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This is the first of a series of posts about skills and strategies for language learning, brought to you by Matador Abroad editor Sarah Menkedick. I’ve seen a lot of learners and a lot of strategies pass through my classroom in the past four years of teaching English abroad. In those four years, I’ve also managed to learn two languages and am working on a third. How people successfully learn a new language is an elusive topic – one that academics have had cat-fights about for years. What exactly are the factors that determine a language student’s success? Yesterday at the Nagoya International Center I came across the single most important language-learning factor: Motivation. I’d been taught about the importance of motivation in my SIT TESOL course (one of the single greatest learning experiences of my life) but, as usual, learning the concept in the classroom and experiencing it in real life are entirely different stories. The Nagoya International Center was offering eleven 90-minute Japanese classes for 2500 yen (25 bucks). The application and interview period was from 11:30-12 on Sunday. We got to the NIC at 11:10, twenty minutes early for the interview period, figuring hey, nobody’s going to be that eager and we’ll probably be among a small group of language nerds. Ha. We took the elevator to the fifth floor. The entire place was jam-packed with people. People squatting and filling out forms on the inches of available floor space. People milling around and chatting nervously. People bunching up around the desks where application forms were being handed out. There was only one form left in English, so I let my friend have it and I filled out the Spanish one. As we sat there, going through the requisite names-numbers-checking-boxes form, I soaked up the energy of the room. It was a veritable U.N meeting of nationalities—there were Filipinos, Brazilians, Brazilian Japanese, Chinese, Southeast Asians, Americans, Brits, Africans, Mexicans, Spanish... (I know because I kept peaking at the “native language” box on people’s application forms as we stood waiting in line). All of us had the same eager, slightly nervous, first-day-at-school posture, and I realized that all of these people needed to learn Japanese. They were there because in their immediate, everyday lives, they had to use Japanese in some form or another and they’d jumped at the chance to do so for a bargain. I’m sure if I’d asked them there, on the spot, “Why are you taking these classes?” They could’ve clearly and specifically defined their goals: “I want to work in an office and I need to learn polite Japanese conversation and basic vocabulary.” “I want to open a shop and I need to interact with customers and officials.” “I want to have conversations with people about Japan and Japanese culture.” “I want to be able to read the newspaper and the subway signs.” Clearly Defined Goals And so, waiting in line at the Nagoya International Center with representatives of a dozen different countries, I saw again what I’ve seen throughout the years in my classes: having clearly defined goals and the motivation to charge at them makes all the difference in learning a language. I’ve heard a lot of people say “I’d love to learn Spanish” or “it’d be great to speak Chinese” but their aims don’t go much further than that—which isn’t to say they aren’t motivated, but their motivation doesn’t have specific goals attached to it. If you want to learn a language, ask yourself these three questions: 1. Why do you want to learn a language? 2. What do you want to do with it? 3. Why do you need it? The more clearly and specifically you can answer these questions the more success you’ll have in learning a language. Make a list of your goals and make sure you avoid general, vague statements like “I’d like to talk to people.” Be as specific as possible. Once you’ve drawn up your list, start looking for programs or classes that fit the goals you’ve defined. And stay tuned to Matador Abroad for where to go from there. iStock It’s no revelation that the key to learning a new language is immersing yourself among native speakers of that language. But what if those native speakers are Dora the Explorer and Diego? It turns out television and radio might be even better tools for new language learners than previously thought. According to two recent studies summarized by Scientific American, it is possible to further your understanding of a new language without actively practicing or fully paying attention. For starters, research published in the Journal of the Acoustical Society of America suggests that language learners who focus continuously on learning new sounds retain no more information than those who take periodic breaks. While one group of study participants practiced differentiating three tricky Hindi sounds for one hour a day over the course of several days, another group alternated spending 10 minutes on learning and 10 minutes on an intentionally distracting task as the Hindi sounds played in the background. When tested on the sounds, the distracted group performed just as well as the focused group. Score one for the subconscious mind! But a subsequent study published in the Journal of Memory and Language further validates the power of inactive learning. Researchers found that Spanish students learning the Basque dialect improved less when they were instructed to repeat sounds back during their training; listening to new sounds silently actually resulted in greater retention. (Start learning languages on your own! Start with “Hello.” So, is it time to fire your tutor and invest in a box set of Corazón Salvaje? Not quite. While this growing body of research suggests inactive language learning is an awesome tool in your language-learning arsenal, the value of focused practice cannot be discounted. “You need to come to class and pay attention,” says Melissa Baese-Berk, a linguist and co-author of one of the studies. “But when you go home, turn on the TV or turn on the radio in that language while you’re cooking dinner, and even if you’re not paying total attention to it, it’s going to help you.” So get out there and learn... but not too hard. While you’re at it, it wouldn’t hurt to brush up on your grammar skills, too. Originally Published: February 16, 2017 If you’re reading this, I assume you’re ready or at least thinking of taking the leap into a new challenge: that of learning (more) functional programming, and considering learning a functional language. This is a great idea! But with so many functional languages out there, which one should you choose? Language or paradigm: which to learn first? The following remarks expand on the epilogue in my book Functional Programming in C#, so by time the reader reaches the epilogue, I assume he’s already learned to think functionally, and to leverage functional techniques in C#. Indeed, there’s an important difference between: Thinking functionally Coding in a functional language Thinking functionally is the really tricky bit. The order in which you should approach these two depends on your background. If you’re fairly new to programming in general, you’re lucky: just skip down to the list