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Second Language Acquisition

My chosen thesis topic is second language acquisition, with a focus on my personal experience learning German abroad. In the interest of ensuring that the personal experience aspect does not cause the thesis to become too casual, and that I use an appropriate amount of secondary sources, I have split the entire work into three sections.

I will begin with first language acquisition and discuss a normally developing human's ability to learn his/her mother tongue. The next chapters will have a psychological focus and also discuss the linguistic aspects of acquiring a second language. I will discuss some theories surrounding the topic, and focus on what factors (both general and individual) affect one's ability to learn a second language. In doing so, special attention will be paid to personal variables such as age and learning style, but especially commitment and motivation, and personality, especially introversion and extroversion. It will also be important to look at where the language is being learned (in an individual's home country, or a setting where the language is spoken by a majority of the population), and the response of the native speakers to the learner's attempts to use his/her new language, especially the responses of those who speak the learner's native tongue. The contact that an individual has with native speakers, combined with the level of acquisition of the specific individual, may play an important role in determining how simple or difficult it may be to learn the language.

Part II will be a journal i.e., a personal narrative. I will incorporate the material used in Part I, and the general variables I examined to better understand how they affected my ability to learn German while studying abroad. I will take examples from Part I and apply them to my first-hand knowledge and experiences. I will discuss the steps that were taken to improve my command of the German language, paying special attention to the country I was in at the time. Part II will therefore be split into three chapters (focusing on classroom learning in both the US and in Germany, and "learning on the street" while in Germany), and will be completed over intersession

Part III will be more theoretical, and I will work towards answering the questions: "What is proficiency" and "What does fluent mean?" This may prove to be a difficult task, since there are so many different levels of proficiency and fluency. In discovering what these levels are, I will attempt to determine how proficient and fluent I am, and what steps were required to get there. Additionally, I will look into what I still need to do in order to achieve ultimate fluency. The factors discussed in Part I should help determine what steps are needed to achieve this goal. Lastly, I will discuss why it is important, as an American living in the United States, to be multilingual, the importance of learning a second language, and how this relates to gaining an understanding of the culture surrounding the language.

In writing this thesis, I hope to learn more about myself and how I best acquire language. I would like to determine what realistic goals would be for an individual attempting to learn a foreign language, taking into account certain personal variables, as well as more general variables, such as learning in a classroom versus learning abroad.