Lessons From Learning to Read and Write Português in 10 Weeks

<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 then finally all of 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. I think that this 'why' can be as simple as being 'my project'.</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 with them. </p>

<p>No matter the time or space, the style would always be the same. My French classes 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 in a 'simply fascinating' conversation. 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 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. Even though there isn't a need to write new documents in Latin, I think if we had had more writing assignments we would have ended up much more fluent translators.</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. Don’t get me wrong: our Latin was so hard that exactly 2 people passed the AP test. It's more that the difficulty wasn't calibrated right. It was either so hard that you never succeeded, or too easy because you looked up the answer in a translator. </p></li>

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<p><b>Projects Create a Dopamine Chain. Lessons 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. The project of 'write about a hero, his back-story, where he is now, and a future quest he has just been given', would have someone learning each tense of conjugation not in a rote style lesson by lesson, but instead 'just in time'. They would happen upon needing to say something in a certain tense for a reason driven by story, and then they would look it up. They would need certain words, most of which that couldn't be grouped into convenient groupings of 'Kitchen words' or 'Skiing words'. Their learning would be driven by the need to learn in order to complete their project. The further their story developed, the more invested and attached they might become to finishing their story. People don't get attached and invested in lesson plans. Once invested and attached, the increasing difficulty of learning harder more remote aspects of the language is met with more passion and investment. This is how projects access the magical dopamine chain, and get someone learning in the active sense.</p>

<p><b>My Português Project</b><br>

In the fall of 2010, I had just finished up swim coaching, and was working in commercial real estate. After a series of random events, interests and happen chance coincidences, I couldn't ignore my random desire to learn Português. I decided to create my own 'learn Português project' that I would work on in some of my free time after work. It wasn't an ongoing lesson plan that would last for all of my years of schooling. It wasn't a sequential reductionist step-by-step plan for learning each little part of the language in a predetermined order. It was a project with the end goal of being to be able to think in Português, period. In practice, this goal was a lower bar than it sounds since I was only focusing on reading and writing: read a Português news article, book, or instant message and be able to fluently understand without translating in my head. I knew from my earlier European travels that trying to learn speech and hearing fluency without actually living in a country, while I guess theoretically possible, wasn't a good concrete goal (still I did use music, movies and skype to help boost my reading and writing goals).</p>

<p><b>Active Learning: SharedTalk.com</b><br>

The beauty of active learning is that you can actually 'cheat' and still be learning. One of the most effective ways that I learned correct syntax and new vocabulary was talking on sharedtalk (a language exchange site for instant message rather than pen pals). In one window I'd be talking on sharedtalk, while having my translator and syntax rule cheat sheets in another. For the first few weeks I would lean heavily on these cheating mechanisms. By traditional education standards I wasn't learning at all, as I wouldn't have passed a memorization test. However, after these initial weeks, I noticed that I was using the cheat sheet and translators progressively less and less. Part of this was all of the other studying I was doing.

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<li><p>Free easy browser-flash based language exchange (matches you with another person online looking to learn your native tongue): <a href='http://www.sharedtalk.com/'>www.sharedtalk.com</a></p></li>

<li><p> Google translate (self explanatory): <a href ='http://translate.google.com/'>translate.google.com</a></p></li>

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<p><b>A Baseline of Vocabulary: Frequency Dictionaries and Anki</b><br>

Before one can really hit the sweet spot of 'need based' or 'just in time' project based learning, one must have at least a baseline of knowledge to add to. Rather than trudge through lesson books and overly convenient groupings of 'all of the kitchen words' one should use the filter of Word Frequency. Linguists who have studied languages have noticed a pattern that despite total lexicons of 30,000 to 100,000 words, most people in everyday use can get through 80% of what they're reading or saying with just 5,000 words. Even just 2,000 of the most frequently used words can get you over 60% comprehension. Thankfully, there are these dictionaries, with words ranked by frequency rather than by alphabet, readily available (try googling 'frequency dictionary \_\_\_your\_target\_language\_\_\_').

<p> What I then did was take a frequency dictionary PDF of Português, and created flash cards in the memorization app Anki. Anki is different from regular flash cards because it uses a technology called Space Repetition Method. Hypothetically, a normal person might learn their flashcards, and then review them again say one week later (review period of 1 week). With Space Repetition Method, each time you answer a card correctly, it moves up a level to a longer review period. Each time you answer a card incorrectly, it moves down a level to a shorter review period. In effect, you would have a ladder of say 1 day, 1 week, 1 month, 3 months, and 6 months. After a few weeks of reviewing flash cards, some of your cards may have advanced to being 'review 1 month from now' and your more problem words might only be at 'review 1 day from now'. It's a beautiful system because it gets the easy words out of the way, and gives you more practice with the words you struggle with. Anki is a program (desktop, iOS and Andriod) that handles all of the review spacing for you. A program like this is essential. I couldn't ever imagine dealing with 2000 flash cards manually.</p>

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<li><p> Flash card program using space repetition method: <a href='http://ankisrs.net/'>ankisrs.net</a></p></li>

