

# Learning to be a Language Learner – An 18-Year-Old in Sweden

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This short article will look at a series of “transformative” experiences which inspired me to become a lifelong language learner and profoundly informed my approach to language teaching.

## Background

As an eighteen year old, following high school graduation in Canada, I moved to Sweden to participate in a year-long high school exchange program. Why you ask, if I had already graduated would I be going back to high school? Well, the reasons are threefold. First, as I had already completed my studies in Canada, there was no pressure or requirement to achieve academically – a year of adventure or so I assumed. Second, in Sweden they begin elementary school a year older than we do in Canada hence I was the same age as my classmates. Third, and perhaps most importantly, I wanted to live abroad for a year prior to beginning my university studies.

My motivation for choosing Sweden was simple. I am of Swedish heritage and had wanted to travel to Sweden since I was a child. When the opportunity to live in Sweden presented itself, I didn’t hesitate to apply. I was accepted and in August 1988 my life-altering Swedish endeavor began.

## Introduction

In this paper I will outline briefly some of the approaches (strategies to succeed) I used to acquire proficiency in Swedish and how I have subsequently applied these same techniques within my role as a language instructor.

## Insights, Goals, and Application

While living in Sweden as an 18 year old high school exchange student, there were a number of explicit speaking moments (in Swedish) that profoundly shaped my language learning experience and subsequently my language teaching style. I will draw on these individual experiences to illustrate how real-life interactions can inspire individuals to be motivated and successful language learners.

When I arrived in Sweden I was a monolingual English speaker with little interest in foreign languages. When I left Sweden ten months later I was almost (perhaps 90%) a fluently bilingual speaker with aspirations to learn as many languages as

I could. How did this change occur? Without question, my time in Sweden broadened my worldview and inspired curiosity. However, thanks in large part to a variety of transformative moments, I was also able to discover situations and people that could foster my own language learning. These scenarios acted as powerful motivating engines that drove my learning forward on a daily basis. Within these scenarios, I identified methods of interaction that helped with language acquisition and immediately began refining these strategies.

The most important insight gained was realizing that certain types of individuals were more inclined to talk with someone like myself – a beginner, barely able to make himself understood. The second insight was that by putting myself in situations where people were interested or motivated to communicate with me, I could create massive amounts of linguistic input that would drive my acquisition of new vocabulary and allow for the repetition needed to develop a solid foundation in Swedish grammar. Therefore, putting myself in scenarios and situations that facilitated my language development became the primary goal of my daily routine. My second priority was to use this new linguistic knowledge as quickly as it was acquired. Thirdly, and perhaps my most vital goal was generating ongoing relationships where individuals “voluntarily” acted as my “teachers”. The use of these real life activities became the foundational strategies for both my language acquisition efforts and for what would become my future endeavors as a language teacher.

## Approach to Acquisition – “Speaking beyond what you know”

My approach was simple but effective. It involved targeting certain people that were either committed to helping those with whom they were speaking or had a personal interest in chatting with a young stranger from Canada. Once these individuals were engaged in a conversation, however simple, I always attempted to “speak beyond my ability” or “push my vocabulary beyond what I knew”. Regardless of where I was or with whom I was talking, I was determined to use my surroundings to their fullest potential as an active tool for my language learning needs. To the best of my ability, I worked to deepen and broaden my Swedish ability by either placing myself in a never before encountered circumstance or

discussing a topic beyond my ability with an unknown individual that I met at some point during my daily routine.

## Transformative Moments – Whom should we speak with?

The key groups I targeted as those with whom I wished to speak, and who appeared positively inclined to speak with me in return, included children and the elderly, people in uniforms, my hockey and baseball teammates, friends and teachers at school, part-time job co-workers, shopkeepers, Swedish lesson classmates, and finally construction site workers.

Initially this list developed naturally as I attempted to speak with different people in different scenarios. However, after having considerable success with my first three groups, children, the elderly, and people in uniforms, I began to be more directed in my choices for interaction. I would try to engage as many different individuals as I could during the typical unfolding of my daily routine.

