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Achieving Success in Second Language Acquisition

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Chapter

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1 Planning foreign-language study

Preview

This chapter will ask you to think about a number of things that we associate with language study. With the exception of some “natural language learners,” students who succeed at language study usually plan their study in advance and check their progress along the way, fine-tuning as they go. They look at language learning not only as something that is accomplished in the classroom during a particular course, but as a lifelong activity, if not commitment, and as learning that they can work on in many places, even on their own. Some of the questions you will be asked to consider in this chapter are:

- **Why am I studying this foreign language?** You will benefit most from language study if you orient your learning activities around your reason for studying the language. You may, of course, over time discover other reasons for continuing to study.
- **What is foreign language study?** You probably know what a foreign language course is, in general, but have you thought of foreign language study in terms that go beyond the classroom and the textbook?
- **How is studying a language as an adult different from studying it as a child?** You may find that your experiences in your school classes differ quite radically from your university experiences. Some of that is because of educational level. There are other reasons, too, including, for example, the fact that in many ways adults learn differently from children.
- **How should I plan my language study for this course?** This is a very important question, because planning is often at the root of your success. Poor planning results in efforts that – while not wasted – could have been put to better use.
- **How long should I study a foreign language?** The answer to this question depends on your answers to many of the previous questions. The better you need or want to know a foreign language, the longer you will need to study it. There are some statistics that show how long it takes a speaker of English to reach various levels of skill (we call that *proficiency*) in various languages. You can use those statistics as a yardstick, or you can make a decision based on some other criterion more closely related to your plans for future language use.
- **How do I make language learning a part of my life in the future?** One language course is not, unsurprisingly, sufficient for language learning, but even a collection of courses is less helpful, in general, than a fully thought-out

and cohesive program that includes such varied components as coursework, study abroad, independent study, outside reading, Internet support, use of a native speaker, practica, foreign work assignments, internships, and a range of other opportunities and activities designed to improve your language proficiency.

The purpose of language study

Why are you studying a foreign language? There are probably nearly as many answers to that question as there are students in your classroom. Take a look at some of the reasons other students have given for studying a foreign language. Very likely, your reason(s) can be found among them.

- Gaining skills for a job
- Gaining access to foreign bodies of knowledge
- Traveling abroad
- Studying abroad
- Working abroad
- School requirement
- Personal edification
- Interest in linguistics
- Parental influence
- Becoming familiar with your heritage
- Understanding people in your neighborhood
- Maintaining knowledge

Gaining job skills

There are many different kinds of jobs that require foreign-language skills. The number of jobs that require language skills is growing as the world becomes smaller. Moreover, many jobs that do not require language skills do benefit from workers who have them. In other words, having a high level of foreign-language proficiency can sometimes help you get the job you want over other highly qualified candidates. Some of these jobs are in your own country; others are abroad.

Jobs in your own country

Some jobs in your own country require a low level of language skills. These might be jobs that require you to ask repetitive questions and understand a range of standard answers in a second language. One example would be the position of security guard in a setting with a diverse language population.

Other jobs require a very high level of language skills. These might be jobs that ask you to interpret what someone from another culture really means or

interact with native speakers in constantly changing situations. An example of the former would be an interpreter at an intergovernmental negotiations table; an example of the latter would be a secretary in the headquarters of an international company.

Some positions do not require foreign-language skills, but the employers consider the skills to be of value to the company or organization. In these cases, the employee with language skills is more likely to be promoted or given coveted assignments. Sometimes, too, the employer considers language skills important enough to pay a bonus of some sort to employees who reach specified levels of language proficiency.

Jobs abroad

While some students decide to take foreign-language courses because they want to study abroad, others learn of work-abroad opportunities once they are in foreign-language classes. Historically, a number of companies based in English-speaking countries have offered internships abroad, and a number of foreign companies have opened their doors to interns who speak their language sufficiently well to assist with various business activities.

More and more businesses with foreign offices are requiring that an increasing portion of their personnel be fluent in the local language. General Electric, for example, considers foreign-language skills to be very important for its employees and language proficiency can often be the key ingredient as to why one employee gets hired over another (Mears, 1997).

Learning a language to enhance performance on a job means that the language will be a tool for you to use at work. Such a reason for language study is one example of “instrumental motivation” (see chapter 3 for more information about motivation in general).

Gaining access to foreign bodies of knowledge

Traditional foreign-language majors often end up in literature or linguistic tracks. For both of these areas of study, language skills are needed. If you really like foreign literature, you will find your enjoyment much enhanced and your understanding greatly refined if you can read the literature in its original language without impediment. If you enjoy linguistics and the science of how languages are constructed and evolve, you will find greater understanding and a stronger base for generalizations if you have a very good understanding of the structure and evolution of at least one language other than your own. If you can also speak that language, you will gain insights into linguistics that theory alone will not give you.

Non-majors who have studied a foreign language in depth are students who want greater insights into foreign research, theory, and contributions in any number of disciplines. Future scientists like to know what their counterparts in other countries are doing without having to wait for articles and books to be translated

or cited. History, political science, and art are fields that overlap very closely with foreign-language study. Being able to read about these areas in original works, talk to foreign practitioners, and/or publish your own views either at home or abroad have been motivating goals and experiences for many foreign-language students.

Traveling abroad

While many people do travel abroad without knowing the language of the countries that they will be visiting, most will tell you that they wished they had learned some of the language before going there. If you are simply a tourist abroad, it is often possible to get by with English alone, given that English is typically the language used for international business and tourism. However, under such circumstances, you will see mostly the surface phenomena of a land – its architecture, its museums, and perhaps some of its customs. Needing an interpreter to communicate with citizens significantly reduces the amount of communication and kind of relationship that is possible. It is having a shared language that leads to a true understanding of a country by a foreigner. Further, even the person who is only interested in tourism may still find the need for access to the local language from time to time. After all, not everyone everywhere speaks English, and unforeseen circumstances do swallow up a tongue-tied tourist from time to time.

Studying abroad

Anyone who is planning to study abroad in a non-English-speaking country is very likely to be a student of foreign languages already, although there are cases in which students go abroad to institutions and programs where they can “squeak by” without the local language. This latter group is missing out on tremendous opportunities. They will not have access to the local culture. They will spend much time in a place and come back knowing little about it.

Students with lower levels of foreign-language proficiency do not make as many relative gains in proficiency from study abroad experiences as do students with higher levels. Up to a point, the higher the language proficiency when one goes abroad, the more one can learn about the culture and achieve in improved language skills in the same amount of time – up to a professional level of proficiency (Brecht, Davidson, and Ginsburg, 1993). At the highest levels of proficiency, however – those associated with professional-level ability – additional study abroad carried out in the typical fashion of being in a classroom with other foreigners does not seem to make a significant difference in regard to measurable proficiency gain and the sociocultural value can be obtained through immersion work with immigrant communities at home (Bernhardt, cited in Ehrman, 2002). Rather, study abroad needs to take the form of foreign-degree work

(Leaver, 2003a) or instructed study at home with targeted, short-term assignments abroad (Shekhtman, 2003b). (More information on issues of the nature and value of study abroad for high-level learners can be found in the epilogue to this volume.)

School requirements or recommendations

Some programs, for obvious reasons, require students to study a foreign language. One example might be a degree in international relations. Perhaps this is the reason that you are studying one. What proficiency you will acquire in the language, in this case, will depend on how many semesters your institution requires, how well you succeed in the courses, and how interested you are in exploring the use of the language outside the classroom. Even if you did not want to take a foreign language and feel that you are being forced into it by your institution, advice on language learning provided in this book can help you be successful and gain some enjoyment from your classes.

Personal edification

Some students are very interested in foreign cultures. The more they study these cultures, the more they realize that in order to understand them, they need to have access to their literature, art, music, and other cultural mentifacts and sociofacts (and maybe even to plan one or more trips there). The deeper you go, the more you will need foreign language skills.

Knowing about the world and the people in it can be fascinating in and of itself. In this case, it is difficult to say whether the language is a tool (instrumental motivation) or a mechanism for understanding and being accepted by natives of the foreign culture (integrative motivation). Integrative motivation pushes students to bond with members of the foreign culture; it is, in many cases, a desire to act like and be accepted as a member of the culture.

