

The Linguist on Language

How to learn languages in the age
of the Internet

Steve Kaufmann

Voted the #1 language learning blog on
the Web in 2009

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Thanks for reading.

What is a linguist?

What is a linguist? Why do I call my blog The Linguist on Language? Why did I call my book [The Way of the Linguist?](#)

Every so often someone comments on my blog about that fact that I am not a linguist, since I have not studied linguistics.

So let me be clear. I have read a few books and articles about linguistics. I am not interested. I do not find the hair-splitting and categorization of the phenomena of language that takes place in linguistics to be interesting. It certainly does not help me learn languages.

So why do I call the blog The Linguist on Language? Because I use the term "linguist" in the sense of the first definition provided by the Oxford dictionary. I believe we are all potential linguists.

linguist

The Oxford Pocket Dictionary of Current English | 2009

lin·guist / 'linggwist/ • n. **1.** a person skilled in foreign languages. **2.** a person who studies linguistics.

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FOREWORD

This is a book of blog posts that I have made over a period of five years. These are personal thoughts on the subject of language learning. At times I may be wrong and at times I may contradict myself. I am not an expert in the traditional sense. I do not offer footnotes nor quote colleagues. I have not conducted research projects to support my views. These are just my views.

I am a bit of simplifier. I believe that formal language education is stifling learning because it attempts to be too precise, too organized and too formal. I believe that this is counterproductive. In this book you will find a call to something different, something vaguer, more natural, more ambiguous, yet richer, more satisfying and more effective.

The ability to speak, read, and write your own language well is an invaluable asset in today's information age. It is a source of confidence, and is essential to effective communication, network building and persuasiveness. Language skills are usually the best indicator of professional success in a modern society.

The ability to speak one or more foreign languages is, perhaps, more important for the vast majority of people whose native language is not English, at least for now. English still enjoys the position of being the most used international language. However, this may be changing. Foreign language skills are becoming more important, even for English speakers. The world is becoming smaller. People are traveling more. The internet is bringing language content to our finger-tips, in text, audio and video formats, in an avalanche of information. We are more interconnected than ever.

Politically the world has become multi-polar, as Europe, the BRIC countries (Brazil, Russia, India and China), Spanish-speaking Latin America (and North America), and the Arab world, as well as other regions, are increasingly challenging the 150-year-old dominance of the English-speaking world.

In many countries of the world it is common for people to speak more than one language. This is true in such different places as Ethiopia, Singapore and Sweden, to name but a few examples. However, in many other countries, in Europe, North America, South America, and Asia, enormous time and effort, public and private, are invested in language teaching with relatively poor results. People do not learn well in language classrooms and, in fact, are often discouraged by traditional language teaching methods.

Language learning should be fun, and can be. It almost has to be, if a person is going to succeed to learn another language. In fact, my reading and experience tells me that the overwhelming goal of language teaching has to be to make the learning of the language meaningful and enjoyable. Nothing else really matters.

I have had an on-again, off-again, fascination with language learning throughout my professional career. This was true when I was a diplomat, and then an executive in the forest

industry with dealings in Asia and Europe, and more recently when I have been able to devote more time to language learning. I have enjoyed language learning and usually found the time to spend on it.

In 2002, while still running my own company in the international trade of wood products, I created The Linguist Institute, to come up with a more enjoyable and effective way to learn languages, one which takes advantage of the Internet and related technological and social change. During this period I have also been spending more time on language learning, attacking Cantonese, Korean, Russian and Portuguese as well as a number of old friends like German, Italian, Spanish and Chinese. I am not young. I was born in 1945.

Since 2004 I have maintained a blog on language learning, where I discuss the subject from the perspective of a learner. If I am at times critical of the language teaching establishment, it is because I feel that it is responsible for considerable waste and poor results. I believe that language schools, and schools that teach teachers, have tried to convert what is a natural process into an academic maze of hoops and obstacles. I believe the Internet is an unlimited source of language learning resources and opportunities that will bring us back to basics in language learning.

I have removed the dates from most of the posts so that I could reorganize them into chapters, each with a common theme.

This book, then, is a collection of observations and comments on how to learn languages. I hope it can help people take on the rewarding task of getting to know another language or two.

CHAPTER I: ATTITUDE

It is not possible to exaggerate the importance of the attitude of the learner. It is the deciding factor. Do you like the language? Do you think you can succeed? Can you see yourself as a speaker of the new language? Are you an independent-minded learner? These are the most important considerations in language learning success.

A talent for language learning

Some people learn faster than others. Some people pronounce better than others. Why is this? I am more and more convinced that it is a matter of attitude rather than talent. There is something that good language learners have in common. They can let themselves go. They are not afraid. They achieve that independence from their mother tongue. They do not ask questions about why the new language is this way or that way.

I do not know if you can you teach this attitude. I think that a teacher can inspire this attitude. It happened to me. Once the switch is turned on, everything else becomes easier. Of course it is still important to learn in an efficient way.

Freedom

Stephen Krashen, who has had a major influence on my approach to language learning, once said that the main goal of a language teacher is to create the conditions whereby the student can become an autonomous learner. The more independent the learner, the better he or she will realize that freedom is key!

Freedom can mean many things. First the learner must strive to be as independent as possible of the teacher, of any explanations the teacher might have to provide, independent of the textbook and independent of the classroom. Of course the teacher has a role, as a guide, for feedback, for encouragement, for the occasional explanation etc.. But that role should be as small as possible.

The learner should be free to choose content to learn from, to choose words and phrases to learn, and to choose the kind of learning activity that suits his or her mood.

The learner needs to be free of prejudice. I remember when I started learning Chinese, I had another Canadian learning with me. When he discovered that in Chinese the structure for saying "Are you going?" is "You go not go?". His reaction was "that is silly." Yesterday I bought some Russian books and chatted with the Russian owner of the bookstore. He said that he gets

mad at English because it is so illogical. In Russian "This book" is enough, in English we need to say "This is a book." This makes him mad.

We need to be free of the assumption that there is anything universally logical about grammar, nor anything superior about the structures of our own language. Every language has its own "logic", or way of saying things. Double negatives work in some languages and not in others. Some languages require the constant use of pronouns and articles, and others do not, etc.

Learning techniques that provide the maximum freedom for the learner are the most effective. These techniques are reading and listening. The book and the MP3 player are small and amazingly powerful language learning tools. We can carry them and use them anywhere. We are not dependent on finding native speakers to talk to. Even if we have native speakers around us, they may or may not be interested in talking to us and therefore we are dependent on them. If we can talk to native speakers and enjoy it, fine, but it is not necessary. It is not always available to us. Not so with our books and MP3 players. We can choose what to read and listen to, when to read and listen, and even re-read and re-listen. This immersion in the words, phrases, and sounds of the language are always available to us. It makes us free.

Good language learners

Who is good at languages?

- People who are motivated to learn languages.
- People who put enough time into learning languages.
- People who are not afraid to make mistakes.
- People who are good at simplifying tasks.
- People who are willing to imitate the behaviour of another culture.
- People who do not resist the new language and just accept it.

Make sure you have fun

I often see people who feel they have to learn a language, for work or for a test. Somehow these people often have trouble. They run into a wall. They stagnate. They just seem unable to achieve the kind of fluency they want or need.

People who enjoy the language do better. They do not even have to be surrounded by the language. These are people who enjoy listening and reading, who enjoy exploring the

language, the history, the culture and the romance of the language. These people do well, no matter where they live.

No learning without motivation

I remember one French company we approached about using our language system. They will only pay for English language instruction for those employees who have demonstrated an ability and willingness to study English on their own, using some self-study method. Should we not expect the same of any language student, whether corporate, immigrant or university student, in other words whenever the cost of study is being covered by someone else? Someone once said that to ensure that a person shows up to study, you either have to pay them or make them pay. That is not always true. The intrinsic motivation of a personal interest is the strongest of all, but sometimes we need to see the proof!

Find the time

There is a lot of money spent on English training in large and small corporations. From what I can gather it can consist of a limited amount of contact with an English language instructor, often a native English speaker. This contact can be as seldom as once a week and often in a group. In the period between these English learning sessions the employee-students often do very little, because they are either too busy or not very interested. I suspect that people who are interested manage to find the time.

Uncertainty

To be a successful language learner you have to deal with uncertainty. You have to accept that there will always be words that you do not understand, and words that you pronounce wrong. There will always be times when you do not really get your meaning across as clearly or elegantly as you would like. You may meet someone or phone someone and the communication is more difficult than you would like. There can even be rejection.

Once you accept this as part of the adventure of language learning you are on your way. If you can actually enjoy the experience, the challenge of overcoming these difficulties and seeing them gradually become smaller, then you will enjoy learning. If you enjoy learning you will improve.

Language improvement is so gradual and so uneven that it is easy to get discouraged. Therefore, especially for adult learners, it is important to just enjoy the process. The more you can learn from interesting and meaningful content, the more enjoyable the experience can be. The less you are forced to be accurate or correct, the better.

So I always say. Do not expect perfection from yourself, but constantly work to improve. And learn to accept uncertainty—it is one of the charms of language learning.

Speak when you feel like it

So when is the best time to start speaking? Some say we should start speaking from the beginning. I prefer to build up some knowledge and familiarity with the language first by listening and reading. Who is right? The answer, to me, is obvious.

You do what you want to do. The overwhelming principle for the self-directed language learner is that it should be fun. If it is fun you will keep doing it. If you feel like speaking right away, speak. If you do not want to, don't. If you speak, do not worry about your mistakes—you will eventually make fewer mistakes.

Passive learning

Language skills are unlike most of the skills we acquire in life. This is for two reasons. First because language is so important to everything we do, and second, because we learn language largely passively. We learn more by listening and reading than by speaking. This is true for our first language, and it is also true for any other language we learn.

Unless we have a physical disability, we all learn to talk. Some of us start talking earlier than others, but all children learn to speak their first language. We do this without any drills or explanations, and largely without correction. We do not need a textbook to learn to speak. We just imitate what we hear, noticing words and phrases and patterns. In fact we learn as we listen passively, and then start talking when we feel like it. Some children, like Einstein, do not start talking until quite late, but they are learning all the time they are listening. How well we learn to use the language will depend on our exposure to the language, not when we start talking.

If we hear people around us talking about a wide variety of subjects as children, we naturally and passively pick up the words and phrases they use. If we pick up a lot of words, we will have an advantage when we start school. If we read a lot in school, driven by what interests us, we will acquire a larger and larger vocabulary and achieve a high level of literacy. This will give us an advantage in our education and in our professional life.

If we are exposed to a limited vocabulary as children growing up, and if we do not develop the habit of reading a lot, we will not learn so many words, and we will have fewer phrases and ways of expressing ourselves. We will do less well in school and professionally. In general, remedial reading or grammar instruction will not help the poor reader catch up. What will help is increased exposure to the language, reading and listening to more and more stimulating and challenging content. The earlier this starts the better, but it is never too late.

The same is true when we learn a second language. We mostly need to hear it and read it. We do not need to be taught how to speak. It is something we do naturally. We can even take advantage of our knowledge of a first language to learn words in the new language faster. We do not need to experience everything in life over again. When we notice words, phrases and patterns in the new language, we at first relate them to our own language. Gradually we get used to the strange patterns of the new language, and they start to seem natural. They become natural, not because they were explained to us, but because we have come across them so often in different interesting contexts.

We do not need instruction in pronunciation any more than we need instruction to imitate regional accents in our own language. We just need to let ourselves go, observe and imitate. Unfortunately, we are often more self-conscious when pronouncing a new language because we take ourselves too seriously. We often are more relaxed when we try to imitate different accents in our own language, which is only playacting. This is not the case with the child who simply imitates without inhibition.

I have learned 10 languages. I always found passive learning enjoyable. I just listen, read, review and observe. As long as I am exposed to the language, I am learning passively and it does not matter when I start to use the language. I start using it when I feel like it. In fact I study what I want, on my own schedule. I do not need to start anywhere or finish anywhere. I can have several books or audio books going at the same time.

I follow my inclinations. Sometimes I am more motivated to review new words and phrases, sometimes I am more motivated to listen and read. I never know when I will learn a word or language pattern. My brain seems to just learn them on its own schedule, not on a schedule set out by a teacher or a text book.

Whenever I was asked questions about my reading, questioned on my vocabulary, asked to fill in the blanks, or had to do tests, it disrupted my enjoyment of passive learning. It interrupted my learning. It annoyed me and my learning energy would fizzle.

Learning a language does require effort. But it is the effort of the learner pushing on a slightly open door, pursuing things of interest. It is the pleasant effort of passive learning.

Rubem Alves, a wonderful educator

Rubem Alves is a Brazilian educator whom I discovered as part of my Portuguese studies. I enjoy reading his comments and listening to his wonderful audio books.

Here is what Rubem Alves says about grammar.

"If the scientific knowledge of anatomy were a condition for making love, professors of anatomy would be unrivaled lovers. If the academic knowledge of grammar were a condition for making literature, grammarians would be unrivaled writers. But this is not the case....Grammar is made with words that are dead. Literature is made with words that are alive."

I had a post earlier about how learning a language is like falling in love. I really feel that way. Now, it is possible that some people may fall in love with the grammar of a language. I do not deny that. Most people, however, do not. They fall in love with other things in the language: the sounds, the music, the rhythm, the words and phrases, the content, the literature, the culture, the people they can now reach out and touch. This can all be done with no knowledge of grammatical terms.

Alves goes on to say;

"There is a complete incompatibility between the pleasant experience of reading, a vagabond experience, and the experience of reading for the purpose of answering questions of meaning and understanding."

And he goes on to say about students in a typical classroom:

"They were forced to learn so many things about the texts, grammar, analysis of syntax, that there was no time to be initiated into the only thing that mattered: the musical beauty of the literary text."

And yes, learning a language is first and foremost about listening and reading and, if possible, loving the language. That comes first. If you can manage that, and if you can encourage learners to do that, the rest is easy.

The language teacher's role should be to make the learner independent according to Krashen. Rubem Alves talks of encouraging students to fly, of helping them learn things that become a part of their bodies so they do not have to think of them. He quotes the parable of the centipede.

"Once a centipede was asked how he could operate all of his numerous feet in such an orderly manner without getting them confused. The centipede shook his head, shrugged, and said that he had never given it a thought. From that time on, the centipede became unable to move, the legs all got in the way of one another."

Alves wants teachers to create hunger, so that students will find their own way. He wants the learners to fall in love with what they are reading, so that they will love reading. He disparages grammar and the other useless dictates of the curriculum. You cannot learn music just from the notes, he says, you first have to hear the song.

You cannot push on a rope

Recently I had a conversation at a local sushi bar. The person beside me was originally from Japan and had lived in Canada for over 30 years. His English was OK but not great. He commented that Canadians who go to Japan learn the language faster than Japanese who come to Canada. Of course this is not always true but it is often the case, even though Japanese people have up 10 years of English in school.

Most English-Canadians take French in school and cannot speak French. Tens of thousands of Canadian public employees have been sent to language school and did not become fluent in French. I have former colleagues in the Diplomatic Service who studied Chinese or Japanese and are unable to use the language. Yet Canadians who go to Japan to teach English often come back fluent in Japanese. I have two of them working for me in my lumber business (we export lumber to Japan).

I have read that graduates of French immersion in Canada do not become bilingual, and that it makes no difference whether they start in grade 1 or grade 7. Certainly the many ESL schools funded by government to teach immigrants English here in Canada, do not produce fluent speakers, and in fact, seem to have very little real impact.

It is impossible to teach an unmotivated learner. I do not mean motivated to get a better job or pass a test, but motivated to speak the language well. I doubt it. Maybe we should stop trying.

Curiosity

Many people attribute language learning success to talent. Of course, the talent for language learning may vary from person to person. The important question is whether talent is the most important factor in determining language learning success. I do not think it is. Well, then what is?

One has to be open. It helps to be outgoing and unafraid of making mistakes. All of that is true, but it is also true that learning and speaking a foreign language is stressful and tiring. Why would people deliberately impose this stress on themselves?

Perhaps it is necessity. But then there are many examples of people who have a strong need to improve their language skills, who can earn more money if they improve their language skills, and yet they do not learn. Often they really do not try very hard, or if they do try, they do not succeed.

If I think about the good language learners that I have known, who exist in every language and cultural group, what they all had in common was curiosity. They were curious about another culture. They were interested in another language. That was what enabled them to accept the stress of learning and speaking a foreign language, and to overcome the obstacles.

So, for a teacher, stimulating that curiosity and maintaining it is the number one responsibility.

We all have our price

An old man approached an attractive young socialite at a party. "For one million dollars, would you sleep with me?" he asked her. "I might consider it," replied the girl. "Well how about for \$20 then," said the old man. "What do you think I am, a prostitute?" exclaimed the girl, her feelings hurt. "We have already established that," said the old man. "We are just negotiating the price."

I like to ask "if I gave you a million dollars to learn the language in six months, do you think you could learn?" Then the answer is yes. I guess like in the story about the old man and the pretty young socialite at the cocktail party, everyone has their price.

We are different

In the opening lines of *Anna Karenina*, Tolstoy wrote "all happy families are happy in the same way but unhappy families find their own individual ways to be unhappy," or words to that effect.

All good language learners, of whatever national origin, are in some ways the same. What about those who struggle? Does it depend on their nationality? Here I am following up on Hiroshi's comment on Swedes speaking so well.

I know Japanese people who speak English very well. Yet it is true that most Japanese people I meet in business, or who are living and working in Canada, struggle with their English. There is much hand-wringing in Japan over their poor average TOEIC scores and other indicators that even in Asia, the Japanese do more poorly than other countries.

In my view the Japanese face a few unique obstacles and share other problems with other larger language groups. These problems do not affect those language learners who manage to liberate themselves from these obstacles. These are the good Japanese language learners who are in the same category as the Swedes we are talking about, and all other good language learners whether from Asia, Africa, Europe or wherever.

A major problem is the "language or cultural ego" that Hiroshi referred to. "We are unique. Our language is unique. Our culture/language is uniquely refined, difficult, expressive. I do not want to lose my uniqueness.

How can I possibly become a fluent speaker of another language when I am so unique?"

This attitude is strong in Japan and East Asia, but also exists to varying degrees among other people everywhere.

If you cannot believe in, and look forward to, the idea that you will become a natural speaker of another language; if you cannot make another language and some of the behaviour of another culture your model to imitate and emulate; if you resist this process; if you think this

process is a big serious deal, rather than an entertaining adventure; you will always be on the outside of the language looking in.

Let's look at other factors. It is certainly true that the sentence structure, vocabulary and pronunciation of Swedish are very close to English. This is not the case with Japanese. Japanese has relatively few sounds compared to many other languages. This will make it more difficult for Japanese learners to acquire new sounds, since they are not familiar with as many sounds as, say, the Swedes. The Japanese would have an easier time with Spanish where the vowels are similar to Japanese. They would still face the problems of sentence structure and vocabulary and lack of confidence.

The Kana writing system is another obstacle. In the Kana phonetic systems, each symbol stands for a syllable. Many Japanese learn other languages with Kana as a phonetic guide. Most of their teachers are Japanese and not native speakers of English. This is a formula for failure. A combination of using Kana and a Japanese teacher's pronunciation as phonetic guide would certainly put the Japanese learner at a disadvantage. With modern MP3 technology available, there is no excuse for this kind of education.

Young Swedes hear a lot of English on TV and radio, and even if they hardly ever speak English, they understand it, often repeat words and phrases from pop culture, and are ready to speak as soon as they need to. They pick up the natural phrases of English. This may include slang, but need not. It is just the natural phrasing. The Japanese seem to do more translating from Japanese, and their phrasing reflects this. They seem more reluctant to just attempt to use the phrases that they hear in English. Observing, identifying and learning phrases needs to be emphasized much more.

Japanese people generally have less personal exposure to English speaking culture, or any non-domestic culture, than Europeans. You need to have confidence to use a new language. You need to just jump in and use what you heard, without worrying. Perhaps it is not fair to compare Japanese people with Swedes, when it comes to learning English. It would be interesting to compare Japanese and Swedes in learning unrelated third languages, or even languages like Chinese or Korean which have a lot of vocabulary in common with Japanese.

I think the differences that arise will be individual differences of attitude and learning method, not of innate learning ability, nor differences of nationality. Everyone can be a linguist if they really want to be, and if they treat it as an enjoyable adventure.

Why I decided to learn Russian

Leonid asked, in a comment, what my reasons were for choosing to learn a new language. So let me give them here, working backwards from my most recent learning activities. I have always been interested in Russian literature, which I have read in translation. I read *The Idiot* by Dostoevsky in French, as one of the first full-length novels I ever read in French, at the age of seventeen.

But I had a more specific reason. Ever since I studied Chinese, I have believed that teaching and explaining and giving questions on grammar has a negative effect on language learning. In my view, occasional grammar explanations can be helpful, after the learner has absorbed a lot of the language. However, introducing theoretical explanations at the beginning, in an attempt to describe what the learner will encounter in the language, spoils the fun and is counter-productive. I think we learn better if we just discover the language through input, lots of listening and efficient vocabulary accumulation. We train ourselves to become observant. I guess it is like the difference between just being the passenger in a car and doing the driving yourself. If you are the driver you notice things and you remember the route.

I was concerned that this approach only worked for "grammar light" languages like Chinese or Japanese. Even though I had, in my own mind, confirmed this truth when learning German and Italian, I wanted to test it again in a "grammar heavy" language like Russian.

Perhaps I am not objective, but I did find that I could not make sense of the grammar explanations of the cases etc. in Russian, but I was able to get used to how the language works through a lot of listening, reading, and vocabulary review.

Why I decided to learn Korean

We started the Linguist system with the local immigrant population in mind. I began buying infomercial time on local Chinese language radio stations. What made sense for the local Chinese community also made sense for the Koreans. There are a lot of Koreans in Vancouver. Korea itself is also a large potential market. Speaking the language would give me credibility.

From a personal interest point of view there were other reasons. Learning Korean represented "low-hanging fruit" in the sense that I had already learned Chinese and Japanese and could get a further return on my investment by studying the language. I also enjoyed the sound of the language. I find the male Korean language quite strong and masculine and the female version elegant and feminine. I was also intrigued by the writing system, Hangul, which is unique and quite efficient. *(The official transliteration system into the Latin alphabet, on the other hand, is hopeless from the point of view of the foreigner. Fortunately, as a learner, you can essentially ignore it by relying on sound and Hangul.)*

Incidentally, to me language learning confirms the French adage that *"l'appetit vient en mangeant"*. Even if moderately interested in a language, for a true language learner, the more you get into it, the more you like it. I thought Cantonese sounded ugly until I started learning it. I guess the same will happen to me when I start learning Dutch.

CHAPTER II: NATURAL LEARNING

In most classrooms, language teaching involves instructing students in a new language, then asking them to produce the language, and then correcting them. This is not how we learn a language naturally. I believe we learn better if we discover the language on our own, with a little help from our friends. I think we retain what we have learned better if we acquire the language naturally.

Understand before you speak

Before you can speak a language you must first understand it. I like to learn a language first, before I start speaking.

Some people say that they can read and understand a language but cannot speak it. I find far more people who say that they can speak a language, and, in fact, do manage to say things in the language, but obviously do not understand when spoken to at normal speed.

I believe anyone who understands well, and who can enjoy reading a wide range of content, and who has acquired a large passive vocabulary, can easily learn to speak if and when the opportunity or necessity presents itself. The first job in language learning is to understand. If this is done thoroughly, then speaking will come easily. It is pointless to put pressure on learners, or for learners to put pressure on themselves, to speak before they understand.

False friends to avoid

There must be millions if not hundreds of millions of people who study languages. Many of them are frustrated and do not achieve fluency. Often it is the false friends of language learning that let them down.

These false friends are:

- the classroom
- text books
- grammar explanations
- exercises and drills

- vocabulary lists and books
- conversation class
- thick dictionaries

Why are these false friends? Because they are not natural. They do not offer real communication in the language. Many people who are fluent in a second or third language did not learn primarily from these false friends. They learned by listening, reading and communicating in the language on subjects of interests. Maybe they learned from friends, from TV, or from movies or from necessity, but the key is that they were motivated to learn. They took over the learning process and did not rely on the false friends.

There are many ways to enjoy a language

I am learning Russian and I want to be able to speak—fluently—one day. I have stated that I am in no hurry to start speaking with native speakers (although I am ready now). I am enjoying my listening and reading and vocabulary learning. I can do it whenever and wherever I want, stress free. I am discovering a new world. I have said that I do not want someone correcting my undoubtedly poor spoken Russian. This caused some controversy here on my blog. I know that I will have to start speaking at some point. I know that it will be difficult to try to remember everything that I have learned. I will undoubtedly confuse Russian patterns with Japanese or Korean patterns, depending on where my brain decides to go in the confusion of trying to put together Russian phrases for me.

Language learning research

I believe that what happens in the language class is less important than what happens outside the language class. Therefore I think most of the research on language learning is irrelevant since it is based on learning in the classroom and not on how we learn naturally.

Don't believe the myths

Along with the false friends of language learning, there are myths.

1. "You have to have a talent for languages in order to learn."

Is it likely that this talent for languages exists only with certain nations? Is it likely that the Dutch and Swedes are all born with this talent for languages whereas the English are not?

Is it likely that Singaporeans are all talented while the Chinese are not? I do not think so. Instead it is a matter of attitude and exposure to the language.

2. "I have to go to the country to learn the language."

This is not so. I grew up in Montreal surrounded by French, but I was not interested in learning French until I reached the age of 17. When I became motivated, I learned. There are many immigrants in Canada who never learn to speak well. Yet I have met people in places like China who were absolutely fluent in English. I learned to become fluent in Mandarin in Hong Kong, a city where the language was not spoken. Exposure alone will not do it. If you are motivated and know how to create your own interesting language world to learn from, you can learn anywhere. This is the key to effective language learning. I know. I have done it many times.

