



3-Cómo aprendo: Metodología

Semana 10.07.15

- **How long does it take to learn English?**

Speaking a language is beneficial long before you are an expert. You do not need to become fully bilingual before you can enjoy many benefits of speaking another language. It is, however, important that you can maintain a conversation without too much difficulty. That means you should be able to talk to English speakers without having communication breakdown. Communication breaks down when you cannot express your ideas either by simplifying or by working around language gaps.

Many language students reach this level of expertise after 400 hours of formal instruction.

That is a lot of time. But let's do some reflection:

20 minutes a day = 140 minutes a week = 7280 minutes a year = That is about 120 hours a year.

If you take "17" minutes a day and work on English, by the end of your university studies, you will speak English.

This is the case if you work on your own. If you take advantage of the language learning opportunities offered at UDLA you will reach this goal faster.

The basic program delivered by the Language Institute provides 100 hours of training a semester. Signing up for this program will help you to communicate in English within 2 years.

- **What is the best way to learn English?**

It is useful to discern two basic ways of knowing: we can obtain conceptual knowledge of a certain topic that allows us to engage in thought processes like explaining, analyzing, evaluating, etc. Many subjects in education call for these abilities. On the other hand we can develop knowledge that allows us to do certain things. A surgeon has to operate on people. This means that the professional has to develop fine motor skills. It is not enough to know about a certain health condition. The surgeon has to be able to perform very precise procedures.

The first kind of knowledge describes **understanding**, the second **performing**. Often we find these categories interacting, but there are disciplines where one aspect of knowing takes on a more dominant role.

1st Principle: We can know about something, and we can know how to do something: **Showing mastery in a language is mainly about doing something.**



There are different paths to developing the kinds of knowledge described. Understanding can be reached by way of experience that leads to reflection and insight. Or the process can start with reflection that seeks to exemplify insight with selected exercises. The aim is always the same: you need to experience a change in the way your mind can act.

Performing involves not only the mind. Indeed, one could say that performing can be successful with less mindfulness. For example, most people learn to drive a car. Upon closer inspection, driving a car is a highly complex skill. The mind has to gauge physical forces and make correct estimates about multiple objects in motion. There are many processes happening without you ever noticing. Actions and reactions are automatic. This ability is a result of practice and our ability to adjust our performance to reach desired results. With good practice, we get better.

2nd Principle: Good performance is a product of good practice. **Language skills are a result of good practice.**

Learning is a biological process. As we are aware of the conditions in our environment through our body, we feel the heat, the cold, the humidity, so does our brain register the nature of our learning context. The body sends these messages in the form of feelings and emotions. If the temperature drops below comfort level, we feel cold. If we are isolated and do not have reliable friendships, we can feel lonely. The brain as the seat of consciousness—the mind—is the central switchboard for these experiences. And the brain itself is vulnerable to the environment. If there are too many things happening in our environment, if we are exposed to danger, if we skip meals and have come short on water intake, the brain reacts: you get distracted or nervous, you feel tired or get a headache. In the end learning is impeded.

3rd Principle: Mental processes are anchored in physical experiences. Make sure you **take good care of your physical resources**, your body and your brain.

Athletes know how to train for the skills that help them perform at maximum effectiveness. Training programs identify sub routines that aim at particular muscle groups, movements, hand-eye coordination, etc. Athletes train in harmony with the nature of element of their performance. In other words, for a swimmer, top performance needs to follow the laws of hydrodynamics. The principle elements of language that you need to follow is sound and meaning. When people communicate through speech they manage to exchange meaning through the use of sound.

4th Principle: Language by nature is the use of sound to exchange meaning. Your priority has to be **the practice of good listening skills**. You learn English from hearing others speak it.

The brain is not a muscle. But in certain ways it behaves like one. Practice makes the brain more sophisticated. This is one of the great side effects of learning another language. Learning English takes your brain to the gym for a work out session.

Imagine you had to lift 100kg weight on your first visit to the gym. We could imagine the impossible, that you can actually lift 100kg without ever having trained for it, but we know with absolute certainty that reality will never compromise. You cannot fake muscle strength. Instead, you will train on the edge of what you can still barely lift, be this 1, 10, or 100kg. Too heavy weights are counterproductive. When you learn a language, too heavy means—unintelligible. If you do not understand what you hear, the brain will treat language as noise. Noise is not stored in memory.



