

# 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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Students typically conceptualise language learning as essentially a cognitive activity that relies on the instructor's input. We refer to this phenomenon as *the language injection metaphor*, where students arrive at class expecting to be *injected with language knowledge*. A lack of understanding of socioemotional factors impacting language learning (see, Arnold, 2011; Dörnyei et al., 2015) as well as performance anxiety, and feelings of isolation associated with the pandemic, further decrease students' confidence and self-esteem.

We believe it is vital to provide students with appropriate strategies to enhance their language learning experiences, particularly in the early stages of their studies. These factors instigated the creation of the course we discuss in the remainder of this report. We first outline the course, its goals and rationale, and its pedagogical underpinning of transformative learning. We then report findings based on students' feedback on the course's effectiveness and impact. The report concludes with pedagogical implications for language programs and considerations for further research.

## Rationale of the Course

The first-year course *1012LHS How to Learn Languages* was developed to address the challenges discussed above. The course was planned prior to COVID-19; however, the pandemic further augmented the urgency and rationale for its introduction.

The purpose of the course was to debunk common beliefs about language learning and assist students in developing effective language learning strategies that enhanced their language competencies across all areas. The course was delivered at a leading Australian university, to students in their second trimester of studies. The decision for this timing was the importance of students' prior experience with language learning at university, that could be used as a starting point for reflection. We strongly believe that acquiring basic language learning strategies in the early stages of their studies could better equip students to transfer these skills to subsequent studies, in other areas of academic pursuit.

## Pedagogical Underpinnings

Our course was influenced by the concept of transformative learning, defined by Mezirow (1997) as “the process of effecting change in a frame of reference” (p. 5). According to Mezirow, ‘frames of references’ are “the structures of assumptions through which we understand our experiences. They selectively shape and delimit expectations, perceptions, cognition, and feelings” (p. 5). Despite different interpretations of this approach, most scholars agree that the main aim of transformative learning is fostering a transformation in learners' perspective. This goal was the main tenet that guided the development of the course under discussion: to help students understand that language learning is *something they do*, rather than something that *will happen to them*.

Mezirow (2000, p. 22) presents 10 non-sequential phases related to a shift of perspective, which are applied to identify transformative practices in our student cohort.

1. A disorienting dilemma
2. Self-examination with feelings of fear, anger, guilt, or shame
3. A critical assessment of assumptions
4. Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared
5. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions
6. Planning a course of action
7. Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans
8. Provisional trying of new roles
9. Building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships
10. A reintegration into one's life based on conditions dictated by one's new perspective

The process of transformative learning is personal, and the final outcomes will vary depending on the learners' level of maturity, life experiences, motivation, and degree of engagement in achieving deeper self-awareness. However, the proposed phases can be used as a framework to conceptualise and facilitate activities aiming to enhance students' likelihood of achieving deeper levels of engagement.

Crucial to the process of transformation is the first step: provoking a situation where students face a disorienting dilemma, initially described by Mezirow as “an acute internal and personal crisis” that learners need to address and resolve (Taylor 2000, p. 298). In our course, this first step involved developing an awareness of how their previous language learning experiences

resulted in habitual responses and unexamined beliefs, uncritically transferred to their new situation as university language learners. These reflections were triggered by group discussions and individual written work on the expectations students had about language learning at university. Some students came to realise that these expectations were built on their previous language learning experiences in high school, but that the transition into higher education requires a greater level of self-regulation for which they were unprepared.

Importantly, and despite Mezirow's focus on negative emotions, positive emotions such as surprise can also trigger transformations (Coffman, 1989, in Taylor 2000, p. 324). This was corroborated in our findings below, with some students' reflections expressing satisfaction with their progress. What is important here is that learners recognise that feelings and emotions are linked to the language learning process.

Another crucial component of this first step is the willingness to act and bring about change, based on developing self-awareness. Without this willingness there would be no transformation. We found that once students encountered a disorienting dilemma of the kind we described, and were encouraged to reflect on it, the processes of self-examination, exploration, trial and error of new possibilities, and planning, followed organically, albeit not linearly for most students. Indeed, scholars such as Taylor (2000) and Mezirow (2000) have suggested that perspective transformation is recursive rather than linear and that there is continued reassessment of the disorienting dilemma. Furthermore, Taylor (2000) proposed that disorienting dilemmas can be more subtle and profound, "providing an opportunity for exploration and clarification of past experiences". According to this view, a triggering event is "less a singular significant experience and more a long cumulative process" (Taylor 2000, p. 300). This is consistent with our data, as we will illustrate in the Findings section.

