

Imagine yourself ten years from now - you are settled into an international job that requires you to travel the world. You are attending a conference in Copenhagen, and during a wonderfully interesting cocktail party, you meet delegates from many countries. What role will language play during this event? For one, it plays a large role in defining your credentials. If you are an American, some will expect you can speak Spanish, since over 16.7% of Americans are of Spanish heritage, and the US is a close neighbor of 22 Spanish-speaking countries. If you are Canadian, people will expect that you can speak French, since 22.3% of the population is French, and it is one of the official languages. International professionals are expected to have second and even third language abilities. Being multilingual builds credentials, but more importantly, learning a second language provides insights into how other cultures think and behave, and this insight is highly transferable as you meet people from other cultures. Below are a few tips on language learning and its importance in building an international career:

Why You Need a Second Language for an International Career

- **International employers expect you to have a second language:** Knowing other languages will not guarantee you a job abroad - your international career must be grounded in technical or professional expertise. However, foreign language proficiency is an important secondary element in your skill inventory.
- **Your international hosts look for signs of openness:** Language abilities are universally appreciated. If you have already learned a second language, you recognize that your effort to speak a few words in a new language will send an important message to your hosts. It tells them that you are interested in their customs and culture and will meet them, at least partially, on their terms.
- **Second language skills are common outside North America:** In North America, we have a long way to go in our sophistication and recognition of the value of a second language. Among the general populations of Europe, Africa, and many parts of Asia it is common to speak two or more languages. This is also true of educated elites almost everywhere.

High-Level Tips on Learning A Second Language

- **One major rule – total immersion:** To learn a new language, you need to breathe the language and culture. Language learning cannot happen just inside a classroom. Live abroad, drink in your new language, fall in love with someone from the culture, perform daily tasks in your new language, and see your ability soar. And of course, enjoy!
- **Be an active listener:** Even when you don't understand what is going on, listen actively; watch for facial expressions and don't tune out.
- **Be humble:** Language learning is like being a child all over again, you will need to re-learn how to walk, so practice the self-deprecating laugh.

Radically Change Your Life in Four Months

Here are a few strategies you can use to acquire a second language and chart a new course in life. The common element is that you need to live abroad in "full immersion" to learn a second language and culture.

- **Spend four months and \$4,000:** How much does it cost to sit on your couch for four months? Probably \$4,000, and you accomplish nothing! Borrow or save \$4,000, and you can change your life forever. You can go to Guatemala and live in Antigua—a UNESCO designated world heritage site; and for as little as \$100 a week, you can board with a local family and employ a personal Spanish language instructor for half-days. After four months you will be functional in Spanish, and you will never be the same. It is that simple to change your life and build a major component of your international resume.
- **Learn another language while studying abroad in English:** Did you know that many universities in non-English speaking countries (in Europe, Eastern Europe, Latin America, Asia) now offer Master's degrees taught entirely in English? Imagine completing an MBA at a French university in Paris or Montreal taught entirely in English - with the added benefit of learning French on the side. Quebec, Canada is a low-cost alternative to France, and allows you to discover the rich social and cultural life of "Les Quebecois."

- **Begin an eight-month backpacking trip by completing a semester at a third world university:** Launch your travels by registering to learn a language at a third world university. Costs are low and you will benefit from friendship with locals. You may not be able to transfer credits, but you will launch your trip with language abilities and a strong cultural immersion.

Gain International Work Experience While Learning a Second Language Abroad

There are many ways that you can build international work experience while studying a language abroad. The following examples assume that you have taken the four-month challenge and are studying Spanish in Antigua, and that you have given yourself the parallel objective of building career experience.

- **Take a part-time job:** Work for free to practice your language and understand the culture. Offer to work in a café, a kitchen, as a carpenter's helper, or to teach. International employers take note of any cross-cultural work experience.
- **Track down experts in your field:** Attend meetings, conferences, and courses. Volunteer to work with them any way you can. Offer to be an English editor. As a future internationally savvy job seeker, you'll be able to use these experiences to describe your top-notch global career skills.
- **Volunteer teaching sports, music or a skill that you are good at:** By demonstrating initiative while living in abroad, you prove that you possess the skills that are critical to international employers. Offer your services in a non-structured environment by working with neighbourhood kids or a local family.
- **Teach English as you learn Spanish:** Develop a one-page lexicon of Spanish and English words related to any work that you are doing. Share your lexicon with your non-English speaking host country nationals and enjoy the fun of sharing your language with people who want to learn it.
- **Write a quick reference card on local culture:** Share your culture synopsis with others, build up your cross-cultural vocabulary, and impress future employers with this essential international skill set.
- **Network for possible future jobs while you study:** Let it be known that you are looking for short-term contract work when you finish your language learning. For example, befriend expatriates who are locally employed or experts in your field. Start building contacts with local NGOs or with firms that work in your field. For more ideas on this, see remaining tips.
- **Why is it critical to gain work experience immediately after language learning while still abroad?** You can double the value of your trip abroad and build on your language training by seeking out international work experience immediately after you finish your language course. You are ideally suited to find work after a language course since you know the country (and the language) and you most have likely made contacts. So take advantage of this situation because it is much harder to acquire international career experience after you return to your home country.
- **Go backpacking and gain experience:** One of the best examples is the environmental studies student who, after her language studies, spent three months visiting eco-tourism sites. At each site she offered to translate and improve their poorly-written English trail guides. This was great experience for her resume and helped her land her first professional international job!
- **Other work strategies abroad after language training:** Consider the business student who helps an NGO automate the accounting systems using the *Simply Accounting* software package—common software that anyone can learn in one day. Imagine, therefore, you are a nursing graduate (or any type of graduate) who helps a health clinic set up their accounting system. This is a powerful job search strategy proving your management skills and differentiating you from all other job applicants, (a nurse with accounting/management skills), and is sure to land you a job when competing in your field.
- **Do small, extraordinary things to gain international work experience while abroad:** Whatever your field of study, you can gain entry to the international career path by building small, entrepreneurial international experiences.

These strategies add up and show employers that you possess the skills required to be effective in a multicultural workplace. *Et voilà* - you land your first professional international job. Good luck! Happy language learning!

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