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Language learning obstacles

By Jeremy Quinton



Once again, as with this time every year, millions of people are (re) starting thousands of different study programmes, including, of course language courses. So it's interesting to note that this week Europe celebrates its annual *Jour of Languages*, to raise our awareness of the richness of linguistic diversity on this multicultural continent we live in.

Last year www.weeklyletter.com posted an article discussing and inviting opinions on what makes people learn languages - the reasons for *starting*. But what are the things that stop us from learning more on a language course, once we've started?

Maybe if we have a clearer idea of what the Germans call the *Hindernisse*, we'd have a better chance of learning more, without spending any more time. To learn more effectively. To "maximise learning". The benefits? Less time & money spent on learning. More for other things in your life. This article wants to draw our attention to these obstacles & invite readers to reflect on possible solutions.

Many of the "obstacles" are not difficult to see, but that doesn't necessarily imply that we as learners actually spend any *tiempo* trying to find a way round the obstacle. So I've put the question to both learners and teachers, to see what viewpoints come up.

"What is the major obstacle that prevents you from learning more English?"

Here's what people said...

While students & teachers had a wide range of perceptions on how learning can be seriously hindered, there were two factors which came up again and again.

All learners say that the main factor is **lack of time**, given other responsibilities and interests. They also mention the fact that it takes so long to obtain a high level, and that in most cases, the higher you go, the less visible the speed of progress. This can dampen enthusiasm or even make people lose all interest - temporarily or "for good". Even "top" students suffer from the "*I don't think I'm improving*" feeling too, which perhaps confirms just how much work is needed from a person in order to continue learning. Antonio talks of his own "*...mental block or mental fatigue with a language that I have been studying all my life and I feel unable to improve with traditional classes of English*".

A common response from teachers was that many students don't *appear* to **organise or use time** well, and that they have (or state) unrealistic goals & expectations that are impossible to fulfil from the start. When that happens, sadly there can never be any solid sense of *avanzamento* (and the self-fuelling motivation that comes with it). That's even sadder, some said, when seen in people who *are* investing the time to learn with quality coursework and (as a direct result) are making some progress, but find it difficult to recognise.

Teachers also mention "not attending", not actually completing the coursework activities and not reviewing what's been learned as typical barriers to effective learning, despite a student being "on" the course.

So, it seems that when learning a language there are the "tangible" things that hold us back - the real lack of time or opportunities to converse with other speakers, or the complications of a long car journey to the classroom or a class which finishes at 10pm. But many courses these days offer ways to get round these obstacles. A complete e-learning course - giving opportunities to practise the four main language skill areas - is just *one* of them.

In addition to raising our awareness, the European Day of Languages also aims to encourage people to learn more languages. Many of us would be happy to learn just one foreign language, but to learn it well, even if, for most of us that's something that could take a long time. As a colleague said, "*it is not the obstacles - it is how to make your way around them*". Do any of you have suggestions for dealing with the two big barriers - lack of time, and unrealistic expectations? *Dankzegging* in advance...