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How Learning a New Language Can Benefit Business Professionals

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Abstract

A new language can certainly provide new dimensions and outlook on life and allow one to tap into different parts of the brain. It can help an individual to understand others and oneself better; and expand the boundaries of their actual and virtual worlds. In addition, using even the very basics of a new language can establish a closer connection with the native speaker of that language. This initiative can send positive signals of acceptance, trust and interest to the native speakers. A Business professional can certainly benefit from establishment of such a positive relationship.

This paper explores why and how, in particular, a Business professional should go about learning a new language. It establishes connections between language and culture. It presents innovative methods of learning a new language using the latest technologies, learning ideas and approaches. The use of emerging technologies such as those used in speech recognition are also discussed. A number of multimedia language learning environments, which encourage creativity and right brain functions are presented, analyzed and recommended.

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1. Introduction

The word language can be traced back to its Latin origin *lingua*, which means tongue. Hence, quite appropriately, it is often referred to as a *tongue*. The ability to communicate in the *mother tongue* can be easily taken for granted until one is in a situation to choose or have to use another language.

All languages stem from the same origin – that is the human thought. With the eye and ear of our mind we see images and hear sounds of actions and events. We can, without any conscious effort, store these thought-based clips for future reference or turn into actions. If we wish to share our thought-based information with others then we will have to carry out some form of conversion process. Unfortunately, we have not achieved that level of sophistication to convey our thoughts directly to another human being. Although symbolic representation is still a very effective way, language-based communication is perhaps the most commonly used method. For example, this paper is relying on the use of a language to share the author's ideas with others.

2. Problem Statement and the Research Question

The majority of people are blessed with at least one default language and we learn this language (*mother tongue*) almost automatically. So, a great deal of effort would not be usually required in acquiring the necessary skills to communicate with each other and meet our standard day-to-day needs. However, we will certainly face a different challenge when it comes to learning another language.

This paper aims to explore the benefits of having some knowledge of a different language when a Business person visits another country. The abilities can be even limited and very basic conversational skills. Can these skills help the Business professionals to feel welcomed and be accepted more quickly by their hosts in social and professional situations?

3. Approach to the Investigation – Language and Culture

In any given culture, the roots are deeply established in the years of tradition and history. Hence, it would be reasonable to assume that often language and culture are interrelated as one influences the other.

The development of languages and their evolution has been very much influenced by the culture, customs and the geographical location of their people. Hence, different languages have different ways of pronouncing and producing sounds. For instance the position of the tongue and the shape of the lips contribute to the basic sounds produced. In a language, we use these basic sound units (phonemes) to build words and put these words together according to some rules specific to that language to make phrases. So, both sounding out the words and sequencing them cause the variations in different languages. As a result of these differences, we have ended up with different ways of expressing and conveying the same thought, which is, probably created and processed in the same or very similar manner.

Fuller (1987) suggests that learning a different language enables us to operate in a world much bigger than the one provided by our mother tongue. This is a valid point as a new language allows us to assume or at least imitate a different personality than the one we are accustomed to in our mother tongue. For example, the sense of humour, the manner of requesting (direct/indirect), the form of verbal protest, showing courtesy, voice-volume and intonation used are some of the examples. Take English and German, which are both sub-

branches of the Indo-European languages group. Despite the similarities between English and German (as opposed to a Romance language such as Portuguese), one needs to adjust his/her personality according to the language (English/German) spoken. Some of the cleverly chosen ambiguous and double-meaning dialogue used in English (similar to those heard in the classic British comedies) may not sound funny at all in German even if they are translated well. Cursing a friend to show sincerity in one language may be interpreted as an insult in another. To sound polite when asking a favour in a language such as Farsi relies on the intonation of our voice and it makes the use of politeness indicators such as please and thank you redundant. If the intonation is not used correctly, it can become offensive. Speaking loudly is quite acceptable in one language but it can sound aggressive in another. So, we embark on a journey and cross many different boundaries when we choose a different language. This experience can make us appreciate and understand our mother tongue in a different way.

In order to establish the benefits of learning another language, the relationship between language and culture should be investigated. As an example, an investigation by Nooriafshar and Vibert (2012) has utilised the data collected from eleven different case studies based on Japan. Each case study deals with issues and challenges facing the western expatriates residing in Japan for the purposes of business or education. The case studies were analysed separately and then the commonalities in issues were identified.

