

*Challenges and Benefits of Learning a New Language for the Business Professional
Visiting another Country*

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Abstract

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.

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.

The use of multimedia language learning environments, which encourage creativity and right brain functions are presented and recommended.

Key words: Language, Learning, Business

Introduction and Purpose

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.

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.

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 to very basic conversational skills. These skills can certainly help the Business professionals to feel welcomed and be accepted more quickly by their hosts in social and professional situations.

Research Framework

English has become the international language of communication in formal and informal situations. Its uses have even extended to situations when people from different linguistic backgrounds choose it as their common language for communicating with each other. This global popularity is not just attributed to the fact that English is the language of a number of highly industrial and powerful nations in the world. It is also due to the fact that English is a very rich language. This richness is a result of marriage between Latin-based and Germanic Anglo Saxon languages. The English people became bilingual for a few hundred years after the

French invasion. The French vocabulary gradually influenced English and converted it to a rich language. The modern English vocabulary contains around sixty percent of words of Latin origin. It is interesting to note that this combination has made English an ideal base language for learning other Indo-European languages used in Europe.

It would be reasonable to note that the language richness and the barrier-free way of conversation have certainly contributed to making English the preferred language of governments, businesspeople, movies, music, the Internet and of course education.

Hence, should a native English speaker learn another language and use it when visiting the country where it is spoken?

It should be noted that often language and culture are interrelated as one influences the other. Culture's roots are deeply established in the years of tradition and history.

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.

Companies or organisations sampled in this study included those associated with mining, higher education, language school, technology training, educational event management, investments, multinational technology company, a chamber of commerce, automotive manufacturer, management consultant and news reporting. Four organisations were large with global operations and while the remainder would be characterized as SMEs. In total 4 of the organizations were headquartered outside of Japan if one includes the Canadian Chamber of Commerce among that set. Three of the interviewees were female and eight were male. Six of the interviewees were business owners.

The video interviews are hosted on the Acadia Multimedia Case Management System (AMCMS). This system is a web-based, password protected, scalable platform designed for higher education business students and the corporate training market.

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 Buddhahood, 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).

Insight from the interviews suggested 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. A former executive of a multinational information technology put it as follows.

“Most people coming to Tokyo nowadays particularly on an expat assignment have difficulty finding the survival skills needed to really learn Japanese and I think maybe that’s the most difficult thing. You get to a stage where you have little bits and pieces but you can’t really have a conversation with anyone so you either kind of get siloed into the foreign community and you don’t really interface with the Japanese community or some people do make a little effort but for people here on shorter term very often they live on a little microcosm of the world in Japan.”

Hence, an attempt to learn the basics of the language and using it in every opportunity would allow the person to progress and ultimately hold basic conversation with the locals. This approach will contribute to creation of better links and relationships with the Japanese people socially and professionally in different countries.

Although the writing system can be quite overwhelming, specially, with its different types of (Kanji, Hiragana and Katakana), the Japanese languages was a spoken language long before it had any writing (Gilhooly, 2010). Hence, acquiring some basic conversational skills in Japanese should not pose a great challenge for a western person. Especially, in the case of a person from the English speaking background, the learning process in terms of speed and enjoyment should be reasonably high. Firstly, the Japanese language does not have many hard -to pronounce or very specific phonemes as in the Romance and other Indo-European languages. One can very easily imitate the basic sounds used in Japanese. Secondly, the Japanese grammar is straight forward and very logical. Unlike a Latin based language such as French, or even a Germanic language such as German, Japanese has rather a simple way of conjugation.

It should be noted that every aspect of life in Japan is different from the cultures closely associated with the English speaking societies. Fully understanding and appreciating the Japanese language and culture can be rather challenging. Accepting the differences and adapting attitudes to suit the Japanese environment are essential in overcoming the obstacles.

Different languages have different ways of expressing a thought or emotion. Often, these expressions cannot be easily translated into English. For instance, the expression “Gute Malzeit” said to the German hosts before eating with them would certainly signal politeness and an appreciation of the local culture. Except in certain parts of Paris where international tourists with good/some English speaking abilities roam around, initiating conversation in French would definitely establish a better rapport with the locals. One can then, if needed, switch to English. Approaching French people and having a cold start by communicating in English may not be appreciated by them. Despite the acceptance of English as a universal language, depending on the country and circumstances, the locals can be very proud of their language and culture. Some knowledge of the language can act as a key to opening the treasure chest of customs and culture and understanding them in different countries.

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.

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. The next section provides how the latest technologies can be adopted in learning languages.

Approach to Learning Languages and the Use of the Latest Technologies

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).

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, 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 of 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.

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)?

The future technologies will enable us to interact with computers in a less formal manner. In other words, we will not have to sit in front of a computer, switch it on and then start typing and mouse-clicking. The main computer will be able to receive commands and requests remotely and produce output to various locations around us. The output will be in the form of holographic images and sound. The speech will be controlled by the user. Hence, the user can choose any language for input or output. The user will be able to interact with the output in a natural manner by touching, separating, lifting and moving parts. Hence, a true virtual reality situation will be created.

Conclusions and Main Findings

Every new language will teach us how to use different parts of our brain, which we have not explored before. Adopting well established concepts and approaches allow the learning process to become both efficient and enjoyable. Learning by association and creating opportunities to use the right brain through visually rich multimedia systems are some examples. Therefore, learning a new language can no longer be a frustrating process for the learner.

One can also move away from the sequential learning and adopt more creative methods. By adopting the latest technologies available through Apple's SIRI and Google's "Google Glass", learning a new language can be approached in a more natural manner.

Finally, as was demonstrated, speaking the local language (at any level) can contribute to creating better opportunities of connecting, accepting and being accepted for the Business professional.

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