

## The Psychology of Learning

Before you read, think about these questions:

1. What do you need to learn a language well?
2. How important is it to have good teachers and books?

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When I was young I studied French for many years, with little or no success. Yet when I was an adult, in a short period of time, I became fluent in a language. What made the difference?

To answer this question, let's look at psychology. What do psychologists believe is the most important factor in learning a language? Environment - things such as good books and good teaching - can help, but they are not the most important factors.

What psychologists have found to be most important is self belief. When we believe we can do something, we are much more likely to be able to do it.

Take the example of a placebo. A placebo is a pill which contains no medicine. Yet when sick people take a placebo, which they believe contains medicine, they often get better. Why? Because of the power of belief.

Puchta, a writer and researcher in this area, gives the example of a businessman he worked with. The man was successful, highly intelligent and motivated. Yet when he tried to speak Spanish on the phone he turned white, sweated, shook and was unable to speak.

As a child this businessman had been humiliated when learning languages. As a consequence, he felt he was unable to learn languages - and therefore he couldn't.

Puchta contrasted this to a girl of 8, who was a very successful learner of English. When he asked her if she was worried when she couldn't express herself or forgot a word, she laughed and said no, it didn't concern her at all. When asked why it didn't worry her, she replied that she knew she would be able to do it in the future. She said that she could imagine herself in London, as an adult, with friends. She could see herself talking English with them, and being understood by them.

Puchta argued that these examples proved his point that our self belief is important for success. He gave the example of a successful skier he knew. When he was about to start a race, he closed his eyes and imagined himself shooting down the slope, doing everything perfectly. Puchta compared the businessman to a skier who, before taking part in the race, imagined himself falling down the slope and breaking his neck.

As a child I was filled with the experience of failure. As an adult, and a language teacher, I know that I can learn languages - so I do.

So, next time you are going into an exam, or feeling down about your ability to use English - just remember, you have to imagine yourself as the successful skier, not the one who breaks his neck!