

Most people who are around me for more than a few weeks realize I don't have more than a dozen or so soapboxes from which I stomp my various gospels. I rarely feel compelled to distill the blather an initiate may misinterpret as self-righteous (but for actual sermons which only seldom get delivered orally without having existed as a manuscript), but on this occasion, since I've said it so often, and will say it again no doubt within another week in class or in office or what have you, I've decided to put down in words the simple advice I believe worked for me in my own journey to learning languages and music and poetry and the other strains of the spheres that touch our hearts. Perhaps the reader will be able better to appreciate the sentiments next time he hears it (which as I say may be next week in class!) once he's let these words hit his eyes and sink in by reading them.

Discipline. In a word. And while it's a word I despise more than I'd like to admit, there simply is no substitution for it. You can't cut corners with this stuff. Raw talent is nice, but raw talent be damned if you want to do anything with it later on. It's hard work to learn a language. It took most of us years to master English before we got to school (and by the looks of most papers I grade, most of us still have got a long way to go!). So it should come as no surprise that it will be hard work to learn a non-native language. There is no substitution for discipline.

Now that I've got the dirty, awful word out of the way, let's not say it anymore. Let's just describe what it looks like. My favorite analogy is the work of the musician. If you've never sung, played, learned to read music, sat with an instrument for 15 minutes to an hour engaged in "practice time," well, this analogy may not fit you well. But I'm taking as my analogy the context of the practice studio in which may be found the music stand and chair, the instrument, the metronome, and the tuner, a pencil and pen and nothing else. And what does the accomplished musician do during practice time? The same thing she did ever since her mom or dad or teacher forced, cajoled, screamed at, commanded, or begged her from the fourth grade on. Devote the time. Practice. Scales, arpeggios, etudes, all that stuff you learn and drill over and over again.

Scales and arpeggios. Just like in that Aristocats song. There is nothing like being able to jump from a B-flat major scale to an F-sharp minor at the drop of a hat, or fly through the cross-fingers of a challenging arpeggio study. But it doesn't happen automatically. You don't begin by being amazed at the magic of the circle of fifths or with an intimate knowledge of your instrument. You begin as we all do with Do, Re, Mi, etc., and gradually add more. But the adding doesn't mean you put away the act of going through the scales and arpeggios. You continue to do them, and you get better at them all the time until they become for you the life-blood,

the natural course of how you understand the instrument and yourself with the instrument.

As I said, this is the practice of the accomplished musician. The scales and arpeggios are the frame, the skeleton of his musicianship, and he takes care of his skeleton just as any one who is health-conscious takes care of his own skeleton and innards with the right foods and appropriate sleep and exercise. We build habits.

You need to build the habit of devoting time to your scales and arpeggios. What, pray tell, are the analogues in learning, say, Latin? We get to exchange Solfege with the endings of nouns in the declensions at first. So instead of singing or playing Do, Re, Mi, Fa, Sol, La, Ti, Do, we chant out an exuberant and thrilling (or more likely monotone and begrudging) A, Ae, Ae, Am, A, Ae, Arum, Is, As, Is. Not nearly as lovely as Julie Andrews singing the tune to the von Trapp children, surely. Though interesting in that I learned my A, Ae, Ae's from a German nun ...

But I digress. Scales and arpeggios. Don't be satisfied until you've mastered A Ae Ae Am A and Us I O Um O and Is Is I Em E and Us Us Ui Um U and Es Ei Ei Em E. And O S T Mus Tis Nt. And Bam Bas Bat and Bo Bis Bit and all the other things that you really just can't by without. They will make the task of learning to read an awful lot easier once you get there.

Also included in scales and arpeggios for learning Latin - and this is true of learning any language - is vocabulary. This must be learned and continually reviewed with flashcards, lists, internet resources, and oral/aural reinforcement. It's interesting to watch people from time to time, sitting in church, waiting to be seated at a restaurant, sharing a smoke between classes, whatever it may be. You can tell who will be doing well in language classes because they stand in line with flashcards on a ring, not wasting time, but taking advantage of idleness by letting the fundamentals sink in at every opportunity. You know they go to sleep at night chanting their paradigm endings (or do so silently so as not to jeopardize any intimate relationship they may have).

