

LIFELONG LANGUAGE LEARNING

Learning a foreign language requires lifelong effort to continually improve—but that effort yields great benefits.

by Laura Catharine Smith (Theoretical Phonology)

When talking to graduating students, many of my colleagues like to pose one simple question: **What will you do to keep up your language skills after you leave BYU?** As a university dedicated to fostering a commitment to lifelong learning, this question should not be surprising. Chances are, if you are reading this, you have (1) taken at least a couple of semesters of a foreign language, (2) served a foreign-speaking mission, or (3) majored or minored in a foreign language.

While speaking at least one other language is very beneficial in Europe where a short trip can land you in a different country, learning and maintaining additional languages in the US requires more effort, especially if your second language is not Spanish. Moreover, since English tends to be a lingua franca, allowing Americans to function abroad in many countries, many English speakers simply have not seen the need to learn additional languages. But the effort is worth it. It can even be life changing.

THE BENEFITS OF LEARNING FOREIGN LANGUAGES

Learning languages provides numerous benefits, including opening doors for employment, enlarging our social circles, increasing our ability to connect with past generations—including the living (relatives in the home) or dead (family history research)—and helping us be better informed about the world. The latter point is particularly relevant to us today. Recent updates to the Church's *General Handbook* address the pernicious nature of misinformation in our world today.¹ Learning additional languages, however, can serve as “careful study,” thereby providing us with a bulwark against such misinformation. Expanding our options for news and information sources allows us to break free from our echo chambers and hear different perspectives on issues. Indeed, learning new languages can help us realize that issues that are politically divisive at home are not so in many other countries.

But there are even more, perhaps less obvious, benefits. Here are just a couple.

Improving Cognitive Functions

Recent research has demonstrated that those who speak more than one language can often stave off the effects of cognitive decline associated with conditions such as dementia or Alzheimer's for an additional four and a half to five years compared to monolinguals (those who speak just one language).² Indeed, bilingualism boosts the brain's reserves by creating denser gray matter than found in monolinguals, while also corresponding to increased nerve fibers and neuronal connections in the brain (white matter).³ These benefits are found regardless of differences between speakers (for example, socioeconomic or education levels). Not surprisingly, language learning is also associated with other cognitive benefits such as increased memory, better attention and focus, creativity, and even problem-solving, all of which are required to learn new vocabulary items, grammar rules, etc.⁴

Developing Empathy through Other Cultures

It goes without saying that learning new languages opens the door to learning about new cultures. Not only can we read the literature



of a culture in the original language as we increase our proficiency, but we can also understand how a culture ticks. Admittedly, however, attaining that level of proficiency is often humbling to the core as we quickly learn that we cannot express ourselves as well in the new language as we can in our first.

This can ideally help us develop greater empathy toward others who have had to learn our mother tongue as a second language and sometimes struggle to get the right words out. Instead of just speaking more loudly, as happens all too frequently, we seek ways to understand and help these foreign language learners in our midst because we recognize the mercy that such understanding and patience provided us. Moreover, by learning about new cultures and coming to love the speakers of those cultures, we better understand that ultimately, even despite cultural and linguistic differences, people really share more in common than we often admit: we all want to be loved, understood, and connected. This exercise can help us learn empathy, compassion, and even tolerance of individual and cultural differences that can otherwise create barriers that keep us divided.

DEVELOPING OUR PROFICIENCY

It is never too late to either learn a new language or increase proficiency in ones we have already learned. New technologies have made it easier than ever. Apps can help us unlock new vocabulary and basic grammar, while watching movies with subtitles (especially in the target language), listening to local radio, watching news programs on the internet, practicing with native speakers via Zoom or Skype, or taking classes locally or via Zoom with reputable language programs can all open new opportunities for learning and practicing.

