

Marbles In Your Mouth

Tiptoeing into the world of foreign language learning, Part 2

Introduction

In *Marbles In Your Mouth, Part 1*, I challenged two faulty and self-defeating beliefs adults commonly use to justify their lack of success in, or avoidance of, the process of learning a foreign language.

First, I challenged the belief that learning a foreign language is just TOO hard for adults and that those who are successful somehow have unique and special attributes for learning language. I noted that, in fact, millions of adults from all sorts of backgrounds, of varying ages and education levels do become functional in a foreign language. And, there are numerous ways in which they come to their new language skill.

Second, I challenged the belief that children learn languages better and faster than adults. I discussed facts about language learning in childhood that leads us to conclude that children do not have advantages in language learning. I made the point that if we do what children do regarding language learning we would produce no less a result. And following on from that it was said that if we were to do what children do then the process would be unnecessarily long, taking many years.

In this part of the article my outcome is to disclose, what to me, are the first 2 most critical components of foreign language learning for the beginner. In other words, what is **most useful** and **generalisable** to learn and upon which you will gain the control you need to grow your language skills naturally through everyday activities well into the future to whatever level you desire. **You don't want to be studying forever!**

Foreign language programs will be effective, somewhat effective or totally useless. Your **success or failure** to learn a foreign language is **caused by** the program's design, and some critical qualities of the "teacher" who delivers the program. It is dependent upon what the program teaches first. It has **NOTHING** much to do with **YOU**. Anyone can learn a foreign language.

The program you use as a beginner is critical, less so as you progress. Therefore, you have to **KNOW** what it is that is important to learn first, and to then find the best avenue to achieve that learning.

These 2 critical components of a language to be developed **FIRST** when embarking on a foreign language learning adventure: The **RULES** of the language and the **SOUNDS** of the language.

LEARNING THE RULES: GRAMMAR AND SENTENCE STRUCTURE

Without the rules of the language, grammar and sentence structure, you will fail in foreign language learning. Period. Without the rules, or map of the language, you can invest the time developing a large vocabulary and have **NO**

way to use it. Vocabulary is *ONLY* useful if you can use it! Yet, many people falsely believe that vocabulary is the key to language and spend countless hours studying lists of words. But experience shows that how large your vocabulary is, is secondary to the ability to control the use of the vocabulary you know. You will not be able to construct a sentence properly to say or to write if you don't know the rules of grammar and sentence structure in a language. You will also not understand what is being said to you.

Let's take a quick example: You invest a bit of time to learn a small set of vocabulary including the verb "to eat" and the noun "pizza". But what can you do with that? Using those words and a bit of mime you might be able to express a few thoughts about eating pizza. But this will be very limited, not much better than playing a game of Pictionary. To truly **USE** your vocabulary you need to know something of the rules of the grammar and sentence structure. Even when we were young expanding our English vocabulary from weekly lists of words given to us by the teacher included the critical learning activity of using those new words in full sentences.

For instance, you need to know how to express WHO is eating pizza:

I am eating a pizza

John is eating a pizza

The dog is eating pizza

We are eating a pizza

If the person doesn't know the rules of English grammar to conjugate the verb "to eat" you might just hear, "We is eating a pizza." They will be understood by a native speaker but they will sound less than fluent.

We also have a difference in meaning when we talk about "a pizza" and when we talk about "the pizza". For example, the sentences, "The dog is eating a pizza" and "The dog is eating **the** pizza", mean different things. So we need rules to know the rules for expressing the indefinite and definite articles "a" and "the", even if we never know the technical grammatical names "indefinite" and "definite".

In addition to WHO or WHAT is doing the eating, you need to know how to express time. WHEN the pizza is, will or was eaten.

I am eating pizza. (present)

He used to eat pizza every night. (always, in the distant past)

We ate a pizza last Wednesday. (once, in the recent past)

Mary will eat pizza for dinner. (future)

Bob and Sam would eat pizza if you made it. (conditional)

You need to know how to express possessiveness:

The dog is eating MY pizza.

My mother's sister makes the best pizza.

Mary's pizza is cold.

You have to know the structure (order) of things in a sentence:

In English we use subject, verb, object:

John (subject) ate (verb) the pizza (object).

In Turkish you would find this to be different. Subject, object, verb:

John (subject) pizza (object) is eating (verb).

And so on!

Once you know the **rules** of a language using a small vocabulary, you then have control. You can **GENERALISE** those rules and apply them to new vocabulary as you learn it.

