

virtually **NATIVE**

**Learn How To  
Learn English**

**by a  
NON-NATIVE  
for the  
NON-NATIVE**



*Vladimir Skenderoff*

# VIRTUALLY NATIVE

Learn How To Learn English

*by Vladimir Skenderoff*

(by a non-native for the non-native)

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“I never teach my pupils. I only attempt to provide the conditions in which they can learn.”

Albert Einstein

## Why this book, Who is it for, Why listen to me?

It's very shocking how much time and money we waste because we don't know How To Learn. It's such a loss on a personal level and for the society as a whole. And it all starts at school – years wasted studying subjects with no real life application. How much of what you studied at school do you really remember and know how to use in your daily or professional life – all that mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology...and of course foreign language, the English language?

It all starts in school but it continues in adulthood. I see first-hand how people continue to waste time and money because they don't know how to learn English – most people either do the wrong thing or do the right thing but the wrong way.

Well, no more. Introducing VIRTUALLY NATIVE

“Virtually” means Almost

“Virtual” also means Online

VIRTUALLY NATIVE attempts to help you become an Almost Native speaker of English using language tools and learning material available Online.

LEARN HOW TO LEARN ENGLISH is a self-explanatory subtitle. Although there is a chapter on Grammar, this book will not teach you theory, it will teach you How To Learn English. You will learn how to make your second language learning more Effective and Efficient:

Effective is about doing the *right thing*.

Efficient is about doing things the *right way*.

This book will save you time, money and stress.

FOR THE NON-NATIVE

This book is mainly for people learning English. The language used is easy and simple with only a few “difficult” words. If **1** is the lowest and **10** is the highest, then level **4 (B1)** learners of English should be able to read and understand everything with a little help from a dictionary and Google. Furthermore, this book must be read together with the website

[www.virtuallynative.com](http://www.virtuallynative.com)

where I've given some very important visual and audio aids to better explain my method – a *picture is worth a thousand words* (you need to see it), *language is music* (you need to hear it).

This book is also for language teachers. I've been teaching English for a long time and my unique method is developed based on my experience both as an adult learner and a teacher of the English language. Fellow teachers will find plenty of useful information on language education.

And finally, this book is for all language learners. The principles discussed are universal across virtually all languages. In addition to English, my method has helped me learn Russian and Japanese.

BY A NON-NATIVE

My name is Vladimir and I was born and raised in Bulgaria, a small country in Eastern Europe. Growing up behind the Iron Curtain I had virtually no access to western books, music, movies or western culture of any kind – think North Korea.

- I started learning English seriously at the age of 27.

- I started teaching the language 3 years later and so far have taught over 13,000 individual lessons to more than 1,100 people.

I have a unique experience as both an adult learner and teacher of the English language. Everything in this book is practical and it is tried and tested. It's not just about what works in theory, it's mainly about what works in practice.

I have a Ph.D. but it's not in linguistics. I speak 4 languages but I don't consider myself a linguist, let alone a polyglot. I am not a human dictionary either, I don't claim to know every word in the Oxford Dictionary. I consider myself a ***virtually native*** speaker of the English language and an *expert on how to learn English*, able to answer any question related to learning English as a foreign language. What you are holding in your hands is the proof of that.

Thank you very much for buying and reading my book and I sincerely hope it will be of value to you.

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## Book Outline

This book is my outlook on the English language – the adult non-native learner of English and foreign languages in general. VIRTUALLY NATIVE basically lets you inside my head, allowing you to see the workings of my brain – how I perceive (=hear) and how I produce (=speak) language, the English language, and in order for my method to work you need to have the same or at least similar mindset. To do that, you need to get rid of some wrong beliefs you might have about second language learning – it's what we do first.

We start with the Myths about learning a foreign language. It's like building a house – we need to clear the ground, remove the weed (=myths), in order to lay the foundations.

Next, we will establish the Facts about foreign language acquisition – facts, the opposite of myths. These are my facts and they are the Pillars that hold up my method.

After that, we will gradually build up My Method – the roof of the house. Simply defined, my method is a set of techniques (8+2 steps) for memorizing new words.

Finally, we will look at the real-life applications of my method in practicing the four skills of language – Reading, Listening, Writing and Speaking – the four walls of the house.

L1 = First Language = mother tongue

L2 = Second Language = foreign language

## Myths about L2 Learning

“The truth will set you free”

**The amount of time and money people waste because of bad advice or false beliefs is staggering.** We need to remove those first, you need to get rid of the old in order to make room for the new.

The following are the most common myths about learning an L2:

Myth #1 Practice makes perfect

Myth #2 Too old to learn

Myth #3 It's all about talent

Myth #4 Better go abroad

Myth #5 Native speaker = best teacher

Myth #6 Strong Motivation is essential

Myth #7 Mistakes are okay

Myth #8 Understand, don't Memorize

Let's look at each myth in more detail and disprove it together.

### Myth #1 Practice makes perfect

Practice does make perfect but the problem is that it takes too damn long. Many people study English every day, study hard and they are having a hard time learning the language.

The key is not to study hard, but to study **smart**.

By *smart* I mean both **effective**(ly) and **efficient**(ly):

- Effective has to do with doing the **right thing**(s) in order to achieve the result you want. It answers the WHAT question.

- Efficient is about doing things the **right way**. It answers the HOW TO question.

The WHAT question is somewhat easier. We all know what we need to do in order to learn an L2: we need to read, listen, write and speak the L2 as much as we can. The answer to the HOW TO question is what this book is mainly focused on: how to read, listen, write and speak English. Nevertheless, you will find plenty of *Whats* and *How-Tos* in relation to

vocabulary, dictionaries, grammar, pronunciation, flashcards and so on and so forth.

## Myth #2 Too old to learn

The age myth: Children learn faster, and it's difficult to learn an L2 past a certain age.

There is truth and there is untruth in this belief. Let me explain: Acquiring an L2 has 3 main aspects: pronunciation, accuracy and fluency. In my experience, age matters only for pronunciation.

The younger we start to learn an L2 the more native-like we sound. It has to do with muscular plasticity. Human speech uses hundreds of muscles (throat, mouth, lips, tongue, larynx, diaphragm and others) and a lot of muscle control is necessary to achieve a native-like pronunciation. That's true even for native speakers of English like British actors doing an American accent or American actors doing a British accent – Christian Bale, Tom Hardy, Meryl Streep, Angelina Jolly do an accent for the movie they are making, but right after filming they revert back to their native one. It is difficult to maintain an accent even for native speakers.

But the problem with native-like pronunciation is not only in the speech muscles. It's also in the adult learner's ability to distinguish (hear) sounds from another language. It's in the brain, it's what we call brain plasticity. Children's brain plasticity gives them an advantage over adult learners, they can hear and differentiate sounds most adults can't:

If you can't hear a sound, you can't pronounce it.

The greater the phonetic distance between your L1 and your L2, the slower you are to learn the L2, and the thicker the accent: If you are a native speaker of Portuguese and you decide to learn Spanish it will be relatively easy for you because of the sound similarities between these two languages. You will have a smaller accent. But if you are a native speaker of Japanese and later in life you decide to learn English, it will be more difficult because of the phonetic difference between these languages. You are likely to have a stronger accent.

However, the difficulties are mainly on achieving a native-like pronunciation. There are no limitations on successfully reaching a native-like fluency and accuracy:

- Language accuracy has to do with the correct use of grammar. Correct means no mistakes.
- Language fluency has to do with the fluid use of the language. Fluid means smooth and continuous.

You don't have to have a voice like Luciano Pavarotti in order to learn to sing well, you can do it even with a voice like Bruce Springsteen.

### Myth #3 It's all about talent

You need to have a talent for languages. The language gene, does it exist? The Nature vs Nurture debate – how much is genetics and how much is hard work? Some people say that even *the desire to work hard is genetic!*

I guess we'll never know for the simple reason that it's very hard, even impossible to draw a line between hard work and talent...but I'm going to try and answer the question anyway. There are two places I can look for answers to that question – my students and I. Let me start with the man in the mirror.

Do I have the language gene?

I don't know, but I probably don't.

What I have is a certain curiosity for languages. It's not that I like studying, no not at all, but I've always enjoyed and most importantly NOTICED the way different languages sound. I grew up in Bulgaria, a very monolingual society, but I remember noticing and being fascinated by the range of accents and speech patterns I heard.

I developed an ear for accents.

At a relatively young age, I was able to tell apart most European languages: German, French, Italian, Spanish, Russian, English, Greek, etc. I didn't speak any of those languages, and I still don't speak most of them, but I was able to tell them apart. I have a good ear for languages and can usually tell where the person comes from.

*It's not about the individual words, it's about the way different languages*

*sound.*

To get a better idea of what I mean by “the way different languages sound”, there are a few YouTube videos of people doing fake languages by speaking gibberish (=nonsense words). Please take the time to watch those videos before continuing with the book:

[virtuallynative.com/book/fake-languages](http://virtuallynative.com/book/fake-languages)

The sound of the language, the rhythm and beat of the language, the harmony and melody of the language. Having a sense of the melody of the language is central to my method and is something we will talk much more about later on in the book.

How does one acquire an ear for languages?

Through listening, there is no other way.

I did it mainly through movies, but more importantly, I was interested in the way different languages sound so every time I heard a foreign language as a child I took a mental NOTE...

So, I have a good ear for accents – does that mean I have a talent for languages? No, I don’t think so. Being able to tell various languages apart is a skill many people have. It’s like telling the difference between “heavy metal” and “rock” or “baroque” and “classical music.” It’s a matter of listening and paying attention.

What did my students tell me about Talent vs Hard Work?

I’ve had over 1,100 *individual* students and it does seem that some learn faster while others struggle. And it isn’t for lack of trying: there are students who are studying hard but are still struggling with fluency – sentences broken or incomplete, response time slow, sentence flow halted with a lot of pauses and overall lack of confidence.

Is it because they are lacking talent or is it something else? Trying to answer that questions I discovered something startling yet so obvious. I discovered that: L2 fluency very much depends on L1 fluency – in order to be fluent in a foreign language you have to be fluent in your native language first.

## Defining Fluent

Fluent is a big word, it means different things to different people.

“Fluent” comes from the Latin word “fluere” meaning *flowing*

“Fluency” is the noun and it means *flow*

- According to Cambridge Dictionary “when a person is fluent, they can speak a language easily, well, quickly and without many pauses.”

- The most general definition of fluent is to be able to speak the language *well*.

- For many people, fluent means to be able to speak like a native, to be able to speak the L2 the same way you speak your L1.

The 1,000,000 dollar question is:

Are you a fluent speaker of your mother tongue (L1)? The mistake people make is that they don’t consider their own L1 fluency, but instead focus on other people’s fluency.

The fluency goal language learners set for themselves is usually about being able to emulate somebody else’s fluency. That somebody is often the language teacher, but for many people that somebody could also be a movie star like Robert De Niro or Jennifer Lawrence, or a business person like Steve Jobs giving a perfect product presentation – smooth, engaging and confident. That’s the image most learners have when they say “I want to be a fluent speaker of the English language” – the teacher, actor, celebrity or a person they often see on TV.

And then I ask my students: “Are you a fluent speaker of your L1, do you speak your mother tongue well?” Most of them are quite startled by this question and they usually say: “Of course I can speak my mother tongue. I am a native speaker.”

But then I ask again: “I’m not asking you whether you are a native speaker, I’m asking you whether you are a fluent speaker? I’m asking you whether your L1 usage is smooth and flowing, as opposed to slow and halted. Do you speak with ease? Do you pause a lot and do you use a lot of fillers (um, uh, like, y’know, well, etc.)?”

Being a fluent speaker of a language, native or foreign, is a special skill and

it's not just about knowing vocabulary and grammar. Fluency requires vocabulary and grammar, but vocabulary and grammar alone don't guarantee fluency. It's a logical fallacy called *non sequitur* (Latin for "it does not follow"):

1. If A is true, then B is true.
2. B is true.
3. Therefore, A is true.

1. If I speak fluently (A), then I know vocab & grammar. (B)
2. I know vocabulary and grammar. (B)
3. Therefore, I can speak fluently. (A)

This form of non sequitur is called “converse error”, also called “confusion of necessity and sufficiency.” To be fluent, to be able to speak easily, well, quickly and without many pauses (A), we need to know words and grammar (B), but knowing words and grammar does not guarantee speaking fluently. In that sense knowing words and grammar is necessary but not sufficient for language fluency.

Robert De Niro is a native speaker but does not speak very smoothly. In interviews he is painfully shy, his sentences are short and he is often lost for words. Johnny Depp and George Clooney are not that good either. They all are native speakers and know English grammar and a lot of words but their language lacks fluidity. In movies, actors memorize their lines and do a lot of takes before they get it right.

People like Steve Jobs and other public speakers practice a lot before they get on stage and give their presentations, not to mention the teleprompters.

Language teachers talk well by definition because it's what they do – they talk and explain the same thing over and over again, over the course of many years.

[virtuallynative.com/book/fluent](http://virtuallynative.com/book/fluent)

Language learners set themselves unrealistic goals of speaking fluently without taking into consideration their native language fluency. It is very hard, even impossible to be smooth and fluent in an L2 and not be fluent in your L1 in the first place. I tell my students to take a long and hard look in the mirror and make an honest assessment of their L1 fluency:

- Do you speak your L1 “easily, well, quickly and without many pauses”?

- Are you a good storyteller?
- Is your response time quick?
- Do you generally care when you speak your mother tongue?

If you cannot do an honest self-assessment then ask your friends or parents – ask them to secretly record one of your conversations and then listen to it and *you* be the judge.

The startling thing I realized was that most of my students who were relatively fluent in English were also fluent in their native language, and vice versa – most of my struggling students were not that fluent in their mother tongue either. Sentences short and incomplete, response time relatively slow, sentence flow halted.

But that *doesn't* mean they were less talented, less intelligent or less educated. It means that being fluent, being able to speak easily, well, quickly and without many pauses, is a very different skill. There are a lot of smart people who are not good communicators. At the same time, there are people who are very good at using language, very smooth and expressive, but who are not all that intelligent.

Is fluency genetic?

No, I don't think so.

I believe fluency, the ability to speak well is a skill we learn as children from our parents. If our parents care about language and are articulate and entertaining speakers and good storytellers, we as little children listen and mimic their speech and develop an interest in speaking and storytelling. Plus, fluency is a skill like most other skills – it requires practice.

To sum up:

I don't know whether language genes exist and I don't think that anybody can say for sure.

I don't think I have a special talent for languages. What I have is an ear for accents, an ear for the way different languages sound.

Knowing words and putting words in a sentence easily, well and quickly are two separate skills. To be fluent in L2, you need to be fluent in L1 first – your L2 fluency is likely to mirror your L1 fluency.

For the remainder of this book, *fluency* will have the meaning of *smooth, easy* and *quick* use of L2, provided that the learner's L1 fluency is also smooth, easy and quick.

## Myth #4 Better go abroad

Learning in the L2 country is better than learning at home – the holy grail of learning a foreign language.

This is not a myth, it's actually true, but it's one of the most useless pieces of advice you will ever hear. It's like saying that if you want to learn how to swim, you had better live on an island. It's true but it doesn't give you any useful information on how to swim – you don't simply jump into the ocean and automatically start swimming. You don't go to England and effortlessly start speaking English. And the way they sell this piece of nonsense is that moving to the country is the **ONLY** way to learn the language. You cannot learn an L2 in your own country.

The main argument is that we have more chances to speak the language.

However, answer me this question: How often do you speak your native language in your own country outside your workplace and your family? How many words do you say between your office/school and your house?

99% of all communication is done at work and at home.

99% of all communication is with our coworkers or classmates, with our family and with our friends. Living abroad gives you about 1% more opportunity to practice the language...

In all fairness, the belief that studying an L2 in the country where it is spoken *was* kind of true until recently, before the invention of this thing called the Internet. In the pre-Internet era, there was very limited access to foreign books, radio, TV and movies – one benefited from living in the country. But today, it makes virtually no difference where you live and especially with regard to English.

I believe that traveling abroad, seeing places and meeting people from different cultures is one of the most meaningful things a person can do. I also believe in seeking better education – abroad or at home. However, I don't

believe in going to a country for the sole purpose of learning the language – the 1% benefit hardly justifies the cost.

Learning abroad is not cost-effective. ***The amount of money people spend/waste on language schools overseas is enormous.***

It's such an enduring myth, unfortunately kept alive even by big-name dictionaries – Cambridge Dictionary gives this example sentence for the phrasal verb *pick up* (=learn):

“When you live in a country you soon pick up the language.”

NO, you don't...that's not true! You don't pick up the language “soon”, it's not that fast and it's certainly not effortless. Language is not a virus, you don't just pick it up (=get infected) by visiting the country and walking among the people who have it. The same way you don't learn how to swim by taking a shower.

### Myth #5 Native speaker = the best teacher

The myth is in “=” the equal sign. Many learners equate the term “native speaker” with the term “the best language teacher.”

It's a very unique skill that native speakers have. Native speakers of any language. We all know our native tongue, but we didn't really study it...

I am a native speaker of the Bulgarian language. I know the language. I understand everything I hear. I can read, write and speak that language with ease. If you asked me a question about how to say something in Bulgarian, I would be able to answer it. I know the language, but I didn't really learn it. Not really... I mean, we all studied our L1 in school, the alphabet/kanji and grammar, but we all know that it's not a real study.

We have the skill but we didn't learn it. We don't know what it's like to learn it, yet we have it. It's a truly unique skill that humans possess.

So what's the point that I'm trying to make here? My point is that:

a) Teaching a language is so much more than just being a human dictionary. Dictionaries are free, teachers are not.

b) Knowing something and teaching something are two very distinct,

separate areas of expertise. Being an excellent athlete doesn't necessarily make you an excellent coach. Being a brilliant musician doesn't automatically make you the best music teacher. Being a native speaker doesn't necessarily make you a good language teacher.

I'm not arguing that non-native speakers are better teachers. No, I'm not saying that either. All I'm arguing against is the equal sign '=' between native speaker and the best language teacher. Don't automatically assume that native equals the best.

Finding a good teacher, tutor, trainer or coach is crucial to learning any skill. It is very important and expensive so choose your teachers carefully. ***The amount of time and money people waste on bad teachers (native and non-native) is stupefying.***

### Myth #6 Strong motivation is essential

This too is kind of true but it's like saying: in order to enjoy your food you have to be starving.

What do I mean?

Of course it's true that being interested in something can help you learn that thing. Having high motivation sure does help. People say: If you are passionate about what you do, you will never work a day in your life.

- But what about the majority of people who are not that passionate? People with a bit of motivation (slightly hungry), having a moderate liking for languages.

- What about all those people who start off learning a language with strong motivation, but get frustrated and lose their passion (appetite) along the way.

No, strong motivation is *not* essential... all you need is a *bit* of motivation. You have to be a bit hungry, no doubt about that, but what you also need is a smart way of learning – *what* you do and *how* you do it is as equally important. I believe that successful learning can actually increase motivation, having a sense of improvement can actually strengthen the development of interest. In other words, motivation helps learning, but successful learning can also improve motivation.

They say: Appetite comes with eating.

I say: Motivation comes with smart learning.

Once you start reaping the fruits of your labor by using the right (*my*) *method*, motivation will improve. And there are two more things to keep in mind when thinking about motivation: Learning an L2 *takes time and effort*. It takes time and effort even with the best method in the world. And you also need to know that learning is a *lifelong process*.

And, do we really need motivation to learn English? At least a little bit? Do people really need convincing to learn the only true global language? It's like needing a reason to quit smoking or take a shower... I can understand the doubts people have about learning other languages, acquiring a third language. You learned English, but should you take up Chinese or Japanese as your next foreign language? Or perhaps German or why not Spanish? 400,000,000 people speak Spanish. Well, I can't help you make that decision. Chinese seems like a good third choice, but that is not what this book is about. This book is about learning English.

Here are my reasons for learning English:

My *first reason* is that English is the language of travel and travelling is arguably the best hobby a person can have. It is so much more fun when you are able to communicate with the locals at least a little bit. I've been places and there has NEVER been a country I wasn't able to get by on a bit of English. And if, for one reason or another, you don't travel, then communicating with foreigners visiting your country, showing them some of your hospitality might be a good enough reason to learn at least a little bit of English.

My *second reason* is that English is the language of business. There is no need for me to prove this point so I will just move on to my third and most important reason for studying English.

My *third reason* is that most GOOD quality information on the Internet is in English.

- You are looking for information on stomach pain for you child – most of the good stuff on the Internet is in English.
- You want to learn how to make sushi – most of the good videos and articles on the Internet are in English.

- You would like to learn Japanese – most of the good learning material on the Internet is in English. Useful information about your health, about your child’s education, about your hobby and I’m not even going to talk about the amount of helpful information about your business.

Why is most good quality info in English?

English is the language of science. “By 2000, among journals recognized by Journal Citation Reports, **96%** were in English.”

English is the language of Wikipedia. As of 2016, there are:

- 5.2 million English articles,
- 1.9 million German articles,
- 1.7 million French articles,
- 1.3 million Russian articles.

English dominates the Internet. As of 2015:

- 53% of the most visited websites had English homepages,
- Russian was at #2 with 6.4%,
- German at #3 with 5.5%,
- Japanese at #4 with 5.4%.

The best motivation for learning English is not to think of it as learning English but learning good quality information...through English. Learning the language is just an added bonus, a welcome by-product.

And I have *one more reason* for learning English. English is the language of one of the best entertainment in the world, and I am mainly talking about Movies and Stand-up Comedy. I love laughing and I love Hollywood movies, and they are so much more fun when you watch them in original, without subtitles. So much better. But I didn’t learn English in order to watch movies, nor do I watch movies in order to learn English. I watch movies because I like movies and it so happens that I learn English along the way.

## Myth #7 Mistakes are okay

Some language teachers even go as far as saying that “mistakes are your best friend” while others go further still by saying that “you have to make at least

200 mistakes a day.”

WHAT?

It’s crazy but it’s the *most common advice* language teachers give.

I’m not going to waste any more ink on this nonsense...I will just say: There is a big difference between something being *inevitable* and okay. Mistakes are NOT okay, mistakes of any kind, and we should avoid making them.

How you ask?

Through self-correction.

