

Marbles In Your Mouth

Foray into the world of foreign language learning, Part 1

Introduction

In August 2005, having completed my project for the Parelli Natural Horsemanship organisation in America, I found myself unusually free of work. The only event on my calendar was a date for surgery to reconstruct the ruptured ACL in my right knee. That I had scheduled for December back home in Australia.

I was keen to find a project that fit in with my knee recovery activities. Clearly sprinting, motorcycling and dancing would have to wait.

All my life I had wanted to have the experience of hearing a foreign language spew forth from my lips. I wanted to read with comprehension an alien construction of words and phrases. What would it be like to NOT think in English?

I had made tentative starts to learn a foreign language at earlier times in my life, but absent a good set of learning strategies, I fell into the same traps that plague many adult language learners. I quit prematurely. Now, I had time and knowledge of learning on my side. I felt I could make a better attempt. At the same time, given my professional experiences I thought perhaps I would be a good person to evaluate of the methods being used to teach adults and on from that be able to offer some insights into the process.

I have been involved in this project now for 3 and 1/2 years. I have had many experiences with different schools, programs and teachers and their teaching methods and philosophies. I have learned a great deal about foreign language learning and teaching.

I did not, of course, have any idea what I would find when I started. I didn't know what was true or who to believe. Was it true that children learn languages better than adults? Were the assertions of a popular language program true when they say you can be learn a new language in just a few

minutes a day? Is learning a foreign language just too hard to be realistically achieved by the average adult?

I was about to find out.

About this article

I have not been avoiding putting into print what I have learned about foreign language learning and teaching. The simple fact is that I am not finished with my own research and will not be for at least another 12 to 18 months. And, then I do not yet know of the value of the time spent to write a book on the subject. Who would read it? I will make that assessment at a later date.

Yet, I have been finding myself in conversations with colleagues and friends that contain ideas that are well formed and come easily about the study of foreign language in adulthood. I thought for a start, and to satisfy some of the requests I have been receiving, I might start with those.

None of these ideas as presented here are complete. But in saying that, I do think there are some thought provoking points to be made and they might lead to good conversations between us in the future. Let's see how we go.

I have interviewed and/or have had conversations with hundreds of people who are now, or have in the past, set a goal to learn a foreign language. In the main these have been functional members of society with good educations who started with confidence, made an honest attempt to learn and used readily available programs. Unfortunately, only some of these people gained any real functional or practical use in the new language. There was no apparent reason related to the individual's intelligence to account for this discrepancy, and there is NO such thing as being a "natural" when it comes to language learning. The only distinction between success and failure lay in the method of teaching used by the teacher or program.

Unfortunately, common amongst those who failed was that they quit in frustration, confusion and with low confidence. They did NOT attribute these internal experiences to the program they used or to the teacher they

had, but instead, in they were attributed to some imagined deficiency within themselves. This is the devil in adult learning programs of all types.

From those who failed I heard expressed the other persistent belief that learning a new language is just too hard. Coupled with that, I found a persistent belief that had they learned the language as a child it would have been easier. And, of course, I heard the all too common self-deprecating comments about their own deficiencies when it comes to learning - too old, bad memory, poor concentration, no natural talent for languages, blah, blah, blah.

These first two beliefs I want to address at the start.

Is learning a foreign language is too hard? What is the evidence?

What is the evidence related to foreign language learning in the world around us today? We have millions of people who try, fail and conclude that it is just too hard.

Yet, in contrast to this, I listen in, or have conversations everyday with people in my community who arrived here in Australia as adults who speak quite passable English. Well enough to understand me when I communicate in English, and well enough to get their point across when speaking.

There are more people studying and speaking English in China than there are Americans. It is hard to speak Italian in Italy when Italians want to use you to practice their English! I didn't once need to speak French in France because English is so widely used.

