

Learning How to Learn Languages: A Transformative Learning Approach to Empower Effective Language Learners. *A Practice Report*

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Abstract

This practice report describes a 12-week stand-alone course designed to address the challenges university students face in foreign language classes. Adopting principles of transformative language learning, course content, activities and resources were designed and implemented to dispel myths and preconceptions regarding language instruction, promote self-directed, independent learning, and raise awareness of the cognitive and socio-emotional processes involved in language learning. Students' feedback indicate that the course had a significant impact on their perceptions of adult language learning, their capacity to reflect on their use of strategies, and the importance of developing a plan to continue applying these new understandings in their academic pursuits. The course fostered a shift in students' perspective, from viewing themselves as passive recipients of 'language injections', to becoming self-directed, motivated, and independent learners.

Keywords: Transformative learning; language learning strategies; student motivation.

Introduction

This practice report outlines an innovative stand-alone course designed to address the high levels of attrition in foreign language classes in Australian universities. High attrition rates are costly for universities, but they also show an inability to support students in thriving and achieving their aims. This state of affairs might be partly explained by a combination of factors that challenge students in language learning programs. While there are numerous factors at play, in this report we focus discussion on three key challenges.

The first challenge is the monolingual outlook evident in Australia. Despite being a multicultural and multilingual nation with around 22% of the population speaking one or more additional languages (SBS, 2022), languages other than English receive little or no institutional support in the school system. Only 8% of students are learning languages in Australian high schools, compared to 50% of students across OECD nations (Richardson, 2021). At the university level, foreign language learning is not compulsory, and is often discouraged due to stiff competition for student funding across disciplines. The second challenge is insufficient funding for language courses taught at universities. Budget cuts across the Australian higher education sector have also meant reduced contact hours for existing language courses, further compounded by COVID-19 restrictions and lack of options to partake in study abroad and exchange programs. The third challenge is a lack of understanding of the language learning process. Pedagogical tools, such as interactions with native/fluent speakers or online programs and apps may have mitigated some of the previously mentioned challenges. However, the effectiveness of these initiatives would require a deeper understanding of learning processes and a degree of self-regulation which is beyond the reach of most beginning students.



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Learning Their Language Learning Their Language

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