Although Japan is regarded as one of the main democracies of the world, one must remember that it is a society in which people are ranked according to their social status or position at work. Hence, a totally different kind of relationships between people should be expected. As pointed out by Hofstede (1980), the fact that not all individuals in societies are equal expresses the attitude of the culture towards these inequalities amongst us. Hofstede

(1993) also suggests that Japan is a hierarchical society. The hierarchical feature of the Japanese society does not imply inequity. Japan is a free country with its strong beliefs in their traditions and religions of mainly Buddhism and Shintoism. With regard to their traditional beliefs, one may refer to the Bushido concept which contains egalitarian principles that have allowed wealth to trickle down to the vast majority in Japanese society (Fujimura, 2011). The traditional religions have also had similar effects on the Japanese attitude in terms of equity and equality of human beings in their society. According to Taka et al (1994), "In the case of Buddhism, every living creature is said to have an equal Buddha-hood, a Buddhahood which is very similar with the idea of numen and micro-cosm."

Respect for others, in particular, people who are older or have a higher status in the society or the organisation is definitely observed in Japan. Respecting the superiors is extremely important. For instance, the person in charge in Japan would practically decide how the subordinates should behave or even appear in their presence. Unlike the western societies, the superior can even charge the subordinates with various tasks outside the written duties of the position. One must remember that this kind of general attitude should not be perceived in a negative manner as it certainly functions well and effectively for Japan. Perhaps, some of the other societies may start learning how to re-introduce this important attitude which is unfortunately being gradually phased out. One must accept the fact that unlike Australia and Canada, Japan is not regarded as a universalist, rule based society but it is classed as a particularist society. For further reading refer to Trompenaars (1994).

Many of these cultural attitudes have influenced the Japanese language. So, the true adoption of these cultural ways requires some knowledge of the Japanese language. The insight from the interviews validated the advantages of knowing the language. It was found

that a lack of knowledge of the Japanese language can create a solitary situation for the Westerner who is trying to become part of the society. It would be reasonable to hypothesize that these findings can, to a certain extent, be valid in the case of other cultures and languages too. The next section provides a background on language learning.

4. Methods of Learning a Language

Some people learn a new language more easily and quickly than others. These people are said to have a special talent for learning languages. Unfortunately, the exact nature of the conditions and factors that contribute to these so-called talents has not been known. It has been said that people with a musical ear and ability to play musical instruments are good at learning languages. Although there is no scientific proof, the reasoning could be due to very similar abilities. They can remember and imitate sounds to produce tunes or words. It is interesting to note that there are other similar situations where one form of skill helps another one. For example, poets can be good painters too. Again we can reason by considering the visual abilities of a painter. In other words, what a poet does with words is very similar to what a painter does with shapes and colours on canvas or paper. In both cases the eye of the mind sees images and then they are expressed and described using different interfaces.

Although a basic knowledge of grammar is helpful in understanding and using any language more effectively, it is not essential in learning it. As a child, we learn our mother tongue mainly by association. In other words, we associate words and phrases with situations, sounds and visions. For instance, take the example of a child attempting to touch a hot surface and hearing a word(s) in a special tone from his/her mother. This child will always associate avoiding excessive heat or danger with the words heard. If we analyse this basic but

practical example, we would realize that a language learning process is being taken place in a natural manner. Incidentally, domestic animals also learn in a similar fashion.

A practical tip in learning a language is to try and imitate the words like the natives pronounce. Many Indo-European languages share similar words, which are pronounced in different ways. Usually, these differences are minor with only a change of position for the accent. This is quite apparent when we listen to people with different mother tongues pronouncing words in our language. For non-academic learning purposes, we do not have to be 100% accurate in using the “the” equivalent. Instead, an effort to imitate the sounds as the locals do would be more useful. For instance, if we say *shaavesh* to a hotel receptionist in Portugal, he/she will know that we are asking for our keys (in Portuguese: *chaves*). If we pronounce the word as *chaves* (*ch* as in change) even in a complete sentence, they will not understand what we are trying to say.

A fascinating method of learning languages has been provided by the well-known language teacher Michel Thomas. He adopts a less formal but very effective approach, which places an emphasis on understanding rather than memorizing. With this method, the learners do not need to take any notes, read from a book or even do any homework. Michel Thomas encourages the learners to construct their own learning material based on what they already know. For instance, he teaches Spanish (Thomas, 2000) to complete beginners, who speak English, by informing them about the common routes of the words found in English and Spanish. He explains that these words are spelled almost in the same way (*possible* or *acceptable*) but pronounced differently. Guidance on pronunciation is provided so that the learners can apply a general rule to similar situations. Hence, the learners start constructing sentences by receiving guidance instead of trying to memorize words and phrases. According

to Thomas (2000), close to 1200 words in English end with *tion* (pronounced *shen*). These words are the same in Spanish except they are spelled with *cion* and pronounced as *sion*.

Hence, the message that we already have a knowledge base for the new language (Spanish or even French) is certainly encouraging. In particular, speaking English well or as a native tongue puts us in an advantageous position for learning several Latin-based languages. The commonalities in sounds for many words (such as milk and the German *milch*) are also a very good start for learning Germanic languages.