I have attended Italian conversation classes here in Australia where I met dozens of older Australians, many who have never been to Italy, with the ability to watch an Italian film or read an Italian book and then follow up with in-depth conversations in Italian with the teacher and classmates.

Everywhere I have travelled I have met adults who have by one means or another gained some measurable fluency in a new language and perhaps most importantly with the confidence to use it. The evidence is that hundreds of millions of adults do learn to function in a new language.

Clearly, there are means or methods of teaching and learning that work, and those that don't. I wanted a first hand experience of these many methods used to teach foreign languages. I didn't know it at the time but I was about to start a very long journey. I have seen what has to be some of the worst of the programs and teaching methods, and I have also seen what must be some of the best. I feel very sad every time I hear another story from someone who so wants to learn a new language and is frustrated to the point of abandoning the goal because of the program or method they chose.

Before I can talk about the various methods, first there is that one other common and persistent belief to get out of our way.

Believing children learn languages faster and better than adults has no foundation in reality

The most pervasive over-the-dinner-table comment I hear about language learning is that children learn faster and better than adults. People wish they had learned as a child and point to their own children who are studying. Parents are so impressed with the language learning abilities (both foreign and native language) of their children. Under scrutiny, there isn't much to be impressed about.

Comparing foreign language learning with native language learning

First, we cannot compare foreign language learning in adults with first language learning in children in that way that is often times done by adults. These are dramatically different brain activities and first language acquisition is something achieved by us all, like learning to walk. Language acquisition is impressive in that it is accomplished so consistently, but it is by nature a SLOW and arduous journey. Blessed we be for our amnesia of early childhood learning.

It will be 18 to 20 months before a child's brain has learned all that is necessary to make their first attempts to use spoken language to communicate what it is they want or need. They have been fully saturated in a language environment with much of that language directed squarely at them. It is long process for the brain to make the neural connections in the

auditory cortex for understanding and differentiating the sounds into discreet interpretable words and just as long for the sensory-motor centres of the brain to begin to control the muscles of the mouth, tongue and palate for speech production. Around this time a child will make their first recognisable word. And, by the age of 2 years most will have the grand vocabulary of 7 to 10 words. Of course, these first words are usually only understood by the parent or other family members. Friends to the home are often heard asking, "What's he saying?" To which the mother replies, "Oh, he's asking for his blanket." Okay, right.

Many parents know, too, the experience of trying to figure out just what "crahm" means. The child utters "crahm", the mother looking perplexed picks up the milk, "Do you want milk?" "Craahmm" the child repeats with a bit more volume and some spittle forms at the corner of the mouth. "Do you want a cracker?" the mother asks scratching her head. A blood curdling, "Craahmm" returns. "I'm sorry honey, I don't understand" the mother implores, "What do you want?" "Craahmm", is accompanied by some diffuse arm pointing (no control over the fingers yet). The mother turns and looks, "Oh, candy! You want candy!" as she reaches for a jelly bean in the bowl and gives it to the child. Content, the child has learned to get something he wants using language. Success. The mother has learned too, a foreign word "crahm" means "jelly bean". And, it will mean that for quite some time to come! The mother will even teach this new word to other family members and friends who come to wonder just what does that the child want?

The childhood process of learning a first language is long, very long. Thousands of hours are dedicated to this process passively and actively, and that is before school begins. This initial language learning period is then followed by another 13 or more years of schooling to build an adult vocabulary, comprehension, quality of speech, reading skills, correct use of grammar and good hand-writing and writing skills.

Adults forget how much language learning was developed during their school years. Because the process is long and slow we have little memory of the small gains made over this long period of time. In primary school language development is an active process with weekly vocabulary words to learn and use, writing exercises and so on. Later, in high school this development is

embedded into other study activities and growth in language areas is incidental.