3. "You have to have an ear for music to learn languages."

I lived in Japan for nine years. I often went to karaoke. Most Japanese men at karaoke bars are good singers, and have a good ear for music. Very few of them are good at languages. They either are not motivated or do not have an effective system for learning.

4. "My teacher is no good."

It is not the school or teacher that will determine language learning success. It is the learner. The greatest role of the teacher is to stimulate the learner, to help the learner become a truly motivated independent learner. It is still up to the learner to learn.

5. "Only children can learn languages well."

Children are uninhibited. They are encouraged and not usually corrected. They spend a lot of time using the new language with their peers. They not cling to their own language and culture and resist the new language as adults do. On the other hand adults know more, have a wider vocabulary and can learn faster. If they can imitate the attitude of the child and take advantage of their own greater knowledge and experience, they will learn faster than any child.

Three laws of language learning

1) The law of unpredictable returns.

If I invest time in learning a word or phrase or language use pattern, I cannot predict the return. For example, I easily remember certain uncommon Russian words but cannot relate to numbers. No matter how many times I hear dates in Russian, they are a blur for me. We cannot control the rate at which language information is acquired. There is also no predictability

for the teacher's investment. If a teacher spends 20 minutes of class time on a term or grammar rule, he does not know who already knows it, who picks it up right away, and who will simply not learn it.

2) The law of massive input.

A direct consequence of the first law is that language learning requires massive input to allow different elements of the language to click in at their own pace. Input should involve repetition as well as novelty. This will stimulate the brain to groove certain connections on the one hand, and create new ones on the other hand. Input can consist of listening and reading, as well as reviewing vocabulary. The greater the variety of ways that the same material is encountered, the greater the likelihood that some things will stick.

3) The law of pleasure and reward.

Learning will take place best if the learner experiences pleasure and reward. Pleasure can come from activities where the challenge is meaningful to the learner and appropriate to his or her skills, creating a sense of achievement. Enjoyment can also come from hearing pleasant sounds or reading familiar or interesting content. Pleasure increases the production of dopamine in the brain, which in turn improves performance and memory. The study of the language becomes its own reward. Learners remain committed to sustained involvement with the language, for a long period of time.

Take it easy and enjoy your silent period

I enjoy learning languages by starting with a long silent period which can be, as in the case of my Russian studies, over one year long.

When I listen to, or read, content of my choice, of interest to me, and at my level, in the language that I am learning, I am doing things that I can control. I do not depend on finding someone else who might have the patience to listen to me speak poorly in Russian. I listen. I read. I learn words and phrases. I imitate pronunciation. I observe the patterns of the language. I get used to the language. When I need to, I will speak.

I googled "silent period and pronunciation." I was curious to find out if there were many studies to show that an initial silent study period helped in developing better pronunciation. Certainly I favour the silent period approach to language learning for various reasons. It does, however, depend on the situation of the learner. For someone living where the language is widely spoken, the silent period is not an option. On the other hand for someone like me learning Russian in Canada, it works just fine. I enjoy my learning and do not feel any pressure to speak nor any frustration at my inability to speak.

Language learning is like falling in love

This evening I have to give a short talk in Japanese to about 30 members of the Japan-Canada Chamber of Commerce. I am a Director of this Chamber, which consists mostly of recent Japanese immigrants to Canada who are involved in their own businesses here. Here is what I intend to say in Japanese.

Language learning is like falling in love. In fact you have to be in love to learn a language well. I mean in love with the language. You have to have a love affair with the language. You do not have to marry the language. You can have an affair and then move on to another language after a period of time. But while you are learning the language you have to be in love with it. And you will learn faster if you are faithful to the language while you are studying it.

Just as when you are in love, you want to and need to spend as much time as possible with the object of your love. You want to hear its voice and read its thoughts. You want to learn more about it, the many words and phrases that it uses to express itself. You think of the language wherever you are. You start to observe the object of your love closely. You notice all the little things it does, you become familiar with its peculiar behaviour patterns. You breathe it. You hear its voice. You feel it. You get to know it better and better, naturally.

Just as in a love affair, there are things about the object of your love that you do not like. You ignore these. You only think about the things that you love. You do not question the object of your love. You just accept it. You do not ask why. You do not ask why it behaves a certain way. You do not seek to understand the secrets to its structure. You just want to be with it, and even to imitate it, the highest form of appreciation.

Loving a language is a one-sided love affair. You love the language. It does not love you back. But the good thing is that it is not jealous of you, of your other previous love affairs. It really does not care if you carry on another love affair at the same time. But, as with people, doing so can create problems. The language does not criticize you. You can use it however you want, as long as you enjoy yourself.

You are not jealous of other people who love the language you love. In fact you like to meet people who love the language you love. It is a lot less bothersome to love a language than to love a person, because the love of the language is its own reward. You do not care what the language thinks of you. You are enjoying your affair with the language and do not expect anything in return. As long as you have that relationship, you will learn and improve in the language.

If you just use a language without loving it, you will not improve. If the goal is only to get a better job, or to pass a test, you will not improve. People are the same way. You cannot have a love affair with someone just to get a better job.

This has been my approach. So when I learn a language I spend most of my initial time just listening and reading and building up my words and phrases. I just want to get to know the language, enjoy its personality and get used to it. I do not want anyone to question me, or explain my love to me. I do not want to speak in the language before I have really gotten to

know the language, because I know that I will not do justice to my love. I only speak in the language when I want to, when I am ready.

Seek out high resonance situations

1. Resonance in language acquisition. The great imponderable.

Stephen Krashen is one of the leading proponents of the importance of input in language acquisition. Much traditional language teaching does not follow Krashen's ideas and suffers from a fundamental flaw. Too often teachers try to coax learners to produce the language, and to produce the language correctly, well before learners have acquired enough vocabulary or familiarity with the language to be successful. This is counterproductive, because it creates a feeling of inadequacy in the learners' minds, and can cause feelings of frustration and resentment towards the language being studied. It is important to have a positive resonance between the language and the learner. Resonance is a positive response in our brains, cognitively and emotionally, to the messages and impulses that the new language is sending our way. There are at least four important ways to achieve positive resonance with a new language.

2. The resonance of interesting content.

If I enjoy the subject matter I am studying, I learn better. I feel immersed in the content, and therefore in the language. I remember words and phrases, as well as the scenes and characters of what I am reading or listening to. The language comes alive and resonates. I can often remember where I was and what I was doing, when I was reading or listening to particular episodes of high resonance content.

3. The resonance of combining listening and reading.

The resonance of any learning material is greatly enhanced if I can both listen and read. I usually listen to content before reading it. I sometimes listen while reading and I often listen repeatedly after reading.

4. The resonance of the culture.

In language learning, "*l'appetit vient en mangeant*," the appetite comes with eating. The more I learn a language, the more I get caught up in the culture and way of thinking of the language. I find myself responding to the culture, feeling the culture and participating in the culture. This is high value resonance.

5. The resonance of talking to the right person.

Where resonance really comes into play is when we start to speak, when we finally have a chance to put into practice what we have learned. I always perform best when speaking with a high-resonance person. By that I mean a person whose use of language, intonation and voice suits me, turns me on, resonates with me. I pick up on the energy of such people, which

releases the language within me. I find a rhythm and fluency that I cannot achieve with other people. I come away from such encounters energized, and the effect stays with me long after the conversation is over. A discussion with high-resonance speaking partners unlocks the language potential that I worked so hard to build up through my input activities.

Avoid low resonance situations

Here are a few low-resonance learning situations for me, or learning situations that I dislike.

- Podcasts, or learning material, which begin with a lengthy musical introduction, or are interrupted by pop music, songs and the like.
- Songs are low resonance for me, because they are not word intense.
- Learning material that is artificial, where the text and voices are not natural.
- Audio content with English in it. Pimsleur and Michel Thomas are examples. On the other hand I find bilingual dictionaries much higher resonance than dictionaries which give explanations only in the target language.
- Speaking to a non-native speaker is lower resonance than speaking with a native speaker, and the poorer the language skills of the non-native speaker the lower the resonance. That is part of what makes language classes low resonance.

CHAPTER III: INPUT AND CONTENT

Leading researchers on language acquisition like Stephen Krashen and Beniko Mason, to name only two, have shown that we learn best from input, and that relatively little is to be gained by a major emphasis on deliberate instruction, correction, or forcing output.

While I do not agree with all of Krashen's views, I think he is an important pioneer in the way he has challenged language teaching orthodoxy. Let's start with his hypotheses.

Stephen Krashen, a pioneer

Stephen Krashen is a proponent of input-based learning. Some of his principles of language learning are as follows.

- 1) Language acquisition (an unconscious process developed through using language meaningfully) is different from language learning (consciously learning or discovering rules about a language) and language acquisition is the only way competence (the tacit knowledge that underlies the language performance of a speaker of a language) in a second language occurs. (The acquisition/learning hypothesis)
- 2) Conscious learning operates only as a monitor or editor that checks or repairs the output of what has been acquired. (The monitor hypothesis)
- 3) Grammatical structures are acquired in a predictable order and it does little good to try to learn them in another order. (The natural order hypothesis)
- 4) People acquire language best from messages that are just slightly beyond their current competence. (The input hypothesis)
- 5) The learner's emotional state can act as a filter that impedes or blocks input necessary to acquisition. (The affective filter hypothesis)

I am not sure about 3) above. Structures are so different in different languages that I wonder how the order can be predictable for all people regardless of their native language and regardless of their personality. What is clear to me is that we do not learn grammatical structures based on the teacher's agenda, nor on the agenda of any text book or teaching system. We gradually get used to them, just as we gradually get used to words, phrases and even sounds.

Context, context, context

A key to understanding anything in a second language is being familiar with the context. There are many ways to become more familiar with context. Actually living the experience is the best but is not always possible. That is why extensive reading and listening is the best alternative to actually living the experience.

When I lived in Hong Kong and studied Mandarin, I built up a vast library of content on different subjects of interest that I would read and listen to often. Each time I listened I would focus on different words and phrases until they became natural to me.

Even when I lived in Japan, I still had my own language world of reading and listening because it was too difficult to get it all from real life until my Japanese was good enough.

Experiments have shown that if you give language learners a glossary or vocabulary list of new words for a text they have not seen, it will not help them understand the new text. They simply will not remember these words, which they have tried to learn out of context. If they are already familiar with the subject of a text, they will understand better, but the vocabulary list will not help.

So the lesson is that attempts to memorize isolated vocabulary lists, TOEFL vocabulary lists, technical vocabulary lists, antonyms and synonyms, or memorizing the dictionary which Chinese learners sometimes try to do, are usually ineffective ways to learn.

Bored with Korean

I was asked how I find the time to learn languages. Let's look at my recent efforts to learn Korean. I believe that you need to go at language learning in concentrated periods of relatively intense effort. These can be two or three months long. Each one of these periods will bring you a breakthrough to a new level.

During my first spurt of Korean learning I would make sure that I always had audio content in my car CD player, or in my MP3 player. I would get in 15 minutes here and 30 minutes there. I would try to get in a minimum of 60 minutes every day. In the evenings I would spend 30 minutes reading and reviewing the new words. I think you need to work 90 minutes a day almost every day for a period of 3 months to achieve a breakthrough.

Unfortunately the Korean learning content was very boring. If I had had interesting and authentic real Korean content (as opposed to textbook content) I would have done better. I would have done a second and third spurt. I did not, because I kind of lost interest in the same old boring Korean content.

Listen to learn

I feel that in learning a language it is very important to have as much contact as possible with the new language. Ideally you should try to listen or read or review or write or speak every day. The more you enjoy what you are doing, the more likely you are to do it regularly. Rule number one is: do what you like to do.

When you start out in a language, it is beneficial to listen to the same content many times. The first time you may be trying hard to understand the content. You will probably save some words and phrases. The second and third time you are better able to focus on these new words and phrases. Hopefully you have reviewed these words and phrases and said them out loud a few times. When you hear them again, in context, this helps to reinforce your memory of them. You are also participating in a familiar environment in another language. This helps train your ability in the language. But if you find it boring or annoying to listen to an item, by all means move on to the next item. I certainly do. I do not like listening to boring content.

When I am better at the language I may listen as little as twice or three times and then move on. If you really do not like a content item, do not listen again. Find something you like. In any case, you can always go back to earlier items to review and reinforce.

You will find it easier to listen again if the voice is pleasant to your ears. Spend more time on content that you like. There are some content items in various foreign languages that I have listened to 20 or more times. I always enjoy them. Some items I can only listen to once or twice.

So there are no hard and fast rules. Repetition is important. Enjoying yourself is important. Being in daily contact with the language is important. The decision is up to you. See what works best for you.

How often should we listen?

I have often stated that repetitive listening is a powerful language learning activity. This is especially true in the early stages of learning a language. As you progress you tend to listen less often to the same content. I am often asked, by learners, how to decide when to move on to new content. Here is what I had to say on this subject on our LingQ Forum.

In my experience it does not really matter when you move forward to the next item. You move on when you feel like it. Certainly you do not need to "master" anything since it is not the sheer repetition of anything that will guarantee that you learn it. You need exposure, pleasant and yet challenging exposure. When an assignment is no longer pleasant nor challenging to listen to, you just move on.

Yes you should go back to old material again, especially if you feel like doing so.

As you continue your listening, and reading and word review, and your writing and speaking activity, the bits and pieces of the language will slowly fall into place, not on some timetable dictated by anything you deliberately do, but according to some timetable that only the brain controls. Just keep feeding the brain with enough stimulus, and keep wanting to learn, and enjoying your learning, and you will be surprised at the results.

Use it or lose it?

It is often said that in language learning, you either use it or lose it. Here "use it" usually refers to speaking in the language.

I do not find this to be the case. Since I speak and understand 11 languages, I really do not have enough time to use them all in speaking to people.

I find that if the learning process is largely based on input, and not dependent on speaking to people, it is not so easy to lose languages and it is easier to maintain them. I have CDs in different languages, books, and of course today there are podcasts. So maintenance is easy. I listen and read.

I usually find that when I leave a language for a long period of time, and then go back to it, I am quickly at my previous level. In fact, because I have been acquiring other languages, I find that I have actually improved in the languages that I have neglected.

Maybe people who learn based on remembering grammar rules, or based on speaking the language, are more likely to lose a language they do not use. I do not know for sure.

The exciting new world of podcasts

Podcasts are going to assume increasing importance in language learning. There is a vast and growing wealth of podcasts on the Internet. They may be language teaching podcasts intended for language learners, or podcasts on everything from IT to politics, economics, food or travel. A google search will quickly bring up lists of podcasts to choose from. These are some of my favourite learning materials.

I really only want the podcasts for content. I do not like to hear my own language, English, trying to explain things to me. However, many other learners like to hear their own language, and also like to study grammar. If that makes them enjoy their studies and study more, good. Go for it! I disliked it when a language teacher would use English in a classroom environment.

What about video?

Art asked in an earlier comment why we do not use video more at LingQ. We may in the future, simply because it is popular with learners. However, in the past I have resisted using video for the following reasons.

- 1) Video is less portable than audio and text.
Once you have downloaded an audio file to an iPod, or printed a text, you can easily carry it with you. To watch a video or movie is a full time job, sitting in front of a screen. As a result it is easier to find the time to listen and read.
- 2) Video is a less intense language environment (at least to me).
There is not the same density of language exposure as when listening to an audio file or reading a text, both of which consist only of words. In fact, the movements and visuals of the video distract me from focusing on the language.
- 3) It is easier to listen and read something more than once, whereas it is more difficult (at least for me) to watch the same movie over and over.
- 4) Video makes the viewer passive. No imagination is required.
So to me video, while it can be entertaining, is less intense a language learning environment. After listening to an audio book, I inevitably find the movie to be uninteresting and shallow, not as rich an experience as the audio book. With the audio book I find myself going back again and again to enjoy the language.

CHAPTER IV: GRAMMAR

How important is grammar instruction and testing if we want to become fluent? Traditionally it has been at the forefront. I prefer to see grammar instruction very much in the background.

Intransitive verbs etc.

I spoke with an English teacher. I asked him why, in English, we say "listen to" someone, but "hear" someone. He answered proudly that "listen" was an intransitive verb, but "hear" was transitive. But then I asked myself if this was really a meaningful explanation or just an abstract restatement of the original question. In French, the word for listen, "écouter," is not intransitive, why in English?

I asked myself if it is not just as easy to remember that "listen" takes "to" while "hear" does not, that "speak" takes "to" and "tell" does not. If I listen to English or read English often, I will come across these words often. If I do not ask why, but just observe and absorb the language, I will gradually get used to how the words are used. Then it will not matter to me if I know if these verbs are intransitive or transitive. I will not need to learn this term. I will know how to use the words.

Do we need to study grammar?

Many language learners have been conditioned to think that they need to study grammar in order to learn a language. This is wrong, wrong, wrong! When I go to learn a new language I avoid explanations of grammar and avoid all questions or exercises based on grammar. Instead I look to the language to teach me how it works.

I listen and read and observe the new language. I take it in small doses. At first it is only 30 seconds or one minute at a time. In time the doses can be longer. I repeatedly listen to these small doses and occasionally read them. Of course I need help in having the meaning explained. This help can come from a book, or a teacher. The teacher can be with me, face to face, or online. Mostly, however, it is just me and the new language.

The grammar learner is conditioned to think of rules and ask why? "Why is it said this way? I thought the rule was something else." Half the time the learner has the rule wrong. Besides, if every time the learner wants say something he/she has to remember a rule, he/she will never speak fluently.

I speak nine languages quite well and do not remember ever asking "why do they say it this way? Why is this wrong?" I know that when I studied Chinese, learners around me who asked "why," did not learn the language well.

Structures in the new language that seemed strange and might occasion the "why?" question, usually started to feel normal with enough exposure. It was pointless to try to understand "why" before I was ready, and once I was ready I did not need to ask "why" anymore.

Confusing "he" and "she"

I often get resistance to the idea that language learning should not emphasize grammar instruction. This idea does not go down well with many teachers and learners. "You have to learn grammar to stop making mistakes" is the refrain. However, just understanding the "why" of a grammar rule will not ensure accurate language. Chinese speakers regularly say "he" when they mean "she" and vice versa. They understand the principle. They just cannot say the correct word when speaking. This is because spoken Chinese does not make this distinction. You would think that this rule would be easy to learn, but it is not. It is not the understanding of the principle, but the development of the correct language instinct, that will enable the speaker to be accurate and fluent. Only enough exposure and the gradual training of the brain will make that possible. The emphasis needs to be on the word gradual.

Buy the smallest grammar book you can

Learners can have a grammar book for reference, although the smaller the better. I have looked up verb conjugations and noun declensions in languages like Spanish and German. It did not help me to speak. It did not help me to use the right declension or conjugation. I needed to learn phrases from real contexts, to notice phrases when reading and listening, and to repeat these phrases when speaking, in order to gradually improve. And the improvement was uneven, with frequent lapses. But I was happy communicating, or reading, or listening, and happy in the knowledge that I was getting better just by listening, reading and using the language. My lapses and inaccuracies did not bother me.

Grammar is presented as a shortcut to learning the language. To me it is a distraction. When I learned Chinese or Japanese or Korean there were all kinds of grammatical explanations that I just ignored. These explanations seemed contrived to resemble grammar explanations for European languages but did not help. I had to see the actual phrase patterns. Even in learning German, I could read the lists of declensions and conjugations many times, but it never sunk in. If I read a lot and listened a lot, paying special attention to the words and how they come together in phrases; and if I got used to certain phrases, then I would slowly start to use them correctly more often.

Grammar learning may be an obstacle

There is a body of research that suggests that learning grammar is an impediment to fluency since it creates filters. The learner has to refer to a grammar filter before expressing himself or herself. This is difficult to do in a conversation. What is needed is to develop the right natural reflexes. Thus it takes time and a lot of exposure for Chinese people to stop saying "he" for "she" even though they understand the "why".

The study of grammar and the frequent (and unavoidable) mistakes on tests can create negative feelings towards the language, which are referred to as "affective filters". This makes the learner nervous, uptight, and reluctant to leave the safety of the native language. But to learn well you need to let yourself go, imitate and have fun. I have found a more holistic approach to be more successful in the long run. I do not believe that people who learn to be genuinely fluent in a second language do so in the classroom.

"You can only learn what you already know"

There is a Sufi proverb that says "You can only learn what you already know." I agree. Once you are familiar with a subject you can start to learn about it. Can you imagine teaching someone how to swim based on theory, if that person has never been in the water?

Russian is the most grammar-heavy language I have come across. The grammar explanations in all of the books and tapes I have bought just make my head spin. I took a simple story I wrote for our English learners at The Linguist. I had a friend translate it into Russian and asked some Russians to record it. I listened to it and read it more than 30 times in order to get some familiarity with Russian.

Once I know Russian, I will look at the grammar to see a summary of what I have already come to know.

An English teaching certificate holder

I am more and more convinced that much of language instruction, TESL certificates and the rest of the industry are one big scam. The only thing I do not know is whether it is intentional or unintentional. I suspect it is unintentional.

I met a gentleman today who is originally from China. He has lived in Canada for three years. He studied English in China. In my opinion his English level is upper intermediate. He recently spent \$1,100 to take a one week course in TESL and got a certificate for teaching ESL. He felt that he did not learn anything useful. I suspect he is correct.

English grammar and Russian grammar

Alexandre claims that English is grammar easy. Perhaps so. But it is my exposure to Russian that has increased my sense that grammar instruction is at best a luxury to be enjoyed (for those who enjoy it) after the language has been massively absorbed. Korean is also a complex language and I had a similar reaction. Give me the language and spare me the complicated explanations at least until after I have a sense for the language. When I see sentences telling me about the "infinitive of the imperfect aspect and the perfective infinitive or infinitive of the imperfective aspect" I just flip the page.

Rules

There are concepts of grammar that are explainable and easy to reproduce, like the use of three different words for "year" in Russian, depending on whether the number is one, two to four, or five and more.

There are concepts that are easy to explain, like the use of "he" and "she" in spoken English. Yet producing this accurately remains difficult for Chinese speakers, because the distinction does not exist in spoken Chinese.

There are the explanations that are difficult to understand if the phenomenon does not exist in one's own language, like articles in English, or verb aspects in Russian verbs, or "ser" and "estar" in Spanish etc.

There are the explanations where the exceptions exceed the rules.

Then there are the rules which are so complex, like the use of cases in Russian, where the accusative depends on whether the noun is animate or inanimate etc. and where the same ending can be used for different cases, numbers and genders...that the whole package is just too complex.

So every few months I used to leaf through a Russian grammar book, occasionally reminding myself of something. I have stopped doing that now. I now know roughly what the rules are supposed to be, in most cases, or at least I know what the overall game is, but I cannot remember them or refer to them when speaking,

On the other hand I am getting better at "feeling" what the case, or aspect, should be, and even expecting it when I listen.

CHAPTER V: WORDS

Languages consist of words. To learn a language we need to learn words, many words. We need to get a sense of what they mean, in different situations, and which words they are normally used with in phrases. We need to learn how these words change. There are thousands of words to learn, and even more combinations of these words, that we have to get used to. How do we do it?

Words, the basic building blocks

Should we learn words or should we learn phrases? There is increasing realization that it is important to learn phrases. There has been some research to show that we learn languages in chunks, which I guess corresponds to phrases. I agree that learning phrases, getting used to recognizing phrases that regularly appear in the language, is important. We need to give our brain enough exposure to these phrases, in contexts, and in flash cards or other deliberate study activities, so that they start to become natural to us. That is the easiest way to get comfortable with tenses, prepositions, case endings, and all the other things that are so different from language to language.

Phrases are important, however, so are words, individual words. They are the basic building blocks of the language. We need a lot of them. Many words are connected to other words so that the more we know, the easier it is to pick up new words without even noticing it, incidentally. In vocabulary acquisition, the rich get richer. The sooner you start accumulating, the better.

Phrases, chunks of the language

Native speakers of any language know naturally which words belong together. They have heard their own language so often, and in so many situations, that they can naturally put words together in a way that sounds effective. The foreign learner cannot do this.

Every sentence is unique, but phrases repeat themselves often. A phrase is any group of two or more, (usually no more than five) words that naturally belong together and can be used in many situations.

Learn to look for phrases, save them and learn them. One word of caution is necessary, however. The phrases must come from meaningful content that you are listening to and reading. Free examples of sentences and phrases from dictionaries are false friends. You think you are learning but you are not. You need to find your own phrases as you discover the language from interesting content.

Vocabulary over grammar

What is the most important thing and what is the most difficult thing in learning a new language? My answer is always vocabulary.

You can express yourself with faulty grammar and less than perfect pronunciation. If you do not have the words you cannot express yourself. The constant battle to acquire enough vocabulary to read what you want to read, to say what you want to say, and to understand what you want to understand—that is the hardest part.

Imperfect grammar and pronunciation do not prevent communication and enjoyment of the language. Lack of vocabulary does.

When I correct writing, it is overwhelmingly vocabulary, improper use of words and phrases that is the biggest problem, not grammar.

How do you accumulate words and phrases? You do so from input, from reading, and from listening to content that is of interest to you. You have to see the words and phrases often in different contexts.

Three questions about words

(I will use English as an example but I believe the principles apply to all languages. Note that the relationship between word families and total words varies from language to language. For English I will accept Paul Nation's ratio of 1 word family to 1.6 words.)

1) How many words do we need to know?

A Japanese language blog put out by the ALC group called Business English (BE) made the point that Japanese students of English are best advised to focus on the most frequent 2,000 words, which account for up to 80% of most written material and up to 90% of most conversations. BE cites sources that say that the average Japanese university student has a passive (receptive) vocabulary of between 2100 and 2600 word families, and an active (productive) vocabulary of 1900-2300 word families. BE quotes a certain Professor Schmitt, who claims that it is common to have a passive vocabulary 20% larger than one's active vocabulary.

