

Seven concepts of natural language learning

Language learning is essentially fun, or should be, if it is done naturally, in line with how the brain learns. We learned our first language quite well, without explicit instruction. Unfortunately, the teaching of second languages has been turned into a complex classroom ceremony, consisting of obtuse grammar rules, annoying drills, rote memory and tests. The result is that many people are discouraged from learning languages. Maybe they would not learn their first language if it were taught in this way.

One of the most innovative thinkers on language learning is Stephen Krashen, who has pointed out that languages are acquired through meaningful input and not deliberate instruction. His insights are being confirmed by the latest research on how the brain learns, as described in an excellent book by German brain researcher, Manfred Spitzer, *Learning: The Human Brain and the School for Life*. As Spitzer says, learning takes place in the brain, not at school.

Here are seven concepts of natural language learning that reflect the most recent research on how the brain learns.

1. The brain can learn languages, trust it.

The brain learns all the time, and, in fact, is designed to learn. Throughout our lives the brain retains “plasticity”, creating neurons, and neural connections, in response to what it sees, hears and experiences. The brain draws its own conclusions from the input it receives, and is better at forming its own rules than understanding logical explanations. The brain is always at work, consuming over 20% of the body’s calories. We can learn languages right into old age, and in fact it is good for the brain to do so.

- The brain develops its own rules, naturally, from the observation of the input it receives.
- The brain takes its time to learn, requiring continued exposure to meaningful and interesting content.
- The brain can prioritize what to learn, dealing with easier subjects first, and more difficult ones later.

2. The brain needs stimulus. Give it massive amounts of meaningful input.

The brain likes things that are relevant and interesting. So if the task is language acquisition, the most important condition is massive and continuous exposure to interesting and relevant language content. At first, when the language is new, it is helpful to reinforce what has been learned by repetitive listening and reading. As we progress we need to find new, fresh, interesting, stimulating and meaningful content.

- We learn better from stories, real conversations, examples and episodes than from rules and facts.
- We learn best from content that matters to us.
- It is easier to listen to and read content is at the right level of difficulty, however the interest and relevance to the learner is the most important consideration.

3. The brain will miss things. We can help the brain notice the language.

The brain learns naturally by observing, constantly labeling and creating its own rules. But the brain can miss things. We should, from time to time, review grammar rules and tables, focus on mistakes we have made, or study specific words and phrases that we have learned. We should also attempt to write and speak, if we feel like it. These activities, which dominate traditional language learning, are, however, optional and minor activities in a natural language learning system. They increase attentiveness but should not take away from the main activities of listening and reading.

- Good language output can only come from absorbing massive amounts of language input.
- When we practice output, speaking and writing, or review vocabulary and grammar rules, we increase our attentiveness to the language.
- Heightened attentiveness increases the ability of the brain to notice the patterns and sounds of the language.

4. Learn to engage your emotions in order to increase learning efficiency.

Positive emotions energize the brain, and increase the efficiency of learning. An interesting story, a powerfully narrated audio book, a person we like – these are the things that will engage our emotions. Uninteresting learning tasks, or negative tension, decrease learning efficiency.

- We should stay with content we like, and discard content we do not like. We should do those learning tasks we enjoy doing.
- We should always combine audio with text, and choose narrators whose voice we enjoy. This will make it easier to listen repetitively.
- We need to like the language we are learning and at least some aspects of its culture.

5. When you learn naturally, you will feel motivated by your own success.

Motivation is the basic motor of learning. Success is motivating, as is praise. Any teaching activity which creates frustration, such as traditional grammar based language learning, can demotivate the learner. In a natural learning environment, the main task of the teacher is to encourage the learner to become independent of the teacher, rather than to impose tasks or explanations on the learner.

- Many of us want to learn another language but are skeptical of our ability to do so, because we have not done it before.
- As the strange language starts to acquire meaning through our listening and reading, our brain feels a sense of reward at this new and unexpected experience. This is highly motivating.
- Give language learning a chance, the results will be better than you think.

6. When we learn, we change. We need to accept this change.

When we learn, our neural networks change, physically. When we learn a new language, we adopt some of the behaviour patterns of another culture and our personalities and our perceptions change. Many of the difficulties that grown-ups face in language

learning, come from the a resistance to change. It is often more comfortable to follow the patterns and pronunciation of our own language, rather than to commit to fully imitating the new language.

- Children are not afraid to change. Moving to a new country, they learn the language of their new friends without hesitation.
- Older learners have a stronger vested interest in their own identity, and in what they already know.
- All learners benefit from the help of an encouraging tutor and an enthusiastic group of fellow learners, in order to overcome these barriers to learning.

7. The Internet – the new world of natural learning at our finger-tips.

The internet offers a wide range of content in many languages, many low-cost websites with efficient learning methodologies, on-line tutors, and people from around the world with whom to talk and interact. The internet becomes the classroom, the library, the source of content, the language laboratory, and the support community. The Internet is the home of the language learning revolution, the natural language learning revolution.

- Internet learning is available whenever we want, at no, or little, cost.
- The iPod or MP3 player and other language resources on the Web have created a natural language learning revolution.
- Join a language learning community on the Web today!

Steve Kaufmann is a former Canadian diplomat, who has had his own company in the international trade of forest products for over 20 years. Steve is the founder and CEO of LingQ.com an on-line language learning system and Web 2.0 community. Steve speaks ten languages, having recently learned Russian at LingQ. Steve maintains a blog on language learning.

Read more at <http://www.pickthebrain.com/blog/language-learning/#BkvdgR5km538YqAG.99>