## Myth #8 Understand, don't Memorize

Understanding is everything, Memorization is bad

This is one of the biggest myths about L2 acquisition. Busting it is central to my method of smart learning. But before we do that, let's look at the difference between the following 3 words:

Understand, Memorize, Remember

to Understand: we all know what that word means, but there those who say that there are different levels of understanding:

- there is basic understanding
- there is deep understanding

to Memorize a piece of information is to learn it so that you remember it exactly. Memorize information = commit information to memory

to Remember a piece of information is to bring it back into your mind. Remember = recall = not forget.

Can we use the words Memorize and Remember interchangeably? Take the following two sentences:

I have to memorize all these words to get a good test score.  
and

I have to remember all these words to get a good test score.

Which is correct and do they have the same meaning? Both are correct but have a slightly different meaning. The idea is: You memorize something today so you can remember it tomorrow. First you memorize new vocabulary so that later on you can remember it. You remember it today because you memorized it yesterday.

To use a computer analogy: to Memorize is to encode and save information into your Hard Drive (=memory), and to Remember is to retrieve (bring back) that information from your Hard Drive into your RAM (working memory). Memorize is IN (send to memory), Remember is OUT (bring back from memory).

Let's reintroduce the word Understand into the discussion. How are all these 3 words related?

*Remember* is considered a more positive word, learning *with understanding*, and having a lasting effect.

*Memorize* has connotations of something mechanical, robot-like, learning *without understanding*, and not having as lasting of an effect.

That is true for most school subjects, but when it comes to learning an L2, things are little different:

- Understanding new vocabulary and grammar doesn't take effort,
- Memorizing new vocab so that we later Remember takes effort.

Most school subjects are very difficult to understand. Subjects like mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology, philosophy, law and economics require multiple reading and a lot of time and effort to understand. You don't just look at a mathematical equation and understand it.

When students encounter new mathematics, previously unlearned math causes problems. For example, a quadratic formula requires lots of previous math knowledge in order to understand. You don't just glance at a math equation and understand it right away:

$$x = \frac{-b \pm \sqrt{b^2 - 4ac}}{2a}$$

Even if I showed you the solution you would still need time to fully understand it. You have to look closer, read slowly and carefully, analyze and cross and back reference to things you already know and understand, and not just read but also put pen to paper and do some calculation, basically spend a lot of time, reading and writing, again, and again and again.

However, L2 learning is NOT mathematics.

Unlike math formulas, even the most difficult word or phrase takes not more than a few seconds to understand. It takes less than a few seconds because we have dictionaries! There is an instant and easy-to-understand translation of the foreign word. We gain a clear and deep understanding of the foreign word the moment we see its translation into our native language. There aren't any math dictionaries to just type in the formula and instantly understand the solution, but there are a zillion language dictionaries.

Let me demonstrate:

I just used a relatively rare English word: “zillion”

If you look it up in a dictionary you will understand its meaning very quickly with almost no effort.

If you look it up in an English to Japanese dictionary you will see that it means: 莫大な /bakudaina/

If you look it up in an English to Spanish dictionary you will see that it means: *tropecientos*

Even if you check an English to English dictionary you will see that: zillion = a very large number.

It took about 5 seconds to Understand. And most people assume that once they've understood the new word, they will be able to remember it later on. And move on to the next word. People do that because, most other school subjects once you understand, you kind of remember. We are told that once we understand a piece of information, we are more likely to retain that very piece of information over a longer period of time. With most subjects, understanding is difficult so we are conditioned to believe that once we understand we will remember.

But L2 acquisition is the complete opposite:

Understanding is easy, understanding is almost instant – just look up the new word in a dictionary and it's all there. Even difficult phrases and grammar don't take long to understand. English-Japanese, English-French, English-Russian dictionary and it's usually fine.

10 minutes later it's all gone (forgotten).

When it comes to L2 acquisition, understanding is easy, the subsequent practice takes more time and effort. With regard to learning an L2, the time you spend after you understand a word or a phrase is what counts.

With regard to math, physics, chemistry, etc.:

BEFORE we Understand ~ 70% of time & effort,

AFTER we Understand ~ 30% of time & effort.

With regard to learning a foreign language:

BEFORE we Understand ~ 10% of time & effort,

AFTER we Understand ~ 90% of time & effort.

I would even say that often times Understanding is not important for L2

acquisition:

- why do we say “black and white” instead of “white and black”?
- why do we say “train of thought” but not “train of feelings”?

Often times there is no reason for why things are the way they are, there is nothing there for us to understand...it’s simply the way the language evolved.

Some people call the time and effort we spend AFTER we Understand “deep learning” or “deep encoding” – I’m going to call it Memorization. From now on, by the verb Memorize and the noun Memorization we will mean the time we spend after we understand the meaning of a foreign word or phrase.

Understanding is easy, remembering the word when it’s needed is difficult. Remembering the new word today is difficult because we haven’t done a good job memorizing it yesterday. From now on, I will be using both words, Memorize and Remember, but the focus will be on Memorize, the process of memorization. How to memorize, how to commit new vocabulary to memory, so that later on you can remember it, how to encode new vocabulary into your brain and later on retrieve it quickly and use it in a sentence.

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## Facts about L2 Learning

“Anyone can produce a new fact; the thing is to produce a new idea.”

My method of smart learning has 4 Pillars – the four pillars are the Facts my method is built on (pillar=fact) and they are:

Pillar #1. Limitations on L2 learning

Pillar #2. Goals of L2 learning

Pillar #3. Common vs difficult

Pillar #4. Memorization is everything

Let's look at each Pillar in more detail.

## Pillar #1. Limitations on L2 Learning

Eminem ends his 2002 megahit “Lose Yourself” with the following line:

- “You can do anything you set your mind to, man”

which is another way of saying: There are no limits on what you can accomplish as long as you focus and try hard.

These words are attributed to Benjamin Franklin but are often used by musicians, actors and successful people in general as a way to motivate others to not give up on their dreams.

Beautiful words. There is a multimillion dollar industry around those words – motivational speakers, inspirational movies, self-help books...but this book is not part of that industry. This book is about my experience and in my experience, adult language learners have certain limitations, two to be exact:

- Biological Limitations
- Personality Limitations

Let’s look at each one in more detail.

### Biological Limitations

I pride myself on being a good teacher but when I first started teaching English in Japan I was very frustrated with my inability to teach my students proper English pronunciation. We would spend hours practicing various sounds like V, L, R, and TH, but without much success. My students did fine in practice, but in a normal conversation, they would make the same pronunciation mistake over and over again. I thought I must be doing something wrong so I entered Google University (went on the Internet) looking for answers, and sure enough, my questions were answered.

There is a lot of hard data that shows that past a certain age it is very difficult and almost impossible for a non-native speaker to acquire a native-like *pronunciation*. It is difficult because there are certain biological limitations on pronunciation, something we already talked about when discussing the impact of age on language acquisition. Where do these limitations come about? In order to find an answer to that question, we need to look at how we learn our L1 and the idea of *phoneme*.

In his lectures on “Sensation, Perception, and the Aging Process” Professor Francis B. Colavita says that “the basic unit of speech is not the word, but the phoneme.”

### What is a phoneme?

Phoneme is the smallest unit of speech sound. It comes from the Greek word “phone” meaning “sound”, “voice.” Phonemes are the basic distinctive sound units of a language and are not always the same as a letter:

- There are 26 letters in the English language, but the number of phonemes is much higher. I counted about 35 phonemes, Google University gives numbers between 30 and 48, Wikipedia puts it at 44 – 24 consonant and 20 vowel phonemes.

- On the other hand, the Japanese Hiragana consists of 46 characters, but the number of phonemes in the Japanese language is much smaller. I counted about 23 phonemes and Google gives numbers between 20 and 24.

Phonemes are the pronunciation symbols you find placed between slashes / ... / or square brackets [...] in every dictionary that show how a word is pronounced. The symbols used for particular phonemes are often taken from the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). These symbols are one of the first things every English learner should learn. There is a difference between the pronunciation symbols used in British (UK) and American (US) dictionaries:

- UK: [dictionary.cambridge.org/help/phonetics.html](http://dictionary.cambridge.org/help/phonetics.html)

- US: [merriam-webster.com/pronsymbols.html](http://merriam-webster.com/pronsymbols.html)

So again, ‘phoneme’ is a specialized word for ‘speech sound’; not ‘dog sound’, not ‘computer sound’, but ‘human speech sound’. Phoneme is the smallest unit of speech sound.

### Phonemes and Limitations

- According to Prof. Colavita “babies less than 6 months old, can pronounce any phoneme that has ever been a part of any language on the surface of the planet.”

- In her TED presentation on “The Linguistic Genius of Babies”, Professor Patricia K. Kuhl says that “young babies less than 6 months old can discriminate (=hear the difference between) all the sounds of all languages.”

- In her lectures on “How We Learn” Professor Monisha Pasupathi makes

a similar claim: “At birth, babies...can distinguish (=hear the difference) between all the known sounds in human languages, including clicks and unusual phonemes.”

According to all three, by the first year of life, two processes are going on that limit the range of phonemes that a baby can perceive (hear) and produce (say):

The *first limitation* comes about from what babies hear – babies only hear phonemes in the language of the people around them, usually their parents.

The *second limitation* comes about from what babies say – babies start to mimic the parents and start repeating only the phonemes they hear.

We are not talking about words yet, just phonemes – speech sounds.

Let’s start with the first limitation:

Quite naturally, babies only hear speech sounds in the language of their parents. Eventually, each phoneme the baby hears is going to be recorded in the baby’s brain. Prof. Colavita calls it a “phonemic perceptual map” – a sound map in our brain where each sound we hear as a baby is recorded and has its place.

Prof. Kuhl describes the process of the formation of the “phonemic perceptual map” as babies “taking statistics only in the language that they hear.” In her TED presentation, she gives a clear example of the difference in sound development and phonemic perception between American and Japanese babies less than one year old: “Babies absorb the statistics of the language and it changes their brain.” Prof. Kuhl shows a graph of the way the R and L sounds have spatially separate locations on the American baby’s phonemic map and how those same sounds are merged in the phonemic map of the Japanese baby in what it’s called “Japanese R.”

“The two phonemes (R & L) are far apart in the English perceptual map, overlapping in the Japanese perceptual map” says Prof. Colavita.

According to Prof. Pasupathi, the changes that take place in the baby’s brain “help tune the brain for the native language” and we become less sensitive to phonemes that don’t play a role in our L1.

According to both professors Colavita and Kuhl the “phonemic perceptual map” is completed around the time the child turns one year of age.

The 1,000,000 dollar question is:

Can adults learn to perceive (=hear) new phonemes?

Prof. Colavita's answer: "The fact of the matter is if you do not hear a phoneme from another language as a child you will be **functionally deaf to that phoneme** later in life."

Prof. Pasupathi's answer: "Attempts to train people to recognize phonemes that they don't need to distinguish in their native language have **not** been **successful**, although this is an area of active research today."

Vladimir's answer: "My attempts to train people to recognize new phonemes that they don't have in their native language have been **unsuccessful**." And it is true for me too. I am a native speaker of Bulgarian and as such I am functionally deaf to some English phonemes. I can't clearly hear the difference between the following pair of phonemes:

*flush* vs *flash*

Most adult native speakers of Japanese can't hear the difference between:

V vs B

R vs L

TH vs S

And we all are functionally deaf to the clicks of the Khoisan and Nguni languages of Africa. According to Wikipedia, some Khoisan languages have as many as 83 click sounds, but to most of us, they all sound the same.

Let's talk about the **second limitation**:

It all starts with listening but soon babies start making random noises and in no time those random noises become less random and babies start mimicking and producing the sounds their parents are making. From random babble to single words and full sentences in their mother tongue.

[virtuallynative.com/book/limitations](http://virtuallynative.com/book/limitations)

As we already said: lots of muscles are involved in the production of human speech and we all know that with age muscles lose their plasticity which is also why it is difficult for adult learners to pronounce sounds they don't have in their native language. Sounds like R and L are usually learned at about five years of age when muscular plasticity is still present.

The 1,000,000 dollar question is:

Can adults learn to pronounce new phonemes?

Let's make the question more specific:

Can adult language learners of English as a foreign language from Germany, France, or Japan learn to pronounce the TH sound, IPA symbol θ?

To answer that question you first need to answer the following question: Can you hear the phoneme you are trying to pronounce? Can you hear the difference between TH and S / Z / T / D?

Before you begin doing any pronunciation practice make sure you are able to hear the phoneme you are trying to master. Make sure you are not deaf to that phoneme.

The ability to hear before the ability to pronounce.

Don't put the cart before the horse. Don't do things in the wrong order. Don't spend a second, don't spend a cent on pronunciation practice unless you can hear first. WHAT you need to do is make sure you can hear the difference between TH&S, R&L, V&B, SH&S before you try pronouncing them.

As an inexperienced teacher, I thought that the problem with pronunciation was in the *mouth*. I thought that my students were unable to pronounce certain sounds because they didn't know how to move their tongue, lips and throat muscles. But what Prof. Colavita taught me is that the problem is in the *ears/brain*. ***The amount of time and money people waste practicing sounds they can't hear is truly mind-boggling.***

HOW to check your hearing? It's easy and it's free. Most online English learner's dictionaries have a pronunciation button – a recording of the word spoken by a native speaker of UK or US English. Find commonly confused sets of words (minimal pairs):

Vest, Best, Fest, Pest

Thin, Tin, Shin, Sin

Thick, Tic, Chic, Sick

Theme, Team, Seem

River, Liver

Record the pronunciation on an audio recording device like a smartphone or voice recorder by placing it next to your PC speakers, and play them in random order.

You don't need a teacher, you don't need a doctor – you can check your phonemic perception by yourself for *free*.

Can you hear the phoneme you are trying to master?

If the answer is “No”, you have 2 courses of action: the first one is to accept it (the recommended one) and the second one is to keep trying. If you take the second course of action my advice for you is to do it yourself.

Nobody can help you hear a sound, nobody but you.

Teachers might help you pronounce a sound but they cannot help you hear a sound. Only you can teach yourself how to hear those sounds. Just watch movies, YouTube videos, listen to the radio or use a dictionary – it's so simple and most importantly free.

If the answer is “Yes”, then you have to know that it takes a lot of effort and time to improve your pronunciation and there is no guarantee you will ever reach a native-like level – reach a point where people actually mistake you for a native speaker.

I'm truly baffled by the number of pronunciation “fixing” material available both online and offline – books, DVDs, YouTube channels – “helping” people fix their English pronunciation. And I am even more baffled by the number of people buying those books and DVDs and watching those YouTube videos. I'm baffled because by and large those things **don't work**.

Before you buy any of those “accent-fixing” books, DVDs or online courses ask yourself this question: Why has nobody been able to “fix” Arnold Schwarzenegger's accent? He has been living in America since 1968 and he still speaks with a strong German accent – he says that he used to take “accent removal classes.” Same goes for Yoko Ono, Jackie Chan, Melania Trump, etc. But enough about the millions of non-native speakers living in the US.

Let's talk about native speakers. Let's talk about Liam Neeson – he has been living in America since 1989 and still has the typical Irish R. Lionel Messi moved to Spain at the age of 13 but never lost the Argentine accent.

[virtuallynative.com/book/accents](http://virtuallynative.com/book/accents)

There is an unhealthy obsession with perfect pronunciation. In my

experience, nobody cares about our non-native accent as long as it is somewhat understandable. It's *what* we say that matters and it's what people care about, not to mention that the majority of communication is non-verbal.

Is pronunciation important?

It might come as a complete surprise after what you've just read, but my answer is: Yes, pronunciation *is* important, but for a completely different reason.

Why?

The answer to that question will come shortly.

## Personality Limitations

Besides the two biological limitations related to *hearing* and *speaking* there is another possible set of constraints related to learner's *personality*.

Every adult learner comes into the world of L2 acquisition with a certain package. We are who we are in terms of personality – some people are outgoing while others are shy, some are confident while others are not. Some feel comfortable in their skin while others don't and want to change who they are.

It's all well and good, it's all common sense, right?

However, many people forget the baggage they bring into the learning process and blame the L2 for their undesirable personality traits. I can't remember how many times I have heard people say:

“I feel nervous when I speak English”

“I lose my confidence when I speak English”

Confidence has very little to do with your L2 skills. I've had many students with very poor English skills but high self-confidence who were still able to get their message across and I've also had students with high-intermediate English skills but low self-confidence who were struggling to share their opinion.

[virtuallynative.com/book/confidence](http://virtuallynative.com/book/confidence)

What I'm trying to say is: Don't blame the L2 for your personality traits. If

you lack confidence it is not because of your L2 skills. If you lack confidence it's because you lack confidence, it's how you walked into the classroom. The same way, don't blame the L2 alone for your lack of speaking fluency. Before you blame the L2 you need to take a long and hard look in the mirror and do an honest assessment of your L1 *fluency* and your overall *self-confidence*.

The 1,000,000 dollar question is:

Does personality change with language?

Before we answer that question consider the following questions first:

- Will learning Italian make you more passionate?
- Will learning French make you more romantic?
- Will learning Queen's English turn you into royalty?

Some polyglots claim that learning a new language causes you to re-invent your sense of self, adopt different behavior. Well, I'm not sure about that. In my opinion, personality doesn't change with language. I base my answer both on my work with my over 1,100 students as well as my own experience as a speaker of foreign languages.

There are conflicting theories on when our personality develops – some theories claim that it happens by the age of seven, others suggest that it is by the age of twenty and there are theories claiming that our personality keeps changing throughout our lives.

Many people say that a sudden rise to fame and fortune can change a person a lot. On the other hand, there are people like Oprah Winfrey who says: "Fame is just a magnifying glass on who you really are. Nothing really changes, it just gets amplified."

In my modest opinion, personality is shaped at a young age, but it is not set in stone. It is possible to change but it takes much more than learning a foreign language for that to happen.

Learning English won't turn you into the next Steve Jobs.

From self-observation and from what I've seen working with my students is that personality doesn't change with new language. I don't change as I switch between Bulgarian, English or Japanese. It's much more important WHO I'm talking to than what language I'm using. People could change people – communicating with people like Steve Jobs might change you.

We are who we are and we shouldn't blame the foreign language alone for our lack of confidence and fluency. Don't expect the L2 to change who you are in terms of personality either. What the L2 can do for you is open new doors and create better career opportunities. It might give you a chance to meet new people, move to a foreign country, basically change your environment. Living in the same place, seeing the same people and doing the same thing can't change your personality. Only a change in environment could lead to personal transformation and a foreign language could give you that, and especially English – the only true global language.

To sum up the chapter on Limitations:

The notion that you can do anything so long as you apply yourself is ineffective one at best, and at worst quite unhealthy. The idea that all you need is a garage, a laptop and hard work and you can be the next Bill Gates or Mark Zuckerberg is wishful thinking.

We are who we are. We grow up in a certain country, learning to speak a certain language, raised in a certain family, with a certain personality and it takes more than a foreign language to change all that.

- Look in the mirror and assess your limits in relation to personality and time as well as what you can hear and what you can say.
- Focus on the things that really matter and the things you can change. Study smart in order to save time and money and avoid frustration.

A second language is a wonderful tool but it's just a tool – what you say with it is what really matters. Your pronunciation is important too but it's secondary. Don't give up on your L2 because of unrealistic goals...it is what we are going to talk about next.

## Pillar #2. Goals of L2 Learning

Learning an L2 is an ongoing process – if you stop you forget. Language is like a living organism – if you don't feed it, well it stops living. And the key here is to feed it regularly. On a daily basis if possible. It's probably the same with most motor and cognitive skills. Learning a new language is an ongoing process but there are certain thresholds (=goals) we need to reach.

For me, there are 3 goals every foreign language learner should aim to achieve. The first is a short-term goal, the second is a mid-term goal and the third is the ultimate and it's a long-term goal. Here they are:

1. The First Goal is for the learner to use only monolingual dictionaries.
2. The Second Goal is for the learner to hear the difference between native and non-native accents.
3. The Third Goal is for the learner to acquire the ability to self-correct.

### Goal #1: Monolingual Dictionaries

I've always been a strong believer in simplicity and the KISS (Keep It Short & Simple) principle but that's not always possible (hence the size of this book) – learning an L2 is a very complex endeavor. However, if I were pressed against the wall and made to give the language learner only one advice and one advice only...that advice would be:

Use Monolingual Learner's Dictionaries as much as you can.

English to English

French to French

Spanish to Spanish...

Cambridge Dictionary was the single most important study tool in my path to learning the English language.

Monolingual dictionaries go by different names: “native-speaker dictionary”, “learner's dictionary” or “monolingual learner's dictionary.” I will be using the name Monolingual Learner's Dictionary and its acronym MLD (so please remember it).

The other type of dictionaries are called Bilingual Dictionary (BD):

English to French

English to Spanish

English to Japanese...

WHAT you need to do is to start using MLDs as soon as possible in the early stages of your language studies and use them as much as you can – that’s the single most important advice I can give. “Mistakes are okay”, “have confidence”, “have fun”, “go to the L2 country” are NOT practical pieces of advice – it’s just wishful thinking.

Every language learner, regardless of level, should use MLDs. And the good news is that they are all free. They cost nothing and weigh nothing. And by all, I mean all MLDs for learning English. And by weigh nothing, I mean they are online (virtual). You don’t have to buy them, you don’t have to carry them.

My top two English MLDs are:

1. Cambridge Dictionary
2. Longman Dictionary

I also like:

3. Macmillan Dictionary
4. Thesaurus.com
5. Oxford Collocations Dictionary

Why do you need to use MLDs?

- 1) MLDs give you more choice.
- 2) MLDs shorten and eliminate translation time.

Generally speaking, most people learn foreign languages because they want to express their thoughts and opinion as well as share their emotions, basically communicate with people from different countries:

1) MLDs double your choice – MLDs explain new words using other similar words so if you forget one word, hopefully, you will remember another word and thus be able to make a sentence and get your point across. BDs don’t give you choice. If you forget a word, all you are left with is its corresponding word in your L1 and thus unable to make a sentence and get your point across.

