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## What makes learning a language difficult?

### Abstract

Difficulties in learning a new language are experienced when the language learner encounters differences between the target language and the mother tongue. Some of these differences are in script (ideographs, pictographs, syllabaries, and alphabets). With alphabets, the learner must recognize the letters of the alphabet. The English alphabet has 26 letters, while Khmer, spoken in Cambodia, has 74 letters. With some alphabets there are correlation problems between sounds and symbols. For example, there are silent letters, as in Spanish: *hay*, or in English *talk*; double letters for one sound, as in English *comment*; one sound represented by several symbols, as in Greek /i/ = ει, ι, η, υ, οι; or one symbol representing different sounds, such as the English letter “a” for the sounds in *father*, *at*, *was*.

In some languages there are more sounds produced than in the mother tongue. For instance, Spanish has 5 vowel sounds whereas in English there are 12. Hawaiian has 8 consonants, while English has 24. Another problem is if the native language is not a tone language but the target language is. For example, the word “yan” in Chinese has 4 different meanings (cigarette, salt, eye, swallow) according to the tone given it. There are 4 tones in Mandarin Chinese, and in Vietnamese there are 6.

Some languages have peculiar rules of grammar that make learning the language quite difficult for some learners. An example is when the language has cases. In English there is a genitive case exemplified by *brother's*, in which the idea of possessive is shown by a change in the form of the noun. In Modern Greek there are 4 cases, In Hungarian 35, and in Tabassaran, a Caucasian language, 48. Another problem is the personal pronoun system. In English we have 7 personal pronouns. In some variants of Zapotec spoken in the valley of Oaxaca there are 12, and in Vietnamese, more than 17. In Mayan there is one set of 6 personal pronouns used for asking a question or affirming something, and another set used for answering questions. Other grammatical obstacles to be overcome are conjugation of verbs, learning irregular forms of pluralization and difficulties in word order.

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## **What makes learning a language difficult?**

In this article I will give examples of the difficulties a language learner faces when trying to learn a new language. In general, difficulties are experienced when the learner encounters differences between the target language and the mother tongue. The first of these difficulties is a difference in script. Among the most widely-spoken languages on the planet there are 3 types of writing: ideographs, syllabaries, and alphabets.

Chinese uses ideographs in which the idea is represented by a picture, or a character. Every word has its own character which has nothing to do with the pronunciation. So, a learner coming across a new word has no idea how to pronounce it, or inversely, upon hearing a new word, has no idea how to write it.

Japanese uses ideographs (adopted from Chinese) as well as two syllabaries, one for Japanese words, and the other for writing words from foreign languages.

Hindi uses a syllabary of 51 symbols. A syllabary is similar to an alphabet, only that the symbols represent syllables, like *ba* or *ta* instead of individual sounds. One difficulty encountered by learners of this language is the system for writing consonant clusters such as *stri* (woman) or *snan* (bathe). The “letters” of the syllabary are combined in ways that make it necessary for the learner to memorize all the possible forms of consonant clusters.

Arabic and Russian are examples of languages that use alphabets different from the alphabet we use for writing English, Spanish and the majority of European languages. Learning an alphabet is easier than learning Chinese characters, or a syllabary, but still one must be able to recognize the individual letters of the alphabet. In the Arabic alphabet, some letters have different forms depending on whether they are in the initial position (at the beginning of the word), in the medial or in the final position. Khmer, a language spoken in Cambodia has 74 letters in its alphabet. English has only 26, but if you count the upper and lower case symbols, there are 52. Learning how to read cursive script poses an additional difficulty if one is not familiar with this type of writing.

With some alphabets there are correlation problems between sounds and symbols. One sound can be represented by several symbols, as in Greek /i/ = ει, ι, η, υ, οι, or in Mexican Spanish with the sounds of the consonants in the words *malla-maya*, *hacer-asir*, *jinete-ágil*, *casar-cazar*. In English, examples of the sound /ai/ : aye, eye, I, buy, buy, die, dye, Thai, height, guide. Or the sound /k/ : Kilo, Chymera, Car, Queen.

