Lessons From Learning to Read and Write Portugués in 3 Months

<p><b>Lessons Don’t Work; You Need a Project</b><br>

Si eu posso te falar uma cosa sobre aprendendo uma lingua, eu falar que deve mergulhar na lingua. If I could tell you one thing about learning languages, it would be to just dive in. Learning all of the "school words", then all of the "home words", and finally all the "clothes words" just never worked for me. I've certainly tried the conventional way many times. The only thing that has ever worked was having 'a why' that forced me to push through the inevitable frustrations of learning a language.</p>

<p><b>Why I Originally Liked Languages</b><br>

I have been blessed with travel to many non-English speaking countries. My family was honestly a little travel obsessed growing up. My swim coaches became accustomed to me missing weeks of summer practice. I would substitute weeks of double workouts chasing walls in the pool with weeks of seeing the Italian piazzas (I know what you're thinking - poor me!). It didn't matter the country or the language, we always tried to learn what we could and get a flavor of the culture. It was organic and natural. We would learn the basic 'please' and 'thank you' instantly not because it was lesson 1, but because we always had an honest need to thank someone.</p>

<p><b>Then School Happened</b><br>

I would start the school year enthused to perhaps finally pursue a language more deeply. However, this passion would grow fainter and fainter as we trudged through lesson after lesson in our 1980s style lesson book (seriously why were all of our language books illustrated like a 1980s ski comedy?). I always thought of myself as a smart person, but I could never see how to put it all together. It always just felt like we were being told about certain types of wrenches and drills, but never about what a person could actually build. </p>

<p>No matter the time or space, the style would always be the same. My French class in middle school and my Spanish classes in college would go through each vocabulary set as if that's how words are ranked in importance. We would learn all of the kitchen words, and then all of the car words, and then maybe all of the food words. This would invariably lead to forced 'conversations' during class time where 5 different types of fruit would be name-dropped. Very realistic fluency I'm sure.</p>

<p> My high school Latin classes were better. We would learn a lot of syntax rules up front, then a lot of vocabulary, and then we'd be turned loose onto real <em>actual </em> documents written in Latin. By my senior year we were reading the Aeneid (for those that aren't familiar ie The Iliad, Achilles, Siege of Troy, etc). The two things that always kept me from real fluency with Latin were twofold I think: </p>

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<li><p>Active vs Passive: reading someone else's work in a foreign language is sort of passive. It's not as active as learning to write in that language.</p></li>

<li><p>Dopamine: online translators have made it too easy to bypass struggle. There's not much of a dopamine reward when a task is too easy. When a task is hard, but you push through anyway, and then <em>finally</em> solve the problem, you get a nice dopamine reward. This is why video games get progressively harder. They want to be challenging, and just the right amount of challenging to keep you going. I never got a good chain of 'always wanting more' when it came to learning Latin. </p></li>

<p><b>Projects Create a Dopamine Chain. Lesson's Don't. </b><br>

Maybe I'm just a sandbox gamer who likes to learn in a sandbox way. Maybe others out there do get a dopamine chain from lessons and maybe these are the type of people who like strict levels in their games. For me, and I suspect a fair amount of others, an open project based style of learning creates that dopamine chain that keeps you wanting to learn more and more every step of the way. </p>

<p>Here's the steps that I used to learn portugues in 3 months.

I created my own 'learn portugues project':</p>

<p><b>Learn the bare necessity syntax rules</b><br>

(conjugating verbs, sentence structure, and pronouns are plenty to get started).</p>

<p><b>Learn the 2000 most frequently used words</b><br>

Anki flash cards. 80% of a language uses these wordings

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<p><b>Struggle on purpose</b><br>

Don’t just learn about screw drivers, do something with them. I read stuff that I knew I wouldn't 100% understand. I didn’t run to the translator at every word either. I read knowing that I would struggle with about 20% of the words, but I just kept reading anyways. More dopamine.

I wanted to read books in portugues. Eventually I found that there wasn’t enough to keep my interest in pt. Ive since replaced much of the hard drive space of my brain with newer and more often used information. Im glad that I learned about this…

<p><b>How this all applies to coding</b><br>

learn the syntax

learn the most frequently used ie loops arrays and etc

make something. Struggle on purpose