



Expert language learner Jon Rooney at the top of Mount Gorbeia (see page 2)

"Mountains viewed from a distance seem to be unscalable, but they can be climbed. The slopes that seem so steep seem to level off as we near them."



Are You A Good Language Learner?

Learning to learn while climbing the language mountain

fulfilling: to feel satisfied, having achieved something

foothills: low hills at the base of a mountain

to turn down: to refuse and not accept an offer

take charge: to assume control and be responsible

flustered: worried and / or nervous over something

Learning a second language is one of the most challenging, at times frustrating but ultimately **fulfilling** adventures a person can embark upon.

At ECP we try to share our experiences as teachers and learners.

Learning a language is like climbing a mountain. It's not a great idea to climb alone, especially if you do not know the exact route. At the start of the journey we feel like pygmies on the **foothills** of the Himalayas. To reach the peaks a guide can help us on our way, push us along and sometimes even carry us. However, to get to the top we have to do it ourselves.

Here are examples of good practice by successful language learners:

1. They find their own way and **take charge** of their learning. They determine the methods that are best for them as individual learners. They learn from others and experiment with different methods.
2. They organise their study of the language, and they organise information about the language they study.
3. They are creative. They understand that language is creative. They experiment with the language and play with grammar, words, and sounds.
4. They make their own opportunities for practicing the language inside and outside of the classroom.
5. They learn to live with uncertainty by focusing on the meaning of what they can understand, by not getting **flustered**, and by continuing to talk or listen without necessarily understanding every word.

6. They use mnemonics and other memory strategies to recall what they are learning.
7. They make errors work for them and not against them.
8. They use linguistic knowledge, including knowledge of their first language, in learning a second language.
9. They use contextual clues to aid their comprehension of the language. They maximise use of all potential contexts around the language attended to for enhancing comprehension.
10. They learn to make intelligent guesses.
11. They learn chunks of language as wholes and formalised routines to help them perform beyond their competence. For example, they may learn idioms, proverbs, or other phrases knowing what the whole phrase means without necessarily understanding each individual part.
12. They learn certain tricks that keep conversations going
13. They learn certain production techniques that also fill in the gaps in their own competence.
14. They learn different styles of speech or writing to learn to vary their language according to the formality of the situation.

John Hird, Master in TEFL, University of Jaén

RUBIN AND THOMPSON (1982) 14 Characteristics of a Good Language Learner

"Let's chat about that!"

Write your answers in an email and send them to your ECP coach! Give reasons for your answers.

- Are you a good language learner?
- Do you follow any of the strategies above?
- Talk about a successful language learner you know. Why are they successful? What do they do?
- How far up the language mountain are you?

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“iLook, iThink, iSpeak” Express yourself better!

Mr. Rooney’s Language Journey

Real-life examples of how people learn languages can be motivating. This is a true story of one of ECP coach John Hird’s friends 😊

A friend of mine called Jon Rooney has learnt Spanish, Euskara, Portuguese and Arabic in that order and to near native level in Arabic. I observed him at close quarters developing his strategies when learning Spanish and using similar strategies years later in the Middle East when learning Arabic. I have also been witness to the success of his strategies as many native speakers of Arabic refuse to accept that he is in fact a native English speaker rather than a native speaker of their own language. Here are some of his techniques.

1

Jon used to repeat words in front of the mirror every day. He would also translate books and newspaper articles word by word using a dictionary. He could be seen every Saturday and Sunday morning in ‘Casco Viejo’ in Gasteiz with a coffee, cigarette, El Pais and a notebook. **He would also practise pronunciation by repeating new words over and over again** in the street.

4

Jon took advantage of every situation where he was able to communicate with native speakers. In Spanish at first, even with a small vocabulary he would talk about the things he knew how to say. Even when he lacked the vocabulary he would still nevertheless try to express himself using hand signals and facial expressions.

5

In Saudi Arabia he would always have a positive approach to his language learning. He often commented to me that his experiences learning other languages meant **he had clear sign posting for his journey learning Arabic.** He would regularly talk about the processes involved in learning a language. **He is adamant that there is no short cut.** The road is long and sometimes hard but ultimately rewarding if you continue the journey as far as you can go.

6

Jon immersed himself in the cultures. Whether it was music, literature, politics or people he was interested in, he always tried to deepen his understanding. In Spain he found a Basque flat mate and later a girlfriend. **They watched the films of Almodóvar together and discussed the books they were reading with a bottle of Rioja.** He was integrated into a ‘cuadrilla’ and spent countless Friday and Saturday nights being socialised into Basque life. **At some points he refused to speak to, and even avoided, people from his country who would not speak Spanish. This was a conscious learning strategy on his part to maximise his learning time.**

2

When learning Spanish and Euskara Jon insisted I played memory games with him and test him on his knowledge. **He used to carry a notebook with him everywhere and his vocabulary was organised into various groups** – football, literature, chit-chat, flirting, politics etc. **He would use poems and especially songs to remember whole phrases and words.** He learnt several songs by Oskorri in Euskara and by Silvio in Spanish to improve his language learning. He also told me that in Portugal he learnt by heart the lyrics of Chico Buarque (Brazil’s musical maestro) and used to sing his songs as part of his language learning strategy.

3

Jon set himself the aim of learning how to write in Arabic before he went to live in Saudi Arabia. **He planned the process meticulously, setting goals and objectives** and strove might and main to stick to them. He would regularly report to me how he was doing and it was clear **he was following a well organised plan.**

John and Jon immersing themselves in Basque culture 😊

