

FROM THE CURIA:

**Online resources are a learning catalyst for foreign language acquisition
*One student's experience also suggests motivation could be a Rosetta Stone***

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As a mid-career public relations professional whose chief tool is language, I often scrutinize my ability to communicate effectively. I performed a similar exercise when I was employed in the field of language translation 22 years ago. Communicating effectively is important for every occupation using language. But achieving the desired level of language proficiency takes practice, dedication and time.

In early 2017, I took the *Test de connaissance du français* (TCF) French language exam as an English native speaker after investing nearly 1,000 hours of preparation. That took practice, dedication and time. And while the resources available to support foreign language teaching have undoubtedly changed since my days as an undergraduate learning German and French, one thing is certain: today's online and digital resources are abundant, and provide an extraordinary learning pathway for meaningful engagement with the target language. Such resources contributed in no small way toward my ability to confidently prepare for the TCF. When combined with traditional book-based learning, the multitude of online resources can markedly enhance the learning experience associated with foreign language acquisition. But it all starts with the individual student and their motivation to learn.

Research supporting the critical period hypothesis (CPH) suggests that acquisition of a first language – and likely a second language – comes easiest during the first few years of life and extends until puberty (Lenneberg, 1967). As one ages, CPH proposes that acquiring a new language along with its unique system of grammar and pronunciation becomes biologically more difficult, although it should be noted some newer research challenges this early form of CPH.

While the innate ability to acquire a new language in adulthood is not the focus of this writing, there are demonstrably certain factors other than CPH, which may influence the ability to learn a second or third language. Masgoret and Gardner (2003) suggest motivation is a strong predictor of successful language learning. Morris (2001) submits that *integrative motivation* provides the foundation for wanting to learn a language based on identification with the community that speaks it. In *instrumental motivation*, the desire to learn the language is linked to the language learner's needs and goals, for example to meet immigration requirements or employment demands.

As an undergraduate in the early 1980s, I would most closely have identified with integrative motivation as the rationale for pursuing what was then my first foreign language. But the story really begins with my mother arriving in North America from Germany and starting a family soon thereafter. I did not acquire much more than a scant handful of German vocabulary words during my upbringing because English was the dominant language in our household and the value of second language learning was not a primary consideration. For this and other reasons I was highly motivated to learn my mother's *langue natale* while attending college.

The language learning resources available to my classmates and me in that first semester of German instruction consisted of a lecturer, a textbook (which I still possess), and access to a somewhat rudimentary language lab. Classroom instruction focused on grammar objectives, reading exercises, and question and answer drills. Homework was assigned regularly with each student assessing their own level of preparation needed for weekly quizzes. The publisher did not record or include any companion learning tapes to support the textbook (published in 1975) and this made any real use of the on-campus language lab redundant.

My final grade in that first semester German class was just above failing, a result that would appear to support CPH and the difficulty it signifies for second-language acquisition by adult learners. But I pushed forward, retook the class and felt the excitement of the training wheels coming off after subsequently completing an additional beginning and one intermediate German class with highest marks. Language learning resources beyond the classroom were still virtually nonexistent. Classroom instruction, homework and practice, practice, practice represented the chief means by which I learned my first foreign language. Then, around the time of my intermediate German class, I discovered what studying abroad was all about.

The manifold benefits of the study abroad experience

In my mind, the study abroad experience held the key to attaining language fluency because, what could be more instructive and immersive than diving into the deep end without a lifeline and learning to swim? To a lesser degree, studying abroad also meant having an opportunity to learn more about the maternal side of my family while escaping the sanctuary of my parents' home and achieving some independence. And just as motivation had laid the groundwork for wanting to learn German, so too did it play a role in my decision to study abroad. I investigated and selected the Junior Year in Munich Program (JYM) through Wayne State University. The 60-year old JYM program had a great reputation then as now and is still used as a model for international programs sponsored by other colleges and universities.

Like many endeavors, the results one can expect from language learning are roughly equivalent to the effort one makes. My conviction that *Übung macht den Meister* or "practice makes perfect" gradually led to an increase in my speaking confidence upon settling into the student dormitory near the University of Munich. In addition, JYM's six-week, in-country orientation program focusing on language, current events, history, customs and etiquette also gave rise to a keen cultural sensitivity for those of us who were sufficiently attuned.