Don't study vocab in church, by the way. Listen to the sermon.

I said just a moment ago that attention to these fundamentals, the scales and arpeggios, make the task of learning to read an awful lot easier once you get there. But how do you get there? That's what etudes are for. Studies. Accomplished musicians move from scales and arpeggios to etudes: studies that are intended to exploit a certain corner of the instrument or music, a fingering, a position, a certain style of playing with

variations. And studies are available to you: this is in general what you would call "homework." The stuff you need to read in your book and exercises you need to work on: the Practice & Review and Sententiae Antiquae sections of Wheelock; the various translation and reading assignments in OLC. But I hope by now that you're sensitive to the idea that "homework" is not accomplished fully simply by reading Practice & Review #1 and translating into English and setting down your book to go play Wii or do your Calculus or whatever you kids do with your MTVs these days. Practice time - homework - must enjoy a broader, yet systematic identity than just playing through the etude. It starts with a certain amount of time devoted to the basics - vocab and forms - and then part two of your time ought to be devoted to etudes. Your busy book-work, in other words. Just as important, you want to be engaged actively in asking yourself the questions about the etude: why is the book author or editor throwing that form at me? Why did this sentence seem so difficult? Or so simple? What lesson from previous chapters is that tense or case reinforcing? How do I parse this word? What is its usage? How would it be different in the accusative case, or how would I change it if it were to be future instead of perfect? Etc.

This sort of thinking underscores the logic of doing composition work - something we risk losing in a class devoted to a language that is no longer spoken by any but a crazy few who proclaim Latina Vivit! No, it's dead, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't be able to think the other direction and Latin our English just as we English our Latin. And it's that sort of thinking, so natural in a conversational language class, that will help you get the most out of your studies: you'll be engaged not just with a puzzle to figure out the endings and word order and all that to make sense of a subject, object, and verb ... no, you'll rather be engaged with a piece of text that you know is trying to have a conversation, with which you'll indeed be conversing. That's how a language gets learned.

So do your scales and arpeggios. And practice your etudes. But Ack! How boring it is to sit in that study room, that practice room, how tiring to practice once again by rote all you've learned from time immemorial ... what incentive is there to practice when it's just the same thing over and over? That gets to the final part of practice time. Something fun.

Those guys at the LA Phil don't just play stuffy old orchestra stuff you know. They like to pop off a little jazz and rock too. And you have to have some fun with what you're doing if you're going to keep doing it at all. That's why I say you need something fun at the end - some incentive. Now this is of course individual, unique for each person. My incentive was trying to translate songs I'd hear on the radio, even while I was in Latin 101. I've had students write me emails in Latin - because they needed

something to do to have fun with the language. I know others who decide to bite off a little bit of "real" Latin - an ancient author they quite like, and begin reading very slowly, marking forms and words they don't know and looking them up little by little. I know others who just want to read Harry Potter in Latin or Greek and they feel like they can stay in the game if that cherry is on top. But whatever it is, you need to have a little fun everytime you practice. Otherwise you'll break your piano or kill yourself with your cello bow. Or tell your Latin teacher to go to hell. We want to stay sane.

There it is, in a nutshell, how to study a language. Where and when is up to you and your needs, but I'll reiterate what I've said countless times in countless classes - you should spend two hours outside class for every hour you spend in class. For a 5-day a week Latin class that meets an hour a day, that means you should probably quit your job. Ask mom and dad to fund your freshman year. Because you're going to need to study for two hours each day, Monday through Friday. And you ought to be able to break it up each day the way that works best for you - perhaps a half hour of scales and arpeggios (warm ups - fundamentals), an hour of etudes (busy book work), and a final hour of something fun, something that's for you (the Latin version of Led Zeppelin's "Houses of the Holy").

Make it a habit. Stick with it. You'll be happier not just at final exam time, but in another 10 years too.