

Adult Language Learning: Some Personal Musings

S Mohanraj | mohanrajsathuvalli@gmail.com

Mohanraj has worked as a teacher educator in different parts of the country for over 40 years. His longest stint was at The English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad, where he served as the Dean of the School of English Language Education. He received the Professional Teaching Award from TESOL in 2010. He is now retired.

Key Words: First language, Aptitude, Senior Under-Officer, Devanagari, Wodeyars, Language variety, Mandyam Tamil

Abstract

In this paper, I have tried to recount my experience of learning three different languages, all of which I learnt after I grew out of my teens, in very distinct contexts. I have attempted to show how needs and circumstances come together to provide the necessary motivation to learn a language. Besides the need, other essential factors include proper exposure and the right type of encouragement from speakers of the language concerned. However, there can be exceptions to this and language learning may remain a distant dream for many an aspirant.

My Observations

Adult language learning has been an interesting field of study, for it exhibits variety in terms of learners and their situations, and sometimes defies established theories. In my life, I have come across a very senior person (a seventy-odd year-old Tamil speaking lady) who has lived in a foreign language environment (in Gujarat) for several years, refusing to pick up a word of it. Yet she could go around the markets and do her shopping and also bargain with the vendors about the prices of vegetables and other commodities. She was very successful.

I have also come across several people who have picked up languages just like that; my mother with almost no schooling to her credit, picked up several languages largely because she lived in different parts of the country. She, my mother, could fluently use Kannada, Telugu, Marathi, Urdu, and Hindi, and had a smattering of Tamil and English. Both these women had similar backgrounds, but their adult language learning abilities were different. Perhaps the reason is that one was motivated and had an aptitude to learn language, while the other did not. That is perhaps too general a point, however. Let me now come to how I myself learnt some languages.

A Bit about Myself

I can operate in six different languages with varying degrees of fluency—Kannada, Telugu, Hindi, Tamil and Gujarati, besides English. I learnt Kannada and Telugu in my childhood, and both can be considered as my first languages. Tamil being a popular language in Mysore, where I lived, and with quite a few friends of mine being Tamil speakers, I was able to pick up a smattering of this language. Later in life, I

chose a Tamilian for my life partner, and so my ability to use this language improved considerably. As a teenager and a little later (closer to my middle age), I picked up Hindi and Gujarati. I shall now share some of my learning experiences with these three languages (Hindi, Gujarati and Tamil) in this brief write-up.

Learning Hindi

Hindi being an official language of India along with English, as a school going boy in the 60s of the last century, I had to learn some Hindi formally. This was part of the curriculum – a compulsory course of study, but this did not give me any knowledge of Hindi. Since Sanskrit was my second language, I was familiar with the Devanagari script; therefore, I could read and write Hindi as part of my studies just enough to pass the examination. But I could neither speak nor understand the language.

After matriculating from school, I joined college to continue my education. This was a period immediately after the wars we had with China (1962) and Pakistan (1965). The spirit of patriotism was strong, and so we enrolled ourselves as cadets in the National Cadet Corps Rifles (NCCR). I also became part of the troupe, reluctantly to begin with; but I participated much more enthusiastically later, to rise to the position of a Senior Under-Officer—the highest rank a cadet could achieve in the NCCR.

I was with the NCCR for a full four years. During these years, I had to attend parades twice a week, annual camps of 10 days duration every year, and twice in these four years, special camps of 30 days each. In all these events the medium of instruction was Hindi (with occasional talks by officers in English). My interaction with the trainers and with cadets from different institutions and places during the camps helped me gain knowledge of Hindi.

Gradually my speaking ability became better, which stimulated me to read a few weekly magazines in Hindi. (This was largely during my visits to the barber once a month.) I used to enjoy small jokes, snippets, short news items and some short stories which were published in *Dharmayug*. This helped me refine my use of the language. This was when I could appreciate dialogues in Hindi movies and also got bold enough to croon Hindi songs with an understanding of their meaning.

With my college education coming to a close, I joined postgraduate studies, and my use of Hindi took a back seat. Luckily, I had a few classmates who were from the Hindi belt, and I made it a point to converse with them in Hindi. They helped me develop good conversational skills, and then there was no looking back. My life as a participant at the CIEFL, Hyderabad (the Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages, now The English and Foreign Languages University), and later as a teacher educator in certain parts of north India, gave me the confidence to use Hindi in public. It took me close to six years to learn this language and to stake a claim to knowing it.

