

Language Acquisition — Living Versus Learning

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Learning a new language is an often difficult, frequently necessary, task for those in global organizations. Working from the theory that learning a first language was relatively easy for most adults, Massoud details a process for learning a second (or third, or fourth) language, known as “language acquisition.” The process involves immersion in the culture of the language, learning it through first-hand experience, rather than classroom drills.

By Andrea Massoud

Language acquisition refers to the process of natural assimilation, involving intuition and subconscious learning, which is the product of real interactions between people where the person learning the language is an active participant.

It is similar to the way children learn their native tongue—a process that produces functional skill in the spoken language without theoretical knowledge, develops familiarity with the phonetic characteristics of the language, as well as its structure and vocabulary, is responsible for oral understanding, the capability for creative communication, and for the identification of cultural values.

Teaching and learning are viewed as activities that happen in a personal psychological plane. The acquisition approach praises the communicative act and develops self-confidence in the one learning the language, as it is more about sensing than teaching and learning.

A classic example of language acquisition involves adolescents and young adults who live abroad for a year in an exchange program, attaining near native fluency, while often knowing little about the mechanics of the language. They have a good pronunciation without a notion of phonology, do not know what the perfect tense is or the modal or phrasal verbs are, but intuitively recognize and know how to use all the structures.

Language Learning

The concept of language learning is linked to the traditional approach to the study of languages and today is still generally practiced in high schools worldwide. Attention is focused on the language in its written form and the objective is for the student to

understand the structure and rules of the language through the application of intellect and logical deductive reasoning.

The form is of greater importance than communication. Teaching and learning are technical and governed by a formal instructional plan with a predetermined syllabus.

One studies the theory in the absence of the practical. One values the correct and represses the incorrect. There is little room for spontaneity. The teacher is an authority figure and the participation of the student is predominantly passive. In the teaching of English in Brazil, for example, the student will study the function of the interrogative and negative modes, irregular verbs, modals, and the like.

The student learns to construct sentences in the perfect tense, but only learns with difficulty when to use it. It is a progressive and cumulative process, normally tied to a preset syllabus that includes memorization of vocabulary. It seeks to transmit to the student knowledge about the language, its functioning and grammatical structure with its irregularities, its contrasts with the student's native language, knowledge that hopefully will produce the practical skills of understanding and speaking the language. Many students make it even harder by trying to translate every word and sentence they learn to their native language. They think it makes it easier if it "makes sense" to them in the language in which they are most comfortable. This effort of accumulating knowledge becomes frustrating because of the lack of familiarity with the language.

We believe language acquisition is more effective than language learning to reach functional ability in the foreign language, and that the efficient teaching of languages is not that harnessed to a predetermined didactic package, nor that uses technological resources, but an individualized one in a bicultural atmosphere that explores the personal abilities of the facilitator in creating situations of real communication focused on the areas of each student's interest.

Living Versus Learning the Culture

We compare living a culture to living a language; the key to success in both is to be part of it and not to hear of it by third-parties. When you try things on your own, all your senses are alert—especially when you feel as though you do not belong. Not belonging at the beginning puts you as an observer, and allows you to be a sponge with the language, which enhances your perceptivity.

While you would not pay attention to things you do automatically in your culture and your spoken language, you start thinking over almost every cultural detail, noun, and adjective in the new culture. You want to belong, you want to be perfect. It is then that you learn. You try, and you may get it wrong the first time; but then you try again, and maybe you will get it right the second time.

What matters is the assimilation through natural and instinctive cognitive system—as is done when one is a child, except with a cultural reference. A child is a blank slate, and learns through trials. Living a foreign language and culture requires that we try; we only

need to be gentle on ourselves and have a thick skin for our mistakes and enhance our emotional resilience.

Following the old saying “the more you do, the more you learn,” the accumulation of international experiences is a relevant factor in the adaptation process of the new culture, but is not enough. No matter how much an individual learns about a certain country or culture, through readings and gathering information, only by living day-to-day in the new context will he or she really know and understand how the culture works. No matter how much one has lived in different countries, the experience of living in a particular country is unique and non-transferable.

Both language and culture complement each other. Language can be a means to a culture: if you know at least some of the language, you feel more prepared to try to be a part of a culture. Lack of language does not put you at ease at the beginning, at least, to make your way.

Andrea Massoud is managing partner, *Living in Brazil International Relocation*, and a member of the MOBILITY Global Editorial Advisory Committee. She can be reached at +55 11 4191 8515 or e-mail amassoud@livinginbrazil.com.br.