Interest in linguistics

Some students are fascinated by linguistics and languages. They study one language after another, develop really good language learning skills, and with time become polyglots. Of course, some languages of polyglots will be strong, and other languages will be weak. Two of the authors of this volume are polyglots. One has studied seventeen languages, has been tested at professional fluency (and higher) in five of them; the other languages range from nascent to limited working knowledge – as is typical of a polyglot. She does much work overseas; her knowledge of many languages opens doors of all sorts. The other has worked with languages from all over the world both as a linguist and in helping others

learn them. Her understanding of how languages are learned is enhanced by her experience with a wide range of language types.

Parental interest

Some students study a particular foreign language “because my parents made me do it.” Parents have a number of reasons for wanting their children to study a foreign language. These include the enhancement of career options that comes with foreign language skills, the parents’ own enjoyable experiences in foreign-language learning, and family heritage, among many other reasons. Even if you feel that you are being “forced” to study a language that was “picked out” for you by your parents, this book can help you be a successful language learner. In the process, you might even find that you really do like the language you are studying. (After all, you do have some of your parents’ genes in you!)

Familiarity with heritage

Students whose heritage is other than that of the country in which they are living are often interested in learning about their relatives and ancestors. While one can learn much from the study of culture alone, acquiring high-level language proficiency can help tremendously in understanding one’s heritage. These skills open doors to the literature and the people of the parent nation. They also provide a conduit to a culture that, if you are a heritage learner, belongs to you and has shaped who you are today whether you are aware of it or not. Studying the language provides insights not only into the foreign culture but into your own kin culture, as well. The history of your relatives and the culture from which they emanated becomes more alive, understandable, and rich when you can access it, using the foreign language.

Understanding the neighbors

Some students live in neighborhoods where a foreign language dominates. For example, in Salinas, California, Spanish can be heard in as many establishments as English, and on the east side of town English is sometimes hardly useful at all for communication. A great many students study Spanish, then, to understand their neighbors. Another example is Secretary of State Colin Powell, who learned to speak Yiddish while working in a Jewish-owned baby-equipment store in New York City.

Being in a two-language community often dictates what a student’s second language will be. (Additionally, there are lots of opportunities to practice the language outside of class.) This is equally true for students who live in border towns in Europe. Frequently, borders and languages are permeable. Without the

CASE STUDY

Problem

Sharon has just learned that she must take a foreign language in order to complete her university requirements. She had two years of Spanish in secondary school and absolutely hated it – and she barely passed. What is she to do?

Possible solutions

(1) It could be that Sharon and Spanish just did not get along. In that case, it might be better to start over with a new language and a new attitude. She could choose French, Italian, or Portuguese, if she thinks part of the problem was her aptitude for languages. In this way, she will be able to make use of some of the common elements between these languages and Spanish: the general grammatical structure, some cognate words, and the like. This will give her a little bit of a head start and may be just what she needs to succeed this time.

(2) Sharon can decide to continue with Spanish. There are some good reasons for this. If she can remember some of her Spanish, she will already have a basis for continuing, and if she remembers enough to skip a course or two, it will take her less time to get through the requirement than if she starts over with a new language. Sharon should analyze what happened in high school. Perhaps her problem was a learning style incompatibility with the teacher; this may not be the case with her university teacher(s). Maybe the problem was lack of learning strategies; she can then learn some learning strategies (like the ones presented in this volume) and set herself up for success this time around.

Figure 1.1

second language, everyday living becomes more complicated. In some cases, some of the second language is acquired through osmosis-like processes (see also chapter 4, ego boundaries); in others, either it is not learned, or learning must be done the hard way, by classroom.

Maintaining knowledge

Anyone who studies a language has invested much time and effort into acquiring knowledge and proficiency. This is even more the case for those who begin studying foreign languages when they are young children. One reason to continue studying a foreign language is to protect this investment. It is far too easy to forget a foreign language and re-learning does not always come as easily as re-learning some other subjects.

The nature of language study

The second question that you can ask is: what is foreign language study? Some experts consider that language learning consists of acquiring four

skills – reading, writing, listening, and speaking – and four sets of enabling knowledge – grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and cultural understanding. The former are the means for developing communicative competence, or the ability to use the language for communication with native speakers in authentic situations. The latter are the building blocks that you will need in order to acquire any one of the four language skills. Some learning strategies will work for all seven of these objectives. Others will be pertinent to only specific skills or enabling knowledge. So, let us look at each of the skills from the point of view of what it is, what the sets of enabling knowledge are, and what kinds of strategies can be best used to become proficient at that skill. (Specific strategies are discussed in chapter 3.)

Reading

Reading is termed a receptive skill; the other receptive skill is listening. (You might have heard reading and listening referred to as “passive” skills. That is a misnomer. There is nothing passive at all about learning to read and listen well: both require *active* processing skills.) What “receptive” means is that the reader receives input from a writer. Rarely does the reader have the opportunity to question the author about what he or she really had in mind when writing a text. However, in reading, a reader can, at least, read the text multiple times in order to make sense of it.

Reading consists essentially of decoding and interpretive skills. Decoding at a simple level is a matter of matching symbols (letters, characters) to sounds and/or words. At a very high level, decoding is a matter of interpreting social consciousness from words.

In order to read any kind of text, readers must decipher symbols. English speakers generally have an easier time decoding Latinate alphabets (even though some letters may look a little different) than non-roman alphabets, such as Arabic, Georgian, Cyrillic, or Chinese. There are about three dozen different writing systems in the world, including alphabets, syllabaries (a set of graphic symbols, each of which represents a syllable in the language), and other kinds of writing systems. Some writing systems encode from left to right, others from right to left, and yet others from top to bottom. Each new script can pose a challenge to a brain already habituated in one or another type.

Decoding takes many forms. One decodes letters into meaningful sounds. One decodes foreign-language words into the things and actions they describe. One decodes full sentences and texts into interrelated units of meaning. How difficult message decoding is depends on how saturated the message is with sociocultural schemata, how sophisticated the writing of the author is, how much the author implies rather than states directly, and how differently text organization differs from one’s native language text structure (i.e. where the ideas come in the text – in the beginning or later, a highly convoluted and circuitous structure or one that

is linear and stated up front, one with conclusions or without, with repetition of ideas or without, with introductions or without).

To be able to read well, you will need to know a lot of words, and you will need to know the grammar rules. That is the minimum enabling knowledge. You will also need to know the scripts of the language (i.e. formulaic exchanges, such as the way people interact in a telephone call or what goes on and gets said at a grocery store – while oral in nature, they are reflected in texts written in an informal style about everyday life), the way native texts are organized (something linguists call discourse competence), and how texts differ according to genre-specific ways of writing. For example, newspaper articles are written very differently from science fiction, and so on.

The list below contains a few tips for becoming good at reading. Following the list is an explanation of how to put these tips into action.

- Read a lot.
- Learn about text organization.
- Learn writing conventions.
- Explore genre differences.
- Develop knowledge about the target culture (and the world, in general).

Extensive reading

To become a proficient reader, you will need to spend a lot of time reading. One of the most important findings about acquiring good reading proficiency is that time on task is very important. In short, the more you read, the better you will read.

In extensive reading, however, you will probably make the most progress if you carefully choose the level of text you are reading. If the text is too simple, you may learn some new factual information and gain some reading speed, but you will not increase your knowledge of vocabulary and structure and, therefore, will make limited progress in gaining proficiency in reading. Likewise, if you choose a text that is too far above your level, you will also impede your progress in gaining proficiency because you will be spending too much time trying to figure out what the text means. The best text is the one that is just a little beyond your comfort range. Then you will be able to use the text effectively to take the next step in proficiency development.

Krashen

Text organization

You can improve your reading significantly by learning all you can about how various kinds of written materials in your foreign language are organized. Are they organized similarly to American English, where one starts with a topic paragraph and topic sentence that gets developed by adding details? Or are they organized like texts in Persian, in which a topic is repeated several times in circular fashion, with each iteration adding new information? Or is the text organization unique in some other way? As new language learners, we often approach

a foreign text with the same expectations we have for texts in our own language, and it can be very confusing for us when there are significant differences in the ways in which thought is encoded between languages.

