

The Importance Of Learning A Foreign Language

The world is shrinking as globalization and the Internet brings people together like never before. Yet the value of learning a foreign language remains as hotly debated as ever.

Today, even a small business can find themselves competing overnight thanks to the power of eBay and Amazon.com. Moreover, Google translator and others are getting better. So, do the benefits of a foreign language still hold up?

Foreign Language Staying Power

Despite all the reasons you've heard about the benefits of learning another language, good for your degree, great for travelling, helpful for fast-tracking your career, many people still seem to believe being multilingual isn't all that important anymore.

We're here to remind you that an ability to speak languages remains important, even in a shrinking world. So, despite more and more people learning to speak English what are the most effective ways to learn a foreign language?

Language Arts

Foreign language studies remain a neglected sphere of academic development in many country's education systems. The traditional approach to encouraging students to speak a range of languages continues to be the language arts model.

Language Arts is the formal study of languages. Traditionally, the primary focus of a language arts curriculum, comprise the literature and linguistic structure of a chosen language.

Language arts programs typically comprise a blend of reading the foreign language, writing in the chosen language, pronunciation and listening and comprehension skills.

In this form, learning a foreign language forms a curriculum of similar academic status to Mathematics, Science, History and Social Studies.

While remaining the mainstream gateway to learning a foreign language, the efficacy of these programs, particularly at high school level remains debatable.

Language Exchange

A less academic model for learning a foreign language is the language exchange experience. Language exchange is a learning method based on pairing learning

partners who each speak a different language. The interaction enables participants to refine their language skills with the help of their learning partners.

This most common language exchange approach is typically based on assigning two native language speakers to a team. They then teach each other in their own native language. The primary difference between a language exchange and other language learning strategies is its lack of a structured syllabus or set formal learning activities.

Language exchanges have been found to be effective in contemporary contexts for developing language skills as the emphasis is placed on comprehension and speaking fluency.

Some language exchange programs also harness the exchange of writing or instant messages to improve participants' grasp of reading and written language skills.

The general orientation of language exchanges is to stimulate the development of fluency in a language together with intercultural skills. This is generally accomplished predominantly by means of casual social interactions between the native speakers.

Improved cross-cultural communication is also one of the primary side benefits of language exchange programs.

Language Immersion

Language immersion is a great technique mostly applied to facilitate bilingual language skills development. Despite the millions of students who go through public school systems, learning a foreign language remains fraught. Despite the best intentions of conventional education systems most classroom learning situations come up short.

Few students emerge from high school language courses fluent in their chosen second language. Most manage to memorize by rote a few scattered words and phrases, but there it stops.

Four Reasons Why Immersion Learning Works

While learning a language in an immersion environment is increasingly common amongst college students studying abroad, it remains far from the norm. Here are four reasons why learning a language in an immersion environment, even if only for a few months, can prove transformational in your approach to learning your target language.

1. You Learn To Shed Your Fears

Learning a language in a classroom is inevitably a fragmented process. The emphasis is on memorizing a basic vocabulary, exploring basic conversation skills, and short writing and comprehension exercises.

In an immersion environment, you are forced to quickly learn to speak the language, or else suffer from a degree of isolation. This can be especially true in countries where English is not widely spoken.

After a while, participants begin to shed their initial inhibitions and become less afraid of making basic mistakes in pronunciation or grammatical errors. Once the fear factor diminishes, participants open up to authentic conversation practice, where students learn as they go and interact daily.

2. You Learn The Language The Way It Is Spoken In "Real Life"

There is more than just colloquial slang when learning to be fluent in a living language, as it is actually spoken in real life. There's the nuanced learning that comes with experiencing the way people tell jokes, and the style of local humour considered funny. Participants also encounter the local idiomatic ways of speaking that aren't considered slang.

3. You Learn Language Elements That Rarely Feature In A Classroom

Conventional classroom education models provide students with a necessary grounding in their chosen foreign language. Many students are amazed by how much they learn about a foreign language, from the pronunciation, the intonation, the vocal and facial emotions that accompany some expressions by immersed in a local environment.