2) Many language learners, tend to translate in their head from their L1 into their L2 and it often goes both ways – when speaking (from L1 to L2) and when listening (from L2 into L1). That type of mental translation is quite natural and I'd say unavoidable for beginners and low intermediate learners. The problem is that it slows you down by adding an extra step to the communication process and the only way to get rid of that extra step and stop translating is to start using MLDs. You eliminate that step at the time of studying the new word by looking it up in an MLD and keeping your brain in an L2 mode.

- There will always be mental translation if you keep using BDs.
- The mental translation will gradually disappear if you only use MLDs.

## Goal #2 Hear the Difference

The second goal of L2 acquisition is to hear the difference between native and non-native accent. This book is mainly about learning English so:

The Second Goal is to distinguish the difference between British and American English. It's NOT about being able to *speak* in a British or American accent. It's about being able to **hear** the difference between the two in terms of flow, rhythm and overall melody.

Think of it as being able to discriminate between 'rock music' and 'heavy metal music', or between 'baroque music' and 'classical music'. You don't have to be a musician in order to hear the difference. You don't have to be an advanced speaker of English in order to differentiate between British and American accents.

[virtuallynative.com/book/british-vs-american](http://virtuallynative.com/book/british-vs-american)

Once that goal is achieved you can add to that Australian accent, next Irish and Scottish and then Kiwi accent – learn to tell those accents apart. After that, you can move on to Jamaican and African accents of English.

After you are done with the native accents then you can take on the non-native ones like Indian accent of English, French, Italian, Spanish, Japanese, and Chinese accents of English in whatever order you like.

For learners of Spanish, first is to be able to distinguish Spanish from other Romance languages like Portuguese and Italian. Then comes distinguishing

Spain Spanish (Spanish spoken in Spain) from Mexican Spanish. Then is Spain Spanish from Argentine Spanish. And finally, native from non-native.

Without going into every single language on the planet, I will just repeat that you have to be able to distinguish the difference between native and non-native speakers of the language you are learning.

How to reach goal #2?

Through listening and paying attention. The same way you are able to distinguish between 'jazz' and 'R&B' – through listening to enough 'jazz' and enough 'R&B'.

To me: language is melody, language is harmony and reaching that second goal is crucial for my method of learning. Unless you reach the second goal, you will never achieve mastery of the L2. If you don't reach the second goal, you will never achieve the third goal.

### Goal #3: Self-correct

The third and ultimate goal of every language learner is to acquire the ability to self-correct. You can acquire that skill long before you become a fluent speaker.

How do you do that?

The answer to that questions is what my method is all about, is what this book will teach you...but let me give you a taste, let's have a quick quiz. I'd like to ask you to translate the following words into your native language:

Want  
Handsome  
Have  
Young  
Big  
Small  
Man  
Biscuits  
Cakes  
Balloon  
Flat

Red

I'm going to ask you a question and I want you to focus on the thought process... Focus on how your brain works in order to come up with the answer... Notice what your brain does as it answers my question...

Ready?

Write down the following three pairs of sentences in your *native language* and tell me which one is correct?

I have a red big balloon.

I have a big red balloon.

He is a young handsome man.

He is a handsome young man.

Biscuits are flat small cakes.

Biscuits are small flat cakes.



### Pillar #3. Common vs difficult

Everybody approaches L2 acquisition with the mindset of something being *difficult* or *easy*:

- this word is *easy* and that word is *difficult*;
- this grammar is *difficult* and that one is *easy*.

We all have the Difficult vs Easy mentality, we all have this dualistic approach to learning and it's not just in relation to acquiring an L2.

If you see a legal document written in your L1, you will most likely label it as being difficult. If you see an academic publication in mathematics in your L1, you will most likely find it difficult. But to a lawyer, legal documents fall into the easy category, and for the same reason, mathematicians don't find academic publications in their field difficult.

What am I trying to say?

I say STOP calling words and grammar Easy or Difficult, stop fitting everything into those two categories. There is nothing difficult about learning an L2, there is nothing easy either. These are not the appropriate categories to work with. Instead use

*frequent* (=common) vs *uncommon* (=rare).

There is nothing difficult about the word *frequent*, it's just a little rarer than the word *common*. There is nothing easy about the word *rare*, it's just more frequent than the word *uncommon*.

- Using the Difficult vs Easy categories is very inhibiting; the brain shuts down making it harder to take in new information.

- Using the Common vs Uncommon categories is more liberating; the brain is more open, making it easier to absorb new information. It a very simple yet powerful shift in thinking about language learning which makes it much more focused and efficient.

What do we mean by frequent words and how many words do we really need to know? This is a very common question, a question I've been asked many times. And it's a common source of frustration among language learners: "I need more vocabulary, I don't know enough words" is what people say all the time.

According to Google, there are 1,025,109 words in the English language (which is crazy), however, the Second Edition of the 20-volume Oxford Dictionary contains entries for 171,476 words.

How many words do we need to know?

Well, there are 3 answers to that question, there are 3 numbers:

- The first number is about being able to speak and express your every thought.
- The second number is about being able to understand other people in a face-to-face conversation.
- The third number is about passing a language test and everything else.

It's basically the size of your Active vs Passive vocabulary. Let's look at each of these 3 numbers.

How many words do we need to know in order to speak fluently? The answer is in the most important piece of advice I give to every language learner and the first goal of L2 acquisition: ONLY use MLDs.

MLDs use a limited list of common words for writing simple definitions of every word in the dictionary. The list is called "defining vocabulary" and according to Wikipedia, in 1978 Longman was the first modern dictionary to use defining vocabulary, "and since then defining vocabularies have become a standard component of monolingual learner's dictionaries for English and for other languages."

How many words are on the defining vocabulary list?

- According to Wikipedia:

Longman uses about 2,000 words in its definition;

Macmillan uses approximately 2,500 words;

Oxford uses around 3,000 words.

- According to Oxford Dictionary:

The 10 most common words (the, be, to, of, and, a, in, that, have, I) "account for a remarkable 25% of all the words"

The 100 most common words account for 50%;

The 1,000 most common words account for 75%;

The 7,000 most common words account for 90%.

- According to Macmillan Dictionary: Native speakers of English use 7,500 words for 90% of what they speak or write. Those words appear in red in

Macmillan Dictionary, and are graded with stars:

One-star words are frequent (2,500),

Two-star words are more frequent (2,500), and

Three-star words are the most frequent words in the English language (2,500).

$$2,500+2,500+2,500=7,500$$

- Cambridge Dictionary also grades its vocabulary using the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR):

A1, A2 – essential vocabulary

B1, B2 – intermediate vocab

C1, C2 – advanced vocab

- Longman Dictionary too grades its words in terms of frequency by dividing them into 3 groups:

Top 3,000 written & spoken words

Top 2,000 written & spoken words

Top 1,000 written & spoken words

So here is your answer to the question of speaking: You need no less than 1,000 and no more than 2,000 words in order to speak well. With approximately (=about) 2,000 words you can express ANY idea and make a sentence on ANY topic – from literature to business, from philosophy to mathematics, from sports to movies, and so on and so forth. *Approximately* is a two-star (B1) word, *about* is a three-star (A1) word.

Throughout the years I've had many students who knew a lot of words but didn't know how to use them in a sentence, use them quickly. They had a high test score but very poor speaking skills...which takes us to the third number, the answer to the third question: In order to pass a language test you need, as you might have guessed, about 7,000 words which account for 90% of what native speakers say and write.

2,000 vs 7,000 is a considerable difference. It's Active vs Passive vocabulary:

- Active is vocabulary we use with great ease on a daily basis.
- Passive is vocabulary we understand when we hear or read but don't use daily.

Active doesn't mean *easy* nor does passive mean *difficult*. Active means *common* and passive means relatively more *uncommon*. You should focus on

building your active vocabulary. As you are learning new words and phrases you should be able to tell which vocabulary pool those same words and phrases are more likely to fall into. Slang and idioms are more likely to be in your passive vocab pool – you should be able to understand when you hear them but not very likely to use (=say).

How about listening comprehension? How many words do you need in order to understand what others are telling you in a typical conversation?

Well, it depends...but in most cases 2,000 to 3,000 words should suffice, for two reasons:

1) In a face-to-face conversation native speakers are kind enough to adjust their level, cutting down on the slang and focusing on more common words and phrases.

2) The second reason you could get by with even 2,000 words in a face-to-face conversation is that you can clarify and confirm when you don't understand:

## Survival English

In a face-to-face conversation you could ask:

I'm sorry?

Pardon me?

Could you repeat that, please?

Could you speak more slowly?

Could you speak more loudly?

Could you write that down?

What do you mean?

What do you mean by ... ?

Did you say (16) or (60) ?

These are the few questions every language learner must learn first. There is nothing wrong with not being able to hear or understand what other people say, but there is plenty wrong not being able to ask, confirm and clarify.

Let's recap:

1,000~2,000 words for speaking (active vocabulary)

2,000~3,000 words for listening in a typical face-to-face conversation

(active and passive vocab)

7,000 words for language tests as well as movies, newspapers and news on TV (passive and active)

It's a matter of common sense that the more words we know the better, the numbers above are not absolute and should only be used as a general reference when setting language learning goals.

It's also common sense that the bigger our active vocabulary the better. The more you read, listen, write and speak, the more words move from the passive pool into the active pool, the bigger your active vocabulary.

## Collocation

All vocabulary learning starts with *nouns*, nouns are the building blocks of any language – a dog, a chair, a desk, a window, etc. Next come *verbs*, followed by *adjectives* and finally *adverbs*. A very easy and quick way to assess a person's English language proficiency is to count the number of adverbs – the more adverbs a person uses the more proficient he or she is.

The top 10 most common *nouns* are: time, person, year, way, day, thing, man, world, life, hand

The top 10 most common *verbs* are: be, have, do, say, get, make, go, know, take, see

The top 10 most common *adjectives* are: good, new, first, last, long, great, little, own, other, old

The top 10 most common *adverbs* are: up, so, out, just, now, more, also, here, well, very

One of the ***biggest mistakes*** people make when studying vocabulary is that they study individual words.

Never study individual words

but rather, learn new words in combination with other words. We call this a collocation. *Collocation* is “a word or phrase which is often used with another word or phrase in a way that sounds correct and natural.” Terms like: *word chunking*, *word web*, *word association* could also be used to mean *collocation*.

For instance, you are trying to learn the noun *jacket* ... when you learn a

*noun* you should always collocate (=connect) it with a *verb*:

wear a jacket

put on a jacket

take off a jacket

2-3 collocations should be enough as long as they are the most common ones.

Hand:

take his hand

hold her hand

shake my hand

Bag:

carry a bag

hold a bag

buy a bag

Computer:

watch a computer? – not really, the verb *watch* is not our first choice for the noun *computer*:

use a computer

switch on/off my computer

When you learn a *noun*, you could also add an *adjective* to the collocation:

buy a waterproof jacket

wear a light jacket

hold her beautiful hand

have a cheap bag

buy a fast computer

When you learn an *adjective*, you must always link it to a *noun*.

When I say *beautiful*, you say ...? *Woman, flower, dress*, etc. There are many collocations with the adjective *beautiful* but you need at least 1 quick one:

marry a beautiful woman

wear a beautiful dress

buy beautiful flowers

When I say *expensive*, you say ...? *Car, house, bag*, etc. There are many

collocations with the adjective *expensive* but you need a quick one, a quick noun. Imagine as if the word *expensive* was a magnet...what noun would that magnet attract first? Or imagine playing a game of word association.

When I say *efficient*, you say ...? The adjective *efficient* is less common than beautiful (uncommon, not difficult), so most learners struggle to quickly connect to a noun. My first choice is the noun *system*.

When I say *system*, you say ...? What verb comes to mind?

When not sure about the verb, know that have works 90% of the time:

have an efficient system

as well as

create an efficient system

develop an efficient system

We could also say:

have an efficient transport system

create an efficient management system

develop an efficient delivery system

We could rewrite the above collocations without the word *system*:

have an efficient transport

create an efficient management

develop an efficient delivery

But my collocation of the word *efficient* is “system” or “method” or “way” or “organization”, etc. Those are the first words that come to my mind when I hear the adjective *efficient* ... those are the words the “magnet” *efficient* attracts first. People and machines could also be *efficient*, a word like *Germans* pops to mind as well; there are many collocations with *efficient*, but we need 1, 2 quick ones.

One last thing about learning *adjectives*: every time you learn an adjective think about its opposite, its antonym:

efficient ≠ inefficient

beautiful ≠ ugly

cheap ≠ expensive

light ≠ heavy

etc.

Think about antonyms when you study *verbs* and *nouns* too:

take ≠ give

borrow ≠ lend

win ≠ lose

win ≠ loss

success ≠ failure

etc.

Never learn individual words.

There are no difficult or easy words, there are common and uncommon words. Focus on the 2,000 most common words and build your vocabulary from there, and you do that by using MLDs.

Now is a good time to revisit the First Goal of L2 acquisition – ONLY use Monolingual Learner’s Dictionaries – and give it a more precise definition:

The First Goal of every language learner is to effortlessly read and understand the *definition* Monolingual Learner’s Dictionaries provide... which is another way of saying that the language learner knows the 2,000 most common words.

You are bound to come across new words, as we’ve established English has at least 170,000 of them. I myself am still discovering new words almost every day (the last one was *compunction*) but it has been a very, VERY long time since I came across a new word in a monolingual definition (at least 15 years).

When talking about learning words, the conversation inevitably veers onto the subject of Flashcards, so now is a good time to talk about Flashcards, Spaced Repetition and Reviewing in general.

## Reviewing

It’s widely believed that reviewing vocabulary is important for L2 learning, however, I was very close to placing this belief in the chapter on the myths about L2 acquisition...but I didn’t.

We all know the saying: “Repetition is the mother of learning”. I’ve never

used Spaced Repetition as a method of memorizing new words but I read that there is growing body of research on its benefit on recall tests.

I don't doubt that.

However, I also think that spaced repetition and reviewing in general, is not the most effective way of learning new vocabulary. It sounds like I am contradicting myself, doesn't it? Reviewing and Repetition is essential but ineffective...?!? How do we go about dealing with this contradiction? How to reconcile such different points of view?

- My first issue is in the **re-** prefix. The prefix **re-** is used to add the meaning 'do again' and the problem with doing something over and over again is that it is **booriing**. Reviewing and repeating is rarely fun and especially with vocabulary (even with sex – it's why people cheat on each other). Flipping thought flashcards is boring and boredom kills motivation.

- My second issue with reviewing in general and spaced repetition in particular, is that real-life conversations are NOT recall tests:

- Recall tests assess your passive vocabulary.
- Real-life conversations assess your active vocab.

People's passive vocabulary is always bigger than their active one.

- Recall tests are about individual words.
- Real-life conversations are about full sentences.

There is a huge difference between doing well in practice and doing well in real life. It's one thing to remember a word on a recall test; it's a completely different thing to instantaneously remember the same word, in a grammatically correct sentence, in a real face-to-face conversation.

- My third issue with reviewing in general and flashcards in particular, is that they lack in context. There is a word on one side and a word on the other and what's even worse is that it is in the mother tongue. Those are the worst flashcards – an English word on one side and on the other side its meaning in the native language of the learner.

So WHAT should you do instead of reviewing...what is the alternative to flashcards, spaced repetition and reviewing in general? What is more effective?

### Keep reading!

Just keep reading *new* texts on subjects you like and enjoy. Books, blogs, magazines, newspapers, etc. It's much more enjoyable than flipping through flashcards and vocabulary lists and certainly more informative and educational – have fun and learn something along the way. Keep reading and keep listening (watching) to things you enjoy.

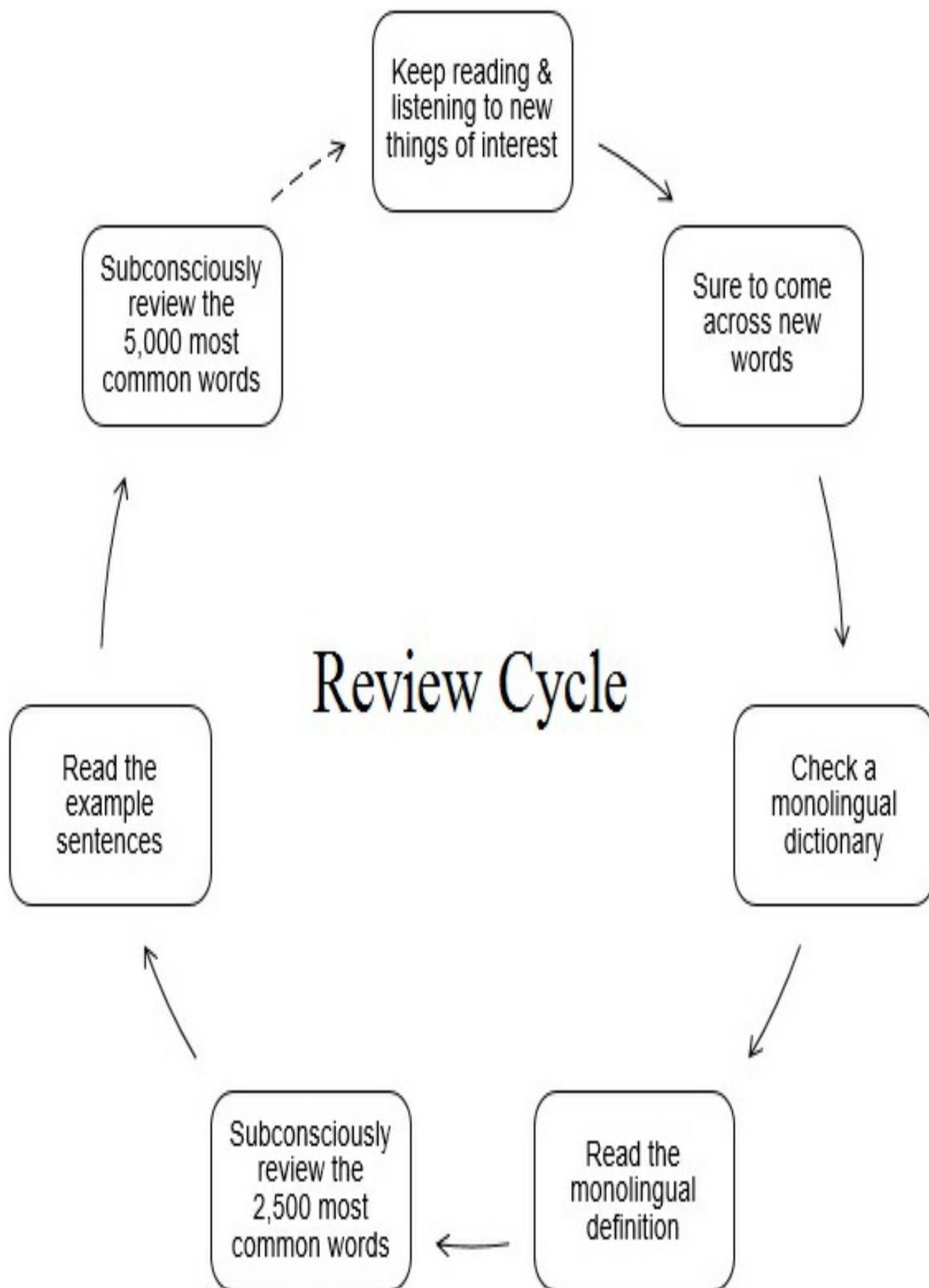
There are three reasons for why you might forget a new word:

1. You don't use my method (or use it the wrong way).
2. The word you forget is not frequent enough.
3. You don't read and listen regularly enough.

As we already said, we are bound to come across new words as long as we read and listen to new stuff. When we come across a new word, we do *what*?

We use an MLD.

When reading the definition MLDs provide we subconsciously review the most common vocabulary. It's a much more effective form of spaced repetition – we still review our vocabulary in a spaced out manner but it is all subconscious:



Review Cycle: Keep reading & listening to new things of interest > Sure to come across new words > Check a monolingual dictionary > Read the monolingual definition > Subconsciously review the 2,500 most common words > Read the example sentences > Subconsciously review the 5,000 most common words > keep reading &...

No flashcards, no spaced repetition, no conscious reviewing. ***The amount of time and money people waste on “vocabulary building” books and poorly-made flashcards is jaw-dropping.***

I do realize that my opinion on Flashcards, Spaced Repetition and Reviewing is quite controversial. The thing is that learning English for me was never a short-term goal – it was never about taking a test or a job interview...flashcards will probably help with that.

To me learning English was all about getting good quality information and good quality entertainment, something my native Bulgarian can rarely give me. I don't care much about foreign languages, but I care very much about communicating with other people and learning new things and English gives me all that.

I don't study words, I learn interesting info...and English along the way.

## Pillar #4. Memorize in order to Remember

Memorization is everything

“A person is the sum of their memories. Your memory and how you remember is what makes you who you are.”

You may be studying very hard, reading a lot of textbooks, reviewing tons of vocabulary, watching a lot of movies, but at the end of the day it’s all about how many words you can remember and use in a sentence in a real-life situation – at a business meeting or job interview, on the phone or on a date, during a sales presentation or while travelling abroad... It all comes down to the words you are able to remember there and then. The words you remember after the meeting or interview don’t matter all that much.

Remembering is everything.

As a language learner, how many times have you got stuck on a word, only to remember it the second your teacher tells it to you, exclaiming:

“Oh yes, I remember that word”?

As a language teacher, “Oh yes, I remember that word” is something I hear all the time. The problem with a lot of people is that they have the word or phrase in their memory but are unable to remember it, remember it quickly and easily. As a language learner myself, every time I was stuck on a word, I would “search my memory” knowing that it was somewhere there and thinking: “I know it is here, I studied that word before...what was it, if I could only remember it.” I don’t know about you, but I’ve never had a very good memory, I often forget things. And it’s probably the main reason why I’ve become so obsessed with human memory.

Remembering is everything.

As a language learner, I came to the realization that remembering is everything relatively early in my language studies. It was when I realized that understanding is easy, understanding is not the goal. Words are easy to understand because we have *dictionaries*. As a language teacher, hearing “Oh yes, I remember that word” all the time was a clear sign that understanding is not the goal. My students would shower me with praise for how easy-to-

understand my grammar explanations were, only to make the same grammatical mistake one hour later. The fact that you've understood a word or grammatical structure is great, but it's only 10% of all the effort. The remaining 90% is making sure you don't forget what you've just learned.

