

How to Learn a New Language on Your Own

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In this paper, Pouya Vakili introduces readers to the concepts of translanguaging and contrastive rhetoric and their relationship with language learning. Additionally, he also discusses some important language learning theories and shares his own experience of learning English.

Introduction

Have you ever been to a place where you didn't know the language? Have you ever wanted to learn a language, but thought the process is too difficult, or thought that it takes too long? Have you thought, "What's the best way to learn a language? What's the quickest way to learn new words? How can I sound like a native speaker? Do I really have to study grammar?" These are some of the questions that may pop up in someone's first thoughts when they embark on learning a new language. Learning a new language is always challenging, frustrating, and sometimes just plain difficult, so you might try to avoid it. Maybe you've looked for the quickest and easiest way to learn the language, but felt the language was just "impossible." Well, I'm here to tell you that it's not impossible, and if we focus on translanguaging and then take a look at different sciences, theories, and learning styles, we can figure out different methods of learning a new language. After all, despite the difficulties of learning new languages, bi- or multi-language acquisition is rapidly growing in popularity around the world, and bilingualism is

becoming a highly-desired resume addition. Furthermore, when we learn a new language, unintentionally, we are exposed to a new culture and a new life. We discover rhetorical differences in our writing and even speaking. These can be two major challenges that language learners need to deal with when learning a new language, but they're not impossible! I know this from my own experience learning English as a foreign language, an experience I'll share a little about.

Some Important Terms

First, though, you might be thinking, "What's translingualism?" Well, **translingual** phenomena are words and other aspects of language that are relevant in more than one language. Thus "translingual" may mean "existing in multiple languages" or "having the same meaning in many languages," and sometimes "containing words of multiple languages" or "operating between different languages." **Translingualism**, then, is simply the existence of translingually relevant aspects of language. Now, that said, there's another important concept you should know, and that's **contrastive rhetoric**. Contrastive rhetoric is an area of research in second language acquisition that identifies problems in composition (or writing) encountered by second language writers and, by referring to the rhetorical strategies of the writer's first language, attempts to explain them. Contrastive rhetoric maintains that language and writing are cultural phenomena. As a direct consequence, each language has rhetorical conventions unique to it. Furthermore, the linguistic and rhetorical conventions of a writer's first language interfere with his/her writing in the second language (Connor, 2003).

Therefore, we need to learn a new language *and* its associated culture (either in speaking or writing) if we want to write with that language successfully. But, how can we achieve this? This is, undoubtedly, one of the main questions we all, with no exception, have asked ourselves or others in one stage of our learning or another. But what we need to remember is that "there is no best method for learning a language" (Pennycook, 1989). I know, you're disappointed. You were probably thinking I had the key, the secret, to successfully learning a new language. I don't, but I am going to introduce you to some different methods for learning a new language that I have learned both from my study of linguistics and from my own experience about learning English as a foreign language. Hopefully, sharing some of these methods with you will help you start to think about the complexity of language and of writing in the world.

An Overview of Some Important Language Learning Methods

When we step into any language center, language teachers are probably using different methods and giving conflicting advice. Some suggest learning vocabulary by memorizing word lists; others suggest learning vocabulary by reading in the language you are trying to learn. Some concentrate on the pronunciation first; others suggest improving pronunciation as you go along. Some prefer giving students grammar drills; others recommend not to open a textbook for grammar practices. They all probably claim that their method works best, and that they know it works best because they have been using it for quite a long time and everyone has been satisfied. Here, I don't want to either prove or disprove their claim; I want to introduce their methods and others without passing any judgments, again, to demonstrate that language and learning language is complex.

Throughout the history of language learning, a lot of theories and methods have been proposed, and each of them has been built on the premises of the previous one(s) in one way or another. Because I think it's important to think about language learning more completely, I'd like to offer a summary of some of these methods in the genre of foreign language instruction and then describe its sub-genres. Now, one of the earliest methods of language instruction in the world was the grammar-translation method. This method was introduced in the 1500s (Chastain, 1988). At that time, Latin and Greek were the two classic languages of the world, and people tried to learn either of them. In this method, the main task for students was to translate sentences from these languages into English, so they had to memorize large lists of words. Conversation was considered the last skill in this method. Therefore, the learners might have been able to master the skills of reading and translating, but other skills were easily ignored. It was a method that really focused on writing, not on speaking.

