

# Language and Culture



**METROPOLITAN STATE UNIVERSITY™**  
OF DENVER

# Understanding Culture: The Key to Learning a Language

Can you really learn a language by simply memorizing words and grammar rules, and leaving culture at the door?

To learn a language well, you must also learn about its culture(s). In other words, understanding language is understanding culture. In many ways language *is* culture.

But what is culture?

When we use the word “culture” we may mean:

- Food
- Customs, Traditions, Celebrations
- Music, Art, Literature
- Mythology
- Idiomatic Expressions
- Etiquette, etc.

*Source:* <https://www.daytranslations.com/blog/2017/10/understanding-culture-9988/>

# Definitions of Culture

*Culture is the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one category of people from another.*

--Geert Hofstede Professor Emeritus of Organizational Anthropology  
Maastricht University

*Culture is the characteristics and knowledge of a particular group of people, encompassing language, religion, cuisine, social habits, music and arts.*

--[Live Science](#)

*Culture:*

- *The set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterizes an institution or organization*
- *The set of values, conventions, or social practices associated with a particular field, activity, or societal characteristic*

--[Merriam Webster](#)

Source: <https://www.daytranslations.com/blog/2017/10/understanding-culture-9988/>

# Language and Culture Are Intertwined

The common themes in the above definitions of culture are: patterns, beliefs, interactions and learned behavior.

These all show in language.

In this way we can see that, although language is not the same as culture, it is a reflection of it. Understanding language is understanding culture.



*Source:* <https://www.daytranslations.com/blog/2017/10/understanding-culture-9988/>

# PIZZA: No, You Do Not Speak Italian

An American and an Italian will most likely always disagree about what is “pizza.”

The Italian might swear that traditional Neapolitan pizza is the only legitimate form of this food. It’s a yeasty flatbread baked with tomato sauce and mozzarella cheese on top. You have to go to Napoli to get it. It’s even protected as a Traditional Speciality Guaranteed Dish by the European Union.

To many Italians, what Americans call “pizza” is an abomination.

Americans love their pizza. In fact, America has its own subset of pizza styles according to regional subcultures: New York pizza is flat, greasy, and served in wide slices; Chicago pizza is deep dish and comes with hearty toppings, etc. This is not an Italian food. It’s distinctly American, developed by generations of immigrants in a multicultural context.



Whether or not these American styles truly qualify as ‘pizza’ is a question of language. Same word, different languages, different cultures. Do we need a new word, other than ‘pizza,’ in order to define it satisfactorily?

*Source:* <https://www.daytranslations.com/blog/2017/10/understanding-culture-9988/>

# What Is the Best Way to Learn a Language?

## How Long Does it Take?

- **MOTIVATION. What is your goal?** Most people aim to participate actively in a business or social conversation in the target language. This is the equivalent of an advanced level. Near-native fluency is a superior level.
- **BACKGROUND. What is your target language and what is your first language?** For example, people who speak English as a first language will have less difficulty learning German or Spanish, compared to Mandarin Chinese or Japanese.
- **ATTITUDE. Are you willing to take risks?** Most people learn faster by speaking, even if it is imperfect. Be ready to step out of your comfort zone.
- **EFFORT. How often will you take classes? How hard are you prepared to work?** The more exposure you have to the language, the faster and better you learn. Multiple class and study sessions a week will guarantee more progress. Language learning can be very enjoyable, but it is also hard work. The amount of time you invest in preparation is directly proportionate to the results you can expect.
- **TEACHING. What method will you use?** Different methods of language instruction render different results. Typically, the so-called communicative approaches, which rely on frequent interaction and practice through meaningful context, are the most helpful in building speaking skills. At *MSU Denver* we favor these approaches.

