
ICCT Learnernotes

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Basic Assumptions for Language and Culture Learners

The following assumptions are based upon the insights of specialists in the fields of intercultural communication and second language acquisition. They address your ability to learn and use a new language in order to work effectively in your target culture; they include assumptions about how you can best learn a new language and assumptions about how courses in *learner training* or "learning how to learn" can help you to become a more effective learner.

- 1. You have the innate capacity to learn another language and culture.** While some learners have the natural ability to do better—sometimes much better—than others, we believe each person who functions normally in his/her own language and culture is endowed with the ability to develop competence in a new language and culture—and this is nearly always (far) more competence than the person believes is possible. This does not mean that every language learner can become almost like a native speaker or even highly proficient in a second language, but it does mean that very few people have a valid excuse for giving up on language learning. If you are 85 years old and almost totally deaf, we'll let you off the hook—or mostly off the hook. But if you are 35 or 45 or even 55, we won't let you off the hook. You simply need some help in learning how to be a better learner, and then you'll find that you can learn far more of that new language than you thought possible. Always keep in mind that your ability to speak in "their" language is an invaluable gift to the speakers of that language, even if you don't speak it all that well.
- 2. Language learning and culture learning should be tightly integrated.** While it is possible to learn some components of a language when you are thousands of miles from any native-speaker contacts, you cannot learn the more subtle aspects of communication such as how native-speakers think and feel, and how they use language in everyday situations. To develop the high level of proficiency needed for effective communication, you must learn the new language and culture in a native-speaker environment.
- 3. No formal language-learning curriculum (language school or tutoring arrangement) can meet all of your individual needs.** At best, a formal program can provide a basic foundation upon which to build. However, by depending totally on a formal study program to meet your every need, many of your needs will go unmet. This is because language learning is not just an academic activity; it is also a social activity. Thus, classroom, tutoring and/or textbook instruction, even at its best, is not sufficient to develop the type or level of language proficiency you require, even when instruction is supplemented with unstructured contacts with persons in the second-language community.
- 4. Language and culture learners should make use of the widest possible range of available learning resources.** In principle, you should plan to tap as many resources as are available to you—language schools and/or tutoring arrangements, textbooks and materials, books and articles about your new culture, local mass media, native-speaker helpers (e.g., friends, neighbors,

language assistants), more advanced second language speakers, and the broader community of native speakers.

5. **Your learning program should accommodate as many of your unique learning characteristics as possible.** The most effective program for you as a learner is one that suits your learning rate, personality and learning style, and preferred learning strategies (specific steps and behaviors that you use to improve learning).
6. **Your learning program should accommodate as many of your unique situational variables as possible.** Even when the language and culture you will be learning may be the same as that of your fellow workers, your on-the-field learning program should reflect your individual needs and goals, daily schedule, range of personal contacts, and other responsibilities.
7. **Language and culture learning should be a lifelong pursuit.** Many new learners think that only the first year or two, or perhaps the first term on the field, should be devoted to language and culture learning. Believing they should be prepared to work effectively once they "finish their course" or "pass their exams," they fail to understand that language and culture learning have just begun. Having completed their period of concentrated study, they need to know how to continue learning on their own.
8. **Learner training promotes more successful learning.** Studies have shown that "good" language learners—people who know when and how to use strategies, techniques, and procedures that are most suitable for their learning style and personal needs—learn more quickly and become more proficient in their new languages and cultures than those who are not "good" language learners. They also find it much easier to stay motivated over the long haul. Studies have also shown that most people need some assistance in becoming the most effective learners they can be. One of the best ways to acquire the skills you need for on-field learning is by taking a pre-field Second Language Acquisition course, such as the one offered by ICCT.
9. **Effective language learning requires self-direction.** The most important factor in your language and culture-learning progress is not your personality type, or innate aptitude, or the range of available resources, or even the length of time you have for full-time learning, but *you*—what you do with your personality and aptitude and what you make of your available resources and time. You are the key to your own progress.

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