

THE
WORLD
GUIDE TO
LANGUAGE
LEARNING



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One

Settling In: *Where Do I Go from Here?*

Imagine that the long-awaited day has arrived. Not only are you “in-country,” you have moved into what will be your home for the next year or two. That first-blush newness of arrival has become memory: the chaos of an unfamiliar airport, that first taxi or bus ride, the new smells, the initial anxiety of a new destination.

You have settled in, at least physically. You have moved from the hotel into your new “family’s” home, an apartment, a house. You have made your first visits to the major sights: the marketplace and plaza, the cathedral, the town statues, the nearest beach and historic markers. You have tasted the local delicacy, washed it down with the local brew, exchanged pleasantries with your new coworkers or classmates and the neighborhood kids. And you have discovered how ill-prepared you are to carry on normal daily conversations.

You are not alone. It is a challenge faced by thousands of Americans each year. Your opportunity to live overseas may have come suddenly. Amid preparations for moving, winding up work and personal affairs, you have had no time to study a foreign language. You may be a spouse, uprooted when your husband or wife’s employer decided work overseas must begin immediately. Skilled language students are not immune: you may find your straight-A classroom performance didn’t prepare you to

crowd up to the window and buy postage stamps or chat with neighbors about what you are doing in their country. Even if you studied in an intensive Peace Corps-type training program, you find that folks on the street spray words faster than a record on the wrong speed. They slur words, drop syllables. You speak clearly, but folks can't understand you.

On the other hand, maybe you are the exception. You speak the local language well enough to carry out your daily routine and perform your job, or are one of those gifted individuals who picks up languages without effort.

If, however, you are like most of us, if you

- find yourself living in a community where people speak a language you have never heard, let alone never studied; or
- have the basics, but find you can communicate only with language teachers; or
- are well on your way to mastering the language, but haven't yet become fluent, this book is for you.

Our goal for language learning is *communicative competence*. It's a simple goal: to be able to speak to, understand, and be understood by native speakers.

It sounds deceptively simple, communicative competence. It's strikingly different from the goals of many language programs. The aim is not to analyze the language, explain its grammatical structure, or hear lectures on such topics as the indicative use of subjective past participles in action clauses. It's not to memorize grammatical rules, manipulate lists of verbs, or sit through hours of conjugation drills.

Our goal is to communicate—effectively, efficiently, comfortably—with folks who speak the language. It means learning not only words, phrases, and sentences, but the cultural components of language—the social rules; the signs, gestures, and other nonverbal cues by which people communicate; the context in which words take on meaning.

If you share this goal with us, this book is for you.

MAKING IMMERSION WORK FOR YOU

In living abroad, you have taken a key step toward foreign language proficiency: native speakers, speaking naturally, surround you.

If you had a chance to study at all, however, you have found that despite your formal classes, training program, or self-study, you are not yet fluent.

Don Larson, a linguist with a distinguished background in language teaching in the Third World, reminds us that after formal classes come

to an end, your learning must continue. "The school must therefore help the student to become a learner, to follow a different pattern: learners tapping the resources of knowers."¹ Yet, most courses fall into a standard pattern in which students study routines set for them by their teachers.

Living overseas verifies Larson's observation. You find yourself a learner as well as an expatriate. Without formal language class, though, you lack direction for your learning. Suddenly you must be a self-directed learner, a role for which you have not been trained.

Our message here is simple: you can greatly improve your language learning prospects (and better understand the culture and people of the country in which you are living) if you personally assume responsibility for your own language learning.

Unfortunately, as thousands of Peace Corps volunteers, business people, government workers, and study-abroad students can testify, living abroad merely provides an opportunity to learn. It does not guarantee language proficiency.

Immersion in a different culture sets the stage for language learning. For maximum benefit, however, you need an individual learning program which systematically taps the resources available in the community. Language learning, even when you are immersed in a native-speaking environment, will flourish best when not left to chance.

You can become fluent without formal classes or teachers by concentrating on your own needs rather than on performing for a language instructor. To do that, you need a framework which

1. provides direction for your language learning,
2. focuses your learning on areas of personal interest, and
3. systematically prepares you to deal with more complex language usage.

This introductory chapter outlines such a method. Subsequent chapters provide detailed recommendations for implementing your own language learning program. But first, let us place language learning in its proper cultural context.

THE CULTURAL CONTEXT OF LANGUAGE LEARNING

Living abroad is exhilarating. We make new friends; discover new sights, sounds, tastes, smells; see firsthand events, places, art works, historical and natural monuments we have only read about or seen on television. We plunge into different patterns of living, probe common events from new perspectives, challenge our assumptions about what is "natural" and "right."