Writing conventions

Punctuation is one writing convention, and while it seems like a simple thing, habits are hard to break. Even very advanced students often make mistakes in punctuation. Just as learning to punctuate in your own language meant learning to pay attention to details that perhaps did not seem entirely meaningful, so learning to punctuate in a foreign language means learning to pay attention to language-specific details – and to notice and remember where punctuation rules differ. For example, in American English, when making a citation, the final period goes inside the close-quotation mark. In most European languages, including British English, it goes outside the close-quotation mark. There are similar differences in the use of footnotes, dashes, placement of commas, and capitalization.

There are other kinds of writing conventions, some formal, some very informal. These can be marks, omitted letters, or ways to indicate an obscenity. For example, in American personal letters and notes, the marks xxxooo mean hugs and kisses. Omitted letters often occur in words that we might not want to say aloud, e.g. d—n and f—k. Another way of expressing the latter obscenity is by use of a combination of marks such as !*#!. Similar marks can also be used to express surprise or hitting. The interpretation is situational. Other languages also have these kinds of writing conventions, and you will get to know them as you read more.

Yet other kinds of writing conventions have to do with the way text is organized. For example, English is written from left to right, Arabic from right to left, and Chinese from top to bottom.

Genre differences

You will become a competent reader, indeed, if you explore the various genres and how they differ in specific ways from the general text organization patterns. For example, literary texts are typically structured differently and use different grammar and vocabulary than do newspaper texts. Even within a newspaper, there are different genres: sports reports, weather forecasts, political commentaries, and so on and so forth.

Cultural and world knowledge

We call cultural and world knowledge background *schemata* (pieces of information that you know that you can use in learning new information). This is particularly important for developing reading skills. The more you know about the world, the better you will be able to understand factual information written about it, as well as authors' opinions about it. The same is true for the target culture.

The more you know about the culture, the better you will be able to understand texts that are highly imbued with cultural values, ideas, and ways of doing things.

Writing

Writing is the opposite of reading. Instead of interpreting authors' meanings, you become the author and need to express your ideas in ways such that others can interpret your meanings accurately. This means that writing is a *productive* skill, whereas reading is a *receptive* skill. In writing, unlike in reading, one does have control over the speed of production and the content of the message. Of course, where the alphabet is different from that of your native language, you will need a lot of practice writing in the foreign alphabet before you can expect to have any kind of speed in writing.

Writing is the opposite of reading in another way, too, in that good writing is a matter of *encoding* your thoughts into symbols, words, and texts that communicate what you want to say, whereas reading required *decoding*. As with reading, the enabling knowledge for being able to write in a foreign language consists of knowing a lot of words and having a good command of grammar. It is also important to know what the scripts (formulas) of the language are so you can decide whether or not or how to use them. Keep in mind the following:

- One learns to write by writing.
- Writing alone is generally not enough. You will need to learn writing conventions, style requirements, and genre differences for your language.
- One learns to write by reading.
- Good reading strategies can be good writing strategies.

Writing by writing

Writing in any language – your own or a foreign one – is a skill. As with any skill, proficiency requires knowledge and practice – much practice. Use every opportunity you can to write, whether it is in taking notes in class, leaving a note for a friend, or writing to a pen-pal. Perhaps your course work will include composition, a task that is not as often required in foreign-language courses as perhaps it should be. You certainly do not have to wait for your teacher to assign you a writing task. Write compositions of all sorts, even short stories and poetry, if you are so inclined and so talented, and ask your teacher or a native speaker to correct them for you. In learning to write by writing, much of the initiative is yours.

More than writing alone

Just as simply writing notes to your friends probably did not make you a good writer in your native language, so, too, simply writing by itself will not make you a proficient writer in the foreign language. Writing, in fact, has

been reported by many high-level language users as being one of the most difficult skills to acquire. You will need to learn writing conventions (see the earlier section on writing conventions for your language), and you will need to learn the requirements of various styles and genres. Different genres (newspaper articles, journal publications, fiction) require differing kinds of annotation, as well as different choices in words and text organization. In English, there are some helps: the *APA Style Manual* (American Psychological Association, 2001); the *Chicago Manual of Style* (University of Chicago Press staff, 2003); and *Elements of Style* (Strunk, White, and Angell, 2000) are just a few. For most of the languages you will be studying, there may be style manuals for native speakers; some of these may be adaptable for your use as a student of foreign languages. You may have noticed (or been taught) genre differences in reading. However, being able to recognize them is not the same as being able to produce them. For production, one needs much practice, which takes you back to the earlier strategy: learn to write by writing.

Writing strategies

The things that you learned in the previous section about how to be a good reader will also work for becoming a good writer. In fact, the better a reader you become, the better a writer you will be, and conversely, the better a writer you become, the better a reader you will be because you will start to understand more completely the nature of text structure and writing conventions in your foreign language.

Listening

Like reading, listening is a receptive, though not a passive, skill. In the case of listening, we have little control over what comes our way in terms of auditory input. Moreover, more often than not, in real life, we have little control over the speed at which we receive the input or the number of repetitions, if any, we get. At home, though, we often have the option of replaying an audiotape, film, DVD, or interactive computer lesson. In this way, it is possible to gain a modicum of control over the input, at least temporarily.

There are a number of strategies that you can use to build listening skills. More of these will be discussed in future chapters, when you can put them into the context of what kind of learner you are. In general, though, listening skills are acquired by putting yourself in positions where you can hear real language in progress. For planning purposes, you might consider how that can best occur:

- by making the most of study abroad; or
- by looking for listening opportunities at home.

Listening abroad

If you have the opportunity to study abroad, especially once you have acquired a basic set of language skills, take it and make the most of it. Go out – anywhere (and do anything). Go to movies and the theater. Go to parties. Eavesdrop on fellow bus riders and make small talk with shopkeepers. Take a long walk with a new friend. Interview a range of people on topics that interest you. Watch television. Listen to the radio – and to music.

Listening at home

Whether or not you go on study abroad, then consider where you might have the chance to hear authentic language use around you. Perhaps you can develop friendships in the local émigré community. Look for local theaters that show films from countries where the language you are studying is spoken. There is usually some way, given a little thought, that access to authentic speech can be acquired. You can also listen to radio via the Internet. Voice of America and BBS are also available on the Internet in dozens of languages. Some universities have access to SCOLA broadcasts; these are regularly televised shows of a variety of genres from around the world. Sometimes university departments have weekly roundtables where the foreign language is used. From time to time, some foreign-language departments bring in guest lecturers who make presentations in the foreign language.

Speaking

Speaking is another productive skill; as in writing, we *encode* language, though more rapidly. We have few opportunities to slow down or repeat without sounding uncertain or foreign. In encoding messages into words, sentences, and texts, we have to use sufficiently clear phonetic forms that interlocutors understand us.

As with other skills, the enabling knowledge that supports good speaking includes building a good lexical reserve (i.e. a large vocabulary) and using proper grammatical forms regularly enough so that mistakes and errors do not interfere with communication. At higher levels, of course, you will need to exercise great precision in your choice of words and sophistication in your choice of structures, and cultural knowledge will become even more important.

Specific strategies for developing speaking skills will be discussed in subsequent chapters. Listed below are a few that you might think about right now:

- Speak a lot
- Read voraciously
- Work on accent reduction

Speak by speaking

Much of learning to speak involves habit formation. Habits are formed by doing the same thing over and over. In this case, talking about the same or similar topics over and over, and using some of the same terms and structures, can do much to build smooth and easy speaking skills – at least, on those topics. Similarly, using new structures and terminology over and over in a range of different contexts will also build fluent speech.

Read voraciously

One might be tempted (as we were, above) to say that one learns to speak by speaking, as we have said about other skills, and that would be true in general. However, research studies are beginning to show something else that is quite interesting. Many good speakers did not acquire their speaking skills by a lot of speaking practice; rather, they acquired them by doing a lot of reading (Badawi, 2002; Leaver, 2003a), then using what they had read in speaking.

Accent reduction

Listening to someone with a heavy accent talk can be very tiring. You have probably felt some discomfort in speaking to non-native speakers of English whose accent is so strong that you have to work very hard to understand them. This can be so tiring that after a while you just give up. The same is true in reverse. If your accent is strong, people will get tired of listening to you, and if they speak English themselves, they may switch to English, depriving you of speaking practice in your language. Develop a more native-like accent. It may take a lot of time in a language lab, working with a native speaker, and comparing your taped speech to that of a native speaker, among a host of other strategies. The time, however, will be very well invested.

