Tips for Language Learners: how to meet the challenge

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Points to keep in mind on the task you face in studying a foreign language

Not all language learners are created equal. While children learn their first language(s) effortlessly, post-puberty language-learners show mixed success, and few attain the fluency of their childhood experience. During and after the teenage years, atrophy of the innate human capacity to pick up a language intuitively is simply a fact of maturation. Nature intends us to be early language learners: the sooner, the better.

Though as an adult you face diminished facility in language learning, by now you have picked up other learning strategies, plus developed a capacity for problem-solving in general. You can apply this capability to the version of language learning which you typically encounter in this second stage of life: that of a school subject involving a teacher and associated pedagogical materials designed to help you learn in this quite artificial situation.

These two ways of know a language (for the child or for the adult) have been given different names, the first dubbed language ACQUISITION, which occurs automatically, effortlessly, and completely; the second known as language LEARNING, which requires conscious effort, an instructional program, is frustratingly difficult and usually falls well short of the goal.

But learning a foreign tongue in school is different from other subjects like geography or art history. These latter involve mastering a set of facts, to then interpret, relate and analyze. If second language study were like this, then its exams would ask students to describe the sentence patterns available in the language, the different kinds of pronouns it uses, whether verbs are conjugated for tense/aspect/mood or not at all, its inventory of basic sounds, what types of prefixes and suffixes it uses, how it forms compounds, etc. There is in fact an interesting academic discipline which deals with such matters; it is called LINGUISTICS.

Language learning, on the other hand, involves developing a performance SKILL. The goal is not to display knowledge ABOUT the language, but to express oneself IN the language. Seen in this light, becoming functional in a foreign language is more like learning to ice skate, or to play the piano (also skills), than it is like taking a sociology or physics course. Just as is the case with other performance skills, mature individuals exhibit varying degrees of residual talent for mastering a foreign tongue, most of us facing real challenges in this regard.

So if you now find yourself in an uphill battle trying to pick up another language when you are already “past your prime,” it may help to know that this is a natural condition, since the deck has been genetically stacked against you. However, this is also a good time to remember that you HAVE already learned a great deal about the new language, that you CAN already partially function in this strange tongue, and that there ARE strategies which can improve your chances for success in this less-than-ideal situation.

In your previous foreign-language courses you were exposed to a large amount of information, which did not all stick – not just because you were not always paying attention: there was just too much data to assimilate on a first pass. If you’re now ready to take deeper look at how the language works, you should get seriously organized to maximize your learning.

Find an effective method for mastering those essential but arbitrary details; e.g. verbal irregularities, whether the word for bottle exists as a noun the bottle (what gender?) or as a verb we bottle it (and its conjugational class, what kinds of objects it takes, etc.) – or both.
The grammar-review component of your new course will better present many recalcitrant features (e.g. subjunctive) and difficult constructions (uses of *se*) than did your earlier textbooks. A foreign language is best approached on its own terms, from within its grammatical system rather than from the outside, distorted by English translation (*traductor* = *traidor*). Familiarity with grammatical terminology is crucial to describing patterns in the new language, to clarifying its procedures and mechanisms. Grammar is key to perceiving the systematic regularity, meaningful structure, and organizational unity of Spanish.

Be conscientious in doing your written assignments: they help you practice something new and strange that you need to get used to (“practice makes perfect.”). When your corrected assignment is returned to you, figure out why you still made whatever mistakes you did. Review those problem areas, to reduce chances of repeating those mistakes the next time.

Take every opportunity to hear and SPEAK the language. If your class does not provide conversational opportunities, you must actively create chances to use Spanish for real-world communication. Seek out Spanish-speaking friends, surf for Spanish-language media, and GO ABROAD for foreign study. When you do, stay as long as possible (a semester is better than a summer; a year is better than a semester) and LIMIT YOUR CONTACTS WITH ENGLISH-SPEAKERS; otherwise you risk squandering an opportunity and throwing away your money.

Do not be easily discouraged. Realize that second-language learning is an uphill climb. It will not happen without your active involvement and your best efforts. Pick up a textbook of annotated readings, keep adding to your active vocabulary, intensify your grammar review, and use the language (orally and in writing) as much as possible. Progress will be slow but steady — unless you opt for an extended study-abroad experience, away from English, in which case it will be more dramatic. Good luck!

**IN SUM:** There are two options for improving fluency in a foreign language after the introductory courses (i.e. the equivalent of the first two years of college study):

1) Go to a country where the language is spoken and immerse yourself in it for months or years, staying away from English — this option works better the younger you are.

