

COMPOSING BUSINESS

Language Deconstruction

New Ideas About Learning Language

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Portfolio

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I. Introduction – Learning A New Language

Learning a new language can be a great boon to your personal or professional life. Whether you're getting ready to bicycle through Europe for a summer or whether you're preparing for high-powered corporate negotiations in Taiwan, mastery of a language other than English can be a tremendous advantage.

Still, the process of learning a new language is daunting. There are so many components to learning a language – from new and difficult grammatical constructs to subtle nuances in pronunciation that can totally change the meaning of words – that the task appears Herculean. Unless you studied a foreign language in school, chances are you may not even be sure where to begin.

Even if you feel like you're up to the task of learning a new language, you still may have trouble figuring out where to start. There are an endless amount of books, DVDs, software applications, language boot camp programs and even private tutors available. Choose the wrong one and you'll be out your money and still not be ready to speak the language you want to speak.

Before you decide what method you want to use to learn a new language, you have to ask yourself some questions, and take stock in what you're able to put into a program, and what you want to get out of it.

Three Key Components to Learning a New Language

Learning a new language doesn't have to be a big mystery. However, there is a reason that some people can learn a language with ease and others can't seem to get off the ground. Usually, the difference is in one of three key components: Time, Money or Dedication.

Time

One of the most significant resources you're going to invest in learning a new language is your time. If you're not in a hurry, for example, you can enroll in a course at your local community college. If you're like most people, however, you probably want to make some real progress in relatively short order. For that, you'll need a quick method.

Language deconstruction, which is the method that this report will focus on, is one of the quickest methods of learning a new language. Language deconstruction helps you to break that language down into manageable but significant components. Master those components, and you're well on your way to learning the language.

There are, of course, other quick methods to learning a new language. For example, there are audio courses you can use while you work out, or while you work on cleaning the house. You can even use these to learn a language while you drive back and forth to work. These methods are the perfect follow-up for language deconstruction. Use language deconstruction to get the big picture and get the most important data, and use these tools after the fact to deepen your understanding of the language.

Money

A full year of a foreign language course at a community college is likely to run you somewhere between \$500 and \$700 in addition to the cost of books, depending on where you live. On the other end of the spectrum, there are some software programs that claim to be able to teach you a language for less than \$15.

While cost alone doesn't determine the quality of instruction you'll receive or guarantee your success, you can be pretty certain that a \$15 language learning course is going to come up short. Likewise, if you don't have to spend \$700 to learn the language, why would you? Especially if that course doesn't really give you what you want out of a language learning program anyway?

Dedication

While using the language deconstruction method to learn a new language is a fast and easy shortcut to success, like other language learning methods it requires a certain amount of dedication and commitment. If you're not ready to spend some serious time, money and energy learning a new language, you may as well forget about it.

Like most things in life, with learning a new language you get out of it what you put into it. If you put a few dollars and half an hour into the language deconstruction process, you shouldn't expect to master the language. If, on the other hand, you start by spending a few hours with language deconstruction and then supplement that learning with some high-quality secondary methods, your chances of success have just increased exponentially.

Language Learning Methods

Over the years, there have been several different approaches to learning language. Today, you can find a language learning program that is based on just about any one of these methods. Here is a look at some of those traditional methods:

Structural Method

This is the traditional method of learning a language, and was the most popular method of learning prior to the 1950s. With this method of language learning, the student is

taught the structure of a given language first. They learn the grammar and vocabulary, and only work out the practical and communicative use of the language as an afterthought. This method takes more work than most of the other language learning methods, and it is arguable whether or not it is any more effective than the other methods.

Audio-lingual method

This method of language learning was popular in the 1950s and 60s, and is used in many programs today. This method is based on the idea of laying a foundation of the language's building blocks, then learning the rules for combining those basic elements. It focuses on accurate grammar and pronunciation, a strong grammatical base, and the ability to respond quickly in conversation. This method focuses on dialogues and repetitive, patterned drills.