Remember is everything, but as we said, the ability to remember is often the result of conscious memorization – our ability to remember something depends on how well we memorize it when we first encounter it. We don't have much control over what we are able to remember, but we have all the control on what we try to memorize...therefore:

### **Memorization is everything.**

Big words. Let's pause for a minute and regroup. Let us look at what we have (hopefully) established so far:

I hope that I've managed to erase some of the wrong beliefs (myths) you might have had about learning a foreign language and that you have welcomed some new ones.

By realizing the limitations you might have, I hope you've adopted a more efficient mindset and from now on will focus your time, effort and money on more productive things and activities.

I hope that you've understood the importance of using MLDs thus focusing on the most common vocabulary and I sincerely hope you've understood the difference between Understand and Remember in regard to learning a foreign language.

What you've realized is that to understand the meaning of a new word doesn't mean much. Understanding the meaning of a new word doesn't mean you will remember it and will be able to use it when you need it.

The mindset you've adopted is that the real learning/effort begins after you've understood the meaning. Your focus as a language learner is on how to memorize the new word in such a way that you will be able to remember it in the future.

## How to memorize?

The first thing you need to know about committing vocabulary to memory is that

CONTEXT is KING.

The richer the context (short story, movie scene, etc.) the easier to memorize and later remember.

What is context?

The Cambridge Dictionary says: “Context is the text or speech that comes immediately before and after a particular phrase or piece of text and helps to explain its meaning.” Generally speaking, context is something with a beginning, middle and an end – at least 3 sentences. Everything else is more or less a **waste of time**.

When you come across a new word, in a book or in a movie (rich context), in order to increase your chances of remembering that word later on, you need to do the following 7 things:

- Use MLDs
- Collocate
- Rephrase
- Visualize
- Personalize
  
- Harmonize
- Notice

Let's go through each one in more detail:

### Guess

The first thing you need to do is guess the word's meaning – that's quite natural. The context should provide enough clues to make a reasonable guess. Both collocations and context limit the number of possible word

combinations. You should also try to guess its pronunciation as well as the root of the word, because the next thing you need to do is look the word up in an MLD and start with learning the correct

## Pronunciation

This first pronunciation practice is very, very important.

Why?

Because that's the way the human brain works, it's what we remember. We remember most things first – it's called the *primacy effect* – first sex, first fight, first car, first job, etc. First time experiences are very easy to remember, it is very easy for the brain to create neurological pathways from our long-term memory (Hard Disk) to our working memory (RAM). Therefore it is very important to build the correct neural pathway the first time around – if you make a mistake it will be very difficult to build a new pathway later on.

It's like building an actual road (=path). If instead of building a road from A to B you made a mistake and built a road from A to C, it would be very difficult and effortful to destroy the latter (A-C) and build the former (A-B).

If you are not careful and learn the wrong pronunciation of a new word it will be difficult later on to unlearn it and learn the correct one. So make sure you learn the correct pronunciation the first time around.

For example: the word *beard*

It looks very similar to the word *bear* pronounced /beə/ so it would be very natural to assume that the way to pronounce *beard* is /beəd/. However, *beard* is pronounced /biəd/...much closer to the word *beer* /biə/.

There are English words, fortunately not that many, which have two readings.

For example: the word *tear* meaning “liquid from the eyes when we cry” pronounced /tiə/.

The word *tear* has a second very common meaning of “break into pieces” pronounced /teə/.

Beard and Tear are examples of short, monosyllabic words. With longer words, you need to make sure you stress the right syllable (more about

syllables later in the book). Every dictionary shows the main stress = main accent so make sure you get it right the first time around. Longer words have a secondary stress/accent so be mindful of that too. Most dictionaries indicate stress by placing a stress mark ( ´ ) before the stressed/accented syllable.

There are English words, fortunately not that many, that change their stress depending on whether used as a noun, a verb or an adjective.

For example: the word *increase*

When *increase* is a verb, the stress is on the second syllable, but as a noun, the stress is on the first syllable:

increase (v) /in´kri:s/

increase (n) /´inkri:s/

The same is true for the word *decrease*:

decrease (v) /di´kri:s/

decrease (n) /´di:kri:s/

There are English words, especially words ending in “ate”, which have two readings depending on whether used as a verb or noun/adjective:

graduate (v) /´grædjueit/

graduate (n) /´grædjuət/

separate (v) /´sepəreit/

separate (adj) /´sepərət/

There are English words, fortunately not that many, that are pronounced differently in British and American English:

laboratory (UK) /lə´borətri/

laboratory (US) /´læbrəto:ri/

niche (UK) /ni:sh/

niche (US) /nitch/

Choose the one you feel is easier for you to pronounce (my English is a bit of a hybrid in that my R is British but my T and OU, as well as overall intonation, are American). Most dictionaries provide an audio recording of each word and Cambridge Dictionary provides audio recording for both British (UK) and American (US) English.

The longer the word the more careful you should be, but with a little practice

it shouldn't take more than a few seconds for you to move on to step (3) and UNDERSTAND the word's meaning by reading its definition, its

## Monolingual definition

Why is monolingual definition important?

Monolingual definition gives you choice.

As we already said, most people learn foreign languages in order to express themselves, to share their thoughts and feelings and what monolingual definition does is give you a backup word or words in case you forget a given word. Monolingual definition doubles your chances of remembering, whereas bilingual definitions give you no backup words, no second choice of expressing yourself. If you forget a given word, all you are left with is its meaning in your native language and thus with no sentence, no communication.

When you come across a new word in a text, some teachers advise using BDs in order to return to the text as quickly as possible. Their argument is that MLDs take too much time and interrupt your reading fluency. If you do that, if you only use a BD, you need to ACKNOWLEDGE the fact that you are very likely to forget the new word. You need to remember the forth pillar of L2 acquisition – understanding the meaning is only 10% of the work you need to do in order to memorize and later remember the new word. You acknowledge that there is roughly 90% chance of you forgetting the new word.

It is true that monolingual definitions take longer to understand but that is up to a point. It comes a time when using BDs is more time consuming than using MLDs. Once you learn the 2,000 words MLDs use in their monolingual definitions (defining vocabulary) it's going to get so much easier and faster for you to understand new words. In the short run, MLDs are certainly more time-consuming than BDs, but in the long run, MLDs are unquestionably much, much more time-efficient and far more effective. Get over the 2,000-word hump and it is all downhill from there.

It's like when you try to quit smoking. It is very hard at first but you know that the hardship will not last forever, it will end and you will be free from the addiction and live a better life. But you have

to go ‘cold turkey’ – stop smoking completely. Quitting by reducing the number of cigarettes or having the occasional drag (BD) saves you pain in the short run but prolongs the agony.

Now, I am not saying that beginners should never use BDs – my advice is to try using MLDs as much as you can, but the first goal of every language learner is to ONLY use MLDs (in all honesty at the beginning I did use Bulgarian-English dictionary for a while but I can count the number of times I used an English-Bulgarian dictionary on the fingers of one hand).

For beginners I recommend Longman Dictionary as well as Cambridge Dictionary which has two settings in terms of difficulty – one for beginners and another for advanced learners:

- Cambridge Learner’s Dictionary
- Longman Dictionary

Even beginners should first consult an MLD, consult BOTH Cambridge and Longman, and if the monolingual definition is too difficult then check the bilingual definition in a BD ...but don’t stop there, instead, WHAT you should do is go back and read the monolingual definition once again. First use both Longman and Cambridge, if difficult, consult a BD, and finish off by going back to the MLD.

- BDs are for Understanding;
- MLDs are for Understanding *and* Remembering.

For example: the word *consult*

Pronunciation: /kənˈsʌlt/

- Longman Dictionary definition: “to ask for information or advice from someone because it is their job to know something”
- Cambridge Learner’s Dictionary definition: “to go to a particular person or book to get information or advice”
- Cambridge Dictionary definition: “to get information or advice from a person, book, etc. with special knowledge on a particular subject”

If you forget the word “consult” you will hopefully remember the word “ask for information” or “get advice.” It’s what we call synonyms – a word or phrase which has the same or nearly the same meaning as another word or phrase.

Synonyms are great but you should never underestimate the power of

antonyms – a word which means the opposite of another word. Antonyms are super important and it is something we will talk more in the next-to-last chapter on speaking.

- Quite naturally, the most common words rarely have direct synonyms and/or antonyms, and that's especially true of *nouns* (furniture, water, etc.) and *verbs* (eat, play, etc.). The verb *consult* is a good example – to *ask* is a relatively close synonym and a close antonym would be to *ignore*. Virtually all *adjectives* have direct synonyms and/or antonyms.

- Quite naturally, words which don't have direct synonyms have longer monolingual definitions, but you shouldn't be alarmed by that. Dictionary definitions follow certain grammatical patterns, there are certain templates for explaining nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs. What you need to do is NOTICE and look for those repeated grammatical patterns – it's not just about the word's meaning but also about how it's presented. Therefore monolingual definitions are one of two best places to learn grammar. The second place to learn grammar is the dictionary's

### Example sentence

Every MLD provides at least one and sometimes as many as five example sentences with each word. Nobody disputes the benefit of learning words in a sentence, it is a well-established fact, but why?

Why learn words in a sentence?

For 2 reasons:

1. A sentence gives you one-third of *context*.

The dictionary example sentences of the word *consult* are:

- "I'm not quite sure how to get there – I'd better consult a map."
- "If the pain persists you should consult your doctor."

It's normal to come across a new word in the example sentence (not so much in the definition) – the word *persist* for instance. My advice is to consult an MLD and follow steps (1), (2) and (3) only:

(1) Guess

(2) Pronunciation: /pə'sist/

(3) Definition: persist = continue

Stop there and go back to the word *consult*:

If the pain continues you should consult your doctor.

Don't get sidetracked by other words. There is a limit on the number of words your brain can commit to memory at a given time. If the new word has a direct synonym it means that it is not that common. *Persist* is a C2 word. *Continue* is a B1 word.

After reading the dictionary example sentence(s), you need to

## Collocate

Notice and look for collocations in both the monolingual definition and example sentences:

- ask for advice
- get advice
- consult **a** map
- **the** pain persists
- consult your doctor

You don't learn individual words like *consult* or *advice* but rather 1-2 collocations with those words. Having noticed at least a couple of collocations, the next thing you do with the example sentence(s) is

## Rephrase it

You already know a couple of synonyms of *consult*...the word *ask* and *to go to a person for information*:

- If the pain continues you should go to your doctor.
- I had better check a map.

There is always another way to get your point across – that's what the monolingual definition is for. Then next thing you need to do with the example sentence(s) is to

## Visualize it

You need to create an image around the example sentence – imagine a situation, like a movie scene, with the example sentence at the center of that scene. You need to complete the context by creating a mini dialogue. Imagine what comes “before and after”, and especially **before**, the example sentence, but not just any image, not just any context – the context you visualize should be *realistic* and *personal*. Every word you learn you have to imagine using in real life, you have to imagine **saying** the new word:

WHO you are talking to when you say the example sentence?

WHERE you are when you say it?

WHY you say it?

WHO – it could be anybody – your boss, your friend, a stranger, a sales clerk, a doctor...in your movie scene, you are always *you*, you don't change but other people can change. The key is to make it realistic; create a scene/context which is likely to happen to you.

WHERE – it could be anywhere – in your office, your school, in a foreign country, at a coffee shop, on the street...don't go too crazy and make it unrealistic – don't put yourself in space unless you are an astronaut.

WHY – why do you say the sentence?

The two example sentences were:

- “I'm not quite sure how to get there – I'd better consult a map.”

- “If the pain persists you should consult your doctor.”

Can you imagine using them in real life?

Where is “there” in the first sentence? Who are you talking to...are you talking to yourself?

Who is “you” in the second sentence?

If it's hard for you to imagine using the dictionary sentence(s) then you need to do some changes in order to make the example sentences fit your life – you need to

## Personalize

Keep the basic structure of the dictionary sentences and change only the Subject and/or the Object in order to make them more personal.

When personalizing the dictionary sentences, many people make the

mistake of forming only positive (=Yes) sentences. When you make a personal sentence you have three basic choices. You could make:

1. Positive 'Yes' sentence
2. Negative 'No' sentence
3. Question

1. John, you should consult your doctor.
2. John, you shouldn't consult your doctor.
3. Should I consult my doctor if the pain persists?

The key is to make the scenes as realistic as possible. If you visualize an office situation, try to picture clearly the exact location and coworker or boss you are having the conversation with. The more vivid and realistic the scene the easier to memorize and later remember. *Consult* is an "easy" word – easy to spell, easy to pronounce, easy to understand and like most other words it's also easy to forget. In order to make your personal sentence more *memorable* you need to answer the WHY question:

“Why do I say the sentence?”

The answer to the WHY question is what grammar is all about.

## English Grammar – the essentials

Grammar is like a mathematical formula but instead of numbers, we plug in words and collocations. An argument could be made that vocabulary is more important than grammar – knowing enough words might help you get your message across whereas grammar alone will get you nowhere. However, to me and my method, the vocabulary-over-grammar argument is silly and pointless. This is not an either-or choice. As we have established numerous times, we should never learn individual words, we should always learn words in combination with other words (collocation) and in a sentence. When we learn words in a sentence, by definition we learn grammar too.

The good news is that the English grammar is relatively easy to master – it's mainly about the verb. As with vocabulary, there are common and less common grammatical structures. As the top 1,000 most common words account for 75% of all words used in the English language, about 5 major plus 5 additional (5+5) grammatical constructions account for about 75% of all English grammar used in spoken language. However, as with vocabulary, grammar is easy to Understand but difficult to Remember and use quickly and correctly in a real-life situation... therefore, there are three things you need to do in order to improve your speed and accuracy:

- The first thing you need to do is: As you Visualize and Personalize the example sentence MLDs provide, as you create Context, make sure you give an answer to the WHY question – “Why do I say the sentence?” The answer to the Why question will provide a keyword/trigger – it is what we call FUNCTION. The Function word is usually not in the sentence.

- The second thing you need to do is to associate each Function/grammar structure with a keyword/trigger – I call it CUE. The Cue word is usually in the sentence.

Both sets of keywords/trigger – CUE and FUNCTION – will hopefully trigger a memory thus help you retrieve the grammar you need.

- And the third thing you need to do is NOTICE how grammar is used in MLDs definition and example sentences. Just from the definition alone, you can learn so much. Most definitions are in

# 1. Present Simple

*consult* = to **get** information or advice from a person, book, etc. with special knowledge on a particular subject

Most definitions are in the Present Simple Tense because a definition is a Fact. We use the Present Simple to talk about Facts and things that are USUALLY true:

The Earth revolves around the sun.

Dogs hate cats.

Generally speaking, Japanese cars are better than American cars.

Practice makes perfect.

I believe all languages have Present Simple tense. We also use it to talk about Habits, Routine and things we USUALLY do:

What do you usually do on weekday mornings?

Vladimir: I usually wake up at 6 am, go jogging, take a shower, have breakfast and head to work.

Since Routine and Habit is something we do repeatedly, a common question you might ask is HOW OFTEN:

How often do you go jogging?

We usually use Present Simple with the word USUALLY as well as words like OFTEN, SOMETIMES, RARELY, etc:

My wife usually gets home at about 6 pm.

I often just have a sandwich for lunch.

My dad cooks dinner sometimes, but usually my mum does it.

My mother rarely wears jewelry.

CUES: Usually, Often, Sometimes, Rarely, How often, Generally speaking...

FUNCTION: Routine, Habit, Always, Fact, Generalizing...

A note on the Simple Present:

In the third-person singular (he, she, it) the verb ends in **S**:

Practice (it) makes perfect.

My wife (she) usually gets home about 6 o'clock.

The Earth (it) revolves around the Sun.

John (he) plays tennis twice a week.

To me, the added **S**, has never been about grammar but always about

sound/harmony. I don't think about grammar, I hear cymbals.



'He', 'She', 'It', as well as names of people (John, Smith, Vlad, etc.) names of cities (Tokyo, New York, etc.), my boss/wife/husband/son is often followed by cymbals.

The same could be said about *plurals*. Certain words are followed by cymbals – S sound – and most notably the words **many** and **few**:

Many friends/cars/countries/words, etc.

A few pictures/cities/accidents, etc.

But of course there are some noteworthy exceptions:

Many people/children/women/men etc.

*There are* is usually followed by S (cymbals): There are (2,3) ponds in the park.

*There is* is followed by A and never by S: There is **a** park in my neighborhood.

The negative sentences in Present Simple usually use Do / Does + not:

I do not wake up at 7 am.

My wife does not get home before 6 pm.

The question form is also with Do / Does:

Do you wake up at 6 o'clock?

What time does your wife get home?

A **common mistake** people make with Simple Present is to use it to talk about actions happening in the present, happening NOW. I guess it's because of the name of the grammatical structure Present Simple Tense – a lot of people take the word *present* to mean *now*.

## +1. Present Continuous

be + ing: You **are reading** this book now.

Most definitions are in the Present Simple but if you look closely you will notice the Present Continuous Tense too: *habit* = something which you **do** often and regularly, sometimes without knowing that you **are doing** it

- Present Simple is about the way things Usually are:

It rarely snows in Tokyo.

The rainy season usually ends in the middle of July.

- Present Continuous is usually about things happening Now, as we speak:

Is it snowing outside?

I think it is starting to rain.

CUE: ~ing, Now

FUNCTION: happening Now, as we speak, etc. My native Bulgarian doesn't have the Present Continuous tense (we use the Present Simple) but it is quite easy for me to imagine it.

## 2. Future Simple

*anticipate* = to imagine or expect that something **will** happen

The second major grammar structure is Simple Future Tense. Not all languages have Future tense. The Japanese language for instance doesn't and that's perfectly fine – it doesn't prevent Japanese people from developing

futuristic technology. Just look at their space-age toilets. Some languages don't have future tense but English does and the first word that comes to mind when talking about the future is WILL.

Remember the WILL, don't forget the WILL.

What will you do TOMORROW/NEXT week?

I will see my friend tomorrow.

I will go to England next week.

To make the future less certain you can add the word *probably*:

I will probably see my friend tomorrow.

I will probably go to England next week.

Another way to express future actions is Present Continuous:

What are you doing tomorrow/next week?

I am seeing my friend tomorrow.

I am going to England next week.

CUES: Will, Tomorrow, Next week/month, etc.

FUNCTION: Future, from now on

There are other ways to express future actions, like *going to*, but WILL is the first word you need to learn. The negative form of Will is Will not. In spoken English, *will not* often contracts to *won't* /wəʊnt/:

She won't see him tomorrow.

## +2. IF & First Conditional

*numb* = **If** a part of your body is numb, you are unable to feel it, usually for a short time

Something related to Will and the Future is a grammatical structure called First Conditionals and the CUE word here is IF. I believe most languages have IF in their grammar. IF is something we use to Make Plans for the future or when we Negotiate with somebody.

Conditional (=if) sentences are made up of 2 parts:

1<sup>st</sup> part is IF part, also called the *condition*

2<sup>nd</sup> part is Will part, also called *result*

IF + present simple (condition), Will + base verb (result)  
we could change their places:

Will + base verb (result) IF + present simple (condition)

If it rains tomorrow (condition), we will stay home (result).

We will stay home if it rains tomorrow.

If it rains tomorrow, we won't go to the beach.

Will we stay home if it rains tomorrow?

If it rains tomorrow, will we stay home?

Depending on your FUNCTION, you may replace Will with Should, May, etc.

If the pain persists, you should consult your doctor.

If it rains tomorrow, we may stay home.

CUES: If

FUNCTION: If, Future, 2 sentences, etc.

A **common mistake** people make is to put 2 *will* in 1 sentence:

*If it ~~will~~ rain tomorrow, we will stay home.*

People do that because the IF (=condition) part of the sentence is in the future 'tomorrow'. Just think in terms of sound and melody: If you Will, If it Will, If I Will, If she Will do not sound well together ... IF and WILL don't like to be too close one another. They like to keep a bit of distance ... at least 3, 4 words apart:

*If it rains tomorrow, we will stay home.*

### 3. Past Simple

*ancestor* = a member of your family who **lived** a long time ago

The third major grammar structure is the Past Simple Tense. I believe most languages have this verb tense.

Did you do anything interesting YESTERDAY / LAST summer / 3 days AGO?

I went shopping yesterday.

I got married last summer.

I saw my friend 3 days ago.

CUEs: Yesterday, Ago, Last, When I ...

FUNCTION: Past, tell a particular story

The difficulty with Simple Past is the *irregular verbs*. Every verb in the English language has 3 forms:

Present / Past / Past Participle

- *Present* is the base form of the verb, the dictionary form.
- *Past* is the second form of the verb.
- *Past Participle* is the third (perfect) form of the verb.

With regular verbs the second and third forms are made by adding ~**ed** (so simple and easy):

Want/wanted/wanted

Play/played/played

Watch/watched/watched

Kiss/kissed/kissed

Unfortunately, most common verbs in English are *irregular*:

Be/was or were/been

Have/had/had

Do/did/done

Say/said/said

Get/got/gotten or got

Make/made/made

Go/went/gone

Know/knew/known

Take/took/taken

See/saw/seen

Come/came/come

Think/thought/thought

Give/gave/given

Find/found/found

Tell/told/told

Feel/felt/felt

Leave/left/left

Put/put/put

Mean/meant/meant

Let/let/let

How do we go about learning the second (past) and third (past participle) forms of irregular verbs? Well, there are no magic tricks of learning irregular verbs so you have no choice but to resort to the good old rote memorization. Start with the top 20 most common verbs as I have given them in the list above. Don't do more than that. Learn those and keep building your vocabulary list as you would with all other words. I am strongly against rote memorization and cramming but with regard to the top 20 irregular verbs, we can make an exception. The more irregular verbs you know, the more you will start to NOTICE repeated patterns. There are repeating patterns everywhere, you just need to look more carefully. And don't forget to collocate and make a sentence with every verb you learn – never learn individual words.

I saw my friend yesterday.  
Last month I went to Hawaii with my family.  
He left the office 2 hours ago.  
She kissed me on the mouth.

The negative sentences in Past Simple take Did + not (Didn't):

I did not see my friend yesterday.  
I didn't go abroad last month.  
She didn't kiss me on the mouth, she kissed me on the cheek.