BE goes on to state that 5,000 word families are needed to read English university text books, and that a survey of foreign students at US universities showed that the best group knew only 4,000 word families.

BE describes the situation in Japanese high schools, where text books are supposed to focus on the highest frequency words, but many of these words do not appear more than a few times in over one million words of text. Since we need to encounter words anywhere from 5 to 10

times to learn them, BE claims that it is not surprising that there are great gaps in the known vocabulary of these students, even those who claim to know 3,000 or more words.

BE then quotes a source which shows that knowing the highest frequency 1,000 words enables learners to obtain scores of over 700 on TOEIC, 3,000 corresponds to a score over 900, and so forth. He shows a graph to this effect.

I disagree with a lot of this.

I have stated earlier, based on the vocabulary level of learners (mostly Japanese) at The Linguist (now LingQ), and their reported scores on TOEIC, that the required vocabulary level for TOEIC is much, much higher than BE implies. At LingQ we assume that a known words level of 7,500 (or 4,680 word families) is required to achieve a 750 score on TOEIC. In an earlier post, I quoted Batia Laufer whose research largely supported our observations.

If the average second year Japanese university student has a vocabulary of 2000 to 2500 words, and if 1,000 words will get you a score of over 700, why is the average score of Japanese people taking the TOEIC test around 400? I am sure that the vocabulary knowledge of these test-takers exceeds the 1000 level.

Beyond the level of traveling and shopping abroad, I believe the next goal should be fluency, with a TOEIC score as a meaningful target. And that is where piling up the words through a lot of exposure starts to be more and more important. The first 1,000 words may account for 70% of the content of a conversation, but the next 1,000 add only 3-5%, and after that there is not necessarily that much difference in the utility of words, regardless of where they place in the frequency lists. It depends more on what a person is using the language for. So you do need a lot of exposure and an efficient system, like LingQ.

If the goal is to communicate comfortably, read, and become fluent in the language, I believe 5,000 word families, or 8,000 words (as we count them at LingQ) is a realistic goal. Once you achieve that you will be well on your way to learn more, since you can infer more and more words from the context. If you can get to 5,000 families you can get to 7,500 families or 12,000 words on the LingQ count, which should ensure a very good score on TOEIC.

Even then, there will be many useful and necessary words that will not be covered. BE cites "punctual" as a word that Japanese students are required to know, but which he feels is so rare that it hardly ever appears. This might be the case, but to me, as a native speaker, "punctual" is not a rare word. It is word that a fluent speaker should know. However, not knowing a word, or forgetting a word is no disgrace. I am certain that there are many high frequency words that I either do not know, or have forgotten, or use improperly, in the foreign languages that I speak. Language learning is not about perfection. The odd mistake in TOEIC is not going sink you either.

At LingQ we set the target for "known words" high. We will be introducing tests to measure whether the words that are claimed as "known words" are, in fact, known. However, we will make sure that we test the learner only against the words that he/she claims to know. The important thing is to have a vocabulary level of 8,000 or 12,500, which have been "earned" through listening and reading. If there are still many lower frequency words that the learner has

not encountered in listening and reading often enough to know them, that is not a problem. Remember that the native speaker might know 50,000 or more, and the learner cannot match that, but can focus on contexts which are relevant to him or her. There will always be holes.

2) What does knowing a word mean?

To me, knowing a word, just like knowing people, means recognition. There is such a large potential range of understanding of a word, its scope, how it is used with other words, when it is used most appropriately etc., that there is no clear point at which we can say that a learner has achieved total mastery of the word. Once we have recognition of a word, we are on our way to grasping more and more of the word, and this process might include forgetting it and relearning it. Hopefully we will understand it when we meet it again and build on that.

I doubt that there is only a 20% difference between active and passive vocabulary in a non-native speaker. I think the difference is much larger. BE quotes a source which describes the vocabulary knowledge that Japanese students have of English as being "large, shallow and useless". This is unnecessarily harsh. The non-native speaker has had more limited exposure to the words he/she has learned and therefore his/her grasp of these words is necessarily shallower. This is not unique to Japanese learners. Only continued exposure can gradually deepen this understanding.

We will get better at using these words through use. We can build up our potential (passive) vocabulary, but ultimately to get good at using them we have to use them. As long as we have no need to use them we can happily continue building up our potential usable vocabulary, and our understanding of the scope of meaning and usage patterns of these words through meaningful input.

3) How do we best learn words?

Most people learning languages have limited opportunities to use the language. That would certainly be the case for Japanese learners. For that reason, although not only for that reason, I think the correct strategy in learning words is to focus on building up one's passive vocabulary. This is also easier to do where there are not a lot of native speakers around. This means a great deal of emphasis on input, meaningful input. It means reading and listening to a lot content that is of interest and at an appropriate level of difficulty.

In my view, the first goal in language learning has to be a defensive one, to understand what is said and written in the language. The native speaker of English knows anywhere from 30-50,000 or more words. Even a 14 year old knows 14,000. With the native speaker, the difference between active and passive vocabulary is not as great as with the learner, so we have no idea which words the native speaker is going to use in communicating with us, orally or in writing. We need to prepare ourselves in order to understand. There is no escaping lots of reading and listening.

We all want to learn to use words. We want more active vocabulary. However, I believe that having a large passive vocabulary is very important, and it can be 2 or 3 times or even ten

times larger than the active vocabulary, it does not matter. Passive vocabulary will convert to active vocabulary over time.

I would guard against any attempt to be perfect in another language. Even people with a high level of fluency and a large vocabulary will stumble on the simplest words or structures. This is not a problem.

BE says that not consolidating one's grasp of the first 2,000 words is like building on a foundation of sand, and that this is a bad thing. He points out that children use a very small number of words. However, children spend up to two years just listening, without speaking. Learning vocabulary is not like building on sandy foundations, but rather like climbing up a sand dune. That is why you do not want to stand still, but rather need to keep going if you want to get to your destination.

Idioms

I was asked in an email about learning idioms in a language. Maybe I am different from most people, but I do not bother with them. To me they are kind of the dessert of language learning. They come at the end of a meal. Once you have filled up on the solid fare, the key words and phrases that are used in a variety of situations, then you can add a few idioms to spice things up. And by that time you will be able to pick them up naturally anyway.

I find that many learners have an obsession with slang and idioms, as if trotting out some very colloquial expression is going to upgrade how they sound in a language. In fact it is the opposite. Idioms are difficult to use correctly. They can easily sound very strange coming from someone who obviously does not have a good sense of the language.

Yes, occasionally you hear idioms or slang and do not understand. But, in my experience, there are always situations where you do not understand. It is best to focus on the most important words, what they mean and how they are used. Certainly, it is best for a non-native speaker to stick to standard speech.

Some teachers even try to teach the "real language." Then you hear non-native speakers saying things like "I gonna" "You wanna" etc. I just cringe. You will learn all the idioms you need just by exposing yourself to the language.

Paul Nation's four strands and my vocabulary acquisition zone

Nation defines comprehensible input as content with only one in fifty unknown words. That is 2%! I think this number is too low to be realistic.

First of all, when you start a new language, and for a long time thereafter, it is difficult to find any content, and in particular interesting content, that meets this definition of comprehensible. For a long time most content will have a much higher number of unknown words, unless you read painfully childish content, which is unlikely to motivate a learner.

Second, the main job in language learning, in my view, is to acquire words and phrases. If you have to read fifty words, for every new word you learn, you will have to read an awful lot in order to acquire a fluency level vocabulary, which I consider to be over ten thousand words.

I prefer the term meaningful input, where the interest of the learner is taken into consideration. I am not interested in reading children's stories with a lot of easy words. I prefer to struggle through the authentic version of some novel, conversation or news report, as soon as I am able, even though there may be 40 or 50% unknown words. Having the chance to listen, as well as read, helps. Having access to an online dictionary helps. Using LingQ helps. Using LingQ for Russian I have seen the percentage of new words come down from 40-50% to a level of roughly 20% for the novels I am learning. Some podcasts are now down to 10%. Using LingQ, that level is quite comfortable. Other LingQ members have told me the same thing.

So I consider that an unknown word rate of around 10-20% is a reasonable balance between ensuring that the content is "comprehensible", on the one hand, and that new words are being acquired, on the other hand. It is often more important that the content be of interest to the learner. This assumes that it is a learning assisted form of input, such as reading and listening at LingQ. Reading a book, unassisted, is another matter.

I consider this range of difficulty (10-20% unknown words) to be an ideal "vocabulary acquisition zone", just like the "fat-burning" or "aerobic" zones that we can achieve when running on a tread mill. I think it is an ideal level of difficulty for a language learner.

One word a day

Many language learning sites offer a "word of the day" service, which is amusing for learners, even though I do not find it all that useful for learning a language. I mean you need thousands, or even tens of thousands of words. So, at one word a day, it would take a long time to learn a language. What is more, getting words devoid of any meaningful context, I mean meaningful to the learner, is quite useless, so most of these words will be quickly forgotten.

My wife likes to do crossword puzzles. I sometimes help her, and this morning I discovered that on the same page as the crossword puzzle, there is a Word of the Day item, sponsored by CanWest Canspell and the Post Office! Today's word was Niebelung! That's right, Niebelung, definition "a member of a Scandinavian race of dwarfs."

My wife keeps her old crosswords so I looked up some of the recent Words of the Day, which I list at random below. Either these words are known to the reader, or they are quite useless and will not be learned. If anyone comes across an unknown word, it is easy enough to

search the Web or a dictionary for a definition and examples of usage. In any case, these words have nothing to do with the effort to improve literacy among low literacy people, i.e. those people who have trouble reading.

- Niebelung
- Weir
- Riparian
- Osprey
- Lunula
- Paleontologist
- Perihelion
- Febrile
- Exequies
- Fusilier
- Ochre
- Necromancy
- Discrete
- Rascalion

Study conversations to master phrases

When trying to increase fluency, it is often best to work from texts which have few rare or difficult words. Often these less formal texts contain more idiomatic expressions. With such texts you can concentrate on the phrases and pay attention to how the prepositions, articles and tenses are used.

The ideal content for this is natural conversation. People use more common words and phrases and fewer difficult words, in conversations. In my experience, conversations and interviews are interesting only if they are genuine and not scripted for learners. Remember interest is key. Look for conversations and interviews, with sound and transcript as ideal content for intermediate and even advanced learning.

Getting the big words

On the other hand to increase your knowledge of more difficult words, especially words needed for academic and professional purposes, or for tests like TOEFL, TOEIC or IELTS, there is nothing better than doing a lot of reading in your areas of interest. If the subjects are familiar or of interest to you, it will be easier.

It is best to read new and somewhat difficult content on a computer to take advantage of online dictionaries and other new learning technology. Whatever you do, there is no substitute for learning in context through lots of reading and listening.

If you can find audio for these texts you will find it even easier to read more difficult texts and to remember the new words and phrases.

Why do they do it?

As I am reviewing one of my old Korean books I am reminded of all the things that textbook authors do to make it hard to learn languages.

Most textbooks introduce vocabulary in categories. The names of the colours, or the parts of the body etc. will be introduced together. Words that mean similar things or opposites will be introduced together. So the vocabulary list for each lesson includes not only what I need to understand the text in a given chapter but a lot of as yet unnecessary words that the author thinks will help the learner.

In fact this does not help. Research has shown that it is more difficult to learn new items in such categories or associations. We end up confused. The brain does not remember them.

We learn best when we can get a clump of information, or a few new words or phrases together with a lot of familiar material or content. If we know all about flowers and are reading about flowers then a few colors or names of flowers can be absorbed as part of reading and hearing about interesting content.

A long list of the names of flowers or colors, on the other hand, is very difficult to learn. Most facts or concepts that are taught in a way that is separate from real and interesting language content are not easy to remember. That goes for grammar explanations as well.

Academic and business English

There are courses on academic writing and on business writing. For people who already write correctly and well, these might be helpful. For people who lack sufficient control over the words and phrases of the English language, these courses are misleading.

There is only one kind of English prose; clear, concise and well constructed prose. If you control the words and phrases of the language it is easy to learn how to start with a "theme sentence" in every paragraph and the other little conventions of writing that are taught in these special writing courses. Without the vocabulary you do not have the resources to express yourself effectively.

Once you have brought your vocabulary up to the required level, read everything you can find on specialized writing. Start looking on the web where it is available free of charge. Or just buy a book on the subject.

Global English

Among the many fads in the world of English language teaching is the idea that English is no longer the language of its native speakers. The native speaker does not matter. English belongs to the world. You should be just as happy to learn Indian English, or Spanish English as American English.

I have real trouble with that one. Being able to speak to the native speaker, or listen to or read authentic native language content, is what attracts me to learning any language. If I am putting effort into learning Russian, it is to be able to speak to Russians, to visit St. Petersburg or Moscow, and have a beer or a vodka with a local. I want to speak an Indian language with an Indian, and Spanish with a Spaniard or Peruvian. Is it so different for learners of English?

Another concept that I do not agree with is the idea that a person need only learn a small number of words in a language. Or the idea that you can memorize a few key phrases to look after most situations you will meet in the new language. It isn't that simple.

My goal in language learning is fluency. I want to read the newspaper and books. I want to talk to people, not as an idiot, but as an educated person. The most frequent 1000 or so words typically account for 70-80% of most content. But most of the key meaning is often in the missing 20-30%. Since these less frequent words appear so infrequently, they are difficult to learn, unlike the high frequency words that appear often and are easily learned.

With a strategy of concentrated reading and listening to authentic content, coupled with an intelligent vocabulary learning system, any learner can reach educated fluency.

The big muscles-the words and phrases

In golf most teachers emphasize using the large muscles of the back, hips and thighs, rather than the small muscles in the wrists and hands. The large muscles are more stable, easier to control and give stability to the golf swing. The wrists and hands can come later. In many cases they take care of themselves if the big muscles work properly.

Language is similar. To me the big muscles of language learning are the important words and phrases - the key words that describe people, things, and actions. The small muscles are the details of articles, prepositions, verb or noun endings etc. Unless you have the big pieces in place, the little pieces do not matter. You can communicate well with a big vocabulary of words and phrases without knowing much about the smaller details.

Many textbooks, however, focus on the small details. My Russian text starts right in with talking about the genitive and dative case and when they are used. The book introduces different tenses and other rules. I just ignore them. If I can learn the words for the key people, things, and actions, that is all I need for now. If I learn the nouns and verbs as parts of phrases that I start to recognize, the little pieces will slowly fall into place. If I read and listen a lot my language will become more and more natural.

But I need to continue listening, reading, observing the language and reviewing words and phrases. I must not just think I have reached my level of competence in the language and then stagnate in the language as so many people do. If I keep listening and reading and learning I can continue to ignore the rules, drills and questions and still improve, all the while enjoying my studies, without any pressure to be perfect.

And the small details

Correct usage does matter, but I doubt that a lot of explanations will help achieve correct usage. Alice Walker says in her email "who really cared between the difference of 'du' and 'de' and 'de la' "Surely the question is not whether it matters whether you say "de," "du," or "de la" in French. It definitely matters.

The question is how to most easily learn to get it right. Explaining the principles will not help a lot if it is not possible to remember the gender of nouns. It is only with massive input via listening and reading that the learner's natural accuracy in the use of gender improves. It also helps to have mistakes corrected as long as it is understood that mistakes are normal and the corrections are used to help the learner become more observant of the language in her listening and reading.

Slang

I once bought a book of Beijing slang when I was studying Chinese. I have occasionally bought books with slang expressions or even other specialized dictionaries. They all gather dust on my shelves until I throw them out.

Why am I not interested in these? If I think about it, there are several reasons.

1) I am not that interested in slang. I just instinctively know that it is not something that I am going to use very much. When I am confronted with unknown slang expressions in movies

or in real life, I just let them go by me. They are just part of the many aspects of a new language that I do not understand for now. If certain slang expressions appear often enough, I will pick them up, at first, well enough to understand them, and with continued exposure, well enough to use them.

2) A dictionary of a specifically defined range of terms, whether slang, or technical terms, or political terms, or newspaper terms, or whatever, is not a learning tool for me. I have never been able to read these dictionaries and then go out and use these terms. I have no sense of the context if I just read something in a dictionary. Nor can I remember terms that I deliberately study in a dictionary.

3) A dictionary is, at best, a place to look up words that you encounter in other contexts. The more complete the dictionary the better. It is unlikely that in reading a text on politics, it is just the political terms that will give me trouble. So if I am going to use a dictionary it is better to use a general dictionary, a very complete one.

4) The time spent looking things up in a conventional dictionary is better spent reading and getting more exposure. If there are a lot of new words I prefer to read on the computer where other tools are available. If reading a book, I often make lists of the unknown words, and then never bother looking them up, as long as I am kind of getting about 80% of the meaning of what I am reading.

CHAPTER VI: OUTPUT - SPEAKING AND WRITING

I have emphasized focusing on listening and reading and vocabulary learning. But, how do we get to using the language to express ourselves? I will tell you my experience, when I speak, what the obstacles and difficulties are, and how I overcome them.

Moving to output

Mostly I just listen and read when learning a language. This is largely because I am learning in a location where the language is not spoken. Even when I am in a place where the language is spoken I favour input activities, in order to develop my language potential. They are easier to organize and control. They are also cheaper.

When I do write or speak in the language that I am learning, it is usually for one of the following five reasons.

1. to maintain interest and motivation
2. to provide myself with feedback
3. to identify problems in my use of the language
4. to practice using the language
5. to communicate in real and meaningful situations

Do not seek perfection

Language learning is not a matter of intellect and it is not a competition. Do not worry about your performance. You are probably doing better than you think. There will always be words that you do not know, or times when you feel awkward expressing yourself. Just take credit for being able to communicate in another language.

If you put pressure on yourself to remember a person's name you are likely not to be able to remember it. In expressing yourself in a new language, the more relaxed you are, the more easily you will be able to recall the words you need to convey your thoughts. So take it easy.

Corrections

I received the following comment recently related to the learning of Chinese. I think it raises a larger question about language learning or even learning.

Here is the quote:

"Steve, how would you then practice Chinese tones without the teacher standing by to tell you whether or not you actually got it right?"

My answer:

1. If the teacher tells you that you got it right, that does not mean that you will get it right the next time. And if you start to get it right often, that does not mean that you will not get it wrong again.

2. Trying to learn the tones of individual Chinese words is a bit like trying to learn the gender of nouns in French or the rules for cases in Russian or German, or articles or tenses in English (for non-native speakers). You can look at them, study them, think you have learned them, but when it comes time to speak, you will not remember them and not be able to get them right, consistently.

3. Your brain has to get used to these strange patterns. I learned 4,000 Chinese characters. I cannot tell you the individual tones of all of these words, yet I am quite accurate in my tones.

How did I do it? I listened often to high resonance content. My favorite was the XiangSheng comic dialogues, where the intonation of the language is exaggerated. I listened often, over and over. I picked up on the rhythm. My brain began to be able to imitate, and eventually to anticipate the tones. Speaking without even worrying about tones also helped, if I was able to listen and pick up on the "frequency" of the resonance coming at me from native speakers.

As it is with other aspects of the language, rules, tables, lists of Chinese words with tones, etc. may all help a little. They may help us become more observant. But basically we need a lot of exposure and we need resonance.

Having a teacher standing by, telling me if "I got it right" or not, is a low resonance learning environment, at least to me. The important issue in learning is not having the teacher tell me that I got it right. It is figuring out how to connect with the language, how to be energized by it, how to enjoy it. It is pointless to get something right for a specific situation, like a test, or when standing in front of a teacher, if you are unable to reproduce this skill regularly in practice.

To achieve that level of skills is a long road, and getting it "wrong" along the way is of little importance. You have to believe that you will get better, and in the meantime you just bumble along making mistakes, and focusing on input as much as possible.

Mistakes are good

Making mistakes, when speaking or writing a new language, is not the same as making certain other kinds of mistakes, at least to me. Making mistakes in language learning is not only necessary, it is a good sign. If you are not making mistakes, you are not trying hard enough to use the language.

If you are trying to master a new language, there are certain things that you are not going to remember, or get right, until your brain is ready. All you can do is to continue to use the language as much as possible, to read, to listen and to speak and write. Eventually that elusive word, or that difficult phrase, will start to become natural.

Each time you make a mistake, and get corrected, is a chance to remember that word or phrase. This is easier in writing than in speaking. If you are corrected when speaking you are already a little tense so you do not remember too much. You are keen to say what you want to say, so the corrections are a bit of a distraction and can even discourage you a little bit. At best you can remember one or two things from each conversation.

However, if you write and have your writing corrected, you have time to really look at what you wrote. You have the time to think about the mistakes you made. You can look at the learning opportunities you created. If you take it the right way, your mistakes are your opportunity to improve. Some mistakes you will have to make over and over. The most important thing is not to be upset over mistakes. They will correct themselves eventually with enough exposure, but only when your brain is ready. So just keep enjoying the language.

Take it easy

I was asked to talk a bit more about my experience as I went through the stages of language acquisition.

One thing that all learners have in common is the feeling that there are always situations where they do not understand what is going on, or words they do not understand. I often hear people complain of frustration that they are not doing better.

"I have been studying English for eight years and I use it in my work, and yet when I go out for a drink with my colleagues I cannot follow their conversation very well, or I do not feel confident enough to really jump in with my own comments." I hear this kind of comment often.

I never felt this way. As I struggled to understand and express myself, often the language was just flying by me and I did not understand most of it. This never bothered me. There will always be situations in another language when you have trouble following the conversation. It still happens to me, even for languages that I speak quite well. It still happens. It does not matter. I participate to the extent I can and feel happy that I am able to do so.

The more familiar you are with a certain context, the better you will be able to communicate. Maybe you can talk about your work, but you cannot talk about sports or politics. I lived in Japan for years, did all my business in Japanese, and yet for a long time could not understand television dramas.

You learn to recognize that even when you are having difficulty understanding, just hanging in there and listening is helping to train your mind to some extent. To improve in a certain context, you need to expose yourself to it, and even to "overload" in this context area. Read up on politics. Listen to the news more. Learn the key words and phrases. Then you will be able to discuss politics. This only works if you are interested in the subject.

A deliberate effort to "overload" a particular type of context will certainly help you, but in the meantime do not worry about it. Relax and give yourself credit for the success you already have achieved. A positive and relaxed attitude will only help your learning.

Overcoming fear

Chris asks "What do you mean speak without fear? If you haven't mastered the language and you're nervous about being in a situation, how do you overcome that?"

It all depends on your goals. Stage one of using a new language is what I call the "hit and run" stage. You are just want to try out saying "hello", or "what is the time", or a phrase you just memorized, or perhaps a vulgar swear word that you heard. You throw it out and then smile and throw up your hands when the answer comes back at you. This is not communication. It is just test firing a new gun. You have limited expectations and therefore you are not disappointed.

In the next stage you would like to have a limited conversation, to try out what you have been learning. Usually this is in a classroom or with friends. You do not expect to cover too much ground, but you do expect some conversation. You struggle and you are frustrated by your inability to use all of the words you have learned. But still your expectations are limited and you are facing a friend or teacher, so there is no fear, just frustration. Hopefully this frustration drives you back to more studying.

The fear stage happens when you want to use your new language to communicate in a real situation, where the native speaker may not have the patience of your teacher or friend. Here you do not want to fail. You want to understand and you want to be understood. It matters to you, so you get nervous. The more nervous you are, the more poorly you do.

In this situation your expectations of yourself are often unrealistically high, and your evaluation of your own performance is probably too critical. So just relax. Just pat yourself on the back for even being able to communicate at all in another language.

Recognize that this stage will continue for a long time. It started when you entered the ranks of the intermediate learner. You have put a lot of work into your language studies and want to be able to use it. You expect it of yourself and you think that others expect it of you. So

lower your expectations and do not presume that others are so unforgiving. So what, if they ask you to repeat yourself a few times, or you have to ask them? But do make sure that you commit to improving.

Here is the strategy to overcome the fear of speaking

1. Do not allow yourself to get too uptight. Learn to enjoy your language learning at every stage. Do not just focus on that happy day when you will be fluent. Perhaps you will never be as fluent as you would like to be. My wife practices piano every day. She is improving gradually but she enjoys it every day. Do not be impatient to get to the end of your studies. Choose learning activities that are enjoyable.

2. Put a lot of effort into input activities, like listening and reading and vocabulary study, based on interesting and enjoyable content. Make sure you enjoy those activities and believe that, if they are continued, they will help you to improve.

3. When you have a less than satisfactory encounter in the new language, make sure you go back and redouble your efforts to absorb more of the language. Build up your abilities for the next encounter. It is like playing sports. If you are playing your friend in tennis, you are not self-conscious of how you look, you just want to win. Whether you win or lose, you will want to improve your technique, so that you will win the next game. Whether you win or lose you can still enjoy the game.

4. Learn to accept uncertainty. That is key. You will forget words. You will get the structure wrong. You will find yourself in conversations where you are lost. This will go on for a long time. If you are not prepared to accept that level of uncertainty, you should stay in the comfort zone of your own language. If you prefer the comforts of home, do not travel. However, no pain, no gain. But the surprising thing is that the more relaxed you are, the better you will remember what you have learned. The more confident you feel, the more natural you will sound.

Talk to yourself

You probably talk to yourself quite a lot during the day. Try doing it in the language you are learning. Repeat some of the phrases you have been noticing in your listening. Or just say something silly. Do it out loud or just to yourself. It will depend on who is watching you.

How much writing and speaking is needed

That depends on your situation and what you want to do with the language. Writing and speaking are not as important at the beginner stage, when you are not yet used to the language. At that stage you need lots of repetitive input. However, as you start to feel the need

to express yourself, writing and speaking activities will become key to moving to output, even if you are not surrounded by native speakers.

