



## Learning a South Asian Language

You've begun the study of a South Asian language: Hindi, Urdu, Sanskrit, Persian, Bengali, Tamil, etc. What follows is a brief introduction to the sociolinguistic situation in South Asia, followed by an important section on your responsibility to take charge of your own learning. Language learning is a journey of an entire lifetime and it does not work without voluntary and conscious engagement in the process. Serious learners with long-term goals need to be aware of their learning environment, how to use their academic and social resources, and how to think about language learning in a systematic way. Here are some tips that will help you in the language acquisition process.

### **Sociolinguistic Situation in South Asia**

The South Asian subcontinent is very multilingual. English is the dominating link language between different educated speech communities. Most people have good command of two or more languages. It is not uncommon to see someone using one language at home, a second on the street, a third in school, a fourth in a holy place, and a fifth at work. Furthermore, people find it difficult to keep them separate in their speech. For various social and psychological reasons, they mix them freely at the word and sentence levels. They also switch from one language to the other, depending on the topic they are talking about or who they are talking to. This is commonly known as code switching.

South Asian languages are *diglossic*. There is a divergence between informal and formal varieties of every language. The two varieties of most South Asian languages differ in their choice of vocabulary. For some South Asian languages such as Tamil, there are also differences in the use of morphology and syntax. Even for native speakers, acquisition of the formal vocabulary and formal grammatical features of their language is not automatic. One acquires them through formal education. Persons who have not acquired formal education may not comprehend the language of a newspaper editorial, TV news or a high-flown speech, as all of these are highly formal in their structure.

The literary styles of South Asian languages with long literary traditions have interacted with other literary traditions and to meet literary exigencies. Tamil has assimilated Sanskrit traditions; Hindi has assimilated Sanskrit and Urdu conventions; and Persian has been greatly influenced by Arabic vocabulary, religion, and culture. As a result, you'll find incorporated in the corpus of your chosen language many new concepts and words from the theology, ideology, and practical daily life of a contiguous culture. For example, in Hindi, there are many different words for water, sky, flower, cloud, food, earth, body, soul, deity, God, teacher, mother, father, son, daughter, and hundreds of such words. One will find that such a variety of words have their own niche and they appear in their own contexts with some overlapping. This intuition builds up from an in-depth interaction with the language and its various genres.

### **Empowerment of the Learner: Taking charge of your own learning**

As we've learned more in the last ten years about the brain works and how languages are learned, the focus has been shifting gradually from lecturing and passive listening to active involvement of learners, the learning environment and the learning process. The results are extremely gratifying. With this focus shift, it is necessary that the learners get involved in the planning and implementation of the learning process. Here are some suggestions in this regard:

- Be involved in all stages of your language learning: planning, implementing, monitoring, problem solving and evaluating.
- Discover what you can already do in the language, and note down what you need to focus on.
- Define your own needs and see their fulfillment through initial stages of planning to the final stages of communicative performance.
- Keep a systematic record of your needs, your achievements and your failures. Learning logs help learners to reflect on their learning needs and their progress.
- Consult and negotiate with your teachers in planning the syllabus, selection of materials and employment of classroom strategies.
- Enhance your awareness about the sociolinguistic aspects of the target language.
- Heighten your analytical view of language use.
- Identify and invent language learning opportunities outside the classroom where you will grapple with the "real" language in all its regional and socioeconomic variations.
- Keep track of your language learning curve: your strengths as well as patterned and unpatterned errors.
- Think of ways and means to upgrade your structural accuracy and the idiomatic ways of language use.
- Develop confidence for interacting with a variety of native speakers in unpredictable (informal & formal) situations.

### **Individual Learning Log**

You can derive enormous benefit from recording your goals and progress in a personal log. Use the log for noting:

- your long term goals for speaking, listening, reading, vocabulary, grammar, strategies, and cultural background knowledge
- your successful interactions today: what you were able to communicate and understand;
- your observations about your interlocutor's strategies, content and language
- what you did not succeed in doing but wanted to do
- your short term goals for the next day/next week

### **Setting Short Term Goals and Long Term Goals**

In your program, you will have some general goals for all the students but you will also have the opportunity to set your own goals based on your specific needs. Your long-term goals should be divided into a series of short-term goals.

Each short-term goal should be further subdivided into day-by-day goals. Speaking of day-by-day goals:

- Every morning, set your communicative goals.
- During the day, try to accomplish your goals to the best of your ability.
- Keep a note of the details of daily communicative activities, your successes and difficulties.
- Complete your log the same evening.
- Next day, seek your instructor's help for the points you had difficulty with.
- Ensure you understand the new point conceptually and then you had some practice/drilling using it.

### **Benefits**

A continuous awareness of one's own learning path

- helps learners to assess their language learning needs, the appropriateness of the tools (materials, strategies), the learning processes and the progress (successes and failures) in accomplishing their language learning goals;
- commits learners to greater emotional and psychological involvement in the language learning endeavor;
- helps learners to correct or adjust some of the measures under way when necessary.

