Learning a Second Language without Living Abroad or Going Broke

I actually own Polish For Dummies. That’s what I think when people tell me, “You must have a gift for languages.” What I’ve learned about languages has come from frustration, being humbled over and over and tedious work rather than from any gift I have. More than running a marathon or adapting to Chicago from a small farming community, learning new languages is the hardest thing I’ve ever done. And I haven’t really done it. I’ve been learning Spanish for nearly a decade and there is still a lot I do not know. I speak, write and understand it with limitations and very imperfectly. I’ve studied Polish for several years and still can only communicate in a few hundred phrases. I took Biblical Greek in seminary for three semesters and still have to utilize resources to remember vocabulary and grammar. I hope that does not make you want to stop reading. I think the fact I struggle is why you should keep reading. I’m not Mr. Ivory Tower gifted second language learner. I’m an Average Joe who has learned through weeping and gnashing of teeth. That is how most of us learn other languages. As an ESL (English as a Second Language) teacher I have deep compassion on my students that struggle, which is nearly all of them. I understand it. But people often ask me for advice in this area. I think I have learned enough to help people. And that is what I am doing here. I’ve learned what I’ve learned without living in a foreign country and without spending a ton of money. And if you are interested in doing the same, I hope this article will be helpful.

First...Why?  Why learn a second language if it is unnecessary in the US?

These things are merely my opinion. Not absolute truth. Take
them for what they are saying.

1. It’s a way to intensely exercise the brain.

I’ve seen research that endless, mindless scrolling on social media adversely effects the brain. [1. http://www.helwyssocietyforum.com/?p=6215] The scope of Mr. Talbot’s article goes beyond how technology inhibits (young) people intellectually. I recommend reading it all.] I’m sure the deadening of complex thinking skills is among these adverse effects. Second language learning is the opposite of that. It requires utilizing the various parts of your brain with intensive effort. If internet scrolling is the mental equivalent of sitting on your couch eating potato chips, language learning is a full body Tony Horton workout. And it helps with focus as well. You probably can’t practice learning a language while doing something else at the same time. Deep focus on one thing at a time is another lost art in this age.

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2. It affords ministry opportunities.

Well over 60 million Americans prefer a language other than English at home. [2. http://www.citylab.com/politics/2013/08/geography-americas-many-languages/6438] Every indication is that this number will only rise in the future. I think it is wise for immigrants to learn English. That is why I teach ESL in my Chicago neighborhood. But there are few better ways to scream to a person “Jesus loves you” than to speak to them in their heart language. This is particularly true if they are in the U.S. where English is the primary language of the masses. I do not think second language learning is for everyone. However, for
those who can and will it can be a great servanthearted alternative to ignoring other languages here or complaining about them.

3. It’s a huge agent of humility.

I never tell people I know Spanish well, partly because I don’t and partly because the process has humbled me due to mistakes and embarrassment. Once after ESL class a student said “Yo te llamo” (I’ll call you). I mistakenly thought she said “Yo te amo” (I love you). Let’s just say things got a tad awkward. And I had to laugh at myself, which is a good thing for people like me who tend to take themselves too seriously. Language learning has a way of making you feel like a child. [3. All the research tells me that children learn languages more quickly and easily than adults in part because their brains are like sponges. But I also think it’s because it corresponds to where they are in life. Adults don’t want to feel like children so they are turned off by language learning. This is also a reason adults are turned off by Christianity.] It makes you feel ignorant. And I’m certain that is a huge motivation for many people not making an effort or giving up quickly. Yet these are good things to me as a person who believes pride is dangerous. I read “See Spot Run” type Spanish books when I first started learning it. And I’m a better person for it. Exposure to and appreciation for what I don’t know keeps me from being proud of what I do.

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4. You learn about the world, other cultures and even the Christian God.

Allan Crowson, former missionary to Ivory Coast and France, once shared with me that language is the skeleton of the body
of culture. The more you learn about a language the better you can understand people and their culture. It will help keep you from thinking just “within the box” and thinking there is a right way or only way to do something. My God is a God of every culture and language. I think we can see bits of him in our differences.

Secondly, How? How do you go about this without breaking the bank or living in another culture?

As far as strategy, first realize no two people are the same and there is no one-size-fits-all. But I do think most people are either visual or auditory learners with language, and I would play to which ever you are good at but you have to work on both to be good at speaking and reading, listening and writing. I’m a visual learner and could hear a new word ten times in speech and never remember it, but see it once and have it just about every time. The advice below is with Spanish primarily in mind because its the dominant second language here and so many languages are similar (French, Portuguese, Italian, etc.) but may need to be tweaked for languages I do not have experience with. With that in mind, here are some ideas I’ve used to advance:

1. **Start with the verbs and learn the patterns.** Study them and use them as much as you can. Except in a few areas—mainly in this one—English is much harder than Spanish. At most, we have five total verb forms and a few helping verbs in English. Other languages often have about 30-40 forms to learn that correspond to those five. However, although there are many patterns, they are relatively easy to memorize and don’t have many exceptions to their rules. But I think that jumping into a new language will not be helpful until you at least have a grasp on a few dozen of the most common verbs. You should at least have a grasp on the present, past and future tenses. The base meaning of most communication resides within verbs.
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2. Use things you already know in English in the new language. Like songs, or children’s books or Bible passages or TV shows. I know Seinfeld dialogue already, so watching it in Spanish doesn’t leave me confused, frustrated and fallen behind. A huge complaint with second language learning is “I don’t understand anything.” This helps combat that.

