



When learning fails - *Je ne parle pas Français*

I had an embarrassing reminder recently about the gap between *learning* and *capability*.

Now, I talk about capability all the time - you'd think this wouldn't happen to me - but it did.

Looking forward to two months in France, I decided my schoolgirl French needed a top-up. On previous trips I'd have confidently said, "*Je parle Français un petit peu!*"¹ and managed to get by. So, this time I thought a few online courses would make things easier.

I used two different apps and practised 30 - 45 minutes a day for six weeks. I was rewarded with badges, praise and a steadily improving score. My vocabulary grew, my pronunciation impressed my laptop, and I convinced myself I was getting somewhere.

Then we arrived in France.

The first time I asked for something, I delivered my question perfectly. The problem came next - the reply. The person spoke quickly, naturally, and with an accent I hadn't heard in my carefully moderated lessons. Cue *possum in the headlights*. I froze and blurted out "*Je ne parle pas le Français!*"²

In the bigger towns people switched politely to English. In smaller places we muddled through with "*un peu*" on both sides. What I thought then, was a lack of progress but what I think now, is something else entirely.

What happened... and why was I so disempowered to try?

Unlike my gym trainer, who adjusted exercises so I could safely carry a suitcase upstairs, my language training wasn't related to reality.

The learning environment provided clear sound, a steady pace, no background noise, and no social pressure. It was comfortable, even satisfying, but it didn't prepare me for real-world conditions.

I now see that the courses rewarded *completion*, not *competence*. They gave me vocabulary and confidence in theory, but not the experience of responding to a live, unpredictable human being. I had the *knowledge*, but not the *capability*.

In contrast during my gym training I built *capability* with activities that were as close as possible to real challenges. When I look back, the gym training probably mirrored Kolb's *experiential learning cycle* (overleaf):

¹ I speak very little French

² I don't speak French

- **Experience:** Training exercises were close to real-world needs.
- **Reflection:** Progress was reviewed against my actual performance goals.
- **Learning:** Progress was linked to previous training, injuries and needs.
- **Experimenting:** We adjusted the plan with higher weights and variable steps.

Through the learning cycle I honed my *capability* to the point I could carry bags up unpredictable stairs in old buildings, without hurting myself.

We build capability whether physical, linguistic, or leadership when the learning experience mirrors the real environment, we'll need to perform in.

My language learning had offered structure and input, but no opportunity to apply and adapt it in context - no feedback, no reflection, and no gradual move from controlled practice to fluent use.

When experiences aren't *close to reality*, learning remains abstract, we can talk about it but not necessarily *do* it.

Capability develops when we're supported to bridge that gap between theory and practice, between *knowing* and *doing*.

A reminder in this world of on-line learning ...

Courses can share great frameworks and tools, but skills only become *capabilities* through **practice, interaction, and reflection**.

Communication, whether it's listening, influencing, or leading a conversation, is nuanced. It can't be mastered in isolation.

People need the chance to practise in safe conditions first, then apply what they've learned in the real flow of work, supported with coaching and feedback along the way. That's where confidence, adaptability, and real capability are built.

Developing capability means combining **knowledge**, which supports good planning and decision-making, **with skills**, built through realistic practice and supported application.

Whether we're learning a language or leading a team, we need more than information - we need experience, reflection, and feedback to make it real. As Dr Seuss put it:

*"The more that you read, the more things you will know.
The more that you learn, the more places you'll go".*

Dr Seuss is right - learning does take us places BUT *capability* ensures we can order lunch when we get there!

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