



A year of language learning

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My title is wishy-washy and not quite right. First, I've been learning language for more than just this past year. Second, this year I've been learning a little about lots of languages, not so much just one language. My goal learning multiple languages was, however, trying to better understand Language, the general thing behind those pesky differences that makes Italian not Irish, and Spanish not Turkish.

That opening may have confused you. I can't even get the title of my own reflection right. But it is part of my annual strategy to dive deep into something new.

Last year I immersed myself in technology integration in school. I participated in a MOOC, I download this and that app, I tried to be more interested in social media by tweeting this and pinning that, I took online Google tests and lined up all sorts of little icons on my Gmail toolbar that I don't ever use. Heck, I don't even know what some of them do!

This year I immersed myself in languages, like never before, so it was a year of language learning for me. I suppose next year I'll have to pick a new theme. But that's next year.

Here were some of my language learning strategies:

Duolingo

I used this app daily - literally. In fact, I haven't missed a day in the last 514 days, according the app. This isn't terribly unusual; there are many other users with streaks of 500 days plus.

Further, I wasn't just getting a few points a day to keep my streak alive. For several months now I've probably been averaging around 1,500 - 2,000 points a week. In order by the number of points, which almost mirrors my relative ability in each language: French, German, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, Dutch, Swedish, Danish, Irish, Turkish.

I do some translating (into English) of articles for the first five. For the last five I've

just done the exercises, which Duolingo advertises as containing at least 2,000 words per language. I forget many of those words, but in most of these I can now look at a newspaper and enjoy articles, though of course I don't get everything. In Irish and Turkish I'm only able to pick out isolated words.

Other online apps

I completed the available lessons in Cat Spanish (don't recommend it), did a good amount of Swedish with Babble (probably a good one for many people) and told my students over and over that FluentU seems to be the best thing I've found. I did French with FluentU, but only for a while, even though I ponied up for a year-long subscription. It's good, but it's not gamified and I'm a sucker for XPs and reaching the next level, probably because I grew up with Asteroids and Space Invaders.

Newspapers online and off

I don't have a lot of hobbies. If it were recognized as a hobby, here would be one of them: reading looking at newspapers in various languages.

I like to get local publications, even the ones that only come out once a week, if the place is small. I look at lots of graduation and engagement notices, and of course obits, of people I'll never know. I love flights that give out newspapers, through oftentimes the helpful flight attendant explains to me that the paper is in Danish, Dutch, whatever, while trying to give me the International New York Times.

Three to four times a week I look online at a selection of papers, most commonly the Svenska Dagbladet, Le Monde, Bild Zeitung (which is embarrassing to admit, though I'm sure its readership is huge), the Swiss equivalent Blick (even more embarrassing), and my hometown paper, the StarTribune of Minneapolis. When I was focused on Dutch I looked at De Telegraaf. When big news events happen in countries that speak a language I'm somewhat familiar with, I look at the papers from that country, in their language.

Lots of reading, some writing, nearly no speaking and listening

It occurred to me lately that I'm the linguistic equivalent of the guy at the beach who has done a million bench presses to the total neglect of every other muscle. All triceps and shoulder, Chicken Little skinny white legs. And in my heavy-reading, low-oral/aural language practice, there isn't even the equivalent of a ripped upper body to flex on the beach, because a newspaper reading hobby doesn't exactly show-off well.

I do get some French speaking-and-listening practice, living in Suisse romande and all, and there are times when I get some extended German practice. I'll also try other languages when I'm traveling or with international students I'm comfortable with. Hardly ever are these planned learning sessions. Instead, an opportunity presents itself and if I'm brave, I embrace it, or at least get through it. My default introvert setting needs a lot of managing to override.

This is why I think FluentU is so good. It addresses listening well – one of my weakest areas. It's also another reason I don't use it as much as I should.

Ending the year

It will be hard to let my 500+ day streak with Duolingo end, but once I cut the tie, I imagine I will actually enjoy the break. Lately while doing Irish I've notice that I'm far too concentrated on finishing the grammar and vocabulary exercises than I am in remembering what I've learned. As a language teacher I know how important cyclical review is, but I keep pushing on to "get done," whatever that means.

I sort of thought that with my daily language play, sometimes twenty minutes, sometimes two or three hours, that I might experience some sort of cognitive burst, a moment of linguistic punctuated equilibrium after which I'd find myself on a higher plane. I'm sorry to report that this hasn't happen. However, I have noticed that if I'm intensely focused primarily on a single language, even though the combination of my personality and the nature of online learning means I'm far too focused on reading (and writing), I do notice improvement in speaking and listening as well. Trying some Portuguese at lunch with our school drivers, speaking Italian during a weekend in Florence, even channel surfing a European TV of many channels and languages, I catch myself wondering if I would have been able to say that or hear that before. The problem is, of course, that I can't remember how things were before I went and changed what my brain can do, just like you don't notice as a kid that you are growing until a distant relative you only see at Christmas exclaims, "My, how you have grown!"

So no great leaps forward to report, but it's probably safe to say that my current equilibrium in a variety of languages is at a different place than it was.

I may have already identified my personal development focus for next year. I am interested in expanding the book that my language and linguistics students put together with me this year. We have settled on fifteen short chapters, each dedicated to a set of exercises to deepen our awareness about how language works. Maybe another fifteen chapters would make it marketable. At the minimum, it would make it twice as long.

Did you know, for example, that when you count in Irish, you say the equivalent of “three apples ten, four apples ten” and so on? That the Swedes have adopted a pronoun that is neither male nor female to get around the he/she and his/her problem we have in English? And that there have been multiple proposals in English to address the same problem, dating back more than a hundred years?

Have you ever considered whether a complicated system of grammar takes more mental processing time than an easy grammar? Do Czech speakers get more mental floss than Swedish speakers? Or do they waste good brain power on how they say things instead of the content they are trying to convey?

Perhaps you’ve traveled in an area where your hosts explained to you in complete seriousness that their particular accent and dialect of their language is actually the real version. I’m actually quite sure that you’ve heard multiple claims for a certain language being the most difficult one, even though the person making the claim might only know two or three of the estimated 4,000 to 6,000 languages on the planet. Perhaps you have made that claim. You are completely forgiven and our language awareness exercises might be just the thing you need.

See www.las.ch/academics/laser for a review of nine online platforms for language learning that my students wrote this past year. A couple of articles that go into some depth about the use of Duolingo in the classroom are also posted there.

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