Beginner learners need only one or two short (15-30 minutes) one-on-one sessions per week with a native-speaker. Writing is not necessary at that stage.

Intermediate and advanced learners should try to write at least once a week, join a discussion with a native speaker and 3-4 other learners, once or twice a week, and have a 15 to 30 minute one-on-one session with a tutor once a month.

On the other hand, if you have the opportunity, or the need, to use the language in real meaningful ways, you should take maximum advantage.

Output activities and learning

A recent study investigated whether giving learners an opportunity for oral output has any positive effect on the L2 learners' acquisition of a grammatical form. Twenty-four adult ESL learners were randomly assigned to one of three groups: an output group, which engaged in a picture description task that involved input comprehension and output production; a non-output group, which engaged in a picture sequencing task that required input comprehension only; and a placebo control group. The two treatment groups were exposed to the same aural input for the same amount of time. Learning was assessed by means of a pre-test and a post-test consisting of production and reception parts. The results indicated that, contrary to our expectations, the output group failed to outperform the non-output group. On the contrary, it was the non-output group that showed greater overall gains in learning. A careful post-hoc re-examination of the treatment tasks revealed that the output task failed to engage learners in the syntactic processing that is necessary to trigger L2 learning, while the task for the non-output group appeared to promote better form-meaning mapping.

Source:

Yukiko Izumi and Shinichi Izumi

Investigating the Effects of Oral Output on the Learning of Relative Clauses in English: Issues in the Psycholinguistic Requirements for Effective Output Tasks

Pronunciation

Do not worry about whether you pronounce like a native speaker or not. By all means try to imitate native speaker pronunciation as closely as you can. It can be fun to try to do so. I will provide some hints on how to do so below. But do not worry if you do not achieve this goal. This may sound like contradictory advice. What I mean is that you can aim to sound like a native speaker but should be satisfied with yourself if you can communicate clearly and effectively. You should not have the slightest sense of being inadequate if you do not achieve this 100% native speaker like pronunciation.

It is better to use words and phrases like a native speaker, and pronounce with an accent, than to pronounce like a native speaker, but have phrasing that is not natural. So work hardest on your choice of words and phrases.

Having said that I offer the following advice on pronunciation. First of all choose someone whose voice and pronunciation you like. Listen repetitively to that same person. Imitate that person as much as you can. Overload your brain with that person's voice and intonation.

Get a hold of the text of what that person is saying or transcribe it. Now read it out loud many times imitating the person you are listening to. Record yourself. Identify the differences in pronunciation and intonation between yourself and the native speaker. You will gradually get better and better at doing this.

Isolate the vowel sounds and consonant sounds that you are not satisfied with. Work very hard on saying those sounds. Record yourself and compare yourself to a native speaker. Do the same with intonation.

How bad is your accent?

I think there are two issues with accent. First of all, can you be understood? If your accent is so "foreign" that you are difficult to understand, you need to work to improve it. Otherwise, an accent reflects your personality, and a noticeable but easily understood "foreign" accent can be either of little importance, or, in some cases, charming.

I admit that the closer you are to the native accent, the less likely you are to attract attention to yourself. A lack of accent is usually easier on the ears of the listener, but only at first. Ultimately, if the conversation continues, the foreign accent becomes less and less important.

What does become important is what you have to say, how you say it, and what you convey to your listeners about the kind of person you are.

In that regard, what you have within you, and your ability to use words and phrases effectively, is much more important than your accent, in the long run. So, as a language learner, put more emphasis on words and phrases and the natural use of the language and do not worry too much about accent.

There is another aspect of accent, and that is the fact that an accent can identify a native speaker in terms of regional origin and even, in some societies, class. I see no reason why people would want to hide their regional origins, so I see no reason to change one's regional accent. In so far as accents identified with class are concerned, this is really not an issue in Canada where everyone more or less speaks with the same accent. It may be a bigger issue in some other countries, like the United Kingdom.

I notice that the old "Oxford accent" or "Queen's English" is much less common than before, although I must confess that I really like hearing it. More and more people from southern

England seem to speak with an "estuary English" accent, which is strongly influenced by the London accent. It appears that class distinctions are less important than before, even in the UK. But I do not know that for sure.

In the US, there is controversy about whether the way that many Black Americans speak is a language (sometimes called Ebonics) or not. However, I was recently told, by a leading Black American educator, that most Black parents would like their children to speak mainstream English, at least outside of the home. There, I believe, the issue is not so much the accent, which is really a Southern accent, but the use of words. It is quite possible to have a very erudite way of using the language and still speak with an accent that is similar to that of a "rapper."

So my view is that phrasing and vocabulary are more important than accent in all situations.

To reduce accent or not

Very few language learners do not want to emulate the pronunciation of some native speaker group. That is the model, whether it is achieved or not. Very few native speakers of a language do not react more positively, at least initially, to a person speaking in a familiar or native accent, even though in time this initial impression can be overcome.

So it is not necessarily helpful to pretend that learners do not want to reduce their accent nor that it is unimportant. It is useful to tell learners that they should not be unduly preoccupied about their accent, but to suggest that it does not matter is not, in my view, a good idea.

One of the best ways to reduce an accent is to listen repeatedly to a limited amount of content. Repeating along, with an emphasis on rhythm and intonation is particularly helpful. It can also be helpful to memorize short paragraphs and repeat them often. And of course it is important to relax and not worry about one's accent even as we try to improve.

I am not American, but if and when people with Hispanic ancestry become the majority in the US, most of them will likely speak English with the same accent as their neighbours and fellow citizens of other different ancestries.

I find that this politically correct attitude "your accent is part of your culture" is patronizing towards new citizens of the United States, who are trying to speak like everyone else. I know that I make mistakes in grammar and pronunciation, when I speak another language. It does not bother me. However, I do not pretend that my incorrect way of speaking is just "a cultural trait." To speak like a native is still the ideal, even though I cannot achieve it. Speaking the way I do is not a "cultural trait". I do not believe that those people who speak another language well are less able to represent their own culture. I believe this is just another example of politically correct "feel good" nonsense.

CHAPTER VII: LEARNING TECHNIQUES

We all have slightly different approaches to learning. Here are some observations on learning techniques that I use.

Learn like children

Language teaching based on explaining the language and its rules is still the norm in most schools. This method has been quite unsuccessful. Unless such classroom instruction is accompanied by a considerable amount of listening and exposure outside the classroom, most students simply end up not speaking or even understanding the spoken language after 10 years or more of classroom study of that language. This represents a spectacular failure. With the same effort put into math, most students end up able to do quite complicated math. The same is not true for language study. It is time to try something else.

We do not explain a first language to children. We do not put pressure on children to speak. They speak when they are ready. And then we do not correct children. We just let them enjoy discovering the language on their own.

We need to use the same approach for second language study. We need to help the learners enjoy discovering the language, and we need to encourage them to do so. Adults already have a wide range of concepts and words in their own language, so that they can learn much faster than children, if they are as motivated and as positive and as determined as a child at play.

The role of the teacher begins with showing the learner how to find interesting content at an appropriate level to listen to and read. Ideally the teacher is able to show the learner how to start using authentic content, i.e. not learner language, at a very early stage. The teacher can then point out some efficient techniques for observing and discovering how the new language works.

Mastering a language

Can we master another language? Can we master our own? Can we achieve native-like fluency in a second language? What do these terms mean?

In my previous post I said that we can never master a foreign language. Julien commented that we cannot even master our own language, so we are even less likely to be able to master a second or third language.

Rob had this to say in his comment to my post. "...but it is very possible to speak and write correctly at a native level. I think this type of message should be promoted rather than telling a student he/she can't reach that level. Belief is a huge part of language learning. I guess it depends on what your definition of "perfect" is. If you mean a person can't know any one language in its entirety then I agree, if you mean that a person can't learn a second language to native-level fluency then I wholeheartedly disagree."

Well, first of all, let's say that I agree with Julien. Master is the wrong word. But it is true that some people speak their own language well and others speak their own language poorly. There are differences in how well people speak their own language. When I am in the presence of people who express themselves well in their own language, I am always impressed. I am referring to people who have a large vocabulary, who speak with precision and express complicated ideas simply and clearly. It does not matter if their accent is from this or that region.

Many ESL teachers I have met do not speak their own language, English, well. I know there is the view, amongst some, that everyone speaks their language equally well. According to this view, people with a limited English vocabulary, who use a lot of "you know" "like" etc. are communicating as well as anyone else. I gather that Stephen Pinker, renowned linguist and Harvard professor, is of that view. I am not of that view. We all have an equal ability to learn to speak well. But to realize that potential we need to read a lot, and to spend time with people who use the language well. And ideally we do that from an early age.

As to achieving native like proficiency in another language, I do agree that it is something to strive for. However, it is rarely possible to achieve a level in a foreign level that is as impressive as that of a proficient speaker of the native language. We rarely if ever sound as natural as even a poor speaker of that language.

It is pointless to compare the non-native speaker to a native speaker. If someone listens to me speak a language and says, "but I can tell that you are not Chinese or Japanese or French". I say, well of course you can. I am not! The way the native speaker speaks is my model, what I strive to emulate and imitate, but I do not expect to fully achieve it. I visualize myself as a proficient speaker of that language, but I am not disappointed when I am told that I do not sound like a native.

Hard work

I sometimes reflect on the fact that language learning is hard work. It can be fun. It can be enjoyable. It can be interesting, but it is hard work. I guess playing music is the same way. You have to put in the time. You have to work systematically. You have to read and listen a lot and you have to review your new words and phrases.

I wonder how many people who say they want to learn a language are really serious enough to get anywhere. Is it 5%? I see immigrants in Canada who flock to free language school but do not put the effort into learning that is necessary to make a breakthrough. Many people are happy to sit in a classroom, or to have a conversation in the language they are

learning. How many are prepared to do what we ask of them at LingQ, to read and listen, and to save up to 90 LingQs per week?

Language learning and physical training

I have often compared language learning to physical training. There are similarities and of course there are differences.

Language learning is mental exercise. It works the brain and not the body. It is beneficial for the brain. You do not sweat nor expend physical energy. You not only train the language fitness of the brain, you also accumulate words and phrases. None of this is true in physical training where you essentially do not have to think.

But there are many similarities. I compare aerobic training, or jogging, to extensive reading or listening, where you are reading or listening to a lot of different content, most of which you understand. You jog to build up your stamina and the strength of your heart, your cardiovascular system. In the same way the extensive reading of material that is fairly easy for you improves your reading and speaking, and your confidence in the new language.

Anaerobic training is more about power and strength. You focus on power in sprinting, or jumping. You build up the ability for your heart and muscles to explode when needed in a sports event or competition. I liken that to the intensive study of more difficult texts in language learning where you are saving many words and phrases and listening and reading the same content many times. You want to increase your word power.

In weight lifting, you would overload certain muscles to strengthen them. In accumulating word power you concentrate on a certain subject matter to make sure that the new words and phrases you need to learn appear often enough for you to learn them. People talk about business English, or academic English or whatever other kind of English. To me there is only one kind of English. To improve your ability to write business English or to write academic papers in English, you just need to overwork that kind of content. You need to select just business papers or academic papers in your field for a period of time. You need to save words and phrases from that kind of content. You need to review these words and phrases. You need to listen to and read this kind of content over and over. You overload in that content type.

It is not normally recommended in physical training to only lift weights. Running and aerobic exercises are necessary for your heart. In the same way, extensive and pleasurable reading and listening on a variety of subjects will strengthen your ability to concentrate on your heavy lifting, your focused study of certain content areas. So it is important to have a balanced approach.

In running there is a concept called the "fartlek" run. This comes from the Swedish terms "fart" which means "speed" and "lek" which means play. So fartlek means speed play. The idea is that when you go jogging you should also do a little sprinting. If you do not, your body gets used to the comfort of running at a steady pace and the training benefit is reduced.

I believe some of the same concepts apply in language learning. I think learners should listen to content read slowly and then read at normal and even high speed. They should listen to different speakers with different accents. It might even be a good idea to hear the same content read by different voices and using different accents.

I certainly notice in my Russian studies that after listening to content that is read very quickly, even though I do not understand so much of it, when I go back to content that is read more slowly, I have an easier time with this slower content than before. I have trained my brain to become more nimble and alert, to become more language fit for Russian.

By the same token, when I start a language, like Russian, I make sure I buy two different beginner books and CDs so that I can cover more or less the same beginner content listening to different people cover more or less the same beginner vocabulary but in different contexts.

Mixing up content, voices, speeds, and accents can help improve our language fitness. Nevertheless, when it comes to working on pronunciation it is wise to concentrate on one voice which we find pleasant and imitate that person's intonation, pronunciation and tempo. If we want to internalize new phrases and words we also need to listen repetitively to the same content. So the key is to mix it up.

Starting the kids off right

I propose that we offer children comparative language as a subject in grades 1-7. This would consist exclusively of listening to and reading stories. No marking, no output! Children could choose one or two languages a year. They would be able to change every year or stay with the same languages. The purpose would be purely exposure.

Thereafter language would be optional. The students could continue with this exposure approach but would be asked to concentrate on one or two languages. Only then would they be expected to start writing and speaking. But the main thing would remain listening and reading.

If the emphasis were on choice and pleasure, perhaps a larger percentage would end up genuinely motivated to learn. And once they decided to commit to learn they would be more flexible and better prepared for success. In any case what we are doing now in schools does not work for most students.

Repeating

In strength exercises you need to work the same muscles repetitively in order to get stronger. Language learning is a little like that. Athletes in all sports do repetitive exercises to increase their strength.

I have always found repeating effective. When I start learning a language, I listen to the same content repeatedly. It helps if the content is interesting and the voice pleasant to listen to. When I listen I pick out or focus on different phrases or words each time. I then read that same content repeatedly for fluency in reading. I will review new words and phrases from that same content. I have saved these words and phrases on a separate list. (This is automated in LingQ). Then I go back to listening and reading the same content again.

This is my strength training in language learning. It can be quite passive. I can listen while walking or jogging or even driving or sitting in a bus. But it is deliberate and is done almost every day during my period of intense study.

Talk is not cheap

Many language learners just want to talk. They think that if they just talk they will improve. In my experience just talking is not enough. Talking is like playing the game of language learning. In a way it is the reward. It is why we do the other things like read, listen, write and accumulate words and phrases. We work hard to acquire more and more effective language tools so that when we talk we can express ourselves more accurately and more naturally.

Just talking is good practice..... at talking. However, conversing in a foreign language, while fun, is also a little stressful. It is not the ideal place to learn new words and phrases. It is a great place to confirm your knowledge of words and phrases that you have already learned, or to identify your gaps...

Conversation class can be time consuming and expensive. It can also become quite boring if the conversation is forced. Like everything you do in language learning, you learn best when the context is meaningful and real. Conversation is a most effective learning activity if it is genuine and combined with other activities.

Fitness

I am back from my fitness session and have had breakfast. I guess there are major differences between physical exercise and learning languages. Here are few that come to my mind.

1) If you stop exercising you will lose your fitness level quite quickly and it will take a lot of work to get it back. If you stop working on a language, you get a little bit rusty but you do not lose much. It is easy to get it back.

2) In learning a language, the emotional commitment to the language, the words, the subject matter, the sounds of the language, people you know who speak the language, episodes that you remember, etc. are all important parts of your learning. This is not true for the pure "grunt work" of physical exercise, although it helps if you enjoy doing it.

Memory

Since ancient times people have been developing systems to assist with memorization.

Mnemonics are clues or associations that are supposed to help us remember. Hopefully these clues are easier to remember than the objects themselves. I have never used mnemonics. It has always seemed like a lot of work to set these systems up.

Memory retrieval systems organize information to be memorized in a certain order. Bits of information are ranked and the frequency with which they are studied and reviewed is determined by the learner and/or by an algorithm, which, according to some research, optimizes retention. The Leitner cardbox system and Supermemo are examples of this approach.

There is undoubtedly value in these systems for those who enjoy using them. I would think that the cleaner the bit of information, the more effective these systems are. When it comes to learning words, I feel it is unwise to rely too much on such systems. I also question the relevance of the learning algorithms.

Words are messy, fuzzy things and their meaning and usage is dependent on context. It is through exposure to context, lots of context, that we eventually learn them. A word is most often acquired incidentally as we suddenly see it or hear it for the nth time. That is when we reach the tipping point in the understanding of a word, and the word becomes a part of us. That tipping point can come at any time and the timing will be different for each word. Deliberate study of words, and for those who like them, memory systems, can help accelerate the process of reaching the tipping point.

However, it is important that the main activity remain listening and reading, and eventually speaking and writing. The deliberate study of words needs to be very closely integrated with this listening and reading. It is important to strike the right balance between enabling learners to enjoy their listening and reading, and offering them an efficient support system to make sure that words are retained and the tipping point is reached earlier.

Don't try to remember

I think adults get more frustrated than young learners when they seem unable to remember things. They probably have poorer short term memory than younger students. Even high school and university students probably have an ability to cram information into their heads for exams that adult learners have lost.

So I believe you should not rely on memory to learn languages. Expect to forget most of what you learn. That is why consistent and intensive exposure through listening and reading to meaningful content is so important. Through the process of ingesting the language, often the same content, over and over again, you gradually improve your ability to deal with the new language.

Of course it is also important to make the effort to learn the bits and pieces, the words and phrases. Flash cards or similar systems are very effective. Working on the words and seeing them again in different sentences that you have heard or listened to is a good exercise for the brain. It also helps you learn how to use them.

But when you seem unable to remember these words and phrases, do not worry. You are still training the brain to process the new language. The effect of all of this is cumulative even if at times you feel you are just not improving. We all have a tendency to overestimate the possibilities of short term change and to underestimate the opportunities for long term change.

Rote memory

I have been asked in comments here what I think of rote memory as a language learning method.

I would imagine that memorizing texts could be an effective way to learn languages. However, I would not do it, because it is not natural and not fun. I cannot imagine that I would do it more than once. It kind of takes the fun out of language learning. I do not mind listening to the same text over and over, even 30 or more times, if I like the content and the voice of the narrator. I can read the same text a few times. I can invest the time in learning the words and phrases from that text, especially in a system like LingQ, using Flash Cards and other tools which make it rather painless. I just cannot get myself to memorize texts.

Even if I did memorize, how much can I memorize? I need to cover a lot of material. I need to cover more and more content in order to really become comfortable in the language, and in order to learn all the words I need to know. I think memorization is limiting because it is too time consuming for a relatively small amount of content.

What is more, I am driven by my interest in what I am reading. Memorizing would slow me down. So, for those who have the patience, go for it. It is not something that I use.

Lazy learners

Five recommendations for lazy language learners, (which I think refers to most people.)

1) Spend most of your time listening, while doing other tasks. Listen over and over to a limited amount of content at first. Gradually, as you get better, listen fewer times to the same content, and move on to more varied content. Try to listen to content you find interesting, and where you like the voice of the narrator.

2) Read what you are listening to in order to "mine" it for words and phrases. Review these words and phrases regularly, without expecting to learn or remember them. Just try to notice them in your listening and reading.

3) Get the smallest grammar book you can find that explains the language in your own language. Read through it from time to time, skimming, without expecting to understand or remember any of it. Eventually it will make more and more sense to you.

4) Never force yourself to speak. Speak when you want to, when you are ready to try out what you have learned. When you are with native speakers, relax, speak a little and listen a lot.

5) Do not worry about what you do not understand, nor about what you forget, nor about what you are unable to do in the language - ever!

Hard working learners

I should add some additional tasks for the hard working learner.

- 1) Set weekly goals and stick to them.
- 2) Go for weeks without missing one day with the language you are learning.
- 3) Write at least once a week, and possibly once a day.
- 4) Connect with a tutor twice a week.
- 6) Spend 30 minutes a day reviewing words and phrases.

And find every opportunity to speak to native speakers!

Shortcuts

It is a fact of life that language learning takes time. It takes a lot of exposure through reading and listening. It is another fact of life that many learners and even teachers are constantly looking for shortcuts. I often see lists of "100 common English expressions" or "handy Italian phrases for travelers" or "business terms in Spanish" or "50 everyday Mandarin situations", "common mistakes in English", "irregular Spanish verbs", and on and on. The idea is that if you read the list of expressions, phrases, business terms, grammar mistakes, or read the 50 situations (at the bank, at school, at customs (perhaps the most useless of all), at the store, on the air plane, at the train station, at a restaurant etc., you will be able to use these words and expressions and phrases, and be able to communicate effectively at the bank, train station etc., or avoid grammar mistakes.

I do not think so. These pre-packaged lists or situations, or grammar books, are only a very small part of what it takes to learn a language. In fact, in my experience of reading through such material, I always have the impression that I am learning something, but when I go to use the language I am quite unable to remember any of what I have read from such material.

On the other hand, if I do a lot of listening and reading and then review the words and expressions that were in the contents, I am able to connect the words with familiar contexts. So there is nothing wrong with reviewing words and phrases, or even constructions of grammar, as long as the contexts for these words, phrases and grammatical constructions, are already familiar.

You first have to earn the words by reading and listening to a variety of content. You, in fact, have to read and re-read, listen and re-listen. And in so doing you build up a bank of contexts that are familiar to you. Then you can review the words and phrases and remember them. That is how you earn the words. The list or any other shortcut will not work. So I say, you have to earn it to learn it.

There are language learning geniuses out there like Powel Janulus who learned 60 or 80 languages. He said that he could learn most languages in a month. I am not one of those people. For me it takes time.

I believe you have to put in the time and earn the language. But that is why it is so important to enjoy what you are doing to learn the language.

Cross-training

In sports it has been found that to improve in sport A it is often a good idea to practice sport B. Tennis or ping pong or gymnastics may improve the strength or quickness or balance needed for ice hockey, for example.

I think the same works in language learning. If a person speaks only one language and starts to learn a second language, I believe there are many advantages to starting to learn a third language as well.

First of all, I believe learning a third language will improve the language learning capability of the brain. There is no doubt that I am a better language learner now, at the age of 59, than I was as a seventeen year old in school trying to learn French. I have learned so many other languages that I am simply better trained at language learning.

Second, the more languages you become familiar with, the more you become independent from your native language and culture. This independence is important in terms of your attitude towards a new language and in terms of your ability to master the structure, vocabulary and pronunciation of another language.

I think it is worthwhile taking a two or three month break from your major target language (say English) to study another, say Spanish or Chinese for a few months. The goal is simply to train your mind. You would not expect to master this minor language, but rather to cross train your mind.

I am not sure this works for everyone. I am sure it works for me.

Playing the piano

I am happy to receive comments and this morning there are three, two from Pako and one from Blinger. Blinger recognizes the need to make mistakes in learning a language. Blinger points out that language learning can be like playing the piano. Blinger points out that we need to challenge ourselves with more and more difficult pieces on the piano so that we can gradually raise our level. Language learning is like that says Blinger, and Blinger is right.

Pako claims that we have to avoid mistakes when learning languages. He feels that language learning is different from learning the piano.

In my view, language learning has a lot of similarity with playing the piano. First of all, if you do not enjoy playing the piano, you will probably not do well. If you can play pieces that you like you will learn faster than by playing pieces you do not like. Both require repetitive practice. In both cases, most of the work needs to be done by the learner on his or her own. The improvement in both is gradual. And in both cases, most learners are best to avoid theory.

Yet language learning is also different. One difference is the large quantity of new vocabulary, words and phrases that has to be learned. The only way to learn new vocabulary is to constantly read and listen to new content. Yet to retain the words and phrases and to get a feel of the language you need to repetitively read and listen to things you have already covered before, especially in the early stages.

Keep it simple

I think a key concept in language learning efficiency is simplicity. The greatest damage has been done to language learning by the complicated theories of the academic linguists. Once we get into terms like interlanguage, sociolinguists, phonemes, allophones, discourse analysis, speech acts, morphemes, and I do not know what else, we are getting far away from anything that will help the learner. Similarly I am not a fan of games and role playing. The introduction of the computer creates new opportunities to find new gimmicky approaches that distract the learner from the task.

What you need first of all is lots of real authentic language on subjects of interest to the learners. Then you let the learners listen to it and read it over and over, and help them systematically learn the words and phrases that they want to learn from these texts. You encourage them to write. You explain and provide feedback as they learn from the language. You talk to them on subjects of interest. You encourage them to go and meet the language wherever and whenever they can. Those who become autonomous motivated learners learn the language. The others never really do, wherever they study.

Dictionary

There is a point of view amongst language teachers that learners should only use monolingual dictionaries in the language they are trying to learn. All of my experience argues against this point of view..

I am neither a classroom teacher nor an interpreter. If I were I would own monolingual dictionaries. But I am a language learner. I do not study dictionaries. I learn from content. I have done so for over 40 years. My shelves are full of foreign language readers with glossaries which give simple translations of words into English. To me these are mere hints of the meaning. Only after meeting these words in many contexts do I learn how to use them. I do not want lengthy explanations of new words, nor unrelated examples of the words in use, nor synonyms nor other, to me, irrelevant information. I want a quick hint so I can get back to trying to figure out the meaning of what I am enjoying reading (and often listening to). A dictionary does not define the meaning of words. Usage does. A dictionary just reports on different examples of common usage at the time of printing.

Language learning is, to me, a fuzzy logic process. We can try to learn words and rules deliberately, but mostly we learn incidentally, from listening and reading, as we get used to the language. The content needs to be interesting, in order to keep us motivated. Thanks to online dictionaries, MP3 files etc, I can alternate between easy texts and difficult texts, I even recommend doing so. The meaning of what I am reading is sometimes unclear. There are contexts which I do not fully understand. But I do not ask why, because I know from experience that it all becomes clearer eventually. The important thing is to continue the exposure to content of my choosing. In that task the quick hint based on the experience of my own language is most effective. Using a monolingual dictionary in the language I am learning is less efficient. I have tried. And in language learning efficiency is the great accelerator, the great intensifier.

