INNOVATIVE AND EFFECTIVE METHODS OF LEARNING OTHER LANGUAGES AND THEIR BENEFITS

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ABSTRACT

Human beings' ability to communicate in mother tongue can be easily taken for granted until a situation arises when one uses another language. How should people go about acquiring the necessary skills for learning a new language, in this situation? Can learning a new language complement modern tertiary courses such as Business? This paper discusses why and how human beings learn a new language. It presents innovative methods of learning a new language using the latest technologies and teaching/learning ideas and approaches. The use of emerging technologies such as immersive Virtual Reality is discussed. A number of multimedia language learning environments, which encourage creativity and right brain functions are presented and analyzed. The author draws on his own experience of learning several languages, which includes various branches of the Indo-European group.

Key words and phrases: language, mother tongue, Indo-European, learning by association.

INTRODUCTION

The word language can be traced back to its Latin origin lingua, which means tongue. Hence, quite appropriately, people often refer to it as a tongue. In any language, human beings use phonemes to build words that represent situations, actions or objects. People use these words in spoken or written forms to store their thoughts and ideas or transfer them to others. Each language has its own unique features and subtleties in development and the use of basic sound units, word construction and rules of stringing words to create a phrase.

English has become the international language of communication in formal and informal situations. Its uses have extended to situation when people from different linguistic backgrounds choose it as their common language. This global popularity is not just attributed to the fact that English is the language of a number of highly industrialized and powerful nations in the world, but it also attributed 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 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 about 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.

English has become a language with some unique features that are not found even in Romance or Germanic languages. These features contribute a great deal to having direct and relaxed conversation in any situation. For instance, take the pronoun *you*. Both Latin-based (Romance) and Germanic languages contain formal and informal versions. Formal *you* in German is *Sie* and it is used to address strangers or signify respect. The use of *Du* (Informal *you*) in any of these situations would signal ignorance or disrespect. Similarly, other Romance languages such as French and Spanish follow the

same accepted "rules". There are many other languages (such as Persian and Turkish) that have the same or very similar style. English however, adopts only one second person pronoun. In many ways, this style of addressing avoids building barriers between people and does not create different categories of friends, colleagues or acquaintances. Hence, a more relaxed and barrier-free relationship can be created in any conversation. Referring to people using the formal *you* would create a barrier, which makes the use of first names almost impossible. Perhaps that is why the first name terms are more common in English-speaking societies. Unlike many other societies, using first names is not regarded as being impolite, disrespectful or aggressive. It is reasonable to concur that the richness of a language and the barrier-free way of conversation have certainly contributed to making English the preferred language for governments, businesspeople, movies, music, the Internet and of course education.

The aim of this paper is to present innovative methods of learning new languages. These methods are based on proven learning theories and rely on the latest technology for implementation. Some justifications for learning new languages are presented next.

WHY A NEW LANGUAGE SHOULD BE LEARNED

All languages stem from the same origin – that is the human thought. With the eyes and ears of the mind human beings see images and hear sounds of actions and events. People can subconsciously store these thought-based clips for future reference or turn the clips into actions. If people wish to share their thought-based information with others then they will have to carry out some form of conversion process. Unfortunately, people have not achieved that level of sophistication to convey their thoughts directly to other human beings. Although symbolic representation is still a very effective way, but language-based communication is perhaps the most commonly used method. For example, the author of this paper is relying on the use of a language to share factual ideas with the readers.

The development and evolution of languages are influenced by the culture, customs and the geographical location of human beings. Hence, different languages have different ways of vocalising and producing sounds. For instance the position of the tongue and the shape of the lips contribute to the basic sounds' production.   In a language, people use basic sound units (phonemes) to build words and put the words together according to some rules that are specific to the language to make phrases. So, sounding out the words and sequencing them, both cause the variations in different languages. As a result of these differences, human beings have arrived at different ways of expressing and conveying the same thoughts that are created and processed the same way or similar manner. Fuller (1987) suggests that learning a different language enables human beings to operate in a world much bigger than the one provided by their mother tongue. This is a valid point, as a new language allows human beings to assume or at least imitate a different personality than the one they are accustomed to in their mother tongue. Some examples are sense of humour, the manner of requesting (direct/indirect), forms of verbal protest, showing courtesy, voice-volume and intonations. 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 in German even if they are translated well. 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 the voice, thus making the use of politeness indicators such as "please" and "thank you" is 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, a

human being embarks on a journey that crosses many different boundaries when he or she chooses a different language. This experience can make people appreciate and understand their mother tongue in a different way. Business graduates in a continuously shrinking globe will also benefit from some knowledge and appreciation of other languages. Even some basic knowledge and appreciation of other languages will help graduates to enhance their abilities to build better relationships with their colleagues of different cultural backgrounds.