Immersion in another culture provides much more than the setting for language learning. It serves as the context for an intense experience in cultural learning and personal growth. We learn about other peoples, gain insight into cultural and historical identities, priorities, and values different from our own. We gain, as much as anything else, a deeper understanding of ourselves as individuals and as members of a particular culture and nationality group.

Living as a foreigner is not all good times, of course. We become frustrated and perplexed when people misunderstand us and we fail to understand them; when our work seems to bring no result; when "simple" things go awry—mail arrives late; when grocery shopping consumes an entire morning; when the office telephone still hasn't been connected; when the prearranged taxi fails to show; when the bus stops on the "wrong" corner and we miss it; when the bed promised by the host organization comes a month late. We feel lonely, missing old friends, familiar sights and ways of doing things, and accustomed foods and leisure activities. We fall prey to illness or disease.

Living abroad can be stressful as we encounter cultural differences at deeper and deeper levels. We experience the uncertainty involved in deciphering unfamiliar cues, in coping with unfamiliar behaviors, in attempting to adjust to new ways of doing things.

Some days we wonder why we came. At other times, we rejoice that we have been so fortunate to experience life anew. Every day we are reminded that differences between ourselves and our hosts include not only language, but a complex pattern of beliefs, values, and activities that we call culture. Sometimes we fail to communicate because language differences impede us. At other times, we find the right words, but realize that something beyond language is at work.

The pursuit of communicative competence using the techniques recommended in this book takes place in the context of learning and adapting to living in another culture. The better you understand the language, the easier it will be to understand the cultural milieu about you. But the demands of your cultural experiences will sometimes seem to be barriers to your spending the time and energy needed to pursue language learning as intensely as is needed to become a fluent speaker.

Recognize the cultural context of your language learning. Expect to cope not only with a new language but also with the personal emotional challenges of living abroad.

LEARNING STYLE AND LANGUAGE STUDY

In recent years, linguists and language professionals have made great gains in language-teaching methodology. A host of different

approaches have been developed based on experience and research into varied learning styles.

Traditional language teaching rested on the study of grammar. As language professionals realized that one doesn't necessarily learn to speak through grammar translation, speaking and listening exercises became common. More recently, researchers have looked not only at techniques of instruction but also at the instructional atmosphere as important components of good language training. Approaches have been advocated which emphasize long periods of listening before one begins to speak, physical response to words so as to tie language to action, reduction of stress for the learner through relaxation techniques, strong peer support and cooperation among fellow language learners, and inductive learning.²

Effective language learning involves more than learning words, phrases, and sentence structures. It is an interactive process involving language, culture, personality. Activities which work for one individual may not be effective for another. Effective language learning thus must rest not only upon particular learning techniques, but also on those techniques which are meaningful to you as an individual learner.

The recommendations for field-based language learning advocated in *The Whole World Guide to Language Learning* are based on a notion we call *in situ* exploration, or more simply, learning in place, that is, where the language is spoken. This method lets you direct your own learning. The approach is eclectic—it recognizes that specific objectives, particular activities, and learning exercises must mesh with the learning style which best fits you. As a learner, you must consider our recommendations with a self-analytical eye. Ask yourself, "How best do I learn?" "What kinds of activities best fit my preferred style as a learner?" "How can I use these suggestions to take advantage of my experience and strengths as a learner?"

The *in situ* approach is broad enough to accommodate a variety of learning styles. Let's take a look at it.

THE LEARNING CYCLE: A KEY TO SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING

In reality, only rarely do individuals have the tenacity (and need) to study foreign language entirely on their own. Most of us believe we need teacher direction. We feel lost without classes, books, someone who knows if we are correct or not. We need structure.

In conventional language study, structure is imposed by grammar. One studies language that is correct according to recognized rules.

organizing sessions, finding and working with mentors—you will hasten your own language learning. Helping your spouse sharpens your own language ability. You will become your family's best target language speaker.

JUMP INTO THE POOL BEFORE YOU CAN SWIM

In general, the more you interact with local folks in their language, the more quickly you will master the language. And the better you speak the language, the greater your opportunities will be to participate in a broader range of activities. You don't have to speak fluently, however, before you begin talking with people. You can develop friends and build language ability at the same time.

