ICCT *Learnernotes*

for second language and culture learners

Will you soon leave your familiar North American home to enter a new culture? Will you also be learning a new language? If you're like most new overseas workers, you've had many years of preparation in your field of expertise. You may have more than one degree and considerable practical experience in activities similar to those you'll be doing overseas. It is unlikely, however, that you have had preparation for the important task of learning another language, a task that will be very different from anything you may have undertaken in North American classrooms. As a result, you may have some fears, some doubts, or at least some questions about language learning and your prospects for success. Let's look at some of the most common questions that overseas workers ask about learning a new language and explore some of the ways you can plan for a successful learning experience.

Can I learn a foreign language? Can I learn it well enough to use it effectively in my work?

These two questions often reflect an assortment of related concerns, such as the following from a language learner headed to West Africa: "I barely scraped by in college French. What will 'learning for real' be like?" And from a church worker in his 30's: "Maybe I'm too old. I'm not sure I can get back into the routine of studying after more than ten years out of the classroom." And from a young mother: "Managing to learn a new language while raising three lively pre-schoolers sounds overwhelming! Where will the time come from?" Although many new language learners share at least some of these concerns, their thoughts may go unvoiced. They often don't realize that their private apprehensions are both widely held and very normal.

For those who feel these concerns, there are good reasons to be encouraged. Researchers in second language acquisition have shown that almost anyone can learn a second language.[1] While some people are quicker than others, the rest of us cannot use our age or our lack of natural ability as excuses for not launching our language study and expecting some degree of success. Granted, the process that leads to a versatile command of a new language requires a great deal of time and effort. You cannot gain that command by listening to cassette tapes for fifteen minutes per day. But, given your willingness to work hard at the task, coupled with some practical know-how about how languages are put together and how to go about the process of learning, you can learn your new language. Furthermore, you can learn it well enough to use it to communicate effectively in everyday situations, if not also in contexts that require more advanced language skills.

Why have so many people been less than successful in foreign language learning?

The stereotype of North American college and university students struggling through their language courses is not far wrong. While the reasons are many, two in particular account for much of their discouragement—the teaching method and the perceived irrelevance of the instruction. Many foreign language courses focus on exercises and activities for learning grammar and vocabulary, using a moderate amount of oral and written practice. Even at their best, however, these courses can provide

students little opportunity to actually use the language in everyday situations. Without frequent communicative encounters, students stand little chance of gaining more than a rudimentary proficiency. Furthermore, the students, seeing little immediate value in their foreign language study, often lack motivation to do more than pass the course or get a good grade. As a result, they frequently stop far short of learning to communicate with native speakers.

Nor have overseas workers been immune from difficult times in on-the-field language learning. Again, the reasons are many. Some have expected the language school to teach them all they needed to know. Some have lost their motivation to stick with the task. Others have been overwhelmed with too many competing responsibilities. Most have had difficulty simply because they didn't have a firm grasp of (1) what they needed to learn and (2) how to go about that learning. They were not as good at language learning as they could have been because they did not go through what we call learner training—instruction in learning what and how to learn.

How long does it take to learn a second language?

Many new language learners assume that once they have completed their required formal language study (in the range of a few months to two years), they should "know" the new language. They believe they should be able to use it to handle all the activities that they handle so easily in their native language, including teaching, preaching, and counseling, as well as meeting the demands of daily life. More often than not, however, such expectations are unrealistic. After completing a year of language school, most students have gained only a shaky to moderate control over their new language. More realistic is the expectation that by completing the organization's language requirement, language learners have only laid a foundation upon which to build.

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So how long does it take to learn a second language? For less difficult languages, it often takes new overseas workers about two years to feel comfortable using their new language in most situations. For more difficult languages and/or more difficult learning situations (e.g., languages for which few language-learning materials exist or situations in which workers are expected to learn two languages in one four-year term), people frequently require a number of years before they can manage with ease certain high-level tasks such as speaking extemporaneously on a technical subject before a group or serving as an interpreter.

From these observations, it should be clear that in the matter of language learning, efficiency is of the essence because to some extent the length of time it takes you to learn a second language is within your control. You will need to know not only how to make maximum progress during your formal language study (if you have any), but you will also need to be equipped to continue learning on your own once formal language study has come to an end. To make a success of language learning under these circumstances, and do so in the shortest time possible, you should prepare yourself specifically for the tasks that lie ahead. One way to get the preparation you need is to participate in a pre-field program that offers learner training.