of languages. If you’re already proficient with one of the imperative and/or OO languages (say, Java, C#, or JavaScript), then learning to think functionally is hard. It requires changing your habits, challenging your assumptions, becoming a beginner all over again, and gradually building a new intuition and thinking process about how to solve problems in a functional way. Doing all this while at the same time learning the syntax, libraries and tools for a new language can be overwhelming. For this reason, I suggest that your first approach to functional programming should be to learn to code more functionally in the language you’re familiar with. (If this language is C#, then my book was written for you.) I say this because most mainstream languages are multi-paradigm, so they offer some support for functional programming. At a certain level, you can program functionally in any language that has: functions as first-class values (you can pass functions around as arguments) automatic memory management (the garbage collector) (For more on this point, see my previous article Is C#7 starting to look like a functional language?) Why learn a functional language? So, let me assume you’ve come to the point where you use functional techniques regularly in your daily work, especially higher-order functions, immutable data structures, and so on. Should you still learn a functional language? Of course! You will need to, if you want to go deeper. In a multi-paradigm language, you can mix and match between the different approaches the language supports. A functional language, on the other hand, will force you to use the functional approach throughout—for example, by not allowing any state mutation at all. And naturally functional languages have better syntactic support for functional techniques than multi-paradigm languages. An additional benefit of learning a functional language is that it will allow you to take advantage of other learning resources: books, blogs, talks, and so on. Most learning material on FP available today has code samples in Haskell or Scala. Which language you choose will depend on what you want to get out of it, so I’ll discuss this next. Haskell The natural choice would be to learn Haskell, which is the functional language of reference and a lingua franca among functional programmers. Most of the literature on functional programming—not just academic papers, but blogs and other online resources—has code samples in Haskell. For this, I recommend you read Learn You a Haskell for Great Good by Miran Lipovaca. You can read the full contents online for free, but do consider buying a copy to reward the author’s hard work. Another good way to learn Haskell is to do so while following Erik Meijer’s MOOC on functional programming on edX, which you can follow along in Haskell or one of several other languages. Haskell is the language that every functional programmer worth his salt knows, at least to some extent, but the flip side to this is that very few people make a living writing Haskell. Adoption in industry is extremely limited (but growing), so be aware of this: if you learn Haskell, it’s because there’s value in learning it—not so much in using it. Scala Scala is a multi-paradigm language with an emphasis on functional programming that runs on the Java virtual machine. As of today, Scala is your best chance at programming functionally and getting paid for it, and the Scala community is the most active in addressing the question of how the ideas of functional programming (which often originate in academia) can best be put to work in industry. Because Scala is compatible with Java, the fact that you’re writing code in Scala doesn’t mean that it’s functional. This is the reason why I recommend that if you’re just learning functional programming you do so using a purely functional language—not a multi-paradigm language like Scala or F#. In other words, I recommend you approach Scala only after having learned a purely functional language, or having otherwise acquired a very good foundation that allows you to tell functional from imperative techniques (for example, having read my book or similar material). If you want to learn Scala, I recommend you do so by following Martin Odersky’s MOOCs on Coursera. These courses stick to the functional subset of Scala. Two younger functional languages I’m fond of are Elm and Elixir, both of which are supported by an enthusiastic user community and are gaining popularity, especially among startups. I hope to see these two languages gain wider adoption and recognition in the next few years. Elm Elm is a strongly typed, purely functional client-side language that compiles to JavaScript. The syntax is terse, similar to Haskell or F#, but the languageand tooling are much more user friendly. It includes a framework that takes care of managing state and performing side effects. As a result, the programmer only writes pure functions (I discuss these in chapter 2 of my book). Simply put, Elm puts any existing JavaScript framework to shame. If you’re a full-stack web developer, consider using Elm for the front end. As a first functional language to learn, Elm ticks many boxes, because: It’s approachable It’s similar in syntax to Haskell (so it will allow you to understand some of the literature) It’s useful: because it compiles to JavaScript, it’s much easier for an open-minded company to allow you to write a browser app, or even a small component within a browser app, in Elm, compared to adopting a new language on the backend Elixir Elixir is a dynamically typed language that runs on the Erlang virtual machine (this is based on the actor model, which I discuss these in chapter 15 of my book), and as such it’s particularly well suited if your interest is in systems with a high degree of concurrency and you want to explore message-passing concurrency. There are many more functional and multi-paradigm languages out there. Just to mention a few popular ones: OCaml, Clojure, F#— sorry if I forgot to include your favourite! Each of these languages has its niche and its reasons to appeal, but I feel the languages listed above have something that truly sets them apart and makes them worth learning first. The most important thing to remember is that functional programming is a way of thinking which is language-independent. Once you know the techniques, picking up a new functional language is easy: as part of the research for my book I learned 6 of them, and I can tell you it can be done in a couple of days once you know how to think functionally. For more information (and a discount code!) on Functional Programming in C# download the free first chapter or see this slideshare presentation. For more information (and a discount code!) on Functional Programming in C# download the free first chapter or see this slideshare presentation. For more information (and a discount code!) on Functional Programming in C# download the free first chapter or see this slideshare presentation. Manning | Functional Programming in C# Functional programming is a way of thinking about programs that emphasizes functions, while avoiding state mutation. It.... www.manning.com

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