Use life's necessities as language practice. Unless you live in a five-star hotel with a rich expatriate aunt, or are chained up inside a barracks or student dormitory, life abroad means you will spend time shopping. You need bread, wine, and cheese; toilet paper, toothpaste, and soap; stamps, envelopes, and writing paper; maybe a new shirt, skirt, or sandals. Or you may want to find a friend's house, catch a bus to a nearby city, or tour a castle.

When you do venture out, don't run errands; go on language learning excursions. Buy bread at the *boulangerie*; cheese at the *fromagerie*; your soaps and toiletries at the *parfumerie*. Avoid the supermarket. It takes more time. It is more hassle. It also creates opportunities to talk to people, to practice, to gain fluency.

In short, don't spend Saturday morning shopping. Make Saturday's language class a field trip to the nearest commercial strip. Buy a few items as your language exercise.

Buy your stamps at the central post office, even if you can use the APO system. It takes longer, but the reward transcends language learning. Think of it as buying year-round Christmas presents. Your stateside friends will enjoy a letter adorned with an exotic foreign stamp much more than one mailed with the same boring stamp they got last week from Chicago.

Dine at restaurants frequented by local people rather than by tourists. Local cafes are cheaper as well as being good places to practice reading and speaking. If you are a bit daring, order at random. You will quickly learn the names of various dishes. If you cannot tolerate hunger pangs, carry a sandwich for those times you order something you just can't get down. (Wouldn't you think, for instance, that *beche-de-mer* would provide an exotic entree to a lovely evening? Alas, for the

uninitiated, the sea slug serves better as a stimulant for conversation than it does delight for the taste buds!)

In summary, creatively meeting your survival needs provides language practice in its cultural context. Structure your chores into learning opportunities.

Engage in a social life that both fits your style and reinforces your language practice. Recreation and relaxation preferences differ. Some of us read; others climb mountains or scuba dive. Some of us thrive on competitive sports: tennis, football, hockey, cribbage. Others think joy comes on a bar stool, guzzling a brew and lamenting the ways of the world with our fellow swizzlers.

Whatever your preferences, recreation offers opportunity to meet people and expand your language ability in specialized areas. Try joining a local sports club, for example. If your sport isn't among the local fare, try something different: soccer, *Te Ano*, cricket, lacrosse, rugby, quoits. Even if you are chosen last in pickup games, you will at least meet people and learn new terms. If you play poorly (and your teammates take the game seriously), you can learn swear words (a vital part of your listening vocabulary).

Another idea is to volunteer your services for a worthy cause. Spend time with orphans, at a day-care center, youth club, adult education center, hospital, library, or historical society. Contribute, as you would at home, to the betterment of society, and make friends while you are at it.

If you have the inclination, you can visit local pubs. You will find establishments where *gringos* (or *haoles* or soldiers or *gaijin*) aren't welcome, so make the rounds carefully, preferably with a local guide.

If music is your interest, find a musical group, regular jam session, choir, or coffee house. If you sing, play a mean guitar, flute, or panpipe, you can make acquaintances by the score. Add local favorites to your repertoire, and your musical flair will win many friends.

If you are a churchgoer, your religion offers a passport to a family of believers with a myriad of activities and a body of specialized language as well as a congregation of people. If you are not a churchgoer, become one. Churches offer social, cultural and language experiences as well as religion.

Try learning a local board or card game. Whether it's checkers, chess, *warrl*, or *Parcheesi*, watch first to learn the rules. Have a friend teach you the basics. You have added a pastime, vocabulary, and another window on the language.

One more suggestion is to take advantage of live arts, entertainment, and social events. The potential is enormous: theater, concerts, opera, special arts festivals, holiday feast days, weddings, coming-out and birthday parties, wakes, arts and crafts fairs, school presentations,

recitals, lectures, folk festivals and folk-group concerts, saints days, etc.

Each of the above activities offers special language forms and different ways to meet people. Seek them out—beginning with those which fit your own lifestyle—and use them to expand your language-speaking ability.

Enroll in a traditional language class. Be broad-minded as well as eclectic. If you believe the structure and direction of a traditional, teacher-directed language class will help you, sign up. Attend faithfully. Work hard in class. Do your homework. The regular schedule will focus your study, expand your vocabulary, and, perhaps, sharpen your speaking and listening skills.

A note of warning: don't let formal classes replace learning. Don't enroll, congratulate yourself, and assume your language needs will be met. You must study diligently after class if you expect to master your target language. A traditional language class, at best, provides an appetizer to learning; it is not the whole meal.

Spend time with people of different age groups. Children and elderly people can be excellent resources for the language learner. Both have time to converse, and both can be enticed to speak slowly enough to be understood.