If you say you want to learn a foreign language as well as a child learns his or her first, ask yourself: Would you, as an adult, be happy to spend 5 years of intense diffuse study, the first few years doing nothing but listening to the language around you to eventually speak, read and write with the vocabulary, grammar and quality of a 5 year old? Do you believe as an adult if you spent 5 years intensely studying anything you would learn less or perform more poorly than a child? Would you then be happy follow up with some daily learning program to grow your language skills to something resembling an adult level of competence for another 13 years?

With good methodology, learning a second language will always be faster than learning our first language.

Just another point here: Please don't take this to mean that I do not understand nor appreciate what is miraculous in the early developmental processes in children. It is remarkable and I would not like to see an adult try to manage that process. I used to say if children had adult brains when they were learning to walk most of us would still be bumping around town on our bottoms.

Comparing to children learning language in primary school

I have been hearing more and more comments related to the superior language learning abilities of children from parents whose children are starting language studies in early primary school. They speak glowingly about their child's prowess with a foreign language impressed by the beautiful Italian or Spanish or Mandarin word or two that emits from their little lips.

I started to explore this in more detail with teachers. I was most interested in their methods and the curriculum covered in their early classes. Armed with this I started asking adults what they imagined their experience would be going to school with their 6 year old each day of language class and sitting in. They'd play games, colour in some pictures, say rhymes and sing songs. At the end of the semester (a whole semester!) they would know their colours, how to count to 10, the names of a few animals and other stuff, and

could say hello and goodbye. Every adult I have presented this scenario to rolled their eyes in boredom before I had finished. It would be painfully slow, and not one person imagined they would not be able to keep up with their child. Nor would any have been satisfied with the small amount they had learned given the time invested. Sure, knowing your numbers and colours will one day be useful, but they are by no means the most important things to be focused on first when learning a foreign language! Of course, if you are 6 years old this is fun and what they have just recently learned in English. It is appropriate to their age.

I could, without difficulty, teach any adult that full starting curriculum within an hour. The methods used in school may be useful for the brain's of young children but are wholly inadequate the speed of learning of the adult brain.

On the subject of language learning in childhood I believe this has been a big missing component of our curriculum here in Australia, as well as most English speaking countries. In my day, foreign language learning wasn't introduced until high school. The major problem was that we didn't study long enough to use the language in a way that allowed for full functional use of the language or for long-term retention. Most of us have very poor recall of much of what was taught in our high school French, Spanish or Latin lessons.

Starting language studies early is important IF it will continue for all the years of school. A few years in primary school will have no value later on if not continued.

Most of my friends from other countries who today speak passable, and in many cases very good, English started in school at the age of 6 and continued those studies through high school. This went from the simple to complex and resulted in a foundation in the language strong enough to learn to use the language quickly when the need presented itself.

Ex-pat children learn faster than their parents

This was another repeated comment related to language learning and children. The children of parents who move to a foreign country seem to

learn the language faster than their parents, especially the mother if she is not working. But again it comes down to looking at the life of these children as compared to that of the parent. The children go to school everyday. They have dedicated time focused on learning. The language they are learning is that of a child. They speak in short phrases and commands, use simple vocabulary and they have no concern for the acceptable childhood errors in grammar. The child also has a compelling need to communicate with his or her peers.

While the child is in school everyday, the adult may do little on a daily basis to learn the language. They may take a class and then return home alone. The adult, with a high need to make themselves understood will quickly learn they can get by in the shops by pointing at what they want. They will seek out other English-speaking friends. They continue to read in English, speak in English and think in English.

The point is the adult does not do what the child does, and the different results boil down to this: If the parent did what they child did, the parent would soon be speaking like a child! And, believe me they would not be impressed with themselves. Adults are used to using language in an adult manner. When they learn a foreign language they have their native language as a reference point for what they expect in fluency and function. Most adults want to do in another language what they can do in their native language. They will not be happy for long reading children's books, watching children's programs on TV, or being unable to have a conversation at an adult level.

