

the Road to Fluency



Thomas Leverett on the personal journey of language learning

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hen you start out learning a language, it's like starting out on a journey: you get your supplies ready; you prepare your mind for hours

of drudgery, memorizing words, trying to understand what you hear, trying to wrap your tongue around new sounds, and in general encountering new things that you don't understand. Little do you realize that you may come to a fork in the road, a place where many turn back in despair, having given up, being unable to go further.

It's as if, having bushwhacked through a jungle or forest for many miles, you come to look over a small cliff at a fast river below. It's not so much that the drop is too steep, but that you're not so sure where the river goes, or whether it will be possible to come back, once you've committed to that course of action. To many, this is the end of the road. They'd rather give up and go back than take the plunge.

I'm referring to the moment at which you are really able to begin to think in the new language, without translating every word back to your own first language. Making this decision, to remain in the target language without returning, is most difficult when you are reading, because you are alone, and you really have to decide, on your own, to do this for yourself.

You think back to the drudgery, the difficulty of your trip so far, the lists of words, the grammar puzzles, the listening, the copying of whole sentences, the using of your bilingual dictionary until its pages become darker and the ink runs a little in the corners. When you started, cultural knowledge was a little like nuggets of gold in a river of plain stones; as an outsider, you liked learning about the culture and the way people expressed it through the language. As you learned more, you began to create sentences in the new language, and even see yourself as part of the new culture, speaking a little with people, understanding some things, participating in public conversations.


But that's different from jumping right in, using the target language to think as well as listen and speak, letting the new culture wash all over you, and leaving your old self behind. That is why, at this point in your journey, you'll hesitate, if you're like most people. Will I forget my own native language? Will I ever be the same again? Will I ever see my own native language and culture in the same way again?

The answers to these questions are not absolute, and the differences in each situation come into play here, but there are a few generalizations that can be made. You will probably not forget your native language, but you may forget a few words of it, or have some inconvenience when using it again after many years. You will not be the same again; you will be more than you were. You will have a wider view of your native culture and language, and this could be good or bad, depending on how important it is to you to fit back into it.

Having seen many intermediate learners having trouble at this juncture, I can say that this can be especially difficult for two reasons. One is that the new language and culture might be viewed as threatening to the old; as an English teacher, I often sense this dynamic at work, but don't know how to identify it precisely. It's as if learners are struggling with an inner battle, one to learn and master the new language and culture, but another to hold on to their native identity and culture at all costs. I can't help them with this: I can't guarantee that they will still be the same person tomorrow, and I know that it's a personal decision.

The other reason it's difficult is simply that it's changing strategies in midstream. What worked as a reasonable way to study a language at the beginning doesn't necessarily work forever, but it's hard to change something you've done for a long time, even when you know it's no longer working well.

Fortunately, however, our own minds, in their ruthless efficiency, are really our best allies in this struggle, as they are not going to tolerate rampant inefficiency forever. If you are determined to become fluent, you are continuing to surround yourself with the language, so you're having to live with whatever system you have made for yourself, and you'll see the value of better efficiency soon enough. In the end, you will be grateful when you make life easier for yourself, and when it's not such a struggle just to function.

It's just like most journeys: in the end, you arrive at the place you set out to find. It's just that the trip wasn't really what you thought it would be. And it wasn't the scenery that changed; it was you. 

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