



## Bridging Cultures through Language

Learning a new language is quickest and easiest when you are a child. The next best method is with a partner, coyly described as 'pillow talk'. But if you have neither of these luxuries then your only approach is the hard way – find a teacher, preferably a good one, and attend many, many hours of classes to pick up and learn by rote the basics of grammar, new vocabulary, simple conversations, casual writing and formal business communications. For most adults this is neither an easy nor a very pleasurable task. Compound that with having to learn a language that has a new set of phonetics and a completely different script and it becomes an increasingly frustrating task too!

In our massively globalized 'flat' world people are migrating between countries and continents to further their professional careers and to enhance the business prospects of the organizations they work for. Americans in Japan, Germans in Brazil, Koreans in India, Brazilians in China, Indians in Mexico, we're all over and often with families for long durations. Learning a new language then becomes a necessity for all – students, homemakers and working professionals.

Pune is the 6th largest city in India and home to 4 million people. Historically it has been a manufacturing and academic centre, nicknamed the 'Oxford of the East'. In recent decades Information Technology firms have mushroomed too. There is a constant flow of expatriate families of diverse origins and nationalities in and out of Pune. Most stay for 2-3 years, some longer, and a few just make Pune their home for ever.



Early on in their visit they realize the importance of needing to strengthen their English language skills or having to learn basic Hindi conversational skills. 'Happy Hour Class' located in a cosmopolitan locality and in a predominantly expatriate society has grown to become a convenient focal point for these activities. Its where the busy Italian exec from Ferrero, the sixth grader from Korea, the German hausfrau and the Colombian who tagged along with her boyfriend who is a chef at the Westin, all come together to learn varying levels of English and Hindi, to cope with the daily necessities of living in India. Their teacher is Ujwala, who's been making expat lives easier through language for the past 5 years.

Living in India is not easy, not even for the average Indian! A recent ambitious study by the [People's Linguistic Survey of India](#) published by the Bhasha Research and Education Centre counted 860 languages of which 780 were certified to be 'living languages' i.e. still spoken today, and 66 scripts! Contrast this with about 250 languages spoken across Europe. Government courts and offices in India allow the use of 22 languages. In an average metro city in India over 300 languages are used. Truly, diversity begins in India.

Thankfully, most of us get by with English or Hindi, the 'national' language, sometimes disputed in the south which prefers Tamil, and any one regional language such as Marathi, which is spoken in the western state of Maharashtra, or Tamil which is spoken in the southern state of Tamil Nadu or Bengali to the east. The average foreigner mercifully can survive with just English or Hindi in urban and semi-urban areas. Rural districts invariably require knowledge of regional dialects.

Learning a new language in such a culturally diverse environment comes with loads of added benefits. At Happy Hour Classes students almost always start with an initial (and only) objective of brushing up their grammar or enhancing their vocabulary or building their confidence in using business terms. Soon, however, they realize the bonuses that accrue.

To begin with, they get to meet other students of the same or different nationalities. This is very important for their social wellbeing. Newcomers soon make new friends and become aware of various cultural and social programmes specially organized for expatriates. They get to compare schools, locate shops catering to their styles and needs, decide on playgrounds and cultural classes for their children, attend newer social circuits and, in every situation, get to practice the language they are learning. All this helps them quickly settle down and feel immediately comfortable in an alien country.

Soon after these basic 'hygiene' factors have been addressed their thoughts and curiosities turn to the cultural, historical, traditional, religious and regional milieu presented by India.

An almost immediate fascination is to be able to wear a sari. But that's such a cumbersome task!

Six yards of thin cloth to be wound and wound and tucked and nipped and yet look presentable in the end! Thankfully there are 'ready-made' saris that women now can wear just as they would trousers and tops. It feels trendy to be able to sport that 'Indian' look, replete with bindi (the decoration on the forehead) and Indian jewellery to go.

Religion is so ubiquitous in India. You can't avoid it. There's a festival or an auspicious occasion almost every day! Some festivals last a week or even longer! We celebrate a multitude of religions – Hindu, Christian, Sikhism, Jewish, Moslem, Jainism, Buddhism – to name just a few, and all of these are celebrated out in the open – on playgrounds, street corners, malls, gyms and bazaars. The opportunity is immense to learn about a new religion and to identify with the followers, even to participate. Several students have participated in street and stage dances, often without the need to be invited! Cultural diversity, openness and inclusiveness are the cornerstones of all religious celebrations in India.

Then there are so many pilgrim places near and far. Once the natural curiosity of the student is heightened and the student feels at ease travelling and conversing in a new environment, he or she begins to wander and explore in depth the cultural depth of the country and its peoples.

Reading, listening, conversing is encouraged through participation in book clubs, social events such as 'sari parties' or wine trail excursions which are aplenty around Pune – all to build the confidence of speaking up in public.

Teaching is an art, teaching requires passion and enthusiasm, and at Happy Hour you see a lot of both brought to the table.

When several Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking students arrived Ujwwala realized how difficult it was to communicate with them at first because they understood so little English. So she embarked on learning Spanish and Portuguese in order to be able to talk to them in their language so they could relate and translate into English. Such authenticity and sensitivity established between teacher and the student a commonality of purpose, making the learning experience easier and enjoyable.

Slowly but surely these expatriates have started to understand, appreciate and enjoy their opportunity to learn about such vastness and diversity and to assimilate quicker in an alien society. There's never a dry eye when they have to return to their homelands.

If you want to learn more about Ujwwala Gokarn, her methods and special language school, give us a call on +49 (0)6221 – 735 13 71 or send us an [e-mail](#).