## Overview of the Course

The purpose of this workshop style course was to engage language learners in reflective, transformative activities designed to improve their language learning experiences. The content of the course was organised around six central modules. Activities and weekly assessment tasks were focused on reflections aimed at triggering the first phase of transformative learning: the disorienting dilemma. The final phase (Phase 10, a reintegration into one's life on based on conditions dictated by one's new perspective) is evident in the final reflection assignment task. Since the remaining phases of transformative learning can occur non-sequentially and may be repeated, the transformative phases targeted in each module are included in brackets after each example activity to indicate this iterative process of transformation being triggered throughout the course.

### *Module 1. Understanding How Age and Context Impact Adult Language Development.*

Students enrolling in language ab initio programs<sup>1</sup> tend to have unrealistic expectations about their progress, hoping to develop native-like proficiency early in their degree. The realisation that language learning is a longer process than they anticipated, requiring considerable time and effort, can lead some students to develop feelings of frustration. High levels of attrition in beginning language courses attest to this phenomenon. To address this common experience, this module fostered understanding of the challenges impacting adult second/foreign language learning, shifting the focus from the ideal to the feasible. Typical activities in this module required students to reflect on their personal language trajectories by completing questionnaires and surveys (Phase 2), discussions to challenge their assumptions about language learning (Phase 3), to formulate SMART goals (i.e. Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Timebound) based on areas of personal interest and aspirations (Phase 6), and to become familiar with well-established frameworks (e.g., the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)) to charter and self-monitor their learning (Phase 2).

### *Module 2. The Role of Individual Variables in Adult SLA*

The purpose of this module was to raise students' awareness of individual variables that affect second language acquisition, and to foster understanding of the effect of these variables on their individual language learning processes (Phase 2). Through recognising these variables, students were empowered to draw upon their strengths to organise their own learning (Phase 6). Among the activities in this module were TED talks by polyglots explaining and demonstrating efficient language learning techniques, in addition to students' reflections on factors affecting their own language learning experiences (Phase 7).

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<sup>1</sup> Language ab initio is a language acquisition course designed for students with no previous experience in - or very little exposure to - the target language.

### ***Module 3. Language Learning Strategies***

Considering the constraints of language teaching in higher education discussed above, it is imperative for students to seek learning opportunities outside of class. However, as also noted, students are generally uncertain about specific activities to engage with and are often anxious about their language learning progress. This is where explicit instruction in language learning strategies plays a significant role, as documented in the literature (Oxford, 1990). This module therefore covers cognitive, metacognitive, social and affective language learning strategies, which are instrumental in preparing learners for independent learning in the local target language community and beyond.

A social activity that students particularly enjoyed involved learning a new language in 45 minutes – an activity designed to increase students' awareness of their own involvement in self-managing their learning process (Phase 5). Individual students in the class who were competent in a foreign language (experts) were put in groups with students who did not know this language at all (learners). To everyone's pleasant surprise, students were able to produce simple conversations or messages in the target language by the end of the activity. Furthermore, the social and affective activities in this module were designed to enhance learners' confidence in working in groups and interacting with speakers at different levels of proficiency in and beyond the language classroom (Phase 9).

### ***Module 4. Improving Study Practices Within the Four Macro-Skills***

The purpose of this module was to deepen engagement with effective strategies for language learning in all linguistic domains, both for general learning and for language-specific aspects (such as memorising Chinese/Japanese characters, distinguishing Chinese tones, engaging in interactions using culturally and linguistically appropriate language) (Phase 7 & 8). One activity worth mentioning here involved students understanding the central idea of texts in unfamiliar languages, while taking notice of the strategies they applied to make sense of the texts. Additionally, metacognitive activities (such as a variety of note-taking methods) were introduced to students. These resources and strategies were also transferable beyond language classes (Phase 6).