<li><p> Frequency dictionaries: <a href='https://www.google.com/#q=frequency+dictionary+spanish+pdf'>Example Google Search</a></p></li>

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<p><b>Other Resources</b><br>

Of course, beyond vocabulary and active learning, one still needs a baseline of grammar rules, conjugation and more. I mostly picked these up from a few apps and websites along the way. </p>

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<li><p>Free mobile app for Verb Conjugations and Tenses: <a href='https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/portuguese-verb-conjugation/id358585056?mt=8'>Portuguese Verb Conjugation Trainer</a></p></li>

<li><p>Innumerable websites about Português Grammar. Don’t stick to just one, as there's plenty of good free sites. Here's just one of many from googling <a href='http://www.learn-portuguese-with-rafa.com/portuguese-grammar.html'>Portuguese Grammar</a></p></li>

<li><p>Any of the Português English dictionary apps</p></li>

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<p><b>Struggle On Purpose</b><br>

Don’t just learn about screwdrivers, build something with them. As soon as I had a base of frequently used words, and could communicate on sharedtalk without cheating too much, I would seek out things to read that I knew I wouldn't even 80% 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. Its amazing how much you can learn by reverse engineering. Context would usually allow me to figure out what the missing 20% of the article or book was trying to say. Learning those '20% words' are exactly what I mean by 'the right amount of struggle leads to more dopamine'. It’s a challenge that keeps you hooked, but its not so challenging that you outright fail.</p>

<p><b>Sometimes a Mere Project Isn't Enough of a Why</b><br>

Remember how I said that having a why might be as simple as having a project? Sometimes that's not enough. After 10 weeks of Português, I found that I could indeed read online news articles, converse on sharedtalk, hear and understand the lyrics of CPM 22 (like the offspring but from Brazil), converse out loud on skype, and even read a best selling book from Brazil (<a href='http://www.amazon.com/1808-Pr%C3%ADncipe-Corrupta-Enganaram-Napole%C3%A3o/dp/8576653206'>1808 Laurentino Gomes</a>). However, something was off. The book <em>1808</em> was actually pretty fascinating. It talks about how the Português royalty fled from Napoleon, causing Brazil to be the only Americas colony to locally house a royal court, and a mercantile empire. This in turn led to the eventual Brazilian succession for Portugal, having their own Emperor, and the history of the country that followed. However, despite how fascinating it was, I never made it past page 97. Once I found that I <em>could</em> read and think in Português, my project stopped having enough of a 'why' for me. If it hadn't been written in Português, I would have had zero desire to be reading that book, despite how interesting I ended up finding it. This all relates to the 'don't just study screwdrivers, actually build something'. I had no real need to create or communicate anything in Português, and with that I moved on to other hobbies. To this day, I'll feel guilty about letting this random skill slip away and attempt to stay sharp by reading something I'm interested in off of the Português Wikipedia. Within an hour or so, I do find it comes back a bit, but as the years go by (it's been almost 4 years now), I have no doubt that I've forgotten much of it. I have no regrets, as the experience was one that has and will aid me in learning future things.</p>

<p><b>How This Applies to Other Feats of Learning</b><br>

Coding: With coding the why has always been obvious to me. 'I want to build \_\_\_\_\_\_'. I have a need for something. It doesn’t exist yet, and I decide that I need to build it. In 2009, I needed to learn VBA to study stock data and develop a stock trading plan I had hypothesized. Towards the end of 2013, I learned python because I wanted to be able to BCS style rank swim teams in my child hood swim league. Since then, a friend and I have been working on software and a mobile app to manage and generate swim workouts based on user inputs. I have new ideas of what I'd like to build every day. Anyways, taking what I had learned from the Português experience, here is how I tackled learning Python this past fall:</p>

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<li><p>Learn the basic syntax: <a href='http://www.Codecademy.com'>Codecademy.com</a>. Also, <a href='http://learnpythonthehardway.org/book/'>www.learnpythonthehardway.org/book</a> is a great resource (especially the command line and OOP sections)</p></li>

<li><p>Make something you don’t know how to make (struggle on purpose). For a webscraper, try <a href='http://scrapy.org/'>scrapy.org</a>. For some GUI or an app, try <a href='http://kivy.org/'>kivy.org</a></p></li>

<li><p>Get Stuck? <a href='http://docs.python.org/2/tutorial/'>Python documentation</a>, documentation of whatever framework you're trying to use (Django, Scrapy, Kivy etc), and finally sometimes even just reading through the source code of the package helps makes sense of things.</p</li>

<li><p><a href='http://stackoverflow.com'>Stackoverflow.com</a> is a good place for getting questions answered when you're really stuck. Usually there's already answered questions there that help as well.</p></li>

<li><p>It really helped to already understand some basic concepts such as what is an array, a map, a loop etc. Similar to how knowing Latin helped me with Português, a lot of what I learned in the more static typed VBA helped make things like arrays, loops, modules, functions, etc instantly seem familiar in Python.</p></li>

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