Communicative language method

The Communicative language method came to the fore in the 1960s, and focuses on expression and communication. This method utilizes activities that relate to real and actual communication. The activities focus on specific tasks, and on principles that are meaningful to the individual learner. Communicative language methods teach students to use the language for the purpose of expression, to communicate their needs, and to express their judgments and values.

LAMP method

The LAMP method was developed by Thomas and Elizabeth Brewster in the 1970s. This method views language as a social activity. The LAMP method suggests that the language learning process focus on what the learner wants to be able to say. In other words, if the student wants to be able to negotiate corporate contracts, learning will focus almost exclusively on words, phrases and concepts revolving around that activity. This method suggests that the learner "learn a little and use it a lot," focusing on the parts of the language they most need.

Natural method

This method was developed in 1977 by Tracy Terrell and Stephen Krashen. It's one of the most popular methods of language learning today. Based on the communicative method, it assumes that a language is better "acquired" (by learning and using it in context) than "learned" in a classroom or through a teaching method. Conscious learning is only a conduit through which acquisition experiences can occur. This method also allows learners to learn at their own speed and to learn only the things they need or want to learn.

Language Deconstruction

Language Deconstruction takes a radical approach to the process of learning a new language. In many ways, this method of language learning combines some of the best elements of the other language learning methods.

For example, Language Deconstruction places an emphasis on high-frequency words and phrases. In this regard, the method has similarities with the Communicative method. However, unlike the Communicative method, Language Deconstruction doesn't rely on the learner's desire. Instead, it focuses on statistical frequency.

Regardless of your reason for wanting to learn a language, there are certain words and phrases that are going to come up again and again. Language Deconstruction analyzes those words and phrases, and uses that as the base for learning the rest of the language.

Still, Language Deconstruction also relies on some of the principles of the old tried and true Structural method. It examines the foreign language – in both terms of vocabulary and grammatical constructs – and directly relates those structures to structures in English. However, it doesn't have the inherent weakness of the Structural method of being comprehensive and intensive.

II. Compatible Languages: Structures, Sounds And Scripts

One of the most common questions asked by people who are considering learning a language is, “How difficult will this be?” The fact is that there really is no exact answer to this question for any given language. How difficult a language is to learn is, in many ways, relative to the two languages in question and to the learning methods that are being implemented.

To put it another way, you may have heard that English is the hardest language to learn. If your native tongue is Mandarin Chinese, that’s probably true. However, if your native language is Spanish or Portuguese, English is a relatively easy language to learn.

You see, it’s not as if we all start out with a blank slate when it comes to learning a new language. You already have a primary language: English. Some languages are much closer to English than others. Spanish will probably be easier for you to learn than Russian, and Russian will be easier for you to learn than Japanese.

Language Families

Because the Department of State sends so many diplomats out into the world, and because only a percentage of those countries speak English, the Foreign Service Institute trains American diplomats, as well as other Federal officials, in more than 70 different languages. The Foreign Service Institute classifies languages in to three categories, based on how close to English they are and therefore how long it takes to learn the specific language.

Category I

Category I languages are those that are most closely related to English. The Foreign Service Institute estimates between 575 and 600 class hours to gain proficiency in those languages.

Languages in this category include:

- French
- Spanish
- Italian
- Portuguese
- Romanian
- Danish
- Norwegian
- Swedish

- Dutch
- Afrikaans

In addition to the above languages, German and Indonesian are also considered Category I languages. However, German takes slightly more than average (750 class hours) as does Indonesian (900 class hours).