### ***Module 5. Improving Cultural Awareness, the Fifth Macro-Skill***

Because of the reduction in contact hours in language courses, mentioned above, courses typically target the development of linguistic competence to the detriment of cultural awareness and other components of language use. However, in authentic contexts, native speakers typically overlook learners' grammatical errors, but judge pragmatic *mistakes* harshly (Eisenclas, 2011). This module then aimed to increase learners' awareness of pragmatic aspects of the target language, which necessitates a comprehension of cultural conventions and expectations in their own cultures (Phase 3 and 7). To achieve this purpose, students engaged in a 'mini ethnographic study' by choosing two speech acts in the target language and exploring their sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic features. To complete their study, students had to work with native or fluent speakers, identify relevant pragmatics readings and other useful resources (Phase 5). Incidentally, this activity provides another example of the use of social strategies to enhance independent learning outside the classroom.

### ***Module 6. Digital Tools and Apps for Language Learning***

The goal of this module was to expose students to additional resources for language learning that they could access outside their courses (Phase 7). We focused on specific challenges raised by the online environment (e.g., avoiding multitasking, selecting appropriate resources among the plethora of choices available and dealing with the sense of isolation some students experienced when learning online) (Phase 2). We also discussed the importance of identifying additional strategies for facing these online challenges, such as managing human-human online interactions as well as human-computer interactions (Phase 5). Students' prior experiences with these digital tools were incorporated in a Show and Share activity in which students introduced language learning apps they had previously utilised (e.g., HelloTalk, Tandem, Duolingo) to others in the class, discussing the advantages and drawbacks of each App (Phases 8 & 9).

### ***Assessment Tasks***

The assessment tasks included in this course provided additional pedagogical opportunity for transformative learning. Assessment comprised of four tasks: (1) Completing the *Learning how to Learn* MOOC (Massive Online Open Course) (Coursera); (2) A portfolio of weekly tasks and short reflections (e.g., worksheets on readings or TED talks, surveys, etc.); (3) a short reflection at the beginning of the course outlining their previous experiences learning a language, including their self-identified strengths and challenges, and (4) a longer reflection at the end of the course identifying, resources and strategies from the course that had enhanced their language learning experiences and articulating a plan for continuing to apply these strategies in their language learning.

In line with principles of transformative learning, these continuous reflections were designed to challenge their preconceptions on language learning, foster responsibility for their own learning, expand their language learning toolkit and identify best practices for their individual learning. Crucially, the phases of transformative learning were intrinsically connected in these evaluation tasks. For instance, students were required to reflect on the difficulties they encountered throughout their first trimester of language study at university for Assessment item (3). Often students enrolled in language courses at university had enjoyable learning experiences in high school but are not ready for the increased academic expectations of a university education, which can be aggravated by online study. This troubling encounter created a *disorienting dilemma* (Phase 1) that set in motion the transformative process through an increased understanding of the need to shift their viewpoints and adjust their study habits. In addition, the final Assessment item (4) challenged students to identify the specific components in the course that triggered a shift in their understanding and to consider ways of adopting these new strategies into their plans for future language learning (Phase 10). These final reflections provided the data for the aforementioned issues, as well as for the preliminary findings discussed in the next sections.

## Methodology

We assessed the effectiveness of the course based on students' final reflections, for which we obtained Ethical Clearance (GU Ref No: 2021/714). The consent procedure followed the standard process of discussing the purpose of the research project, providing students with a written information sheet posted as an announcement, and asking students to complete a quiz indicating consent (or not) to participate. It was made clear that acceptance or refusal would in no way affect the academic outcomes of this course, or their standing with the University. We obtained consent from 26/70 students who completed the course in 2021 to use their reflections. A qualitative analysis was conducted on anonymised reflections by applying established principles of thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006). We coded the reflections for key topics and themes related to the language learning strategies used, transformative phases, and other key aspects of this course. In the next section, we discuss the findings and present illustrative excerpts of these key themes.

## Findings

Transformative learning's effects may not become apparent during the course of one trimester, making a long-term research strategy necessary for evaluating its effectiveness (Johnson, 2021). Furthermore, as previously mentioned, a significant variation of these effects among learners was expected, related to their level of maturity, receptivity to novel encounters and other individual differences. Nevertheless, data from students' reflections revealed their perceptions of the course, how it affected their perspectives regarding language acquisition, and which aspects of their learning were impacted by the course. Despite some initial skepticism regarding the need or value of such a course to their language learning, most students, regardless of their proficiency in the target language and/or previous language learning experiences, reported they were satisfied that the course had exposed them to new strategies and that they had increased their confidence in self-directed learning.

Five key themes were identified in the students' reflections as having significant impact on the transformative learning that occurred during this course: 1) The impact of the disorienting dilemma. 2) Developing a sense of community in the classroom. 3) Social and affective factors. 4) The impact of materials and activities. 5) Plans for the future.