## Transformative Moments – How to prepare?

At the outset of my year in Sweden I would enter possible scenarios spontaneously, without any forethought or specific preparations. However, after a particularly lengthy chat with an elderly woman (for 20 minutes on a bench at a train station outside of Stockholm without understanding almost anything) I realized that before beginning a conversation, if possible, doing some degree of language preparation would be best.

With the idea of preparation in mind, I also realized that I should target specific scenarios in order to ensure useful and effective preparation. For example, when I went to buy something at a shop, I studied the specific language necessary for shopping at that type of store (i.e. buying a badminton racket). I would also bring a vocabulary and grammar list, as well as a sample conversation. This revelation and learning strategy implementation made the experience shopping a free but effective lesson in learning Swedish.

In short, the preparations for creating conversations involved studying the target words and grammatical structures suitable for the intended scenario as well as preparing one or more sample conversations.

## Transformative Moments – Interactions in action

Here is a short list of the types of people involved in the most instructive speaking scenarios and why. One important reason that was consistent across all of the people with whom I engaged was that they all tended to generate large amounts of extemporaneous authentic input (extemporaneous, although the topic was predetermined by the question I posed).

### 1. Children and the Elderly

- They never hesitate to talk about whatever they are asked.

- They speak with brutal honesty.
- They speak a lot.
- They tend to be very patient.

### 2. People in Uniforms – for example, “Directions please!”

- They are almost always patiently willing to help.
- They are excellent when practicing asking questions.
- They are very helpful with “recasting” practice.
- They almost always take the time to thoughtfully answer your questions.

### 3. Hockey and Baseball Teams – What are the specifics about a play or a technique?

- You have to prove yourself to be accepted.
- They don’t care about English and thus only want to use the local language.
- They care about communication and understanding because it contributes to the team winning.
- It is in their best interest that you understand clearly their message.

### 4. Friends, Dating, Parties – What was going on?

- Making friends and finding a girlfriend can act as a powerful incentive.
- Extrinsic motivation comes from the demands of those around you.
- Intrinsic Motivation comes from the pressure we place on ourselves to achieve these relationship goals.
- Friends offer sincere support, patience and a desire to understand.

- Learn about the local culture and language in context.
- Creates the desire to learn the local language.

### 5. Part-time Job – What was I supposed to do?

- The co-workers had very little sympathy for a lack of language ability.
- You are forced to pay strict attention to what is being said and done.
- One’s power of perception and persistence strengthens.
- Co-workers and supervisors simply wanted you to get the job done properly.
- One devises strategies on how to succeed at one’s task and understand what is being explained.

### 6. Shopping & Shopkeepers – What was I interested in?

- They want you to buy their “stuff”, therefore they will talk to you.
- One example would be buying shoes: By this I mean, when I went to buy shoes for the first time in Sweden, I studied the language necessary to go to a store, try on various shoes, and possibly buy a pair. I also brought a vocabulary and grammar list, as well as a sample conversation with a

shoe store clerk. This revelation and learning strategy implementation made the experience of buying shoes a free but effective lesson in learning Swedish.

- Shops offered clearly contextualized, targeted learning opportunities.
- Restaurants offered repetition and an apt teacher in role of server or bartender.

#### 7. Swedish Class

- We used a very simple textbook that lacked details and clear explanations. Therefore, I was forced to find other learning materials and sources which were authentic in nature.

- The instructions were only in Swedish which lead to ongoing confusion and frustration.

- This particular classroom experience informed my own teaching style in two important ways. I understood the value of authentic materials and I realized the usefulness of using a learner's L1 in an L2 classroom.

#### 8. Miscellaneous Construction site workers, car repair shop, churches

- These particular locations were concerned with your safety or wellbeing.

- They always seemed more than willing to answer a question about their activities.

- They tended to react either surprised or glad that someone would show interest in them and what they were doing.

#### 9. ESP Everywhere!

- Everything in the local environment was an ESP communicative Language setting.

- Whenever I was communicating I received immediate feedback and knew whether or not I had been successful in conveying my message.

- There was an ongoing reflective analysis in my learning style without realizing it was a reflective analysis.

#### 10. Language learning strategies for success!

- I developed techniques I still use to this day: While learning one must...

