

Motivation, Time, and Opportunity to Practice

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I grew up in Florida, about 30 miles south of Miami. When I was five- or six years-old, Cuban immigrants, displaced by the Cuban revolution, began to arrive. The schools tried to prepare us for the influx of Spanish speakers by gathering us, grades one through six, into the auditorium to watch a Conversational Spanish program on TV. We watched the same set of programs, which were broadcast about once a week, for the next six years. There was no other instruction, as this was a quiet Southern suburb, far from the big city, with no Spanish teachers—at least not yet.

For an hour or so after I came home from school—maybe I was then in the fourth or fifth grade—I did my Spanish vocabulary work as a kind of ritual. It hadn't been assigned...I just thought it was fun. The house was empty, as my parents hadn't come home from work yet, and I assumed a relaxed position, hanging upside down on the couch, with my feet on the back of the couch and my head hanging down, imagining I was walking on the ceiling. Well, perhaps this had nothing to do with my vocabulary learning, but I would look around the room, and think about what I could and couldn't say about it in Spanish. "The carpet is dirty," perhaps, or maybe, "The windows are open," or even, "My Favorite Martian is on TV." I had an English-Spanish dictionary next to me, and I would look up any needed words, and then practice saying the phrases I created to myself. I didn't have any confirmation of the phrases I created, and never knew if they were correct. Still, by the time I started studying in real Spanish classes in high school, I could read and understand Spanish, write it a bit, and speak it with a fairly good accent. Near the end of my high school days, I took a trip to Bogota, Colombia with the University of Miami Youth Symphony as part of a cultural exchange program. We played music and talked to people. I was happy to find that communication in a foreign country was not as difficult as I had imagined. It renewed my interest in continuing my study of languages at the university level.

I think my early work helped prepared me for my later study, and I have retained quite a bit of Spanish to this day, considering that my last class was almost 40 years ago. At the latest JALT conference, I attended a class intended for Spanish teachers. The presenter was kind enough not to kick me out or laugh at me when I told her I just wanted to hear Spanish, and I was happy to find that just seeing words come up on the screen or in the handouts was enough to trigger a memory and to bring back the meaning of the words. I've lost a lot, but I think it's retrievable.

My early Spanish training differed a great deal from the way I learned vocabulary in French in college, which was mostly through reading. After the two Basic French courses following an audio-lingual method framework that included listening to tapes and practicing dialogues, I took reading and history courses. These classes expanded my vocabulary beyond basic phrases, though the expansion followed no known natural progression. I learned *ecstatic* before I learned *excited*, and *inexplicable* before learning *difficult*. The texts were somewhat turgid, though occasionally interesting, with vocabulary in the margins of the page, with occasional examples, or explanations of grammar, at the bottom of the page or at the end of the chapter. The methods used in these reading classes would seem familiar to some Japanese learners of English, perhaps.

French History was another story, as it was a fourth-year class attended mostly by graduate students and it was above my level. Lectures and discussion were in French, as were the final papers. My dictionary was worn out by the end of the course, but the class was well-taught. I would need a lot of study to bring my French up to a usable level at this point in my life, but I've retained some memory of the subject matter, if not the language.

Japanese was a completely different language-learning experience than learning French and Spanish. My wife and I arrived in Saitama years ago with zero Japanese, hired as private-contract AETs, rather than JETs. One of the first days we were there, I went to a local grocery. I still remember hearing a shopkeeper yell, "*Irrashaimase!*" at me, and I put my hands up to show that I wasn't stealing anything. I had no clue why he was yelling at me until later.

Thankfully, the Board of Education in our city did a good job of providing us with opportunities for learning. We were taught to do basic introductions, greetings and leave-takings, like, "I'm sorry to be leaving before you" and such things that one needs to know in an office or workplace in Japan. We were also encouraged and supported in taking language classes, but most of the vocabulary learning, for me at least, was situational. I learned phrases, not words. I needed to send money, I needed to send a package, I needed to get a haircut—I remember a friendly vice-principal writing down, in romaji, what I was supposed to say to the barber, the equivalent of "Please cut my hair short." I was worried about coming back from the experience with no hair, but dutifully memorized and recited the message and got a nice haircut.

I repeated this process of learning and memorizing phrases in lots of other situations, and the year that we were in Saitama was probably the best and fastest time in my Japanese-learning history. Not everything I tried worked, however. I was mostly unsuccessful at reading a children's book, "*Sanbiki no Kobuta*," even though the story of Three Little Pigs was known to me. This showed me one of the difficulties in learning a language where the characters were not accessible. If I didn't know the word or have an informant, the process of looking it up was just too time-consuming. I could look up a word I heard, but not a word I read, unless I was reading something specifically for foreigners.

Thanks to advances in computers, we now have programs like "*Rikaichan*" or "*Furigana Inserter*," additions to Firefox which allow access to Japanese kanji and vocabulary, at least in online text and, through these tools, my Japanese vocabulary learning has recently begun again. While I'm still on my own when trying to read signboards, these programs allow me to understand, or at least attempt to understand, the memos, reminders, etc. I receive from my office or through my email, and with luck, and a little effort, some of what I learn will be retained.

What do I need to learn vocabulary? For me, it is motivation, a quality I had more of when I was young; time, a quantity I had more of when I was young; and the opportunity to practice, something I have more of now, if I can persuade myself to take advantage of it. I think some play with the language (not necessarily while lying upside down) is essential, some drill with dialogues and grammar is useful, and some foreign travel can put things into context. The heart of my language learning so far has reflected a desire to interact with speakers of other languages, and that is where my path to successful learning still lies.