One symbol can represent different sounds, such as the English letter “a” for the sounds in *all*, *ace*, *at*, *was*. Sometimes it is two symbols that together form different sounds, as in . in these examples from English: *read* (present tense) , *read* (past tense); and three different sounds from the combination th: *thought*, *though*, *Thomas*. In some languages there are “silent” letters. For example Spanish has a silent *h*, as in *hay*. English can offer a host of such silent letters, as in *debt*, *indict*, *Wednesday*, *clue*, *gnome*, *honest*, *knowledge*, *talk.*, *mnemonic*, *hymn*, *psychic*, *aisle*, *listen*, *sword*. Another problem with spelling is double letters, such as in English *comment*; or *beautifully*.

Sometimes the target language has sounds, either vowels or consonants, that the student will have trouble producing because those sounds are absent from his or her mother tongue. Take the vowel sounds, for instance. In Spanish and Modern Greek there are only 5 vowels. In Russian there are 6; English 12; and French 16. At times there are consonants in one language which are not used in the mother tongue. These can be difficult for the language learner to pronounce. The Hawaiian language has only 5 vowels and 8 consonants (h k l m n p w ‘). Thus, it was extremely difficult for the first Hawaiians to learn to speak English, which has 12 vowel sounds and 24 consonant sounds. The sounds that are absent in the native language are then written with the closest approximation possible in that language. The phrase “Merry Christmas” in Hawaiian, for example, is written *Mele Kalikimaki*.

Examples of consonants that are difficult for native English speakers are the guttural sounds in Arabic *kha* خ, or *qaf*. ق . In Mayan the difference between *p* and the intensely aspirated *p'* (also *k*, *k'*, *t*, *t'*) can be difficult to master. In Spanish the trilled *r* as in *ferrocarril* is difficult for many native speakers of English. Sometimes it is the consonant clusters which pose the

problem. In Zapotec of San Juan Taguá, Villa Alta, Oaxaca, there are combinations of initial *r* with other consonants, a phenomenon not allowed in either English or Spanish: as in the word *rla* (“it hurts”), *rbecha* (“I cry”), *rtzalo* (“I converse”), *rdila* (“I hit”). Zapotec of Tlalixtac de Cabrera, one of the dialects of Valley Zapotec, offers these examples: *mniebdidxa* (“I ask”), *mdudxa* (“I finished”), and *rschiecha* (“I get angry”). For some Spanish speakers, it is difficult to pronounce English words that end in consonant clusters, such as /skt/ as in *asked*, or /bd/ as in *clubbed*.

Tone languages, such as Chinese or Chinanteco from Oaxaca, are quite difficult to pronounce unless one

masters the concept of tones. For example, the word “yan” in Mandarin Chinese has four different meanings (cigarette, salt, eye, swallow) according to the tone given it. There are four tones in Mandarin Chinese, plus one “neutral” tone. In Vietnamese and Cantonese there are six. An example of the different meanings in a word in Cantonese is seen as follows:

(1) Example of six tones in Cantonese

High level	sí	'silk'
Mid level	sii	'to try'
Low-mid level	sì	'matter'
Low fall	sì	'time'
High rise	sí	'history'
Low rise	sii	'city'

Source: Coleman, J. (2005)

One of the first things one learns in a new language is the set of personal pronouns. This can be a stumbling block for some learners, and a source of misunderstandings when one uses the wrong pronoun. For Spanish speakers learning English, it is very common to substitute *he* for *she* or vice versa. English learners of Spanish have difficulty knowing when to use *Usted* or *tú*. We will take a quick look at peculiarities in the sets of personal pronouns in different languages. Examples 2-10 present the personal pronouns in several languages.