Category II

The next set of languages are significant in how they vary from English. These languages require 1100 class hours, according to the Foreign Service Institute:

- Croatian
- Polish
- Hebrew
- Russian
- Hungarian
- Turkish

Category III

The last category of languages are the most difficult. These languages require 2200 hours to learn. In addition, the Foreign Service Institute requires students to spend a year of study on the specific culture. These include:

- Mandarin
- Korean
- Cantonese
- Arabic
- Japanese

Now, having said all of that, there are some shortcuts you can take when it comes to learning a new language. By using the power of language deconstruction, you can get a basic understanding of any language – even a Category III language – in a relatively short amount of time. In fact, using the principles of language deconstruction, it shouldn't take you much longer at all to learn Korean than it would take you to learn Dutch.

The Building Blocks of Language

If you want to successfully use language deconstruction to your advantage, you have to be able to identify specific parts of the language that will contribute to fluency, and to understand which parts of a language will be a barrier to fluency. More specifically, you need to examine:

- Grammatical structures that significantly differ from English, which may create a barrier to fluency
- New sounds, especially vowel sounds, that can delay fluency
- Specific similarities to English that you can build upon
- How verbs are conjugated, and if they are conjugated based on number as well as gender
- The placement of direct and indirect objects in a sentence
- The placement of pronouns attached to direct and indirect objects
- How negation is expressed, and if it differs in different tenses
- Fundamental structure of sentences (i.e. Subject – Verb – Object, as in English, or Subject – Object – Verb as in Japanese)
- Whether there are noun cases, which can be especially mind-boggling to someone only familiar with English.

The Deconstruction Meter

Now, finding out all of this information isn't nearly as difficult as it sounds. Your instinct may be to try to find someone who teaches this language, and ask them all of the specific questions above. Interestingly enough, you can discover all of this information using just a handful of translated sentences. Find someone who speaks the language you want to learn, and ask them to translate these sentences:

The grass is green.

It is Jane's dress.

I give Jane a compliment.

We give Jane a gift.

He gives Jane a kiss.

She gives a kiss to him.

Contained within these six sentences are the answers to every one of the questions above, with the possible exception of pronunciation issues and the issue of specific sounds.

Tackling sounds

For most people, learning a foreign language isn't especially useful if they can't actually use that language to communicate with others. One of the most important parts of being able to do that is to accurately reproduce the sounds involved in the language. Here again, you can apply the principles of language deconstruction in order to get a leg up on learning the language.

Think about how you learned letters and sounds when you were in kindergarten. Chances are you learned that "A is for Apple, B is for Ball, C is for Cat," and so on. When it comes to learning a new language, few things are as valuable as this same practice.

For this task, you will ideally have access to someone who speaks the language you want to learn. Ask them to take you through their alphabet (which may, of course, differ from the English alphabet). For each consonant and vowel, ask for one example word that uses that letter's sound. If a letter has more than one sound, ask for a second example for that letter.

During this process of listening for sounds, you're looking specifically for difficult vowels. While there can be some consonant sounds that are difficult to master for a non-native speaker, the fact of the matter is that difficult vowels tend to take exponentially longer to learn to pronounce.

Learning Letters

It isn't enough to be able to pronounce the sounds of a language. You obviously want to be able to read and write the language correctly. To do this, you need to learn some things about the native writing system (known as the "orthography" or, more simply, the "script" of the language).

To learn a language's script, you can again utilize someone who natively speaks the language. Ask them to write down their alphabet, along with the word that goes with each letter, in their native writing system. Ask them to repeat the process in English, using a phonetic approach.

Limits for Sounds and Scripts

One final point should be considered when it comes to sounds and scripts. Using this method of language deconstruction is practical only with languages that have a phonetic writing system that has 50 sounds or fewer. Anything beyond that becomes extremely difficult to deconstruct. In Chinese, for example, tones on some letters actually create a

multiplicity of variations for other sounds, and the permutations are so many that you can't realistically approach them in less than several days of study.

This doesn't, of course, mean that you can't use the principles of language deconstruction to learn Chinese. Rather, it means that this component of language deconstruction isn't particularly helpful.