The author has had the opportunity of evaluating and testing the Teach Yourself *one-day series* (French, Spanish and Italian) by Smith (2004). The material is presented mainly in the medium of audio (CD). The approach is extremely effective as the new learner is not overwhelmed by excessive amounts of vocabulary and grammatical rules. The words provided are just enough to have a basic conversation when necessary. Encouraging the learners to use body language is also very practical and useful. For instance, doing an impression of doors opening and closing with hands after *a quelle heure, a que hora* or *a che ora* is a good example of encouraging learners to be creative and innovative. This way of creativity can of course be extended to various other situations and it will encourage the learner to communicate in a new language.

The materials in One-Day series contain many features of effective and innovative teaching. Learning by association is encouraged by linking words with words, images or sounds that one can easily remember. For instance, thinking of the principal coming down the main road would be a good example of learning *la rue principale*. The learner is also guided to build new meanings based on what they already know throughout the course. Avoiding

long sentences and large amounts of vocabulary to learn and remember is also effective and appropriate for beginners.

The following section presents approaches to language learning using the latest and emerging technologies, concepts and ideas.

5. Main Findings – The Latest Technologies in Learning Languages

Using multimedia system, learners are able to learn a foreign word or phrase by seeing how it is written, how it sound sounds and what object or situation it refers to. For instance, if they wish to learn how to say “Where is the taxi station please” in Spanish, they can read the phrase and listen to its recording. Obviously they can repeat the phrase too if they wish. There is no doubt that this way of learning is far more effective than the old-fashioned text only approach. Research findings have shown that students prefer and benefit from visually rich methods of teaching. For details see Nooriafshar et al (2004); and Nooriafshar and Todhunter (2004).

The UTalk apps series on languages, originally known as EuroTalk*interactive* (2002), are iPhone/iPad multimedia learning applications, which approach language learning by association. This is achieved by presenting an image on the computer screen and at the same time pronouncing the word/phrase with it its text on the computer screen. Therefore, an effective blend of three kinds of media (visual, audio and text) is presented to the learner. The use of appropriate and at the same time entertaining images is a very powerful way of tapping into our right-brain, which according to Buzan (2002) is responsible for more creative activities such as comprehending rhythm, colour and space. He also believes that relying on our left-brain functions limits us to only 50% of our brain.

The learning approach relies on text, sound and images, For instance, an image is associated with the phrase *Je ne sens pas bien* (I do not feel well). So in the future, when we experience a situation like the one depicted by the image, we will be prompted to remember the phrase, which we associate it. This experience is, in some ways, very similar to the hot surface and the child hearing the word *hot*. Similarly, a descriptive image is associated with *Dèsolè* (In French: sorry)

As suggested by Gruneberg (1994) the Learning by Association approach has been in existence since the ancient times. The ancient Greeks regarded this method an efficient way of learning and remembering by utilising a memory handle.

Gruneberg (2002) approaches language learning in a similar manner. However, the images become virtual rather than actual. In other words, the learner is instructed to use their mind's eye to visualize for 10 seconds an image related to the segment. For example, in order to learn the word *valise* (suitcase in French), the learner is asked to visualize the image of suitcases, which are strewn all over the valleys. This is probably more than just the use of the mind's eye as the "mind's ear" is also encouraged to associate the sounding (pronunciation) of the word *valise* with *valez* (valleys).

Some of the other interesting examples presented by Gruneberg are:

- Imagine that you are looking at a plate (in French: *assiette*) and saying to yourself *I-see-it*.
- Imagine that you are going through the customs (in French: *douane*) and counting *the-one, the- two and the-three*.

As in the EuroTalk examples, we can easily refer to these visualizations in our mind and be prompted to recall the words. Although these ideas can be taught and practiced in a

classroom from a book, the technology has made the delivery of them of more efficient and readily accessible.

It might have sounded far-fetched or a technological prediction if a few years ago, we had claimed that one-day we would be able to convert our language or dialect to any language or dialect via a machine.

The introductions of Apple's ios5 in 2011 and the latest hardware and software available on iPhone 4s and higher, have certainly added another dimension to learning. We can mention Apple iPhone's intelligent personal assistant SIRI as a specific example of innovation which can have amazing potential uses in education. This system has been introduced and promoted as an intelligent personal assistant which allows the user to set alarms, organize meetings, search the web and display the emails. Its, very applications can certainly go beyond those features. It can enable the user to hold an almost meaningful dialogue (not just commands) with the system. The developers are continuously enhancing the abilities and performance of the system. Hence, having conversation with an "intelligent" and knowledgeable machine is not a science fiction any longer. The system has a great potential for a variety uses including education.