In working on accent reduction, our suggestion is to start with trying to produce intonation that is close to native-speaker patterns. Often, books and tapes are available to teach *intonational contours* (patterns of intonation within a specific language – usually there are several patterns, depending on whether you are asking a question, making a statement, expressing anger or surprise, etc.; see chapter 6 for a discussion of intonation). We recommend starting with intonation because incorrect intonation has a greater impact on both understanding and perception of a speaker as a foreigner than do incorrect sounds here and there.

Once you have mastered intonation – through listening to tapes and comparing your own intonation to that of native speakers or perhaps through work on intonation in your classroom – start to work on the sounds. Find out exactly where to place your tongue and how to move your lips for each sound. Many of these positions will feel very strange to you. That is because your muscles are not used to moving in this way. Therefore, once you know exactly how to make the sound (and a native speaker confirms that it sounds close to the native-speaker version), you will need to practice making it over and over until your muscles do it for you

CASE STUDY

Problem

Sam is experiencing difficulty understanding his teacher in class. The teacher uses only Farsi, and Sam just cannot understand what it is she says to him. It is even worse when she speaks directly to him or asks him what sounds like a question. It is so embarrassing when he cannot respond adequately! What can he do?

Possible solutions

There are a number of things that Sam can do to help him survive a teacher who uses immersion techniques in the classroom.

(1) He needs to build his listening skills in general. (The pronunciation section in chapter 6 may provide some hints.) He needs to listen to many spoken authentic texts outside the classroom – films, tapes, lectures by and talks with native speakers, etc. Simply listening may not be enough, however, and it might help him to have the scripts to the texts so that he can start associating words with how they sound. One strategy that has helped a number of students has been to have the teacher record texts that will be discussed in class later; that way students can listen to them ahead of time and be prepared to discuss them. This latter approach is an example of *advance organization* – something that is very helpful to nearly any student.

(2) Sam needs to develop some good listening strategies. It is easy to get lost in a stream of sound. Sam will survive better if he lets the words that he does not know simply slide past his ears. If he listens for words he does know and uses them to piece together the meaning of what the teacher is talking about, he should be able to figure out the general thrust of what is being said.

(3) Sam can prepare in advance for class. If he knows, for example, that educational systems will be an upcoming topic, he can become acquainted with much of the vocabulary and grammar in advance through reading ahead in the textbook or finding authentic written materials on the topic.

(4) Some students have found that if they work on improving their pronunciation, their listening skills improve correspondingly.

Figure 1.2

automatically. Pay special attention to sounds that do not exist in your language (such as the flap sound that sounds like a little of both /l/ and /r/ in Japanese or the *yerih* sound in Russian), as well as those sounds which are similar to your language but made in a different way (such as long vowels in Czech and long consonants in Arabic). The latter will be the most difficult for you because your brain and mouth are used to processing and interpreting the same sounds differently. (Chapter 6 contains a more in-depth explanation of phonemes, phonetic and phonemic difference, and other language features that influence accent.)

Finally, if your university offers a course in phonetics, take it! It may be one of the best courses, long term, that you will ever take. These courses often focus on

where and why accents occur – the differences between how your language and the foreign language makes and interprets sounds and intonational patterns.

Differences between child and adult foreign-language learning

If you started studying a foreign language when you were small or in the lower grades at school, you have probably noticed that studying it then was different from studying it now. Why is that, and does everyone experience the same reaction? How is studying a foreign language as an adult different from learning or studying it as a child?

A number of years ago, language teachers and researchers believed in a critical period for language learning (Scovel, 1988). That period was said to end with brain lateralization (early theorists posited age five as the time of lateralization; the theory was later amended to suggest that this occurs during the teenage years). Brain lateralization refers to the brain's finalizing the location of the functions that will be accomplished in either the right or left hemisphere – or cross-laterally. Before lateralization, functions can be picked up by the other hemisphere, e.g. speech, which is generally a left-hemisphere function, can be taken over by the right hemisphere when the left is damaged in a young child. After lateralization, this cannot happen. Lateralization is also considered to be responsible for the finalization of the range of sounds that a person can hear or learn and an explanation for why children generally acquire foreign languages without an accent and most adults have a moderate to severe accent when they speak.

Children have also been said to have a *Language Acquisition Device (LAD)*, or “black box,” in their heads (Chomsky, 1998). This LAD is envisioned as an unseen, uncharted part(s) of the brain (or perhaps just a manner of synaptic functioning) that allows children to acquire the structure and words of a language without conscious effort. After childhood, the LAD seems to cease functioning, although the authors have heard of some instances of adults reporting LAD-type activity and at least one of us has experienced it personally as an older adult. The fact is that in childhood language acquisition, whether a native language or a foreign language, is closely associated with a developing mind (Golinkoff and Hirsh-Pasek, 2000), whereas adult acquisition of language is associated with a developed mind.

Contrary to these earlier suggestions, the role of age in language acquisition is a very disputed aspect of language learning theory. Some adults have been able to do everything a child does – pronounce words with a native accent, learn language in context, and the like (Birdsong, 1999; Leaver, 2003a). Moreover, a cognitive advantage has been found for adults – knowing one language and its lexicogrammatical system can sometimes create impediments through its influence on a learner's expectations of how another language will work, but a good grasp of the systems behind one's native language can also provide the learner with basic

linguistic categories that are useful in learning a second language. Often, too, the learning is faster because of this cognitive advantage (Schleppegrell, 1987). The discussions below explore the relative advantages of child and adult language learning.

Pronunciation

Researchers have found (and nearly every language learner has noticed) that children learn to pronounce words better in a foreign language than adults. Most adults who learn a foreign language have accents; in some cases, the accent can be quite strong and noticeable. Children, on the other hand, pick up the sounds pretty much as the native speaker makes them, seemingly without much effort.

Adults, however, can improve their pronunciation. It just does not generally happen easily or quickly. Typically, it takes much time working in language laboratories, with tapes, and with native speakers. There are adults with very good language skills – you may be able to think of some famous ones – whose speech clearly gives them away as foreign because they have never mastered the sounds of the language or its intonational patterns. There are other adults who have been able to master the sounds well enough to pass as native speakers, perhaps not all the time and in all circumstances, but frequently often enough to allow them to do the kinds of things that language learners with strong accents cannot do. Perhaps you can think of some adult learners who have largely eliminated their accents.

Now, think about those adults you know with strong accents. Is it sometimes difficult to understand them? Do you sometimes feel uncomfortable with them? Do they seem really foreign to you, i.e. not someone you would choose to pal around with because they are *so* different from you? Do you sometimes have to put out more effort than you are willing to in order to get their point? For all these reasons and more, it is important for you to try your best to develop good pronunciation – and the sooner the better. Cole (2004) suggests that good pronunciation from the beginning speeds up language acquisition and that poor pronunciation not only slows down the acquisition by limiting the amount of time native speakers are willing to talk with someone whom they have difficulty understanding but also becomes fossilized, making the work of acquiring a good accent later much more difficult.

Sounds

For producing more native-sounding language, adult learners have two chores: to learn to *hear* sound differences that do not occur in their own language and to *make* sounds that do not occur in their own language. Additionally, knowing the conventions of standard and dialectal forms can help the foreign-language student develop consistency in speaking that does not mark him or her as a foreigner. Some institutions offer accent reduction courses; these can often

help. Where these are not available, noticing, training the ear to hear, and practice will go a long way.

Words

In developing better pronunciation, there are many things to consider. Learning to make new sounds is only the beginning. There are also word boundaries. In some languages, e.g. in French, words are elided (or run together) in specific ways. In some languages, e.g. in English, parts of words are not pronounced by native speakers, talking informally. If you are learning a language or a dialect of a language that uses a lot of elision, you may have to spend a good deal of time with authentic texts (those writings, broadcasts, or speech events prepared by native speakers for native speakers) before you can understand elided language, even though you can readily understand language that is well enunciated. Children in the process of language acquisition often can hear and process elisions quite readily; adults may find that they need to work at this harder and spend time in deliberately studying and practicing this particular aspect of language. (See chapter 8 for more information about this.)