2) Take more courses in the language and its analysis; find readings and podcasts, get as much experience using the language as possible here in your North American context.

**Grammar study and structural analysis of the foreign language can help**

All human languages have the potential to express the same messages, and they do so by pairing certain sounds with certain meanings. But the grammatical mechanisms which relate sounds to meaning in each case can vary widely. Linguistic description concerns itself with determining the basic elements of a language, showing how they interrelate and form structures of various types, and clarifying their systematic and regular behavior (“rules”).

For comparison, consider musicology, the scholarly description of music. It studies how tones are organized into scales (major, minor, Phrygian mode...) sequential and simultaneous relationships between tones (interval, dissonance, cadence ...), the several schools of composing (baroque, classical, minimalist...), form and organization (third movement, tone row, sonata form...), performance medium (piano, string quartet, full orchestra ...), etc.

Describing any system identifies certain components and their relationships to each other. In the music analogy some concepts are tonality, *allegro andante*, crab inversion, descant, etc. In a grammatical system, we find concepts like clause, subject, object (direct, indirect), adverb, subjunctive, transitive, definite article, locative, impersonal, etc., as well as the processes (e.g. passivize, nominalize, subordinate, modify) that they undergo. Each branch of knowledge develops its own specialized vocabulary, appropriate to describing its content.
Language learning beyond the basics often involves mastering structures and processes which are opaque to translation, meaning or logic, and can best (or only) be understood via an avowedly grammatical analysis. Here are three examples from Spanish:

(1) If who is generally quier, why can it not be so in the Spanish version of The woman who lives next door has three dogs.? That is, why does one NOT say *La señora quien vive al lado...? The reason is that Spanish disallows quien as the subject of a “restrictive relative clause” (that is, one which provides information essential to the identification of the noun it modifies), which is what we have here in ... quien vive al lado ... (since this clause pinpoints one woman). What seems a vocabulary problem finds its resolution in underlying structural factors.

(2) Spanish has a passive construction entirely parallel to the English one seen in The tacos were prepared by my aunt. Los tacos fueron preparados por mi tía. But the correspondence fails in cases like e.g. My aunt was thanked (for the tacos) by all of her nieces and nephews. In fact *Mi tía fue agradecida por todos sus sobrinos... is impossible in Spanish. But what is the crucial difference between these two cases?

Answer: (a) passivizing an active subject means changing an object into a subject, and (b) Spanish passive applies to VERBAL DIRECT objects only (not indirect nor prepositional). So although passive has the same effect in each language when it applies, its applicability is limited in Spanish. *Mi tía fue agradecida fails since mi tía is an INDIRECT object in the active version of the phrase: Todos sus sobrinos le agradecieron [a su tía]IND [los tacos]DIR. (Agradecer’s DIRECT object tacos CAN be passivized: Los tacos le fueron agradecidos …)

Crucial to this analysis is the fact that thank and agradecer take different sets of objects: agradecer has one direct, one indirect (agradecerle algo DIR a alguien IND); while its English counterpart takes a verbal one and a prepositional one: thank someone DIR FOR something PREP. The Spanish direct object tacos is matched with a prepositional object in English, while the other Spanish object tía (personal, indirect) is the wrong type for passivizing

(3) Spanish has three versions of the English comparative term than: que, de, de lo que. So how do we know which one to use where? These sentences exemplify the problem:

a) She spends more than she earns.
b) “...those who work with her.
c) She has more than 5 credit cards. (she has 6)
d) “... (she has money in the bank to pay them off).

a) Ella gasta más de lo que gana.
b) “... que los que trabajan con ella.
c) Ella tiene más de 5 tarjetas de crédito. (tiene 6)
d) “... que 5 tarjetas de crédito. (tiene dinero en el banco)

Look at what immediately follows the than phrase in the Spanish version: (a) a CLAUSE (a verb conjugated for an understood subject); (b) it is a NOUN PHRASE (a pronoun and its modifier)—it could also be an adverb phrase or adjective phrase ...); (c) one NUMBER compared with another; (d) a NUMBER compared with a NON-NUMBER. So the generalization is: than ➔ de lo que before a clause, ➔ de before a comparison of quantities of the same thing, ➔ que before a quantity compared with a non-numerical concept, and ➔ que before a phrase. The translation of this one word turns out to be a function of several grammatical factors.

IN SUM: Do your best to familiarize yourself with grammar terms and processes, since they go a long way to explaining some otherwise mysterious behaviors of the language.