The question form is also with Did:

Did you see your friend yesterday?  
Who did you see yesterday?  
Did you go to Hawaii last month?  
When did you leave the office last night?  
Did she kiss you?

Don't forget that after Did the verb goes back to its first form, to its dictionary form. We don't say:

Did she kissed you?  
I didn't go (~~went~~) to Hawaii last month.  
Did you see (~~saw~~) your friend yesterday?

### +3. Used To

Another common grammatical structure for expressing Past action is USED

TO + base verb. USED TO + base verb is so easy because we don't have to use the second form of the verb – we always use the first/base form.

USED TO is about the Past but we never use it with 'yesterday', 'ago', 'last' – those CUEs are for the Past Simple.

USED TO is similar to the Present Simple in that it is about a 'habit' and 'routine' but in the Past, and we don't have that 'habit' Now – the Present is different from the Past

I used to play tennis twice a week (now I don't).

I used to be lazy (now I'm not).

My friend used to live in France (now he doesn't).

My sister used to love cats (now she doesn't).

CUEs: Used to, When I was ...

FUNCTION: Past habit but not anymore,

A **common mistake** is confusing USED TO with *be used to*. They are very different, but more importantly, they sound different:

I used to eat sushi. /aiju:stui:t/

I'm used to eating sushi. /amju:stui:ting/

/ai/ vs /am + ing/

## 4. Present Perfect

Past Simple & Present Perfect: *ancestor* = an animal that **lived** in the past, that modern animals **have developed** from

Present Simple & Present Perfect: *kickoff* = the time when a game of football **starts**, or it **begins** again after it **has stopped** because of a goal, etc.

### HAVE + Past Participle

The Present Perfect Tense, the fourth major grammatical structure, is the most complex one:

I have lived in America. (live/lived/*lived*)

My mother has never been to Japan. (be/was/*been*)

Have you run a full marathon? (run/ran/*run*)

Wikipedia says that analogous forms are found in some European

languages like Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, French, German, etc. My native Bulgarian has something similar to Present Perfect, but Russian, as far as I know, doesn't. Japanese has something similar to Present Perfect but not quite the same and according to Google University, Korean doesn't have that grammatical structure.

The main Function of Present Perfect is when you talk about Experience. Some languages use Past Simple to talk about Experience so it is very important to explain the difference between Present Perfect and Past Simple:

- Past Simple often focuses on the exact time of the experience and it is used with more specific words of time like: YESTERDAY, 2/3 days AGO, LAST week/summer, etc.

I went to Australia last year.

- Present Perfect doesn't focus on the exact time of the experience and it is used with more unspecific words of time like: ALREADY, not ...YET, Have you EVER, I have NEVER, RECENTLY, etc.

I've already been to Australia.

With Present Perfect the exact time is not important. If you want to specify the exact time you have to switch to Past Simple and make a second sentence:

*I have already been* to Australia. *I went* there last year.

*I haven't been* to Australia yet. *I will go* there next year.

*Have you ever been* to Australia? Yes, I have. *I went* there 3 years ago.

*Have you seen* any films recently? Yes, I have. *I saw* a movie yesterday.

#### +4. Present Perfect Continuous

Present Perfect has a very close relative in the Present Perfect Continuous Tense.

Present Simple & Present Perfect Continuous: *dump* = to suddenly **end** a romantic relationship you **have been having** with someone.

HAVE + BEEN + ING

It is much easier to make – you don't need to remember the third form of the verb:

I have lived in Japan for 10 years.  
I have been living in Japan for 10 years.  
I have lived in Japan since 2001.  
I have been living in Japan since 2001.

Present Perfect and Present Perfect Continuous are often used with SINCE and FOR to indicate duration of time from the 'past'... 'until now' and answering the question HOW LONG?

How long have you had a cold?  
I have had a cold for 2 days.  
I have had a cold since the day before yesterday.

How long have you been playing football for?  
I've been playing football since I was a child.  
I've been playing football since 1989.  
I've been playing football for many years.

SINCE and FOR with HOW LONG is a very common grammar structure about duration (however the cue word *during* is usually used with Past Simple). Other Cue words about duration from 'past' 'until now' are RECENTLY and LATELY:

Have you been doing anything interesting lately?  
What have you been up to recently?  
Have you seen any good movies recently?  
Lately, I've been feeling a bit depressed.

CUES: Already, Yet, Since, For, How long, Recently, etc.  
FUNCTION: Experience, until now, so far, etc.

As we already said, English grammar is relatively simple – it's mainly about how the verb changes depending on whether you are talking about things you Will do in the future, about things you are doing Now, about things you Usually do, about things you did Yesterday, or about things you have Already done or haven't done Yet. Two verbs require special attention and of course, I am talking about the two most common ones BE and HAVE.

5 There Is / There Are...

is a grammatical structure I like very much. THERE + BE(is/are) is very basic yet extremely common:

There are many high mountains in Switzerland.  
There are a lot of French words in the English language.  
There is a big park near my house.  
There is a new movie on at our local movie theater.  
There was a big earthquake last night.  
There were many people at the concert last night.  
There will be rain tomorrow.

There aren't many tourists at this time of year.  
There isn't a McDonald's restaurant in my neighborhood.  
There won't be enough snow to go skiing next week.  
There weren't many people at the party yesterday.  
There wasn't a single person at the party yesterday.

Is there a movie theater in your neighborhood?  
Are there any Michelin star restaurants in Sofia?  
Was there a lot of food at the wedding?  
Were there many people at the party yesterday?  
Will there be enough snow to go skiing?

There is/isn't, There are/aren't, (present)  
There were/weren't, There was/wasn't, (past)  
There will/won't be, (future)

CUEs: There is **a**, There are ...**s**

FUNCTION: Exist, Describe things

Instead of THERE IS / THERE ARE we could also use the second most common verb HAVE / HAS – not exactly the same, but close enough:

+5 Have / Has

Switzerland has many high mountains.  
The English language has a lot of French words.  
We had a big earthquake last night.  
We will have rain tomorrow.

We don't have many tourists at this time of year.  
My neighborhood doesn't have a McDonald's restaurant.  
We didn't have many people at the party yesterday.  
We won't have many people at the party tomorrow.

Does your neighborhood have a movie theater?  
Does Sofia have any Michelin star restaurants?  
Did they have enough food at the wedding?  
Will we have enough drinks for all guests?

A **common mistake** learners make with HAVE is with its negative form and when asking questions:

I have a car.

- The negative form is NOT: I haven't a car.
- The correct grammar is: I don't have a car.
- The question is: Do you have a car? (NOT: Have you a car?)

This mistake is caused by the difference between British and American grammar. In the UK, instead of HAVE, people usually say HAVE GOT:

I have got a car.  
I haven't got a car.  
Have you got a car?

UK: He has got two sisters.  
US: He has two sisters.

UK: He hasn't got two sisters.  
US: He doesn't have two sisters.

UK: Has he got two sisters? How many sisters has he got?  
US: Does he have two sisters? How many sisters does he have?

Choose whichever you find easier but don't mix them up.

What we've just covered is roughly 75% of all the grammar you will ever need in order to express yourself. THERE ARE more grammatical structures in the English language, English HAS (has got) other grammatical forms like Past and Future Perfect, Passive Voice, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Conditional, Relative Clause, and so on and so forth. As you come across new grammar, you should always connect with CUE words and FUNCTION words.

## Grammar books

I've written a separate book on grammar titled "English Grammar and Functions".

The **problem with grammar books** is that they don't provide enough context, but rather focus on individual sentences. My overview of "the essential English grammar" suffers from a similar problem – I gave you a lot of examples but all those examples consisted of individual sentences. That's why I focused on CUEs associated with each grammatical form and, you need to answer the WHY question for each sentence – create FUNCTION /context. The idea is that those CUEs and FUNCTION words will act as *memory triggers* to help you retrieve the grammatically correct sentence.

Grammar books do a good job of explaining, but don't teach learners how to memorize. Language learners read the textbook and understand the grammar and still don't know how to use it quickly in a real-life situation. Nevertheless, grammar books are good as long as you create context/FUNCTION and CUE words around every sentence they provide. The brain cannot retain the new information without context. ***The amount of time and money people waste on grammar books*** (not knowing how to use them) ***is stupendous.***

Please read my second book "English Grammar and Functions" as well as keep using MLDs. When you come across a new word, and you certainly will, make sure you use MLDs and don't forget to pay attention to the grammar used in both the definition and example sentence and especially the definition. For example, a grammatical structure called

### Relative Clause

Relative Clause is "a part of a sentence which describes a *noun*." It is an important grammar for when we forget a *noun* – it helps us REPHRASE – but I didn't know that it was called "relative clause." I learned this grammar subconsciously from reading the definition of words like:

- Teacher = someone **whose** job is to teach in a school or college
- Learner = a person **who** is still learning something (sth)
- Full moon = the moon **when** it looks like a complete circle
- Cause = the reason **why** sth, especially sth bad, happens
- Bottleneck = a place **where** a road becomes narrow

Bottleneck = a problem **that** delays progress

Sequel = a book, film, play etc. **that/which** continues the story of a previous one

Why are both **that** and **which** correct? Does it matter? Don't focus too much on understanding it but rather choose one, and focus on how you can memorize it. You need to Visualize, Personalize and

### Harmonize

Feel the rhythm, feel the harmony, feel the melody of the sentence by pronouncing it as one word:

What's your new book about?

- It's a book that expands on my previous one.

itsəbukdetikspends onmaipriviaswan

- that expands on /detikspends/ (can you hear the cymbals?)

Can you feel the harmony, can you hear the music? It's what we are going to talk about next.

## Language is Music

Which came first: Language or Music? Google University doesn't give a definite answer. Some theories favor language while others music/singing. And there are theories that suggest that both evolved together. Click languages in Africa are considered the original languages – what do they sound like to you?

Whatever the answer, it's quite obvious that there are similarities between music and language, singing and speaking. Language is sound, language has rhythm and harmony, language has sing-songy quality to it – a point very well illustrated by the YouTube videos of fake languages.

It's very important to approach language learning as music learning.

In every language, to a varying degree, words are pronounced together – more so in English, for example, and a little less so in Japanese. Nevertheless, in no language on this planet words are pronounced one by one. When we speak, we connect words in a continuous stream of sound, as with singing, by attaching the end of one word to the beginning of the next word. It's what we mean by flow and fluidity, it's what I mean by language fluency. Ann Cook the author of the bestseller “American Accent Training” says: “Part of the glue that connects sentences is an underlying hum or drone that only breaks when you come to a period, and sometimes not even then.”

As I've already said, it's very important to approach language learning as music learning.

But why?

Because people remember melodies.

I was convinced of that long time ago, it's how I learned English. Turning the language into melody helped me remember the words and sentences I was learning. I knew it to be true and I knew that it wasn't just me, but I didn't have a scientific explanation as to why, so I started doing online research and unsurprisingly discovered a lot of information on why people remember melodies well.

But before we look at what science have to say about how the memory works, I'd like to invite you to answer the following question: How easy is

for you to remember a song you hear on the radio? You might not remember the lyrics but you can recall the melody so easily and you are able to hum or whistle through effortlessly. Songs you haven't heard in years that, upon hearing, are instantly recognizable.

If I start singing the Beatles song "Yesterday", just after the first *yesterday*, the first few chords, the whole song will come back to you with a rush. The same thing will happen with Frank Sinatra's "Strangers in the Night" and it is not just about those megahits. Go back to when you were a teenager and listen to all songs in the top 100 charts and I'm sure you will remember all of them. You might not remember the singer, or title, or the lyrics, but you will remember the melody. My personal music collection is about 50GB or so, which is roughly 10,000 songs and melodies and I can hum along every single one of them – just give me the first few chords and I will tell you how it goes...

That's me, how about *you*?

Test yourself: [hookedonmusic.org.uk](http://hookedonmusic.org.uk)

Why do we remember songs and melodies?

When attempting to explain why we are the way we are, scientists often take the evolutionary approach – what is the survival benefit of having something instead of something else:

- What's the evolutionary/survival benefit of having human penis as opposed to os penis?
- What's the evolutionary benefit of having periods?
- What is the evolutionary advantage of having good Memory for Music?

Daniel Levitin, an expert in the neuroscience of music, says that "the structures that respond to music in the brain evolved earlier than the structures that respond to language." We have been around for about 200,000 years but written language has a much shorter history of around 5,000 years. Most neuroscientists believe preliterate societies developed music in order to memorize and remember vital information accurately and pass it down from one generation to the next. Survival information about food and health as well as laws and customs. And even for stories such as "The Iliad" and "The Odyssey" – we all know how much easier is to memorize a poem than a text – poems have rhythm and flow, texts don't. Levitin says the combination of rhythm, rhyme, and melody provides reinforcing cues that make songs easier

to remember than words alone.

Unlike language which is normally held in the left hemisphere of the brain, music exists in both hemispheres. Music is accessed in many different areas of the brain that aren't designated for language. We are retrieving pitch, melody, rhythm through all these different areas and those are working to pull the melody out, remember the song. It's probably why patients with Alzheimer's have been known to sing along to familiar songs.

Advertisers are also very much aware of the power of music as a mnemonic device in communicating advertising slogans. In commercials almost everything is being sung: from company names, through toll-free numbers, to website addresses. "Advertising jingles that pair words with music are remembered better than words alone or spoken words with music in the background."

I'm going to end my discussion on Language and Music with the movie "The King's Speech" – the story of the relationship between King Edward VI and the speech therapist who helped him overcome a stuttering condition. In one of their sessions, the speech therapist tells the king to "try singing it", and adds

"continuous sound will give you flow".

The story of King Edward VI and "try singing it" is quite similar to another story, that of "American Idol" contestant Lazaro Arbos. He too has a bad stutter, which disappears when he starts singing.

[virtuallynative.com/book/stutter](http://virtuallynative.com/book/stutter)

### Why Don't People Stutter When They Sing?

The general consensus on Google University is that for people with no speech impediment, speaking and singing are produced in a similar way. Both processes are subconscious and automatic and the focus is on chunks of sound as opposed to individual words. Those chunks of sound are collocations, common phrases and even full sentences. Each sentence like a musical phrase, glued together by intonation, the speech equivalent to melody.

For people who stutter speaking and singing are created differently. For those people, the focus is on individual words. The process of speaking isn't

subconscious with the brain trying to control the mouth, tongue and lip movement. Because people who stutter focus on individual words, they can't take advantage of intonation (melody) to help them glue those words together.

Why are we talking about movies, TV shows and people who stutter?

I believe that people who stutter and people who learn a foreign language experience a similar speaking difficulty. Language learners too focus their attention on individual words which makes their sentences choppy and halted as if they had a stutter. Never learn individual words, always learn them in a sentence, a sentence that has to sound like a *single word*, like an advertising jingle, as if you are singing it:

“Continuous sound will give you flow.”

I'm going to stop here with the overview of my online research on the subject of memory and music. Neuroscientists have their disagreements on some aspects of the workings of the human brain in relation to memory, but they all agree on one thing:

Information set to music is one of the easiest to remember.

What my method does is set language to music, transform/harmonize language into melody, transform/harmonize sentences that are hard to remember into melody which is easy for your brain to remember and get out. It's what I mean by

## Harmonize

Harmonize a sentence = pronounce a sentence as if it was a single word, with a bit of rhythm and melody.

Some people advice learning language through songs. That's NOT what my method is about. In my opinion, the problem with using songs is their relatively poor grammar as well as lack of clear context (no dialogues). Plus, songs melody is very different from language melody. Songs are fun, just not sure how effective they are in helping the learner remember new vocabulary – everyday conversations are not musicals – you don't just suddenly burst into

song.

How to transform words into melody, how to harmonize?

1. Collocation
2. Sentence
3. Repetition

I sincerely hope that by now you are 100% convinced that words should always be studied in combination with other words, I hope that you've already understood the importance of collocations. Most people know that collocations are important but very few people know *why*.

Can you guess why?

Because, individual words are too short to have harmony and flow...

Let's take a look at the adjective *individual*:

individual = single

*Individual* as a standalone word is not long enough for our brain to perceive as a melody. We need a bigger chunk of sound for our brain to recognize as a melody.

1. Collocations are the smallest possible building block of a music phrase.

Here are some collocations of *individual* – make sure you harmonize them, you pronounce them together as one word:

Individual word /individjuəlwə:d/

Individual style /individjuəlstail/

Individual sport /individjuəlsport/

Individual investor /individjuəlinvestə/

Much better and much easier for our brain to memorize and later remember. But why stop there, let's make it a little longer.

Why?

Because it is easier for our brain to memorize and later remember:

Study individual words /stadiindividjuəlwə:d/

Play individual sport /pleiindividjuəlsport/

Become an individual investor /bikamənindividjuəlinvestə/

Much, much better. We collocate adjectives with nouns, and nouns with verbs. Let's make it better still. Let's make a complete sentence, a short one

but a full sentence.

Why?

2. Because sentences are long enough for our brain to perceive as a melody, and melodies are easier for our brain to memorize and later remember. As you are more likely to retrieve the melody, you are more likely to retrieve a complete sentence. Sentences are built around keywords and as you retrieve the key you will be more likely to retrieve other words often collocated with the keyword – continuous sound will give you flow. All in one complete music phrase, all in one sentence. (harmonize it):

You shouldn't study individual words.

I've never played individual sports.

My friend wants to become an individual investor.

You should always try to learn new words in a sentence – it doesn't have to be long, it just needs to be *complete*.

3. There is one last step: Mindful Repetition

Once you've formed a sentence with the new word, you need to repeat that sentence a few times. Don't make the repetition mindless, make it *mindful*. Repeat the sentence 2-3 times slowly and mindfully. Run it over in your head a few times and try to feel its harmony, flow, rhythm and overall melody:

My friend wants to become an individual investor.

Harmonize it:

Maifrendwantstubikamənindividjuəlinvestə

It doesn't have to be fast, it has to be one, connected as if it were one word, as if you were singing it. You need to stop thinking about each individual word and start perceiving the sentence as a single word:

Maifrendwantstubikamənindividjuəlinvestə

or two or three words if it's too long or difficult for you:

Maifrendwantstubikam ənindividjuəlinvestə

Maifrend wantstubikam ənindividjuəlinvestə

But always strive for one word, so keep your sentences short and don't try to say them quickly. Oneness over Speed.

My friend wants to become an individual investor.

Maifrendwantstubikamənindividjuəlinvestə

Pronouncing the words one-by-one makes the sentence dissonant:

Mai/frend/wants/tu/bikam/ən/individjuəl/investə

No rhythm, no melody, no harmony, just a group of words with a minimal chance of being remembered.

Instead, harmonize by pronouncing them slowly as one:

Maifrendwantstubikamənindividjuəlinvestə

Repeat a few times and be mindful of the S sound in “wants”. The sound of cymbals:

Maifrendwants

Mindful repetition is key to building your sound library – that’s how I look at language learning. Instead of learning words and grammar I learn musical phrases.

I don’t build my vocabulary, instead, I build my music library, and I do that because I know that melodies are easier to remember later on.

I stop seeing individual words and I start seeing musical phrases composed around those words – a sentence is one big word, a sentence is one musical phrase.

No discussion on language and melody is complete without talking about Syllables and of course Pronunciation.

## Syllables – beats by Dr. Vla

Melody has rhythm and pitch and language has intonation and stress. Language too has rhythm but we call it syllable. The official definition of a syllable is a single unit of speech (syllable is a word you needn’t remember, but a word you need to understand so feel free to use a bilingual dictionary). For me, *syllable* is the *beat* of the language. Syllables, intonation and inflection work together to create the overall harmony of the language. You should try to beat out the rhythm of the sentence.

- They say that people with no sense of rhythm are terrible dancers,
- I say that people with no sense of rhythm can never be fluent speakers.

Having a sense of rhythm doesn't mean being able to dance like Michael Jackson, compose like Mozart, or sing like Freddie Mercury, it means to be able to tap out a beat on the desk, or clap a beat or hum a melody.

Counting syllables is an excellent practice in rhythm. You start with individual words, then collocations and finally sentences. The easiest way to count syllables is to say the word with your mouth shut and count the sounds you make with your nose, in other words, try to hum the word and count the hums.

Most dictionaries give the syllable count in the /pronunciation/ and it is shown by separating each syllable with a dot positioned either low or in the middle /prə·nan·si·ei·shən/. There are also "syllable dictionaries" available online.

#### A little more Grammar:

When forming *comparatives* and *superlatives* we follow some very simple rules:

We add *~er* and *~est* to the end of short (one-syllable) adjectives. By adding *~er* and *~est* we automatically add a second syllable/beat. With superlatives we also add the definite article **the** which means adding a third syllable:

Short /1syllable/, shorter /2s/, the shortest /3s/

Tall /1s/, taller /2s/, the tallest /3s/

Fat /1s/, fatter /2s/, the fattest /3s/

With two-syllable adjectives ending in *y*, we drop the *y* and add *~ier* and **the** *~iest* thus adding a third beat and forth with superlatives:

Happy /2s/, happier /3s/, the happiest /4s/

Angry /2s/, angrier /3s/, the angriest /4s/

Crazy /2s/, crazier /3s/, the craziest /4s/

With long adjectives (=containing three or more syllables) we simply add **more** and **the most** or **less** and **the least**:

Beautiful /3s/, more beautiful /4s/, the most beautiful /5s/

Interesting, less interesting, the least interesting

*Interesting* is an interesting word. How many syllables?

in·tres·ting: /3s/ in UK English

in·tə·res·ting: /4s/ in US English

Collocation:

Beautiful girl /4s/

Interesting story /5s/

Tall building /3s/

A beautiful girl /5s/

An interesting story /6s/

A tall building /4s/

One way I teach *articles*, the *indefinite article* A/AN in particular, is by using syllables. A/AN and THE should be thought of as an *extra beat*. There isn't much to it, it's just another beat:

A tall building /ə·to:l·bil·ding/ 4s

An interesting story /ən·in·tres·ting·sto·ri/ 6s

A beautiful girl /ə·bju:·ti·fəl·gə:l/ 5s

Full sentence:

She lives in a tall building. /ʃilivzinətə:l·bildin/ 7s

I heard an interesting story. /aihə:dənintrestinstori/ 8s

I will marry a beautiful girl. /ai wil ma ri ə bju ti fəl gə:l/ 9s

I'll marry a beautiful girl. /ail ma ri ə bju rə fəl gə:l/ 8s

### Contractions and Syllables

Contraction, also called Reduction, is a shortened form of a word or combination of words which is often used instead of the full form in spoken language. They play a very important role in the English language in that they often change the syllable count, minus 1, and from there the musical harmony of the language.

