

LEARNING A FOREIGN LANGUAGE OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM

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When describing the importance of knowing a foreign language, Charlemagne declared “To have another language is to possess a second soul,” and Federico Fellini once averred “A different language is a different vision of life.” Yet, for many of us learning a foreign language can be a difficult task. We spend years in middle school, high school and at the undergraduate level learning a foreign language because we are told “it’s a requirement.” So we sit for hours in a classroom trying to write the correct verb, adjective or noun in our workbook only to be frustrated and disappointed for the umpteenth time when we are told the answer is incorrect. At the same time, our school transcripts indicate that we received a proficient grade in our foreign language requirement but the little voice inside reminds us that at best we are fluent in how to greet someone until they respond or ask a question; then we freeze, fumble for the correct word and want to crawl into the nearest hole. In short the method for learning a foreign language in a classroom setting is not enough to develop real fluency.

The classroom setting for learning a foreign language is not conducive to a student becoming fluent. I have found the classroom environment to be too rigid and constraining. There is, however, a distinction between language learning and language acquisition. According to linguist Kamil Wiśniewski, these two words must be defined. He states that “the term learning is used to describe a conscious process that includes thorough explanation of grammar rules, practice of those rules, as well as memorizing lists of vocabulary. Learning is what we usually experience during classroom lessons. Acquisition, on the other hand, is unconscious processes which does not involve tutelage and is more dependent on the amount of exposure to language and interaction” (2007). The question then becomes does the formal classroom setting have any impact or purpose toward language acquisition? I argue that most students do not retain the tools necessary to develop language acquisition learned in a classroom environment. Thus educational institutions should set up and support programs that require learning a foreign language abroad. Study abroad programs create a level of consistency for students by allowing them to become immersed into the language. Acquisition of another language in a foreign country gives the learner the ability to step inside the mind of that other culture. Without the ability to communicate and understand a culture on its own terms, true access to the language is unobtainable. Moreover, Canadian psychologist and linguist Robert C. Gardner (1993: 157–194), together with his associate, describes “core second language learning motivation as a construct composed of three characteristics: the attitudes towards learning a language (affect), the desire to learn the language (want) and motivational intensity (effort).”

In the summer of 2000, I travelled to Salamanca, Spain to enroll in a foreign language school and studied the Spanish language and culture. I did not realize that at the time I would be spending three consecutive summers there learning the language and culture. These summers turned out to be one of the most memorable and gratifying experiences of my life. I wanted to participate in this program because as a high-school teacher I know communication with parents is essential for the success of any student. Therefore I wanted to be able to communicate with the Spanish-speaking parents of my students during parent/teacher conferences or just to communicate when necessary. Studies indicate a significant increase in student success when

parents are involved in their child's education. How does a parent get involved when they do not speak the language? This question and approach was what some linguists like Gardner suggest, is my motivation and desire to develop acquisition. Although my school is located between Manhattan's Lower East Side and Chinatown, and Latinos are not the majority in the school. Chinese-Americans are, and I decided to study Spanish rather than take on Mandarin, for I had a positive attitude, a strong desire and a willingness to make an effort but my time and ability are limited.

My other reason for choosing Spanish was my familiarity with the Neapolitan dialect that I learned by spending my childhood summers in Italy. Most language teachers and linguists would agree the earlier one starts to learn a foreign language, the more likely one is to learn multiple languages. I also had some experience with Spanish in college and a few years before in middle-school but did not remember most of what I learned. So my ability at best was at a beginner's level and I certainly did not feel confident having a conversation. Finally I did not want to fall under the spell of most American-born individuals who have a lack of interest in learning a second language because they believe English is the world's *lingua franca* and will suffice. As the American writer and humorist David Barry (quoted in Spanier, 2008) observes, "Americans who travel abroad for the first time are often shocked to discover that, despite all the progress that has been made in the last 30 years, many foreign people still speak in foreign languages." There is a practical reason to learn a foreign language so long as one has certain elements in one's favor that will facilitate this process.

Most study abroad programs strongly encourage students to stay with a host family that speaks the native language. I stayed with a woman who was a former fashion designer and now runs a hostel for foreign students learning Spanish. We have over the years become friends. In fact whenever I am in Spain I stay with her and I call her at least three or four times a year. The foreign language schools in Salamanca are designed for the serious student who truly wants to learn the language. In my case, from Monday to Friday I had a Spanish civilization class in the morning in which the instructor spoke only in Spanish. At times I was lost but usually I grasped the main idea, thanks to the fact that the instructor spoke in perfect Castilian Spanish. She served as my model for proper pronunciation and usage of words that I later mimicked in private. Listening to a native speaker is vital to developing fluency. At times the instructor used visual aides to help us understand a particular time period in Spanish civilization. After my civilization class was over I had a two half-hour grammar classes similar to what I had when I was in middle-school and college. We were given a textbook and workbook and every night we were assigned lessons for homework. Once we were back in class we would go over the homework in a round-robin format and begin a new lesson usually related to conjugating verbs. There was no difference between this method and the way I was taught at home except the instructor spoke entirely in the language studied, creating a different level of intensity in learning. The class size was small, no more than eight to ten students, and we learned a great deal about each other's culture. As the weeks progressed some students excelled at a faster pace than others. I completed the exercises for homework but felt as if I were back in New York by simply going over homework assignments, reading the sentences aloud and listening to the instructor teach different lessons but retaining very little. My objective was to learn the language well and I did not feel the classroom environment was going to do this for me.