Intonation

Native-like intonation is another area that is often difficult for adult learners to acquire and that seems to come readily to a child. Typically, the intonational patterns that are present in one's own language strongly influence one's intonation in a foreign language, including, sometimes, even at pretty advanced levels of foreign-language proficiency. Often, the babbling of babies sounds like real language, mainly because intonation is one of the earliest features of language that is picked up by babies. Tempo, pitch, and inflection are all part of intonation; chapter 8 will explain these features to you in more detail.

Vocabulary

As has been mentioned in the discussion of acquiring language skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking), vocabulary learning is one of the sets of enabling knowledge and a critical aspect of developing the ability to use your foreign language in useful ways. One can never know too much vocabulary. One should also know how words are formed in a foreign language, what international words (e.g. *radio*, *television*, *computer*), if any, are available to make the vocabulary acquisition task easier, and where semantic differences in words occur. Chapter 6 will guide you through the specifics of vocabulary acquisition.

Grammar and syntax

Knowledge of target-language grammar, sometimes called structure (or forms), and syntax (word order) is an equally important aspect of second-language acquisition. Words alone are not enough to communicate. The

words must come, in most languages, in a certain order and take a certain shape, or they will not be understood and your message will not be conveyed. For example, if someone said to you, “the book sees I,” you would not understand what the speaker meant unless you knew the context. If the speaker used correct word order (syntax) in English – “I sees the book,” you would understand much better, but you might think he or she meant, “I seize the book” because “sees” is not the correct form (grammar) to use with the word “I.” Similarly, unless you understand the grammar and syntax of a foreign language you will miss the message (and, with more sophisticated levels of grammar and syntax, the nuances, which can sometimes be very important, too). This is a part of language that the LAD, discussed above, supposedly helps children to acquire with relatively small amounts of conscious effort. You will very likely find that as an adult you will need to spend much conscious effort to learn the grammar and syntax for your foreign language, beginning with the same activities we recommended for acquiring good pronunciation – noticing and practice. Chapter 6 will explain aspects of grammar and syntax to you in a more comprehensive format to spend time noticing (or to look for).

Literacy

Some studies indicate that adults are better at developing literacy than children (Atwell and Leaver, 2002). What do we mean by literacy? We mean the ability to communicate in the language in ways that are considered educated. In a foreign language, we often refer to a literate person in a foreign language as communicatively competent.

Although adults develop literacy as well as children, if not better and more quickly, they do learn somewhat differently from children (Schleppegrell, 1987). In developing literacy, adults have some very important advantages over children. First, they are already literate in one language – their native language; this allows them to transfer some skills into the second language. For example, it is not necessary to learn how to read again, that is, to learn that letters form words, words sentences, and sentences thoughts. Similarly, adults already have cognitive processing skills – they know how to think analytically and critically, and they have background knowledge they can apply to reading and writing tasks.

Planning language study

Planning is perhaps one of the most important things you can do if you want to make the most of your language learning opportunities in or outside of a classroom. Knowing how you learn (see chapters 3 and 4), how you feel about various situations and kinds of interactions (see chapter 4), and how you work with others (see chapter 5) is very important. This volume will help you understand all of these things, and that understanding will and should influence your planning.

CASE STUDY

Problem

John Smythe started studying French relatively late – when he was fifteen years old. He has found it difficult since then to develop a good French accent. Some of his friends, who started studying at a younger age, have accents that are much better than his, and this makes him embarrassed to speak French with them. By comparison, his German accent is quite good, but he started studying German when he was quite young, and besides, German is the native language of his mother. John knows that his French may never “sound” as good as his German, but he would like to reach the level of his friends’ French accent.

Possible solutions

It is possible for John to improve his accent, even though he is now an adult. Some of the actions he might take include:

- (1) spending time in a language laboratory, completing exercises on phonetics and intonation that both “sharpen” his ear and “limber” his tongue;
- (2) asking a native speaker of French to give him feedback and suggestions;
- (3) taking accent reduction courses in France;
- (4) making recordings of his voice that he can compare with those of native speakers (and re-do many times, trying to come as close as possible to the native speakers’ sounds);
- (5) using a spectrograph (a special machine that records the frequency of sounds and produces a spectrogram – chart of the sounds) to compare the sounds he makes to those that a native speaker makes;
- (6) reading about tongue and lip movement in a text developed for second-language learners of French and monitoring his own physical formation of sounds.

Figure 1.3

What should you plan? Everything you can! You can plan what you want to get from the course and how you will do that. You can plan how you will study and interact in the classroom. You can plan how you will study at home. You can plan how to find native speakers to talk with who are not teachers. The better you plan, keeping in mind your own learning needs, personality, and goals, the more likely you are to be a good learner, to succeed in your course, and to meet your goals.

Planning language study for a course

When you decide to take a language course, you are usually motivated to do so by one or more reasons. Those reasons should have objectives attached to them. Just what do you want to get out of the time that you spend in language study? What would you like to be able to do with your second language at the

end of the course? The better you can define your goal, the more likely it is that you will reach it.

In defining your goal, you might try using the same kinds of behavioral objectives that teachers use in lesson planning. This means that you should identify:

- the outcome that you want,
- the condition under which you want to be able to accomplish the outcome, and
- the criterion or standard by which you will judge your success.

For example, in an intermediate course, as one goal (of several), you might say that you would like to be able to read contemporary short stories in the foreign language (outcome), given texts whose authors use a straightforward narrative style that is not entirely dissimilar from everyday speech (condition), and without having to resort to a dictionary (criterion/standard). With this amount of specificity in stating your goal, you will not need a teacher, native speaker, or test to tell you how well you are progressing; you will be able to measure your progress yourself, using the outcomes, conditions, and standard you have set for yourself.

Once you have defined your objective, you can decide how you will approach the course. Certainly, the teacher's objectives and syllabus will influence much of what you do. Still, you can also do what you yourself want, if you keep your ultimate objective(s) in mind.

Planning language study for the classroom

If you leave all the language study planning to your teacher, you may achieve what the teacher has set out for you to achieve, but you may not achieve all that you would like to achieve for yourself. Further, you will have given control of your learning over to someone else. The deepest and most effective learning, though, comes from controlling for yourself as many aspects of the learning process as you can.

How can you control your learning process in the classroom? Here are a couple of suggestions:

- organize yourself before class, and
- pay attention in class.

Advance organization

Plan before class to improve your performance in class, as well as to increase the amount of "intake" you ultimately get from the teacher's "input." You will probably choose techniques, called "learning strategies," based on your preferences for how to learn, i.e. learning styles. (Styles and strategies are addressed in chapter 3.)

Advance organization (Ausubel, 1960), which is a learning strategy in itself, is more than just planning ahead and knowing what strategies you will need to

use for any given class hour. It also involves looking ahead at the topics you will be studying and finding out what you can about them *before* you go into the classroom.

Attention in class

Pay attention to what is going on in your class in order to be more aware of the process in the classroom. That will help you make more informed choices in and out of class. What is the teacher doing now? Why? What are the students expected to do now? Why? What do you think will happen next?

You should also notice the language concepts that are being presented. Not all will be presented overtly. Some will be present in texts that you read or listen to; make sure you understand the key elements of the text and not just have a fuzzy understanding of overall meaning before you move on to other texts. That does *not* mean that you have to understand every single word, and trying to do so would be inefficient, if not ineffective. It *does* mean that you should understand how your teacher or classmates arrived at the general meaning of the text.

While in the classroom, the most successful students use a number of *metacognitive* strategies. The term *metacognitive* is simply a way of saying that one deliberately pays attention to his or her thinking processes. What are you doing now? Is it effective? What else might you be doing that might be even more effective? Planning itself is a metacognitive strategy; so are evaluating your ways of studying and assessing how effective they are. (You will read more about metacognition in chapter 2.)

Planning language study outside the classroom

Equally important is what you do outside the classroom. For the most efficient use of time outside the classroom, planning is required. Some of the things that you can and should plan include answers to questions that you have probably heard many times before in many different venues: what, when, where, how, and how much. Here are some such questions that you might consider answering:

- *What* do you want to learn?
- *How much* do you want to learn?
- *Where* do you want to learn?
- *When* do you want to study?
- *How* do you want to learn?
- *How much* can you take in at once? (The lower your proficiency, the faster you will experience *language fatigue*, or lack of ability, attention, and strength in continuing to speak and listen to the language.)

