As Many Software Choices as Languages to Learn

DIANA ROHINI LaVIGNE of Foster City, Calif., edits a magazine for Indian-Americans and is married to a Hindi-speaking software architect, but until recently she could not speak Hindi herself.

Not knowing the language prevented her from communicating with her mother-in-law, who travels every year from Bhopal, India, to California to visit. “I can share more with her if I have the basics of her language,” Ms. LaVigne said. “She’s an expert cook, and she can’t teach me to cook if we can’t share her language.”

So this year, Ms. LaVigne bought a Hindi course from Rosetta Stone, a company that uses computer software to teach languages. She has been studying at least 30 minutes a day since late August, working from her laptop. Her husband, Vikramaditya Gupta, helps her if she has questions.

Ms. LaVigne is among a growing number of adults who are turning to language courses, many of which incorporate new technologies. Some buyers of these courses want to improve communication with family and friends, co-workers or other business contacts. Others want to achieve some language proficiency before traveling to a new country, either for pleasure or for business.

Sellers say demand is strong. Mike Ferrari, director of merchandising for language products at Barnes & Noble stores, says percentage sales growth for language-related items exceeded that for overall sales in the 2005 fiscal year.

Erick Vincent, manager of the software category in North America for Amazon.com, says sales of language products have been growing much faster than the software business in general in the last two years. “This growth has us very focused on this particular category,” he said.

Mr. Ferrari said Chinese and Korean courses had been generating the fastest-growing sales at Barnes & Noble, “driven by the reality of immigration patterns and commerce.” And he said Italian was outperforming other European languages, in terms of percentage gains, because Italy is such a popular vacation destination.

There is also a strong market for more obscure languages. Chuck McGonagle, senior vice president of Transparent Language, which offers software-related courses, says Vietnamese, Bulgarian, Irish, Hebrew, Czech, Dutch, Norwegian, Swedish and Tagalog were each responsible for 1 per cent of its online sales this past September.

Consumers have a dizzying number of choices in teaching systems, technologies and levels of interactivity. Courses can be taught with old-fashioned workbooks, or on CDs, CD-ROMs, DVDs and the Internet. From the Internet, they can be downloaded to a computer or personal players like iPods. One course, Playaway’s Learn Anywhere series, published by Penton Overseas, comes with its own portable digital player.

In shopping for courses, consumers should keep in mind why they want to study a language and what level of proficiency they want to achieve. The Internet can help: many companies, like Berlitz, Simon & Schuster and Rosetta Stone, allow people to sample their programs on their Web sites.

Transparent Language will let potential students download free versions of its Before You Know It series that teach some 150 words in more than 40 languages; the more advanced version is $49.95.

Audible.com, which sells products on its Web site and through iTunes.com, lets people sample all its language courses. Prices range from $5.95 to $146.95 and include most lines. Amazon.com sells both new and used courses, while Audible.com offers discounts to people who sign up for its various membership plans. These Web sites also contain user reviews, as do blogs and various online discussion groups.
For travelers who want a quick introduction to a language, an intensive language course that can cost hundreds of dollars may not be worth the expense. But courses specifically for travelers, and costing much less, are offered by many companies. They include the Penton Overseas Visual Passport Cultural Immersion Experience. It is offered in four languages, costs $39.95 and features learning and travelogue DVDs and vocabulary and music CDs. The Walk and Talk Audio Guides, at $19.98, from Gildan Audio, are offered in French and Italian and feature CDs with walking tours, maps and words and phrases, for visitors to Rome, Venice, Florence and Paris.

Berlitz’s Rush Hour series, which sells for $24.95 for each of five languages, comes with three CDs and a workbook. The Earworms Rapid Languages courses are $28.99 and come with a CD and a phonetics booklet. Both use songs to teach languages.

Courses for serious language students are more elaborate and expensive. The Rosetta Stone courses, which are available on CD-ROM or can be downloaded from the Internet, come in three levels of difficulty and range in price from $49.95 to $499.

Those overwhelmed by the newer choices may be comforted by the familiar name of Berlitz, which has been providing language courses since the late 19th century and has expanded into audio programs and computer-based courses. Simon & Schuster sells courses based on the well-established Pimsleur method, which encourages students to learn through conversation.

The Michel Thomas audio programs from McGraw-Hill teach students short phrases that they can string together into full sentences. Random House’s Living Language series and Barron’s Educational Series also offer courses in print and via computer.

People who have taken the more intensive courses say that it is wise to keep expectations realistic.

Woodie Neiss, chief financial officer of FlavoRx, a company in Bethesda, Md., that sells flavors for medicines, is a fan of the Rosetta Stone courses. But he says they have their limits. Mr. Neiss, 37, studied Japanese for five years when he was younger and spent a college year in Japan. He is now studying Brazilian Portuguese through Rosetta Stone to help FlavoRx enter the Brazilian market.

Although he feels that he can “communicate on a basic level in business, which builds rapport with the people I’m working with,” he also says the course will not make him fluent in Portuguese. “If you’re going to go for complete fluency, you need to immerse yourself in these countries and their cultures,” he said. “A course of CDs will not let you do it on your own.”

For those who have the time, a traditional classroom setting, with a teacher who can provide individual attention, is often the best way to learn a language.

Classroom courses are preferable for beginners who are serious about learning a language, said Mike Ledgerwood, director of the language learning and research center at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. “CD-ROM and technology-based courses work better if someone has had exposure” to languages previously, he said, adding, “If anyone has had a second language and progressed beyond the beginning level, the knowledge of how to learn a language should transfer to any other language studied.”

For people like Ms. LaVigne, a computer course has been a satisfying alternative to a class. The Rosetta Stone program has enabled Ms. LaVigne to speak with her mother-in-law by phone; she says it has also helped her at the magazine she edits for Indian-Americans.

“Hindi is a difficult language,” she said, “and I think the people at work really appreciate my effort.”

Home