



## ROTARY INTERNATIONAL YOUTH EXCHANGE COMMITTEE

### District 5160 – Northern California

### LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

Rotary Youth Exchange District 5160 has made a deliberate choice not to exchange with other English speaking countries. We strongly believe that learning another language is one of the most valuable benefits of living in another country for a year. You will have at least eight months between country placement and your departure to study the language of your host country. You have ample time to acquire functional fluency in the language of your host country.

### Why Bother?

What the heck! You don't need to start to learn your new language right now. You can learn it when you get there, right? **WRONG!!!** It's essential that you have a working knowledge of your new language **BEFORE** you leave. **Arriving without a working knowledge of your language would be blatantly disrespectful to your hosts.** It would reflect poorly on you, your country and culture, and the D5160 Youth Exchange Program.

Keep in mind that you will already "lose" (miss, be in the dark for...) three to six months because of adaptation alone. Many of our exchange partners are expecting that after three or four months in country, exchange students will be able to speak, read, and write with proficiency. This will only be possible if you have put the time in to acquire your language before you leave. Remember that lack of effort or inability to achieve proficiency in your language are valid reasons for your host club to send you home.

For most people, language is one of the key elements of adapting to a culture. If you are at least familiar with the basics of the language, you will make the turn toward cultural adaptation sooner and you can begin to assimilate into your culture sooner. Even the best high school language students need time to adapt. You may have been placed in a country that speaks a language that you can study at school. Unless you are in special immersion programs, though, your school language studies will not provide you the level of proficiency that you will need before you depart. You will need to do study above and beyond your high school language classes. Our expectation is that you will make time in your busy schedules to make language study a priority. You will be amazed at how much you can learn by setting aside thirty disciplined minutes every day. Arriving in your host nation with the ability to make yourself understood and to understand your host family - even if slowly and awkwardly - will make all the difference in your own comfort level and your ability to progress in your language study.

You have the chance to step into your new culture much sooner if you do extra preparation in your new language than if you go in "cold" (or at least "cool"). So what does all this "adaptation" and "assimilation" mean? Your hosts can know who you really are only if you speak their language. As one of our former outbound students said, "I wish my friends here could know me in English." Well, you all have the chance to achieve that reality sooner by doing some work before you leave for your countries. **And remember, the highest compliment you can pay to someone is to speak their language.**

### The Multiple Track Attack

Just like a balanced diet requires you to eat more than one kind of food, when you learn a language you need to use more than one approach to most effectively learn your new language. Go to the language department of any bookstore and you'll see language books, hard-cover and paperback wordbooks, readers, dictionaries, flash cards and courses on CD. As you work with each of these elements, you will feel how the "rub-off" effect works. Words or phrases that you learn from your flashcards will appear in the newspaper you are using. A grammatical structure will move from the audio course you are using to the reader you bought. Each time you see a word repeated, it becomes more a part of your vocabulary. You don't have to buy everything you find. You can still use the multiple track attack by using three or four approaches. **The real secret is to consistently study your new language every day.**

We offer the following suggestions to help you to learn the language of your wonderful host culture.

- **Enroll** in a class (outside of, or in addition to, high school) or with a tutor where you have made an academic or financial investment - nothing like a little commitment to make you show up and do the work!
- **Get** a self-paced language program like Berlitz, Rosetta Stone, or Pimsleur. Again, the financial commitment here may increase your follow through. Many exchange partners will require you to show progress with your program. Other resources include:
  - **Wespeke** is an online “live” buddy system. <http://en-us.wespeke.com>
  - **Anika** is a flash card system. <http://ankisrs.net>
  - **Bravolol** has Chinese! <http://bravolol.com>
- **Listen/watch** radio and TV in your host language. You can do this online if it is not available on cable. This will allow you to get used to the sounds and intonations of the language, and thus be able to isolate individual words from a general stream of spoken language. Ted/Tedx Talks are available in many languages and you can mix and match speech and subtitles.
- **Watch movies** in your host language. Watch the first time with subtitles and the second and third time with the subtitles turned off. Netflix has a HUGE selection of foreign language films. Even if you only subscribe between now and when you go, it will be worth every penny. Movies are a great window into a culture. Get your ears used to the patterns, pace, and rhythms of your host country language.
- **Download** (legally) music from your host country. Get the lyrics on line to your favorites and translate them. What are they actually singing about?
- **Check out** an interactive language-learning online community like [www.LiveMocha.com](http://www.LiveMocha.com). You might also try: <http://www.word2word.com/coursead.html> or [www.ilovelanguages.com](http://www.ilovelanguages.com)
- **Purchase** Mobile Apps for your smart phone:
  - **Babbel** offers a free vocabulary tutor that seems to produce results faster than the two free rival apps below. Each turns a smartphone into “an endless stack of interactive flash cards,” and Babbel supplies “clear, native-speaker pronunciation of every word and phrase.” In-depth online lessons cost \$7.45 a month. (iOS and Android)
  - **MindSnacks** specializes in speed-based language games that gain in complexity each time you triumph. The games we tested proved “surprisingly effective.” (Free for 3 levels, then \$5 for 47 more; iOS only)
  - **24/7 Tutor** offers flash cards, multiple-choice quizzes, and puzzles for several languages, plus native-speaker pronunciations. You may need to know a little bit of the language beforehand, though, because “there’s little in the way of context and no grammar.” (iOS only)
- **At the library**, look for daily newspapers and/or magazines like People and Time in your host language. Check out children’s books in your host country language. They have simple vocabulary and lots of pictures. Children’s music and nursery rhymes are helpful too. Get yourself bilingual books. Or get a book in the new language and the same book in one you already know. Read them together, matching words in the two languages. Read out loud!
- **If** you already know the language to some extent, use a dictionary in your host country language. You won’t believe what a difference that will make in your vocabulary. Be sure you take one with you.
- **Buy** a “501 Verbs” book - learn 3 verbs a day between now and when you leave.
- **Learn** two feeling words a day (happy, confused, irritated, relaxed, hungry, sad, optimistic, excited, etc.) It is when you can talk about what you are feeling that you can begin to deepen your relationships with people.
- **Use** Flash Cards. All you need for this is a stack of index cards. When you run into a word that you don’t know, you can jot the word down on one of your blank flash cards and then look it up when you have a minute. Gradually you will build a library of flash cards.
- **Become a “Grammar Geek”**. You really do sound like a three-year-old when you can only speak in the present tense. Grammar gives language its structure and shape. Grammar is the word for the rules that people follow when they use a language. Clear and nuanced communication is all about knowing the rules. Pay attention to grammar in your own language. What is similar in your new language? What is different? Concentrate on the aspects of grammar that you find most difficult. Focus for a week at a time on that aspect.
- **Find** some native or fluent speakers in your community that you can converse with - perhaps you can trade language lessons if they are still learning English.
- **Change** your phone, computer and FaceBook page to your new language.
- **Translate** recipes from your new language – not only will you work on your language skills, you’ll get to taste your new culture as well!