(2) English Personal Pronouns

singular plural

I	we
*thou	*ye
you	you
	*you'n's
	*y'all
she	they
he	
it	

\*thou, ye in old literature  
and songs; you'n's (you  
ones), y'all (you all) in  
American regional dialects

(3) Spanish Personal Pronouns

singular plural

	yo	nosotros	masculine
		nosotras	feminine
familiar	tú	vosotros	masculine
	*vos	vosotras	feminine
formal	usted	ustedes	
	él	ellos	masculine
	ella	ellas	feminine

\*vos: in some countries

(4) Arabic Personal Pronouns

singular    dual       plural

	ana		nahnu
masc.	anta	antumma	antum
fem.	anti		antunna
masc.	huwa		hum
fem.	hiya		hunna

(5) Valley Zapotec (Tlalixtac de Cabrera, Oaxaca)

Personal Pronouns

singular    plural

	naa	duunu*
informal	lii	laayubtu
formal	yubyu'u	
lesser rank	laa'bi	laa'rabi
equal rank	laa'ba	laa'raba
higher rank	laa'dxa	laa'rardxa
animal	laa'ma	laa'rama

\* In Isthmus Zapotec there is a “we” that includes the hearer (laanu) and a “we” that excludes the hearer (laadu).

(6) Hindi Personal Pronouns

singular    plural

	mai / maine*	ham / hamne
intimate	tu / tune	
informal	tum / tumne	tum / tumne
formal	ap / apne	ap / apne

distant	vo / usne	ve / unhone
near	yah / isne	ye / inhone
distant honorific	ve / unhone	
near honorific	ye / inhone	

\*The second item in each pair is for past tense sentences which contain a direct object.

### (7) Vietnamese Personal Pronouns

		Singular	Plural
1	Formal	to <sup>^</sup> i	chu'ng to <sup>^</sup> i
	Informal	to <sup>^</sup> i tao	chu'ng to <sup>^</sup> i
2	Formal	o <sup>^</sup> ng(male) ba` (female)	ca'c o <sup>^</sup> ng
	Informal	anh (male) co <sup>^</sup> (female) ma`y (both)	ca'c anh
3 He	Formal	o <sup>^</sup> ng ta	ho
	Informal	anh ta	chu'ng no'
3 She	Formal	ba` ta	ho
	Informal	co <sup>^</sup> ta	chu'ng no'
3 It		no'	chu'ng no'

You, I = **o<sup>^</sup>ng , to<sup>^</sup>i**

You, I = **anh, em**  
uses **anh** to

young, middle age

You, I = **Tao, Ma`y**  
friends, colleagues,

two older men of comparable age.

A woman addresses herself **em** when talking with her husband. She calls him **anh**. A man

addresses himself and calls her **em**. It is widely used in informal conversations between

men and young, middle age women.

**Tao** is used as the first personal pronoun in very informal conversations between close

school mates, between those of comparable age and background.

Source: Author unknown. Personal Pronouns in Vietnamese.

(8) Mayan Personal Pronouns

Singular	Plural
teen / teene' *	to'on / to'one'
teech / teeche'	te'ex / te'exe'
leti' / leti'e'	leti'ob / leti'obe'

\*The second item in each pair is used when answering a question, or for added emphasis.

Persian has an easy system of personal pronouns:

(9) Persian Personal Pronouns

Singular Plural

man	ma
to	shoma
u	ishan

Chinese seems to be the easiest of all:

(10) Chinese Personal Pronouns

Singular Plural

wo	wo-men
ni	ni-men
ta	ta-men

In languages that have verb conjugation, a lot of time is spent by the language learner memorizing different forms of a verb. In English we just have to conjugate the verb *be* in the present and past tenses. The other verbs (except for modal verbs) have only a third person singular marker for present tense. In Chinese and Vietnamese there is no conjugation at all. In

the other languages mentioned above each verb has a different form according to the different personal pronouns. In Persian the conjugation is all regular, but in Spanish there are irregular forms, requiring the learner (and even the native speaker, at times) to refer to a dictionary to see the specific conjugation. In Hindi each verb has a masculine and feminine form, except in the past tense for verbs with direct objects in which case the verb agrees with the gender of the direct object.

