Let’s review where we have been and what we have learned.

**Language Is a Human Phenomenon**

Young children are remarkably successful in acquiring language. The human mind is uniquely adapted for this purpose. Children are able to identify the general properties of the language or languages that they are exposed to and use this knowledge to speak and understand. For various reasons, this capacity is gradually lost as children grow older and acquire their first language.

**Language Is a Skill, and Practice Is Essential**

A child learning a first language has ample opportunities for practice. The speech directed to children is generally very simple, the concepts are basic, the sentences are short, and there is considerable repetition and feedback. The child gets to practice this very fundamental skill all day long from a very early age.

The task for the adult learner is similar to the task for the child, but there are some important differences. The main similarity is that it is a skill for the adult just as it is a skill for the child. The key to success for both is practice, practice, practice.

But the differences are significant:

- The child’s ‘universe of discourse’ is very limited and simple; the adult’s is very broad and often complex.
• The child gets to practice the same things over and over again for most of her waking day; the adult has other things to do and thus limited time for practice. In addition, practice may become boring for the adult.
• Practice for the child is mixed in with learning to do other things, such as playing, eating, and interacting with other people; for the adult learner, language practice is an activity that is often distinct from other activities.
• The first language that a child learns is not competing with another language; a second language that an adult learns is competing with a first language that has been very well learned and intensely practiced for many years. The linguistic habits associated with the first language often interfere with the capacity to perform flexibly and spontaneously in the second language, especially in the early stages of learning.
• An adult learner is able to reflect on the structure of his own language and that of the language to be learned.

There Is a Social Aspect to Language

When we learn a language, we must learn not only what to say and how to say it, but also when to say it. The 'when' has to do with the social situation, including what is appropriate in a given situation. Appropriateness has to do with choice of words, use of particular grammatical constructions, and even accent.

Children learning a first language are usually very good at identifying the social aspects of languages and figure out what is appropriate in a range of situations. However, the task is a complex one, and the rules are sometimes difficult to figure out, even given ample evidence.

For the adult learner there are cultural differences that have to be understood and internalized in order to use a language properly in social contexts. These differences are usually difficult to describe in concrete terms. While it is sometimes possible to state clearly what the linguistic differences are between two languages (for example, in terms of the sounds or the order of words), the cultural differences are very subtle and often not understood consciously by native speakers. Nevertheless, sensitivity to the existence of these differences is an important part of learning another language.

Look at Your Own Language

Adult learners typically do not have the time that young children do to focus on the problem of language learning. This, and the fact that the first language interferes with the second language, suggest that adult learners need to adopt certain strategies to make their task more manageable and increase the likelihood of success. One is to understand as well as possible the differences between the two languages. For some people, a conscious recognition of the differences is an important step toward isolating where
problems lie and for dealing with them.

The main areas that we have looked where there are significant differences among language are the following:

**Word order:** Different languages order the main verb and other important words differently with respect to other parts of the sentence than does English.

- **Word forms:** Some languages mark the function of words and phrases using inflection (such as case, tense, and aspect), while for the most part English does not.
- **Sounds:** The sound inventories of languages differ dramatically, as do their phonotactics.
- **Getting people to do things:** What counts as a polite request in one language sounds rude in another language, and doesn’t sound like a request at all in yet another language.

**How to Use This Knowledge**

Observations such as these can be used to structure one’s learning to make the best use of the available time and energy. Here are some of the strategies we have suggested in this book:

- **Keep it simple.** Don’t try to master something complex until you’ve mastered the parts.
- **Keep in mind that structure matters.** Language has structure. It is possible to take advantage of the structure to understand the differences between languages more effectively and focus on what needs to be learned and practiced.
- **Play the odds.** The best strategy is to focus one’s time and energy on those aspects of the language that are most frequent. This includes the words, the forms, the structures, and the set phrases.¹
- **Practice, practice, practice.** Learning a language is like any skilled activity that requires physical and mental coordination—practice makes perfect.

---

¹. We do not recommend this strategy if you are going to be tested on a large number of items that are used relatively infrequently.