

Learning a second language

[Linguistics](#), [Language](#)



Learning a second language after using your native language all your life can truly frustrating and overwhelming at first. But as one begins to chip away at the language and begin to some understand words, these form a foundation or scaffold upon which you can understand more words, primarily in context. More words, more context and this then creates cycle that helps towards achieving fluency in the target or second language.

Mei-Yu (1998) once said that in the acquisition of oral language, “ young children are active agents”, constantly process the language inputs that they are constantly exposed to and define and refine them ways that makes sense to them on a personal level. Children create hypotheses or theories about language rules, constantly filtering these theories through active engagement or connections with the more competent language users in their immediate environment. Unconsciously, they learn to recognize contexts and begin acquiring fine discrimination in their use of a language.

This means that for a second language learner, the best way to learn is through immersion in the language. Total immersion creates a “ sink or swim” instinct within the individual. The need to communicate and express one’s self will supersede all barriers to learning, and the individual will learn the language because of the instinctive need to survive. Children are especially natural linguists, able to effortlessly discern language rules and allow then to learn as many languages as they are exposed to. (Alyousef, 2005)

However, the older we get, these natural language processes are replaced by conscious awareness of rules, which hinders the learning of a new

language. For adults, the process of learning through immersion may take longer than for adults, but the process of second language acquisition remains essentially the same, especially if there is total immersion in the target language. For individuals moving to a new land permanently, total immersion will not be a problem. The “sink or swim” concept is so very true in the learning of a second language, the language must be learned in order to survive in society, then it most certainly be learned, it will only be a matter of time.

Indeed learning a new language is all about exposure, but in most cases, such is not possible. For most of us, we learn a second language through formal and conscious lessons in second language classes. For people who are learning a new language, the best way to do so is through a strategy. For adult learners, it is important to follow some guidelines in order to facilitate language learning. The first step would be is to make an honest assessment of your competencies in the target language; do you have some basic knowledge or none at all? The second step is to analyze the language being taught and recognize similarities between the two.

Teachers should be the one to initiate this. Language teachers should recognize individual skills and competencies which can be used to scaffold the new concepts being learned. Building upon prior knowledge or what one already knows or is already skilled at is the best way to learn something new. In terms of language learning, the important thing is to reinforce the prior knowledge and connect it with the target skill, regardless of the languages involved. Starting with what you know is the best way to attack

second language learning. When an individual approaches a lesson armed with knowledge and skills they already have, they have more confidence in exploring the new language.

It is also encouraging because it gives you a sense of success and accomplishment early on in the lesson, something which is very important to maintain student motivation. Following similarities and prior knowledge, then learning can shift to the differences in the two languages involved to allow them to distinguish one from the other. Using prior knowledge once again, the learners should be allowed to recognize these differences themselves. (Alyousef, 2005, p. 7) Prior knowledge is a learning strategy that second language learners must use so that they will not feel so powerless while learning a new language.

For those learning a second language, it is also important for the individual to realize why they need to learn the target language. Motivation is a crucial element of learning; if the target language must be learned to make an individual functional in society, then this need will facilitate the learning. (Crystal, 1987) Once the similarities have been established and the differences distinguished between the two alphabets, then the next is to focus on reinforcing the target language's alphabet system and how their sounds are produced, making occasional references to the alphabet of the native language.

These references will reinforce the connections between the two languages and help the student in the learning process. This strategy is meant to make the third-grade students be comfortable with the target alphabet by relating

them to their native alphabet. Eventually, such references to the native alphabet will be gradually eliminated. This way the students can be fluent in the second alphabet independent of their mother tongue. (Mora, 2002)

Of course for people who have achieved a certain level of fluency in the target language, the next step is to improve pronunciation. Knowing how to speak in a second language will not be of much value if you cannot be understood because of how you say it. Pronunciation can be a barrier in communication, so being able to say words correctly is crucial. The good thing is that accent is very easy to neutralize. Speech production is universal and the mechanism is the same for all of us. As such, we can learn to produce old sounds in new ways, such as when we attempt to pronounce a word differently. (Mora, 2002) But it must also be said that training the tongue to say words in new ways takes discipline. It can also be frustrating at first, and success can only be achieved with constant practice and conscious effort.

This conscious production is necessary so that we can train the articulators to change its speech production habits. After knowing how the target sound is produced, the key is to constantly apply it until the body remembers it on its own without any conscious control on our part. Initially feedback is necessary; we need to listen to how we make the sounds so that we can make the mechanical adaptations necessary to achieve the change. To address this, we can record ourselves and monitor our progress as we continue to practice. Hearing how we improve over time is inspiring and encouraging. After all is said and done, there is great satisfaction in not just

being fluent in a second language, but also being able to say it properly and clearly.

Indeed, when it comes to learning a new language, the best way to do so is through patience and constant practice. If total immersion in the language is not possible, the best way is to form a strategy when approaching a language learning task. Whenever possible, the target language must be used so that the mind gets used to the language and begins to form a schema about it.

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