The author has experimented with SIRI for language learning purposes by switching the language option of SIRI from English to French and German. The author, as an experiment, tried pronouncing "Que pouvez-vous faire pour moi" (What can you do for me). It was a pleasant surprise when the system responded by displaying all possible options in French. The author then asked, in French, "What is the temperature in Paris" (Quelle est la température à Paris en ce moment)? The system responded in French what exactly the temperature was for that time in Paris.

After a few more attempts, it was realised that the system could only comprehend the exact pronunciation as by the native speakers of French. This was in fact a positive challenge. It forced the author to try and experiment with different ways of pronouncing certain words. For instance the inflections were altered. After several attempts, the system could understand many words and phrases uttered by the author. The author has also tested and tried the Japanese option of SIRI. It was very encouraging to note that it understood and responded to questions such “kyo wa tenki wa do desu ka” (Today, how is the weather) by talking back and displaying both text and charts. This kind of conversation can be a very effective way of practising conversation and pronunciation.

The advantage of all this is that the system responds to the question or statement. A relevant response by the system is, perhaps, the best instant reward which provides a satisfying sense of achievement for the learner. Hence, one can establish a limited but quite natural conversation with the system. The experiment with German was also very similar. It should be noted that the future for the educational applications of this kind of technology is certainly very promising.

Another very promising technology for language learning is the SmartPen by LiveScribe. These pens can record text and audio simultaneously and associate what is written by the pen with the relevant audio. The paper used for this pen appears just like a normal sheet of paper but a closer look reveals tiny dots on it. These dots are used in identifying the locations of the text/drawings. Hence, in the playback mode, the user can touch a piece of text or drawing and hear the audio associated with it. The pen can, potentially, be used for various educational purposes. The author has been experimenting and using the pen for learning/improving French, German and Japanese over the past two years. The results have been very satisfying

as a method of marrying traditional ways with the latest technology has been established. Using this method, the author, writes the vocabulary or phrase in the target language and then associates an audio of the correct pronunciation and the meaning (in English) with it. Descriptive images, are sometimes, include too. Hence, in the review mode, the author sees the word in the target language and listens to its pronunciation and meaning. This way of learning incorporates the visual, audio, text and kinaesthetic modes of learning. It also allows learning by association to be a part the process.

Other technologies such as Virtual Reality (VR) will allow the learners to be a part of the learning materials and play a key role in the learning process.

Although the term Virtual Reality (VR) is used for different purposes, the original concept refers to *immersive virtual reality*. The general concept of immersive virtual reality was developed back in the late 80s. In immersive virtual reality, participants interact with a world completely generated by computer which is a virtual replica of the actual subject.

As suggested by Beier (2004), one of the main characteristics of immersive virtual reality is that the environment is a full scale replica of the real world and it relates to human size. Hence, the participants get the feeling as if they are interacting with the real environment or subject.

Let us investigate how a VR multimedia can be implemented and used in language education. The learners will be provided with VR goggles, gloves and shoes. The gloves and shoes can be in the form of micro-sensors placed in appropriate body parts for input/output and interaction purposes. After wearing and attaching the goggles and the sensors, the learners will visualise, feel and hear themselves in an actual location. For instance, they can, virtually, be in front of the *Plaza de toros* in Madrid. They can physically (in a virtual

manner) approach a virtual local and virtually ask by moving their hands and arms and their usual facial expression (smile, worried and desperate) *Dónde está la Stacion de taxis por favor?* The local pedestrian will smile back in recognition and encourage a foreigner trying to speak their language and point to the right corner. This scenario can be extended into a see, hear, touch and walk adventure too. Imagine entering a virtual shop and virtually touching and picking an object and asking *Cuánto cuesta* (How much)?

It is noteworthy to mention that the technology involved and required for the VR educational multimedia approach as described above is not an impossibility in an almost near-future. Although it is not possible to set up the above-mentioned experiment right now, it is reasonable to predict superior results as several senses will be utilised. We know that for thousands of years, human beings have acquired and processed information using a number of different senses. Hence, the use of different senses for information collection, analysis and remembering is something, which our brain can relate to very well. The introduction of Google Glass (Late 2013) is certainly a “giant step” towards realizing this scenario. Google Glass, to a large extent, can achieve the realisation of the above experiment. Maybe, one day everyone can choose to talk to each other in their “mother tongue” without too much effort.

6. Conclusions

It was demonstrated that there is close relationship between language and culture. To hence, to fully understand the cultural ways of a society one needs to be familiar the language too. This familiarity will certainly help to have better opportunities of connecting with the hosts.

It was demonstrated how we can move away from the sequential learning and adopt more creative methods. Innovative methods such as learning by association and having the opportunity to use the right brain through visually rich multimedia systems were found to be effective.

The adoption of the latest technologies in learning languages was discussed. Examples of the new approaches were provided. As a result, learning a new language can be approached in a more natural manner just like a child with his/her native tongue.

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