Language learning is a hockey stick

Progress in language learning is like an upside-down hockey stick. During an initial period of study you actually progress quite noticeably. From not being able to say anything, you all of a sudden can actually say something in the new language. You can even understand or read something in the new language. Wow!

That is the first steep growth period. That is the blade of the upside-down hockey stick. Most learning material is directed towards this first stage. You cover the usual subjects like the train station, the bank, the post office etc. However, you still cannot carry on a conversation. You still cannot function at the train station, bank or post office. In a way you have an ornament and not a useful tool.

It is the next long stage of language learning, the shaft of the hockey stick, that is the most difficult. There are so many words to learn. Many important words and phrases do not appear often enough to be easy to learn. Instead they are just easy to forget. It is during this period

that you need interesting content to keep you going. You need lots of exposure to the language, listening and reading. You need a systematic way of accumulating and retaining words and phrases. You need practice in writing and speaking. This is a long road.

If what you are reading and listening to is interesting, you keep going. It is your interest in the subjects of your reading and listening that keeps you going. Read widely. Read in your area of professional interest. Also read novels and literature. Gradually you start to notice these new words and phrases more and more. Naturally, and ever so slowly, you start to use the new words and phrases and they become a part of you.

Dogs

1) We used to have a dog, a cross between a Labrador retriever and a Springer Spaniel. His name was Tank. If he was chasing a bird or a squirrel, he would run through thick bushes and come out the other side of the bush, all bleeding. It did not matter. He wanted the bird (which he rarely caught).

2) The biggest factor in my willingness to study any item of content is not how easy it is, but how interested I am in the content. I will attack even items with a relatively high percentage of unknown words, if I am keen to understand what the content is all about. If it is just some article, or story, that I am required to study, I find it hard work.

3) In speaking a new language, I do not worry about how I sound in the language, nor how many mistakes I make, when I am intent on communicating with someone for real. If the communication is artificial, either with someone who knows my language, or in an artificial "role playing" setting, I become more self-conscious. It is not real. I do not see the bird that Tank used to see.

4) In dog racing, greyhounds chase a mechanical rabbit around the track, (and people bet on them). At LingQ we measure the words that people save and acquire. This is indeed a measurement of what people have learned, of how far they have come in acquiring words and the language. It is a measure of learning activity, which is a good measurement of learning itself.

More than that, however, it is an additional incentive to engage with the language. It is like the mechanical rabbit. The learner may strive to increase his word total, but, just like the greyhound running around the track, what really happens is that he or she ends up listening, reading and reviewing words more often. The pursuit of new words is sometimes an illusion, but a lot of ground is covered just the same. Before the learner knows it, he or she has become more comfortable in the new language.

Globish

I was driving home the other day and listened to an interview on the radio with a certain Jean-Paul Nerriere, who has written a book and "invented" a language called Globish. It appears that Globish refers to a simplified form of English which uses a total of only 1,500 words, avoids slang and sticks to short and simple sentences. This Globish is a form of English that all speakers, especially those who are non-native, can easily understand.

I agree that non-native speakers should avoid slang or overly idiomatic language when they speak. I also agree that everyone, native or non-native should use simple, short and direct sentences for clarity. I agree that every non-native speaker should make a special effort to completely master the most common 1,500 words of English.

Beyond that it gets more complicated. Even the simplest natural conversation in English will only have 90% or so of its vocabulary consist of these high frequency words. Any more specialized content will see this ratio of frequent words drop down to 75%. It is simply not possible to be effective in many situations with so small a vocabulary.

Learning new vocabulary is an ongoing part of language learning. If done in a systematic way it can be done efficiently and be a source of satisfaction and sense of achievement. The solution to better communication across language barriers is to simplify the process of language learning and make it more enjoyable and more efficient. In this way more people will be able to communicate in two or three languages.

One more thought: it may be easier for a Frenchman or European language speaker to get by with 1,500 English words, since he or she can guess at the meaning of new Latin or Greek based words. The same is not true for someone coming from a non-European background. But there will be more on this in upcoming posts.

Adult learners

Here is something I found on a website. There is nothing new in education—we just forget.

"An approach which stresses the development of the receptive skills (particularly listening) before the productive skills may have much to offer the older learner (*Postovsky, 1974; Winitz, 1981; J. Gary and N. Gary, 1981*).

According to this research, effective adult language training programs are those that use materials that provide an interesting and comprehensible message, delay speaking practice and emphasize the development of listening comprehension, tolerate speech errors in the classroom, and include aspects of culture and non-verbal language use in the instructional program. This creates a classroom atmosphere which supports the learner and builds confidence.

Teaching older adults should be a pleasurable experience. Their self-directedness, life experiences, independence as learners, and motivation to learn provide them with advantages in language learning. A program that meets the needs of the adult learner will lead to rapid language acquisition by this group"

Chinese characters

I am often asked about learning to write Chinese characters. When I learned them there were no computers and no word processors.

I got a hold of 1,000 flash cards, the most common 1,000. I started with 10 a day and worked up to 30. I wrote or studied characters every, I mean every, day, until I had learned these 1,000 characters.

The flash cards showed the stroke order. I wrote them out on squared paper, down the first column 10 or so times. Then I put the English or pronunciation (Wade Giles in those days) over three columns to the right and picked up the next card, and kept going. Soon I would hit the English of the first card three columns over etc. and have to write it before I forgot it. I kept doing this with the 10, or eventually 30 characters that I was working on. These included new cards and cards that I had already learned and forgotten. I think my retention was less than 50%. After doing this for a while I would review my stack of cards.

After doing this for the first 1000 characters I stopped. From that point on, when I encountered new characters in my reading I would write them out a few times and carry on. I learned 4,000 characters in 8 months, wrote the exam, where we had to translate newspaper editorials in both directions, write a diplomatic note, and take dictation. My handwriting was not pretty, but I passed.

When I was studying Chinese (it was a full time occupation), I mostly read and listened a lot. I did write some, but not as much as I listened and read. I have now forgotten how to write by hand. I can write on a computer.

What would I do today? I do not know. I am not sure I would bother to learn to write by hand. I can read and type on a computer in Russian, Japanese and Chinese, and even a little Korean, but cannot write any of them by hand. It is not a skill I use, and it is definitely a skill you lose if you do not use it, IMHO.

CHAPTER VIII: WHICH LANGUAGE?

Which language should I learn and how long will it take?

I am assuming that by now you are raring to go and want to learn a language. Let's look at which ones are popular and how much effort will be required.

Which language to learn?

I recently said in a blog post that I thought that most people should be able to learn three or four languages. Well, which languages should we learn? Here are a few statistics. I have rounded up to make it simpler.

First of all 45% of the world's population speaks an Indo-European language. This covers many of the languages of India, Persian, and most European origin languages. 22% of the world speaks Sino-Tibetan languages. This category includes Chinese, Thai and Tibetan, but not Korean and Japanese. Korean and Japanese are heavily influenced by Chinese, and a majority of words in those languages are of Chinese origin.

The first consideration in choosing a language is interest. This interest can be cultural or a situation of necessity. However, another consideration is utility, and certainly these two groups will give you access to the greatest number of people.

If we look at individual languages we find that Mandarin is the most widely spoken first language at 875 million people. There are also 180 million second-language speakers of Mandarin; most of these are Chinese native speakers of Chinese languages other than Mandarin. If you know Mandarin you will have an easier time with other Chinese languages and even Japanese and Korean. So Chinese will give you access to lots of speakers, mostly geographically concentrated in East Asia. But this is an area rich in history and with a growing cultural and economic influence in the world.

Hindi comes next with 370 million native speakers and 120 million second-language speakers. If you add in speakers of related Indian languages you probably get closer to the Chinese numbers, although not quite since the Dravidian languages spoken in the South of India are not related. Hindi is next on my list. This is a major part of the cultural history of the world. I do not intend to miss it.

Certainly it would seem worthwhile to invest in learning a language from each of these groups, and then taking advantage of that position to learn a few more.

Next comes Spanish with 350 million native speakers and 70 million second language speakers. If you add in the closely related Latin-based languages of Portuguese, French, Italian and others, you easily bring the number of Latin language group speakers up to 750 million. I

would certainly include a Latin-based language in my repertory. Get started with one of these, probably Spanish and you will find the others easy, if you need them or are so inclined.

English with 350 million native speakers and 500 million second-language speakers is the most widely distributed and most useful language today, but who knows what will happen in the future. English vocabulary is heavily influenced by Latin-based languages; well over 60% of its words are of that origin.

Russian is spoken by 200 million native speakers and another 100 million second language speakers. If you add in Ukrainian, Polish and other Slavic languages you probably get up to 400 million speakers. So that is why I am studying Russian (and having a great time).

German has over 100 million native speakers and 30 million second-language speakers. French (part of the Latin group) has 70 million native speakers and 60 million second-language speakers. German is more widely used in Europe, whereas France has spread to other continents. Both are important European languages with a lot of history and culture to support them as choices for learning.

Arabic with 205 native speakers and 20 million second language speakers is obviously important and rich in history. I am told that the regional differences are great to the point where this group may not really be considered one language. I do not know but hope to find out when I learn Arabic.

Malayo-Indonesian with 160 million or more speakers may be in the same situation as Arabic with regard to regional variations. I do not know.

Bengali with over 200 million native speakers is part of the Hindi group, and I may or may not go after that one. On the other hand Japanese at 125 million is already in my pocket.

This is not intended to be a complete list. There are many other languages to learn, and I know languages that are not on this list, and they give me great pleasure. So in the final analysis, what really matters is your own interest.

The most popular languages in Europe

I have just read a very interesting European Union Report regarding the knowledge of foreign languages in Europe.

- 47% of Europeans can only speak their mother tongue and are, therefore, monolingual.
- 41% of Europeans have a knowledge of English as a foreign language
- 19% of Europeans have a knowledge of French as a foreign language
- 10% of Europeans have a knowledge of German as a foreign language

- 7% of Europeans have a knowledge of Spanish as a foreign language
- 3% of Europeans have a knowledge of Italian as foreign language
- 1% of Europeans have a knowledge of Swedish as a foreign language
- 1% of Europeans have a knowledge of Dutch as a foreign language
- 2% of the people of Luxembourg's do not know a foreign language.
- 13% of the people of Denmark, Sweden and the Netherlands do not know a foreign language
- 33% of the people of Finland and Belgium do not know a foreign language
- 40/50% of the people of other European countries do not know a foreign language
- 66% of the people of Great Britain do not know a foreign language.

According to Europeans the most useful languages would be:

1. English: 75%
2. French: 40%
3. German: 23%
3. Spanish: 18%
5. Italian: 3%
6. Dutch: 1%
7. Chinese: 1%

Here are some more interesting results from a survey of recent participants at Expolingua Berlin (2006), mostly students and largely from Germany I assume. Their interest in learning foreign languages was as follows;

- English 64%
- Spanish 52%
- French 32%
- Italian 14%

- German 13%
- Russian 13%
- Japanese 7%
- Portuguese 6%
- Arabic 5%
- Polish 5%
- Chinese 3%
- Turkish 2%
- Other 14%

I suspect that in different parts of the world the choice of languages to learn would change.

How long does it take?

People always ask me how quickly they can "learn" a second language, like English for example. I always answer that it depends on your level, and whether the language you are learning shares a lot of vocabulary with a language you already know (Italian-Spanish-even English; Korean-Japanese-Chinese etc.).

Most of all it depends on how much effort you put in. Along with motivation, intensity is one of the most important principles of language learning. If you spend at least 90 minutes per day, for six days out of seven every week, you will make a significant breakthrough in three months. If you study 3 hours a week you will achieve very little.

A breakthrough might mean getting to basic conversation ability starting from zero. It might mean going from basic conversation to the ability to express more complex thoughts and read comfortably. You will know when you have made a breakthrough and it feels good.

Of course your activity must be intense. Sitting in language class may not be intense, especially if there are 15 other students in the class. Personal study is intense. I am talking about reading, listening, learning words and phrases and using them in writing and speaking. You can do that with a minimum amount of tutoring.

Language learning is an ongoing process. You are always less than perfect but you should be constantly improving if you do it right. It is a long road of gradually getting more and more comfortable in the language. It should always be enjoyable but it does require deliberate effort.

Three phases of language learning

Looking at my experience in various languages including Chinese, Japanese, French, Spanish, German and now Russian, to name a few, I would say that learning is divided into three phases.

Phase 1.

You go from zero to the ability to understand simple words and phrases. You can distinguish sounds, words and phrases. You are amazed that you can make out some elements of the language.

This takes 3 months of daily listening and reading and word study. Minimum one hour a day.

Phase 2.

You listen to and read simple short articles and work towards a level where you can begin to read material intended for the native speaker. This takes another 3 months of listening, reading and word study. You start to write. You start to speak but only a little. Minimum one hour a day.

Phase 3.

You are now into authentic content. You are interested. You are motivated by your new ability to function in a new language. You still do not speak well but you can read and listen. You continue to read and listen a lot, broadening your range of content. You start some novels which you do not complete. Another three months of heavy listening and reading and word study.

Phase 4.

You continue your input activities but you are now ready to speak. You want to show off. Your first efforts at showing off end in defeat but you keep coming back for more. You notice where you have trouble. You are about to take off in the language.

How long does it take for an immigrant to learn English?

According to the folks at the American Center for Applied Linguistics, it takes six years of 100 hours a year of class time. (Paragraph below). In my view, anyone living in the US (or Canada), who plans to rely on spending the next six years in a classroom, twice a week, in order to improve his or her English, is probably not going to get too far.

“Extrapolating from the studies of children's language acquisition cited below, it appears that it can take several years. For example, studies suggest that school-aged children need 2 to 3 years to develop social language (conversational skills) and 5 to 7 years to acquire the academic language proficiency needed to reach parity with native English speakers (Cummins,

1991; Thomas & Collier, 1997). Moreover, school-aged children usually attend school 5 days a week for approximately 6 hours a day, which is considerably more hours of instruction than adults in adult education programs receive. Therefore, when considering factors that affect gains in English language proficiency and other educational outcomes, it is important to keep in mind the amount of time that may be required for adults to reach the goals that are set.

McHugh, Gelatt, & Fix (2007) examined the number of instructional hours needed for the approximately 5.8 million adult lawful permanent residents currently in the United States to reach a level of proficiency necessary for civic integration or to begin post-secondary education. They found that an estimated 103 hours of study per person per year for 6 years would be necessary (600 million hours of English language instruction per year for 6 years for over 5 million immigrants). This number of instructional hours is comparable to the number provided to immigrants in other countries, such as Australia and Germany). However, the costs of implementing such a plan would be significant."

First of all it is curious that they estimate the adults can learn so much faster than the school kids. (600 hours versus 7,000 hours). It is not surprising that they postulate that only by bringing these five million immigrants to classrooms will they ever learn.

What would happen if we assumed that the classroom was irrelevant to language learning? What would happen if we assumed that all the studies, research, teacher training, workshops, conferences etc. on language learning and ESL were more for the teachers, researchers, professors and conference goers, than for the language learners?

What would happen if we started to notice that what the learners do away from the classroom, what they read and listen to, or what movies they watch, who their friends and acquaintances are, where they work, how motivated they are, all of these things are more important than the number of classroom instructional hours, and what kind of classroom techniques are used?

CHAPTER IX: EDUCATORS

Language education has been the preserve of the experts. These are people who have studied linguistics, or grammar. They often have certificates of languages instruction. The public sector is heavily involved in language instruction but private schools and testing companies are also active. It seems, though, as if the prevailing methodology is the same and the results are often disappointing.

Public education

I have been reading Anna Karenina by Tolstoy in Russian and at one point Levin says this to his brother, who is pushing him to get involved in setting up medical and education services for his peasants.

"Perhaps it may all be very good; but why should I worry myself about establishing dispensaries which I shall never make use of, and schools to which I shall never send my children, to which even the peasants don't want to send their children, and to which I've no very firm faith that they ought to send them?" said he."

Tolstoy did not believe in modern medicine and had his own ideas on education. It may be that Levin is wrong, and that it is a good idea to have medical dispensaries for the public and compulsory education. Certainly politicians have pushed us further and further in that direction. We are living longer and are better educated than before. I have benefited from both public education and the public health system, but then I pay a lot for them.

Education and health are seen today as rights, or entitlements, with no limits, and with no corresponding responsibility on the part of citizens to stay healthy and educate themselves. The government quasi-monopoly on these activities has spawned powerful professional groups that can threaten society with strikes and job actions since we are so dependent on them. Despite their vested interest in the existing quasi-monopoly, these representatives of the establishment in education and health like to present themselves as the only experts, the only ones with the moral authority to talk about these issues.

Levin's comment made me think. I looked up some statistics on the Internet.

In the average OECD country, governments spend over 5% of GDP on education and over 7% on health (and this is projected to double in some countries). Since government expenditures are about one third of GDP in most of these countries, it means that these two items combined amount to around 40% of government expenditures!

Japan and Korea have much lower than average expenditures and higher than average results in health and education. Expenditure does not equal results. How much of health and education outcomes are really dependent on the actions of individual citizens? Should we not be expected to look after our own health and education more?

Library expenditures are around .1% of GDP whereas "higher education" expenditures in Canada in 2003 were listed as 6.14% of GDP. It costs around \$25,000 per year to keep someone in university in Canada. How effective is that? A motivated learner in social sciences (assuming such a thing exists) and humanities, including language and literature, could learn most of what he/she needs from libraries and the Internet. Should we not take responsibility for our own cultural development?

Schools

I attended, as an observer, a national conference on education where the directors of 40 school districts across Canada met with each other and with the suppliers of products and services to those school districts.

The subjects discussed were largely determined by the nature of the products and services that vendors wanted to talk about. Nevertheless it was possible for me to understand the major preoccupations of the most senior administrators of our national education system. I was impressed by the dedication, professionalism, and vision of these educational leaders.

I was struck, however, by the fact that foreign language training was not a part of the discussion. Directors of school boards were concerned about teachers getting older and retiring, about the cost of training and the need for better professional development models, the difficult choices in the introduction of new technology, (although they continued to spend over 90% of their budget on staff rather than other solutions). They talked eagerly about new "buzz-words" of "student engagement," "parental involvement," "student success," rather than just teaching to the curriculum.

In terms of the subjects taught, basic literacy and numeracy were the main preoccupations. In other words the focus was on getting more students to graduate through the system. They also were interested in teaching "character" which I kind of gathered meant some ideological browbeating of the unsuspecting students around the prevailing slogans like multiculturalism, environmentalism, respect for diversity etc. Since teachers are now overwhelmingly women, I wonder how effective this all is with the boys, who are a bigger and bigger problem in schools. I feel "character teaching" belongs with the family and not with some teacher with a political agenda and should be based on the examples of the behaviour of adults and a few simple principles of respect for other individuals and responsibility for oneself. Anyway I digress.

What really struck me was the lack of interest in language study. We live in a global village. We can travel anywhere. We can access books, movies, television and radio in any language. People who speak other languages are sharing our world and our lives with us. The benefits of being able to access these other cultures, the enrichment this brings to youngsters for their whole lives is so obvious to me, but it is not a concern of educators.

Classroom "make-busy" time

Modern technology may finally bring about a democratic revolution in education. I was reading a discussion on ESL the other day on another website. Some teachers were talking about all the "interesting" things they had their students do. One teacher was asking students to read about the recent South Asian earthquake on the web. Then she had them design a toilet using only the kind of materials that would be available after an earthquake. This was a form of solidarity with the survivors of the earthquake, I would imagine. I guess she was teaching her students to reach out to these unfortunate people. I presume the resulting toilet would be "organic".

However, what if her learners were not interested in the subject? What if they had no desire to get involved in a make-believe project to build a toilet? What if this was meaningless for them? Why not let them use English to learn about something that interests them? If the goal is to help them improve their English, then we need to make the language relevant to them, not to impose subjects and tasks at the will of the teacher.

Modern technology, the Internet, MP3 players, podcasting, etc. will enable learners to decide what they want to learn about. Rather than listening to a teacher drone on in class, they will be able to choose to listen to something that really interests them. The challenge for the teachers is to make a variety of relevant and valuable content available. Of course it cannot just be anything. It needs to meet certain educational goals. But let us give people choices. Stimulate them. Do not treat them like mindless objects that can be force-fed whatever nonsense the teacher happens to think up.

I have been a little harsh perhaps. However, if I were asked to design a toilet as a means to improve my Korean I would not be very motivated. Power to the learner!

French immersion

My grandchildren go to French immersion schools. I am happy to hear them speak in very nice French. I look at their homework, written in French. I really get a kick out of that.

On the other hand, for a group of English speaking children to go to school and learn in French is unnatural. They speak to each other in English. They speak to their parents in English. If they are really interested in reading about something, they read in English. I have read that there is no difference in French fluency between children who start French immersion at grade 1 (early immersion) and those who start in high school (late immersion). I have heard that these immersion school children do not necessarily become bilingual.

Why? Because in the end it is the motivation of the individual learner that is key. If this "unnatural" immersion experience motivates the child to learn, fine. If it does not then it is a bad thing. I would favour an approach that gave children an exposure to several languages in

the early years, through listening to stories and reading. In other words a LingQ like approach that worked on words and phrases and avoided grammar and did not bother testing the kids.

At a later stage the school children could start the more "serious" study of language. I feel they would do very well.

I am also not sure that selecting French as the obligatory language makes a lot of sense. I love French, but in North America, Spanish is more important. And there are a lot of other languages and cultures to learn. It is unlikely that young anglophones growing up in Vancouver will have much use for French at any time in their lives. The students should be exposed to a number of languages and be allowed to choose.

New Brunswick, bilingual province

New Brunswick is the only officially bilingual province in Canada. Quebec is officially French and the other provinces are officially English. The federal government and the country of Canada are officially bilingual. About 30% of the population of New Brunswick is French speaking. Recently New Brunswick announced a change in the French program for English speaking schools.

Beginning in September, English speaking parents will no longer be able to enroll their children in the early French immersion program; the core French program, which currently makes the language a mandatory subject in school, beginning in Grade 1, will also be eliminated. The 30 minutes of daily instruction currently offered to the students enrolled in the core French program will be replaced with art, music and gym classes.

Report commissioners James Croll and Patricia Lee released 18 recommendations for the province's French second-language programs on Feb. 27, after reviewing the outcomes of French instruction for students who began school in 1995 and graduated in 2006.

The report found approximately 91 per cent of the 1,500 or so students who started early immersion in 1995 had dropped out of the program by the time they reached high school.

The study also found that only 0.68 per cent of the high school students that graduated in 2006, after completing the 12-year core program, had reached the provincial objectives of intermediate oral proficiency. Something is rotten in the state of Denmark, I mean New Brunswick.

Teachers know best?

"Certainly, we try to influence government, but to be blunt, we're the experts," the teacher said. (At least he realized he was being blunt.) "We have people with PhDs and masters'

degrees and years and years of experience and we're in the classrooms. Why wouldn't you want to talk to the people on the front lines about what we need to do in education policy?"

The answer, of course, is that they should be heard, and with respect. But they should be treated as parties with personal and financial motives, not as the world's only "experts" in what is best for children.

In my experience, a PhD or teaching experience does not necessarily equate to fairness or common sense. University-trained PhDs and teachers have proportionately at least as many narrow-minded, selfish, or simply impractical people as the general population.

Learners need flexibility, innovation, and choice. If I have a child who has trouble reading, or has trouble in some other subject, I should be able to find clinics for these skills and send my child there and not just to the established school national school system. At least 25% of students have reading problems, which means that they probably are not learning as much as they should.

In the famous Lightbown Halter experiment in New Brunswick, French-speaking school children did as well or better at learning English, using storybooks and tapes, as another group did with conventional teaching.

What makes a good teacher?

What makes a good teacher? If I think of the teachers that I liked, and that inspired me, it was not necessarily their profound grasp of their subject that made them successful. In fact, it is almost irrelevant, within limits of course.

For many students, especially at university, the best teacher is one who does not get too deep into his subject. If he can keep it simple, clearly explain what will be on the final exam, and then make sure that most students are capable of getting good marks, that is a good teacher, and his courses will be popular. It really helps if the exam is all multiple choice, or true or false, so that the student does not have to bother expressing him or herself in writing. If the goal is to get a degree, this kind of teacher is good. But this is not real learning.

Universities like professors who do a lot of research on subjects that only interest a small group of their peers. They want their professors to publish papers and attend conferences. So there could be a division of labour, between the researchers who publish papers on subjects of very narrow interest on the one hand, and teachers who ensure that students pass on the other hand.

To me, a good teacher is neither of these. The best teachers I had were the ones who inspired me and challenged me. They need not have had all the answers. They need not have published learned papers. They just had to be enthusiastic, ask interesting questions, act as if they cared about their subject and their students. They needed to be able to put themselves in the position of their students and not talk down to them. They needed to speak clearly and not mumble.

What to learn

I occasionally follow a forum for teachers of English. Recently at that Forum, there has been considerable discussion about whether or not to teach cultural elements in English, and which ones. There have also been discussions on which vocabulary should be taught when, and the importance of word frequency in vocabulary learning. In the past I have seen discussions about which elements of grammar to teach when.

I feel that these teachers are missing the point. The issue is not what to teach. The issue is how to learn. The teacher should not decide for the learner what he or she should learn; what subjects to read or listen to; which aspects of the culture to learn; which words and phrases to learn; etc. The learner should decide this.

The teacher should encourage the learner to be independent, and to discover the language on his or her own. The teacher should make it easier for the learner to do this. The teacher should encourage the learner and provide feedback, always with the goal of making the learner an effective, motivated independent learner. In other words the teacher should focus on teaching the learner how to learn languages.

In that way the learner chooses what to learn. The teacher helps the learner by explaining, providing feedback, asking the learner to use these words and phrases and providing more feedback. The teacher focuses on the HOW to learn, not the WHAT to learn.

Universities

I see that President Obama is committing more money to education. He especially wants more students to attend college.

