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Learning A Foreign Language: The Ventriloquists' Lesson

By Gabrielle Guichard

From a certain point of view, ventriloquists are poets: what matters is not only what they say, but also the way they say it. To master a foreign language, adopt the ventriloquist's attitude.

The main feature you have to master, in order to call yourself a ventriloquist, is to speak without moving your lips. It is not that difficult. There is a trick, of course. The sounds M, B and P make your lips move, as make the sounds V and F but in a lesser way. So, in order to be a ventriloquist, you should ban any word with m, b or p inside and avoid to pronounce f-v words. If your name is Mabel or Patrick, choose a stage name!

Try to say where you come from. Try right now. It is the best way to understand how it works exactly. "I come from...". No, your lips are moving. Try again: "I was born in..." Far better! You are almost a ventriloquist.

There is a competition of this kind among teachers; for example: How to express "I have lost my cell phone and my credit card near the 4WD garage" in Latin. (I agree, Latin teachers are, well, Latin teachers.) It is very alike the game you played in the schoolyard: you had to answer to a lot of questions using such required word but avoiding such other. Remember! It was not easy to place "rhinoceros" and avoid "zoo" when asked: "Where were you on Sunday?"; nevertheless, you managed to! You were a gifted ventriloquist and avoided the m-b-p word "zoo".

In your own language, you use circumlocutions to exclude certain words. In a parallel step, speaking a foreign language is learning how to use circumlocutions in order to avoid some words: those you don't know.

Think of the words you do not know as your m-b-p words.

Do not try to pronounce m-b-p words without moving your lips, you would spend precious time for nothing. Do not fight against obstacles, get round them. Ventriloquists do not master the movements of their lips, they choose their words. Whatever language you choose to learn, there are always several ways to express something.

Gabrielle Guichard, a French teacher who can be reached on GabrielleGuichard.com and listened to on FrenchPodcasting.com

What Is The Best Way To Learn A Foreign Language?

By Lisa Nobles

Studies have shown that how you learn a foreign language impacts whether or not you will actually follow through it. Obviously, if you get bored before you've put in the required time and effort, you're not going to learn much of the language at all. So let's address the facts that help determine whether you're going to stick with your goal of learning a foreign language or not.

First things first, you are going to need positive feedback. That means you need a way to measure your goal of learning the new language. Whether this includes tracking your progress or actually trying to speak the language with someone fluent in it doesn't matter. What does matter is that you have a way to gauge that you're really learning. Otherwise you may get frustrated and give up long before you get anywhere at all.

Secondly, you need to follow a step-by-step course that progresses from easy to hard. It should also do this slowly. Again, the reason you want to learn a foreign language in this manner is so you do not get too frustrated.

The problem with early frustration is that it steers people toward giving up. If you don't see any progress in the early stages, you may not feel like you can accomplish your goal at all. Obviously, if you don't think your goal is achievable after all, chances are good you'll give up.

So minimizing the amount of frustration (especially early on) is a big part of learning a foreign language. On another note, you want to make learning a foreign language as interesting as possible.

As I'm sure you've experienced, learning from a textbook can be monotonous. Not only is reading from a textbook boring, but your chances of sticking with it are slim to none. Besides, merely learning vocabulary and grammar is not going to prepare you for a real-life conversation in a foreign language.

Interaction is the best way to learn anything. You can't just passively read, listen or watch as someone explains everything to you. You need to get involved.

By turning learning a new language into a game, you'll stick with it and actually remember more of what you learn.

You need to actually listen (not just read from a book) and then speak lots of foreign words and phrases. Turn the words into something familiar by associating them with their actual meaning.

You need to practice the new language with fluent speakers, all the while listening to it as it's properly spoken. Many foreign languages are spoken very quickly, therefore you need to make sure you can keep up with the pace and actually hear it spoken correctly.

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