### *Facing a Disorienting Dilemma*

The initial disorienting dilemma was evident in numerous reflections. These *disorienting* experiences evoked (shared) emotions and resulted in shifts in perspectives and approaches to language learning. For instance, students mentioned the realization that their "preconceived notions regarding language learning were stereotypical" and that they experienced a "perspective shift as a result of everything I learnt [which] has been so beneficial in increasing my confidence and attitude towards learning a new language". One student's reflection on their reaction in Week 1 was: "almost shocking in the sense that it made me realise that all the barriers blocking my progress were self-made ones" – a significant realisation and *disorientation* that led to changes in their approach to language learning. A specific quote from one student highlights the enormous potential this type of course can have on students' learning and pushing through barriers: "I do strongly believe now that this course has pushed me through the plateau I have hit with language learning and has opened my perception to the world of languages so much wider". Similarly, another student stated "Overall, 1012LHS has revealed how restricting my approach was with language learning and delivered material that has truly impacted how I view study strategies and methods".

### ***Developing a Sense of Community in the Classroom***

Many students mentioned the benefits of class discussions on normalising their emotions related to language learning, and the realisation that ‘everyone’ experiences similar challenges when learning a language. For example, one student wrote:

Learning that many other peoples also felt anxious or uncomfortable when asking questions in language classes, it encouraged me to feel more comfortable to then raise my hand in my own Japanese class. It was very comforting to know that it is very common to lack confidence in your language skills, regardless of your progress.

Another student stated:

What was most striking to me was that all my peers are going through the same process of learning a language, and so being exposed to everyone’s way of conducting their individual language learning helped me understand that there is no right or wrong in learning, but there are strategies to make it easier, more efficient and more enjoyable.

A similar comment from another student concluded by stating, “the class made my individual studies feel less heavy and isolated”. These comments highlight the significance of being aware that these emotions are typical for most language learners. As part of the transformation process, this realisation served to relieve stress and mitigate the negative emotions related to language learning. The development of the sense of community facilitated, and in turn was enhanced by, the implementation of social and affective strategies (see next section).

### ***Exploring and Implementing Social and Affective Strategies***

The exploration of social strategies for language learning was transformative for students. One student, unable to travel to Japan as originally intended, starting conversing in Japanese in online chat groups stating, “Language is a social act and one that demands interaction with others”. Another student wrote, “I came to realise that communication is, ironically, both the goal *and the means* of language acquisition” (emphasis in original). Still another student highlighted the transformation nature of their realisation through explaining their “lightbulb moment” when they realised “The best way of learning a language is by *using the language* [and that] *communication doesn't require fluency*” (emphasis in original). This example demonstrates that the disorienting dilemmas (lightbulb moments) were occurring throughout the course and not just in the initial stages of challenging assumptions and misconceptions.

Moreover, students recognised the benefits of discussing language learning strategies and sharing ideas with each other. For example:

This trimester I have reached out to classmates for help, forcibly pushed myself out of my comfort zone to meet with people, created opportunities for group studying, and had conversations in my target languages in student chat groups. Recently we teamed up to create a language club at university and that is an idea I am glad we are taking ahead.

This highly successful language club, established and run by students for students, offers convincing evidence of the learners’ increased motivation and application of strategies developed through participation in this course.

In addition to the recognition of shared emotions when learning a language, specific affective strategies featured in the students’ reflections. One student commented that:

Affective strategies have particularly enhanced my language learning journey. I realised that the process of language learning is not just intellectual, but also social and emotional; affective strategies focus on taking one’s emotional temperature through activities such as keeping a language learning diary or a checklist and have given me the ability to control any negative emotions that arise during my study when I feel unsatisfied with my progress.

Similarly, another student recognised, “that I neglected the emotional side of learning for years, and now that I set the time to take my emotional temperature, I can better reflect on my current progress and goals moving forward”.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The learners’ ability to use metalanguage such as processes, strategies, emotional temperature, and to distinguish between the varied types of strategies (e.g., metacognitive strategies) in these reflections, both to explain their experiences and when creating a plan for future study, provides additional evidence of this course’s transformative nature.