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III. Word And Phrase Frequency – Pareto’s Principle And Language Deconstruction

Chances are that you’ve heard, at some point or another, of Pareto’s Principle. Pareto’s principle states that 80% of the results of an endeavor will come from 20% of the resources. So, 20% of the people contribute 80% of the work in an organization, for example. When it comes to learning a language, the principle holds true.

You can learn just about any given language in perhaps 3 months of dedicated learning. In this time, you can reach a 90% mastery of the language, become conversationally fluent and be able to interact with native speakers in the vast majority of situation.

However, to increase your fluency to, let’s say, 98%, will take you another decade. The fact of the matter is that there’s a point of diminishing returns when it comes to learning a language. You get to the point in the process of learning a language where you feel your efforts would be better spent acquiring other skills than adding a small improvement over a longer period of time.

So, how does this apply to language deconstruction? Simply put, you need to be able to identify the highest frequency words and phrases in a language, and master those. These are the “20%” of words and phrases that fit in to Pareto’s principle. These words and phrases make up the “80%” of communication that takes place in the language.

High-Frequency Words

Surprisingly, those common words are usually similar between languages. The ways that human beings communicate, and the things they communicate about tend to be the same, regardless of language or culture.

To effectively use the high-frequency principle, you need to start with high-frequency words in English. Here are the 100 most common written English words:

- | | | | |
|--------|---------|---------|----------|
| 1. the | 6. in | 11. he | 16. as |
| 2. of | 7. is | 12. was | 17. with |
| 3. and | 8. you | 13. for | 18. his |
| 4. a | 9. that | 14. on | 19. they |
| 5. to | 10. it | 15. are | 20. I |

| | | | |
|----------|-----------|------------|-----------|
| 21. at | 41. there | 61. some | 81. my |
| 22. be | 42. use | 62. her | 82. than |
| 23. this | 43. an | 63. would | 83. first |
| 24. have | 44. each | 64. make | 84. water |
| 25. from | 45. which | 65. like | 85. been |
| 26. or | 46. she | 66. him | 86. call |
| 27. one | 47. do | 67. into | 87. who |
| 28. had | 48. how | 68. time | 88. oil |
| 29. by | 49. their | 69. has | 89. its |
| 30. word | 50. if | 70. look | 90. now |
| 31. but | 51. will | 71. two | 91. find |
| 32. not | 52. up | 72. more | 92. long |
| 33. what | 53. other | 73. write | 93. down |
| 34. all | 54. about | 74. go | 94. day |
| 35. were | 55. out | 75. see | 95. did |
| 36. we | 56. many | 76. number | 96. get |
| 37. when | 57. then | 77. no | 97. come |
| 38. your | 58. them | 78. way | 98. made |
| 39. can | 59. these | 79. could | 99. may |
| 40. said | 60. so | 80. people | 100. part |

Now, what's especially interesting about this list is that just the first 25 words make up around a full third of all of the printed material in English. These 100 words make up around half of all written English material. If you expand the list to the top 300 words (which we won't do here in the interest of space) you will have around 65% of all written English communication.

As a side note, there are some differences between this list and the list of the top 100 spoken words in English. However, if you extrapolate out to the top 200 words, you'll find that the written and spoken frequency lists are pretty similar.

Now, it's also important to note that word frequency will vary between languages. This is especially true when it comes to pronouns, articles and possessives. Here again, by looking at the top 200 or so words, you're going to find an almost one-for-one matchup, even if the words appear at different ranks on each list.

Within three months of learning a language, you should try to master the most common 300 to 500 words of the given language. Beyond that, you may want to learn some specific vocabulary related to what it is you'll be doing with the language. For example, if you'll be involved in business negotiations you may want to learn some specific vocabulary related to finance.

High-Frequency Phrases

One of the key principles that commercial language learning tools have used in the past is a "conversational" principle. The idea here is that you learn those phrases that you'll learn in conversation while traveling in a foreign country. Taken alone, learning these phrases will only get you through the most basic situations. As part of an overall approach to learning a language, however, these high-frequency phrases can be an invaluable asset.