Since learner training addresses the central issues of what must be learned and how best to accomplish that learning, let's expand on the ideas of the "what" and "how" of language learning so that you will understand these issues clearly, find the appropriate pre-field preparation, and be realistic about your on-the-field tasks.

What is involved in language learning? Exactly what will I need to learn?

If, like most people, you think of language learning as a mastery of skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—you would be right, but not completely. This is because these four skills are only external expressions of the four types of language competence required in order to use a language accurately and appropriately: formal linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence.[2] To understand in more detail what you must learn when you acquire another language, let's examine each type of language competence briefly.

1. Formal linguistic competence refers to your knowledge of and ability to use the components of language such as word formation and sentence structure (i.e., grammar and syntax), vocabulary, pronunciation, spelling, and the writing system.

   You demonstrate your control of formal linguistic competence by the range and complexity of the components that you can understand and produce and the degree of accuracy you exhibit in doing so. For example, as a beginning learner of your new language, which grammatical constructions have you mastered? That is, how accurate are you in understanding and using these constructions in oral and written communication?

2. Sociolinguistic competence refers to your knowledge of and ability to use the social rules of language. To be sociolinguistically correct, language use must be culturally appropriate for the status of the participants, the topic being discussed, etc.

   Good language learners must also be good culture learners.

   The sociolinguistic norms of your new language and culture will probably be quite different from those of North American English. This means that you will quickly get into trouble if you follow your tendency to handle communication encounters much as you would at home. For example, suppose you were learning Thai. If you follow your natural tendency to say "thank you" when complimented, on some occasions you are likely to sound proud instead of humble.[3] In short, as a learner of Thai, you would need to learn the proper expressions for thanking someone (formal linguistic competence) and you would also need to learn when and how to use these expressions in interaction (sociolinguistic competence).

   You demonstrate your control of sociolinguistic competence not only by saying the appropriate thing for the situation but also by interpreting the culturally appropriate meaning from verbal and nonverbal language. For example, if you overhear two French ladies at a Paris cafe, you may notice both talking simultaneously, each interrupting the other throughout the conversation. This is not rude behavior in French; rather, their conversational style shows that they are interested in the conversation and enjoy one another's company.[4]

3. Discourse competence is your knowledge of and ability to use acceptable ways to join individual sentences and sentence fragments to make a cohesive whole. An acceptable organization in one language may be unacceptable in another. For example, a conversation in North American English does not "hang together" in the same way as a conversation in Indonesian. Each language has different norms and conventions for fitting together the parts and pieces of conversations, prayers, lectures, short stories, letters, etc.

   You demonstrate your level of discourse competence by your ability to conform to the discourse norms of your new language and culture. And you demonstrate your lack of discourse competence by ignoring language-specific discourse rules. For example, a worker in Japan often

composed his speeches in English and then translated them into Japanese. One of the native Japanese speakers in his group remarked, "He gives English speeches with Japanese words. I sometimes have trouble understanding the meaning."

4. Strategic competence is your knowledge of and ability to adjust your language on-the-spot to (1) enhance the effectiveness of communication (e.g., by changing volume, rate of speech, paraphrasing, using gestures, etc.) or (2) modify communication as a result of problems caused by communication breakdown (e.g., using guessing, circumlocution, paraphrasing, gestures, etc.).

    You demonstrate your level of strategic competence by the range of verbal and nonverbal communication strategies you can understand and use effectively.

From the beginning stages of your language learning, it is important that you keep these types of competence in balance, being particularly careful not to overemphasize formal linguistic competence to the exclusion of the others. Jenny Thomas has highlighted the vital role of sociolinguistic and discourse competence in one's acceptance into a new community. "While...a speaker who is not operating according to the standard grammatical code [formal linguistic competence] is at worst condemned as 'speaking badly', the person who operates according to differently formulated [sociolinguistic and discourse] principles may well be censured as behaving badly, as being an untruthful, deceitful, or insincere person."[5] As an overseas worker, your control of sociolinguistic and discourse norms will be particularly crucial. You don't want people with whom you are working to reject you because your use of their language tells them that you are insensitive, uncaring, rude, or untrustworthy.