Programs often avoid teaching structure and grammar

There are many foreign language programs that avoid teaching grammar. Instead, they focus on building a large vocabulary and/or sets of phrases. Why? It is easy to teach vocabulary and phrases. However, vocabulary on its own is: 1) not useful, nor generalisable; and, 2) just as easy to forget because you cannot use it in a variety of contexts.

These programs often site some unfounded notion that you will "pick up" the grammar along the way through exposure. But this is not true. It is true that you "picked up" the grammar along the way in your native language although much improved through your lessons in school. But this process took all the

years of childhood, and importantly, you didn't have another language to fall back on. Perhaps, just perhaps, you might "pick it up", if, like a child you are saturated in the language for a few dozen years, avoid falling back to the comfort of your native language, and in the mean time don't care that you can't express yourself properly.

Go out and listen to non-native English speakers in your community who did not study English formally. Over time they do learn to express themselves such that you can understand what they are saying or asking. When my Turkish friend tells me he "kill a live chicken and torn out the fir" I do understand what he means and laugh until I am sick. Then it is his turn when after a couple hours of dancing in high heels I tell him in Turkish that my "feet is sick".

Designers of many programs bank on the fact that millions of adults suffered through H.S. language classes with mind-numbing experiences conjugating verbs and who now don't want to repeat that experience. Adults are looking for an "easy" or at least "easier" way, and many programs are purchased on this promise. I am all for "easy" if it works, and indeed learning a foreign language does not need to be hard if the skill is built logically. But, that is the point. It is a process of building a knowledge and skill set. It has a logical beginning, middle and end. It will take time and you must be encouraged to do the important stuff (grammar and structure) first.

Learning grammar and structure is essential and does not have to be like the experience you may have had in school. It can be done quickly and

effectively. And, unlike vocabulary that you will continue to add for many years as you encounter it and need it in the new language, grammar and structure only need to be learned ONCE. Once learned you never have to do it again! The fun with language begins when you reach the end of this initial road. With the right approach the rules of a language can be learned in a few months of good study. Then you are FREE!

The single most important element of a successful language program to learn grammar and structure

What is the most important element of a program? **A TEACHER!** Someone needs to be responsible for TEACHING you new concepts and explaining them in a way you understand. If you have prior language experience you might play essential this role. In other words, you become your own teacher using resources such as grammar books, workbooks, and parts of media-based programs. If you are learning a foreign language for the first time, having never studied grammar formally, you will need an external "teacher". I use quote marks to surround the word teacher because a teacher does not have to be a person you see face to face. It might be the voice on a CD, the voice embedded in an Internet-based program or it might be the voice of the writer of a language-learning book.

For contrast we can look at 2 popular programs that do have a focus on grammar and sentence structure, one with a "teacher" and one without. The effects on learning success are dramatic. Let's compare programs produced

by *Michel Thomas*, and those by *Rosetta Stone* in relation to this issue of learning the rules of a language.

A Thomas program is completely focused on the functional and practical use of the language being taught, meaning learning the rules from simple to complex. HE plays the role of the teacher responsible for your learning. His programs use a small vocabulary to teach you to control the language in all its forms, tenses and grammatical rules. Having completed a Thomas program (15 hours) you can easily become your own teacher. You can consolidate Thomas' lessons independently with workbooks, you can build your vocabulary by reading simple books with the dictionary, you can start to improve your hearing comprehension and speaking in conversation classes or with native friends, you can improve further your hearing comprehension with television news programs and films. The point is SOMEONE (Thomas) has TAUGHT (you) the rules of the language and prepared you for your own further study. His lessons are sequenced perfectly and logically.

In contrast, a Rosetta Stone language program has NO teacher. The method is to present you a sequence of ever evolving and complex images, with text and a voice over from which you TEACH yourself through deduction whatever vocabulary and grammar lesson you can tease from it.

For example, it shows you a picture of a flower overprinted and voiced-over with the word, "çiçek". Next to it was a picture with a bunch of flowers with the word, "çiçekler". After a several examples you might come to the idea that the suffix "ler" represents the plural. There isn't a "teacher" so you

cannot be 100% sure, but that seems to make sense, so you locked it in. For simple grammatical elements this works. But take this situation:

You learn that "kız" means "girl". It was printed over the picture of a girl, and contrasted with a picture of a boy with a different word. Deducing this is easy. Then you are shown the same picture with the words, "kız güzel." You ponder the meaning of "güzel". The girl is smiling, with blonde hair and light skin, dressed in a skirt and blouse, and is jumping on a table in a park. There is a lot to choose from. Is this an adjective, adverb, verb?