I am not convinced that universities and colleges are best places to educate our societies in the arts and humanities. These institutions are often bastions of privilege. Professors can pursue obscure studies on subjects of little interest except to their peers, in other words, other people who are pursuing research on subjects of little interest. Students can get "credits" on courses that contain very little of what an average person would call knowledge.

I think it is time to look at other models that take advantage of 21st century technology and social interaction via the Internet. I think that what we are on to at LingQ, although we are just at the beginning, will help to create a really universal "university" where anyone who is really interested can learn, and can learn from the most motivating and talented teachers. Learners, teachers, and content will converge and be discovered on the Internet. Those learners who are not motivated need no longer be subsidized, and those teachers who just want to study some obscure subject for the sake of being reviewed by their peers, and who are not interested in their students, will have to support their habit by themselves.

Universities want to raise fees because of the economic crisis. Their endowment funds and other sources of income are down. They will either have to get more funding from the

government or charge more in fees, or increase the size of classes. In most countries the fees for public universities are a fraction of the true cost of going to university. I wonder, if students had to pay the full cost, let us say, over \$25,000 per year, how many students would still attend universities, especially if they could achieve the same educational results for less money.

I know there are issues of credentials, but I think these issues can be dealt with separately and more cheaply.

Many of the courses offered at university, especially in the arts and humanities, are of little practical use. Much of the knowledge contained in these courses can be acquired by reading books. iTunes University is offering more and more courses online. A recent report points out that students get more out of spending time on their iPods than in lecture halls. If it is language learning, there is LingQ and other online resources.

The average length of a university year is eight months, so that means that the university costs about \$3,000 per month. The average student takes five courses, so the true cost is about \$600 per month per course. Most students are undecided as to what courses they want to study, and even if they are decided, they often cannot get into the courses they want. They often end up having to take unpopular courses, given by a professor who does not want to teach, just to get their credits. Yet someone is paying \$600 for each student to take each one of these courses.

Now let's assume that one of these courses is a foreign language. Typically a student taking, say, Italian, would have 3-5 hours of class a week, plus access to a language lab. Now if I had the choice between spending \$600 a month to attend a university language class or getting an iPod and learning the language via the Internet at places like LingQ, I know what I would do, especially if I had to pay the money myself, or could pocket the money, as long as I achieve certain learning targets.

But it is not just languages. Most students study "liberal arts" or "humanities" at university. The last statistic I saw showed that only 20% of university students studied engineering or science.

A humanities learning providence fund

How about a new approach to arts learning? We know that the majority of university students in North America study arts and humanities. The US spends \$25,000 a year per post-secondary student, compared to \$10,000 per year per K-12 student.

At the combined elementary and secondary level in 2005, the United States spent \$9,769 per student, which was 38% higher than the OECD average of \$7,065. At the postsecondary level, U.S. expenditures per student were \$24,370, more than twice as high as the OECD average of \$11,821.

I assume that in Canada the costs are less, probably around \$20,000. Assuming an average of five years at a post-secondary institution, this would amount to \$100,000 per student.

Now what if, say in Canada, on graduating from high school, every person got a humanities educational provident fund of \$50,000, which they could use to purchase educational services, books, online courses, coaching, courses at different centres of learning or whatever, over their lifetime.

And what if this money could also be used for in-depth testing for the purpose of obtaining degrees, certificates, diplomas and the like. This money would earn interest and could be used at any time in the life of the citizen, but only for well-defined educational expenditures.

Dialoguing as a theory

A friend recently asked me to participate in a one day seminar on citizenship put on by a local university, Simon Fraser, as part of their "Semester on Dialogue" program, described as follows on their website. I have highlighted certain phrases.

"The Undergraduate Semester in Dialogue addresses what we believe is the principal challenge for contemporary education: to inspire students with a sense of civic responsibility, encourage their passion to improve Canadian society, and develop innovative intellectual tools for effective problem solving. Each semester we develop an original and intensive learning experience that uses dialogue to focus student education on public issues."

The site goes on to say:

"Dialogue is a particularly effective educational paradigm, involving collaborative listening and learning to discover meaning among diverse participants, and is best conducted in the context of citizenship and civic engagement. Dialogue offers helpful ways to relate to one another, and leads to better-quality outcomes than the adversarial, position-based discussions that typically characterize debate about complex issues. Dialogue-based processes build deep relationships through free expression of views and respectful exploration of differences, with positive action emerging through mutual understanding around sources of agreement and disagreement."

I am not entirely sure what all of that means. I was not aware that the principal challenge of contemporary education is to inspire a passion to improve Canadian society. I am certainly aware of other major challenges including poor literacy. But assuming that this—improving Canadian society—is a major challenge, surely there will be various positions, and even conflicting positions, on how to do this. People's interests and ideologies differ. Surely, in reality, there will be a need to go beyond a "respectful exploration of differences", as these different positions come into contact with each other. At some point people will have to debate and try to defend their positions, and decide which positions are more useful. And not everyone will agree. Not all positions are equally useful nor equally worthy of respect. I doubt if a love-in of "collaborative listening" can achieve very much.

At any rate, at this one day seminar the students presented us with largely a monolithic "position" on multiculturalism, and when I and others questioned this orthodoxy we were either ignored, or attacked. There was not much listening by the students, collaborative or otherwise.

During our one day conference we were divided into groups around small tables. We were encouraged to doodle, draw and write down "whatever came into our heads" onto large paper sheets on our tables, just like in kindergarten. These were then gathered together and combined to represent our collective ideas. Doodling is collaborative, I guess. Our student moderators were trying to get us into the mood for collaborative doodling by leading serious discussion on citizenship with questions like, (I am not joking), "What is your favourite Canadian movie?" "What is your favourite pastime?" "Should five year olds have the right to vote?"

I prefer free discussion without manipulation. I agree where I agree, and disagree where I disagree. I do not collaboratively listen. I listen to understand. A conversation is by definition a dialogue. The goal is not to effect improvement, but to exchange views and ideas and bring facts forward. It is an opportunity to try to defend one's own opinions, to discover holes in one's own position, and to explore the positions of others. This is best done with no special rules or assumptions about collaborating to improve things. In any case, differences of ideology or interest soon expose all this collaborative theology as bogus.

Testing

How effective are the existing language tests for English? How do we know what our skill level is in another language? How can other people best judge our skill level? Is our own subjective evaluation enough? Is it possible to standardize the evaluation of language skills? What are the advantages and disadvantages of doing so?

I do not know much about tests for other languages since I have not taken any language tests since I did my British Foreign Service Exam for Mandarin Chinese in 1969. Not taking tests has not prevented me from becoming fluent in a number of languages since then. Not having passed any tests in Japanese, Spanish, Swedish or German does not prevent me from conducting business in these languages. These are all languages that I studied very hard on my own after the age of 25. I did it using my principles but without the tremendous advantages of modern technology, like the resources of the Internet, MP3 players, and online dictionaries etc... I know what my level is in these languages even without taking a test. I know what I need to do to improve further.

I am studying Korean now, and what is holding me back is not the lack of tests, but rather the lack of interesting content. I am tired of reading and listening to textbook content in Korea and this really affects my motivation.

For English there is no shortage of standardized tests. TOEFL and TOEIC are perhaps the best known. Many people achieve high scores in these tests and cannot communicate properly in English. Millions of people, especially in Asia, put more effort into learning the tricks of how to pass these tests than into learning English itself. In the long run they are the losers. Their English often does not reach the level required for professional communication. Here in Vancouver our schools have many international students who cannot write a proper essay or report without the help of an editor or tutor. Once they graduate from our indulgent universities and colleges they face a rude awakening in the workplace.

Yet schools and employers want some measurable standards of the English competence of students and employees.

TOEIC

How to approach TOEIC, TOEFL and IELTS

What do these test results really mean? How much time and money needs to be spent to get good results? Who should take these tests and how often? How should people prepare for these tests?

In my view these tests mostly measure the ability to read and listen, both in terms of speed and comprehension. I consider these skills to be the foundation of vocabulary building and language improvement itself. Therefore, these tests are valid measures of language ability. TOEIC in particular has the advantage of being simple, fast, inexpensive and widely recognized. So I suggest working on reading and listening skills, and vocabulary accumulation, as the best way to prepare for these tests.

TOEIC and Japan

Japan accounts for about half of all the people in the world who take TOEIC. I doubt if many in Sweden or Holland, or wherever English is spoken well, worry too much about TOEIC. I understand the need for a relatively objective measure of English skills, from the point of view of an employer who needs employees with English skills. If the Human Resources managers cannot judge English standards themselves, they need a test. TOEIC is less expensive and quicker than TOEFL and IELTS. It serves the purpose. Unfortunately, in Japan, it all too often becomes the sole aim or goal of English learning. The Swedes learn for fun, the Japanese learn for TOEIC. The Swedes do better.

Far too many Japanese people take TOEIC. That is one reason why their average scores are so low. I would not take TOEIC unless I was sure of getting at least 750. In other words, I would make sure that I had a vocabulary of at least 8,000 words, (not word families, just words), before even taking the exam. It makes no sense to take the TOEIC and score 450. I think the average Japanese score is around that level.

So learners need to do a lot of enjoyable listening and reading to build up to their vocabulary level, and the listening and reading ability needed for a decent TOEIC score.

How many words do you need?

According to vocabulary expert Batia Laufer, there exists a threshold level of vocabulary required in order to interpret meaning when reading in English. Tests showed that the greatest variation in reading competence occurred between people who knew 2,000 word families and those who knew 3,000 word families. Below that level and above that level, reading skills did not change so dramatically.

According to vocabulary expert Paul Nation, we can use a factor of 1.6 to convert from word families to total known words. So using LingQ's way of counting words, 4,800 "known words" is the threshold level to be able to read normal English content, guessing at some words but generally understanding much of what is written. It was found in tests, that learners with a vocabulary level of 3,000 word families achieved an average of 56% accuracy in comprehension tests. For every 10% increase in comprehension, the vocabulary needed to increase by 1,000 word families. To achieve a comprehension score of 70%, therefore, requires a total number of word families of 5,000, or 8,000 "known words" based on the way LingQ counts.

For someone wishing to work as a professional in English, there is little value in having a low TOEIC score. I think that 750 is a minimum for someone working in English in a business situation. Therefore I would recommend that the optimum time to take TOEIC is when the total "known words" score at LingQ reaches 7- 8,000 words. This should enable a test taker to achieve a score of 750 on TOEIC. Every time the known words total increases by 2,000 or 2,500 words, there should be an increase in TOEIC scores of 100 points. Once a learner has amassed over 12,500 "known words", as some of our learners have, a TOEIC score over 900 should be quite easily achieved.

Learners can therefore focus their efforts on learning English and on increasing their vocabulary through intensive and extensive listening and reading. They can forget about the TOEIC exam until they have the level of vocabulary that is going to give them the score that they need.

CHAPTER X: IMMIGRANT LANGUAGE LEARNING

Immigrant ESL

In all English speaking countries there is very large demand for adult ESL, in other words teaching adult immigrants who want to learn English. It always amazes me that the effort of helping immigrants learn English is concentrated on the classroom, as the preferred or often the only place where language learning can take place. I do not know what happens in other immigrant-receiving countries.

Governments and other organizations spend a fortune, (many hundreds of millions of dollars in Canada alone) paying for adult ESL for immigrants. This goes overwhelmingly to classrooms where typically 15 or more other adult ESL learners, and one native speaker, perform a variety of artificial tasks or hear theoretical explanations about English. Adult ESL is a huge industry where the teachers and immigrant service organizations are perceived by government as the principle "stake-holders," i.e. not the immigrants themselves.

Immigrants to English speaking countries live surrounded by English. English is on the TV, radio, newspapers, at libraries and bookstores, on buses, at community centres, on the Internet, on blogs, on podcasts, in popular music and at work. Why would we consider that the best place to learn English is in a classroom with mostly other non-native speakers? Why does the society not focus on how to utilize these vast language resources that surround the immigrants in a more efficient and flexible way? Why force the immigrants, after a hard day's work to come to a class?

Every effort to convince government offices here to look at what we are doing at The Linguist has been a failure. We have offered free trials with volunteer tutors. The answer is always no.

I understand the need for classrooms for children in the kindergarten to Grade 12 school system. It is partly a place to look after children while their parents work, and partly a place to teach some basic societal values. And the kids do learn something even if the learning process is very inefficient. They learn because when they are young they are pliable and even as teenagers many of them can be coerced into learning out of a concern for their future. Some, a minority, are genuinely interested in learning. (This also depends, not on the knowledge, nor teaching experience, but on the natural inspirational skills of the teachers.)

I even understand the role of the university, another inefficient place of learning. It is where the grade stamp is put on the output from the school system, making it easier for employers to find the people they want to come and work for them.

But adult ESL learners? They should be motivated to learn. With a little help they can be shown how to learn English very effectively on their own. If they are not motivated to learn English on their own, it is unlikely they will achieve much in the classroom.

There is no doubt in my mind that much more could be achieved with much less money invested. This is not a prospect that sits well with the immigration settlement industry. For some reason it also does not appeal to governments.

I was frustrated.

In the words of one immigrant to Canada, Humberto from Venezuela;

"Hi, Steve: I spent over 14 months studying English (ESL program) in a well recognized Canadian school for adult learners. As I was a new immigrant to Canada, the government paid more than ten thousand dollars for my whole English training. It was a waste of money for Canadian government and a waste of time for me. Even though I studied hard, it was impossible for me to achieve my main goal: speak English fluently. If this ESL program was supposed to help me become involved in Canadian society, it did not work out. When I finished the ESL program, the language barrier which had naturally erected itself was still there as I was still not able to communicate efficiently in English. Truth be told, I was not able to speak English at all. It was the most frustrating experience I have ever had. As you tell in your post, Canadian immigration office never asked me how successful my ESL training had been. It seemed to me that they did not care of anything but getting me in a school room attending an ESL school timetable. They did not care about the results of my ESL program. It was a complete waste of resources"

How useful are existing adult ESL programs?

I have read a survey of outcomes of immigrant ESL learners at government funded schools in BC which was done by an outside consultant hired by the ministry to justify the expenditure of government money. The results were something to the effect that over 50% felt they had improved after six months full time study.

My questions are:

1. Why is 50% a good result? All of our surveys at The Linguist show over 90% improvement and satisfaction.
2. Why waste money on consultants? Why not ask the immigrants during their studies and immediately upon completion of their studies. This was not done in Humberto's case. Just another example of the wastefulness of government-funded ESL.

Money for language learning should go directly to the immigrants. At a system like The Linguist we know right away when the learner has stopped studying. When that happens any third-party subsidy should be suspended.

The US Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL)

Here is an exchange of letters between the US Center for Applied Linguistics and yours truly. I had asked them to look at LingQ as a possible free resource. I just wanted some feedback, some "professional opinion" on what we are doing. First their evaluation and then my response.

Dear Mr. Kaufman:

At the suggestion of our Web site staff, I took a look at your site and its resources to see if and how well it might fit the needs of our audience.

CAELA's aim is to build the capacity of states to educate literacy-level ESL adults. As with all the work done here, our approach rests solidly on research findings and proven methods. Our materials and resources draw on coherent, well-researched methods that deal with adult-level learners and adult-level learning; that have comprehensive methodologies informing the entire approach; that use the many years of well-grounded, real-world experience in teaching and teacher training that our staff bring to their work.

My final point deals with the area between our not-for-profit work and that of the commercial sector. You would not know it, but we field many requests from publishers, consultants, merchandising efforts, advertising concerns, and so forth for the—putting it simply—"CAL stamp of approval." It has never been CAL's policy in all its nearly 50 years of existence to cross the line into approval of others' work. ...

All of which brings me to a quick summary of the point of the message. Much though you may value your efforts and your resources, we find there is a lack of any overarching, guiding language-learning psychology or methodology. You may have done a fabulous job of borrowing a pedagogical tool here, combining a good teaching idea from there with some nice computer graphics, but not tying them together. You may think you have adapted these tools to electronic media: flash cards, vocabulary building, comparing bilingual texts side by side, simple compositions. We think these are neither rigorously planned, integrated nor particularly useful to the population we serve that deals with ESL literacy issues. That is our opinion. Feel free to disagree with it.

Center for Applied Linguistics

Dear Dr.

I never asked for CAL's stamp of approval for LingQ. I asked CAL to look at LingQ and offer some feedback about it as a possible resource for literacy-level language learners. After three months of inaction I get your long-winded letter. You no doubt spent more time on your letter than you did reviewing LingQ, which you describe as "flash cards, vocabulary building, comparing bilingual texts side by side, simple compositions."

What I was hoping for was a practical opinion of whether LingQ could be a useful tool for your learner group. I guess the answer from you is a resounding "no," but I suspect this comes more from a professional fit of pique, rather than from an honest look at the system.

You seem to take great pride in being publicly funded and "not for profit." All that means is that you have successfully lobbied government to divert tax-payers' money (i.e. money generated in the private sector) to pay your salaries. We, at LingQ, do not have that luxury. We need to rely on creating value for our users in order to pay the salaries of our employees. I might add, the bulk of our learners use the site for free, i.e. we pay for them, not some unwitting tax-payer.

Steve Kaufmann

Immigrant language learning in the USA

More hours of classroom language instruction, and more intense instruction, should lead to better results, otherwise why bother? The real question is how much improvement is required to justify the time and money expended by learners, teachers and tax-payers.

In a recent survey by the US Center for Applied Linguistics called "The Effects of Instructional Hours and Intensity on NRS Level Gain in Listening and Speaking," we have some indication of the return on time and money invested in classroom language instruction.

1.2 million adults are enrolled in federally funded adult ESL classes in the United States. Only 36% of these students attained a measurable educational level gain after a course of instruction. In a survey of 6,599 adults, 60% showed improvement. Obviously being in a survey has a big impact on improvement results! (There are apparently close to 20 million adults in the US who need to improve their English literacy, just among the immigrant population.)

Almost half (49%) of the ESL learners in the survey were at level 0 and 1 on the scale, i.e. "no ability whatsoever" or "functions minimally if at all in English." Almost 20% were Low and High Beginner level learners (2 and 3 on the scale). Level 3 is described as "understands simple

learned phrases, spoken slowly with frequent repetitions". At the other end of the scale 7% of the adults surveyed were Advanced or level 6 on the scale, described as "can satisfy most survival needs and limited social demands." So, even the advanced learners were still at a basic level.

It appears the biggest factor affecting grade improvement was not hours of instruction but the level of the learner. Beginner learners (level 2 and 3 on the scale) improved the most and were the least affected by the amount of instruction. Of those Low and High Beginners who had the least amount of instruction (between 2 and 60 hours), almost 75% still managed to improve. For those who had between 140 and 512 hours of instruction, or at least three times as much instruction, the percentage who improved only went from 75% to 84%. The report also says that 78%, or almost four out of five of these Low and High Beginner learners improved regardless of the number of hours of instruction.

The largest group, those with essentially no English skills (49%), as well as the most advanced group (7%), showed the lowest level of improvement, but seemed to benefit the greatest from instruction. The report does not explain this or the fact that the rate of improvement sometimes declines with increased instruction.

Intensity of instruction does not have a great affect on results. The largest group (57%) studied an average of 4.5 hours per week and 61% of these learners showed measurable improvement on the scale. However 31% of the survey group had less than 2.8 hours per week of instruction and yet 56% still managed to improve. The intense group, roughly 12% of the learners, studied more than 9.3 hours per week. Despite more than double the hours of instruction, compared to the middle group, the percentage of learners with measurable improvement only increased from 61% to 66%. Again it was the Low and High Beginners who improved the most, with the least impact from instructional intensity.

To me the conclusion is that class instruction obviously does help, but not as much as CAL and teachers like to believe. Instead, I suspect that what really matters is what the learner does outside the classroom. As the report says, an adult ESL learner has limited time to spend, "typically 4 and 8 hours per week". Surely to help these learners it is better to focus on finding ways to enable these learners to create more time for learning. In other words we should find ways to make it easier and more effective for them to learn outside the classroom, and to encourage them to do so, instead of trying to justify bringing them to class. Classroom time does not seem to have a decisive impact on their improvement.

CHAPTER XI: LITERACY INSTRUCTION

There are many people, even in affluent societies, who do not read well. This is a serious handicap, professionally and personally. A great deal of money and effort is expended on trying to raise literacy levels in all countries. This is a concern both in our schools, and in the field of adult education.

Literacy education, like much of language teaching, is dominated by people who are often more interested in the social implications of literacy, than in helping people read better. I do not believe this is helpful to solving what is a major problem.

To read better, just read more

Literacy means, to me, the ability to read and write. It is really quite simple. What a person does with the ability to read is up to them. The most literate people are those who use the language well. Somewhere between 10 and 40% of the population in developed countries, (depending on definition) struggle to read and write well. People who have limited literacy skills are now called functionally illiterate.

Literacy skills are very closely related to professional success in a society. Some people cannot decode letters either because they did not learn to do so at school or because they have a learning disability. This is the minority. Most poor readers simply do not read enough.

We know from cognitive science research that the brain learns best from experience and example. For most people with poor literacy skills, simply reading more is the best way to improve reading skills. Mostly this requires the motivation of the person involved.

We know from experience that it is easier to read content that is of interest and where the context is familiar. We also know that we can read words that are totally misspelled and jumbled if we have heard these words before, know them, and are familiar with the context. Research has shown that there is a close connection between listening and reading. From an evolutionary perspective, our brains have been listening a lot longer than they have been reading.

So, it seems to me, for the vast majority of people with literacy problems, making available a large library of reading material for the learner to choose from, and making audio files of that material available, will be an inexpensive way to improve literacy skills. Some efficient way to look up new words, and to keep track of them, would also help. Dare I mention LingQ?

Literacy as ideology

Teachers and professors involved in literacy teaching sometimes find the task of helping students to learn important language skills is less worthy of their talents than challenging certain mainstream social values. Here is what some teachers had to say on a forum on literacy. The following are extracts from discussions on an Internet forum of language and literacy teachers. While the heavy use of jargon makes it hard to understand what they are saying. It seems that they are more concerned about social injustice than how to improve people's level of literacy. I think this is unfortunate.

"I believe that social change will continue to be hindered until society as a whole begins to recognize, value, and celebrate marginalized literacies & practices. I see part of my job as an instructor to make cracks in that which we "know" to be "Literacy". To keep an open mind and to encourage students to see the significance of their primary discourses. Just my 2 cents."

"Here's how I see it. Any notion of "L" (capital L) Literacy is a social construct, invariably tied to structures of power and inherently political. I choose to believe that there are many literacies tied to social/cultural transactional practices. Yet only certain ones are deemed valuable enough to be taught/reproduced in formal educational sites--typically those that mirror the language-use norms of historically elite populations."

"A critical issue has to do with reading the political cultures, including the politicization, of students that give shape to the formation of adult literacy programs and agencies, and the ranges of potentiality in working through the dynamics of critical adaptation (accepting the broad paradigms as broadly normative, but with the potentiality of substantial change within them (e.g. Obama) and radical change as implicit in the rhetoric (I'm using this term descriptively in the classical Greek sense rather than pejoratively) of your post which reflects the language of radical pedagogy.

"While I do not advocate illiteracy I advocate for a type [of] literacy that helps people to question, to think critically, historically, contextually and a literacy that promotes care and respect for other human beings as brothers and sisters. Any attempt to teach literacy as a neutral instrument is essentially advocating the status quo. If you agree with it, then you are promoting that ideology. In preliterate societies where people are living without the introduction of industrialism, religion or other Eurocentric values, we should leave them be."

Literacy as an exercise in academic hair-splitting

Here are some more comments from the literacy practitioners, this time on the definition of literacy. To me it is quite simple. Literacy is the ability to read and write. Here is what a group of teachers had to say. Again, I am troubled by the focus of these literacy practitioners.

"In my paper on postpositivism, I linked Popper's concept of "verisimilitude," approximation to the truth (and he uses the lower case t word) to recent work on balanced reading theory. Clearly in that paper I did not provide an evidence-based research report in that the paper is

intentionally theoretical in design. However, toward the end of the paper I laid out a 19-point hypothesis, which could serve as a basis for a more grounded book-length research study, linked in turn to an examination of the underlying precepts of the recent research on balanced or integrated reading theory. The 19 thesis statements are grounded in the following four categories:

- Literacy facilitates knowledge acquisition in the grappling with and mastery of print-based texts.
- Literacy is enhanced to the extent to which individuals gain the capacity to read and write print-based texts.
- Growth in literacy is experienced to the extent to which readers progressively comprehend and draw meaning from texts and appropriate them into their lives.
- Literacy has a technological component in the mastery of reading, writing and the comprehension of texts and a metaphorical dimension that resides in transactions between the reader and the text in which meaning making and significance lies beyond the text into that of appropriation, however variously that may be defined.

Whether learning to read or learning to learn is or should be the central focus of adult literacy education is a matter of some dispute, which has not been resolved within the literature of the field. There is substantial middle ground within these perspectives via the medium of balanced reading theory and a context-derived educational program that focuses on employment, family education, civic literacy, and lifelong learning (Stein, 2000). Nonetheless, tensions between the operative assumptions of the New Literacy Studies and advocates of phonemic-driven approaches to reading are particularly sharp in their articulation of competing definitions of literacy. In moving toward a dialectical resolution that incorporates balanced reading theory within a context-based adult literacy framework, my working hypothesis, much clarification is required."

"Higher-order thinking"

Many English language teachers and literacy teachers feel that to help their learners learn to read, they need to teach them how to think and to give them strategies for reading. The assumption is that the language teacher is qualified to teach these elusive skills. I have never found this to be the case. Most people seem to be able to think on their own.

I googled "pre-reading tasks" and found 325, 000 pages!!! I read through a few of them. To me it seemed that pre-reading tasks were all about creating classroom activities that change reading from something inherently interesting and stimulating, into another make-work classroom task. The process of reading is divided into stages and tasks are introduced to complicate what are really a natural task, learning, observing and thinking. Reality is simpler. The more we read the broader our knowledge base and the better our ability to read.