## Hidden Moments

In learning another language, it isn't how fast you move through the materials that will help you master the language. It is the relentless pursuit of the language through constantly studying the language that will get you there. Study halls? Take out your grammar book. A long bus ride? Use the audio course. Time to kill after school? Do another paragraph in your newspaper. No matter where you are, these hidden moments in your life present outstanding opportunities to make progress in your language. And this isn't a "once in a while" thing. You have these opportunities to study all the time. This is the power of the multiple track attack, you have all these tools to use so you can use the tool that is most appropriate for your situation at that particular time. You wouldn't be able to read your grammar book if you were driving but you would be able to listen to your audio course. You can't really use a portable tape recorder in study hall but you have other visual tools to use like your flashcards. No matter where you are, you have a tool that will work for you. Look for these opportunities and make them work for you!

## Repeat After Me – Speak!!

The only way to improve your oral communication skills in your new language is to practice speaking it. A lot! The biggest problem we Americans have is the fear of looking stupid. Consider this your permission slip to make a fool of yourself. The truth is that your host family and friends will appreciate all of your efforts to learn their language and will have no problem with any mistakes you make in the process. When you have the opportunity to speak with a person who is a native speaker or even someone who has learned the language, you need to use opportunities to speak with them in your new language. In fact, you will really learn a lot through speaking with people. You don't have to rely on chance meetings. You can actively look for someone to talk with to make this happen.

You have teachers at school and other resources available to you that you could use during the time before you leave. Exchange students are also good sources for this kind of practice since they are/were in the same position as you. There are also various ethnic restaurants in our communities where you can find people who speak your new language, or can refer you to people that do. The main point is to get practice by speaking. No matter how bad you feel you speak, you need this kind of practice to round out your learning and sharpen your language skills.

Most new languages contain unfamiliar sounds. Practice them ad nauseam! Make yourself drill sentences full of new sounds and repeat them all the time. For instance, in French, "Il fait de la voile" can be used to practice French f's, v's and d's, or "un grand vin blanc" for French nasals. Remember that improving your pronunciation can help you to understand when someone speaks (as you better understand what the sounds represent). You don't have to be perfect, but if you improve your pronunciation a bit, you might improve your communication a lot. Try not to simply pronounce the words as if they were written in your native language. Listen to how the locals pronounce it. Especially if you like doing things systematically, learn the pronunciation rules of the language. Work out what is different about the way native speakers speak, compared to your own native language and accent. The "neutral state" of the mouth is different in different languages, and if you learn what it is and imitate it, your pronunciation will automatically improve.

Do they keep their tongues further forward in the mouth?

Do they often curl their tongues back (like the English "r")?

Do they speak from the back of the throat?

Sit down with a native speaker and go through the alphabet. Ask them to help you pronounce the letters like a native speaker. Sometimes it helps to ask where they put their tongue when pronouncing a certain letter.

## Write!!

To your host families. To your teacher. To the current inbound and/or outbound students. To yourself. Learn to put your thoughts on paper.

## Your brain absorbs new information differently when you read, write, and speak.

Adapted from Youth Exchange Florida who cited:

From a program by Scott Wisner, Youth Exchange Chairperson, Rotary District 7150, Syracuse NY

Methods adapted from Barry Farber's book, How To Learn Any Language: Quickly, Easily, Inexpensively, Enjoyably and on Your Own

Adapted from District 5360 Youth Exchange who cited:

Taken from: How to learn a language

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