



Communication on the Fly

Learning a language is a complex process which requires much time and effort if it is to be completed successfully. This has always been, and shall always be, the case, at least for the foreseeable future. What we are able to change however, is the way in which we approach language learning so that it becomes more efficient and more engaging to new language students, thereby increasing their motivation to pursue and master it.

What we must remember however, is that the learning process is different for each student. Every individual responds differently to different stimuli. E.g. For some, visual stimuli such as pictures or flashcards are much easier to recall, whereas others may prefer aural stimuli (sounds). Helping students to understand their most efficient way(s) for processing and retaining information will remove some of the difficulty and frustration from the learning process and allow them to focus more closely on learning to manipulate the language.

Because the language learning process is so different as we move from one individual to another, the main goal of language instructors should be to coach and encourage their students rather than simply to provide information. Engaging students actively in the learning process instead of simply feeding them information allows students to branch out, explore, and experiment with different techniques and different media so that they can determine which ones are most comfortable for them to use and which ones are most effective at helping them to learn. Strategically placing some of the responsibility for learning in the students' hands, assisting them as they experiment and explore, and holding them accountable for their progress gives them greater incentive to use their initiative, to be creative, and to experiment more, because their eventual success depends on it. This is in sharp contrast to the traditional approach where the instructor is expected to do all the work while the student simply takes down information and completes written assignments for the most part.

I first came into contact with formal language instruction at the age of 11, studying both French and Spanish in school for five years.

Under this traditional system I was taught a number of disparate grammatical and vocabulary points without fully understanding how to manipulate and combine them for maximum effect. Aside from that, the actual in-class opportunities to practice were not many, so this very important aspect was left up to the individual to do or not do if he so chose, without any real guidance or accountability. It was my affinity and zeal for the languages that motivated me to do the extra work necessary to fill in the gaps and gain a strong understanding of both languages. However, seeing a number of my fellow students struggling to stay motivated signaled to me that there were some shortcomings with this system and perhaps a new approach might yield better results.

This is not only the case at the secondary level but also the tertiary, as I recently tutored someone for a senior-level language course who had been taught mostly grammar and very little vocabulary, so the student still had trouble holding an in-depth conversation despite knowing a number of higher-level grammatical constructs. Here again, lack of practice can be blamed for creating such a deficiency. In such a situation, if students carry out exercises such as translating their thoughts or brief conversational lines from TV shows they are watching, or watching a movie in their native tongue with foreign subtitles, then they will be able to gradually expand their vocabulary because they will find themselves using certain words over and over so they become familiar and almost instinctive.

Four years ago, I had the opportunity to study abroad in Barcelona for a semester so that I could improve my command of Spanish, and also gain a better understanding of the Spanish culture and way of doing business. Around the middle of the semester, we were given a two-week spring break, the first week of which I spent in Italy. When I arrived there, not wanting to be completely lost, I decided to purchase a book to help me get around. I came across a Lonely Planet phrasebook and it was just what I needed. Not only did it have a lot of relevant, topic-related phrases and vocabulary, but it also had a quick,



Haydn C. Griffith offers a practical perspective to the communicative approach to language acquisition

concise basic grammar section to give me the fundamental building blocks of the language, as well as a pronunciation guide throughout to aid with communication. This was enough to start me off actually learning the basics of the language instead of simply reading or pointing out phrases from a book. As a result, I was able to get around fairly comfortably that week, using what I learned to get directions, order food, bargain with my hostel's owner, and have a few other conversations, while receiving numerous compliments in the process. Of course I was also helped by two other key factors: (1) generally speaking, English and Italian have similar sentence structures so once you familiarize yourself with the various Italian components you can begin to construct sentences that are fairly accurate or at least understandable, and (2) Italian and Spanish have a common origin so they are very similar in terms of conjugation and many of their words are similar or exactly the same. These two factors also illustrate another important suggestion for language learners — find common ground between what you already know and what you are trying to learn to form strong linkages and make recall easier.

Discussing this last point brings me to my next point — some basic analysis should be undertaken when attempting to learn a new language. The analysis of which I speak is fairly simple but can be extremely helpful in accelerating the learning process and boosting the learner's confidence. For instance, checking to see whether your native language and your target language share similar alphabets and pronunciation schemes will let you know how much work you will have to do to be able to read and speak the language correctly. From there, simply choosing a few sample phrases and comparing them to their native equivalents will let you know if the sentence structures between the two languages are similar. If these similarities exist then you could begin putting sentences together in a very short space of time by learning some very basic conversational components and then you can gradually expand to more complex topics as it becomes necessary. If not, then you know that some extra time will have to be set

aside at the beginning before further progress can be made.

Subsequent to my Italian experience, I also took the opportunity to learn some German when I visited Vienna, some Portuguese just for fun, some Turkish when I visited Istanbul, and some Polish when I attended my friend's wedding. Each time I approached the learning in much the same way as I had for Italian, but I still did not have a specific step-by-step system to follow so I finally decided a year ago to try to create some type of roadmap to follow for future endeavors. Around the same time I was encouraged by two friends (perhaps half-jokingly) to write a book about how to go about learning another language given my ability to pick them up so quickly. So I decided to write a handbook that would help anyone seeking to learn another language from the moment they made that decision.

The book (*So You Decided To Learn Another Language: Now What?*) has only three short chapters and is laid out in a very straightforward manner. The first chapter informs learners about the various types of tools (both traditional and non-traditional) that are presently available to assist them in their language odysseys, providing numerous examples and where to find them. The second lays out a roadmap for learning depending on if the individual is seeking to gain fluency or simply be able to get around for a few days. The final chapter offers a number of motivational and informational tips about the entire process to try to alleviate some of the confusion surrounding certain aspects of language learning and also put students a bit more at ease with taking on the task of learning a new language.

The intent of the book is not to be a standalone device but rather a companion for the journey. It is supposed to be a coach for students that have not been on such a journey before and thus would like to have the guidance of one who has. It uses simple language to get its points across, trying to avoid arcane academic jargon wherever possible. The hope here is to have not only students but also instructors begin to test and eventually embrace non-traditional methods for language learning because it is clear that conventional techniques do not