HOW LANGUAGE IS LEARNED

Majority of people are blessed with at least one default language and they learn this language (mother tongue) almost automatically. So, a great deal of effort would not be required in acquiring the necessary skills to communicate with each other in order to meet the standard day-to-day needs. However, people will surely face a different challenge when it comes to learning another language. Some people learn other languages more easily and quickly than others. These people are said to have a special talent for learning languages. Unfortunately, the exact nature of the conditions and factors that contribute to these so-called talents are not known. It has been said that people that have musical ears and ability to play musical instruments are good at learning languages. Although there is no scientific proof, but the reasoning could be due to similar abilities. People with those abilities can remember and imitate sounds to produce tunes or words. It is interesting to note that there are other similar situations where one form of skill helps the other. For example, poets can also be good painters. What a poet does with words is very similar to what a painter does with shapes and colours on canvas or paper. In both cases the eyes of the mind see images and then express or described the images using different media.

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, people learn their mother tongue mainly by association. In other words, people 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. The child will always associate avoiding excessive heat or danger with the word(s) heard. If this basic but practical example is analyzed one would realize that a language learning process occurred in a natural manner. Incidentally, domestic animals also learn in a similar manner.

It is noteworthy to mention a small book by Emberley (2000) on teaching colours and a few basic words to young children. In this book, the names of the colours in English and Spanish are presented first and then examples/situations associated with those colours are illustrated. For example, Green/Verde is followed by a picture of green frog with the words frog and *la rana* above it. Learning by association, using either actual and/or virtual visual and aural media will be explored in the next section.

A practical tip in learning a language is to try and imitate the words like the natives pronounce them. 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 one listens to someone pronounces words in a language, which is not his or her mother tongue. For non-academic learning purposes, one does not have to be 100% accurate in using the equivalence. Instead, an effort to imitate the sounds as the locals, would be more useful. For instance, if someone says *shaavesh* to a hotel receptionist in Portugal, the receptionist will know that the person is asking for his or her keys (in Portuguese: *chaves*). If someone pronounces the word as *chaves* (*ch* as in

change) even in a complete sentence, the receptionist will not understand what the person is trying to say. The next section presents approaches to language learning using the latest technologies, concepts and ideas.

INNOVATIVE WAYS OF LEARNING A LANGUAGE

A fascinating method of learning languages has been provided by the well-known language teacher Michel Thomas. He adopts a less formal but very effective approach, which places an emphasis on understanding rather than memorizing. With this method, the learners do not need to take notes, read from a book or even do any homework. Michel Thomas encourages the learners to construct their own learning material based on what they already know. For instance, he teaches Spanish (Thomas, 2000) to beginners, who speak English, by informing them about the common routes of the words found in English and Spanish. He explains that these words are spelled almost in the same way (possible or acceptable) but pronounced differently. Guidance on pronunciation is provided so that the learners can apply a general rule to similar situations. Hence, the learners start constructing sentences by receiving guidance instead of trying to memorize words and phrases. According to Thomas (2000), close to 1200 words in English end with *tion* (pronounced *shen*). These words are the same in Spanish except they are spelled with *cion* and pronounced as *sion*. Hence, it is encouraging to know that a knowledge base for the new language (Spanish or even French) is already acquired. In particular, speaking English well or as a native tongue puts people in an advantageous position for learning several Latin-based languages. The commonalities in sounds for many words (such as milk and the German *milch*) are also a very good start for learning Germanic languages.

Recently, the author had the opportunity of evaluating and testing the Teach Yourself one-day series (French, Spanish and Italian) by Smith (2004a, 2004b and 2004c). The material is presented mainly in the medium of audio (CD).   The approach is extremely effective as the new learner is not overwhelmed by excessive amounts of vocabulary and grammatical rules. The words provided are just enough to have a basic conversation when necessary. Encouraging the learners to use body language is also very practical and useful. For instance, doing an impression of doors opening and closing with hands after *a quelle heure, a que hora or a che ora* is a good example of encouraging learners to be creative and innovative. This way of creativity can of course be extended to various other situations and it will encourage the learner to communicate in a new language.

The materials in One-Day series contain many features of effective and innovative teaching. Learning by association is encouraged by linking words with words, images or sounds that one can easily remember. For instance, thinking of the principal coming down the main road would be a good example of learning *la rue principale*. The learner is also guided to build new meanings based on what they already know throughout the course.   Avoiding long sentences and large amounts of vocabulary to learn and remember is also effective and appropriate for beginners.