Learning Gujarati

I learnt Gujarati in very different circumstances. On completing my research at the CIEFL, Hyderabad, I got a job at the H M Patel Institute of English Training and Research in Vallabh Vidyanagar, Gujarat. I did not know a word of Gujarati, nor was I familiar with Gujarati culture. I accepted the job, and went to Vallabh Vidyanagar taking a train from Hyderabad. It was a long journey of over 24 hours. I had to reach Bombay (Mumbai of today), change trains and then reach Anand in Gujarat to go to Vallabh Vidyanagar. Luckily for me, the train that took me to Anand from Bombay was a day train which stopped at almost every station on the way. I could look at every station and make a note of the names of

places as the train passed each station. At the railway stations, the Indian Railways have a convention of indicating the name of the place in a specific order—the regional language on the top, and the official languages Hindi and English in the bottom left corner and bottom right corner respectively.



[Untitled image of a destination board]. Retrieved from <https://i.ytimg.com/vi/aW0eygbnc3o/hqdefault.jpg> November 22, 2019

This was very helpful to me, for I could read the names of places in Hindi and English and try and relate them to the name of the place as written in the Gujarati script. I was alone, and there was plenty of time (a nine-hour journey), and I started copying the names of the places as written in Gujarati in a notebook. This helped me identify some of the similarities and differences between the Gujarati and Hindi scripts. This was very rudimentary, and I was still to get a hang of writing the Gujarati letters of the alphabet systematically. (Though they had a close resemblance to the Devanagari letters, it was not an easy task to grasp their strokes.)

I arrived in Vallabh Vidyanagar late in the evening. I was given some temporary accommodation for a couple of days before I could find a house to stay in. During the following days, as I walked through the streets I paid careful attention to the sign boards and started reading them. This helped me become a reasonably good reader of the script. It was much later that I learnt that the

phonology of Gujarati was very different from that of Hindi, and being familiar with the script was not a sign of any success in learning the language.

As I continued to work in Vallabh Vidyanagar, I soon picked up the spoken form of the language (slowly but steadily), and with the help of a colleague I also learnt to write Gujarati. This was an achievement, for now I could read, write and speak Gujarati. Though not very fluent, I was accepted in their society with all my nuances, and errors.

The encouragement received from friends and the people at large, gave me the confidence to read some books in Gujarati. As a teacher educator, I had to go with my students to various schools to supervise teaching practice. This provided me with ample opportunities to speak in Gujarati with school children and also the teachers teaching in schools. In about two years or a little less, I was a reasonably good user of Gujarati. I owe this to the good exposure I got to the language and the opportunities to use it, both of which helped me pick up the language fairly quickly and well.

Learning Tamil

The initial years of my life were spent in Mysore. I had the major part of my education and a few years of my life as a teacher in this town. Mysore was a princely state with very benevolent rulers—the Wodeyars. In the late nineteenth century, some of the Wodeyar kings got people from the erstwhile Madras state to work as ministers (*diwans*) in their kingdom. Most of these people were Brahmins and belonged to either Iyengar or Iyer families. Generations of their descendants have settled in Mysore and have become part of its culture. However, they have retained their language—Tamil, though it has emerged as a distinct variety with some Kannada words integrated into its vocabulary. The

phonology and syntax of Mysore Tamil is also distinct. This variety is also known as the Mandyam variety of Tamil.

As a school-going boy as well as a college student, I had some friends who belonged to the Iyengar community. When I visited my friends' houses, I often got to listen to their language and without being conscious of it, I picked up a few of its bits and pieces. I never had an opportunity, nor a need, to use this language as long as I lived in Mysore.

After working for a few years in Mysore as lecturer in one of the colleges, I moved to Hyderabad for further studies. It was here that I met my prospective wife, who was a Tamilian. (She is a polyglot, who is fluent in more than eight Indian languages as well as English. She is also a translator recognized by the national Sahitya Akademi.) It was my marriage to her that gave me plenty of opportunities to use the little Tamil I knew and improve it. Today, I can comfortably interact with speakers of Tamil, though I have not been able to become familiar with its script. Reading and writing Tamil have remained a distant dream for me.

Conclusion

Learning a language depends on a variety of factors. In the first place, one should have a friendly attitude towards other languages. Secondly, one should possess the necessary aptitude to learn a new language when one has an opportunity. It is equally important to understand that no language is superior or inferior. All languages are alike in that they are organic and dynamic. We should be sensitive to their dynamism and accept their nuances. With the right attitude and aptitude, one can learn a new language when there is a need supported by the luxury of proper exposure. In this respect, I was lucky with all the three languages I learnt. I could otherwise have never learnt them.