This leads to my second point of developing fluency outside the classroom. All of us learn through our senses. Some of us learn better through one sense than another. Some students learn best through visual approaches, others through auditory approaches, still others through a combination of the two. Many students enjoy work which involves an active, physical response and learn well when such methods are employed. One of the advantages of using visual, audio and tactile materials to support text work is that the resulting mixture of styles means that teaching will be appropriate for a wider range of learners. We need to accommodate different learning styles because not everyone learns best in the same way. Harvard professor Howard Gardner (1989) supports this claim through his theory of multiple-intelligences. In many classrooms where foreign language is taught there tend to be lessons directly associated with the textbook and the workbook. With this method learners find the text difficult and lose motivation to learn. Research tells us that just telling someone something is not the most efficient way of getting them to learn it. Yes, some of the textbooks and workbooks provide visual aids to identify a word but more often instructors stick to the books. Even my instructor in Spain had this approach. There are many positive results for teaching a foreign language through this conventional method, but for many who are truly motivated in acquiring the skills to be fluent in a language there needs to be more freedom to explore and observe the language in other ways. Different strategies such as visual aids, entertaining activities and total immersion in the language are necessary to develop increased fluency. As Kamil Wiśniewski (2007) observes, “Frequent change of activity prevents boredom, sustains interest. Learners need lots of practice in manipulating the elements of the language before attempting to use the language to speak, listen, read or write.”

I completed my course work for college credits but toward the end I was not motivated by going over my homework exercises from the workbook or even attending class, and this was not because of my instructor. She was originally from Salamanca and vacationed there in the summer but was living in Belgium to teach Spanish. She was very knowledgeable and had her set routines that made the lessons enjoyable. I just felt my time inside the classroom was no longer productive and I also felt more embarrassed when I made a grammatical mistake in talking to a native speaker. I was shell-shocked from my homework assignments. In this regard linguist Noel Greely indicates (200): “there are many things happening in classes that disturb the process, such as embarrassment and fear of making mistakes, lack of motivation to learn or unwillingness to sound foreign because of lack of sympathy towards the target language culture. When factors such as stress or self-consciousness also occur linguists tend to talk of affective factors which influence the entire process.”

Total immersion in a language requires one to take risks. I took the initiative and started to learn the language by going outside and using my senses in different ways. I constantly listened to how language was spoken in public places. I developed a routine of hitting several tapas bars just so I could hear the language being spoken. My purpose was to have my ear grow accustomed to the sounds of words and the sentence structure. I learned how to pronounce the names of different foods, clothing, or other items. I might have learned this kind of thing from a workbook but the difference was that real-life experiences took me on a faster and more enjoyable journey. My level of retention for new words expanded through this interaction. It was better than a classroom situation.

For instance, one evening a classmate and myself went out to a tapas bar in Salamanca. We had ordered our selection of tapas and our waiter served us; but we realized we did not have forks and we did not know how to say “fork” in Spanish. Now I am sure during our classroom instruction we had learned various vocabulary words and “fork” was one of those words. My friend gestured with his hand to one of the waiters and the waiter looked puzzled at first, and then said “*un tenedor?*” To our embarrassment we nodded; we were like innocent babies learning a language. The point is that one can learn hundreds of new vocabulary words and still not remember or know how to use the words unless it becomes part of everyday speech. Language classroom experience is very unnatural because many of the exercises do not reflect everyday language structures. Because of accent, dialect and colloquial language, sometimes the same word or sentence can sound very different from one person to another. In American English some individuals say “I am going to go upstairs,” while others will say “I’m gonna go upstairs.” For fluency to develop language learners need to hear both sounds and how the speaker is forming his word choice. Sometimes a word from one region or country may sound different even though it is the same word. When I was in Puerto Rico studying for a month for the same purpose, I heard a woman on the bus greet an acquaintance and say “*Cómo e’tá la nena*” (with the “s” not clearly pronounced) as I recalled having heard someone in Spain say “*Cómo está la niña?*”

Learning a language inside a classroom will teach the grammatical rules, sentence structures and verb tenses, but one would have to submerge himself/herself in order to learn colloquial words that become in a sense the true language. This is not found only in English or in the Romance languages. In the vernacular of Slavic languages, the same patterns of colloquial use can be observed. According to Jennifer Pitt, a graduate student from Fordham University who is fluent in English and Polish, she recalls (2009) being taught in class “*koche`c ciebie*” (pronounced *coha chebya*, “I love you”), “but outside I only heard my Polish friends and relatives say, ‘*koche`c cie*’ (pronounced *cohache*), which means the same thing.”

I do not say to omit foreign language courses from the curriculum. I say create a debate about how to restructure the time students spend learning in a formal classroom setting *versus* outside. The luxury of living in New York City is that there are many enclaves where students desiring to learn a foreign language can rely on their senses to pick up a language. Today there are blogs, periodicals written in the language of interest, and other means of communication to help. Students should be required to take classes overseas—perhaps as early as middle school—the earlier the better. If industrialized nations can spend millions on military defense and national security they can have programs that support language acquisition in order to understand other cultures and prevent ideological differences from separating countries. More money invested in study abroad programs could improve communication with other cultures. Through these programs more jobs can be created and trade opportunities increased. The present economic crisis is a grim reminder that globalization is here whether one agrees with it or not. This underlines the importance of countries providing opportunities for its citizens to be bilingual. Many of the Scandinavian countries recognize their citizens are limited from outside business unless they learn another language. The importance of knowing a foreign language is not in dispute. We must maximize foreign language acquisition outside the classroom. I think that progressive methods and total immersion in a language should occur first before

implementing bland foreign language requirements that only serve to discourage students rather than ignite a spark.

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