Here are some of the most important phrases you need to master:

- Hello, Good Morning, Good Afternoon, Good Evening
- Hi!
- My name is _____.
- How old are you?
- Where are you from?
- Are you married?
- I am learning your language, but do not speak it well.
- I do not understand the word _____. I am still learning your language.
- Could you please write the word _____ down for me?
- How do you say that in your language?

- Can you please spell the word _____ for me?

These phrases will not only help you to communicate on a basic level, they will also give you the tools that you need for further language deconstruction. Start with these phrases and every native speaker of that language becomes, in effect, an impromptu language tutor for you.

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Iv. Barriers To Learning – And How To Overcome Them

Let's face it. Not everyone is equal when it comes to learning a new language. Some people seem to take like fish to water, while others fight tooth and nail just to get the most rudimentary understanding of a language. While language deconstruction can help the process of learning a language greatly, there are some basic difficulties that have to first be overcome.

Barrier One: A Weak Understanding of English

If you're a native English speaker who wants to learn another language, you need to first have a good grasp on your own language. You might think, "I've spoken English all of my life. Of course I have a good grasp on English!" Just being able to speak the language, however, doesn't mean you understand how the language works.

You need to have a healthy understanding of grammar. To be able to compare English structures to another language's structures, for example, you have to know the English ones first. You need to know that English uses a Subject – Verb – Object structure in order to compare it to the Subject – Object – Verb structure of a language like German.

Does this mean you have to have a Ph.D. in English grammar? Of course not. It does, however, mean that you need to know the building blocks of the English language before you can compare those to the building blocks of another language.

If your weak understanding of English is getting in the way of learning a new language, the most obvious way to fix the problem is to shore up your understanding of English. You can do this in a variety of ways. For example, you might:

- Enroll in a composition or grammar course at your local community college
- Purchase a high school grammar text and work through it at your own pace
- Utilize children's software that's designed to help with grammar
- Hire a private tutor to help you get a better grasp on the language

A weak understanding of English isn't a permanent barrier to learning another language; it's simply an extra hurdle to overcome, one more challenge along the way to learning.

Barrier Two: Commitment

More than problems with English, the biggest barrier to learning another language is probably commitment. Like we talked about in the first section of this report, you need to

be able to put a certain amount of time, money and dedication to the task of learning a language.

Yes, language deconstruction will speed up the language learning process. Yes, using the principles in this report you can learn the basics of a language faster than you can with most other methods. But this doesn't mean that there's no time or money commitment; it just means that it's not as big a commitment as it would be if you learned the language another way.

How do you solve the commitment problem? Well, one of the best things you can do in this regard is to make a habit out of language learning. Set aside a specific time each day. Maybe it's half an hour right after dinner. Maybe it's an hour at bedtime.

You have to decide that learning a foreign language is going to be a priority for you. Once you've made up your mind, it's simply a matter of putting that priority into action.

Barrier Three: Learning Disabilities

There are a whole host of things that can make learning a new language a challenge, regardless of the method that you use. For example, people with a learning disability often have an especially difficult time learning a foreign language. LD makes language-based tasks like reading and writing especially hard, and will magnify problems that the learner has with English, as well as the second language.

The same holds true for dyslexia. Dyslexia can create problems with phonemic awareness, processing linguistic information, working memory, metalinguistic explanations, and stabilizing sound-symbol relationships. It is those sound-symbol relationships, in particular, that make up one of the most significant tools in the language deconstruction arsenal.

A learning disability doesn't mean you can't learn a foreign language. It just means you have some specific challenges that other people don't. Today, there are many products to help learn a foreign language that are specifically designed with the LD person in mind. In addition, there are many private tutors that can work with a person with a learning disability who wants to learn a foreign language.