Rosetta Stone doesn't have a TEACHER so you have to sort this out yourself. You cannot do it within Rosetta Stone. So, you needed to deduce that you needed to have purchased a Turkish dictionary. You trundle off to the nearest language bookstore or wait a week until one arrives that you purchase online. When it arrives you look up the word and TEACH yourself that "güzel" means "pretty".

Okay, but the phrase, what does it mean? Is Turkish like Italian where the adjective "pretty" is placed after the noun? If it is then "kız güzel" (girl pretty) means "a pretty girl". Ooo, or is it "**the** pretty girl"? Oh, maybe it isn't like Italian, it's like English, adjective before the noun. Perhaps it is "the girl is pretty"? Could it be "a girl is pretty"? Yeah, but hang on, where's the "is", where's the "the" or "a"? Don't know for sure and there is no teacher! Now, you are wondering, is this important for me to be learning, or was the point just to learn the new word "güzel".

This continues on in the program in ever-increasing complexity. Sometimes the problem is solved by not introducing grammatical elements. For example, for the first 50 lessons (one a day, five days a week, that's 10 weeks!!!) all verbs used are presented only in the 3rd person singular and plural present tense! After 10 weeks you can say, "The dragon is eating" or "walking", or "brushing his hair", or "watching TV" but you cannot say that "I" am doing anything!!! Why do you need to know the word for "dragon" before you need to know how to conjugate in the 1st person?

Teaching grammar through deduction is highly problematic! You will make lots of fundamental mistakes, miss important lessons and connections, and it is frustrating knowing they are teaching you something, but you are not ever really confident that you are getting it. It builds uncertainty and lowers confidence. Minor confusions at the start build into major problems later on.

As an aside, Rosetta Stone has many excellent features and it is a shame that they don't simply add an English speaking voice-over to point your nose at the grammatical distinctions they are teaching. In my own use of their program, to compensate I had to stop Rosetta Stone for awhile and study the *Elementary Grammar* book written by Lewis Thomas. His voice in the writing provided me the necessary "teacher" for Turkish grammar. Then, I returned to Rosetta Stone to take advantage of its other valuable resources.

To learn the rules of the language the program you choose **MUST** have a teacher.

All teachers are not equal. Some do not sequence material properly, while others beat a dead horse with mind-numbing repetitions. Some have very odd beliefs about learning and teaching. A bad teacher can destroy your confidence and cause you to believe you are somehow deficient and cannot learn what is being taught. To help you think about "teachers" I have printed a list of the characteristics for the "teacher" that to me are critically important. Again, this might be a real person who teaches a class or tutors privately, but it might just as well be the author of a grammar or workbook, or the voice on an audio program.

The "teacher":

- Takes full responsibility for your learning results. If you are confused they recognise that they caused your confusion and they respond by doing whatever is necessary to create clarity and understanding before moving on. A good teacher knows the tricky bits and will anticipate confusion at certain points from years of experience teaching the subject and respond to this with appropriate review and alternative examples. This is one of the attributes of good teachers in media-based programs.
- Prepares you for the experience of learning you are about to encounter. In this way you know what is expected of you, what the process will be like, how long the process will likely take, and so on. You learn what you need to do to succeed. In the case of Rosetta

Stone it would have prepared me by telling me to purchase a good dictionary and grammar book before starting.

- Throughout the program they make clear connections between what you know or what has been learned and what you will learn next.
- Is a native speaker of the language you are learning, or has otherwise developed an excellent accent when they speak in the target language. When speaking they do so slowly and clearly.
- Has a thorough understanding of the language's grammar and structure, and through analysis and experience has discovered the best sequence for teaching it to a beginner.
- Is fluent in English and teaches lessons in this language. This is most critical. How can you possibly understand a complex lesson taught to you in a language that you do not yet understand? There are so many things ridiculously wrong about teaching a foreign language in the foreign language that I will need a complete article to illuminate them all.
- Can relate the grammar and structure of the new language to what you know about the structure of English.
- Teaches from the most simple to the most complex.
- Will allow you to speak English for the sake of clearing up confusion or testing your understanding. There will be time for speaking the new language and exercises to do that which are useful. But when you need to be understood by the teacher you have to be able to do so in English!
- Uses the smallest vocabulary possible to achieve the outcome of teaching grammar and structure.