There is nothing wrong about not using contractions when you speak – it might not sound that natural but it is still acceptable (I intentionally didn't use that many contractions in the book for I know beginners often find them confusing). However, not being able to understand contractions when spoken to, will cause problems.

Here are some of the few most common contractions of *to* and *not*:

want to /2syllables/ = wanna /2s/

going to /3s/ = gonna /2s/

have got to /3s/ = gotta /2s/

have got a /3s/ = gotta

do not /2s/ = don't /1s/

did not /2s/ = didn't /2s/

will not /2s/ = won't /1s/

am not, is not, are not, has not, or have not /2s/ = ain't /1s/

- If it is not broke, do not fix it. /9s/

- If it ain't broke, don't fix it. /7s/

The two sentences have very different rhythm and overall harmony.

- The former sentence is what I call “textbook English”
- The latter sentence is “spoken English”

Which one you say is up to you, but you have to be able to understand both when you hear them and especially the latter – it's the one you are much more likely to hear.

Besides making sentences shorter, contractions also glue words together and help with sentence rhythm and melodic harmony. For beginners I would recommend counting syllables in the same order we just did – start with the new word, next collocation and finally an example sentence with the new word.

#### Quick Quiz:

How many syllables in **start** in the following 3 sentences:

When will you start your new job?

The football season starts in March.

She started her own software company.

start, starts, started

How many syllables in **finish** in the following 3 sentences:

The meeting won't finish soon.

The movie finishes with a song by the Beatles.

Have you finished reading that magazine?

finish, finishes, finished

## Pronunciation

Good pronunciation vs Bad pronunciation is like Steinway piano vs digital piano.

However, the problem with Steinway pianos is that they are prohibitively expensive, so very few people can afford them. Plus, you have to be a virtuoso in order to get the most of a Steinway – such a fine instrument will be completely wasted on an amateur. Having perfect pronunciation but having nothing to say is not what you should strive for.

On the other hand, cheap digital pianos sound awful so nobody likes them. Your goal as a top amateur (virtually native) is to find middle ground – sound as good as you physically can without wasting too much time and money. Or think of it this way: you don't have to have a voice like George Michael to sing and have a lot of fans, you can do it with a voice like Bruce Springsteen – it's more important what you say than how you say it.

Yes, pronunciation is important...but...there are certain biological limitations in terms of sound perception (=hearing) and sound production (=speaking):

Past puberty, it's very hard for the ear and brain to *hear* new sounds.

Past puberty, it's very hard for the speech muscles to *produce* new sounds.

Yes, pronunciation is important because good pronunciation and intonation will help you with the rhythm and melody of the language – good pronunciation and intonation will give you flow.

So what should you do in order to sound more like a Steinway and less like a Casio?

As we've already established, the bigger the phonological difference between your L1 and the L2, the stronger the accent. For instance, English has about 40 phonemes whereas Japanese has about 22. Therefore if you are an American adult learning Japanese you will most likely have just a slight accent. However, if you are a Japanese adult person learning English, you are very likely to have a much more pronounced accent. Those biological limitations is something you need to accept and not fight, instead, try to go around it.

How do we do that?

Accepting your limitations, you need to make your accent as close to a native speaker as your larynx, throat muscles and tongue would allow. English is a very phoneme-rich language so we won't cover every single phoneme just the 3 most challenging ones.

But before we start let me lay a couple of ground rules:

Firstly, make sure you can hear a phoneme before you practice pronouncing it.

Secondly, don't practice individual phonemes. When having pronunciation practice, focus on sound patterns, longer units of sound. Start with collocations and even sentences and later shift to individual sounds.

For example: the sound **V** as in the word *van*. Adopt the top-down approach and start with collocations (harmonize):

drive a van /draivəvæn/

park the van /pɑ:kðəvæn/

buy a van /baɪəvæn/

and then even move up to short sentences:

I want to buy a van.

Can I borrow your van for the weekend?

and then move down to an individual word:

Van /væn/

and lastly an individual phoneme:

V

But first, learn words and sounds in combination with other words and sounds.

Don't start with individual phonemes.

Having said that, I'm going to ignore my second rule and focus on three of the most problematic sounds in the English language: Schwa, TH, R.

## Schwa /ə/ sound

The schwa is the most common sound in the English language and is not represented by a letter. The IPA symbol that represents the schwa sound is /ə/:

about / əbaʊt/  
today /tədeɪ/  
driver /draɪvə/

Not having done any academic research I believe that most people can pronounce the schwa phoneme, and I believe that because it is a very primal sound: It's the sound we make when we cough or clear our throat. In English, the schwa sound is weak and not emphasized so don't overdo it.

The schwa sound /ə/ is most commonly replaced with A. This substitution usually works but you will sound much more native-like if you master the schwa sound /ə/.

## TH /θ ð/ sounds

According to Google University, there are only three languages that have this phoneme: English, Spanish and Greek (the IPA symbol for TH is the Greek letter Theta θ).

And when we talk about the TH sound in the Spanish language we need to say that it's more about the Spanish spoken in Spain and less about the Spanish spoken in Central and South America.

Many, many people struggle with this phoneme. The TH sound is often replaced with S or Z which often leads to confusion and even potential loss of human life as shown in the famous [Berlitz commercial](#). So how do we go about pronouncing this sound? You have a total of 4 choices:

TH as TH  
TH as D  
TH as T  
TH as F

The first choice is the preferred one but if you can't then the other three are possible choices as well. Let's look at each one and let's do it in reverse.

## TH pronounced F

The pronunciation of TH as F is known as *Th-fronting* – for example: *three* is pronounced as *free*. And it comes to no surprise because the F sound comes closest to the TH sound:

TH is pronounced by letting air between your *tongue* and *upper teeth*. The air is pushed between the teeth and the tongue without them touching.

F is pronounced by letting air between your *lower lip* and *upper teeth*. The air is pushed between the teeth and the lip without them touching. Not the same but close enough.

And it's not like pronouncing TH as F is an invention of mine, it's something native speakers of English do. Native speakers of British English, people living in England, the country that gave us the English language. Th-fronting is most common "in and around the cities of London and Bristol" (David Beckham on occasion would substitute F for TH).

It is true that pronouncing TH as F is considered a bit lazy and uneducated – I don't do it myself. The thing is that this book is about what works in practice rather than theory, and pronouncing TH as F is a much, MUCH better option than either S or Z.

The problem is that some of the languages that lack TH also lack F (German, Japanese, etc.), but F should work perfectly fine in Eastern Europe and Russia and all Russian speaking countries.

#### TH pronounced T

It is a much easier choice. The difference between T and TH is that with the former the tongue touches the upper teeth. To make it work you should try and make it softer by not pressing the tongue too hard and long, instead press it gently.

#### TH pronounced D

Substituting D for TH is something many native speakers of English do. The IPA symbol is ð which is closer to D than to T. The most common word pronounced with D instead of TH is the definite article THE which is one of the top 10 most common words in the English language. 'The' is quite often even spelled in colloquial English as da – In Da Club by 50cent

#### TH pronounced TH

That's unquestionably the best way to pronounce TH. There are plenty of free pictures online showing mouth and tongue positions to help you master that sound, but whatever you do don't say S or Z.

Firstly, make sure you can hear the TH sound before you practice pronouncing it, and secondly, practice it in combination with other sounds.

For instance TH in the word *bath*:

I took a bath this morning.

TH as F and D:

/ai tuk ə ba:**f** **d**is mo:ning/

Just DON'T say:

/ai tuk ə bas-zis mo:ning/

## R sound

In my humble opinion the American R is the hardest sound to master – you either learn it as a child or you never will... It's the single biggest giveaway with regard to sounding like a native speaker.

The R sound is by far the biggest difference between American and British English.

I'm very puzzled by the inability of some advanced English learners to tell the difference between British and American accents. To me this is the same as not being able to tell the difference between 'Rock' and 'Heavy Metal'. It's all music but a different type of music, it's all English but a different sounding English.

- The American R at the end of words is very bubbly with a lot of tongue movement. I liken it to baby gurgle.

- The British R is no R /dəbritisha: iznoua:/ – British people don't pronounce R at the end of words.

### R pronounced ə and/or A

Pronouncing R as ə is something I learned from my father. He wasn't a very good speaker of English but the few words he knew he pronounced with a very good British accent.

By British accent, we mean English spoken in England. Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are a part of Great Britain but have very different and distinct accents. Scottish and Irish accents are different from the British accent and one of the major differences is in the way R is pronounced.

In British English, R at the end of words is pronounced as either Schwa /ə/ or long schwa /ə:/ or if you struggle with schwa you could pronounce it as A or long A /a:/.

The British R is much, much easier to pronounce than the North American R (USA and Canada). And it's not just in English spoken in England but also Welsh English, Australian English, New Zealand English and South African English, as well as Honk Kong English, Singapore English, Malaysian English, etc. Approximately a quarter of all native speakers of English drop the R at the end of a word – they are non-rhotic English speakers.

Again, R is better pronounced as ə but if you struggle with it then you could say A:

mother /madə/

father /fa:də/

sister /sistə/ or /sista/

brother /bradə/ or /brada/

teacher /ti:chə/ or /ti:cha/

doctor /dɒktə/ or /daktə/

smart /sma:t/

smarter /sma:tə/ or /sma:ta/

Do as Japanese people do. In the Japanese language, all loanwords ending in R are pronounced as A or long A:

car /ka:/ カー

door /doa/ ドア

computer /kəmputə/ コンピューター

Pronouncing R as Schwa or A will be very beneficial to English language learners from the Middle East and North Africa as well as Eastern Europe and Russia.

There is one more thing we need to talk about in order to end our discussion on language and music:

## Notice

This word already cropped up more than a few times usually followed by

“look for”.

What do I mean by “notice”?

Music and language are not random. Both music and language have repeating harmonic patterns. We don't make each sentence from scratch, instead, we use repeating grammatical patterns built around frequent CUEs and FUNCTION.

You should notice and look for those repeating grammatical patterns – I say grammatical but to me, they are repeating harmonic patterns. There aren't that many of them. The more you read and listen the easier to notice them.

As you get used to one grammar/harmony, you will stop noticing it – it will become your second nature, like your native language.

Then you will start noticing new patterns and if they are repeating/common enough you will get used to them too. Start with the most common and build your way up.

And this is the place where a good language teacher will come in handy. The good teacher will show you those repeating harmonic patterns and speed up the learning process. It's what this book is hoping to achieve – speed up your L2 acquisition and help you become an independent learner.

## Virtually Native – the steps (8 +2)

When you come across a new word, in a book or in a movie, you need to go through the following steps in order to increase your chances of remembering that word later on:

(1) The first thing you do is GUESS the word's meaning.

(2) Look the word up in a Monolingual Learner's Dictionary (MLD) and start with learning the correct PRONUNCIATION – focus on stress (beginners should try to count syllables). Cambridge is best for pronunciation. Next

(3) Learn the MEANING by reading the monolingual definition – Longman *and* Cambridge.

(4) Check out the EXAMPLE SENTENCES. Notice text printed **in bold** – it's how Cambridge and Macmillan highlight COLLOCATIONS. Longman has a collocation box. Notice and look for collocations in the definition too.

(5) REPHRASE the example sentence – find another way to express the same idea. Look for SYNONYMS and ANTONYMS in the definition. You should be able to rephrase no matter how limited your vocabulary is!

(6) VISUALIZE the example sentence as if it was a movie scene. Imagine yourself saying the example sentence by answering:

WHO are you talking to?

WHERE are you?

WHY do you say that sentence? FUNCTION

If you can't easily imagine yourself using the example sentence, you need to

(7) PERSONALIZE it by changing slightly the dictionary example sentence to fit your life. Choose between making a:

Positive sentence

Negative sentence

Question

Create a mini DIALOGUE by focusing on the sentence or event *before* your

personal sentence. Notice and look for CUE words:

FUNCTION: ask about Experience; give Advice, talk about the Future; etc.

CUE: Have you ...?; You should ...; Tomorrow I will ...; etc.

(8) Go back to the original sentence from the source material – rephrase it to check your understanding and continue reading. You could do steps (6) and (7) with the original sentence.

HARMONIZE every sentence by reading mindfully as if it was one word.

NOTICE and look for familiar grammatical/harmonic patterns in the Definition, Example sentence and Original sentence.

That's all. That's my method, that's my set of techniques for improving your vocabulary retention. With just a little bit of practice, you will learn to go through all 8 steps in about 2 minutes or so.

Steps (6) and (7) are usually done simultaneously and are the most time-consuming. And it's up to you how much time you spend on a word – if it is a common word you don't know it will be smart to spend more time. Consult both Longman and Cambridge dictionaries, look for different example sentences, and make more personal sentences with the new word.

If you study from a grammar textbook you should start from step (6).

If you study from a test textbook you should also start from step (6).

The last thing we will do is look at how my method works when practicing the 4 skills of language.

## The 4 Skills of Language:

Reading  
Listening  
Writing  
Speaking

In order to master a language completely, learners have to be competent in all 4 skills:

2 of those skills, have to do with input.

2 of those skills, have to do with output.

2 of those skills are written.

2 of those skills are spoken.

3 of those skills, you can practice on your own.

1 of them, requires at least one more person.

How do I grade them in terms of importance?

For me, the most important skill is Reading, followed closely by Listening – it's what we call *input*. It takes a lot of repetition for your brain to retain and recall new words and grammar, and Reading is the fastest way to clock the necessary hours of practice.

A lot of people have the false belief that they are good at Reading but bad at Speaking – it is a myth – if you are good at reading, you should be good at speaking. Your speaking fluency is likely to mirror your reading fluency. In order for you to say 1 sentence in English, you have to have read at least 10 pages in English.

How do I grade them in terms of difficulty?

For me, the most difficult skill to acquire is Writing. The second most difficult is Speaking, next comes Listening and Reading is the easiest. It's a similar situation with my native Bulgarian. Writing has always been a struggle for me, but I believe it's not just for me...after all there is a reason for there being more speakers than writers. Most people can put a sentence together and say what they are thinking; quite frankly, and in all modesty, not everybody can put their thoughts down on paper and write a book (a similar

analogy could be made about singing and composing – many people can sing, very few people can compose).

Regardless of level of importance and difficulty, in order to acquire any skill or knowledge we need practice. There is no other way. We practice:

Reading by reading

Listening by listening

Writing by writing

Speaking by speaking

And a keyword here is to practice regularly, on a daily basis if possible. It's a well-known fact that studying 30 minutes a day 6 days a week (30mins x 6days = 3h) is much better than studying 3 hours a day, 1 day a week (3h x 1day = 3h). It's much easier for the brain to retain the new information.

However, as we've already established, it's also about WHAT we do (read, listen) and HOW we do it, how we spend those 30 minutes a day – there is hard practice and there is smart practice. What is the smart way of practicing the 4 basic skills of language? Let's look at each in more detail and let's start with the easiest first.

## Reading

Reading is universally considered the easiest skill to acquire and that is what most adult learners start with – it's the big advantage adults have over children. Reading is the easiest as long as we are learning a language based on phonetic writing systems.

Chinese and Japanese are two notable exceptions. Both languages use character-based writing systems which are much harder to learn (and don't let anybody tell you that you can learn Chinese or Japanese without learning kanji). The good news with regard to Japanese is that once you learn the 2,136 most common kanji you've pretty much learned the language.

It takes about an hour to learn the English Alphabet and the International Phonetic Alphabet – don't learn one without the other. Once you've learned both alphabets you can start reading and...you can start using MLDs.

A very common piece of advice teachers give language learners is:

“Have fun!”

“Make it fun” they all say, but it is easy said than done. Studying is not always fun, studying requires effort, not all of us enjoy learning languages. However, now more than ever, there are ways to make reading fun and it's all because of this thing called the Internet. In the pre-internet era reading was a real problem, language learners were mainly using boring textbooks. Now, thanks to the Internet, everything is at our fingertips – it's online (virtual), mostly free and available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Find something you like and read every day, and don't do it just for learning a foreign language but rather to educate yourself – learn more about your health, job, hobby and the world around you.

The key is finding a balance between fun and level of appropriateness – the reading material you choose should be both fun and appropriate for your L2 level. However, fun is more important. The stuff you read might suit your level, but if you don't enjoy reading it, you are likely to lose motivation and give up. The good news is that the Internet makes possible the selection of reading material that is both fun and level appropriate.

Instead of boring textbooks, WHAT you should read is blogs or websites on a topic of your interest.

What are you interested in?

- Movies? There are blogs and websites about that...
  - Technology? There are blogs and websites about that too...
  - Cars? There are blogs and websites about that as well...
- Sports? Gardening? Health? Cooking? History? Business? There are blogs and websites about that too.

You get the point.

Find something you like and read about it in the target language.

Facebook is another source of fun reading material – follow people you like and read their daily posts. Twitter has the advantage of offering bite-sized pieces of information (140 characters) but the disadvantage of having terrible grammar.

The BBC website provides one of the best reading material on the Internet. There are informative articles on every imaginable topic – politics, business, science, health, sports, entertainment, etc.

The same could be said about the CNN website – each article starts with a summary which is very good for beginners.

Oh and let's not forget *books*. You can read books too...

HOW should you read?

When you read you need to do three things:

1. Harmonize – read by connecting the words into one, your reading should be as fluid and smooth as your speaking. Some language teachers recommend reading out loud. I've never done it for I find it distracting. I prefer reading silently but I always make sure that my reading is continuous and sing-songy and true to the melody of spoken language. As I said, your Speaking fluency is likely to mirror your Reading fluency.

2. Notice – look for common grammar patterns.

3. Use my method as you come across a new word.

Let me demonstrate my 8 +2:

I have various interests – I like reading about movies, business, politics, cars, education, Japan and so on and so forth.

Recently I came across an essay titled “[Dare to Err](#)” by the richest man in Japan Tadashi Yanai, the founder and president of the clothing retailer Uniqlo – the 4<sup>th</sup> biggest apparel company in the world. Towards the end of the essay Tadashi Yanai says the following:

- “My advice for young Japanese is simple: get out of Japan. One of our weaknesses is our ineptness at communicating with other cultures.”

Here is a word I don’t know – the word “ineptness”

(1) The first thing I do is to try to GUESS its meaning. The tone of the whole essay in general is quite pessimistic and the word “weakness” provides an obvious clue so I can safely guess that *ineptness* is a negative word.

The second thing I *notice* is that the word has the common ~*ness* suffix. I know from the grammar books and MLDs that ~*ness* is added to *adjectives* to make *nouns*:

adjective + ness = noun

happy ~ happiness

sad ~ sadness

weak ~ weakness

strong ~ strongness ???

- Does “strongness” sound right to you?

Put it in a sentence and tell me how it sound:

“I have the strongness and stamina to run a full marathon.”

- How do you feel about the harmony of this sentence?

- Can you self-correct?

Throughout the years I’ve discussed the “Yanai essay” with most of my students and almost all of them make the “strongness” mistake. But as soon as they say “strongness” they feel that there is something wrong with that word. My students sense that “strongness” sounds strange and off-key and they try to correct themselves. Most say “strongest” or “strength” and I’m okay with that response because for me it’s important for them to feel the

sound of the language and try to self-correct.

Not all adjectives take the ~ness suffix:

strong ~ strength

long ~ length

deep ~ depth

Quick Quiz: high ~ ???

inept + ness = ineptness

From step (1) I know that the root word is “inept” and it is an adjective and it’s very likely to have a negative meaning.

(2) The next thing I do is to check how “inept” is PRONOUNCED and what “inept” means and to do that I look it up in an MLD.

pronunciation: /inept/ (no change)

stress: i´nept (on the 2<sup>nd</sup> syllable)

(3) DEFINITION:

Longman: inept = not good at doing sth

Cambridge: inept = unable to do sth well

Macmillan: inept = someone who is inept does not have much ability or skill

Now, at this point I will not consult a bilingual dictionary (BD) because I perfectly well know the expression “good at sth” as in:

I’m good at playing chess.

I’m not good at cooking.

There is no need for a BD so I will stay with the MLD. Very simple and clear definitions but still worth *noticing* the common grammar/harmony:

- (not) good at doing sth. /gudet ~ing/

- (un)able to do sth. well /eiblto/

- (does not) have ability /hevəbiliti/

(4) Check out the EXAMPLE SENTENCE the MLD gives:

“She was totally **inept at** telling jokes.”

The COLLOCATION “inept at” is printed **in bold** which means it is a common one.

inept at doing sth = not good at doing sth

She was inept at telling jokes = She was not good at telling jokes

I *notice* a pattern here:

She *is* (not) good *at* telling jokes

She *is* bad *at* telling jokes

She *is* inept *at* telling jokes

By this point, I’m very much aware that “inept” will most certainly be passive vocabulary – a word I will be able to understand when I hear, but very unlikely to use in a sentence.

(5) Besides “inept” I have two Other Ways of expressing the exact same idea, I know one relatively close SYNONYM “bad” and one ANTONYM “good”. Plus I quickly realize that sentences with “be inept”, “be good at” and “be bad at” could also be REPHRASED with “can”:

She cannot tell jokes.

Can you speak English?

I could still look it up in Macmillan Dictionary to see how common “inept” is and discover that it’s a word native English speakers rarely use – just 10% of the time. Fully aware that “inept” will most likely be a part of my passive vocabulary, the next thing I do is

(6) VISUALIZE the example sentence: “She was totally inept at telling jokes” is very easy for me to visualize using in real life. Instead of “she” I can put the name of any Japanese comedian and make a realistic sentence. Past Simple Tense “was” will become Present Simple Tense “is” because it is USUALLY true – Generally speaking, Japanese comedians are inept at telling jokes.

(7) Or I can PERSONALIZE it and make it about myself – “I” instead of

“she”. Since I am good at telling jokes I will change the Object “jokes” with “bowling”. I have 3 choices – I could make a *positive* sentence, a *negative* one or a *question*:

I’m inept at ...

I’m not inept at ...

Are you inept at ...?

