

# Chapter 3-Outside the Lines: The Language Learning Ecosystem

Q: So how did those Iraqi teachers you met in 2010 learn English?

A: The same way teachers and students from Peru, Mexico, China, and Jordan are learning languages right now.

Over the next few years, and hundreds of interviews later, I came to a startling discovery: language learning is happening even in the remote jungles of Peru, the Sierra Madre mountain ranges in southeast Mexico, and the western edge of the Sichuan Basin. Even in Syrian refugee camps, language can and is happening...and not only is it happening, but in a way that the world has never seen before.

After returning from Baghdad to my home in Arizona, I have continued training teachers. These groups can come from just about anywhere in the world, and, if the cards fall just right, they receive funding to come to the U.S. and experience American culture (and education) firsthand.

In 2015, it was a young group of 195 Mexican teachers. Early on a Monday morning, they stood in line ready to receive ID cards, vaccinations, and textbooks. I

was selected to lead the program as the educational director, and so I was there in suit and tie to represent ASU as best I could.

While I find it important to have them get to know what Arizona State is all about, I find it equally important to get to know each of these Mexican teachers, and so I go down the line trying to learn names. I have a memory trick that I use to remember as many as possible.

“What’s your name?” I ask.

“Julio Cesar,” the first teacher says.

“Do you know Julio Cesar Chavez?” I ask.

“The fighter?” he replies with his own question and throws me a jab. I like Julio Cesar. He is immediately friendly.

“That’s right. My dad loves boxing. If I forget your name, will you remind me by throwing that punch?” He agrees and pretends to punch again. Julio Cesar, I think to myself. Julio Cesar. The fighter. I imagine him in a ring and I am the announcer. The image makes me smile.

“So, how did you learn English?”

He tells me that he grew up listening to the radio, and that he loves heavy metal. He shares some of his favorite songs. He also mentions Game of Thrones and Prison Break. Down the line, I hear murmurs of agreement.

“I love Prison Break, but not as much as Breaking Bad.”

This declaration surprises me. I have not seen either of these shows. As they continue to share, I get the distinct feeling that this group understands American pop culture in ways that I do not.

“I watch Friends,” one older teacher says.

“Friends? You watch your friends?” says her companion.

“No, it’s a TV show, tonta. Just like your Game of Thrones.”

“I watch YouTube videos.”

“I read the New York Times.”

“I love to play games online with English-speaking friends.”

“I listen to podcasts.”

“Podcasts? No one listens to podcasts, you nerd. I love the Lakers. I watch all their games.”

I go down the line and continue to memorize names. I meet Diana and think of the Roman goddess of the same name, goddess of the hunt. I ask Diana to pull back an invisible bow and shoot an invisible arrow. She agrees. I meet Magalys, who shares the name of a Venezuelan friend of mine, a singer. After some discussion, we agree that she will clasp her hands together as if ready to sing opera. Her eyebrows raise comically and I almost expect her to belt out a song. I will not be able to forget her now—that is for sure.

As I continue farther and farther down the line, I keep learning and asking questions, trying to remember not only names and faces, but understanding what each teacher is currently doing to support their language learning.

Can you guess what the next lesson I learned was? While I witnessed this first in Iraq, these follow up trainings were instructive. No matter if I were with people from Mexico, Peru, or China, people are beginning to learn language without ever leaving their country. This, I thought, was something new. This is something worth trying to understand in full. Here are the key takeaways:

*There is a shift in how people are learning languages.*

*Languages are learned by tapping into, and creating, vibrant,*

*often-virtual communities.*

*Anyone can do it.*

While I will write about this in more detail later, I have learned that successful adult learners systematically search for authentic materials and relationships, and because of the explosion of available resources in the virtual world, this kind of approach can happen just about anywhere. I refer to this approach as the successful learner's "language ecosystem." Here is the hopelessly academic definition: A language ecosystem describes a holistic environment that encourages and extends the learning and application of language beyond the classroom through a diverse system of tasks and incentives. Now let me explain without all the fancy talk: developing an

ecosystem means stepping out of the classroom, making a plan, and above all, exploring. As soon as you see what I mean in the chapters ahead, you will find language learning is unbelievably fun.

*Question 2: Am I willing to explore, online and in my own community?*