

Activity Guide for Students: Tongue Tied

Purpose: To understand how the similarities and differences between languages may influence language learning.

Procedural overview: Compare general features of the English language with features of other languages, and think about how variations between the languages might influence language learning for native English speakers and speakers whose first language is not English.

Directions for students: There are certain ways in which languages can be similar or different, and those features can make it easier or harder to learn a particular language. In this activity, compare English with some other language you know or are familiar with. For example, think about challenges faced by a native English speaker learning Japanese, as well as challenges that a native Japanese speaker learning English might encounter.

Note: Compared with many other languages, English is especially irregular because it has Germanic and French roots and also pulls from Latin, Celtic and Norse languages. Thus, English is a combination of many other languages. As you work through the questions, if you or your classmates know French, German or Spanish, consider and discuss the similarities between those languages and English. Also consider how French, German, Spanish and English have deviated from one another over time.

1. At what age did you start learning English? How many years have you been speaking English?

2. Do you know or are you familiar with one or more second languages? Did you learn it from your family, from classes at school or both? (You can list several second languages if you know them, but you only have to analyze one for the following questions.)

3. At what age did you start learning that second language? How many years have you been learning or speaking that second language?

4. How well do you know that second language? Are you fluent? Or do you know the language well enough to manage daily life in a country that speaks that language? Or are you halfway there? Or less? Can you, for example, just introduce yourself and make small talk about the weather?

5. Are words in English mostly monosyllabic (one syllable per word) or polysyllabic (two or more syllables per word)? How about words in a non-English language that you know? How might differences between languages that are mostly monosyllabic and languages that are mostly polysyllabic affect language learning?

6. Languages may be written with letters from an alphabet (consonants and vowels), syllabograms from a syllabary (various possible combinations of consonants and vowels), logograms (a different character for every word) or a combination of those. How are English and a non-English language that you know written? How do differences between writing systems affect language learning?

7. Cognates are words in different languages that have similar meanings and spellings. More closely related languages have more cognates, and less closely related languages have fewer cognates. What are a few examples of cognates between English and a non-English language that you know? How can the presence or absence of cognates affect language learning?

8. The most important parts of a sentence are the subject (who/what is doing an action), the verb (or action) and the object (what the subject is acting upon). What is the usual order of those parts in an English sentence? What is the usual word order in a non-English language that you know? How does word order affect language learning?

9. Some languages can change to express politeness or formality. How does English change to express politeness or formality? How does a non-English language that you know change to express politeness or formality? How does that affect language learning? Give at least one example for these cases.

10. In some languages, verbs can vary a lot depending on the subject of the sentence, and will therefore be conjugated based on the subject. Some verbs vary in the same patterns (regular verbs) and some verbs stray from established patterns (irregular verbs). In some languages, verbs may not vary much at all.

Pick a few common verbs in English, give the infinitive form (to ____) and then conjugate the verbs in the present tense for various pronouns. How easy is verb conjugation to learn in English?

Pick a few common verbs in a non-English language that you know, give the infinitive form and then conjugate the verbs in the present tense for various pronouns. How does verb conjugation affect language learning?

11. In the English language, do nouns, the articles (a/the) and adjectives associated with the nouns have an assigned grammatical gender? What about nouns, articles and adjectives in a non-English language that you know? How could grammatical gender affect language learning?

12. After you have finished answering the above questions on your own, compare answers with other students in the class who picked the same non-English language. How were your answers similar or different?

13. Compare your answers for the non-English language you picked with the answers for a different non-English language that another student picked. In what general ways are those non-English languages similar or different?