- Moves on quickly once a concept is learned and you have demonstrated control. They regularly test that what they think they taught is in fact what you learned.
- Has a sensitivity to detect confusion, frustration and a drop in your confidence and changes quickly and accordingly.

I cannot stress strongly enough how easy and satisfying knowing a foreign language is when you have control over the rules of the grammar. At that point all new vocabulary can be used effectively rendering it memorable. How easy this process is will absolutely depend upon the teaching effectiveness of the "teacher" in the program you choose.

Because I KNOW the importance of learning the rules of a language first before building vocabulary, and that to learn these quickly and effectively requires a good teacher this is where I set my attention when I select resources for learning. This is easy if you are buying a workbook or grammar book, you simply need to read a bit at the shop to see how the "teacher" is going to guide you through the material. With media-based programs you cannot know until you have purchased it. I would see if I am able to find a recommendation from someone who has used the program. I would not rely on the testimonials of the company but would instead ask for a list of contact details from recent students. If they refuse, then that says something doesn't it? I would do the same query of a program conducted in a school or of a private tutor. I have had good "teachers" and bad ones and good teachers for some aspects and yet not for others. The good ones I

stuck with, the bad ones I moved on from quickly. I am not willing to let anyone undermine my confidence to learn or the efficiency of the process.

THE SOUNDS OF THE LANGUAGE: HEARING COMPREHENSION AND SPEECH

Most of us learn languages because we want to speak that language and to understand it when it is spoken. This skill develops by **FIRST** teaching the auditory cortex of the brain, the part responsible for making sense from the sounds you hear. Your auditory cortex needs to be trained to recognise the discreet sounds for that language. **You can do this training at the same time that you are studying the rules of the language, as the initial steps to develop this skill are not dependent upon grammar.**

Simply stated, you will not understand what your brain is not able to hear clearly. On from that, you cannot reproduce accurately a sound with the muscles of your vocal chords, tongue, lips and palate that you cannot hear.

Try this if you can: If you have access to the news presented in other languages (in Australia on SBS throughout the morning you will find foreign news programs), tune in, close your eyes and listen. First, can you tell what language is being spoken? Can you hear each individual word or do all the words seem to run together?

If you had to, could you tell the difference between say Spanish and Portuguese? What about Farsi and Arabic? Between Turkish and one of the many other Mongol languages? Swiss German and German?

In order to understand a spoken language you need to first be able to hear it clearly. This means your brain has been trained to recognise these sounds.

There is a notion, supported by many language programs, that if you are surrounded by the language eventually you will begin to hear (decipher) its sounds clearly. True, you will, but like children it will take many many years for the brain to finally begin to make sense of what it hears. I attended a "full immersion" Italian school in Florence when I first began studying Italian. Their belief was that you should hear nothing but Italian and somehow miraculously all would become clear. This was not my experience. It took a long time before my ear could decipher the incoming messages sufficiently quickly to make sense of what was being said. For a long time if someone was speaking too quickly I missed much of what was said. It was not a problem with my Italian knowledge because when they slowed down I understood just fine. It was a problem with my "hearing" interpretation at high speed. This simply takes time and exposure, slow at first with small increments in speed over time.

The method for training the auditory cortex

In anything you are learning, you cannot go fast until you have control while going slow. There is nothing more frustrating than learning from a teacher

or program that "speaks" too fast for you to hear. If you can't hear it clearly you will find reproducing the sound nearly impossible. Soon you will lose your confidence stop even trying to speak.

The first part of training your auditory cortex regards the discreet sounds of the letters of the alphabet and combinations of letters common in that language. These can be trained easily by being given a list of simple words containing this set of sounds spoken by a native speaker, slowly and clearly.

It is the same with the training for the mouth. I can say quite clearly with a passable accent single words and short phrases in Turkish. But if the word is long, or the sentence has a lot of words, my tongue and brain gets tied up. Why? I don't have that combination of long sounds stored in my auditory cortex, and the muscles of my mouth need to be trained like any other muscles for any other skill. You would have experienced this same throughout your life even in English. There are times we encounter a new word, and it takes a bit of practise before we can say it quickly and clearly. Why would it be different with a new language altogether?