Living in a foreign country is wholly unlike any stateside classroom experience. It is quite simply the best language lab – digital, analog or otherwise – available to students of foreign language and culture.

An American learns French in Munich

After completing the two semesters of the JYM program, I continued my studies of German philology at the University of Munich as an independent student. During this time, I signed-up for a beginning French class held at the well-known Sprachen und Dolmetscher Institut, Muenchen (Institute of Languages and Translation, Munich).

The real challenge for me in this new classroom environment was found in attempting to learn a third language through a still nascent second language. I felt like a foreign language underdog. Most, if not all, of the other students already had some exposure to French. I had not. Our textbook (which I still possess) was written in German and French. Explanations on everything from verb declensions to latent word-final consonants were in a language of which I effectively had only a waystage understanding. The instructor moved quickly through the lessons; it was a bit of struggle to keep up. What's more, learning resources were rather elementary. As an example, the textbook's introduction (original printing, 1975) reminded readers that:

"In addition to this textbook, a collection of seven phonograph records and two compact cassette tapes is available..."

Reading that passage within the context of today's digital world is entertaining if not, well, downright absurd. How clunky and inefficient must it have been to lift and drop the tone arm into exactly the right groove time and again to replay key vowel and consonant sounds on a vinyl record? I

recall attempting to locate those audio resources in the institute's language library but they seemed to be in permanent use.

Bumping up to language immersion in Paris

The study abroad program in Munich served me well and I was hoping to duplicate that experience in Paris before returning to the U.S. I enrolled in a class at the Alliance Française, the well-known French language and cultural institute with 850 locations in 137 countries.

I found the environment at Alliance Française invigorating. Students came from Europe and many points around the globe. There was a great sense of internationalism and multiculturalism. The class instructor incorporated a teaching methodology based on speaking, listening and everyday situations; a technique known as the direct or natural method. Grammar is avoided. The concept was entirely new to me. Until then, my language instruction had been based entirely on the structural approach, where a complex of grammatical rules is learned one at a time in a set order. Fortunately, I was able to leverage my rudimentary knowledge of French grammar from the Munich course for a better understanding of what was happening in the Paris class. What's more, I continued to refer to the Munich textbook to further my *savoir-faire* of French grammar considering my taste for the structural approach.

Living in the French capital was a big boost to my language fluency. And it was thoroughly experiential. Language and culture were all around me. The simple task of asking for directions (even when I knew where I was headed), reading billboard advertisements, thumbing through newspapers and magazines, listening to radio, watching TV and striking up easy conversations with bus or subway passengers deeply impregnated both my conscious and subconscious. Soon, I reached that state of nirvana every language learner has talked about at some point—dreaming in the target language. According to De Koninck, Christ, Hébert and Rinfret (1990), there are significant positive correlations between REM sleep, dreaming and waking cognitive processes.

After four months in Paris, I returned to the U.S.

Evaluating language skills at the highest level

In my final year as an undergraduate, I squeezed in an intermediate French class and felt good about having basic-to-intermediate conversational fluency in two languages. Shortly after graduation, I returned to Munich where I continued to focus on my proficiency.

During the latter part of the 1980s, I prepared for two of the most widely recognized and accepted examinations for students of German as a foreign language. These were the *Kleines Deutsches Sprachdiplom* or KDS (Lower German Language Diploma) and the *Grosses Deutsches Sprachdiplom* or GDS (Higher German Language Diploma). Both tests were developed and implemented by the Goethe Institut, the well-respected language and cultural association with 159 locations in 98 countries promoting the study of German.

While the KDS certified candidates as independent users of the German language, the GDS affirmed candidates have extremely advanced language skills. Both of these exams evaluated language capability at the highest level based on the Goethe Institut's uniform testing format. Successful passage of these exams meant one could also fulfill a pre-employment requirement, officially enroll in an institution of higher education or satisfy German immigration conditions.

I approached my test readiness with a self-study mindset and the belief that my ongoing language and cultural immersion would automatically serve as a "preparation platform" of sorts. Even so, grammar and style books were my friends and helped ensure my foundational language principles were in order. I also practiced written self-expression on a near daily basis and concentrated on developing a fluid, clear and idiomatically correct style. Native speakers reviewed my work and listened to my spoken word. Flashcards were used to build and reinforce my vocabulary.

The results: on the three-level “very good – good – satisfactory” grading scale used by the Goethe Institute at the time of testing, I achieved an overall grade of “good” on the KDS and the GDS examinations.