- a) Develop an ongoing and ever-expanding vocabulary Database,

- b) Develop an ongoing and ever-expanding grammar Database,

- c) Develop scenario templates with dialogue samples.

## Transformative Moments – How to sustain a conversation?

Following language preparation, the other necessary skill for successfully communicating within a scenario was learning how best to sustain a conversation. This turned out to be far simpler than I anticipated. As long as you agree with people, use kind words or expressions, nod your head politely while they speak, use exclamations such as “Oh, really?”, “Interesting!”, “I never knew that!”, and so on, the conversation will continue nicely. It was also vital to look at people, pay attention to them, and use what they were saying to formulate other questions that perpetuated the flow of the discussion.

## Transformative Moments – Repetition

The final component of this language learning strategy was repetition. The learner need only find the same scenario in a different location, i.e. move from one grocery store to another, or ask the same question to bystanders over and over and over again. It was always preferable to attempt to repeat the conversation as quickly as possible. Furthermore, this is the part of the approach where learners actively focus on their listening ability.

## Practical applications: Vocabulary lists, Databases, and Templates

As the number of scenarios and discussions continued to expand, the question of efficiently cataloguing this new knowledge arose. To that end, what began as mere vocabulary lists evolved into three separate written components. First, I categorized the vocabulary into databases. Second, the commonly used grammatical structures were identified and categorized into dialogue databases. Finally, based on the scenarios and the typical conversations that occurred I designed templates that outlined the structure and content of potential dialogues. These three written aspects of the scenario approach became indispensable as I completed my time in Sweden and moved forward into other languages of study.

This is a very brief explanation of the written components that support and supplement the scenario approach to language acquisition. If you would like more specific details on the structure or layout of these databases and templates, please feel free to contact me at your convenience.

## Discussion and Conclusion

Although this approach works best when one is living abroad where the local population is speaking the target language, these same techniques can be refined and adapted to language study in general. This can be carried out as follows:

1. Target scenarios become classroom topics for which students prepare the required vocabulary and grammar structures.

2. Students produce target scenario dialogues weekly.
3. These target scenarios get revisited throughout the academic semester.
4. Further repetition is fostered through the use of audio and video recordings done out of class as homework.
5. Extra work on “small talk” and “discourse strategies” such as recasting and conversation fillers is done in class.
6. The use of internet resources to find appropriate speech samples furthers the repetition of the language used in the scenarios.
7. Uploading the scenario conversations to video websites such as YouTube allows the students to revisit the conversation as often as the instructor would like for further repetition opportunities.

In conclusion, there are a number of approaches one can use when learning a foreign language. The scenario speaking approach discussed in this short article is one I have used personally to learn not only Swedish, but also, German, French, and Japanese. It is also an approach that I have adapted effectively for use in the L2 classroom.

The skills and character traits one develops by engaging in this approach to language learning are many and varied. A few of the more prominent ones include the following:

1. Tolerance of ambiguity– perpetuating a conversation even though the message isn’t clear.
2. Challenging one’s comfort zone by talking with local people about something for which one does not have adequate vocabulary.
3. Trying to speak beyond one’s ability, attempting to explain things one has never discussed previously.
4. Building patience – learning how to talk to people without really knowing or understanding what is being said.
5. Becoming more confident in one’s ability to interact with people.
6. Building a strong willingness to communicate despite failing regularly.
7. Becoming comfortable with making mistakes while speaking, making your interlocutor feel comfortable discussing topics with you, asking endless questions and many more.

In short, although putting oneself out there and talking as much as possible is absolutely crucial to success, having an effective, implementable language acquisition strategy can mean the difference between communicative competence and communication breakdown.

## **A Note on English for Specific Purposes (ESP)**

Reflecting on my language learning experience in Sweden, it is very obvious to now recognize that I was learning in specific, self-generated ESP scenarios. Every day in Sweden played out like an interactive ESP classroom.

Bio: I am a Canadian by birth, who has also lived in Sweden, German, and Korea, I am now into my 11th year in Japan. My current areas of research include the componential nature of fluency and productive vocabulary in oral assessment, ESP within science and medicine, and discourse analysis of ‘small talk’. I am currently completing my PhD in fluency assessment and productive vocabulary at Hiroshima University.