Barrier Four: Access to Native Speakers

One of the key components to language deconstruction is being able to work with someone who speaks the language natively. In the case of a language like Spanish, it probably isn't too hard to find someone who speaks the language. In the case of Cantonese, however, you might have a harder time of it. Depending on how rural an

area you live in, you might not have many options when it comes to getting help from a native speaker.

One place to start is often at your local colleges. In many cases, native speakers of the language will even staff the foreign language department of a college.

You can also consider placing an ad in your newspaper. Simply state that you want to learn the specific language, and are looking for a native-speaking mentor to help you. You may be surprised to find the response you get, as many people are proud of their language and very willing to help someone learn.

More than ever, the Internet is also a wonderful resource in this regard. Connecting with a native speaker who perhaps even lives in their home country is even a possibility. This kind of contact provides you with cultural exposure, as well as language learning.

Ultimately, it's up to you to find creative ways to get around your barriers to language learning. You need to decide from the beginning that you won't let those barriers stop you, and you may be surprised to find how quickly you overcome them.

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V. First Steps: How Best To Get Started With The Language Deconstruction And Learning Process

One of the most common experiences of a first-time language learner is the emotional ups and downs that just seem to come with the process. One day, you'll grasp a new concept, and it can be exhilarating. The next day, you'll struggle with the most basic task, and find yourself frustrated and discouraged.

Fortunately, there are some time-tested techniques you can use in order to make the most of your language learning time, and to find yourself making regular, visible progress.

Pre-Learning Steps

Before you actually get started learning a language, there are some important things to do. Ignoring these preparatory steps can greatly slow down your overall progress.

Choose the right language

We talked in section II of this report about compatible languages. If you want to learn a foreign language just for fun, choosing a language in Category I or Category II of the Foreign Service lists is a good place to start.

Obviously, you can't always pick and choose the language you want to learn. Learning Cantonese won't do you any good if you're preparing for a trip to Germany, and French won't impress that potential Arabic-speaking client.

Identify and address barriers to learning

As we talked about before, you can't very well learn a foreign language if you don't have a good grasp on how English is structured. If you have some of the language learning barriers identified in section IV of this report, try to address them before you ever start learning the language.

Identify resources

Try to locate a native speaker of the language you want to learn. See if they would be willing to assist you with the language learning process. Figure out what kinds of training materials are available. Find out if classes are offered in your area for that particular language.

Commit

If you haven't figured it out by now, let me say it again: learning a language requires some dedication, some time, and some resources. You aren't going to become conversationally fluent in a foreign language in your sleep. You have to be ready to spend the time and money it's going to take to learn the language.

The Learning Process

Make sure you develop a strong grasp of the language's structure and sounds early on in the learning process. Identify those difficult vowel sounds, and master them right away. Figure out the basic grammatical rules, and compare them directly with English as a point of reference.

Once you've done all of the structural work, you can start learning the language. To maximize your success, remember the Pareto Principle. Start by learning the most frequently used words in the language. Learn to spell them, and how to pronounce them. From there, you can proceed to phrases.

After you've completed those two basic steps, you're essentially done with deconstruction. This process should take just a few weeks to a few months, depending on how much time you're able and willing to devote to the process.

Ongoing Learning

From here, the sky is the limit. You've put your basic learning structure in place. You've mastered at least half of the words that will appear in everyday conversation. Now, it's time to expand on that knowledge.

You can now go several directions. You can enroll in that community college course, for example. You might find, however, that most of what you'll learn in that course you have already mastered. Be sure to read the syllabus carefully, or even speak with the professor prior to enrolling in the course.

The vast majority of what you have yet to learn at this point is vocabulary. There are many vocabulary-building products available on the market, and some are better than others. If you're especially ambitious in this regard, you might be able to simply work from an English translation dictionary.

In the end, your success with learning a foreign language depends on you. If you're willing to utilize effective processes – such as language deconstruction – and combine them with a full-on dedication to learning the language, there is no reason you can't achieve your goal of becoming fluent in whatever language you so desire.