

# Learning a Second Language

BY TOMMY NEWTON

**AS DIRECTOR OF WESTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY'S TEACHING ENGLISH AS SECOND LANGUAGE PROGRAM, ALEX POOLE KNOWS THE VALUE OF — AND THE DIFFICULTY IN — LEARNING A NON-NATIVE LANGUAGE.**

In fact, his goal as an applied linguist “is to find solutions to problems people have with learning a second language.”

Dr. Poole received a first-hand lesson after meeting his future wife, Doris, a native of Colombia, during graduate school at the University of Northern Iowa. By marrying into a family that speaks Spanish not English, “the language was chosen for me,” he said.

“A lot of my research is not only informed by what I saw as a need for others when they were learning a new language but also by the questions I had,” Dr. Poole said. “In some ways, I’ve probably been the biggest beneficiary of my own research.”

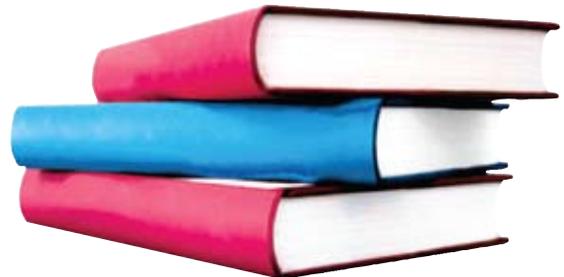
“My research has helped me pursue professional goals but also has enriched my personal life by being able to communicate with my wife’s family and understand their culture.”



Alex Poole

Improving communication and developing a better understanding of cultures is what drives Poole’s research and scholarly activities. His research falls into the following areas:

- Finding the optimal way of teaching grammar to second language students, especially English as Second Language (ESL) students.
- Making people more efficient readers with reading strategies to improve comprehension and understanding of texts.
- Enhancing bilingual education in the United States as the number of immigrants increases.





Dr. Poole is conducting his research all over the world in places like China, Korea, and Colombia with participants ranging in age from high school students to adults in their fifties. "For me, the thing that has enabled me to do research internationally is the fact that I am bilingual," he said.



During a trip to Colombia last year to work with students who want to be English language teachers, Dr. Poole delivered his lectures in Spanish. "I know what is going on in other locations and can empathize with students who are trying to learn English," he explained.

"Doing this research has helped me bring my knowledge and experiences to teach ESL students here and to help them be better readers, but doing research at the international level helps me understand the political, economic, and social circumstances," he said.

*hola* *hello*

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Dr. Poole also tries to pass along that experience to his students in writing or grammar courses who want to study abroad or work overseas. Unless students know and use a second language, they truly aren't going to understand other people or their culture by relying on translators or interpreters, he said.

Dr. Poole, who is teaching his one-year-old daughter to be bilingual, is concerned that U.S. schools don't begin foreign language instruction until middle school or high school when students become more self-conscious about how they sound speaking a new language.

"Sometimes that's where my research really concerns me," Dr. Poole said. "When I go abroad, I see students studying English and doing well, but I come home and there's very little language education going on here because it's not given much funding or much attention. How are we going to become a competitive society?"



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In his research and in his own life, Dr. Poole knows that learning a second language becomes more difficult as people get older and that children of immigrants have always learned English more quickly than their parents or grandparents.

Dr. Poole is troubled by the push for English-only laws in the United States. "The majority of Americans haven't learned another language or studied one extensively so they'd understand how difficult it is," he said. "Immigrants know they must learn English but learning a language is a hard process, especially if you're an adult."

In the early twentieth century, few immigrants even graduated from high school and didn't need extensive English language skills to work in most unskilled labor jobs, he said. "The first generation of immigrants always struggles," said Poole.

Again, Dr. Poole has first-hand knowledge about that aspect of language. Dr. Poole grew up in Sioux City, Iowa, but his grandmother, whose family had lived in the Ukraine, spoke Yiddish. He was fascinated by the stories told by his father and his grandmother and developed an interest in knowing people from other cultures.

He had friends from Pakistan, Syria, Turkey, Mexico, and Greece, and would seek out foreign exchange students in school. "When I was growing up, I remember hearing accents and other languages. I would ask my friends to say things to me in their language. All the different sounds were amazing. I really thought people who knew another language were geniuses and it was so cool," Dr. Poole said.

In high school, Dr. Poole participated in trips to Great Britain and Germany but he didn't really experience a second language until he took a Russian class at Augsburg College in Minneapolis and went on a monthlong study abroad trip to Russia. "Even though I didn't achieve proficiency in Russian, I got to use it, which was almost a mystical feeling for me," Poole said.

After graduating from college, Dr. Poole taught English to middle school students in Israel for a few months. "I got to realize how people in difficult conditions with far fewer opportunities than the average American has were really doing pretty well."

That solidified Dr. Poole's idea that learning a second language required hard work and new strategies for teaching. He returned to the United States and began pursuing a master's in teaching English as second language at the University of Northern Iowa and later earned his doctorate in linguistics at Oklahoma State University.

In working with graduate students wanting to become ESL teachers, with principals and teachers wanting advice on teaching English to immigrants, or with students wanting to learn a second language, Dr. Poole offers one common piece of advice: "Read, read, read."



By learning to read texts written in English or a non-native language, students will hear the words, learn their spelling, learn grammar, and learn pronunciation. "Find materials which are interesting and have content that the language learners already know," Poole suggested. "They will be interested and motivated to read books, magazines, and newspapers and will be acquiring English skills. The more children read the more quickly their English proficiency improves."

But schools also must help the young child's parents and older family members learn English, Dr. Poole explained. "It is extremely important for the child's educational success that the parents can speak a fair amount of English. If the parents learn to speak English, they can do the things that enrich a child's success in school, such as helping with homework or communicating with teachers and school administrators." ■