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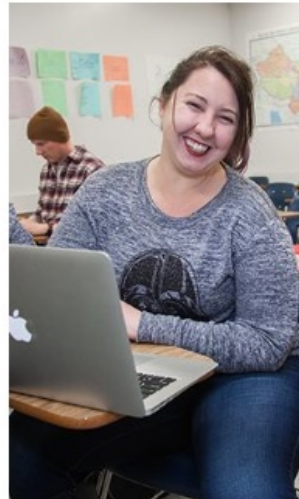
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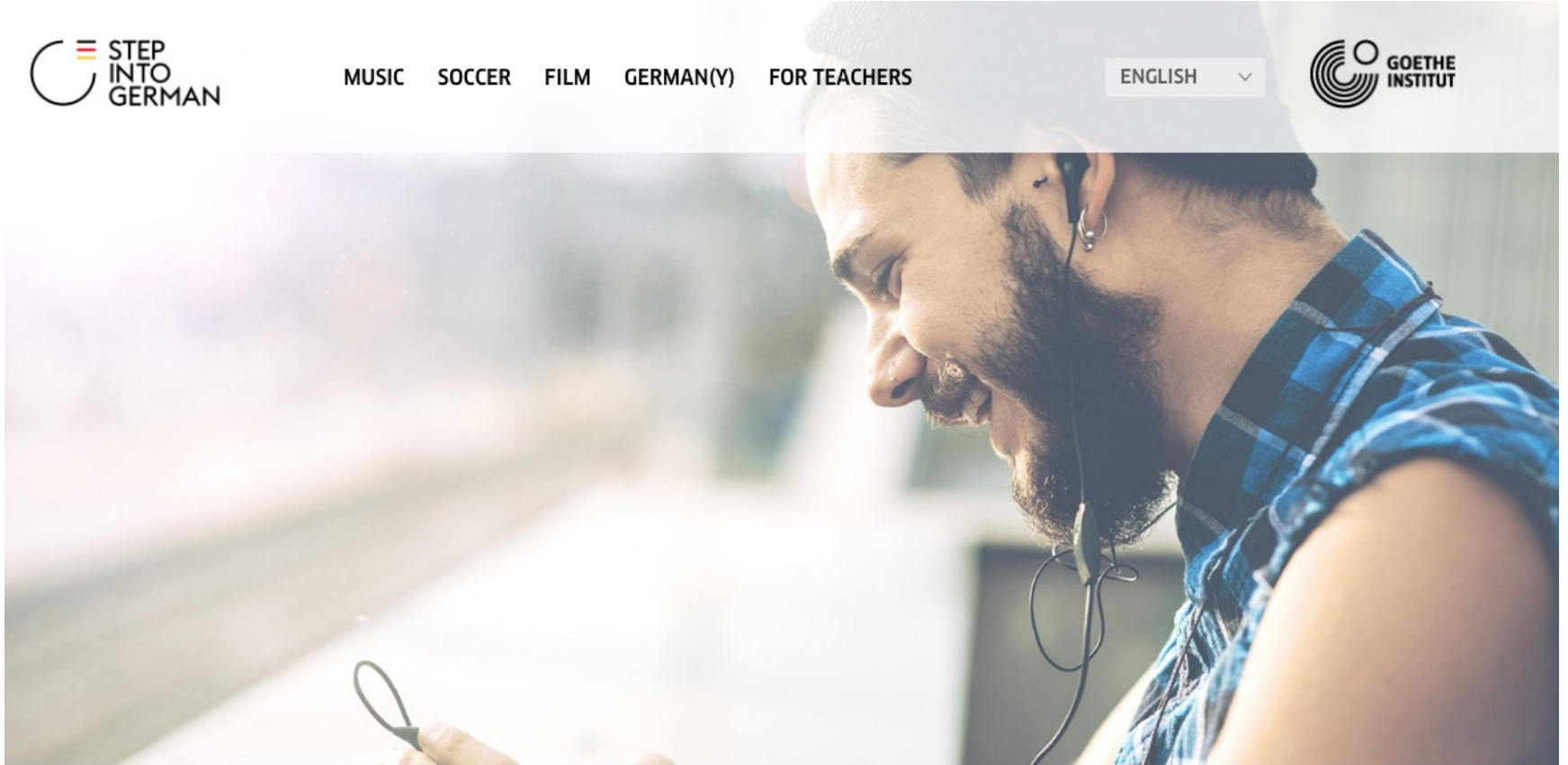
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- Learn the basics of the German Language (GER 1010, GER 1020) with the help of the amazing materials created by Deutsche Welle
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- Become aware of the cultural layers in Japanese Through Media Culture (JPS 3200)
- Develop your vocabulary through Children's Literature (JPS 3300)



# SPANISH

## Appreciate the Diversity of the Spanish-Speaking World

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- Learn more about the Culture and Civilization of Spain (SPA 3200), the Culture and Civilization of Latin America (SPA 3210) or the Folklore and Culture of the Mexican Southwest (SPA 3220)
- Discover Latin American Film (SPA 3600) or the complexity of Spanish Culture through Film (SPA 390C)
- Spend a summer in Spain