The most *realistic* choice would be to make a positive sentence:

I’m pretty inept at bowling.

/aimpritiineptetboulng/

Now, I do know I’ve made a grammatically correct sentence, but I need to put it in a context – beginning, middle, end – I need to create a movie SCENE around that sentence:

WHO am I talking to?

WHERE am I?

WHY do I say that sentence?

Having dinner with my friend at a restaurant.

My friend’s suggestion: Let’s go bowling after dinner.

My response: I’m pretty inept at bowling /aimpritiineptetboulng/. Why don’t we play some billiards instead?

FUNCTION: describe myself

CUE: I am good at, I’m bad at,

(8) Going back to the source sentence: “One of our weaknesses is our **ineptness at communicating** with other cultures” I can clearly understand its meaning and I also *notice* the repeating harmonic pattern.

I could *rephrase* it:

- “One of our weaknesses is that we are not good at communicating with other cultures” or
- “One of our weaknesses is our inability to communicate with other cultures.” (when I learned the word *ability to do sth.* I also learned its antonym *inability*)

And Personalize it:

At a job interview:

Interviewer: What are some of your weaknesses?

My answer: One of my weaknesses is my ineptness at communicating with little children. I am really good at teaching English to adults though.

FUNCTION: talk about my weaknesses at a job interview

CUE: Weakness, one of my weaknesses is ... Actually, I would not bother making a Cue and Function because I am almost 100% certain that I will never use “ineptness” in a real life conversation. I know I will impress nobody with this word, therefore, it will be strictly a part of my passive vocabulary. “Inability to” is a word I feel much more comfortable with and much more likely to use. But I will still NOTICE a grammatical pattern:

One of ~s

One of many

“one of” is often followed by cymbals ~s (=plural) and the cymbals are followed by a singular:

One of my friends **has** 2 cars

One of his cars **is** German.

One of our weaknesses **is** our ineptness at communicating with other cultures.

One of our weaknesses is

wan əf a: wi:knəsiz iz = wanəfa:wi:knəsiziz

Give advice **for** somebody

Give advice **to** somebody

It's a common pattern with *advice*.

My advice **for** you is to get out of Japan.

My study advice **to** you is to use MLDs as much as you can.

Why both **to** and **for** are correct? Because it's what native speakers of English say and more importantly, it's what MLDs say in their example sentences. Don't focus too much on Understanding. Language is not mathematics. Language is music.

Try noticing those grammatical patterns. I say grammatical but to me, they are rhythmic patterns, melodic patterns, repeated harmonic patterns. That's because even when I read, I listen for rhythms and harmony. I don't read aloud, I always read silently but I still read sentences as if they were one word, as if I were singing. If your reading is not smooth and fluent, your speaking will never be fluent. It doesn't have to be fast, it has to be continuous and fluid like a river.

## Listening

In the beginning it was listening.

Some people argue that L2 learning starts with listening. After all, babies start with listening even before they were born, in the mother's belly, and it takes them a few years to start speaking in full sentences. And it's true, L2 learning *does* start with listening – you need to hear and feel the rhythm, harmony and overall melody of the target language – it's the Second Goal of L2 acquisition. You need to hear the difference between perfect melody (=native accent) and off-key melody (=non-native accent). That sense of melody will help you retain new vocabulary as well as improve the flow of your sentences as you try to speak – it will help you speak in tune with the melody of the language.

- You can never be a good musician if you can't hear the difference between “country music” and “rock music”, or between “baroque music” and “classical music”

- You can never be a fluent English speaker if you can't hear the difference between American and British English, between Native and Non-native accents.

[virtuallynative.com/book/listening](http://virtuallynative.com/book/listening)

Like with reading, with listening too, the key is finding a balance between fun and level of appropriateness – videos, podcasts, audio books and various recordings.

As there are blogs about every conceivable subject, there are YouTube channels and podcasts dealing with anything that tickles your fancy – focus on the good quality information, and less on the language.

All news websites like the BBC and CNN have videos in addition to their articles. TED videos are also a good way to practice your listening for each and every video has subtitles.

Oh and let's not forget *movies*. You can watch movies too...

## English through Movies

One of the most common pieces of advice with regard to language learning is:

“Watch movies in the target language.”

I very much agree. That said, I’ve never watched a movie for the single purpose of learning a language. I watch movies because I love movies.

Why are movies arguably the best way to practice your listening? Because:

- Movies are more fun than textbooks. Most people like movies.
- As we said “context is king” and movies provide the best context.
- Movies give you the melody of the language.

Most people know that watching movies is good for learning a language but very few people know How To do it, how to watch movies in order to study more efficiently.

The first question many people ask is: Which movies are the best for learning the language? The obvious answer is contemporary dramas, movies based on true events or about real people (=biopics), and movies with more dialogues and less action, but the truth of the matter is that every movie can teach us a phrase or an idiom of some sort. It is true that for learning English some movies are better than others, however, this shouldn’t be your guiding principle in choosing a movie. Your guiding principle should be selecting movies you enjoy.

Fun over appropriateness.

The first time you watch a movie don’t think about studying. Watch it as you did when you were a child – focus on the story, action, visual effects, acting and try to enjoy it.

For me watching foreign movies with subtitles has always been much more enjoyable than watching ones dubbed into my native Bulgarian. The dubbing and the mouth movement are always slightly out of sync which is distracting and it takes me out of the movie.

The first time you watch a movie it’s better to watch it with subtitles but if you find reading subtitles distracting then watching it dubbed into your native language is fine too.

The main thing is to just watch and have fun.

It's important to enjoy it because you will be watching that movie more than a few times and if you don't like it, and watch it just for studying, the movie will turn into a boring language textbook with little to no benefit. Choose a movie you like because the next thing you need to do is buy the DVD of that movie.

### Why the DVD?

Because of the English subtitles. At this point you have seen the movie and know the story, you buy the DVD and it's now time to focus on studying the language.

A **common mistake** people make is watch the whole movie again and again and again. That's the wrong way – it's very time-consuming, boring and inefficient. The right way to do it is to focus on scenes with dialogues, but don't do them all at once – instead watch them one at a time. One scene today, tomorrow another one, whenever you have time. You have already seen the movie and know the story so now it all about the vocabulary, grammar and full sentences. Once you've isolated a scene with a dialogue, you need to watch it a few times:

1. First, watch the scene without subtitles and see how much you can understand.
2. Next, watch it with English subtitles and compare to your listening comprehension from the first viewing. Pause if necessary and look new words up in an MLD. This second viewing is very important because you get an instant feedback on your initial listening comprehension. Receiving immediate feedback is critical for any type of learning.
3. Finally, watch the scene for the third time without subtitles.

Some teachers recommend watching it forth time with subtitles in your mother tongue but I don't think that's necessary because you've already seen the movie and know the story. I would recommend watching the scene fourth and fifth time without subtitles and just focus on the rhythm and flow of the language.

DVDs don't come cheap and buying them is quite an investment. Renting DVDs is not really an option because of the short rental period. We are all busy with our jobs and family and can't devote a whole day to watching movie scenes and even if we weren't that busy, it's not really advisable

because the brain just can't retain that much information – it's inefficient.

Movie streaming services like Netflix, Hulu, Amazon, etc. provide some cheaper alternatives but make sure all movies have L2 subtitles.

The cheapest option is the free one. A lot of movies are available on video streaming sites like YouTube. And is not like you need the whole movie, as we said, you need individual scenes so what you can do is just search YouTube for movie scenes. For instance:

Google: Heat restaurant scene

And you will inevitably come across the famous Pacino-De Niro restaurant scene. The dialogue is not the best for studying English but it is really cool and memorable.

You can just google: “the movie title” plus the word “scene” and you are bound to find at least one or two scenes from that movie. The problem with YouTube videos is that most of them don't have Subtitles/Close-Captions and that's especially true for movie scenes. But when there is a will there is a way – almost every movie script is available on the Internet for free.

Google the following words: Pulp Fiction scene

And you will see a slew of scenes from the movie “Pulp Fiction” by the king of dialogue Quentin Tarantino. All his movies have memorable dialogues but Pulp Fiction is my favorite. Let's look at one of those scenes.

Google: Pulp Fiction royale with cheese scene

For copyright reasons, please go to my website where I've provided a couple of examples of using movies to learn English:

[virtuallynative.com/book/pulp-fiction](http://virtuallynative.com/book/pulp-fiction)

[virtuallynative.com/book/heat](http://virtuallynative.com/book/heat)

### Bad Grammar

We all make grammar mistakes – natives, non-natives, taxi drivers, university professors, everybody. It's unavoidable. The thing you need to be aware of is that actors too make grammar mistakes and this dialogue is no exception. Make sure you don't learn grammatically inaccurate sentences like the following ones:

“And I don't mean just, like, in no paper cup.” (from Pulp Fiction)

and

“What if you do got me boxed in ...?” (from Heat)

### Bad Language

The thing about Hollywood movies in general and Tarantino movies in particular is that they contain too many swear words, and the most frequent of them all: the f-word.

- “Fuck” and its variations “fucking”, “fucked” and “fucker” permeate Hollywood movies. In the Pulp Fiction dialogue, you can remove “the fuck” and “fucking” and nothing will change.

- “Shit” and its close relative “bullshit” are probably the second most frequently used swear words in Hollywood movies. In the Pulp Fiction dialogue, instead of “shit” you could say “stuff” or “thing(s).”

- Tarantino is also infamous for the heavy use of the extremely offensive *n-word* in his movies – a word no language learner should ever say. (Fun fact: there are 265 mentions of the f-word and 28 mentions of the n-word in the movie “Pulp Fiction.”)

- How about: Goddamn ? Goddamn is strictly in my passive vocabulary pool. Instead, I usually say: “Really!”

How about its milder relative “damn” as in “I don't give a damn”?

### New Words

There are 2 schools of thought about how soon learners should use the words and phrases they have just encountered:

- Some teachers say that learners should start using the newly acquired vocabulary as soon as possible.

- Other teachers, myself included, say that learners should start using the newly acquired vocabulary as soon as they feel comfortable. And that's my answer to the common question about speaking in general:

How soon should you start speaking the language?

The obvious answer is: the sooner the better but with vocabulary you feel comfortable using. Make sure you understand well the newly acquired word and phrase and you know when, where and whom to use it with.

I learned that the hard way: a misused expression changed my life. I wanted to appear cool and natural and used the expression at the wrong time with the wrong people. It was at a job interview that I had, a job I didn't get.

Don't try to use "damn" as soon as possible, don't hurry your new vocabulary. Wait to hear it a second, third and even fourth time to be 100% sure you know how to use it, where to use it and with whom. And by wait I mean

keep reading and listening.

Don't rush your new vocabulary. Don't make the mistake I made. What you need is more examples with "damn" and/or "I don't give a damn!" You could check a dictionary or a grammar book or look it up on the Internet. You could also wait for it to appear again in a different context – keep reading and listening.

In the meantime, you can use a word or expression you feel more comfortable with...like:

"It's really expensive" instead of "It's damn expensive"

or

"I don't care" instead of "I don't give a damn"

### Slang

Many teachers focus too much on "natural English" – slang, idioms, colloquial expressions, phrasal verbs, etc.

The first problem with "natural English" is that there are lots of types of natural English – there is American slang, there is British slang, there is Australian slang and so on and so forth. Within American slang there is California slang and NY slang and so on and so forth.

The second problem with "natural English" is that it is very situation specific and it will sound very unnatural and even rude if not used properly. Being situation specific makes it relatively *rare* – beginners should avoid rare.

Choose your battles. As we said, understanding slang and colloquial expressions doesn't mean you will be able to remember and use it appropriately. You need to accept that most slang and idioms will be a part of your passive vocabulary. The time spent memorizing slang should be much

shorter than the time spent memorizing standard language. ***The amount of time and money people waste on words and expressions they will never use is ridiculous.***

### Movies as Visual Dictionaries

As we already said, movies are great for studying English because they give us a clear context. MLDs give example sentences but you need to create context around them in order to improve recall.

For learners who are struggling to make personal sentences and I would suggest using a website called:

[subzin.com](http://subzin.com)

Subzin is a search engine for movie quotes and lines – it returns a list of films with quotations containing specified cue words. Type in a word or expression in its search window and you will find movie scripts containing that word or expression. Subzin also displays the time at which the word or phrase is said which is very helpful for it allows you to quickly find the scene on the DVD timeline.

The line:

“I don’t give a damn”

is found in 1,937 movies.

At the top of the list is “Pulp Fiction” and a little down the list is the classic “Gone with the Wind.” The line is said (by Clark Gable) 3h:46m:27s into the movie (it’s a long movie). Watching the whole scene will give you a context of how and why that particular line “Frankly, my dear, I don’t give a damn” is used.

Using Subzin is time-consuming but still much more fun than reading a grammar textbook, but what’s even more important – movie scenes are more memorable which is what learning a language is all about: remembering the words you’ve learned.

After you’ve fixed the grammar and removed all swear words, a good thing to do at this point is to record your own voice. Record your pronunciation and compare it with the original sound, to that of the actor. Don’t worry about your speed, slower is fine too, but make sure your fluency is good – all words connected into a continuous stream of sound.

## Shadowing

I need to start by saying that I've never tried this learning technique, I've never tried "shadowing" and I'm not going to.

For those of you who don't know, "shadowing" as a language learning technique is about repeating along as you are listening to a recording of the foreign language that you are learning. The recording has to be of a native speaker and you have to repeat what you hear at the same time as the native speaker.

Why do I say that I'm not going to try this learning technique? My issue with it is in the expression: "at the same time."

I do recommend recording your own voice as you are trying to mimic the native speaker, but I don't see the benefit of repeating it *at the same time* as the native speaker. I strongly believe that when recording your voice you must be able to hear it. You must be able to hear your intonation, rhythm, pitch, etc. You can't do that while repeating at the same time as the audio recording. Your voice will sound off-key because you will constantly be trying to catch up with the native speaker and you won't be able to enunciate your words clearly. You will have no intonation, no rhythm, and your voice will have no natural melody. I honestly don't see the benefit of this exercise.

Instead, it is much better to repeat *right after* the native speaker so you can hear your own voice. But let me share what I used to do when I first started learning the English language. It's a learning technique I call:

"4 in 1"

I used to:

1. **Read out loud** a text from a book and record my voice.
2. Play it back and **listen** to it, and,
3. **Write** everything **down**, like taking a dictation.

I would practice my reading, pronunciation, listening and writing in one go.

Not being able to understand your own accent is a sure sign you need to work on your pronunciation. Read slowly, clearly and smoothly by connecting all words together. Then listen to your own voice and write everything down. Writing will help you remember longer. It is what we are

going to talk about next.

## Writing

Writing is the skill language learners neglect the most. Writing is the skill most difficult to perfect and the skill that brings the greatest benefit for the language learner in terms of efficiency – time spent per words memorized:

- 30 minutes of Reading
- 30 minutes of Listening
- 30 minutes of Speaking
- 30 minutes of Writing

Which 30 minutes will offer the greatest benefit in terms of words memorized? I believe that the 30 minutes of Writing will give you the most lasting memory because when we write, we use our brain to its full potential, we exert our brain to its maximum.

- When we read we can skim or scan through a text and still get the gist of it.
- When we listen we can take cues from context and tone of voice to help us get a better understanding of what we hear.
- When we speak and get stuck, we can stop mid-sentence, recover and start a new one and still get our message across.
- When we write we are not afforded those options. All we have is the blank piece of paper in front of us. We can't write a grammatically-incorrect or incomplete sentence, we need to construct sentences that are both grammatical and complete which requires a lot of brain power which in turn helps the process of memorization. The more we use our brain the better we commit words to memory and the easier we remember them later on when we need them.

### How to practice writing?

Writing is an extension of reading and listening and could be done simultaneously. Every blog post you read has a comment section where you can write a comment of your own. Most BBC and CNN articles have comment sections too. Discussion forums are also a good way to practice your writing skills. Every YouTube video has a comment section as well.

Read a blog post of your favorite blogger, watch a video of your favorite

youtuber and write her or him a comment. The comment could be in the form of a question, a feedback or opinion, or even constructive criticism. Every blogger, youtuber and professional journalist appreciates constructive criticism. The better the comment the higher the chance of a response.

We all know where to write but the big question is how to write grammatically-correct sentences? You have 3 options:

- Copy other people
- Use MLDs
- Use Google

Picasso is credited as saying that "Good artists copy, great artists steal." I don't know what exactly Picasso had in mind, but by copy I mean copy the grammatical structure native speakers use in their writing (and speaking):

If you write a comment on a blog post, use the grammar and vocabulary in the post and add a few words of your own.

If you are writing a reply to an email, do the same thing – use the grammar and vocabulary in the email and add a few words of your own. Keep it simple and to the point.

If you are not writing comments or replying to emails then use the example sentences MLDs provide.

Every sentence you make is formed around a keyword. You have to be able to figure out the keyword and look it up in a dictionary. MLDs give some of the most common sentence and grammar structures associated with every word. Copy the basic structure from the example sentence and add a few of your own words.

Take my last sentence for instance:

- “Copy the basic structure from the example sentence and add a few of your own words.”

Which is the keyword in that sentence?

“Copy”

The example sentence Cambridge gives with copy is:

- “They've copied the basic design from the Japanese model and added a few of their own refinements.”

Do you see what I've done?

- “Copy the basic structure from the example sentence and add a few of your own words.”

I wrote the sentence in Present Simple because it’s a general fact and I kept the basic structure of the original, but instead of “design” I used “structure”

- “Japanese model” became “example sentence”
- “their” changed to “your”
- “refinements” turned into “words”

Copy from the original and add a few of your own ideas.

Some people use websites like Ling8 in order to have their writing corrected. I’ve never used Ling8 or a similar websites and I’m not going to...but it is not because I think they provide bad service. I’m a firm believer in outsourcing in general but not with regard to writing grammatically correct sentences. The other problem with sites like Ling8 is that the feedback is rarely immediate. Instant correction is very important for any type of learning.

How can we receive an immediate feedback?

## Google exact phrase

Google, as well as Yahoo, give you a few search options to find what you are looking for on the web. The one you need is a search option called “this exact phrase” and what Google and Yahoo do is find webpages that contain the exact phrase. The way “this exact phrase” search is done is by placing quotation marks (“ ”) around a phrase.

Learning how to use exact search requires a bit of practice but once you do, it will take little to no time for you to check your own sentences. I first discovered Google exact search in 2003 and have been using it ever since to correct my English sentences. I’ve used Google exact search extensively in the writing of this book.

Take my last sentence for instance:

“I’ve used Google exact search extensively in the writing of this book.”

Should it be:

I’ve used Google ... extensively

or

I've extensively used Google ...

Should it be:

in the writing of this book

or

for the writing of this book

or

in writing this book

or

to write this book, etc.

The key here is to parse out your sentence the right way in order to get the best result.

If we put “ ” quotes (=quotation marks) around the whole sentence we will get no search results – Google displays the following message:

No results found for “I've used Google exact search extensively in the writing of this book”

The sentence is too long, it consists of 13 words, therefore, the odds of finding the exact same phrase/sentence on the web are very low. So how do we slice this sentence? It's pretty obvious:

used ... extensively

... in the writing of this book

I am fairly confident about the first half of my sentence – *extensively* is a collocation of *use* and both sound very natural to my ear, but let us see what Google has to say about my confidence...

I've used Google exact search extensively

“Google exact search” is the Object of this sentence. When we check this sentence we don't need to have the exact same Object. What we care about is the grammar which is: to use something extensively

to use Google extensively

to use Wikipedia extensively

to use wood extensively

to use the hotel gym extensively, etc.

Let's try with: “I've used Google extensively” ...But then again – we could

also change the Subject of the sentence because the subject is not important. It doesn't have to be "I", it could be "He" or "She" or "John" or "Suzan", etc. So we strip the sentence down to its core structure:

"used Google extensively"

Type in: "used Google extensively" (with the quotes) and see the results... What we see are snippet (=short) texts from articles containing these three words printed in bold. You need to read over the sentences and see if the sentence structure fits your idea.

Google search results change but at the time of the writing of this book I had the following search results for the exact phrase

"used Google extensively"

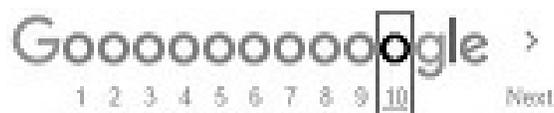
about 1,860 results – this is the number of total results, a very important number.

1<sup>st</sup> result is from productforums.google.com: "I have for the past few years used Google extensively in my ..."

2<sup>nd</sup> result is from amazon.com: "While I've used Google extensively in performing penetration tests ..."

3<sup>rd</sup> result is from books.google.com: "This was the first time I used Google extensively to research a book ..."

Read through the first ten results. What you need to do next is go to the bottom of the page and click the 10<sup>th</sup> and last **O** of the Google logo



and look at the number of total results again. What we see is:

Page 7 of about 69 results

The number of total results went from 1,860 to 69 which comes to show that you shouldn't always take that number at face value. Instead, go to the last **O** and check again. Needless to say, the bigger the number the better.

Now let's compare that result to our second choice: "I have extensively used Google" Following the same line of reasoning we do exact search for

"extensively used Google"

About 2,890 results – a much larger number but we should confirm it by clicking the last **O** and what we get is:

Page 5 of about 47 results

The number of total results went from 2,890 to 47. But what's more important is that 69 is greater than 47. We could still read through the search results for the second exact phrase and we will see that they also match our original idea.

It is very important to make sure that the sentences containing the exact phrase are from English websites and written by native speakers. We saw that all top 3 results were from reputable English websites like Google and Amazon and by clicking on the links we can see that they are written by native speakers of English. This is a very important piece of information because you should avoid using non-English websites as reference.

Going back to the search results for the first exact phrase “used Google extensively” we discovered that there were a few very close matches:

“I've used Google extensively in performing penetration tests”

This looks and sounds quite similar to my idea so I can rest assured that the first half of my sentence is grammatically correct.

Let's look at the second half of my sentence:

“in the writing of this book”

I watch a lot of films, as you have probably realized by now, so I am quite familiar with the sentence: “no animals were harmed in the making of this film.” Therefore I'm fairly certain that “in the writing of this book” is grammatically correct because it follows a similar pattern, but for the sake of demonstration I'm still going to use Google exact search.