The author has found the LinguaFun (2003) Language Learning Card Games present a very amusing, entertaining and effective way of learning to construct simple sentences in French, Spanish, Italian and German. A sentence is divided into three distinct components relating to the subject-verb, object and time. These segments are presented on colourful playing cards. Hence, it would be possible to combine them in a number of different ways to come up with different sentences. An audio CD provides the correct pronunciation of each part. The cards and the audio CD form a non-computer multimedia which is capable of producing desired effect.

EuroTalkinteractive (2002) is a computer multimedia learning system, which approaches language learning by association. This is achieved by presenting an image and text on the computer screen and at the same time pronouncing the word/phrase with it. Therefore, an effective blend of three kinds of media (visual, audio and text) is presented to the learner. The use of appropriate and at the same time entertaining images is a very powerful way of tapping into our right-brain, which according to Buzan (2002) is responsible for more creative activities such as comprehending rhythm, colour and space. He also believes that relying on the left-brain functions limits people to only 50% of the use of their brain.

As Figure 1 shows, an image that is associated with the phrase *Je ne sens pas bien* (I do not feel well). So in the future, when someone experiences a situation like the one depicted by the image, he or she will be prompted to remember the phrase, by associating the phrase with the image. This experience is, in some ways, similar to the hot surface and the child hearing the word *hot*. Similarly, the image in Figure 2 is associated with *Dèsolè* (In French: *sorry*)
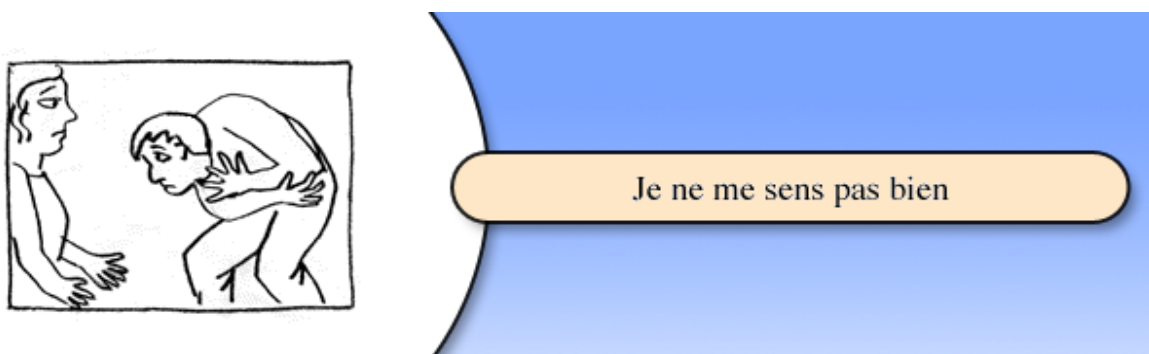

Figure 1 – Associating an image with a phrase - Source: EuroTalk*interactive* French
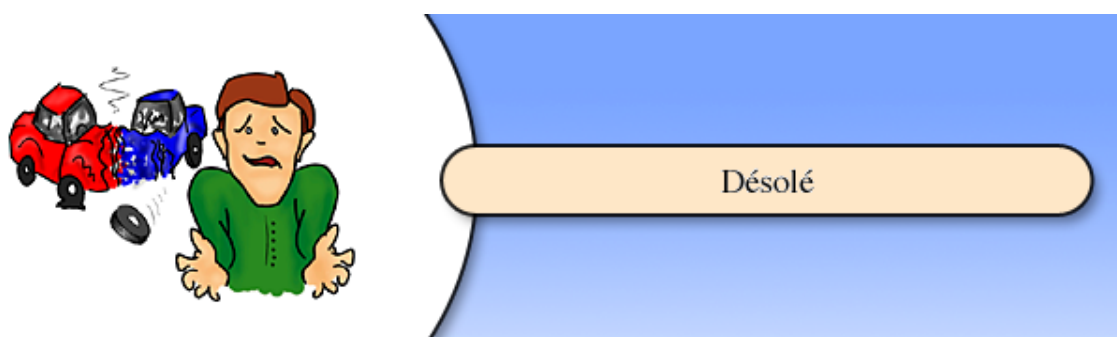

Figure 2 – Associating an image with a word - Source: EuroTalk*interactive* French

As suggested by Gruneberg (1994) the Learning by Association approach has been in existence since the ancient times. The ancient Greeks regarded this method an efficient way of learning and remembering.