Children use basic grammatical structures and can teach simple songs and local games.

One beauty of old age is that old people recognize the value of unhurried conversation. Throughout the world, they gather to exchange pleasantries; they stroll about; they sit, rock, observe. Many have time for you.

PUT YOURSELF INTO THE LINE OF FIRE

One major advantage of living abroad is that your target language permeates the environment. The atmosphere itself is ripe for the plucking of language instruction.

Your first days abroad provide an ideal time to tune into a multitude of possibilities. Notice how reading opportunities leap out at you en route from the airport: billboards and marquees, street signs, shop window displays, newspaper stands, and bus advertisements provide a cornucopia of instruction.

Listen as sounds inundate you: blaring radios and television sets; hawkers, street vendors, public address systems; a babble of voices in buses, on the streets, in cafes. Ride the *Strassenbahn* or metro. Listen to that couple behind you, to the four businessmen at the next restaurant table, to the animated sparring of a vendor and customer in the fresh fish

question and into a negative sentence. If your error was in vocabulary, use the word in another context. Try as many different sentences with the correction as you can.

SKILLS THAT WILL HELP YOU BE A MORE SUCCESSFUL LEARNER

In addition to the techniques presented above, you can develop skills that help make your learning more effective. Whenever you practice—at whatever your level of ability—keep the following in mind as you converse with others or practice on your own.

Master the Style of a Language Pro

As a learner you will have difficulty understanding people. They will have difficulty understanding you. The following hints can ease the transition from learner to conversationalist.

Show that you are paying attention to the conversation by giving steady feedback. Remember those “uh-huhs” that your parents bugged you about? Learn the target-language equivalents. They keep conversation going even if you can’t phrase a response.

Ask people to repeat and/or speak slower. You won’t always understand what people say; learn polite ways to ask them to repeat or to speak more slowly.

Speak simply. Use what you know. You don’t have to speak elegant, poetic language to make a point. Use simple phrases and sentences, particularly if you are a beginner. Avoid sentence patterns or words which give you trouble. As you discover patterns that work, hang on to them. Use them again and again until you can blithely roll them off your tongue. Then vary them slightly and listen to your mastery grow.

If you are not understood, paraphrase. Your natural tendency is to repeat your words in a louder voice. Chances are, unless you were mumbling, speaking louder won’t help. After repeating once, try a different approach.

Learn to gesture. The spoken word is part of a more complex communication system. Use your hands, eyes, and body to convey meaning. Watch how native speakers use their bodies; gestures are an essential part of communication and vary from culture to culture.

Learn the language fillers that native speakers use. Speakers of Waray-Waray (a Filipino language), for instance, have a handy word,

kwan, to convey meaning when they can't think of the proper word, or when an imprecise word is satisfactory, for instance, "We were at the (*kwan*) when he came running up, eyes afire, tears streaming down his face." Fillers are used for words we can't think of, or to fill in time until we can think of the correct response or statement. In English we use such words as *thing*, *thingamajig*, *whatsit*, and *whatsername* when we cannot think of specific terms or names.

Use Mnemonics to Associate Words

Mnemonics are techniques to remember things by calling on familiar words to remind you of new words and their meanings.

Rhymes. Rhyming words (in the target language or English) help you recall other words. Memorize a new word, then think of one or two rhyming words that remind you of it; when you remember one, you will recall the others.

Alliterations. Words that begin with the same sounds can be remembered together, for example, in English, "from *stem* to *stern*." Be sure, however, to associate each similar-sounding word with its proper meaning.

Onomatopoeia. Words that remind you of a particular sound help you form a mental image of their meaning, such as *buzz*, *hiss*, *cuckoo*, *boom*.

Cognates. Words in different languages that stem from the same root word help you build on your English vocabulary. Examples include *madre* in Spanish and *mother*; *kalt* (in German) and *cold*; *vacances* (in French) and *vacation*. Some words are borrowed from other languages, e.g., *boondocks* from the Tagalog *bundok*. They will expand your vocabulary.

Word and image associations. Words which fall into groups can be remembered by recalling other words in the same group or by associating them with mental images of what they mean. For instance, we can associate

- opposites: words thought of in pairs—hot-cold, wet-dry, etc.;
- synonyms: words with the same or nearly the same meaning—glad, joyful, happy;
- physical properties: words which indicate color, size, smell, feel, taste, etc.;
- function: words which indicate use—things for writing with, riding in, sitting on, etc.