### ***Engaging with Materials and Activities***

The course's transformative nature was further demonstrated by students' reflections on specific metacognitive strategies and techniques they discovered in the course and applied to their learning. For instance, one student wrote about:

start[ing] a language learning diary to help keep track of my emotional temperature. I also used it to plan for future language learning tasks, set goals and keep track of my learning. It has been good to organise my learning and have a study schedule.

Another student mentioned compensation strategies that led to undertaking more challenging tasks in the target language:

I learnt some compensation skills which help with reading and writing, and further my listening and speaking skills, such as using circumlocution or synonyms, and selecting appropriate topics for reading (and documentaries). Consequently, I felt more comfortable when navigating difficult texts, such as the novel *Der Vorleser*, that I was recommended to read for a German course.

The introduction of a variety of digital technologies made students aware that there are no limits to the amount of exposure to the target language that they can have, provided they take ownership of their learning beyond the class. Students spoke of their inability to travel overseas but their discovery of new digital technologies allowed them to fully immerse themselves in the language. Tools and apps (such as Pomodoro, Tandem, Duolingo) were mentioned by students as having been trialed and found to be beneficial for motivation and increased learning. In line with the social aspect of learning, students also commented on discovering these apps and the ones which were useful during class discussions. Other strategies such as changing the language of one's computer to the target language also proved beneficial. Moreover, benefits of the MOOC Learning how to Learn were frequently mentioned, including discussion on types of motivation, tips for avoiding procrastination, chunking and the importance of self-paced progress.

### ***Planning for Future Learning***

The students' reflections also revealed how they plan to implement strategies in the future. For example:

For the future, I plan to keep applying new and different techniques that I came across and always keep myself open to new opportunities of learning new strategies. I am also planning on utilising apps such as Tandem and HelloTalk to keep practicing in a naturalistic environment during the trimester break other than developing group activities with classmates.

Another student stated that "Previously it was all about results, but now with such unique strategies learnt, I can monitor my progress and conduct learning in a way that doesn't seem like a task". While the plans for the future are generally expressed in vague terms, as a formulaic list of good intentions, we acknowledge that it would be hard for students to anticipate how their language learning context will be organised in the challenging times facing Australian universities, when a significant number of courses, or course components, are still delivered online. We expect that the strong foundation they developed in this course will be instrumental in dealing with these and potential new challenges.

### ***Pedagogical Implications***

The transformative nature of this course and its perceived effectiveness could drive students to re-evaluate the purpose of language learning classrooms and their personal role within it. Language learning contexts should play a scaffolding role, equipping students with effective tools and inner resources for continual learning beyond the classroom. Of greater importance is the need to develop students' sense of agency regarding their self-directed language learning journey. It has long been acknowledged that language classes serve this purpose (Benson, 2011; Richards, 2015). However, the necessity for adjustments and supplements to language courses has become more urgent as a result of university programs' funding cuts and the shift to online learning precipitated by the pandemic. Specific Learning How to Learn courses (like the course discussed here) encourage the shift from the *language injection* expectation to one of self-reliance and self-directed learning.

Beyond the benefits for students discussed above, additional benefits of the course relate to financial considerations. Offering a stand-alone course such as the one described here is a very economical model for universities. On the one hand, there are financial savings as we provide a single course to supplement the learning of all the languages offered in the degree, avoiding the need for dedicated courses for each of the languages. On the other hand, it frees up time in language classes for teachers to focus exclusively on language instruction and student interaction.

**Concluding Remarks**

All genuine learning ultimately leads to transformation. However, as the literature and students' reflections demonstrate, language learning in itself does not lead to the comprehension of learning mechanisms, to the awareness of cognitive and socioemotional variables that underlie the learning process, or to the effective application of strategies to enhance language learning. These variables, tools and strategies need to be formally taught, practiced and mastered. We believe that enhancing students' awareness of the variables affecting their learning and challenging preconceived ideas, will increase their readiness to apply this new knowledge and new strategies into future situations in and beyond the classroom, and across all aspects of their life. Further longitudinal research on students' language learning results and future reflections on implementing these strategies are needed to fully ascertain the positive effects of this type of language learning course on students' own language learning. However, based on the preliminary findings presented here, students experienced some transformation with regards to their attitudes towards language learning and their application of new strategies to enhance their learning.

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### Please cite this article as:

Eisenchlas, S. A., & Shoecraft, K. (2024). Learning how to learn languages: A transformative learning approach to empower effective language learners. A practice report. *Student Success*, 15(1), 105-113. <https://doi.org/10.5204/ssj.3034>

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