Your answers to the above questions and others like them can help you do effective language-learning planning. You will have a chance to try this out in the practice exercises at the end of this chapter.

CASE STUDY

Problem

Susan is studying Afrikaans. She is currently at an intermediate level of proficiency and wants to get to an advanced level as soon as possible. She is quite flexible as to where she studies, and if necessary, she can study foreign language full time. The problem is: she does not know how she should go about getting to the next higher level of proficiency. What should she plan as her next step?

Best possible solution

Given Susan's personal flexibility and her desire to reach a higher level as fast as possible, along with the fact that she is currently at a level on which study abroad experiences can have a strong influence, Susan's best plan will be to take a semester abroad (or a year, if she can manage it).

Figure 1.4

Duration of language study

Sometimes students want to know for how long they should study a foreign language. Much depends on what level of proficiency they want to reach and how quickly they learn. Much depends, too, on whether or not they will have access to the foreign country and/or native speakers; both kinds of access usually increase the level and the rate of learning, reducing the overall amount of time needed for study.

The US government has gathered statistics over the past thirty or more years, and it now has a good idea of how much time (and aptitude) it takes to learn how to “speak like a diplomat” (or soldier). The chart below provides information on how long it takes a typical US government employee to reach the Superior level in a program with five or six teacher contact hours daily and a class size of 1–6 (US Department of State) or the Advanced Level with six teacher contact hours daily and a class size of ten (Department of Defense) – class size has been shown to have a direct and proportional influence on the level of proficiency that can be reached in a specified period of time. The term *Superior* refers to the American Council on Teaching Foreign Languages (ACTFL) proficiency level scale (available on the Internet at www.actfl.org). This level has other names, depending on which scale is being used. The Federal Interagency Language Roundtable (FILR) scale (also available on the Internet at www.govtilr.org) calls this Level 3/Professional Level Proficiency, and the Council of Europe (see www.alte.org) calls this Level 4/Competent User. The differing lengths of time are not reflective of the inherent “difficulty” of any particular language, but of the “language distance” from English. In other words, in Arabic, there are many more new things to learn for a native English speaker than there are in French, and, therefore, it will take

Table 1.1

category	sample languages	length of study (goal)
I	Afrikaans, Basque, Danish, Dutch, French, Haitian-Creole, Icelandic, Italian, Norwegian, Portuguese, Spanish, Swedish	6 months / 720 hours (FSI) 6 months / 720 hours (DLI)
II	German, Indonesian, Malay, Romanian, Urdu, Swahili	6 months / 720 hours (FSI) 8 months / 960 hours (DLI)
III	Albanian, Armenian, Belarusian, Bengali, Bulgarian, Burmese, Cambodian, Croatian, Czech, Dari, Finnish, Georgian, Greek, Hebrew, Hindi, Hungarian, Lao, Latvian, Lithuanian, Macedonian, Pashto, Persian, Polish, Russian, Serbian, Slovak, Somali, Tagalog, Turkish, Ukrainian, Vietnamese	1 year / 1320 hours (FSI) 1 year / 1440 hours (DLI)
IV	Arabic (all dialects), Chinese (all dialects), Japanese, Korean	2 years / 2640 hours (FSI) 18 months / 2160 hours (DLI)

longer for most English speakers to acquire Arabic than to acquire French. The chart reflects the relative language distance and, therefore, length of time required to acquire the language to a useful level for most of the major languages (USMC, 1998; USAF, n.d.). (We would note that the categories reflect the Department of Defense organization; the Foreign Service Institute uses a three-category system, in which Category I and Category II above are collapsed into Category I.)

Planning for lifelong language learning

If your only goal in taking your current foreign-language course is to complete a requirement, then this section is not for you. If you just want to do a few courses to get a “feel” for the sounds and a sense of the culture of a language of your ancestors (but not one spoken in your home today), then again this section is not for you. This section is for those language students who have already made the decision that language must be a part of their personal or professional lives (perhaps for career reasons).

Having made such a decision (or determination), it is important to understand that language learning is not a one-course activity. Nor is it a short-term activity. If you want to become truly proficient in a foreign language, you will need to invest many years and much effort in the endeavor. This time will be spent in many venues: the classroom is only a start. Interactions with native speakers in many

environments and for many purposes will be necessary to achieve higher levels of proficiency and inescapable for those who plan to use high-proficiency language in their careers. Independent learning will also be critical. In other words, planning for lifelong learning is like making a strategic plan for the language portion of your life. While many people do not bother to do this, among language learners who reached near-native levels of foreign-language proficiency, a significant percentage did, if not formally, then informally (Leaver, 2003a, 2003b).

The first stage of the typical student's language learning endeavors usually, but not always, takes place in the classroom. Classroom learning can come at nearly any age, but there is some advantage, particularly for the development of good pronunciation, in starting at a younger age (as you will recall from the chapter 1 discussion of age differences in language learning). Besides, the younger one starts, the more years one has for learning!

Courses and class work are not only helpful for language learning; they are usually essential, even at very high levels of foreign language proficiency (Leaver and Atwell, 2002). However, a collection of courses is less helpful, in general, than a fully thought-out and cohesive program that includes multiple activities, like those listed in the next section.

How do I organize lifelong language learning?

For many, the most important tool to use in lifelong language learning is an Individualized Study Plan (ISP). ISPs can take many forms. They can be in a date book, as a checklist, or in some form of diary that you keep. Whatever works for you is an adequate format for the plan.

Your ISP should reflect your objectives, learning experiences, desires, style of learning, and financial/time possibilities (Leaver, 2003b). While essential for advanced students who wish to exceed some of the possibilities of language study in a classroom, they can be equally important for serious language students from the very beginning of language study.

ISPs should also be cohesive. That means that everything in them should reflect another step toward your ultimate goal. There should also be a mechanism (or maybe more than one) for assessing your progress on a periodic basis; otherwise, the plan will be much less effective. ISPs take into account some or all of the following:

- Courses
- Study, work, and travel abroad
- Independent study
- Reading
- Use of the Internet
- Work with a native speaker
- Friendships with speakers of the language
- Writing to pen-pals (and/or friends and relatives)
- Practica and internships

- Watching television
- Listening to the radio and tapes
- Becoming acquainted with arts and art forms
- Foreign assignments
- Periodical assessment of progress

Making the most of the classroom

No two students get the same results from the classroom. Some students learn far more in a semester or year or two than other students. Some reasons for this may include motivation (see chapter 3 for a discussion of motivation), aptitude (aptitude will be discussed later in this chapter), and knowledge of how language works in general (an overview is presented in part II). Another reason can be learning styles and how they interact with teachers' and classmates' learning styles, and with the learning strategies selected for use. Most important, some students simply plan better how to use their classroom time experience and choose their courses more selectively.

While you may not be able to change your aptitude, you can certainly change your attitude. This means not assuming that you can't learn just because learning is hard for you (see the discussion on self-efficacy in chapter 4). A "can-do" attitude can go a long way toward overcoming aptitude handicaps. Furthermore, aptitude isn't a monolithic barrier. There are various components to learning aptitude; some people may have better memories, for example, whereas others may be better mimics. So it's possible that you can compensate for your weak areas through your stronger ones.

Course selection, where an institution allows it, can be more important than many students realize. For example, if you want to learn a language to use in an overseas job, you probably shouldn't take a large number of literature courses because the language of focus in such courses is not as useful for daily work as more business – and daily life – oriented language would be. When making course selections, think ahead to what knowledge and skills you need to develop in order to reach your ultimate goals.

Making the most of study, work, and travel abroad

Simply being abroad is rarely enough to improve language in and of itself. *What* you do when you are abroad is very important. Whether you will study, work, or travel abroad, it is important to engage in that all-important planning (thinking about what you will do to learn and how you will do it). It is also vital that you put *effort* into your language learning. Just being there and letting it wash over you simply doesn't work for most people. Tips on how to make the most of your out-of-classroom learning are found throughout this book. For starters, however, you will need to seek out learning opportunities while abroad. In addition to the experiences which can be handled by formulaic language, such as buying food, mailing letters, and the like, find some friends with whom you can discuss a wide range of ideas. Do things together with these friends and leave

time for sharing opinions and thoughts. Students who have actively sought out opportunities while abroad to learn their language and who have spent more time with friends have been shown to have experienced greater gain in their language proficiency (Brecht, Davidson, and Ginsburg, 1993).