The next theoretical method was called the direct method. Unlike grammar-translation, the main focus of this method was communication. The teacher and learners had to use the target language in the class. This method tried to imitate the process of language learning by a child, so it aimed at speaking and simply disregarded writing and reading. But this meant that students' vocabulary knowledge was often unsatisfactory, and they had very little knowledge of grammar (Chastain, 1988). So, to remedy this, the audio-lingual method was introduced in 1945, and even now it is used by some language centers around the world. This method mainly relies on speaking and grammar. Repetition is one of the favorite activities in this method. You can still find some examples of this method in nearby institutes. The teacher says a phrase and then students repeat after the

teacher. Then, the teacher changes a word in this phrase, and the students do the same and it goes on and on (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). But some scholars claim that this method just considers the form of the language and neglects the meaning (Chastain, 1988). But, the last and most current method that I would like to introduce here is communicative language teaching (CLT). The main focus of this method is “interaction” between the teacher and students. The texts students learn from are authentic, and nearly all the skills of language are addressed with more or less emphasis. Now, some linguists criticize this method for not having strong theories. However, you can find many books designed based on this method (Ridge, 1992).

So Why Does this Matter? My Own Experience in Learning English as a Foreign Language

You may be wondering why I’m bothering telling you about these methods. Well, I used different aspects of each to help me learn English, and translanguaging played a big role in my success. But before sharing my own experience in learning English, I would like to briefly write about the educational system in Iran, since it might help explain my experiences and my learning:

In Iran, schooling is divided into three parts: elementary (five years), middle school (three years), and high school (four years). English is introduced at the second grade of middle school on. The method that is used doesn’t seem to be very effective, since most students still don’t seem to know much English (even after taking five years of classes!) unless they have taken additional courses in other private language schools. I wasn’t an exception, and I didn’t do anything for my English, and, eventually, I ended up a twenty-two-year-old with no knowledge of English. But then something changed my life totally, and I think it launched me on the path of my passion. I have a cousin who is as old as I am with the same name, but the difference is that he was born and raised in England, while I was born and raised in Iran. He was going to pay a visit to Iran, and due to a sense of jealousy I had for him, I decided to learn English. But how?

I had come from a family with low financial capabilities; my father was a simple clerk who could hardly afford us (me, my sister, and my three brothers), and my mother was a housewife, so it was terribly difficult to ask my father to support me financially for a language school.

So, I decided to learn English on my own.

In order to start my practice, I bought two books: one vocabulary book and one conversation book. My plan was to study English for as long as I could in a day. I started with vocabulary. I read one unit (introducing 12 words with examples), then tried to memorize the sample sentences. In this way, I was learning both vocabulary and sentences. In the meantime, I started memorizing the conversations in the book. The book, as far as I remember, had situational conversations. I tried to memorize them. But then I realized I was not moving fast enough because my cousin's travel was approaching, so I decided to bring English into my everyday life. I memorized the sentences plus the words in my vocabulary book, I tried to memorize the sentences in my conversation book, and I was repeating them throughout the day. For vocabulary practice, every night I read one unit, but before that I reviewed the previous units. For example, when I was supposed to start unit 10, I first reviewed 1–9 and then started unit 10. So, it was taking me a long time to practice English every day, but I was learning it! The other activity I had was making sentences with those new words and substituting them with the words or phrases in my conversation and vocabulary book. I tried to integrate English into my life; I was getting accustomed to thinking in English. For example, whenever I wanted to do something or say something to someone, I first repeated that in my head in English, then I did it or said it.

Along with these activities, I had been doing something really hard, but interesting. I had bought a small pocketbook titled "100 short stories, by 100 English writers." I started translating the book into Farsi (Persian). That was a real burden for me; the words, structures, concepts and etc. But it helped me think translingually. I got a better sense of the similarities and differences between my native language and English from translating those stories, and I then translated one page every day (while reviewing that translation the next day before proceeding) until I sent one of the translations to a children's magazine and got my first translation publication. I was gaining confidence; I could think in English, I was able to speak about my daily activities in English, and I had gotten published.

My next interesting activity was oral translation (i.e. interpretation). At that time, Iran was in a war with Iraq, and we didn't have a lot of facilities; our TV just had two local channels which started programs at 6 a.m. until midnight, and all the programs were in Farsi. How could I manipulate this situation? Well, I started watching TV (any programs: movies, documentaries, news, etc.) and then translating the sentences I heard in my mind. As they were speaking Farsi, I was speaking English in my mind. If I had a problem with words, I wrote it down and later checked it in a dictionary. I also did this for the phrases, and I became a professional interpreter and translator from Farsi into English. Once again, switching between the two languages and

having to think across those languages and think translingually was helping me master English.

But how about my grammar? As I was memorizing words and sentences, I was doing a kind of discovery learning. I was trying to understand why this sentence is like this, and I tested that in as many other sentences as I could. For example, in one context, I saw that a verb ending in “ing” followed the word “enjoy.” I paid attention to this feature in another context, and I saw it again, so I realized that whenever I use “enjoy” I need to add “ing” to the following verb (example: I enjoy *dancing*). I did this every time I saw something odd about grammar, and it ended up significantly helping me.