Even if you can't afford to fly across the world to learn a new language, you can create your own immersion environment. Seek out native language speakers in your vicinity. Talk to native speakers via Skype, or subscribe to a foreign language channel through your cable company. Whatever you do, try to replicate the immersion environment as best as you can. You'll be surprised at the results

4. You Learn The Way Children Learn

The quickest and most effective way to learn a foreign language is to approach the learning process as children do. They simply listen, absorb, and speak naturally. They don't fret over homework or assignments or worry about memorising cards. Being in an immersion environment plunges language students into learning a foreign language naturally, as a child does.

Language Learning Strategies

Always remember the best approach to take when learning a new language is to engage with a native speaker of your target language. A native speaker will expose you to the subtle nuances of how the language is used locally that you

may not otherwise encounter. As a learning approach, it can be immensely powerful.

This reflects the basic truism about learning a foreign language. Many common learning strategies for a foreign language don't work because they ignore the most critical aspect of learning language, you can't just study a language you have to practice using it.

Typical language learning strategies cover speaking, listening, reading, writing, and testing. Here are some effective language learning strategies for mastering another language:

Strategies To Fine Tune Your Speaking Skills

Remember, reading to yourself silently is never very productive, so exercise your voice whenever you have the opportunity:

- Channel your voice! Reading aloud is an essential way to train your mouth muscles to articulate the unfamiliar sounds of your chosen language!
- Try learning a short common sentence, then switch the vocabulary around
- Remember, verbs and subjects can change around so look for differences in vocalising
- Objects can also change
- Look to stay in the mindset of your new foreign language, giving your brain time to acclimatize to your chosen language prompts.

Strategies To Fine Tune Your Listening And Comprehension Strategies

Practice your listening skills and cultivate an ear for the language! Watch television programs and movies, listen to music and try downloading Internet files with "speech" embedded in the language:

- Look to recognize words, and to identify unique sounds and vocalisation. Initially, focus on getting used to the sound of the language rather than trying to understand immediately.
- Explore language labs. Use reading exercises to prepare then park them listen to more material.
- When others in your class are speaking, listen to what they are saying and build images in your mind of their answers in the language.
- Make friend with a native speaker and practice!

Strategies To Fine Tune Your Vocabulary Skills

Look to be innovative and inventive in how you acquire new words

- Try putting up post notes on your study walls to aid learning and retention

- Identify familiar objects in your room, inside your refrigerator, your car, and so on
- Practice pronouncing your list of labels and understand if the word comes with an assigned gender, or whether it is plural or singular
- Create your personal visual dictionary
- Sketch an image associated with each new word you add to your vocabulary
- Create a concept map setting out a word with its attached synonyms, opposites, and images
- Make a schedule to research fresh and unfamiliar words together with their definitions
- Try writing out the definition and include a synonym or antonym.

Strategies To Fine Tune Your Reading Skills

Never read a foreign language text word-by-individual word, or try to translate it word-by-word.

- Study the foreign language text vocabulary first, then read it once or twice
- Don't interrupt the flow of your reading to look up individual words or phrases.
- Read a phrase or sentence together to get an initial sense of its meaning within the flow of the text
- Develop your own vocabulary list
- Push beyond your set textbook! Explore children's books. They come with illustrations making them simple to read!
- Similarly, websites offer great options to pursue your interests or hobbies in other languages, as their common vocabulary should give you a feeling for the context of what is being written
- As your reading skills progress, start reading novels in your chosen language but focus on understanding the story rather than just assembling your vocabulary
- Read one chapter at a time then if you spot repetitive vocabulary, research it up before reading it once more
- As you work your way through the novel, you will absorb the storyline and characterization rather than being hung up on its vocabulary.

Strategies To Fine Tune Your Writing Skills

All foreign languages have their own unfamiliar nuances and alphabets and approach to writing

- Practice your writing in your language's alphabet to learn the correct writing approach and vocabulary

- Try writing out in full, the sentences you have been practising speaking out loud
- Draft written patterns and then write out each of the sentences substituting words in several places. Use your the “autocorrect”, spell check and grammar features in your word processing programme to refine your skills!
- Correct your initial mistakes, and try repeating the corrected version as a form of mental muscle memory!