Making the most of independent study

Independent study can, and probably will, occur at a number of different times during your language-learning career. It is a key to getting the most out of your homework when you are taking a class; it is equally essential if you are truly on your own without access to a teacher, or at least to a trained, experienced teacher. In either case, the kinds of things that you do independently can do much to improve your language learning. For example, reading as much authentic literature as possible (including not just newspaper articles, but the classical literature of the culture you are studying) builds reading stamina, a deeper lexical and grammatical base, and greater cultural understanding and knowledge. Extensive reading has been shown to be the single best thing that one can do to improve one's reading skills (Krashen, 1993) and general foreign-language proficiency (Badawi, 2002).

What kinds of things should you read? That depends on your proficiency level and your personal interests. Generally, find things that you think you'd enjoy reading and take every opportunity to dip into them. In general, you might start with the same kinds of things that you read in your own language – if there are parallel materials in the foreign language. Carry these materials around so you can read on the bus or if you are stuck on an elevator.

At the earliest stages of your learning, you may not be able to get much meaning from a passage or a text; in that case, see how many words you recognize (such as words borrowed from English or languages you already know) and how many you can guess. Later on, you are likely to know most of the words in a given passage; in that case, try to figure out what the unknown items are before you look (a few of) them up. Rarely should you look up every word. At the higher proficiency levels, it will be more important for you to develop precise understanding; at lower levels of proficiency, a general overall understanding is sufficient. Once you have more than a few words at your command, you will be able to get this general understanding from the passage itself. Until then, select passages on topics that you know something about. That will make it far easier to guess from context; you will know what the likely possibilities are, and you will know what is absolutely not possible.

Making the most of Internet programs

The Internet has given quite a boost to language-learning activities in a number of ways. It offers access to up-to-date texts in a wide variety of languages. Most countries have sites in the language of the country, and so do many enterprises and groups within them. If you have a hobby, you may be able to find a target language site about the hobby. The Internet is also a very convenient

way to develop friendships and find “pen-pals” who will exchange email or even chat with you in real time. You can also often find on-line dictionaries and many other resources (just type the name of your language and the words “online dictionary” into Google, Yahoo, or other search engine). If you are studying a language that uses a foreign alphabet, you may even be able to sign up for a free email account on a site that is located in a country where your foreign language is spoken, making it easier to write to someone in the foreign script. (This can be a problem with some American Internet service providers.) For example, for the ability to use the Cyrillic alphabet, www.mail.ru is a very good source. We cannot, of course, provide a complete list of sites for all languages with a foreign alphabet. However, your teacher or some of your teacher’s colleagues are likely to know about sites, so if this is something that interests you, ask your teacher about it. You can also check on www.mindsolutionsinternational.com (click on the foreign language page).

Making the most of native speakers

Native speakers may know very little about language teaching, but they can serve as models of various kinds of language use and can provide practice to language learners. Some of them will be able to answer your language questions directly; in other cases, you may have to try things out and see how they react.

Some university programs use native speakers who are also students (and generally without teaching experience) to teach languages that would otherwise have too low an enrollment to be offered; the Critical Languages Program (CLP) in the United States is an example. This program came into being in the late 1960s; it is less widespread today than in the past but can still be found at such leading universities as the University of Pennsylvania and the University of Connecticut. Originally, the CLP used foreign graduate students and others to help independent and self-motivated students to develop foreign-language skills; today’s CLP formats are more varied. Most recently years, university, government, and private school programs have begun to use local immigrants to supplement their classroom activities either by inviting these people to class from time to time to interact with students or pairing students up with them for the completion of out-of-class tasks. In all these cases, motivated students can take advantage of this kind of access to native speakers to improve their own language tremendously.

Additionally, some very successful language learners who have not been able to travel abroad for various reasons have sought out local immigrants on their own for practice and language improvement. You can often find immigrants who might be willing to help out in various aspects of language-learning endeavors.

We would add a word of advice here. Learn all you can about how interpersonal interactions take place in your culture before proceeding in developing friendships. In some cultures, effusive, warm, and touching behaviors are expected; in others, they create estrangement at worst and misunderstanding at best. Knowing and following the rules of interpersonal behavior in the culture you are studying will make friendships develop that much more rapidly. In this way, your native

speaker(s) can become your friend(s), which will provide you with very important insights into the culture you are understanding beyond those you can learn in a book.

Developing foreign friendships

As mentioned in the section above on study abroad, foreign friendships can be a very powerful tool for building language proficiency. Developing foreign friendships is not easy, but it is possible. Perhaps the most traditional way is through finding a foreign pen-pal, a person to whom you write on a regular basis. Pen-pals can be located through a number of sources. The Internet is a very good resource for developing foreign friendships. It provides resources for chat, email, and instant messaging with friends and e-pals. Some URLs you might want to check out for pen-pals are the following:

Youth Venture: worldcomputerexchange.org/schools/international_pen_pal_program.htm

People to People International: www.ptpi.org/programs/student_program.jsp

We would add a few words of caution, however, when using the Internet for this purpose. Keep in mind that there is much scamming that takes place over the Internet. Even if everything seems above board, it is always unwise to give out personal or financial information to anyone over the Internet.

You might also experiment with “tandem learning.” This is an attempt by two native speakers of different languages to teach each other their L1 via email. You can find out more about it here: www.shef.ac.uk/mltc/tandem/.

If you are studying a heritage language (a language originally spoken in your family), friends and relatives who live in a foreign country can be a very good source of information about the culture and an excellent resource for practice in using the foreign language. They are even better than pen-pals because they may know a lot about you and your family and may know what will be interesting and useful for you.

The same words of caution apply to pen-friends and Internet pals as to making friends among native speakers. Learn and follow the rules of culturally appropriate behavior, and you will be much more successful in your efforts at making friends, as well as at language learning.

Making the most of practica and internships

Like study abroad, a good practicum or internship in a foreign country can be extremely valuable. The difference between a practicum and an internship is that with a practicum you will probably be guided by a teacher in your home country, as well as overseen by a teacher in the foreign country who is connected with your home university, and you will have specific requirements to meet as a result of carrying out the practicum. The course of your study is, in part, controlled by these teachers.

Internships, on the other hand, are often simply arranged by the home institution or study abroad program through standing agreements with various foreign businesses or agencies. Typically, what you gain from an internship depends very much on you. The better your language skills on entering an internship, the more likely the organization is to give you a solid learning opportunity where you can use and continue to improve your language.

If you have a specific reason for taking a practicum or internship, explore all aspects in advance. For example, find out whether you have access to the level of society, the amount of interaction with native speakers, and the kinds of language use that you want and need. Ask questions – lots of them – before making the final decision. Sometimes you can get an internship or practicum changed onsite, if you find out that it is not what you expected. However, this is not always the case, so it is better to resolve all issues in advance.

Making the most of television, radio, and tapes

For listening comprehension, many resources are available nowadays. Satellite television from a wide range of countries is available in many large cities; these broadcasts can include a wide variety of genres – news broadcasts, movies, game shows, talk shows. You do not have to be in the country of broadcast; many are available in your home country, either through satellite broadcasting or in the form of videotape or digital media. Enclaves of speakers of the language you are studying are likely to have shops where such media are available on sale or for rental.

Radio and television and other forms of media will also introduce you to the popular culture (what is often called “pop culture”) of a nation. Pop culture sheds light on mindsets and gives us common topics of conversation. Much “pop culture” derives from the US and western European media; it may be of interest and use to you to observe how it has been assimilated into the host culture. Pop culture includes the movie *du jour*, the latest “in” expressions and clothing styles, and the like. Depending on your age and the kind of people you want to interact with, you may want differing levels of acquaintance with the popular culture of your target language.

Becoming acquainted with arts and art forms

Low culture refers to the everyday ways of behaving that make one set of people different from another, such as shopping, riding on local means of transportation, and eating out. You will quickly become familiar with artifacts of low culture through study abroad, friendships with émigrés, and other actions that are listed here as part of a good ISP.

On the other hand, high culture – the music, arts, dance, philosophy, religion, and literature of a nation – is different from everyday culture, and not every member of a society is thoroughly familiar with high culture. Nonetheless, high culture is a good entry into understanding the mindset of people who speak your foreign language. High culture reflects everyday life, as well as the values and

thinking of native speakers of the language, in its art forms. Likewise, everyday life incorporates citations from literature and references to various forms of art into its aphorisms and ways of expressing ideas.