Learning the numbers of the new language can be difficult, if there is no pattern to the words used to designate the numbers. For example, in English, to count to ninety-nine, we have to memorize 21 words: the numbers from one to fifteen, then the numbers 20,30,40,50,60. The rest of the numbers have a pattern that simplify the memorization. For example, after 15 we use the word 6 plus “teen”, 7 plus “teen”, etc.

After 60 we learn 7 plus “ty” to form “seventy”, 8 plus “ty” to form eighty, etc. Thus, to count to 99 we need only 21 words.

For some other languages the breakdown goes as follows:

Spanish=25: un, una, 1-15, 10+6, 10+7, 10+8, 10+9, 20, 20+1, etc, 30, 40, 50, 60, 70, 80, 90

French=22: une, 1-16, 10-7, 10-8, 10-9, 20, 30,40,50,60. After 69 we say “60-10” for the number 70. After 20-10-9 (79), we say “4-20” (80). After 4-20-9 (89), we say” 4-20-10.”

The learner must memorize more words if the language has a feminine form of numbers. Spanish and French have a feminine form only for the first number. French economizes on the number of words necessary to memorize, because of the way of saying 70, which is 60-10, or 90 which is 4-20-10. A similar phenomenon occurs in both Zapotec and Mixe, which are spoken in the state of Oaxaca. The way to say *sixteen* in those languages is “fifteen-one.” In Mixe the number 99 is “eighty-fifteen-four” (*maktapsh makmoks tashk*).

In Greek, a person counts using the neuter form, but there are masculine and feminine forms, as well as accusative and possessive case forms for 1, 3 and 4 (and numbers that end in 1, 3 and 4 such as 21, 53, 63), which are used when mentioning the number of items.

Greek=29: 1=enas (nominative masc.)  
mia (nominative fem.)  
enós (possessive masc.)  
miás (possessive fem.)  
enan (accusative masc.)  
mian (accusative fem.)  
3=tris (masc.&fem.)  
4=tésseris (masc.&fem.)  
1-13, 10+4, 10+5, etc, 20, 20+1, etc, 30, 40,50,60,70,80,90

Hindi=99 words: There is no pattern, or repetition of lower numbers already learned. You have to memorize 99 words!

Chinese=10 words only. This is the easiest system. To count from 11 to 20 we say 10-1, 10-2, etc. To say 20, 30, etc., we say 2-10, 3-10, etc.

Esperanto= same as Chinese.

Arabic has a masculine and feminine form for every number, but has difficult rules for using them. For example: For numbers 1 and 2: the numeral follows the noun, and agrees with it in gender and case. For 3-10 the numeral (always in the nominative case) comes before the noun, which is always in the genitive case, but the masculine form of the numeral is used before feminine nouns, and the feminine form of the numeral is used before masculine nouns. For 11-19 the numeral and the noun are always in the accusative case. There are more rules for 20-99, other rules for hundreds, and still others for thousands.

Learning the plural form of nouns is not so hard in Spanish, but English has a few irregular forms for plurals. Languages with cases, require different endings in singular and plural forms for each case, and for masculine, feminine and neuter nouns. In Persian there is no plural form necessary for nouns. It is similar to English: one fish, two fish; or similar to Spanish: un tianguis, dos tianguis. In Arabic, the learner must memorize the patterns for pluralization of nouns. Depending on the form of the word there are plural forms which one must memorize.

(11) Broken plural patterns in Arabic:

singular	plural
qalam	aqlám
dars	durús
rajul	rijál
jumla	jumul
kitáb	kutub
sayyid	sádat
kátib	kuttáb
bina'	abniyat
daktúr	dakátira
ra'ís	ru'asá
sadíq	asdiqá'
maktab	makátib
shubbák	shabábik

In languages with case, the noun will have a plural form, and also other forms according to whether it is nominative, genitive, accusative, etc. In the Finnish language there are 15 cases, in Hungarian 35, but in Tabassaran, a Caucasian language, there are has 48 cases. Imagine how much time is spent memorizing the forms for all the nouns and adjectives in that language!