Gruneberg (2002a, 2002b, and 2002c) approaches language learning in a similar manner. However, the images become virtual rather than actual. In other words, the learner is instructed to use their mind's eye to visualize for 10 seconds an image related to the segment. For example, in order to learn the word *valise* (suitcase in French), the learner is asked to visualize the image of suitcases, which are strewn all over the valleys. This is probably more than just the use of the mind's eye as the "mind's ear" is also encouraged to associate the sounding (pronunciation) of the word *valise* with *valeez* (valleys).

Some of the other interesting examples presented by Gruneberg are:
· Imagine that you are looking at a plate (in French: *assiette*) and saying to yourself I-see-it.
· Imagine that you are going through the customs (in French: *douane*) and counting the-one, the- two and the-three.

As in the EuroTalk examples, one can easily refer to these visualizations in his or her mind and be prompted to recall the words. Although these ideas can be taught and practiced in a classroom from a book, the technology has made the delivery of them of more efficient and readily accessible.

Technology has also made contributions to learning in terms of handheld electronic dictionaries. These devices have gradually evolved into sophisticated language learning aids. One of the earlier handheld electronic dictionaries was the Fanfare Translator by Fanfare Electronics Ltd. This device became available in the early 90s and was capable of translating a limited number of very basic words between English, French, German, Spanish and Italian. Franklin and Seiko have released language dictionaries too. The six Language Translator pocket-dictionary by Seiko is a very compact device, which is able to translate between English, French, German, Spanish, Portuguese and Italian. It also contains a bank of useful and commonly used phrases, which can be translated, from one language to another. Although these pocket size portable devices are ideal for traveling, they are also valuable source of readily available learning reference.

It might have sounded far-fetched or a technological prediction if a few years ago, someone had claimed that one-day a machine would be able to convert human being's language or dialect to any language or dialect. This is a reality now! Ectaco (2001) has developed a very compact machine (Universal Translator), which can understand spoken words in English and convert them to French, German or Spanish with perfect accents. Although the Speech Recognition technology has not progressed to achieve 100% accuracy in deciphering every word or phrase, but it is intelligent enough not to be too fussy about the speaker's accent. Again, in addition to its valuable use in traveling, Universal Translator can be a good means of learning phrases.

FUTURE POSSIBILITIES

Other technologies such as Virtual Reality (VR) will allow the learners to be a part of the learning materials and play important role in the future multimedia systems. For instance, virtual reality has been utilized in practical areas such as 3-D modeling of human genes, physics experiments, surgical procedures and tours of terrestrial and celestial landscapes. For details see:
http://www.easypano.com/p_Virtual_Reality_software.html;   and
http://www.iei.uiuc.edu/class.pages/rw2g/virtual.html .

Learners will be able to learn a foreign word or phrase by seeing how it is written, how it 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).

In the case of VR multimedia, 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)?

It is noteworthy to mention that the technology involved and required for the VR educational multimedia approach as described above is not an impossibility in the near-future. Although it is not possible to set up the above-mentioned experiment right now, it is reasonable to predict good results as several senses will be utilised. It is known that for thousands of years, human beings have acquired and processed information using a number of different senses. Hence, the use of different senses for information collection, analysis and remembering is something, which the brain can relate to very well.

The future technologies will enable people to interact with computers in a less formal manner. In other words, people 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. 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.

Future information technology products may also facilitate capturing, digitising, storing and transferring human thoughts as an independent medium directly to other sources. Imagine the ability of directly transferring an animation of a concept to a learner in a 'thought file'. After all, the language of thought is probably universal and is not based on a particular type of language. In a strictly natural way, people do not have to pronounce words in their thoughts to describe ideas. People's ideas can be "seen" in their thoughts. Perhaps these images are like Plato's Forms (Plato's Republic) or Aristotles' Essences (De-Anima).

In this way, most of the language-dependent barriers will be removed and people will achieve that ultimate level of internationalised information transfer and sharing. Maybe, one day everyone can choose to talk to each other in their "mother tongue" without too much effort.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has demonstrated that learning a new language can be approached in a more natural manner just like a child with his/her native tongue. Therefore, the learning process will no longer be a

frustrating one.   Innovative methods such as learning by association and having the opportunity to use the right brain through visually rich multimedia systems will make the learning process both efficient and enjoyable

Any new language will provide human beings with new dimensions and outlook on life and allows people to tap into different parts of the brain. It can help people to understand others and themselves better and expand the boundaries of their actual and virtual worlds.

Each new language will teach people how to use different parts of their brain, which they have not explored before. People can move away from the sequential learning and adopt more creative methods. These additional learning abilities will certainly help the university students in their courses. They will also be in a better position to appreciate and build professional relationships with their colleagues from other countries and different cultural backgrounds.

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