Making the most of foreign work assignments

Foreign work assignments, if you are lucky enough to get them, can be a huge boon to your language-learning efforts and lead to a great deal of success. Some possibilities include work as a diplomat, diplomatic attaché, foreign business offices, the Peace Corps (for United States residents), non-government organizations, or as a teacher of English abroad.

Unfortunately, many language learners who have had the opportunity to work abroad have not made the most of that opportunity and have actually ended up losing foreign-language proficiency even during the time that they were living among native speakers (Goodison, 1987). This happens when language learners associate with people from their own country and do not force themselves to participate in the larger, local community. It takes a deliberate effort to become a part of the foreign community, but your language skills will improve immeasurably if you do.

Periodic assessment of progress

No ISP can be fully effective unless you periodically stop and measure where you are. In measuring your progress, there are a number of ways to assess your current language skills. These are discussed below.

After you have assessed your progress, you may find that you have a different set of learning needs. At that point, you will need to re-evaluate your ISP itself to make sure it reflects these needs. Keeping your plan current is a good bet for reaching your goals.

How do I assess my progress?

There are several ways to assess your progress. Some are formal, and some are informal. Once you have decided on one or more measures for assessing your progress, you should probably stay with them throughout your language-learning study in order to be able to compare your ability before and after any point. (Instruments can measure somewhat differing things and define levels in slightly different ways, so a consistent standard is a good idea.)

Each time you assess your progress, you will need to make a determination of whether or not you are on target for your objective. If you are moving too quickly to assimilate what you need or too slowly to meet your goals in a reasonable time, you may want to adjust your plan to optimize your learning experiences, based on evidence of your strengths and weaknesses to date. That means that assessing your progress also means assessing your own language strengths and weaknesses.

CASE STUDY

Problem

Mary is in the process of developing a lifelong learning plan for herself and is lost in the details. She just does not know where to start. What can she do?

A possible solution

Before Mary can make a plan of this scope, she needs to know where she stands right now – what skills does she have and which ones does she still need to develop? She can find out this information by checking can-do statements online. She could also ask a teacher to provide an assessment, or she could take a formal test. (She also needs to know how she personally goes about learning – something that will be discussed later in this volume.)

Figure 1.5

Formal measures

There are a number of tests that are available for measuring progress. Not all will be available to you. It all depends on what your personal circumstances are and where you are studying or working.

Formal proficiency tests can test either some form of global, that is, overall, proficiency (through representative activities) or specific proficiency (through performance requirements). Examples of formal proficiency tests are those given by the Federal Interagency Language Roundtable (available to anyone working for the US government) and the American Council on Teaching Foreign Languages (ACTFL). The ACTFL test is considerably less comprehensive than the government test, but it is available to students enrolled in foreign-language programs at US universities, as well as through Language Testing International (www.language-testing.com). Other kinds of proficiency-oriented foreign-language tests in the United States are available through the Center for Applied Linguistics in Washington, DC (www.cal.org). In Europe, the Association of Language Testers Europe (ALTE) has established its own set of testing rubrics for use with foreign-language learners.

Informal measures

There are also a number of ways in which you can get an informal assessment of your language skills. One way is to ask a teacher or other knowledgeable person to give you feedback. A second way is to take note of your successes (and failures) in actual language use or to keep a diary of your progress. A third way is to compare your skills against an established scale. You can use the ACTFL scale for this (www.actfl.org), the Federal Interagency Language Roundtable (FILR) scale (www.govtilr.org), or the Council of Europe/Association of Language Testers Europe scale (www.alte.org) to see how you measure up.

purpose(s) of language study:

ultimate objective:

coursework (and approximate dates) planned:

out-of-class activities planned (and approximate dates):

activities abroad (planned, with approximate dates)

mechanisms for measuring progress (with approximate dates)

Figure 1.6

Checklists are a very helpful way to assess your progress. For example, using the FILR proficiency scale, the Defense Language Institute has developed a series of “can do” statements. By answering questions about what you can do (and, of course, cannot do), you can get an idea of your proficiency level. These can-do assessments exist at a number of sites. Examples of can-do statements can be found at the LangNet site (www.langnet.org) and at the ALTE site (www.alte.org), among other places.

Practice what you have learned!

1. How many purposes of language study can you think of? Use the list in this book as a starting point. Interview some friends who are studying foreign languages other than the one you are studying and find out their reasons for studying a foreign language and for choosing the particular language(s) that they are studying. Compare your responses with those obtained by your classmates.
2. Let's do some work on planning your language study. To begin, answer the following questions:
 - a. Why do you want to study a foreign language? Of the reasons given in this chapter, which ones match your reasons? Do you have a different one? Write it down.
 - b. What is your ultimate objective? Based on that, make a list of the kinds of courses and activities that you will need to take/do.
 - c. When and how will you assess your progress?

Now, fill in the chart shown in figure 1.6. You may want to type the chart into your computer, so that you can keep a record of it via a tracking program or change it at will or upon need. This document can be amended in any way – and the categories used are not sacrosanct. You can include your own categories, as well as the ones on the form or instead of the ones on the form. If you decide to change the categories, explain why.

3. Try a very sketchy and informal self-assessment. If you already know something of the language you are interested in, assess where you are now, looking at:
 - *Vocabulary*. What content domains (e.g. geography, history, political science, everyday life, etc.) can you express yourself in? What other content domains would you like to be able to talk about?
 - *Structure*. Which constructions can you handle easily? Which give you trouble? Which have you decided you aren't ready to work on yet?
 - *Discourse*. Can you speak in connected sentences? Can you tell a story or make an explanation?
 - *Pronunciation*. How much trouble will most non-teacher native speakers have with understanding your pronunciation? (You may have some experience in talking to native speakers and know the answer to this question; if not, you might want to ask your teacher or a native speaker you know.)
4. Analyze your local newspaper. How many genres (e.g. letters to the editor, sports items, news items, advice columns, etc.) can you find? How is the text organized? If you were to write a letter to the editor or a news report, how would each of these need to be structured? Where do the main points come? Where are the supporting details given? Now, with your teacher's help, do the same with a newspaper in your foreign language. How many differences can you find between your local newspaper and the foreign one?

Review

In this chapter, you considered a number of questions. The answers to these questions can be summarized as follows:

The purpose of language study

- (1) Obtaining a job or performing a job better
- (2) Gaining access to foreign bodies of knowledge
- (3) Traveling abroad
- (4) Studying abroad
- (5) Working abroad
- (6) School requirements
- (7) General edification and interest in linguistics
- (8) Understanding your heritage
- (9) Parental influence
- (10) Understanding people in your neighborhood
- (11) Maintaining knowledge

The nature of language study

- (1) Developing skill in listening, reading, writing, and speaking
- (2) Acquiring enabling knowledge of grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and culture

The differences between child and adult language learning

The differences between how children and adults acquire languages are, as a minimum, the following:

- (1) Children have a better “ear” and can spend more time on task.
 - (2) Adults already know one language and learn more efficiently.
- So, the situation is not one-sided, at all. Adults do have some advantages of their own.

Planning language study

Planning language study includes developing:

- (1) goals and objectives for studying;
- (2) plans for the classroom; and
- (3) plans for outside the classroom

Duration of language study

Based on government studies (see the chart in this chapter), we can say the following:

- (1) In general, Romance languages are more quickly learned by adult native speakers of English than are Slavic languages or Arabic.
- (2) In general, Germanic languages take somewhat more time than do Romance languages for adult speakers of English to learn.
- (3) In general, Slavic languages take twice as long to learn to the same level of proficiency for native adult speakers of English as do Romance languages.
- (4) In general, Arabic and Altaic languages take four times as long to learn to the same level of proficiency for native adult speakers of English as do Romance languages.

If you want to learn more about the topics in this chapter, consult the following sources: AATSEEL Publications Committee (2001); Champine (1999); Council on International Educational Exchange (1994–1995); Frantz (1996); Gliozzo and Bishop, eds. (1994); Krannich and Krannich (1994); Leaver (2003b); Leaver and Champine (1999); Modern Language Association (n.d.); Shryock (n.d.).