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Learn language at the FLIC of a switch

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For closer cooperation between EU Member States, closer communication is a necessity. Although second languages are taught throughout Europe, only 51 per cent of EU citizens are able to speak a second language.

Children have long been shown to have an aptitude for learning languages. Moreover, adults learning languages, even to a high standard, seem to acquire the languages differently to children. What if there were techniques available that made learning language as easy as if you were a child? The FLIC project, funded under the Fifth Framework Programme (FP5), and coordinated by MediTech, based in Wedemark, Germany, hopes to achieve this. FLIC (Foreign Language Acquisition with the Instinct of a Child) uses techniques first developed for assisting those with dyslexia, and applies them to adults keen to learn new languages.

Ralph Warnke is the head of MediTech, and spoke to CORDIS news. 'FLIC is so-called because children pick up languages with ease - they do so implicitly, without having to concentrate. But, at school it becomes explicit. It is the same for vocabulary. When learning foreign words you might be able to pinpoint exactly where you saw the word in a textbook, but not apply it accurately.'

Mr Warnke gives the example of children going on exchanges to learn language, where they develop a far more sophisticated language use simply from applying it in everyday life. The project is about ready to deliver its findings, but there have been some preliminary results from a centre in Sheffield, in the UK. The company is gathering further information from five more sites in France, Italy and Germany, and the final report is expected by June.

'In Sheffield, we have made a direct comparison between the standard approach and a parallel 50 per cent FLIC method approach, and our groups have performed better,' said Mr Warnke. The results show that the students in the FLIC group did indeed perform better in almost every category, but particularly in speaking and listening. Interestingly, in self-reported tests, the students in the FLIC group often rated their performance over and above the progress they had actually made. This reveals one crucial factor - confidence.

'This is a key factor,' said he continued. 'Something we identified as a problem in adult language learning is that it is on a rational basis. There is a difference between learning something and applying it. We try to take away any inferiority students may feel. This is a key element - to make them try.'

The FLIC method developed from work with dyslexic children. The researchers found that these children were sometimes not able to 'parallel process' material easily. They may be able to read out a passage perfectly, but if distracted, for example by standing on one leg, then the reading could become impossible, or the child might fall over.

Cross-cultural tests also revealed that in cultures where certain words are absent - for example the differences between 'L' and 'R' in Japan or 'W' and 'V' in the Indian subcontinent, small children can appreciate these differences, but once the child reaches eight months, the ability to distinguish has been lost. The FLIC method hopes to re-awaken these dormant abilities.

Further tests on two and three year-olds show that incorrect grammar sounds simply 'wrong'. When asked to repeat sentences with correct and incorrect grammar, the children made more mistakes with the sentences containing incorrect grammar.

To try and bring some of this childish wisdom back to adult populations, the company has devised a method of parallel processing in language learning, to give the new language an 'inner representation'.

First, the student wears headphones, and repeats words. The student's voice comes through the left, and the trainer's voice through the right headphone. This allows the student to make direct comparisons.

Secondly, the voices shift from ear-to-ear. This is important as it ensures both brain hemispheres attend to both voices - both the student's and the trainer's. This part of the

process is extremely important in making the language available to the subconscious mind - in much the same way as a child processes the information.

Thirdly, the voices are broken up into four component frequencies, and blended, so each ear attends to two quarters of the student's own voice and two quarters of the trainer's voice. The voices, once blended, give the student a much enhanced appreciation of how his or her own voice should sound.

Finally, the students undergo consonant enhancement. Certain phonemes are often difficult to pronounce. Phonemes are repeated, but with an 'incorrect' phoneme added. The incorrect phoneme is much easier to spot from this kind of direct comparison. The technology enables the consonants to be fine-tuned, by attending to the student's inner repetition.

While the process seems to attend more to pronunciation, the evidence so far suggests that the complete learning experience is enhanced. 'We are using grammar without using grammar, hearing and applying words again and again,' says Mr Warnke, who incidentally speaks faultless English, and brings his two young children up as bilingual - he speaks only German to them, his wife only English.

Perhaps the most startling finding from the preliminary results is that the greatest improvement came from those who had the lowest levels of skill before the trial. This suggests that the technique may be a way of reaching those who have difficulty in improving their language skills.

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