Rather than teaching artificial reading strategies, I think that it is more important to find ways to stimulate the readers' curiosity and create pleasure in reading. It is more useful to let the students choose content of interest to read. If they have trouble reading, let them have sound to listen to. Read to them in class, or even better have them listen on their iPods. Spend the classroom in discussion, as a group or in focus groups. Encourage students to express their views and to critique the views of others. Reading is just one part of communicating through language.

When I googled "higher-order thinking skills" I got over one million pages. I cannot say that I remember my teachers at school being necessarily all that logical all the time. I am not sure that an English teacher is equipped to teach an ESL student about "higher-order thinking", whatever that is supposed to mean. I believe that if we can encourage people to read, and encourage them to listen, in order to help them read; and if we use the classroom as a place where people discuss ideas, and accept different points of view, and are forced to find justification for their own points of view, then we will naturally stimulate higher-order thinking.

In my experience, teachers are often quite unwilling to accept students challenging their points of view. This is particularly the case for "politically correct" ideological positions foisted on students in our schools and colleges.

Language is not math

Thinking, evaluating, analyzing, these are things we all do. The more experience we have, and the more we read, and the more we are obliged to state points of view and defend them, the better we get at critical thinking. Language is not science or math. It does not require complicated explanations or laboratory experiments. Language is best acquired naturally, through exposure and use. Language is natural, like breathing. As long as people are allowed choice, given freedom, and encouraged, most people manage quite well. Teaching "pre-reading skills" and "higher-order thinking" seems to me a little like teaching people how to walk and how to breathe.

Language learning is simple. You need to create connections in your mind. It starts with words in interesting content. These words connect to sounds, to meanings, to other words in phrases, to episodes you have enjoyed, to feelings and you have to learn these connections and make them part of you.

Critical thinking

I feel that it is the right and privilege of readers to misinterpret, partly understand or interpret in their own way, what they read. I see any effort of the teacher to impose a certain "correct" internalization of the text, analysis or other elements of "critical thinking" as a possible disturbance of the pleasures of discovery through reading. The definition of what is a superficial or deeper meaning is subjective.

Teaching critical thinking seems to be a fad amongst teachers of English as a foreign language. I am not aware of a similar interest among teachers of other languages. Do people who teach Spanish, Chinese, Russian or French as a foreign language also teach "critical thinking"?

Reading strategies

Mitch follows my blog and sent me an email about a new book by Nancie Atwell called *The Reading Zone*. I have not read the book but from the reviews on Amazon it seems to say that teachers should not try to teach "reading strategies" to young readers. If young people are allowed to choose books of interest, and just allowed to read, they will, in many cases, do just that. Once the teacher jumps in with advice on how to plan reading, connect ideas, or whatever other "strategies" are in fashion, the chances are that the young reader will either ignore that advice or simply tune out of reading. The reading will cease to belong to the reader. It will belong to the teacher. As a result it will be spoiled.

I have seen language learning books, which are full of pre-listening or post-listening, or pre-reading and post-reading "task lists". To me these lists are, at best, a waste of time. In the worst case they destroy the pleasure of listening and reading in the new language.

When my son Eric was in grade 8 or 9, he wrote a 25-page essay comparing Japan to the USSR. It was well written. Eric had done a great deal of research. It was illustrated with maps. Eric got 4 out of 25. I was so angry that I went to see the teacher. The teacher told me that Eric had not answered the specific question that the teacher had asked. I think (or I hope) that I told the teacher that he was an idiot.

The main role of a teacher is to encourage the learner to pursue learning. If the teacher thinks that the main job is to teach a lesson, according to latest fad in education, that teacher missing the point. If the teacher can instill a hunger for learning, for exploring, for reading, for expressing, then the job is well done.

It is like coaches of sports teams that think that they will make everyone do it the coach's way, and that then they will win. It is only when the coach can get everyone to work together and have a positive attitude that the team will do well, for the team and for the individuals.

Reading is more important than studying

Reading is more important than studying, more important than everything, make sure that your children get books into their hands - *Ziraldo, famous Brazilian educator*.

To some teachers, literacy is not just reading. It is much more complex. It relates to culture, to advocacy, to funding, to classroom teaching strategies, reading strategies and whatever else they can find to complicate the issue. To me literacy is just reading. The more you read, the

better you will get at reading. If you get used to reading you will enjoy it and do more. If you can choose material of interest, and at your level, you will enjoy reading, develop the reading habit and progress, naturally. If you have trouble reading, you need to listen first, so that you can hear the language when you read. The less complicated the reading is, the better. No comprehension questions, no reading strategies, no teacher standing over the learner. Just the learner and the book he or she chose.

Yes there are some people with handicaps, or reading difficulties. I suspect that among all the people who do not read, or are discouraged from reading, the people with these reading handicaps is a small number. I suspect that, as the celebrated educator and author Nancie Atwell points out in *The Reading Zone*, the complications introduced by the well-intentioned reading teachers is a big part of the problem.

I suspect that Ziraldo, Nancie Atwell, and I are of the same view. Reading is about reading, and if possible, listening. Reading is the key to academic learning. Reading is the key to literacy. Literacy can be as simple as finding the right book and reading it.

Where the learner is not motivated to do that, there is not much to be done. So let's not confuse the learner. Let's simplify the task and stay away from 15 different definitions of literacy.

Promoting literacy

Two popular activities that are used to promote literacy are national scale spelling bees, and the "one book" reading campaign. As usual I have a somewhat contrary point of view.

The best way to improve literacy is to read, a lot. So I do not understand the relationship between reading and the spelling bee. I would imagine that mostly good spellers go into spelling bees, not the children who do not read. In any case, it is better to read than to study isolated lists of obscure words. I am not sure that the spelling bee actually encourages those who do not have the reading habit, to go and pick up a book and start reading.

As for the "one book" campaign, this too seems aimed at people who already read. Undoubtedly some panel of "experts" decides which book everyone should read. But I fail to see why that is a way to promote reading. It can be fun for people in a book club to read the same book and discuss it, but if we want to encourage more people to read we should really encourage them to read whatever they are interested in.

I am curious to hear opinions on how to get more people to read, for their own sake and for the sake of society, since poor performance in our society seems to be linked to poor reading skills or reading habits.

The fourth grade slump

"Good readers often have benefited from exposure to a wide variety of spoken language at an early age, and poor readers are often those who did not receive that benefit at home."

Dr. E. D. Hirsch, Jr., founder of the Core Knowledge Foundation and professor emeritus of education and humanities at the University of Virginia, has written extensively on cultural literacy.

As he points out, different family educational backgrounds can have a decisive impact on reading skills at school. This difference is not evident in the first few years, but becomes evident during what is called the "fourth-grade slump."

"In fourth grade, poor children's reading comprehension starts a drastic decline—and rarely recovers. The cause: They hear millions fewer words at home than do their advantaged peers - and since words represent knowledge, they don't gain the knowledge that underpins reading comprehension. The Cure: Immerse these children, and the many others whose comprehension is low, in words and the knowledge the words represent- as early as possible."

Hirsch points out in a paper from *American Educator* in spring 2003 entitled "Reading Comprehension Requires Knowledge-of Words and the World" that fluency in a language is key to reading and education. Fluency is greatly enhanced by word and domain knowledge (knowledge of the subject). For Hirsch, the three most important principles of literacy.

1. Fluency allows the mind to concentrate on comprehension:
2. Breadth of vocabulary increases comprehension and facilitates further learning; and
3. Domain knowledge increases fluency, broadens vocabulary and enables deeper comprehension.

What this means is that the more fluent you are, the better you comprehend what you hear and read. If you understand better, you can acquire more new words as you come across them in your reading. The more words you already know, the more you can learn from your listening and reading. The more words you know, the more different subjects you can enjoyably read about, and this in turn enables you to understand even more of what you read, learn more words and become more literate. It is a tremendously powerful virtuous cycle. Those who read poorly fall further and further behind those who read well. The difference in vocabulary level starts to become evident at grade four and the difference gets greater and greater through life, with major consequences in terms of educational and professional success.

What is interesting in Hirsch's article is his emphasis on building oral comprehension and background knowledge rather than trying to teach specific reading skills, as the most effective way to improve language skills.

The importance of listening

Research is increasingly showing that literacy is very much influenced by sound. This is not surprising since language is first and foremost sound. We have been listening for much longer than we have been reading.

If you can listen and understand a language you will find it easier to read it and learn to speak it. I could never get motivated to learn Latin at school because I could not listen to ordinary people using it. Modern research on how we learn is showing that listening comprehension is at the core of language learning and language improvement. The ability to hear words, to listen and understand, is essential not only to developing speaking fluency, but also in order to become a good reader.

The ability to read well, in your own language or in a foreign language is usually the best indicator of success at school or in the work place. That is why literacy is such an important social issue in most countries, for native speakers as well as for non-native speakers of that language. And literacy is greatly influenced by the ability to understand what we hear.

Interesting research by Dr. Paula Tallal, co-director of the Center for Molecular and Behavioural Neuroscience at Rutgers University has established that poor readers are usually people who have trouble decoding sound effectively.

Oral comprehension

The internationally-recognized expert on literacy Thomas Sticht has written that "oral comprehension typically places an upper limit on reading comprehension; if you don't recognise and understand the word when you hear it, you also won't be able to comprehend it when reading. This tells us something very important: oral comprehension generally needs to be developed in our youngest readers if we want them to be good readers."

This is also true for foreign language learners.

Teachers have traditionally focused their efforts on teaching learning skills, reading skills, inferring skills, decoding skills, grammar skills, writing skills etc. Stephen Krashen was one of the first foreign language teachers to point out that an emphasis on comprehensible input leads to better language learning results than an emphasis on grammar and correction. Krashen has long championed extensive reading as an essential tool for increasing language skills.

CHAPTER XII: CULTURE AND POLITICS

When we learn a new language we learn about its culture. That is one of the main attractions and rewards of language learning. We get involved with a new world, with a new way of looking at things, with new events and stories. However, people remain people, and the differences between people should not be exaggerated. Having learned 11 languages, and now being able to enjoy these different cultures, I am even more convinced of the similarity of people wherever they live.

Culture

I attended a conference of the Canadian Council for the Americas yesterday. I am, in fact, a director of this organization, the goal of which is to promote relations between Canada and Latin America. There were presentations by diplomats, and there were some 200 or so business people and academics in attendance.

I thoroughly enjoyed myself. I have been much more involved with Asia in my career and it was fun to start to know more about the countries and people of our common hemisphere.

One of the people I chatted with is completing a PhD in intercultural communication. She explained to me how important this was. I replied that language certainly made it much easier to understand the point of view and the culture of other people. She insisted that one needed to learn how to communicate with people of another culture, with or without the language.

I have never understood all the fuss about communicating with people of another culture. Am I supposed to behave differently, become a different person, try to take advantage of some knowledge of this person's culture to gain some advantage? It all sounds a little manipulative to me.

As I speak another language, some aspects of my behaviour change. But I do not think "this person is Chinese, or Brazilian therefore I will behave differently." I am just me, trying to figure out if I like the person or not. Usually our true personalities will come out and we either get along or we do not, regardless of culture.

I think that anything useful in the way of intercultural training for dealing with people from a particular culture can probably be written down on one sheet of paper. The rest is just part of people interacting. I cannot see how this can be the subject of a PhD study.

Cross-cultural communication

I sometimes hear language teachers talking about cross-cultural communication as if it were something that the language teacher needed to learn in order to be a more effective teacher.

I do not believe this to be the case. It is the learner who must learn, not the teacher who must teach. The willingness and ability of the learner to cross into another culture is vital to success in language learning. The learner needs to be good at cross-cultural communication, not the teacher.

Culture and language

Marcelo in Brazil asked me the following questions:

1. If you are bilingual - does your character change with the language you are speaking?
2. How closely are cultural and national identities defined by language?
3. And what impact will the ever-increasing domination of English have on the way the world communicates?

1. I do not feel that my character changes with the language that I am speaking. Superficially, many things change. After all in speaking another language I have to imitate some of the behaviour patterns of that culture. At the very least I am using another language. Then I may gesture more, or less, or differently. I may bow more or use different sign language. I may be more direct and argumentative, or more conciliatory, looking for agreement, all depending on the language I am using, and what is the norm of communication in that language. But this is superficial. My values do not change. My opinions do not change. My core character does not change.

Yet for every language that I learn I add to my personality an additional dimension, an additional level of understanding of what it means to be human. But all of that is with me, no matter what language I am speaking. It is something I acquire when I learn an additional language.

2. Our identities are defined by many things, ancestry, family upbringing, socioeconomic status, profession, history, culture, education and of course language. Despite these influences, we can, today, to a large extent decide what we want our identity to be. Insofar as the influence of language on identity, it is mostly your first language that is important in determining your identity, not the additional languages that you learn.

3. The present domination of English, and with it the influence of English-speaking culture, will affect how people of certain classes behave. How it affects them is not so predictable. I believe the 9/11 bombers spoke excellent English, for example.

Political correctness

Asians have a harder time learning English than Europeans, according to the Canadian Minister of Immigration, Monte Solberg. He recently made this statement to justify spending more money on language training for immigrants, since more immigrants to Canada come from Asia rather than Europe these days.

Predictably Solberg was attacked by the opposition parties, and the usual "politically correct" forces, for saying something that is obviously true. Chinese people have an easier time learning Japanese than Italians, Italians have an easier time learning English than Chinese. This is not true for every Italian, or every Chinese, just the average.

There are two reasons. First is the vocabulary. There is a tremendous amount of common vocabulary between Italian and English or Japanese and Chinese. But what is even more important is the motivation. In the case of Canada, the average European is more motivated to integrate and therefore tries harder to learn English than the average Asian immigrant. Conversely I believe a Chinese person in Japan feels greater pressure to learn Japanese than a European, since he or she is often taken for a Japanese person and perhaps for economic and social reasons feel more inclined to integrate. But I could be wrong on this.

But there is nothing in the genes that makes a person better able to learn a language spoken by a national group that is genetically closer. I know many Asian immigrants who speak English outstandingly well. I like to think that I speak both Japanese and Mandarin better than the average Asian non-native speaker. So in the end it is the attitude that matters the most.

In any case there is no justification for getting upset at the Minister other than the usual "politically correct" motivation to prevent people from stating obvious truths that are not in harmony with some orthodox ideology.

"French is a value"

I have just finished reading a book written by Graham Fraser, Canada's Commissioner of Official Languages entitled. "Sorry, I Don't Speak French". The book is described as a national bestseller in Canada (whatever that means).

The book looks at "four decades" of bilingualism in Canada and the results. I think the main themes that Fraser develops are as follows.

- 1) For a long time people who spoke French were in an inferior position in Canada, even in Quebec. The French language was in an inferior position, even in Quebec. This has changed. Bilingualism policy is as much a result as a cause of this change in the status and political weight of French-Canadians.

2) Bilingualism is part of a vision of what Canadians should aspire to, as if to be unilingual, especially unilingual English, is unpatriotic, uncultured and ignorant. Bilingualism is the key to the unity of Canada. All political leaders should be bilingual, as well as any other kind of leader in Canada. Some other countries take a more territorial approach to language policy, but Canada wants to offer bilingualism across the country, at least as far as basic government services are concerned. This is to be the Canadian way.

3) It is very difficult for people to work in a second language. It is what Fraser calls the "immigrant" experience, always feeling stupid and unable to express oneself. This feeling of inadequacy should, in his view, be equally shared by English and French-speaking Canadians, at least in the Federal government.

4) A fortune has been spent on encouraging Canadians to become bilingual with relatively little result.

Federally \$60 million annually is paid in "bilingual bonuses" to bilingual bureaucrats. The government has billion dollar program to make Canadians more bilingual. Yet fewer students take French in schools and universities today than before. Even children who spend all their school lives in French immersion mostly do not become fluent speakers. (They spend too much time listening to non-native speakers around them speaking poor French).

5) There are other inconsistencies. Almost 40% of all federal government jobs are designated bilingual. The test of language competence, as well as the language teaching programs, are run by traditional language teachers worried about the subjunctive and other niceties of French, that even many Quebecois do not necessarily master.

The biggest reaction I had to the book was that you cannot legislate people to learn another language. You cannot force people to learn another language. You have to make it interesting, fun and effective. I get the impression that billions of dollars have been spent in Canada over the last 40 years to prove this and with relatively little benefit to the average tax-payer.

CHAPTER XIII: HOW THE BRAIN LEARNS

For too long we have been conditioned to think that learning can only happen in classrooms. Learning happens in our brains and all we have to do is provide the brain with rich input and experience, and we can learn.

Gerald Edelman

I recently read the book *Second Nature Brain Science and Human Knowledge*, by Gerald Edelman, winner of the Nobel Prize for medicine. I cannot claim to understand everything in the book. Edelman claims it is an attempt to create a brain-based epistemology, or theory of knowledge. Much of Edelman's professional career has been in the study of the body's immune system and the selectionist or Darwinian response of our genes to virus and germs that attack it. He has found a similar selectionist response in how the neurons in our brain deal with information.

He begins with a description of this amazing three-pound (1.5 kilogram) organ with its 30 billion nerve cells or neurons. These carry signals in the brain and connect with other neurons to form synapses. The amazing thing is the sheer number of combinations possible and that these synapses are plastic, adaptable, throughout our lives. The next important point to realize is that the brain does not operate like a computer. It does not operate based on logic, but by pattern recognition. The sensory input is not coded tape but a rich, infinitely variable and often ambiguous set of signals. The brain has to order these in order to create knowledge.

In order to deal with the large amount of information the brain receives, it relies on comparison or association, and has to sacrifice precision. This process is one of selectionism, in which neurons from different areas of the brain respond to input, in a manner that necessarily includes error and ambiguity. Any attempt to impose precision would limit the amount of knowledge that the brain can acquire. The brain's own value system, its likes and dislikes, the production of dopamine in response to certain stimulus, all of this influences the learning process. Learning is a creative process and an individual process, influenced by the will or intent of the learner.

I have simplified and probably misunderstood much. Nevertheless, I found that the message in this book was very much in line with how I learn languages. I need to be stimulated by information in the language, in audio and written form, and I need a lot of it. The neurons in my brain selectively respond to this input by forging new networks or maps. With repetition these maps are reinforced. As a result, the new language gradually becomes clearer for me. My learning activities consist of helping the brain form the connections and associations necessary to recognize patterns in the new language. A large part of this is relating new words to words I already know in my language, and then relating them to sounds by combining written text with audio files. Eventually I get used to connecting words together in phrases in the language I am studying.

At all times I resent and resist any attempt by teachers to impose precision on me before I am ready. I want the content, the stimulus, the richness. Corrective feedback has to be of a nature that I feel I can cope with. Correction while speaking is difficult to accept, since it gradually takes away the pleasure (reward) of speaking. On the other hand, feedback after a conversation, with a few things to work on, is OK. Writing correction is OK, if I have asked for it. At least that is what work for me.

Children speak and make mistakes and correct themselves on their own time. Adults do not like being reduced to the status of children. And to follow Edelman, the brain's values, its feeling of reward or punishment, influences the selectionist activities of the neurons.

If the learner can be challenged, yet feel that he or she is performing well, learning will take place. It is not clear to me that the classroom can provide as high a quality of stimulus as simply reading or listening to something of interest in a language.

Manfred Spitzer – A German Neuroscientist

One of the most innovative thinkers on language learning is Stephen Krashen, who has pointed out that languages are acquired through meaningful input and not deliberate instruction. His insights are being confirmed by the latest research on how the brain learns, as described in an excellent book by German brain researcher, Manfred Spitzer, *Learning: The Human Brain and the School for Life*.

Here are six concepts of how the brain learns that I gleaned from Spitzer's book, and how they apply to language learning.

1. The brain can learn, trust it.

The brain learns all the time, and, in fact, is designed to learn. Throughout our lives the brain retains "plasticity", creating neurons, and neural connections, in response to what it sees, hears and experiences. The brain draws its own conclusions from the input it receives, and is better at forming its own rules than understanding logical explanations. The brain is always at work, consuming over 20% of the body's calories. We can learn languages right into old age, and in fact it is good for the brain to do so.

- The brain develops its own rules, naturally, from the observation of the input it receives.
- The brain takes its time to learn, requiring continued exposure to meaningful and interesting content.
- The brain can prioritize what to learn, dealing with easier subjects first, and more difficult ones later.

2. The brain needs stimulus. Give it massive amounts of meaningful input.

The brain likes things that are relevant and interesting. So if the task is language acquisition, the most important condition is massive and continuous exposure to interesting and relevant language content. At first, when the language is new, it is helpful to reinforce what has been learned by repetitive listening and reading. As we progress we need to find new, fresh, interesting, stimulating and meaningful content.

- We learn better from stories, real conversations, examples and episodes than from rules and facts.
- We learn best from content that matters to us.
- It is easier to listen to and read content when it is at the right level of difficulty, however the interest and relevance to the learner is the most important consideration.

3. We can help the brain notice.

The brain learns naturally by observing, constantly labeling and creating its own rules. But the brain can miss things. We should, from time to time, review grammar rules and tables, focus on mistakes we have made, or study specific words and phrases that we have learned. We should also attempt to write and speak, if we feel like it. These activities, which dominate traditional language learning, are, however, optional and minor activities in a natural language learning system. They increase attentiveness but should not take away from the main activities of listening and reading.

- Good language output can only come from absorbing massive amounts of language input.
- When we practice output, speaking and writing, or review vocabulary and grammar rules, we increase our attentiveness to the language.
- Heightened attentiveness increases the ability of the brain to notice the patterns and sounds of the language.

4. Engage your emotions in order to increase learning efficiency.

Positive emotions energize the brain, and increase the efficiency of learning. An interesting story, a powerfully narrated audio book, a person we like - these are the things that will engage our emotions. Uninteresting learning tasks, or negative tension, decrease learning efficiency.

- We should stay with content we like and discard content we do not like. We should do those learning tasks we enjoy doing.

- We should always combine audio with text and choose narrators whose voice we enjoy. This will make it easier to listen repetitively.
- We need to like the language we are learning and at least some aspects of its culture.

5. When you learn naturally, you will feel motivated by your own success.

Motivation is the basic motor of learning. Success is motivating, as is praise. Any teaching activity which creates frustration, such as traditional grammar based language learning, can demotivate the learner. In a natural learning environment, the main task of the teacher is to encourage the learner to become independent of the teacher, rather than to impose tasks or explanations on the learner.

- Many of us want to learn another language but are skeptical of our ability to do so, because we have not done it before.
- As the strange language starts to acquire meaning through our listening and reading, our brain feels a sense of reward at this new and unexpected experience. This is highly motivating.
- Give language learning a chance, the results will be better than you think.

6. When we learn, we change. We need to accept this change.

When we learn, our neural networks change, physically. When we learn a new language, we adopt some of the behaviour patterns of another culture and our personalities and our perceptions change. Many of the difficulties that grown-ups face in language learning come from a resistance to change. It is often more comfortable to follow the patterns and pronunciation of our own language, rather than to commit to fully imitating the new language.

- Children are not afraid to change. Moving to a new country, they learn the language of their new friends without hesitation.
- Older learners have a stronger vested interest in their own identity, and in what they already know.
- All learners benefit from the help of an encouraging tutor and an enthusiastic group of fellow learners, in order to overcome these barriers to learning.

The brain and our attitude

Last night I went out for a bit of sushi and wine (yes red wine not sake) at the Chiyoda restaurant in downtown Vancouver, certainly one of the best Japanese restaurants in

Vancouver. The people beside me turned out to be brain researchers, or rather researchers in cancer of the brain. There was one American, one Japanese, and one Singaporean. I butted in to their conversation.

We covered a lot of ground, from feminism to cultural issues in different societies etc. But, being single minded about language learning as usual, I asked them about the influence of our will on learning.

They confirmed that this was a known phenomenon known as "forced plasticity." The brain is not hard-wired. You can change your brain. You do it with motivation and concentration. You can "force" the plasticity of your brain with your will.

This is scientific confirmation of something that I have always felt. In language learning, the bottom line is you. Not your innate genius for language learning, but your desire, your commitment, your willingness to let go...in other words, your attitude.

Mind over brain

In Jeffrey Schwartz's book *The Mind and the Brain*, he points out just how adaptable the human brain is. Research has shown that this adaptability or plasticity continues throughout our lives. The brain is constantly retraining and rearranging itself in response to different stimuli. He describes clinical examples of how people can use mindfulness to will their brain to change its neural circuits. This is mind over matter, or since the brain is matter, maybe it is mind over mind or matter over matter!! I am not a scientist, obviously, just curious.

Schwartz shows from actual clinical experiments how people who have some kind of obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) can in certain circumstance train themselves away from that behaviour. In so doing they actually alter the metabolism of the OCD circuit in the brain. I remember as a child that my father could wiggle his ears and I could not. However, by spending a lot of time willing my ears to move, they eventually did. Mindfulness therapy at work!

Schwartz talks about "mindfulness-based cognitive therapy" and a four step treatment process. The four steps are Relabel, Reattribute, Refocus and Revalue. It begins with the patient not blaming him or herself for the disorder but recognizing that it is a function of the brain circuitry sending some faulty messages. By accepting that the circuitry was playing tricks, the patient was better able to resist the irrational obsessive impulses when they arose.

I am still digesting this book but I sense it has applications for language learning. If language learners are constantly discouraged because of their inability to express things correctly in a new language, or their inability to remember words when they need them, or to pronounce properly, or the fact that they freeze when they have to speak to a native speaker, this discouragement is only building up tension and making learning more and more difficult.

I believe that the learner's potential ability in a new language is usually far greater than what he or she actually achieves. Schwartz's Four Steps may help the language learner.