### **Role of the Teacher**

In this new scenario, a teacher creates the necessary learning conditions for his students, oversees their activities and steps in to advise them when necessary. The teacher helps when his student is stuck, corrects him when he is wrong. He prepares them for intramural and extra-mural activities to maximize their learning. The teacher is a resource person. He is the storehouse

of knowledge and experience that students draw on in time of need. He is a reservoir of the free-flowing idiomatic target language which students get exposed to in appropriate bits of comprehensible input. He supplements what is available in print, encourages students to think critically, and devises activities in which students can participate meaningfully. He likes his

students to capture the center stage in the classroom and quietly and strategically relegates himself to the background. Teachers provide continuous feedback on the performance of their students and help them to be aware of their learning trajectory.

### **Tips for Language Learners**

Be realistic in your learning goals because the linguistic and cultural distance between South Asian languages and English is much greater than between, say, French and English. You have to remember that the initial obstacle of a new script requires a good deal of patience, to allow the brain pathways to link the graphics with the precise muscular contractions necessary to produce the sound. Once you're inside, however, everything goes faster.

Time spent on communicative tasks and the intensity with which you perform it is crucial for what you get out of it.

In social interactions, there is a lot that is contextual and simply assumed. This is the background knowledge about the target culture that natives share. The new learners need to acquire this, but since it is assumed, often it's not made explicit, talked about, or explained. You have to watch and listen closely. This is helpful in understanding what others say and provides content explicit or assumed content in communicating with others. You can gain such information by reading in your native language too.

Pay special attention to the development of informal and formal styles of your target language. Because of the diglossic nature of the target language, you may be able to get yourself across in speech yet may not be able to comprehend formal speech or writing by others.

Be an independent learner! 2-4 semesters of classroom instruction is not sufficient to gain a working proficiency in a South Asian language, especially if you are a beginner. Language learning is a life-long endeavor, so learn strategies to turn the real world into a classroom. You must seek opportunities for language use and turn every interlocutor into your teacher by asking him or her the right questions. A judicious use of reference tools such as grammars and dictionaries is helpful in language development.

Work with your teachers to achieve your learning goals. Your active participation and creative ideas about learning are very important because pedagogic materials in South Asian languages are not the state of the art. Both teachers and learners have to work together to go beyond grammar-translation and audio-visual approach of the sixties. Language is communication and interaction, so seek and create communicative activities for language use.

Evaluate your proficiency level by carefully reading the proficiency guidelines for your target language. If these are not available for the language you're studying, read them for French or Spanish to get a sense of general levels and tasks. Think in terms of skills, rather than grammar. Make a note of tasks you can perform and how well you can perform those tasks. See if you can ask and answer questions, narrate and describe, give explanations, state and support an opinion. Judge your language not only for its pronunciation and grammatical accuracy, but also for its appropriateness. Pay attention to what you say to whom, when, and where.

Grab opportunities for language practice. The domains for South Asian languages are already curtailed due to the multilingualism and the presence of English in South Asia. One can survive with English alone in South Asia, but remember you have to set your goals beyond survival. If you wish to gain working or professional level proficiency, you must not miss any opportunity that helps you advance your language skills. Remember that at the beginning, it's like a game: some of it will seem artificial, but it's still very important to making the pathways. Don't be afraid to play a role in the game.

Do not be afraid of making mistakes. Mistakes are part of your language developmental process. However, you must pay attention to your mistakes, especially the recurring ones. Work on your errors before they fossilize. Some errors are more costly in terms of meaning than others. The ultimate goal should be to eradicate all major and minor errors irrespective of their functional load.

Know the difference between active (speaking and writing) and passive (listening and reading) skills. These are referred to in linguistics as performance and competence. Performance skills are more demanding because you, the learner, have to know the correct pronunciation or spellings, endings, word meanings, structures, and the rules of usage. In competence skills, however, you can afford to overlook many grammatical and semantic details, e.g., gender or number marking, as they are not important for unlocking the meaning of an oral or a written text. Remember, receptive skills function as a rich source of linguistic and cultural input and in turn help in enriching the output.

Identify your learning style and use appropriate strategies for advancing your language skills. There is a cognitive learning style (analytic approach) versus affective and behavioral style (practice approach). For locking new words into the memory one may use visualization, sound, use of motor activities, or any combination of these. It is true that for the most part learning style is inherent, but some of it can be changed with awareness. Some of your inherent strategies may be counter-productive, so learn to evaluate your existing strategies and experiment with new ones.

There are stages of language development, or linguistic maturation. Most of the time learners proceed from *concept control* to *partial control* and then to *consistent control* of linguistic rules. Concept control means you understand the rule, but are not able to use it when needed. Partial control means you can use it some of the time correctly, but not all the time correctly. Consistent control means you can use it correctly almost all the time. The awareness of your stages of learning will help you to a right perspective of your learning curve.

Take all learning to a level of "automaticity". This implies practice. Lots of it. Learning a foreign language is much more like learning a complex-neuro-motor sport or a musical instrument than it is like learning history, biology, or math.

Language learning sometimes works as a series of "plateaus", rather than being a strictly linear process, i.e., students might find that they don't seem to be getting any better for a week or so and then suddenly, almost without warning, they'll find that they're worlds ahead of where they were just the day before.

Learning and using the language of your host society is one of the highest forms of respect and admiration you can show. It is a powerful act that will bring you respect and admiration, personally and publicly.

*(Adapted from S. Gambhir at AIIS: <http://www.indiastudies.org/aiislang/>)*