A point about language acquisition while living in the country

Another belief I often hear expressed by adults about language learning is that it would be easier for someone who is able to live for a time in the foreign country, to be immersed. But living in the country does not necessarily provide greater ease in language learning. It depends what the adult does about language learning while in the country.

If the adult interacts with locals as their only means of learning the language they will over time, and not a short time, begin to understand simple phrases and commands, and speak exactly as does a 5 year old child

with no further education. They become functional but not fluent in the sense of adult language use. They will not have the ability to read or write in the language. They will not have the vocabulary to follow more complex conversations such as those in films or on the nightly news. I met many such people during my time in Italy. They had enough language to get their needs met, but not to use the language in more complex conversations or activities.

Remember, that most of what you do with your native language was developed during your years at school. Slowly, over time you were introduced to writing and reading at ever-increasing levels of complexity. Vocabulary was a specific focus of the early school years, and continued in a self-directed way as we encountered it in books and in the world around us in later years. Grammar was both taught directly and you were regularly corrected. Johnny says, "I eated the apple" and the teacher corrects, "Ah, you ate the apple." Slowly, slowly we learned.

The adult in the foreign country who does not go to school or otherwise do something to advance their language skills will be trapped with a child's language skill level. For comfort, they will retreat often back to their native language for adult stimulation.

I keep coming back to the point that if the adult did what the child did they too would learn as a child does and what a child does. And, I challenge whether an adult would truly be satisfied with both the time it takes and the quality of the result.

Learning a foreign language is not hard, but it does take time, several years in fact of consistent study with a good program, teacher or school.

Conclusion

Can we agree for a moment on two points? First, that if you used the same approaches and methods used to teach children, be that during native language acquisition or foreign language learning in school, you would produce no less a result. You would not learn more slowly. And, second, the result of that learning process is inadequate to function in adult language environments.

Can we also ponder the notion that it is possible that your adult brain with its knowledge of one language, its understanding of the purpose and use of language, and inherent desire use verbal communication to satisfy needs would likely lead you to far superior learning in the same time?

When we learn a new skill we, in fact, need everything at once. To ride a motorcycle I have to know how to do many things at one time in order to ride proficiently and safely. Yet, the teaching of motorcycle riding is a linear process. The teacher can only teach one concept at a time, and that concept or skill must be learned fully and executed with confidence before the next can be introduced. Good teaching programs and teachers are masterful at their ability to deconstruct a complex skill into its parts and then through analysis and logic present those parts in a sequence that builds to the final result. If the sequence is right, the learning is effortless and almost feels incidental.

In closing

In part 1 of this article I addressed two commonly held cultural beliefs about language learning. I believe that before we can make accurate choices about our own language learning endeavours (or any type of learning endeavour) it is important to push these faulty beliefs to the side, as they provide adults with easy excuses should the going get tough in their own studies. The 2 beliefs I have addressed here are: 1) that learning a foreign language is too hard for an adult; and, 2) that children learn languages better and faster than do adults.

In part 2 of this article I will discuss the many methods of teaching and philosophies of the various schools and programs that I have encountered over these past 3 and 1/2 years. I will conclude that article with some suggestions of approaches that you might take to begin your own journey. There is something magical in the process of learning to speak, read, write and understand a language that today would make no sense.

Questions

I have an interest to hear from those of you who have ventured into this area. If you are someone who is either now, or who has in the past, engaged

in a foreign language learning would you consider emailing me about your experience at me@stephanieburns.com You don't need to follow the questions below strictly, they are just a guide. You might have just one small story from your experience that you think might be interesting for me to consider. I am still learning and would like to walk for a minute in your experience.

What was your motivation to study a foreign language?

At what age did you begin your studies?

What program or method of learning did you choose?

How did you come to make this choice?

What was your experience of the program?

What was the result?

How long were you engaged in these studies?

How would you rate your level of fluency in the language?

Would you consider learning another language, or trying again to learn the one you first started?

Thank you, all stories will be read and responded to.