5th Principle: When you listen to English, you must make sure that you **understand the message**. It is not important that you understand everything. In fact, understanding everything means that the activity is actually too easy.

Patterns 1: Learning languages is an exercise in the appreciation of patterns. Grammar is a shortcut to describe how language behaves in patterns. But there are many more patterns than traditional grammar books can list. The most important patterns for the language learner have to do with patterns that form around words. Words act like molecules. They cluster together and form predictable sequences. It is this predictability that allows the native speaker to process language automatically. These patterns are sometimes fixed, as in idiomatic expressions, or they allow for more flexibility when a word participates in more than one acceptable combination. Linguists call these word partnerships collocations. This is one idea that might prove to be new to you. It is a good idea to remember this idea about language.

6th Principle: Language is patterned. **The most important patterns are the ones forming around words**. Learn to pay attention to these word clusters or collocations. Focus on expressions, and the ways words, especially nouns and verb tend to combine.

Describing is not learning: We must never confuse the description of a pattern with the process that produces the pattern. Think of a water sprinkler that draws neat patterns into the summer sky. You can describe the patterns in geometrical terms. But this description does not tell how the pattern originates. Rather, these ideas would summarize how water pressure, form and direction of valves direct the water jet.

Understood is not learned. As language learners we can easily miss the fact that learning has not yet taken place at the instance when we happen to understand a message. Learning is only present if a) we have developed a lasting memory impression of the way meaning was expressed, and b) when we are able to produce language to express our intentions. Think of a joke. We find ourselves in the situation where we remember that a joke was funny but we are unable to retell the joke successfully. We do not remember the details and the correct sequence of thing, we give away the punch line to early, and we blunder.

7th principle: Be aware of counterfeits of learning. Only when you can **use the language in an unrehearsed setting** can you think that you have learned the language.

Total recall versus forgetting: The fact is that we keep only the most important information in memory. English is treated no different by our brain. Our brain will judge whether English is worth retaining. We need to give English importance in the face of forgetting. We can do this in several ways. Mechanically we can make sure that we engage repeatedly with the parts of the language we want to learn. We need to practice at regular intervals. Repeated practice will assist recall. We need to force our brain to recall. In fact, repeated practice serves not only learning new things. More importantly we need to solidify things we have encountered previously. Recalling can lead to rehearsing and spontaneous application of language. These are mechanical learning strategies that must form part of your learning effort.

8th Principle: We can only think that we have learned when we also remember. Use memory strategies to build solid memory traces. **Use strategies like REPETITION, RECALL, REHEARSE**, to counteract forgetting.

The most effective way of learning and remembering English is to use English as a vehicle to wrap personal interest. You need to do things that are important to you in English. That is the way you tell your brain not to



forget. If you had a friendship with an important person with whom you had only English in common, your brain, with near certainty, would not forget. This is the single most strategy that will help you learn English.

9th Principle: If you want to learn English, **do something that is meaningful and important to you with the language.**

English can be faced as a task. There is a clear beginning and a clear end in sight. The key challenge is to finish the task successfully. In an education environment success is measured by a grade. The goal is to pass the course and to move on. This is not a way that will lead to durable language skills. If English is perceived as a necessary duty, something that is not pleasant but has to be done to avoid further negative consequences, you might find yourself developing the habit of doing your English assignments. Just like the way we brush our teeth, we do not find great satisfaction in doing it but we have developed the discipline of routinely performing a rite. If on the other hand, we actually enjoy the habit, and the whole affair turns into a hobby, if we find reward in developing an exercising a new skill and we become amateurs that do what they do for the love of it, then, no doubt you will become bilingual, and becoming bilingual will be somewhat of a transformational experience.

10th Principle: If you take English as a task, you will stay in your monolingual world. If you take it as a habit, you will learn. If you pursue it as a hobby, you will have turned anglophile, and are on the way of education.

All the principles listed here apply equally well for French, Portuguese, Mandarin, etc.