3. Do things to compare and contrast both languages. I watch Netflix with English speech and Spanish subtitles, or vice versa. If you need to, pause the movie and write things down. It interrupts the movie or show, but it’s worth it if you really want to learn. If you have products in your house or instructions on signs in both languages, look and compare.

4. Focus on learning phrases rather than just the words. The phrase “Con tal de que” doesn’t mean in Spanish what those four words translate to in English. [4. They can translate this as “with such of what.” This is about as confusing as you can make it.] Any language I have worked communicates in phrases or clauses. The meaning in those phrases and clauses is mostly found in how they relate to each other, NOT what the words literally mean. Dictionaries can be helpful, but they often cannot capture the meaning of what you hear from a series of definitions. I learned early on not to just learn words but phrases and clauses. To learn them, I utilized note cards for a long time (English on the front side, Spanish on the back). I didn’t want just words to learn. Nearly every card had a phrase. We don’t say “hide and look for” in English. We say “hide and seek.” Even though “seek” and “look for” can mean the same thing, one is used in this phrase and the other isn’t. Phrasal learning avoids these mistakes.

5. Practice with native speakers if at all possible. This may
not be feasible for everyone reading this, but if you can, by all means do it. Native speakers will tell you things no classroom or dictionary or computer software can. They can teach you things like idioms and slang. I tell my ESL students what “gonna” and “wanna” and “gotta” mean every semester because they are essential to American English and you almost never hear them taught because they are slang. If you find a conversation partner, tell them to be firm in correcting you. Depending on how you know the person, it could be an excellent way to build community with mutual respect and humility.

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6. Value your mistakes as teachers. You will make mistakes and if that is hard to accept for fear of looking bad or failing in your own mind, you likely will not advance. But when I make a mistake it nearly always sticks in my brain to the point where I either don’t make it again or at least not many times afterwards. It only took one time of my English students laughing after I called the leg of a chair a “pierna” instead of “pata” to never, ever forgot that in Spanish an animal and chair ‘leg’ is a different word than human leg.

7. Try to introduce the language into your brain from as many points of entry as possible. Keep Spanish radio on in the background, find a Spanish newspaper, stop and look at business signs in Spanish, etc, etc, etc. Be creative. Label all the things in your house with the word in your new language. It is my opinion that because the adult brain is firm like a rock, you have to assault it, especially if you cannot go to another country. The great thing about the U.S. is that it is not hard to bring other countries to us in most places.
8. **You have to invest time. There is no substitute.** If you cannot commit at least 15-30 minutes a day to this, it likely will not work. Again, get creative if you have to. I would pull out at my flashcards several points during the day. If I had a few minutes to wait at the bank, the flashcards came out. Things like that. It’s a great alternative to social media scrolling.

9. **Repeat, repeat, repeat.** Most learning comes down to exposure, repetition and memorization. Think of it like the brain creating files. The more you review the file, the faster your brain can access it. If I ask you what is the capital of the US, you can think of it quickly because you’ve heard it over and over and over throughout your life. This is similar. You can get to the point where you can think of a word or phrase nearly as fast in your second language as your first, if you hammer it into your brain. At a recent professional development at City Colleges of Chicago, they taught us that an adult second language learner has to hear a word or phrase 15 times before it becomes part of their active vocabulary.

   If you decide to go with a computer language learning system, do not be afraid to repeat levels or lessons over and over and over again.

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10. **Press on if it seems slow and you start getting discouraged.** I will close with a helpful illustration I give my ESL students every year. If a child grows 1/10th of one inch every week, you do not notice it over one week or two or three. You barely notice anything over a month. But over a year at that rate, the child would grow over 5 inches. Over two years, nearly a foot! That is significant. This is how
change works. True change—genuine transformation—doesn’t happen overnight. It’s slow and virtually undetectable while happening. So if after a week, your growth seems undetectable and you are discouraged, take heart. You are growing. Again, unless you are gifted, it takes time. Many days you feel like you accomplished nothing. [5. Josh Crowe, current missionary to Japan and who also spent summers in Brazil and France, taught me that language learning is not linear. There will probably be plateaus where you don’t grow for a few weeks, but there may be weeks you grow twice as much to compensate.] But if you focus on 1/10th of one inch a week (a new phrase or two, 10 minutes of pronunciation practice, a simple conversation with a native speaker) then you are successful. Practicing every day or nearly ever day is key. Although you may not notice it, you are probably growing or shrinking in language learning. I can see this clearly when I go to South Carolina for 10 days and come back to Chicago.

Maybe none of this will help you. Maybe only a little will. But I am confident that at least some can help a lot of people. If you have questions, comments, critique, or anything else, please let me know.