It is exactly like the experience I have when dancing. When I am learning a new step or sequence of steps, it is easy to lose control if I go to fast at first and/or combine too many new things at once. If I try too quickly to execute these new things at full speed I can become extremely frustrated, and might even come to believe it is too hard to learn. My brain, specifically my sensory motor system needs to be trained going slowly with control at first, and increasing speed slowly over time. A good dance teacher works

without music at the start when teaching something new. Then music is introduced, slowed down at first. Then the speed is increased as my body's understanding improves. A good language teacher speaks slowly and with absolute clarity and over time increases that speed as your ear develops.

Let's compare a couple of programs. I mentioned Rosetta Stone earlier. There is much to be liked about their language programs, and no feature more than how they train the ear and the mouth. The program does introduce simply vocabulary throughout the early stages. Each word and phrase containing the sounds of the language. These words are also printed on the screen giving you an added advantage of seeing the word that actually becomes a great aid to auditory memory. The words are spoken very clearly at a moderate speed, one that is very easy to hear for the beginner. There is enough repetition without being boring.

The program also contains a feature allowing you to practise saying the words. Your voice is represented on a graph showing the shape of your pronunciation as compared to the native speaker. This allows you to make corrections and is better feedback than even that you would get from a face-to-face teacher. There are also 3 speeds for the voice of the native speaker, really allowing you to "hear" the sounds accurately.

I quickly gained a good ear for the language enabling me to understand the language when spoken slowly and clearly by my Turkish friend. I also gained quickly the ability to be understood by him when speaking. Within a few days we could take a walk and I could say confidently and clearly the things I saw

for which I had the Turkish vocabulary and he understood! This is a major accomplishment in language learning.

Michel Thomas' programs are also excellent for training the ear for hearing comprehension and speaking. He does not do this directly, but it is embedded in his teaching. More than any other program I found his creates confidence very early on for speaking. Being a CD based program he doesn't have the advantage of printing the words for a visual reference, however, he does spell the words when they might not be otherwise apparent and this is just as effective.

For comparison let's look at Pimsleur. I purchased a Pimsleur Turkish program to supplement my other studies. There are a hundred and one problems with this program however one element stands out in regard to our topic. This program clearly demonstrates the problem of speaking too fast for the beginner. The speakers on the CD are as fast as my Turkish friend when he is speaking to his parents on the phone. Pimsleur compensates by breaking each word down into its component sounds to practise but this is still not enough to get your brain around for understanding at their full speed or for repeating verbally. By the time I started their program I had several months of Rosetta Stone experience and talking with my native Turkish friend. I found it still very hard to comprehend and respond at their speed. I had a definite "marbles in the mouth" experience. I could only imagine what my experience would have been had this been where I started. Terminal confusion and frustration I believe.

I cannot count the number of people who quit their language studies because the teacher or the program decided that given you will need to understand the language at full speed that you should just get over it and learn it at that speed from the beginning. I have met teachers with this idea and even when the evidence shows that this idea and their behaviour was causing a poor learning result for their students they did not change. This is lazy and arrogant teaching. A good teacher knows this process of development and leaves their personal abilities at the door for the sake of your learning success.

Conclusion

In this article I have addressed what to me are the 2 most critical skills to develop first when you study a foreign language, namely, the **rules** and the **sounds** of the language. These skills provide the mental map of the language needed upon which fluency can be achieved. I noted that there are those people who have not done this first, and who over time do learn a measure of functional fluency, however, this takes a very long time and the quality of the use of the language is poor. I noted too the importance of choosing a program that 1) has a "teacher"; and 2) has a teacher with specific qualities.

There is much embedded in this article that needs to be expanded upon. I have a very detailed analysis of this learning process and of many programs and schools involved in teaching foreign languages. The challenge I have now is bringing together those details into some sort of coherent whole.

When I wrote *Artistry In Training*, I found at the end I still had more to say but needed a context to illuminate those additional details. I did this by asking my Training To Train students to send me the challenges they faced and their questions. I received many hundreds of questions and addressing these enabled me to make connections between the overall ideas in the book. Putting the work into a real-world context brought the material to life and to me was the best way to end a book of its nature.

Can I ask something similar of those of you following this work I am constructed on foreign language learning? I would appreciate any and all questions you have based upon both what you have read in my 2 articles and upon your direct experiences with foreign language learning. By answering your questions I hope to find a way to shape the finer details of this project. When I have a sufficient collection and time to write into those questions I will prepare the 3rd part of this article.

With much appreciation in advance,

Stef

Send questions and thoughts to: me@stephanieburns.com