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Parlez-Vous English?

by: Arden Jobling-Hey in: Editor's Desk

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The importance of learning a language prior to take-off...

After reading an article on the benefits of bilingualism featured in the New York Times that suggested learning multiple languages can improve cognitive skills and even shield against dementia in old age, I started thinking about the advantages of learning a new language and the enormous role communication plays when it comes to travel overseas.

To the advantage of English speakers the world over, it has become relatively easy to travel just about anywhere without having to pick up anything more than bits and bites of a foreign language. In many countries, even those where not everyone speaks English, signs will appear in both the official language as well as English, making it easy for tourists to navigate their way around a city without so much as a dictionary in hand. (Caution: these translations can also lead to some pretty funny misunderstandings - see the Lonely Planet "Lost in Translation Photo Contest" entries here for some shining examples!)

The prominence of the English language has led to the development of the lazy traveller, myself included. The ability to rely on English signs or basic understanding of English the world over has made travel more accessible for fearsome travellers but it has simultaneously made it less likely that travellers will make the extra effort to learn a language or conduct necessary research prior to takeoff. For many out there in touch with the latest technology, the ability to "google map" your location or electronically translate a word on-the-go provides an added sense of security, but what happens when your battery dies or you lose signal? Despite the global reach of the English language and the advancements in technology that have, in a way, reshaped the art of travel, by negating to learn a language prior to takeoff, even the most avid of travellers can still get lost in translation.

Case and Point: Adventures in Shanghai

Two years ago, nearing the end of my travels through Asia, I decided to swing through Shanghai to visit a friend of mine who was completing her graduate studies overseas. My friend, born in Canada to parents of Chinese descent, was learning Mandarin at the time and spoke pitch perfect Cantonese, making her our tour guide, translator and general expert on everything Chinese. So, I made sure to learn the words for "hello" (nihǎo) and "thank you" (xièxiè) just to be polite and left the rest of the conversing up to the expert.

Unfortunately, one day nearing the end of the trip, my friend had to hit the books and was unable to join in my excursion around the city. No problem, right? Wrong. After successfully wandering

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around on foot for most of the day and catching the subway to the harder to reach destinations, I realized I was running late so I hailed a cab and jumped right in. I'd agreed to meet up with my friend in Peoples Square, one of the most popular meeting spots in central Shanghai. I'd neglected to take into account however, that Peoples Square is an English name that makes completely no sense to a Mandarin speaking cab driver. So here I was in a car with a driver who didn't understand me, staring at road signs whizzing by that were written in an alphabet I couldn't even attempt to read - I was in big trouble. As punishment for my linguistic negligence, I was driven around Shanghai for 45 minutes or so before deciding to jump ship and put the poor driver out of his misery, making my way slowly to the meeting point using public transit and my tired feet which reminded me for days never again to travel unprepared.

Why it's worth the pain:

Is it really worth the effort to dive head first into a language just for a week or two overseas? Absolutely! Making your way around a city is just one of the many benefits of learning a new language before you travel. Even during short term visits abroad, picking up some key phrases you need to order food, get directions or strike up a conversation with a local will help you discover how to make the most of your trip.

If you're planning on extending your trip to work, volunteer or study your way around the world, learning the language will help you:

- Meet new people
- Build your network
- Integrate faster within the community
- Be more comfortable in your new environment
- Function on a day to day basis (grocery shopping, banking, job hunting etc...)
- Understand the culture and the people around you

What are the best ways to learn a new language?

Whether you're a student or a full-time employee, finding the time to learn a language isn't always easy. Taking a language course during evenings or weekends can be draining and the curriculum may not be designed for the type of travel you had in mind. For that reason, it's important to focus your efforts on a method that is suitable for you, and your demanding schedule. An interesting article by [Charlotte Bowen](#) outlines a number of different learning styles that will help you to focus your efforts. From the the grammar based approach to full-on immersion into the language, each approach is unique and focuses on a different set of methods designed to suit your learning style. Once you've figured out how you want to learn, the rest is up to you! Commitment and motivation are key factors when it comes to conquering a new language - but here are a few more tips to help you on your way:

- 1) Phrase books: looking to pick up the basics in a short period of time? It might be worth investing in a phrase book. More than a dictionary but less than a full time language course, phrase books offer substantial insight into grammar and sentence structure in addition to providing you with useful sentences and translations. Lonely Planet has a wide selection of [phrase books](#) for all languages.
- 2) Flashcards: a great way to extend your vocabulary in a short amount of time is by using double sided flashcards. Write the word in your native language on one side and in the language you are trying to learn on the reverse. Repetition is key and in this case, practice really does make perfect.
- 3) Join an online language community like [Busuu.com](#). Busuu.com is a free language learning community where native speakers interact with beginners and work together to correct each other's work and forward one another's learning. It's a great way to start stringing sentences together whenever time allows.
- 4) Language learning Software: [Rosetta Stone](#) is the best known

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language learning software available, but at a hefty price. That being said, if you're a motivated learner, Rosetta Stone might be the way to go. Their programmes combine vocabulary, grammar, reading and writing activities with pronunciation exercises and repetition that allow you to practice speaking the language. Don't have time to sit and repeat? Invest in audio software that is designed for learning on the go! Check out your local bookstore for a wide selection of language learning material.

5) Jump right in! If you're a confident and enthusiastic learner, than why not dive head first into your language discovery by immersing yourself with native speakers? This can mean a trip overseas or merely a trip to the local expat hangout. Online communities often boasts meet-ups that encourage practicing a foreign language. Look to meetup.com or search for local groups in your area to find out where you can go to practice the basic and learn a language fast.

Useful Links:

[Links: 20+ Links to Learn a Language Online](#)

[Learn a Foreign Language \(useful tips\)](#)

[How to Learn any Language in Three Months](#)

[30 Great Sites for Language Learning](#)

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Originally from Toronto, Arden has studied, volunteered and worked her way around the world. From promoting HIV/AIDS awareness as an international volunteer in Tanzania and teaching business English in Germany, to exploring hidden treasures of the Turkish bazaar. Arden believes that as long as there are unknown lands to discover, the adventure never ends!

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