“in the writing of this book”

Now, I know that “this” could be replaced by “my” or “his” or “her” or “the” or “that”, etc. I also know that “book” could be “books” and “this” becomes “those” or “these”. You have to be able to recognize the main structure and be flexible with some of the words you use. Changing “this” with “my” or “his” or “her” won't change the meaning of the sentence. All we care about is the preposition *in* and the definite article *the* but we can be flexible with some of the other words.

So let's try some other combinations using exact search. Let's start with:  
"in the writing of this book"  
"for the writing of this book"

Both phrases return big numbers in terms of search results. Now we need to start reading the top ten snippet texts to see whether each phrase matches our original idea. Let's repeat that but this time make it a little longer by adding extensively to the set of words:

"extensively in the writing of this book"  
"extensively for the writing of this book"

Google says: No results found for "**extensively for the writing of this book**" so we are left with the former phrase which returned 4 results.

Now let's compare:

"extensively in the writing of this book"

vs

"extensively in writing this book"

The former exact phrase returns 4 results and the latter one 10. It seems that both are correct.

The first thing you do is look at the number of Google hits, it's at the top of the page just below the search window. The bigger the number the better, but be warned: this number is not always accurate so what you need to do is go to the bottom of the page and click on the last GooooooooOgle and look at the number again.

The second thing you do is make sure the top search results are websites from a country where English is first language, i.e. the USA, Canada, the UK, Australia, New Zealand, Ireland, etc.

How do we do that?

By first checking the domain extensions: .com, .ca, .uk, au, .nz, .ie, and by clicking and looking at the website's contact information.

The last thing you do is read through each of the top ten snippet texts carefully and see if it matches your idea.

Using Google exact search does seem like a laborious process but with a bit of practice, you will get better and faster. It is infinitely faster than any web

based correction service, it is free, and most importantly it helps you learn the English language. ***The amount of time and money people waste on writing correction is maddening.***

### Flashcards revisited

We've already talked about flashcards when we discussed the topic of reviewing, but since flashcards also fall into the category of writing, now is a good time to revisit this so very popular way of language learning.

I need to start by saying that I've never made flashcards for my English language studies (I did make for Japanese kanji though). I used to make vocabulary lists which I would hang on the wall for review. I don't think I made more than 4-5 vocabulary lists (4-5 sheets of A4 paper).

Again, I didn't put flashcards in the chapter on myths because there is a certain benefit when done properly. What is the proper way of making flashcards?

1. Make them monolingual
2. Create context by writing a personal sentence

For example, the word *proper*:

Write the word *proper* and on the reverse side write a direct Synonym like *real*, *suitable* or *correct*. Or you could write an Antonym like *wrong* or *inappropriate*.

But don't stop there, write down a sentence:

- If you're going to climb Mt. Fuji you will need proper climbing boots.

And you might also need to write down the pronunciation of the word. How can you review without knowing the proper pronunciation?

So as you can see, the reverse side of the flashcard gets very crowded very fast and it does because what you are essentially doing is writing your own MLD in the form of a flashcard.

The benefit of making flashcards the proper way is that the thought process of writing words down and formulating personal sentences helps you commit words and sentences to memory which is what learning a language is all about and it's the main reason I didn't put flashcards in the chapter on myths. The process of making flashcards is probably more beneficial than their

subsequent use/review.

Also, when reviewing a new word you need to guess its pronunciation, monolingual definition, its collocation(s), and make an example sentence before looking at the reverse side. Don't just flip through flashcards and be content with knowing the meaning of words – spend time connecting with words you already know and creating context around new vocabulary. You need to know how to use words in real life, in a sentence and not just their meaning.

Instead of using Flashcards to review new vocabulary I would very much recommend reviewing OLD vocabulary – words you already know well. Words like:

table  
train  
heavy  
angry  
smile  
drink

For example the word *eat*...everybody knows that word but:

What is the monolingual definition of *eat*?  
What is another way to say *eat*?  
What is the opposite of *eat*?  
Collocation with *noun* and *adverb*?

Put *eat* in a sentence:

Positive  
Negative  
Question  
*If* sentence  
Sentence about the *Past, Future, Experience, Request, Permission, etc.*

And don't just make your sentence grammatically correct but also make it realistic. Create a realistic movie scene with eat:

Who are you talking to?  
Where are you?  
Why do you say that sentence?

Instead of reviewing new vocabulary, spend some time tidying up your old

vocabulary by linking words together (collocating) and by making personal sentences.

Focusing on individual words will make you sound like a stuttering robot. Instead, focus on longer chunks of sound – continuous sound will give you flow. Holding a conversation in a foreign language is a very complex endeavor requiring a lot of effort and concentration, something no native speaker can relate to. You have to have learned and spoken the language in order to give practical advice. It's what we are going to talk about next.

## Speaking

We've saved the best for last. All that reading, listening and writing practice we need to do is to reach the ultimate goal of virtually every language learner – the ability to speak the foreign language. Let's not kid ourselves, it's mainly about speaking, it's why most people start learning a foreign language. We are social animals, we talk, it's what separates us from all other living things on this planet.

As with any other skill, we practice speaking by speaking and unlike the other 3 language skills – reading, listening and writing – speaking is mainly about quantity. We need a lot of speaking practice in order to be fluent speakers of any language including our mother tongue. Quality, in the form of mistake correction, is also important but better done by way of self-correction – the ultimate goal of every language learner.

Speaking is the only language skill which requires a second person. Reading, listening and writing practice can be had by the learner alone and virtually for free, but speaking needs a partner which makes it more difficult to practice and it is rarely free.

- A free option would be doing a language exchange – you teach me your mother tongue and I teach you my native language – I teach you Bulgarian and you teach me French for instance. While in theory, this type of speaking practice should work, it will be very hard to implement in reality, unless you are a native speaker of English looking to learn a second language. I've never done it, maybe because not that many people want to learn Bulgarian.

- Another free option is to find another non-native speaker who wants to learn the same target language and have an L2 practice over Skype, Hangouts, Facebook or Viber. The best place to find such people would be in the comment section of YouTube's most popular online language teachers. Exchange contact information and have a free language practice. You can guess what the downside is, but you get what you pay for...

- And probably the last free option is to just go and talk to foreigners visiting your country.

The free options are not that many and not that readily available so most

people take the paid one. We all want to talk, and not just in order to practice our L2. We all want somebody to listen to what we have to say and that's usually what our friends are for, but even they are not always willing to listen to our nonsense (that is why people end up going to see psychiatrists).

There are more than a few very cheap online English conversation schools which provide Skype lessons with English speakers from the Philippines for as low as \$3 an hour (the Philippines markets itself as being the third largest English-speaking nation – after the US and the UK). At the same time, there are online schools providing lessons for as high as \$80 an hour.

Whatever route you go – online or offline – remember that native does not equal better the same way expensive does not always mean better either. The ultimate goal of every language learner is to acquire the ability to self-correct thus not be that dependent on the teacher.

But the purpose of this chapter is not to promote different school brands, the purpose of this final chapter is to teach you some basic techniques for improving your speaking fluency.

- Speaking is all about remembering what you have previously learned. It's all about the ability to remember vocabulary, phrases and whole sentences.

- Speaking is mainly about your active vocabulary, but not just that. Speaking is also about not panicking when you forget a word. As you get stuck, and you *will* get stuck, you need to have an exit strategy.

- Speaking is like singing in that everything is connected into one continuous sound – continuous sound will give you flow. Cues triggering grammar, and collocations morphing into a sentence.

My dear reader, we are on the home straight. The last few pages will probably be a little confusing so you need to be focused and very alert. What I'm going to do next is try to explain and describe how I form a sentence, the thought process that goes into stringing sentences together, the workings of my brain as I produce/speak English. Here we go.

## Train of Thought & Mental Translation

“Mental translation” is something language learners do when they try to

speak, and that's true not just for beginners but for intermediate students as well. Translation is something completely normal therefore not something we should stress over or try to avoid at any cost. The main cure for mental translation is speaking, more speaking and using MLDs.

“Train of thought” is a curious English phrase. I remember the first time I heard that phrase I couldn't quite understand it – I couldn't make out why use the word “train”...? “Line of thought” makes so much more sense but a train of thought sounded a bit bizarre. It's a little strange to imagine that a thought would move like a train, and yet, it is a good image to have in order to explain how to make sentences when speaking English.

Imagine two trains (of thought)

– a native L1 train and a foreign L2 train –

both moving in the same direction, but on adjacent tracks.

Now, imagine yourself on board the L2 train. Riding (speaking) the L2 train is not easy therefore most people tend to jump (translate) between the L1 and L2 trains. The L1 train is always moving smoother and faster, the L2 train movement is often jerky and halted.

Every time the L2 train comes to a halt language learners tend to jump on the L1 train. The idea is that the L1 train will haul the L2 train so they could jump back on it and continue their journey. The problem is spending too much time on the L1 train – the goal is spending as little time as possible on the L1 train.

How do we do that?

Here are four techniques to help you do that:

- Keep it simple
- Not in 1 sentence
- Other ways
- Opposite way

What all these techniques have in common is the idea of Rephrasing.

Rephrase = to repeat something using different words.

The key to mental translation is the ability to *rephrase*, you need to be flexible with your native language – your L1 train has to be very agile and

maneuverable. If you don't have good command of your L1 you can't achieve good L2 fluency. As we said: your L2 fluency is likely to mirror your L1 fluency.

There is no particular order in which you can use these techniques, it's about which you are able to figure out first.

### Keep it Simple

I'm a big believer in the KISS (*Keep It Short & Simple*) principle in general, but by keep it simple here I mean *keeping it simple in your native language* (L1 train). As you jump on the L1 train looking for a word, you have to keep your L1 simple.

You are all native speakers of your L1 and you have some high-level vocabulary. Your L2 vocabulary doesn't match your L1 vocabulary so when you translate in your head, you need to keep your L1 simple – your native language train of thought has to be very simple (like a toy train).

Imagine you are talking to a 2-year-old child (talking to a child in your native language)

Keep your L1 simple in order to faster match with your L2. The same way you focus on the most common English words, the same way you should focus on the most common words in your L1.

### Not in 1 sentence

Don't pack everything into one sentence – it's the other S in the KISS (*Keep It Short & Simple*) principle. Beginners try to make this big, fat, perfect sentence, but they rarely succeed – it's one of the most common mistakes language learners make. Instead of one complex sentence make a few shorter and simpler ones (short L1 train), give the listener a bit of a background before you get your main point across. This sentence making technique is very well illustrated with "reversed" relative clause:

- One (1) sentence (relative clause): This is the shop where I bought my scooter.
- Two (2) sentences: You know my scooter, right? I bought it from this shop.
- 1 sentence: Do you know the woman, who is talking to John?
- 2 sentences: John is talking to some woman. Do you know her?
- 1: Do you see the cat which is sleeping on the bed?

- 2: There is a cat on the bed. It's sleeping. Do you see it?

### Other ways

There are many ways of getting your message across. It's another one of those most common mistakes people make. Language learners tend to cling on to the first word that pops to mind and keep trying to make a sentence around it. It's all good if you succeed but when you fail it sounds like a stutter.

The key here is to let go of the word knowing that there is *always another way* of expressing your idea. You know there are other ways because you ONLY use MLDs with their monolingual definitions. Don't be afraid to let go, don't keep pounding the same word. Learners are too afraid that if they let go of the word they won't find another one, and many people are afraid because they don't use MLDs. Go back to steps 1 (keep it simple) and 2 (not 1 sentence) and try to find another word that will help you get your message across.

The bonus step of rephrasing and make a sentence is the easiest and my favorite. It's so simple:

### What is the opposite way?

Whenever you forget a word, the first thing you need to do is try to remember its opposite (=antonym):

- You forget *upset* "My friend was upset that I didn't reply to his email", you might remember *happy* "My friend wasn't happy that I didn't reply to his email"

- You forget the word *lend* "The bank agreed to lend me 5,000 dollars", you might remember *borrow* "I was able to borrow 5,000 dollars from the bank" conveys about the same meaning.

- You forget *failure* "My sales pitch was a failure", you might remember *success* "My sales pitch wasn't a success" or

"My sales pitch didn't go well" or

"Nobody liked my sales pitch" or

"I had a sales presentation. People didn't like it"

This bonus step is very similar to "many ways" but it is mainly about adjectives and verbs. So simple, yet super effective.

Mental translation between L1 and L2 is inevitable, you are bound to jump between the two languages (trains), and it's very much about how flexible you are with your L1. You have to be quite a juggler, you need to be able to rephrase sentences, switch ideas and juggle multiple words until you find the one you can translate into L2. The word comes with another one (collocation) or even a full sentence and they all work together to power the L2 train again. Every time you get stuck, go through the 4 techniques we just covered.

I've long stopped jumping between trains (translating between languages) but I still rephrase, I still go through the 4 techniques for rephrasing. I've been on the English train for a long time but every time I get stuck I still try to:

- keep it simple – imagine that I'm talking to a child;
- keep it short – break down my idea into shorter sentences;
- find another way to get my point across; and the other way is often...
- the opposite way.

I go through the 4 techniques for rephrasing but I do it in English, and I am able to do it because I've always used Monolingual Learner's Dictionaries. MLDs give more choice as well as shorten and eliminate translation time.

The 4 techniques for rephrasing and making sentences are for...well making sentences, but the question is: Can we have a normal conversation without being able to ask questions?

### How to ask questions?

We need to start by saying that there are two main types of questions:

1. Yes/No questions:

Do you speak English?

Can you speak English?

Did you speak English yesterday? etc.

2. Open-ended (WH) questions:

What languages do you speak?

How many languages do you speak? etc.

In most languages around the world, making questions is very easy:

- For Yes/No questions, some languages have question words which are inserted in certain places in a positive or negative sentence and transform it

into a Yes/No question, while others use intonation: Japanese has か(ka), Chinese has 吗(ma), Bulgarian has ли(li), Spanish and Russian use intonation, etc.

- For Open-ended questions, most languages add a question word (What, When, Why, Who, Where, Which, How) at the beginning of a positive sentence and transform it into a question. Unfortunately, English questions are not that easy to make, they are grammatically more difficult to structure.

Going back to the original question: How do we ask questions in English? The answer is hiding in plain sight. The answer is in the word *answer*:

Don't ask a question you don't know the answer to.

There are 3+1 steps of making a question:

1. Give a positive (Yes) answer
2. Give a negative (No) answer
3. Ask a Yes/No question
4. Ask a Wh question

Before you ask a question you need to know its answer.

It sounds so counter-intuitive. You might ask: "How can I know the answer? If I knew the answer there would be no point of asking the question." I know it sounds counter-intuitive but it works 90% of the time. You want to ask a question but before you do that you need to *imagine* its answer.

Let me explain and let me start with Yes/No questions.

English questions are grammatically more difficult to structure than answers, but every Yes/No question already contains the answer. That's why they are called Yes/No questions because the answer is usually Yes or No. Therefore, before you ask somebody a Yes/No question imagine the same question directed at YOU, imagine being asked the same question.

What would *your* answer be?

How would you answer your own question? But, don't give a short Yes or No answer but rather a full one. Actually, it doesn't matter whether your answer is Yes or No, positive or negative, what matters is you give a full answer to your own question. Positive answers are easier than negative so it's

much better to start with giving a full positive (Yes) answer to your own question.

For example, you want to ask a woman called Susan about her abilities. Something about her skills at playing sports, or musical instrument, or cooking, or programming, or painting, etc....Now, imagine that Susan is asking *you* the exact same question, about *your* abilities, how would you answer her question?

1. Make your answer positive starting with Yes:

Yes, I can play the piano.

Yes, I am good at cooking.

Yes, I speak English well.

Yes, my child has good mathematical ability.

Yes, I have the ability to communicate with other cultures.

2. Let's follow it up with a negative 'No' answer.

No, I cannot play the piano.

No, I am not good at cooking.

No, I do not speak English well.

No, my child does not have good mathematical ability.

No, I do not have the ability to communicate with other cultures.

3. Now it is much, much easier to structure a question. Just move the word preceding "not" in front of the sentence and you have a Yes/No question:

Can you play the piano?

Are you good at cooking?

Do you speak English (well)?

Does your child have good mathematical ability?

Do you have the ability to communicate with other cultures?

Now you want to ask Susan about her home country.

1. The first thing you need to do is imagine Susan asking you about *your* home country...what would *your* answers be?

Yes, my country is mountainous.

Yes, there are many mountains in my country.

Yes, my country has high mountains.

You need the structure of the answer, not the exact word/answer:

My country has ... mountains (*high* or *low* is not important).

There are ... mountains in my country (*many* or a *few* is not important).  
My country is ... (*flat* or *mountainous* is not important).

2. Let's give the negative answers:

No, my country is not mountainous, my country is flat.

No, there are not many mountains in my country.

No, my country does not have high mountains.

3. And now the Yes/No questions:

Is your country mountainous/flat?

Are there many mountains in your country?

Does your country have high mountains?

And don't worry about response time, the human brain has awesome computing power and as long as you waste no time and quickly follow the 3 steps you are guaranteed to save time and avoid stutter.

Once you master the Yes/No questions, open-ended 'Wh' questions will be easier to learn. Wh questions have the basic structure of Yes/No question plus a question word (Wh). You still need to give a Yes or No answer to your question first.

Let's imagine that Susan is your new coworker and you want to get to know her better by asking her a few questions (imagine she is asking you those questions):

Step 1: Yes answers (your answers):

Yes, I joined ABC company because the money is better here.

Yes, I am married.

Yes, I have a child.

Yes, I have been married for 5 years.

Yes, I like to play tennis in my free time.

Yes, I am interested in rugby.

Yes, I will meet our CEO tomorrow.

Step 2: No answers:

No, I did not join ABC because the money is better here.

No, I am not married.

No, I do not have a child.

No, I have not been married for 5 years.

No, I do not like to play tennis in my free time.

No, I am not interested in rugby.

No, I will not meet our CEO tomorrow.

Step 3: Yes/No question.

Did you join ABC because the money is better here?

Are you married/single?

Do you have a child (children)?

Have you been married for 5 years?

Do you like to play tennis in your free time?

Are you interested in rugby?

Will you meet our CEO tomorrow?

Step 4: Open-ended 'Wh' questions:

Why did you join ABC company?

Do you have children? How many children do you have?

How long have you been married for?

What do you like to do in your free time?

What are you interested in?

When will you meet our CEO?

Once you figure out when to use DO, when to use HAVE, and when to use BE, you can merge steps 1 and 2.

Step 1: Answer your own question

Step 2: Make a Yes/No question

Step 3: Make an open-ended question

Step 1: I went to America with my friend / I did not go ...

Step 2: Did you go to America with your friend?

Step 3: Who did you go to America with?

1: My husband wants a cup of coffee. / does not want

2: Does your husband want a cup of coffee?

3: What does your husband want to drink?

1: I would like to order a sandwich./ would not like

2: Would you like to order a sandwich?

3: What would you like to order?

1: My favorite movie is ... / is not

2: Is ... your favorite movie?

3: What is your favorite movie?

1: We should meet in Times Square. / should not

2: Should we meet in Times Square?

3: Where should we meet?

1: I usually go surfing on weekends. / do not go

2: Do you usually ... on weekends?

3: What do you usually do on weekends?

1: I have been to America. / have not been to

2: Have you been to America?

3: Which countries have you been to? How many countries have you been to already?

1: I will go shopping tomorrow. / will not

2: Will you go shopping tomorrow?

3: What will you do tomorrow?

And again, don't worry about slow response time. Trust that your brain will go through the steps fast enough and with just a bit of practice it will take no more than a few seconds to formulate a sentence or question.

## Self-Correct

How did you do with the two-sentence quiz I gave you? Don't remember? Let's do it again but with different sentences. Which one is correct and focus on the thought process behind your answer:

He has a big black American car.

He has an American big black car.

He has a black big American car.

What most people do, myself included, is look up at the ceiling and start running over (=repeating) each sentence in their head, in a loop, trying to sample each one and choose the sentence that sounds better, sounds right, most harmonious, sounds familiar. The one that puts us at peace, makes us calm.

Language is music.

When a non-native speaker makes a mistake, what native speakers first hear is imperfect harmony, dissonance. Native speakers' first reaction is not about the grammar but about the melody of the sentence – is it in tune or out of tune?

Having been exposed to the language for a long, long time, native speakers have amassed a vast music library. A library of musical phrases (collocations) and short melodies (sentences). Non-native speakers need to build a similar library – a library of music, not words. Music is easier to remember. People remember melodies.

Every sentence you want to memorize you need to mindfully repeat in your head a few times, in a loop. 3-4 times, not more than that.

You need to build your music library.

Be mindful of the cymbals (s), beat (syllables) and every other aspect of the melody. Notice and look for frequent harmonies in every text you read, movie you watch, MLD you use, person you talk with. Building a music library might sound like a challenge but it's the only way to fluency. Start with the basics (common words and grammar) and build your library from there. Keep your melodies (sentences) short and simple at first and more complex later on.

Build your music library by:

- Reading your sentences as one and try to take in the melody.
- Listening to native speakers by watching movies and try to take in the melody.

Self-correct by:

- Writing using Google strict search and MLDs.
- Speaking as if you were singing the language.

When in doubt, repeat the sentence in your head and choose the one that sounds better, sounds right, most relaxing and familiar. You encode your sentences into your memory in the form of melody and retrieve (remember) and deliver (say) them in the same form. And as you are speaking, you should be mindful of your “singing” voice and when you make a mistake you should be able to detect the dissonance (mistake) in your melody (sentence) and be able to self-correct (restore harmony). That’s the ultimate goal.

Contrary to what I said, mistakes *are* okay. Mistakes are okay as long as you are able to self-correct. As you say: “I’m interesting in learning English” you should be able to detect the dissonance and quickly restore the harmony by saying: “I’m interested in learning English.” It’s not about grammar, it’s all about musical and vocal harmony.

That’s all, my dear reader. Thank you for taking that journey with me. I wish you a pleasant road ahead and never forget that it’s not about the destination but all about the journey.

The End...

## About the Author



Vladimir Skenderoff is an English teacher and the author of “by a non-native, for the non-native” series of books on how to learn English:

- Virtually Native
- English Grammar and Functions
- Almost All People

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