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Being unaware of the four areas of language competence, many language learners in the past assumed that with enough work on grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation (formal linguistic competence), their ability to use the new language accurately and appropriately would emerge automatically. All evidence, however, indicates that such a result occurs only rarely. To develop sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence, as well as formal linguistic competence, your overall language learning program must provide concentrated learning experiences in each of these areas.

Language schools, too, have often been slow to recognize the importance of the four kinds of language competence. Instead of designing well-rounded programs of language teaching and learning, their tendency to focus, sometimes almost exclusively, on formal linguistic competence, has promoted an unfortunate imbalance. Organizing their courses and textbooks around grammar and vocabulary as the backbone of most instruction, these schools have left learning in the other three areas to chance.

How can I keep the four aspects of language competence in balance? Is there one best language-learning method?

For many years, language teachers and language learners have searched for that one sure-fire method. However, most second-language acquisition specialists have concluded that this search is futile because no one approach works equally well for all learners. For example, some learners thrive in a more structured classroom environment; others feel stifled in controlled settings and yearn to do

their own thing. Some sense a need to analyze the language from the first day of learning; others seldom think about how the parts and pieces fit together—they just use the language. Some are comfortable making fools of themselves when communicating with native speakers; others find such encounters emotionally difficult. In short, individual preferences are so diverse that no one method can be prescribed as optimal for all learners. Any claim to the contrary must be viewed skeptically in light of current research.[6]

Should I go to language school?

You may be asking, "If language schools tend to overemphasize one type of language competence to the exclusion of others, should I go to language school at all? Or should I try to learn entirely on my own?" No single answer is right for all people in all situations. However, we strongly believe that the majority of new language learners will experience their greatest degree of success when they take advantage of all available resources—language school and/or tutoring arrangements, language textbooks and other materials, a variety of native-speaker helpers, and the broader community of native speakers. In this view, then, language schools can be a part of the total picture, perhaps even an important part. But to balance your development of all four aspects of language competence, you must put the other resources to work as well because in the end they can be as important, if not more important than, the language school.

Ultimately, you—not the language school—must take charge of your language learning process and progress. You are the one who must weave these resources together so that they promote your growth in the areas of sociolinguistic, discourse, strategic, and formal linguistic competence. No one else can manage this task for you. To handle it competently on your own requires training—learner training. Part of that training involves becoming a "good"—or at least a better—language learner.

What are the characteristics of a "good" language learner?

Although there is no one set of characteristics common to all "good" language learners, the following list highlights some of the most important qualities:

1. From the beginning, "good" language learners work to gain acceptance in their new culture. They know they must become accepted members of their new society before their message has any chance of being accepted.

2. "Good" language learners are highly motivated individuals who have positive attitudes toward their new language and culture. They place high priority on becoming effective communicators, and they are willing to work hard at the task.

3. "Good" language learners are also good culture learners. They know how to integrate their learning of these two interrelated areas in order to develop a high level of proficiency in each.

4. "Good" language learners know themselves. They know how to make the most of their unique learning characteristics—learning rate, personality, learning style (the way people are "programmed" to take in, understand, remember and recall new information) and preferred learning strategies (specific steps and behaviors people use in the learning process).

The important and encouraging message of recent research is that average language learners can develop into "good" language learners. This is part of what learner training is about.

5. "Good" language learners know how to manage their emotions. They know how to control tension-producing factors that can block successful learning, such as inhibitions and debilitative anxiety. They are also able to "let off steam" by laughing at themselves and the delightful mistakes they make in learning to communicate.

6. "Good" language learners make their mistakes work for them. They know that they can't learn without "goofing." Through their mistake-making, these individuals learn more about how the language works and they learn more about their own level of competence and where to focus their learning.

7. "Good" language learners assume responsibility for their own learning. They know how to plan, organize, implement, and evaluate their own learning. They know how to combine language school instruction with learning on their own outside the classroom, making the most of each available resource. And when language school is over, they know how to continue to learn for a lifetime through their relationships with native speakers.

The important and encouraging message of recent research is that average language learners can develop into "good" learners with appropriate instruction and practice; likewise, with learner training, poor language learners can become better learners. This is part of what learner training is about.[7]

References

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