Strategies To Fine Tune Your Grammar Skills

Seek out short easily understandable explanations of your chosen languages' grammar rules:

- Look for examples of the grammar rules and check your understanding of the examples
- Create your own instances of grammar sourced from your day-to-day life or from conversations you have with friends, classmates, or native speakers
- Once you understand how to structure grammar rules, search the Internet for additional examples of dialogue, stories and essays

Technology Language Aids

Don't ignore the opportunities to practice, encounter or explore your new language offered by technology:

- Use content played in your chosen language on or through your iPad, MP3 player, or even a CD during your daily commute or during downtime when you are walking, cycling or simply waiting
- Check out apps for your iPhone or iPad!
- Use the Internet to search out language websites, foreign language news coverage or articles
- Watch movies and streaming content in your chosen language and subscribe to foreign language newspapers
- Learn the lyrics to popular foreign language songs and practice singing along!

Practice Testing

Practice testing involves a mix of frequent testing and quizzes carried out over a set timeframe. It is designed to promote a student's recall of their language study materials from memory. When conducted in a structured way, this helps the material to stick.

The critical factor is making sure the tests are sufficiently unthreatening or low profile. This is designed as a learning technique, not for assessment. Practice testing can either be carried out by instructors, or by students themselves.

A significant range of research supports the effectiveness of the practice testing technique. Most discover the method enhances students' learning experience while enhancing their retention rates.

Studies show students quizzed after reading a short snippet of text demonstrated superior recall levels to students who just reread the text. Moreover, student performance in language translation tests has been shown to be significantly superior one week after testing, compared with students who simply read the study material.

Practice testing has been shown to work with students of all ages and subject areas. This includes an aptitude for foreign language study. It has also been shown to be effective with different content modes, be it text or images. Students embracing practice testing were able to apply information in novel ways rather than simply being able to recall it.

Distributed Practice

Distributed practice is a learning technique that involves spacing learning engagement over time, in contrast to accelerated learning programs.

Usually, pacing language learning sessions over several weeks or months leads to superior long-term learning achievements.

Distributed practice is effective regardless of the age of the language students. Research studies have identified positive outcomes across many language content types and learning materials, be they text, lectures, image or vocabulary based or focused on language skills development.

Maintaining Your Motivation

Learning a language is an immense undertaking. Regardless of which language you select, mastering it or even becoming conversant in it always takes time. As with every major commitment you need to be very clear about what you are looking for from your language studies.

If you don't have a clear motivation for studying your chosen foreign language, then the chances of you abandoning your language endeavours are high. Many students abandon their studies before they even reach an intermediate stage of fluency.

So, hold your motivation for undertaking your language studies close. Periodically revisit that motivation to help you stay on course, refreshing and revitalising your initial enthusiasm and motivation.

Don't Be Afraid To Make Mistakes

From childhood, we are conditioned to avoid making mistakes or error. Society expects us to be perfect straight away, and unnaturally high standard where you typically see yourself as having failed is you lack perfection.

This mentality poses a real obstacle to learning a foreign language. The reality is if you aren't making simple mistakes initially, you aren't trying. The more you look to avoid errors, the slower you will be to master your chosen language

You should never be afraid of making mistakes, however, basic and fundamental they may be. It's all part of the learning process. If you talk to native language speakers they will generally encourage you to explore their language and learn new words and phrases.

Besides, at this is almost always a temporary stage. As you gain experience your confidence will grow as will your fluency and comprehension.

Final Observation

Learning a foreign language inevitably demands discipline, endurance and determination. Aside from your inherent resolve, there are techniques to assist you in speeding up your progress. Our list of effective language learning techniques and learning strategies can provide you with a head start on your language studies. Once you set yourself on the path to mastering a new language, you are hopping on a fast-moving express, which will not only expand your mind but open your consciousness to new cultures and experiences. Every language brings with it a rich intellectual world, spanning literature, media, art and music. So, enjoy your language encounters and immerse yourself in a lush new world of meaning and communication.