The Four Steps of the mindful language learner would be as follows:

1. Relabel by recognizing that the learning process is one of training the language fitness of the brain, rather than some hopeless struggle against a perceived inability to learn languages.
2. Reattribute by recognizing the need to develop new brain circuitry, taking advantage of the fact that the brain is known to be plastic throughout one's adult life. Until the circuitry develops it is pointless to be disappointed at mistakes or less than perfect pronunciation or communication in the new language.
3. Refocus away from a vain attempt to master the rules of grammar or lists of words which one will inevitably forget. Instead focus on systematic and repetitive training based on meaningful content. Recognize that consistent effort will bring gradual improvement in the new language even if it seems that so much is constantly forgotten.
4. Revalue by enjoying whatever level of communication in the new language one is able to achieve. Look for enjoyable content and experiences in the new language. Make learning and using the language part of one continuum, where constant improvement and not perfection is the goal.

Darwinism in the brain

Neurons travel freely in the brain, especially in the early stages of brain development in the child, but even later on. Neurons compete for space in the brain. The more we train certain functions the better established those connections become.

Our brain remains plastic or flexible throughout life, changing to cope with new environments and new experiences. We can learn new things. We can recover lost functions after brain injury. Adults who become blind can learn Braille.

If a person has a weak eye and a strong eye, the treatment is to close the strong eye to give the weak eye a chance to catch up, or it will not catch up. The connections for neurons in the brain that control the strong eye are too strong to allow new neural connections for the weak eye.

To me this has application for language learning. We not only have to practice the new language we are learning, (the weak eye) and strengthen those connections in the brain, we also have to try to suppress the neural connections that control our native language, (the strong eye) at least a little bit. We need to foster the development of the neural networks that control the new language.

If you want to make a big jump in your language learning, plan on spending one whole day where you will not use your native language at all! Listen, read, review words, watch movies, practice pronunciation, listen to songs, talk to yourself, but do it all in the target language. No

native language at all!! Do it for 8-10 hours. Do it again the next day if you can. Do this from time to time.

The objective is not only to practice a new language and strengthen those neural connections that govern the new language, it also to suppress the connections for your native language in your brain.

CHAPTER XIV: THE INTERNET

A world of unlimited input and experience

The Internet is an unlimited source of language learning. There are audio books and e-books, publications in all possible languages, podcasts and blogs on every possible subject. You can find language courses, and grammar references. There are audio courses and video courses. There is personal coaching and tutoring. There are even university courses on the Internet for free download. You just have to google to find them. This is LingQ's world, and this is the world of language learning in the 21st century. Massive and meaningful input is at your finger-tips.

The Internet is fun

I do not understand what Face Book is for, let alone Twitter or Second Life. It all strikes me as a lot of hype.

However, I do enjoy the virtual world of the Internet. Not only can I find instant answers to a lot of questions, but now I have installed AirPort Express and have hooked up two speakers and a sub-woofer to it, and I go to iTunes on my computer in my study, go to radio, find the long list of classical radio stations, choose one that is playing music that I like, pick my remote AirPort Express location as the output and enjoy (wirelessly) the most wonderful sound.

The radio station might be in Rio, Moscow, Rome or Los Angeles. It does not matter. Sound from somewhere in the world is playing wirelessly from an electric outlet in my wall. I am connected.

When I get tired of music I can hook up to a podcast in Russian or Portuguese, download it, and hear about the world from a Russian or Brazilian perspective. I can do all of that and work on my language skills at the same time. I am having a ball.

The Internet is the classroom

March 5, 2006 - (I said this over three years ago. It is becoming more and more relevant every year)

For those people who are familiar with computers, we are entering a world where the classroom, the teacher and the textbook will no longer determine the activities of most language learners. With the Internet, podcasting, blogging, and all the related technology, a language learner will have access to unlimited content in the target language. It will not be up

to the teacher to impose his or her political message, or introduce his or her favourite movie or book to a passive class. Technology will enable the learner to find content of real interest to read and listen to. Technology will make sure that content can be chosen that is at the appropriate level of difficulty for the learner. Technology will make it possible for the learner to understand this content and to systematically learn new words and phrases from this content.

The role of the language teacher will change from that of teacher to that of coach. The teacher will be required to stimulate and encourage. The teacher will have to be a model of normal (correct) usage and should have the ability to engage the learner in discussion on a wide variety of subjects in the target language. The teacher will provide feedback and advice on how to improve in areas of weakness. The teacher should be able to correct writing.

The increasing avalanche of information, both in text and audio form, on the Internet, will change the established paradigms of education, and erode the monopoly enjoyed by schools, universities, and other established institutions in education.

People who want to learn will search out the best and most interesting and effective sources of information and education from around the world. People will exchange their respective areas of expertise and skill without regard to formal credentials or institutional prestige. The seekers of education will be able to judge the value of the education that different participants have to offer in this new developing market place of ideas and information.

That is our vision. That is what we are working on in our rewrite of The Linguist system into LingQ. It will be a totally new learning experience with the active participation of all. Everyone can be a learner and a teacher. Everyone can be a linguist!

Convivium, sharing life on the Internet

A Roman banquet was known as a "convivium". It was an occasion where friends got together to share a part of their lives, to share talk and food.

Dante Alighieri wrote a philosophical essay called "convivio" where the participants shared their thoughts in poetry and prose.

Ivan Illitch, famous Austrian educator, wrote about "convivial" learning communities as an alternative to formal schooling.

I feel excited about what is starting to happen at LingQ, and I apologize that we are not able to open the system up to more people. We are doing all we can to get the LingQ system up and fully operating for our existing English language learners from The Linguist.

One of the ideas that is at the core of the LingQ concept is that learners who speak different native languages, and are trying to learn other languages, can help each other. We are hoping that our members will create lively and interesting content in their own language. This is starting to happen already, in French, Spanish and Russian. People are composing interesting original material and recording it. Others are interviewing their spouses and friends, recording it

and transcribing it. This content is gradually being loaded onto LingQ although we do not have learners for these languages right now. We expect that others will also start to do so in a great variety of languages.

When we launch officially in July, this content will be available for our learners in a variety of languages. We expect this content will only grow. Some is deliberately easy. Some is more difficult. All of this content can be integrated with LingQ,

In the future, as learners download this content to listen to it and read it, and to save words and phrases, the authors of this content will be able to earn "points" towards their own language learning. This will be only one part of the "convivial" learning community that we hope to create.

Teacher as guide

The role of the teacher surely is one of coach, guide, reliable source of friendly feedback and encouragement. The non-native teacher can fulfill this role. There is ample native language content available in audio and text form on the Internet and elsewhere. Massive input is what is going to help the students the most. The non-native teacher can guide the learners to appropriate content and, hopefully, let them choose things of interest to them.

Massive input is the best way to learn vocabulary. It is not up to the teacher to decide that vocabulary should be taught in "semantic sets" (colours, the parts of the body etc.) The teacher should facilitate the learning of vocabulary from interesting and appropriate content, show the learners techniques for retaining the vocabulary like lists or flash cards, and then suggest that they can create special lists or collect cards in categories of interest to them if they want.

Rosetta Stone

Rosetta Stone is not an online system although they have launched some online activities. They had to.

Let me begin by saying that I have never used Rosetta Stone. My son, Mark, played professional hockey in Japan for a few years. His team gave him Rosetta Stone to learn Japanese. He tried it and found that it was boring and did not get him very far. We need a lot of input and stimulus to learn a language.

I decided to do some research on the net. Most reviews that I found seemed to have been done by people connected with Rosetta Stone. I am not surprised. The Rosetta Stone people are excellent marketers for which I salute them. They are not only promoting their product, they are promoting an awareness that people can learn languages on their own.

The best summary of the Rosetta Stone method I found was the following.

The most important component of the Rosetta Stone software-based method is what I call "a four squares screen". The user is presented with a page that shows four pictures of various objects or entities. A prerecorded phrase or word is played back and the user must click on the square that contains a visual answer to the question or best illustrates the concept. If the user answers correctly a little "ding" is heard, a check-mark appears on the screen and the program advances. That's all folks!

So, why does the Rosetta Stone method work? At the very center of the Rosetta Stone approach is the idea of constant encouragement. Every step of the way the user receives positive feedback from the program. Rosetta Stone takes you through a rapid succession of multiple-choice questions. Given that there are only four options per question it is not difficult to answer every question even if you don't get it right away. This process turns into a series of gratifying experiences.

This was contrasted with the usual language learning experience where the reviewer felt that we do not know how we are doing.

As a result we have uncertainty, perception of poor performance and general lack of success. A user is much more likely to quit such a course, and it should be known that not quitting is probably the single most important requirement when learning a foreign language.

My reaction to the reviews that I read was that I do not think I would want to use Rosetta Stone. Here are seven reasons.

1. I do not like answering multiple-choice questions at the computer. It is not communicating. I might do it once or twice but would not continue. I would not do it daily. I need to connect with a language I am learning daily, in order to learn. I also do not like to get things right or wrong. I do not need accuracy or precision. I need input.

2. Most of my learning activity takes place during dead time. I mostly listen while running, driving, doing the dishes, waiting in line etc... I also read while waiting or as a relaxing activity. If I had to sit at the computer in order to learn I would not do a lot of studying. I just do not have the dedicated time.

3. I do not believe that I can permanently learn words, whether using pictures or other techniques. I know I am going to forget them. In a way I am not interested in learning the word for "red" or "house". I know that I have to be exposed to so much language content, in audio and text, that gradually it all starts to have meaning. I am not conscious of learning and forgetting specific words, but I know I am doing it. I know I have learned words because I can understand more and more. I know I am forgetting because I am constantly unable to remember the most elementary words.

4. I find it difficult to learn words and phrases that are divorced from a larger story or context. Isolated words and phrases do not connect with my brain. I remember words and expressions as part of larger stories that I remember. I often remember when and where I was listening to many of these stories.

5. When I start learning a language, the gratification that I experience comes from the fact that I start to be able to tell when words begin and end, and then soon after start to make sense of short episodes that used to be just noise for me. That is all the feedback that I need. I do not find the uncertainty a problem. It is the feeling of the "fog lifting", the uncertainty turning into more and more clarity, that is so satisfying in the study of another language.

6. I learn languages with the goal of being able to communicate, to understand what is said, and to be able to express myself. That is a long road. I have the impression that Rosetta Stone only takes you a very short way. I do not see it as a useful or necessary step.

7. I feel that a lot of listening to interesting content is a better start than doing multiple-choice questions. I am in a hurry to engage with the language, real language situations, and to let my brain get used to it.

Live Mocha

Live Mocha has done a good job at attracting media attention, something that LingQ will also be doing, in its own way.

I sniffed around the outside of Live Mocha without leaving my email address. Some of you may want to try it out in more detail and give me your views. I did notice that the courses 101, 102, 201, 202, seemed to cover the same parts of speech or grammatical issues in every language, which strikes me as strange. While I am not in favour of a grammar-based approach, I do know that the grammatical issues (like continuous form of the verb, tenses, prepositions etc.) are quite different in say, Chinese and Spanish. I noticed that the phrase translator that is provided in the Writing section brings up an error in Japanese and had trouble giving a useful answer in other languages.

The system allows members to leave sample recordings and writing samples for other members to correct. At LingQ we are doing this with a little more structure. The idea is a good one; the question is how to make it work in the long term.

To me, Live Mocha has many good ideas, and I am glad to see more people thinking of how to use the web for language training. At the risk of looking like I am knocking the competition I believe they embody four major misconceptions about language learning.

Language Learning Misconceptions at Live Mocha

1. You can learn the language by learning a few handy phrases to use in different situations (the store, the bank etc.)

In my view these handy phrases are very difficult to use, and at best you will get an answer that will leave you lost. I believe in learning the language so that you can react with confidence

to most situations that come at you. This takes a lot of work. You need to learn a lot of words. You need to listen to and read a lot of content. You need to be efficient. You need to enjoy spending a lot of time with the language.

2. You need to follow courses which cover different grammatical aspects of the language.

Mocha has their 101, 102, 201, 202 etc. To me you just need the language, graded to your vocabulary level and directed at subjects that are of interest to you. You need exposure to that kind of content. You will gradually learn through observation, or by asking questions of tutors. You will learn to speak correctly on your own time, and not on the timetable imposed by a teacher or course.

3. You need a lot of correction.

An important part of Live Mocha is the volunteer correction of speaking and writing. This is a good idea, but it needs to be done properly and should not be overdone. There is much research that shows that correction is not as effective as continuous exposure to meaningful content.

4. You just need to talk.

An attraction of Live Mocha is the chance to link up with native speakers. This is a good thing to do no doubt. But it is not realistic to do a lot of it. I have been listening to Portuguese for the last four days, perhaps one hour a day, while doing other tasks. I have been reading in Portuguese. I am getting more and more familiar with the language. I will speak to our member Mairo soon, but I am in no hurry. And I know that I cannot talk enough with him to rely on that as a major way to improve.

I hope we get more companies in the business of providing language services on the web, so that people will look to the web and to other modern technology, and to their own initiative to learn languages.

Censorship and favouritism at Wikipedia?

I just had a Wikipedia entry on LingQ deleted. It was not even finished. The culture of the anonymous, holier than thou, moderator-censor is alive and well at Wikipedia, just like at the language learners' forum I was on.

I started editing a post on LingQ and went to lunch. When I came back it was gone, deleted. It was not even "proposed for deletion". I was not asked to edit or improve my entry. It was "speed deleted" (one of their deletion categories) as advertizing, which, of course, it is.

But look up Pimsleur, Rosetta Stone (software), Live Mocha, Berlitz language Schools or any other language system on Wikipedia, and you are likely to find it there. When does information become advertizing, and according to whom, and why allow some and not others?

Trying to figure out how to challenge the deletion on the Wikipedia website is like going through a maze.

I knew that I had to make it look more like the other language system entries at Wikipedia, I had them open on my computer. I just had to go to lunch. I have it saved in google documents but I do not want to continue working on it just to have it deleted again.

Here is what I wrote.

LingQ is an online community and language learning method, created by [Steve Kaufmann](#) and his son [Mark](#), who live in [West Vancouver](#), Canada. The learning methodology is based on Steve Kaufmann's own experience in learning to speak 11 languages, as well as the influence of two important modern educators. These are [Stephen Krashen](#), who emphasizes the crucial role of meaningful input in language acquisition; and [Ivan Illitch](#), who proposed the creation of convivial learning communities to replace formal schooling.

LingQ members come from all continents and countries of the world. They create language content for each other, help each other, exchange language lessons with each other, and encourage each other. As a result, learners are able to choose from a constantly growing library of language content, graded by level of difficulty, in ten different languages. This content is available for free download, to listen to and read. At present, these languages are English, Spanish, Mandarin, French, Japanese, Portuguese, Russian, German, Swedish, and Italian.

The LingQ community is encouraged to create "LingQs" in order to better notice the words, phrases and patterns of the language. In this way each member is constantly building up a personal database, which generates Flash Cards, statistical records of activity and achievement, and other learning functions customized to each learner.

Grammar instruction and error correction are available from member tutors but are considered less important than motivation, mutual encouragement and constant listening and reading and reviewing of words and phrases.

The term LingQ is a play on the word link. Language learning is considered a process of creating links; between words, sounds, meaning and people, and eventually between neurons as new language skills are acquired.

Steve Kaufmann has written a book about language learning called [The Way of the Linguist, A Language Learning Odyssey](#). He maintains a blog called [The Linguist on Language](#), and has a [channel at Youtube](#) explaining his language learning philosophy.

How I would teach a language class using LingQ

How I would teach a language class. I am not a language teacher. If I were, this is what I would do. This is a draft, a start. I look forward to comments and criticisms.

Class size:

Let us assume that there are about 20 students in the class. The method would have to be modified depending on the age and level of the students, and the size of the class.

Methodology:

I would tell the class that the only way they are going to improve in the language is if they find a way to enjoy spending time with the language. My only goal therefore is to help them enjoy the language. Their goal should just be to find a way to enjoy the language. I do not care how well they speak, nor how well they understand. I will not judge them. I am here only to help them. I only ask that they spend time with the language in some way.

I would ask everyone to enroll in LingQ. I would ask them to prepare a three ring binder, which will be their own language course and record of achievement. This will include printed texts, vocabulary lists, writing assignments and other material that they can print from LingQ. It will also include verb or noun tables or any other grammar resources that they print from the Internet. I would help find these resources and help them organize their binder, which will become their own textbook and growing language portfolio.

The class:

I would ask them all to bring MP3 players to class. I would also make sure that students all have access to computers, whether at home, or at school, or elsewhere.

During class time, I would divide them into three groups, changing them around, perhaps every 15 minutes or so, or perhaps after longer intervals. I would have to try this out.

Group 1: Listeners

Activity: Listening to things that interest them, or to assigned content items from LingQ, on their MP3 players, while sitting in class. All of these audio recordings will have texts as well. There would be no test of comprehension. Learners would be obliged to create LingQs from this content as homework, and as a record of the fact that they have interacted with the content.

Group 2: Readers

Activity: Reading quietly in class. If we have enough computers in class, this can consist of reading on computers and creating LingQs. Otherwise the learners will read printed texts and underline the words and phrases they need help with. Learners would create LingQs later, as homework, when they have access to a computer.

Group 3: Speakers

This group will sit with me and talk in a corner. Students will have with them vocabulary lists printed out at home. They will try to use these words in discussion.

I will follow up the discussion with a Discussion Report, sent via LingQ, listing all the words and phrases that caused problems in our discussion, including some explanations of grammar and usage. These reports would be Imported and studied at LingQ.

Questions:

The last ten minutes of every class will be available for questions. Learners will ask questions about anything related to the language or the content they are listening to and reading. They may ask in their own language or the language being learned.

Learners can also ask questions via LingQ's forum for each lesson, in their own language or the target language, while working on the computer at home.

One class in five will be devoted entirely to questions, or as needed.

All question periods will be followed by a report from me in the target language, to be imported and studied, consisting of words and phrases and examples related to the questions that came up.

Homework:

Homework will consist of the following. (Homework may also be done during class time if computers are available and time permits.)

- 1) Create LingQs: 20 minutes daily.
- 2) Review LingQ Flash Cards received by email: 20 minutes daily or whenever received.
- 3) Submit writing assignments once a week: These are submitted through LingQ, and returned with LingQ writing report. 30 minutes, once a week
- 4) Spend time on the LingQ Forum: 10 minutes daily

Assessment:

I would follow the activity index of all learners. They would be able to see each other's level of activity on the Community. I would recognize the most active learners. I would stress activity over achievement.

LingQ in the classroom: Feedback Part 1

Thank you for all the feedback. I will comment here in a separate entry. There is a lot to say, so I will divide my comments into two blog posts, at least. Here goes.

First of all let me be clear. These are ideas. There may be levels or age groups for which this approach is better or not so suitable. That remains to be tested. In fact the whole concept needs to be tested out in real life. I hope some teachers give it a try.

With regard to some of the issues raised:

1) Is reading and listening on an MP3 player a good use of classroom time? (raised in several comments)

a) I feel that many of the interpersonal, team learning, role playing, reading out loud, etc. activities that are designed to use classroom time, are not all that efficient when it comes to acquiring the language. I do not want to hear 20 other learners reading or speaking and butchering the language. I prefer to read and listen to the language as spoken or written by a native speaker. That is my model. That is what I want to acquire. Language learning, especially at first, is an individual voyage of discovery. The other learners are a distraction. Even the teacher can be a distraction if I get too much of him or her.

b) The main goal of the language classroom is not to provide interaction, social or otherwise, although that naturally takes place. The main goal should be, in my view, to inspire the learner, to encourage the learner, and to give him or her some learning habits that can be taken out of the classroom.

c) Many learners will not read or listen on their own. At least they can do so in the classroom.

2) Will kids read and listen on their own without supervision?

a) It is not without supervision. The teacher is speaking with another group, and can occasionally look over at what the class is doing. He/she should not be reading the newspaper, to refer to Friedemann's example.

b) If they choose content of interest, if they know that they will be reading, listening to, "mining" words and phrases and eventually talking about, the same content, I think kids will do it. That remains to be seen.

3) What about kids who do not have computers, MP3 players, printers etc?

Obviously the school or other resources have to make these things available, otherwise this approach will not work.

4) How to motivate kids? (Sebastian)

This is the big question. How motivated are they now?

I do think that it is not necessary to have native speaker teachers. LingQ and other resources can provide the listening material, and if online access is available, online native speakers can be made available.

The availability of native speaker teachers should not be an obstacle to language learning at a school.

LingQ in the classroom: Feedback Part 2 - Should education be free?

David objects to using LingQ because it means asking kids to pay out of their pockets, to use his words. In fact, kids seldom pay out of their pockets, but that does not mean that education is free. Usually parents or tax-payers pay, and they pay a lot.

Education is very expensive. In the US it costs about \$9,000 per child in the K-12 sector and \$25,000 per student in the post-secondary sector. The reason is that most people who work in the education sector are mercenaries and not volunteers. They quite naturally like to get paid for their work. They sometimes even try to prevent volunteers from teaching in schools, and vote against e-learning to protect their jobs, at least here in Vancouver.

I do not understand why David thinks the fact that he was a teacher is somehow an indication that he has "done his bit" to help others. We can argue that some jobs are more useful than others, but most jobs provide a service that is valued enough by others to justify a wage. All jobs are altruistic in that sense. Most people do feel a sense of satisfaction from doing their job, but they also expect to get paid, usually more than they are getting. So, unless he was a volunteer, David was just doing his job.

Education is not, therefore, free. It can, however, become much less expensive, and much more generally available. There are tremendous resources available at low cost or free of charge. There are all kinds of people who are happy to volunteer their knowledge and skills.

Learners need to be shown what they can do on their own, rather than waiting for a teacher to teach them. Volunteers and resources need to be mobilized to be more readily available to learners. The Internet can be an agent for a revolution in education, making it more generally available at a lower cost, although not necessarily free. That is the role that I see for LingQ.

Education will always require professionals, and others who for profit and for personal gain, although not only for those reason, will devote themselves to helping others learn, while earning a living themselves. So education cannot be totally free.

We would not expect to get milk from the farmer free of charge, nor shoes from the shoemaker. Why would education be different? But we can make it less expensive.

LingQ in the classroom: Feedback Part 3 - Putting the learner in charge

Dr. Pepper has a number of objections to my proposed LingQ based language class proposal. I believe the good doctor's views are important because they faithfully reflect orthodox language teaching pedagogy.,

It is worthwhile going through her main points because they are so representative of an approach that I believe is not efficient or effective and not fun for the learner. It is, however, satisfying for the teacher because it puts the teacher in charge. I prefer to see the learner in charge, hence LingQ.

- 1) "Listening to audio in class is a waste of time unless you are gauging comprehension."
 - To me, if I am listening or reading in a new language, I do not want to report to a teacher on my comprehension. It will gradually get better, at my pace.
- 2) Listening is best "in a study group where each student can help each other out with comprehension difficulties"
 - I do not agree. I just want to listen, and listen again if I want, or go on to other things if I want. I do not want to discuss my listening, neither in the target language, nor in a common language, with other learners.
- 3) Listening - "It's all gibberish unless you have some base knowledge"
 - Yes, that is why you need to read the content you are listening to, and look up words using LingQ. If you are starting from scratch you can listen to a short episode and read the text in your own language, while listening. We offer this for beginners at LingQ. Then you can listen in the target language while reading along. Eventually you can listen without reading.
- 4) "What makes unknown content comprehensive are things like body language, promemics, miming and so on"

- These things can help but cannot always be provided in a classroom. So sound and text are pretty effective. A lot of content has nothing to do with body language etc.
- 5) "Reading in LingQ seems to be essentially a grammar-translation method"
- No. It is reading, and saving words for review, and listening to the same content for reinforcement without worrying about whether you can translate the text or not. No translation, no comprehension tests.
- 6) "It seems like a bit of a waste of class time to do new reading in class for the first time"
- No. Reading in class is a great use of the class time, and the teacher is available to answer questions. Usually the learner will have listened first, and if the text is too difficult, will have read it in their own language first. One lesson that all learners have to learn is that many things remain unclear for a long time. If they cannot accept they will have difficulty. The teacher hopefully can explain this basic concept to the learners.
- 7) The classroom time should be "to do work in class to get the passage translated and share it with classmates"
- No. No translation and no sharing for reasons already explained.
- 8) "As far as creating and reviewing LingQs, this is the same as writing down words you don't know and creating flash cards"
- No. At LingQ this process is made much easier, faster, convenient and therefore efficient. Every word or phrase that is looked up is an instant flash card, and these are emailed on a spaced repetition basis to the learner. They can be tagged, reviewed in many different ways. Each word that is saved automatically captures phrases with that word in it, and subsequently appears highlighted in yellow, with the meaning, as a mental trigger.
- 9) "I would add listening comprehension exercises with peers through conversational exercises."
- No. The teacher can discuss an article or episode, but we do not quiz people on their comprehension. Learners can ask questions but their comprehension is their own affair. No exercises, just discussion.

LingQ, a language learning community

LingQ is an efficient language learning platform, and language learning community consisting of people from all over the world, helping each other learn languages. Of all the systems available on the internet LingQ takes the best advantage of the power of the internet as a language learning environment.

First of all you do not have to buy anything, nor install anything on your computer. You just register and start using it. Your own personal learning database is maintained for you on the web.

Second, LingQ is designed to make input based learning as efficient as it can be. It offers rich and diverse learning content, in audio and text, from all over the cyber world. Then it applies a range of unique learning functions to help learners notice and get used to the words phrases and patterns of the language of their choice, without drills, and complicated rules to learn.

Third, LingQ is a true Web 2.0 community. Members help each other learn, just by the mere fact of learning themselves. They can also tutor each other and correct each other's writing if they want.

To really understand it you have to come and check it out. I look forward to meeting you at LingQ.