

IS VIETNAMESE A HARD LANGUAGE?

Tiếng Việt có phải là một ngôn ngữ khó không?

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1. *Học tiếng Việt có khó không?*

Is learning Vietnamese difficult? Many Vietnamese believe that it's pretty much impossible for foreigners to master their language. There is a saying in Vietnam: *Phong ba bão táp không bằng ngữ pháp Việt Nam*. ("The hardships of struggling with a violent storm don't compare to the hardships of mastering Vietnamese grammar"). Below we will debunk some of the myths regarding the difficulty of Vietnamese, based on my experience in learning 15 languages. Though Vietnamese has difficult aspects, we will see that it is more accurate to say that it is mostly "an easy language."

2. Fifteen Reasons why Vietnamese is easy

1. **Short words.** Words are short and easy to learn. Many words like *ngủ* and *đi* have only one syllable and even longer words like *thú vị* are often short.
2. **Stable tones.** The tones do not change according to the context; that is, the tone of any syllable is always the same, unlike Chinese.
3. **No gender.** Vietnamese has no grammatical gender. Gender is a major challenge for learners of many languages like Arabic and German, since the form is often irregular and illogical.
4. **No plural.** Vietnamese has no plural forms, neither for nouns and adjectives nor for verbs. Plural forms can be highly irregular (as in German and Arabic) and thus difficult to learn.
5. **No articles.** Vietnamese has no articles. In many languages, such as German and Portuguese, mastering the articles is difficult because their form can depend on gender, number, and case.
6. **No conjugation.** Vietnamese verbs are not conjugated. Some languages have hundreds of verb forms, which could take years to learn.
7. **Tenses are easy.** Vietnamese tenses are formed by a small number of particles placed before the verb, such *đã* for past and *sẽ* for future. One can thus master the Vietnamese tenses in a few minutes.
8. **Tenses are optional.** The tense particles can be omitted if the tense is clear from the context, or by using a time word, as in *Tôi ăn trưa hôm qua* 'I had lunch yesterday'.

9. **No cases.** Vietnamese words are not inflected for grammatical case (such as nominative and dative), which makes it much easier to learn than languages with complicated case systems like German.
10. **No agreement.** Since Vietnamese words are not inflected nor conjugated, they never change according to the tense, number and gender of other words in the sentence, as is the case in many languages (for example *muchachas bonitas* 'beautiful girls' in Spanish).
11. **Easy to read.** Vietnamese is written in the Latin alphabet, modified by diacritics. It is much easier to read compared to other Asian languages like Chinese and Japanese that are written in non-Latin scripts.
12. **Easy to write.** Vietnamese is easy to write because it uses the Latin alphabet and because the orthography is fairly regular, unlike such languages as French and English.
13. **Easy words.** Vietnamese words are based on the Chinese model. Since each syllable has a clear meaning (often derived from a Chinese character), compound words can be easily understood if one knows the meanings of each component.
14. **Easy grammar.** Vietnamese grammar is much easier than that of many other languages because of such features as verb conjugation and case endings don't exist, while others, such as plural forms and tenses, are easy to form and are optional.
15. **Information density.** Vietnamese packs more information into the same number of syllables than other major world language, contributing to ease of learning because the shorter words represent meaning more efficiently.

3. Ten reasons why Vietnamese is hard

1. **Difficult sounds and tones.** Vietnamese is phonologically rich and complex: 11 vowels, 20 consonants, 8 final consonants and 8 tones combine to form nearly 7000 syllables, some of which are quite similar and difficult to distinguish, like *nhinh* [ɲĩŋ] and *nginh* [ŋĩŋ], while some tones such as *ngoài* and *ngoải* are difficult to discern in rapid speech.
2. **Listening.** Though normally it is easier to use a language passively (reading and listening) than actively (speaking and writing), for Vietnamese it seems that speaking could be easier than listening.
3. **Fast speech.** Vietnamese is normally spoken relatively slowly, but if spoken fast, unclearly or in a low voice it becomes difficult to understand.
4. **Vocabulary.** A major obstacle in learning any language is the presence of unknown words and phrases. But Vietnamese can be difficult to follow even if most of the words are known.

5. **Expectation.** If someone asks you a question you are not expecting, you are likely to misunderstand even if you know every word in the question.
6. **Auditory memory.** If you have learned a word by reading but have rarely heard it you may not recognize it. You need an "aural image," not just a visual image, to understand the spoken word.
7. **Losing control.** When speaking you are in control of the topic, the vocabulary, and the speed, but when listening, the other party gains control and you may get lost. Therefore, speaking can be easier than listening.
8. **Information density.** Though high information density makes Vietnamese easier to learn in general, it may actually make listening more difficult because it may take more time to absorb the denser information.
9. **Pronouns.** There are dozens of pronouns, and their correct use requires an understanding of cultural and social factors. Confusingly, the same word, like *anh* and *cháu*, can refer to both the first and second persons.
10. **Classifiers.** Vietnamese has a rich set of classifiers, and it is difficult to remember which classifiers are appropriate for which nouns.

4. Conclusions

In conclusion, despite of the challenges faced by learners of Vietnamese, especially in pronouncing and discerning the tones and the many difficult sounds, it can be said that Vietnamese is a relatively easy language to learn: short words, a stable orthography, no genders, no plurals, no conjugation, no cases, no articles, and more. Though we have listed ten reasons for why Vietnamese is difficult, here is actually one major reason: the pronunciation.

Don't let the false prophets shouting "*tiếng Việt khó*" mislead you :-). Screw up your courage and plunge into the exciting and joyous world of *tiếng Việt*!

5. Jack Halpern



Jack Halpern, CEO of **The CJK Dictionary Institute** (CJKI), is a lexicographer by profession, and the chief editor of the world-renowned [Kodansha Kanji Learner's Dictionary](#) and of various other dictionaries and applications for studying Japanese and Chinese. Jack Halpern, who has lived in Japan over 40 years, was born in Germany and has lived in six countries. An avid polyglot, he has studied 15 languages (speaks ten fluently). Based on Jack Halpern's experience in learning foreign languages, CJKI has developed [Liberia](#), a revolutionary tool that provides a whole new way of making language learning more effective and enjoyable than ever before. Founder of the International Unicycling Federation, Jack Halpern has promoted the sport worldwide. Currently, his passions are playing the quena, improving his Vietnamese and Arabic, and overseas travel.

