An interdisciplinary approach to foreign language learning: Myths and strategies for success.
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A Review of

_Becoming Fluent: How Cognitive Science Can Help Adults Learn a Foreign Language_

by Richard Roberts and Roger Kreuz


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_Becoming Fluent: How Cognitive Science Can Help Adults Learn a Foreign Language_ is many things: a foreign language coach, a cognitive science primer, and a motivational resource. At its core, it is designed to place second language instruction within the context of interdisciplinary work spanning many areas of research, including psychology, linguistics, and philosophy. The authors, Richard Roberts and Roger Kreuz, did that and more.

The volume is organized in a way that encourages its audience toward current and future success. Roberts and Kreuz begin by describing myths surrounding second language acquisition, particularly with regard to adult learners. For example, many of us believe that adults cannot acquire foreign languages as easily as young children. This belief is often confirmed when we meet an adult who has tried to learn a new language, but failed. At the same time, we’re also more likely to disregard an adult who has succeeded with foreign language instruction. Roberts and Kreuz remind their readers that plenty of adults successfully master a new language, and that adult learners have a vast number of advantages relative to young children. One important advantage is that of transfer. Positive transfer, as is the case with cognates, can assure even the most apprehensive student that knowing one language will certainly help them learn another—though the authors astutely remind their readers to beware of false friends. Another important advantage resides at the conceptual level of language mastery, where having knowledge and a lifetime of experiences will assist in mapping a new word onto a well-organized conceptual structure.

Importantly, the strategies and techniques that adults adopt can also have a significant impact on their progress and overall mastery. Describing these strategies and techniques within the context of empirical research, theory, and overarching cognitive principles comprises the majority of this volume (for additional methodology and empirical research, see Altarriba & Mathis, 1997). At times, the authors describe previous research in great
detail, only to make a subtle connection to foreign language learning, as was the case with their discussion of the McGurk effect, script errors, and the tip-of-the-tongue phenomenon. At other times, their discussions were both informative and useful, as was the case with learning theories and strategy formation. Two major strategies discussed throughout the volume are overlearning and distributed practice. According to the authors, language learning is facilitated by a great deal of hard work and real effort, contrary to what we might perceive as a speaker’s natural ability. Spacing this hard work by learning a little bit at a time, rather than cramming, is also beneficial, as it allows new information to incubate: a process in which the new language begins to integrate with the more familiar, native language.

One additional strategy described within the volume, and perhaps the most important, is that of elaborative processing. Thinking about new words—including those that lack a direct translation with words in one’s native language—in a meaningful way is far more beneficial than shallow processing. For example, the self-reference effect described by the authors details a very robust finding in which life experiences can provide retrieval cues for new words. Other elaborative strategies include paraphrasing and connecting the new word to other words. Although these methods certainly reduce the amount of new material that can be learned each day, deeper and more meaningful processing will ensure better overall language mastery.

Of great value to their readers, Roberts and Kreuz emphasize the role of culture in foreign language acquisition (for additional commentary, see Altarriba, 2008). Learning a new language, along with the culture in which it is spoken, has many advantages. Roberts and Kreuz note the importance of successful use of pragmatics, as foreign language learners must master not only a language’s vocabulary, accent and literal meanings, but also its idioms, colloquialisms, and cultural references. Thus, learners would benefit from incorporating pragmatics very early on in language instruction, as this will lead to more natural-sounding dialogue. Moreover, findings from the bilingual literature indicate that the proper usage of pragmatic elements such as idioms can promote self-understanding and awareness in clinical settings (Santiago-Rivera, Altarriba, Poll, Gonzalez-Miller, & Cragun, 2009).

One oversight in this volume is its terse discussion of the role of word type effects in the bilingual and multilingual experience. Recent research findings have indicated that translation difficulty differs across concrete, abstract, and emotion words (Basnight-Brown & Altarriba, 2015). Moreover, with regards to accurately identifying emotional expressions, processing speed and accuracy are affected by both the positive-negative valence dimension and the degree to which the word directly labels an emotional state (Kazanas & Altarriba, 2015). As mentioned by Roberts and Kreuz, negative emotion words are particularly difficult to master and incorporate into conversational language.

On the other hand, the greatest strength of *Becoming Fluent* is the inclusion of Roberts’ and Kreuz’s own foreign language learning experiences. Readers will appreciate reading the successes and failures of these authors—at times, comically described—because they offer realistic expectations for adult language learners. Without these personal stories, readers could certainly assume that the advice offered by experts may not assist such a novice learner. Instead, readers should rest assured that everyone struggles (often!) when taking on such an ambitious endeavor. One final piece of advice offered by the authors is that readers should approach learning with not only a healthy mind and body, but also with a
positive attitude toward the learning process itself. Roberts and Kreuz shine here, as they inspire their readers to truly embrace the language and culture they have adopted.

This volume is appropriate for a variety of audiences, but ideally it is suited for the novice foreign language learners looking to adopt new techniques to further their training, as well as the cognitive psychologist looking to learn new applications for their research. Both of these audiences will greatly appreciate the expansive list of references and additional notes. Becoming Fluent is also a very timely volume, with recent findings within the bilingual literature purporting a variety of cognitive and neurological advantages that accompany regular use of multiple languages (but see Paap, 2014; von Bastian, Souza, & Gade, 2015, for challenges to these assertions). Importantly, the empirical research described within the contents of this volume greatly enhances the work, and it is likely to leave the reader wanting more.

References


