency. The ranking is about the first year, not the destination.

The answer for each learner

Who	Easiest	Why
Child abroad with an Indian language at home	The home language	Thousands of hours of listening already done; the class adds reading and writing
Child abroad, no Indian language at home	Hindi	Most children's classes, books, songs, films; widest use in India
English speaker	Hindi, then Punjabi or Gujarati	Phonetic script, most material, most speakers
Hindi speaker	Urdu, then Punjabi, Gujarati, Marathi, Nepali	Shared vocabulary, sentence order; Marathi and Nepali share the script
Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, Malayalam speaker	Another Dravidian language	Shared grammar: Kannada-Telugu close; Tamil-Malayalam close

The first month, and the first words

Week	Do
1	Ten script characters a day with sounds, written and said; the first 20 words: greetings, family, yes and no, numbers to 10
2	The rest of the script; reading simple words aloud; 20 more words; 'I am', 'this is', 'I want'
3	Present-tense sentences about yourself; what, where, who; a children's song or cartoon daily
4	A five-minute conversation with a speaker; the first 100 words reviewed from memory

Twenty first words in Hindi (pronunciation)

namaste	hello / goodbye	dhanyavaad	thank you
haan / nahin	yes / no	kripya	please
maa / papa	mother / father	paani	water
khaana	food	mujhe ... chaahiye	I want ...
kahaan?	where?	kya?	what?
achha	good / OK	theek hai	fine
ek, do, teen	1, 2, 3	chaar, paanch	4, 5
chhah, saat	6, 7	aath, nau, das	8, 9, 10
mera naam ... hai	my name is ...	aap kaise hain?	how are you?
main theek hoon	I am fine	phir milenge	see you

Three sounds to get right from day one

Long vowels doubled (aa, ee, oo) change meaning: kam (less) vs kaam (work). Breathy consonants (kh, th, bh) are the plain letter plus a puff of air. Two kinds of t and d: dental (tongue on the teeth) and retroflex (tongue curled back).

Your choice

Language spoken at home: _____

Language chosen, and why: _____

Who the child will speak it with: _____

Twenty minutes a day, at: _____

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