

Language Notes: 3

Context is Everything

Every year in the USA there is a Scrabble world championship. Who do you think wins? Players from Taiwan and China win the most. Why? They win because they memorized the entire Scrabble dictionary. What is interesting is that most of these players do not know how to speak English. Context is everything. If you study words, phrases and idioms, but you are not learning and using the words in context, it will be to no avail.

Let us imagine you are from the State of Utah, associated with a religious group there, and you are sent to work in Romania for two years. It is required from day-one of your arrival that you live with a national family who does not speak English. What is the advantage of this? You immediately learn the phrase, "Please pass the meat" in context. You hear the phrase, you see the meat, you say the phrase you just heard, you do the action, and you are rewarded with a nice piece of meat, probably cow tongue. You do this every day, several times a day. It is not surprising that this group from Utah can learn new languages quickly.

How can we learn things in context? Here in Hungary, it is a challenge. Before arriving, we read that we should not make direct eye contact with people when passing people on the street, should not say, "Hello" on the street, and we should not ask personal questions. (But it is expected that you say "Hello" in a building or in a doorway.) Well, when we arrived, we found out that the culture was far different than what we expected. After writing out 15 "getting to know you" questions with my teacher, she said that I could ask these questions of Hungarians, but they would never talk to me again. She said, "Do not even ask a person their name! If they give it to you fine, but do not ask." She is absolutely correct. While eating dinner with a Hungarian family, I asked a question of the father, who is also a minister, "*How did you become interested in your line of work?*" He said nothing and kept on eating. I waited and asked again. He mumbled something I could not hear. Well, obviously I was not clear, so I asked again. He slammed his fork and knife down and said, "I am eating my supper!" He never did answer the question....ever. Personal questions are not polite, especially at dinner!

Making the Rounds

"Where there is a will, there is a way," someone once said. If you do not live in a Latin, warm weather type culture, or maybe a small friendly village, here are some ideas for learning to speak with nationals anywhere.

Services

1. Buy a small pastry regularly at a pastry shop. Go at a time when few customers are there.
2. Buy flowers once a week.
3. Buy fresh bread every day.
4. Buy meat only in a store where you have to ask for it.
5. Buy a few stamps at the post office every few days. (Even if you do not need them.)
6. Mail a few post cards or letters and always ask for a special service like express mail or certified mail.

Result: My first language partner became the guard at the post office. We then became good friends with the "bread lady", the flower shop owners loved to see me head in their direction, and many other good relationships and conversations developed.

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Talking with Helpers

1. If you have the need for cleaning or child care, hire a person to come to the house to help who does not speak English. (Too many people hire English speaking help.)
2. Hire a college student to be just a conversation partner, not a tutor.
3. ONLY SPEAK in the NEW LANGUAGE with language helpers!! Let the language teacher explain a few grammar concepts to you in your native tongue, but always speak in the new language. After reading the PILAT material for the first time, I made a seven page list of common English phrases I was currently using with the language teacher. For example: "Can we go over that again?" "If we finish this, I would like to work on that too." "What is another meaning of that word?" First I read my questions, and gradually they become second nature in Hungarian.
4. Sit with a retired person a few hours a week and bring along with you a children's picture book. Have the person tell you one sentence for each picture. For example, a group of farming pictures will feature a tractor, plow, barn, horse and a field. Do not just try to memorize the words. Put them in context. "Every spring the farmer plows his field." "The tractor pulls the plow through the field." "The children ride the old horse." "The horse stays in the barn at night."

Result: First, I developed a very nice relationship with an older, retired lady who was more than happy to help. Secondly, I found that the words and sentences I was learning, applied in many different contexts. I began to understand more of what I heard. Recently, we hired a helper to be with our littlest one so that we can study in the morning. It is hard to wake up and switch my brain to Hungarian right away, but that is how our mornings start. My wife's Hungarian noticeably improved within two weeks of having this new helper in our home.

Dumb-Smart Questions

These ideas come from the PILAT Program. Read the PILAT material for more ideas. The main point is that you ask a question that you already know the answer to in your new language. Before you go out, practice the questions and answers with your teacher.

1. Ask someone what time it is. (Take your watch off first)
2. Ask someone for directions, like where do you find the post office.
3. "Which bus goes to the town center?" (PILAT suggests going to a busy part of town and asking this question to dozens of people who are passing through.)
4. "Where can I find the broccoli?" or "When will you be getting more apples?"
5. "When is the next national holiday? Is it coming up soon?"

Result: This is a fun exercise. You never have to be bored shopping again. Any place you go you can make up questions to ask people and generally, most people want to help. You can practice very polite forms of speech, practice understanding numbers, understanding directions, etc. Almost everyday someone asks my wife or me for directions. It would be hard to answer if we were not regularly practicing these skills.

Games

1. Board games and card games are great for learning languages and developing relationships.
2. Sports and private lessons are great for learning languages.

Result: We know of people who love to play board games and live in a culture where spending lots of time together is expected. One person has said that he learned to speak his new language mostly by playing games. People love competition and will not mind at all if you cannot speak their language well.