A common standard for language teaching and testing arises

In 2001, the European Council established the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). It is “designed to provide a transparent, coherent and comprehensive basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses and curriculum guidelines, the design of teaching and learning materials and the assessment of foreign language proficiency.”¹ The CEFR tests reading, listening, speaking and writing skills and is used for at least 40 languages including English, French, German and Spanish.

The CEFR describes foreign language proficiency at six levels:

- A1 – beginner or breakthrough (basic user)
- A2 – elementary or waystage (basic user)
- B1 – intermediate or threshold (independent user)
- B2 – upper intermediate or vantage (independent user)
- C1 – advanced or effective operational proficiency (proficient user)
- C2 – proficiency or mastery (proficient user)

The CEFR is a systematic way to validate language proficiency by incorporating a highly standardized framework that describes capabilities in specific terms. Through the CEFR, governments, educational institutions, NGOs, administrators and others have a uniform basis with which to assess foreign language proficiencies by users. Language students in the U.S. looking for employment in or immigration to a European country could conceivably be faced with a CEFR-based exam. For still others, the CEFR may be seen as more of a personal challenge. Such was the case when I sat for the TCF French language exam in February 2017.

Leveraging digital resources to prep for the TCF

Preparing for the TCF was a big undertaking. First, it had been well over 20 years since I had used French with any regularity. It had also been many more years since I had formally studied the language, meaning that while I would not be starting at zero, I would need to efficiently reboot my French speaking, reading, writing and listening skills.

And then I discovered a profusion of invaluable language learning resources online and in digital format. These resources were conveniently available to me through my personal computer and on the road through mobile apps and podcasts. Several of these aids were geared specifically toward the TCF. A short list of the chief resources I used would include:

- TV-5 Monde (web): sample TCF exams dating back to 2013 with answer keys; special area of website dedicated to learners of French with gradated resources; wide selection of on demand content; phone app;
- Official Guide to the TCF exam: practice tests with CD from CIEP, an arm of the French Ministry of National Education;
- TCF preparation tips and practice tests with CD from publisher CLE International;
- RFI-Radio France International (web): live audio/video streams, podcasts and transcripts of hourly newscasts in “easy French” format; phone app;
- France Info (web): live audio/video streams, podcasts; phone app;
- Radio-Canada (web): hourly news in French; phone app;
- *Ultimate French*. Living Language. Textbook and audio CDs;

- NewsInSlowFrench.com, website: subscription service with weekly language learning podcasts based on current events with vast educational materials; phone app;
- Linguee.com, website: a powerful online dictionary for many language pairs with extensive definitions, usage examples and translation capabilities; phone app;
- Quizlet.com, website: an online learning community with study sets, flashcards and gamification learning; phone app.

The above list makes no mention of the hundreds – potentially thousands – of web destinations that deliver credible information about French grammar, usage, style and pronunciation. One can always find an author who explains difficult concepts in exactly the right voice. Nor does the list include resources such as YouTube or Vimeo, which can provide additional interactive tools using their respective formats. Web mapping services such as Google Maps and MapQuest can be invaluable for locating places of francophone geographical, historical and cultural importance. This short list omits innumerable other online French learning tools such as audiobooks, self-guided quizzes, interactive curricula or other resources such as language translators or verb conjugators akin to Barron's 501 French Verbs. There is a vast amount of online news, sports and entertainment content available in French on live and on demand streaming platforms. The list of high-quality, credible online resources is seemingly endless and can be used to the extent of one's needs and interests.

It is my belief that the free and subscription-based online study resources I used provided me with targeted language learning support that contributed immensely to my success on the TCF. While students can benefit singularly from instructor-led, book-based classroom learning, when they pair it with today's multitude of online and digital assets, the opportunities for language learning and testing success are amplified considerably.

The reward of using a digital learning strategy became clear when the TCF testing center reported my score on the three compulsory components of the *Test de connaissance du français* as 431 points or level B2, which is equivalent to an upper intermediate or independent language user. I was pleased with the result.

As described above, various types of motivation can be a strong predictor of successful language learning and, in this writer's opinion, motivation can help overcome limitations to second language acquisition among adults as suggested by the critical period hypothesis. But in order to maximize the pedagogical effectiveness of foreign language learning, the wealth of online and digital resources should also be used to complement traditional book-based learning.

Works Cited

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