To make the best use of these opportunities to develop language skills, we need to do more than just practice more. Developing proficiency must be a purposeful endeavor that forces us outside of our comfort zone. The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, or ACTFL, has developed proficiency guidelines that elaborate what developing proficiency means in practical terms. In overly simplified terms, Novice-level learners can use memorized phrases and provide lists of words. Intermediate speakers are “survivors,” able to “create with language,”

discussing typical activities and performing simple transactions. Being able to provide more detailed descriptions of the world around them and elaborate on their narrations make Advanced-level learners “storytellers,” able to communicate with increased accuracy in the three major time frames (past, present, and future) and navigate transactions with a little difficulty. To achieve Superior proficiency, speakers must be able to hypothesize, think abstractly, discuss world issues in detail, and even argue multiple sides.⁵ This requires learners to be informed about the world and break free from echo chambers and partisan thinking.

As each of these proficiency levels highlight, not only do the functions increase in complexity but so does the text type, moving from words to simple sentences to multiple paragraphs with more complex connectors (such as *because*, *consequently*, and *in light of*). Likewise, topics expand from things with which we are familiar to topics of more global importance, moving beyond just ourselves. (*You can learn more about language proficiency and development in the article “Varieties of Proficiency” on page 6 of this issue.*)



Viewing proficiency as a framework has some advantages. First, it changes the conversation from “I am fluent in German” to being able to state what the speaker can actually do with the language. It is worth noting that many missionaries return home Intermediate High speakers, not Advanced or Superior.

Second and perhaps more importantly, it helps us understand how we can be more intentional to improve our language skills rather than just “speaking more.” For instance, can we talk about a typical day at school or work? Or what about a typical family dinner? If not, start there.

Developing Advanced language skills in most languages is often difficult because it involves mastery of the past tense. Likewise, we are often not good at providing details in our descriptions of things and events. You can start by doing this in your first language: If you were asked to describe the room you are sitting in or what you did on the weekend, how much detail could you give without using the filler *um*? As this exercise implies, learning a second language can also help us improve our first language skills. Learning to add more details to our descriptions (“the pensive child eating an ice cream cone with chocolate sprinkles”) and narrations (“As soon as the horse eyed the plastic bag, he galloped off, afraid it would eat him” instead of “The horse saw the plastic bag and galloped off”) will help us increase our proficiency as we also expand the topics we can discuss.

While many BYU learners may default to Church materials to practice their language skills, building proficiency requires moving beyond religious topics. One way to start is to engage in topics of importance to us such as family, work, school, or hobbies. We can find articles or stories related to those topics to grow our vocabulary and see how native speakers discuss those topics. If native speakers are not readily available to practice with, start by journaling or recording yourself talking about these topics. The possibilities

for practice are endless, and part of the journey is tracking our progress.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The amazing part of learning other languages is our ability to see the world through new eyes. Indeed, there is a whole world waiting for us to discover as we learn about new cultures and languages. When I visited the Canadian National Vimy Memorial in Northern France several years ago, I had the chance to meet a number of French men and women who did not speak English. Through French, we shared our sentiments for what had happened on that hallowed ground a century earlier. Had that been the only opportunity for me to ever use my French, that experience alone would have been worth the years of study. In short, my life is richer because of the friendships and connections made in languages other than English. The blessings that come from learning foreign languages are absolutely worth the effort. **H**

ENDNOTES

1 *General Handbook: Serving in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 38.8.41, ChurchofJesusChrist.org.

2 “Can Learning a Language Help Prevent Dementia?,” Glasgow Memory Clinic, accessed June 30, 2023, <https://bit.ly/47VxFle>; Victor Costumero et al., “A Cross-sectional and Longitudinal Study on the Protective Effect of Bilingualism against Dementia Using Brain Atrophy and Cognitive Measures,” *Alzheimer’s Research & Therapy* 12, no. 11 (2020): 1–10, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13195-020-0581-1>.

3 Carley Spence, “How Learning a New Language Changes Your Brain,” *World of Better Learning* (blog), April 29, 2022, <https://www.cambridge.org/elt/blog/2022/04/29/learning-language-changes-your-brain/>.

4 “Benefits of Learning a Second Language,” University of the Potomac, accessed June 30, 2023, <https://potomac.edu/benefits-of-learning-a-second-language/>.

5 American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines 2012*, <https://www.actfl.org/uploads/files/general/ACTFLProficiencyGuidelines2012.pdf>.



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