

Being a language tutor

I have been a tutor for many years and have always loved the feeling when students get that 'Aha' moment. You start with a grammar topic and they look at you as if you are an alien – and then suddenly the light-bulb goes off and by the end of the lesson they are happy students who have not only understood the initial topic, but are now capable of tackling the most difficult grammar rules. This gives them confidence and makes them - and me - happy.

I often find that even if students know a lot of grammar and vocabulary, they can be rather shy of actually speaking the language that they are learning when in school. There are many different reasons for this, although one of the most common is that students can be scared of speaking in front of a whole class, as they fear they might make mistakes and get laughed at. They simply don't want to risk being judged by their peers for using the language incorrectly. Some students have actual gaps that need to be filled with extra vocabulary practice or grammar practice. Others simply lack the confidence that their language skills are already at a good level. Whatever the reasons, the effect is that there are a lot of students who simply do not fully participate in language lessons.

As a tutor my role is both to increase competence and confidence. Once students believe that they can communicate in the language that they are learning at school, they will put more effort into lessons and contribute more in class.

I have recently taught a student who had excellent German grammar skills and a broad vocabulary but who simply couldn't speak much German. Why? Because she wasn't given the opportunity in class. There were 28 students in her language class and with each class lasting an hour, you can do the maths; less than two minutes per student - even if each student got to speak (which rarely, if ever, happened). In addition, my student was very shy. I am happy to say that I have seen an impressive transformation within just a few months, and when she applied for 6th form in some very academic schools in London, she was offered a place in every one of them. All her German interviews were conducted completely in German and each interviewer was impressed by her language skills. She is proof that many that students can blossom as soon as they are given the right platform and opportunity to do so. My constant encouragement and her impressive thirst for knowledge has made her a confident German speaker. She is by no means fluent yet, but she can participate in discussion on an impressive array of topics and hold lengthy conversations. As her tutor, I could not be prouder, as I know that the speaking skill is perhaps the hardest to acquire.

Another example of tailored language lessons being successful is a student from a very academic boys' school in London. He is a keen linguist who studies Latin, Greek, French and German at school and truly enjoys his language lessons - but he doesn't get the opportunity to speak much in class. In addition, the teacher conducts much

of the lesson in English so the students don't hear as much German as they both could and should. As soon as I started teaching this student, I used as much German as possible - and it is amazing to see just how much he picked up when given the opportunity and encouragement he needed.

There are many different ways of improving one's language skills and I know from experience that they all count. When students make the effort to listen to podcasts in German, watch German YouTube videos online, or watch their favourite movies in German (or whatever the language they are learning) with subtitles, they will catch a few phrases here and there. And with the assistance of a committed tutor making the effort to converse in the target language at all times, the student will visibly grow both in confidence and in their ability to answer in the target language as well.

For students who would love to improve their vocabulary but are either very busy with other subjects at school or simply lack the enthusiasm for taking a book or magazine and reading through it, could I suggest that one way to start is by reading German comics. They contain lots of pictures with little text and can be entertaining too. It is easy to understand what is happening in the scenes due to the amount of pictures mixed with short sentences, and this is a great way to learn vocabulary without the tedium of some of the more formal methods. I have introduced the comic method to a number of my students, and once they feel that they can actually go through a whole book, albeit a comic book, they find traditional books and magazines less intimidating.

So all in all, as an experienced tutor I can say that the greater the exposure to the language that students want to learn, the faster they will build both their vocabulary and their confidence. And as a consequence they will almost always enjoy their school language lessons more and increase their participation in class. The most fulfilling moments are when parents come back from a parents' evening reporting that the language teacher said that the student is more active in class. As a tutor one couldn't be happier!

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