Ultimately, this whole process took me almost two months, but during this time I was really involved in English, and I had brought English into my life in every moment. So, I can say it might have been a sitting-practicing time for two to three hours a day, but I was actually practicing English throughout the time I was awake. Then, since I had a part-time job, I could save some money for my English class. So, I decided to register in one English intensive course to practice mainly my speaking. After taking a written exam and having an interview with the head of the institute, to my great surprise, the head asked me, “Would you like to teach here?” That was something I had never expected.

And there you have it. That is how my English journey started. Once I started teaching, since I had practiced and learned English on my own, I tried to inject this idea into my class and encourage my own students to bring English into their life in order to help them identify different translingual phenomena that could help them really learn English. What I did was to train my students to learn *how to learn*. Rather than prescribing some methods for them, I just traveled with them on this trial and error path to see what worked for them. Then we together tried to improve that method. Then, after two years teaching English in different language schools in Tehran, I had won a good reputation. Many institutes sent me letters of invitation and asked me to cooperate with them, but I was just tired of teaching, as I had been working 14-hour days. It wasn’t just teaching; I had been working in three companies as an interpreter and in two translation institutes. As you see, the methods I had been practicing had helped me a lot, and my jobs were directly related to the way I learned English. Therefore, I decided to give myself a break. Yes! I decided to go to university to learn this language (which had become my life) academically. After taking the university entrance exam, I was accepted in one of the good universities in Iran. I will never forget the first week of my university. All of the instructors were my colleagues in language schools I was teaching at, and I was the supervisor of two of my own university instructors. That was awesome!

My Writing Experience in English

While speaking English and translating my native language into English were both important to helping me learn English, so was writing my own ideas in English. When I learned English as explained earlier, I started to write again. But this time, I started to write in English because I didn't want others to read what I was writing. It was like escaping from others. In fact, I used English as a kind of defensive method to express my thoughts and emotions. I sometimes wrote letters to my parents in English (I kept them for myself, as I knew they couldn't read them). The more I wrote, the more I enjoyed writing. When I was admitted to university, I got more interested in writing, and I started reading and analyzing written pieces. I was a junior student when I realized there were some major cultural differences (and not similarities) between Persian and English writings (we hadn't studied that before), and I asked one of my instructors about that, and the answer was, "You will learn about it in the masters; don't be in such a rush." I wasn't satisfied with this answer at all, so I again started my own studies and research on this issue, and here is where I became familiar with translingualism and contrastive rhetoric. I found a lot of differences that English speaking people have in their thinking from people who speak other languages, and that was truly what I was looking for and really what I had been focusing on the entire time I was learning English on my own. I learned that what appears in writing or speaking is directly a reflection of how people in that culture view the world. For instance, English speakers tend to think in a linear fashion, or in a straight, direct line, so as you read their pieces or talk to them, you can find this straightforwardness. However, many Asian cultures think in a circular way, so when you read their writings at the end you should ask yourself "So what?"¹ These have been great breakthroughs for me, as I could see the differences, and I was trying to generalize these into world problems. I actually think the main reason for most world conflicts is the misunderstanding of each other's language in general and culture in particular. If we understand that people in one language think differently from us with another language, then we can nurture respect and esteem between us.

The Ending ...

So where does this leave us? Well, I hope that I have shown you that you don't need to be worried about learning a new language; it just requires us to think about what method works best for us and, regardless of the method(s) you use, to think about translingualism and find those similarities and differences in your language and the language you want to learn. Remember, there is no

single method in the world to claim as the best one. We need to practice trial and error for a while and then decide on which method is ours. Mistakes are always there; we shouldn't be worried about making mistakes at first, as these mistakes may also help us learn. I know all of this from my own experience, and I hope sharing that experience has helped you learn about the value of translanguaging and helped you come to better appreciate the complexity of language. For me, after all of this work learning English, I realized it was time to think about my own career in the future more seriously. I decided to teach at university, and for this purpose I had to continue my education to the highest degree I could. After finishing my Bachelor's degree, I was immediately accepted in a Master's program in the best university in human science in Iran. My overall rank was 7 in the country, and that meant a lot to me and to my family, too. So, I know first-hand the value of focusing on translanguaging when learning a new language.

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Endnote

¹ Some scholars think that this difference is due, at least in part, to the influence of Greco-Roman rhetoric in Western cultures contributing to the linearity of English language structures, while the influence of Confucian thinking contributes to the more circular structures of language style in Asian cultures (Gu, 2008).

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