Word order is another difficulty to overcome. Spanish learners of English may not remember to place the adjective before the noun, because in Spanish the noun goes before the adjective. English is mostly S-V-O (Subject-Verb-Object) in its syntax. Arabic is V-O-S. Persian and Hindi are S-O-V. An English learner can translate into Chinese the phrase “I love you” word for word in the same order, and it will come out in perfect Chinese: Wo ai ni). However, if the learner tries the same thing for Spanish, looking up the words in a dictionary, the outcome might be: Yo amar tú. The teacher will have to explain that in Spanish we must conjugate the verb, and we have to use the object pronoun, which goes before the verb. In Arabic there are two possible translations of this phrase depending on whether “you” refers to a female or a male. In Hindi there are two possible translations depending on whether the speaker, “I”, is a male or female.

Vocabulary can be difficult to learn when in the learner has only one word in his first language, but that word can be translated several ways in the target language. For example Spanish-speaking learners of English have to distinguish when to say *clock* or *watch*, because both of them are *reloj* in Spanish. The English-speaking learner of Spanish has to learn how to distinguish *pared*, *muro*, *tapia*, *muralla*, *paredón*, *albarrada*, and *malecón*, because they all are called *wall* in English. In Persian there are 4 ways to translate “aunt”, depending on whether it refers to the sister of one’s mother (*khaleh*) sister of one’s father (*ammeh*), or the wife of the brother of one’s mother (*zanedai*), or the wife of the brother of one’s father (*zaneammu*). In Isthmus Zapotec if a female speaker wants to refer to her own sister, she will say *benda*, but a male speaker, referring to his own sister uses the word *biza’na’*. A female speaker uses the word *biza’na’* to refer to her own brother, while a male speaker refers to his own brother as *bi’chi’*. In Mayan, a man refers to his son as *paal*, but a woman refers to her son as *waal*. These are some examples of how some languages require the language learner to memorize more words than are used in the mother tongue. Memorizing vocabulary takes time, and if there are more words to memorize, then it takes more time to learn that language.

In some languages there are differences between the spoken and the written language. English has a formal style which is used in text books, and an informal style in everyday common speech. The English of the King James Bible, or of the Shakespearean plays are in an archaic language. Religious hymns and scripture have elements of that type of English. In modern Mexican Spanish the pronouns “vosotros” and “vosotras” (and their related verb conjugations) are not used, but in old Mexican literature, or in Spanish from Spain, one can find this form, and so must become familiar with it.

In Persian, the verbs are conjugated differently in the written language and in the spoken language. For example “you went” in the informal spoken language is “raftin”, but in the written form is “raftid”. If you learn the written language, and use it to speak in informal situations, the native speaker of Persian will say that you sound bookish. The language learner will have to become familiar with two types of the target language: the formal and informal styles. Another example is Arabic, which has many mutually unintelligible spoken

forms. For international broadcasts, and for textbooks Modern Standard Arabic, was developed. Thus, there is one written Arabic language, but many different styles of colloquial Arabic (Egyptian, Gulf, Levantine, Iraqi, etc.). To know Arabic one must master both the standard written form, and one or more of the colloquial dialects.

In short, there are many different aspects of a language that can make it difficult to learn. What is hard for one person is not necessarily difficult for another. One must consider how hard it is for the learner to master the writing system, the sounds of the vowels and consonants (phonetics), the order of the words in a sentence (syntax), the various grammar rules of the language, and the possible differences between the written and the spoken language.

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### Biodata

**Nicholas Athan**, egresado de San Diego State University, con Licenciatura en Lingüística, Biología y Español, es maestro de tiempo completo en la Universidad de Quintana Roo donde imparte clases de inglés en el Centro de Enseñanza de Idiomas. Ha enseñado en la Universidad Autónoma “Benito Juárez” de Oaxaca, la Escuela Berlitz on Campus de San Diego, California, y la Escuela Interlingua en Atenas, Grecia, donde también fue co-editor de *Zero In, Consolidation*, una serie de textos de inglés. Ha dado asesoría a maestros de inglés y observado sus clases en Albania, Bulgaria y la India. Actualmente está escribiendo un texto de Conversación y Gramática Maya.