# 5 steps to speak a new language

(Hung Q. Pham)

# Dedication

*To Thu Nguyen, my wife and best friend.*
*To my parents, they are my true heroes.*

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# Contents

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# Things you should know before starting

*"If you want to shine tomorrow, you need to sparkle today."*

- HUNG Q. PHAM

S peaking a new language is something a lot of people have always dreamed of. They want it for various reasons. For those who are living in my country Vietnam, being able to speak English well could dramatically change their career prospects. For kids born in the US but having parents who cannot speak English well, learning their mother tongue could bring the family closer. Some people learn a new language for their beloved, like my friend, Brian, who has fallen in love with

a Vietnamese girl. Well, I am not here to talk about why we need to learn a new language, but how to do it. So why don't we just jump right into it?

Every player has a warm-up session before entering a game. We are going to do the same. In the next section, we are going to talk about some common myths about learning a new language. You will see that although learning a foreign language is not an easy task, you absolutely can master it if you know how.

## The Myths

### *I am not born to learn a foreign language.*

Most people believe that to learn a new language requires talent of some kind. What we have usually heard from our parents is: "My son has a great talent in foreign language" or the reverse "My son is no good in foreign languages". I hope you are lucky enough to hear the first comment as it could give you huge confidence and boost your learning efforts. If you got the latter one, you might believe it and give up after your very first attempt.

A foreign language is also called a second language. Let me ask you a question: haven't you been successful with your first language? And if you were able to learn the first one, why can't you learn a second one?

When you first learned your mother language, you lacked many tools. At two or three years of age, you had no dictionary, no reading/writing skills, nor experience. Yet, you could master it. Now that you've got a lot of tools around to assist you, why can't you just repeat that success?

The bottom line is that your belief matters.

### *I am too old to learn a new language*

This is one of the most common complaints I have been hearing from my students and friends. Many people, including scientists, believe that kids are better at learning a foreign language than adults. They also believe adults cannot absorb a new language anymore.

It is true that kids seem to adapt more quickly with a new language environment. Many reports support that idea. However, you can also see that kids quickly get familiar with a new language but, after a short period of time, they tend to slow down to a normal learning rate. I first learned French when I was only 11 years old and English when I was in my high school. English had been one of my majors for many years afterward until I left university. It was still important when I started working. Several years after that, I still could not speak English well. However, when I got older (of course, everyone grows older than when he or she was in school), I achieved much more success in only a few months than what I'd achieved in all the years before that.

Steve Kaufmann is an American linguist; he can speak nine languages (by now, he may have learned a few more). And he started learning his ninth language when he was 59 years old.

It is not about how old you are; it is about how old you think you are.

### *I must go to the country where people speak the language I want to learn.*

I agree that being in the country where people speak natively the language you want to learn would help you a lot. But it is not a must.

I have been in the US for six months to learn English. I found that a lot of the "environment factors" I got there does exist in Vietnam, my home country. I still remember my very first days in the US; a Vietnamese-American friend of mine told me: "You better watch television every day to improve your English

listening skills". That was an honest recommendation. But it shocked me because I came to the US hoping that this country could help me skyrocket my English skills, not to watch TV.

If you are at home and want to improve your listening skills, why not just watch TV?

In Chapter 10, I will tell you many other tactics to get a "native speaking environment" right in your country.

## Learning a new language is a long journey. It might take your whole life to learn one.

If it takes your whole life to learn a new language, how many lives do you think Steve Kaufmann or others who can speak four or five languages had? In fact, many people, including me, have been learning a new language for quite a long time but never focused on it. It is as if you want to build your muscles by lifting the 5kg-weights only three times a day. Results never come that way. When it comes to learning a foreign language, being focused is the key. If you focus in the right manner, you can achieve mastery in a short period of time.

## I must have a good teacher

Some people tend to delay things; I call them "delayers". They keep looking for good teachers even though they have no idea what a good teacher looks like. I think every teacher has his or her own strengths and weaknesses. The important thing is what you can learn from them, not what you cannot learn from them.

Even a native speaker will have weaknesses in teaching their own language. For example, sometimes, a native speaker cannot understand clearly why a word is so easy for her to pronounce but not for her students.

You don't need a very good teacher, but you DO need a good process.

### *Only smart people can learn new languages*

It is true that when you meet someone who can speak one or more foreign languages, you feel that the person is smart. However, many studies show that it is learning a new language that boosts your IQ, which means learning a foreign language makes you smarter, not that you must be smart to learn a new language. This finding is quite interesting, isn't it? If you are still concerned about how smart you are, the following findings might excite you.

Research shows that our brain contains around 30 billion cells. Every time we absorb or analyze information, new connections are formed among these brain cells. These connections could disappear quickly or be retained for a long period of time depending upon how important the information is to you. It is not the number of cells that determine the level of your intelligence; it is the number connections that does. The number of connections increases as your brain works and decreases when you stop thinking or remembering things. If you do math to count the connections possible, it is unimaginable; it is almost unlimited!

Tony Buzan, a well-known human brain expert, estimated that an ordinary person uses only around 3% to 8% of his or her brain capability. A person who is considered unintelligent could be using 2% of his or her capability. While those smart persons could be using only 10% their brain potential. It means no matter how much your IQ is at the moment, you are somewhere between 2% to 10%. If you are in a marathon, standing a few meters ahead of or behind the starting line does not make much of a difference, but your continuous effort does. There is much room for improvement. If this is true, your next question is going to be how to be more intelligent?

I used to think that our brain is like a computer hard disk, that if we squeeze too much information into it, some old information will be replaced by the new information coming in and be lost. I found that I was wrong. The truth is that if you

get more information, your ability to memorize increases accordingly. You then can memorize more and at a faster rate. On the contrary, if you think less, your ability to think will be undermined. Our brain has a mechanism similar to our muscles. If you regularly work out, your muscles will become stronger, and conversely, if you don't exercise, your muscles will grow weaker. Research reveals an interesting finding that whenever we face a problem and we try to find a solution, new connections are formed within our brain making us a little smarter. If we choose to stop thinking, we grow a little less intelligent.

I have a neighbor who is a taxi driver. He once told me that he did not like his job. When I asked him why not change to another job, he insisted that he was a dumper and that he could not manage to learn anything new. One day, when we were enjoying a drink together at his home, waiting in front of the TV for the World Cup football match to start, he challenged me to play chess. Just so that you know, I am not a very bad chess player. I used to defeat my father and his friends when I was only 11 years old. Yet, I lost three matches continuously in just 15 minutes! When I was writing this section, my neighbor's image suddenly popped up in my mind, and I asked myself: how could a good chess player be a dumper!

If sometimes you think you are not intelligent, think again!

## Yes, you can learn a new language

I heard an interesting story when I took a course with Brian Tracy, a go-to person if you are seeking success. It was about Africa where there are a lot of elephants and mahouts. One day a group of visitors came to see mahouts train their elephants. They were surprised to see the mahouts use quite thin ropes to tie the elephants' legs onto a pole. It looked like the elephants could break off the rope at any time. When the visitors brought their question to a mahout working nearby, he explained: "An

elephant is tied by this small robe when she is just born. In the beginning, she tries aggressively to escape. But all of her efforts only result in painful marks on her leg; she is still too young to break the rope. After a few days of attempting to break free, she finally gives up. Even when she has grown into an adult and is much larger in size, she never gives it another try again".

Any of us could have suffered a failure of some kind when we were young. A bad grade at school is just one example. These failures have an impact on our beliefs about our ability. They drive us to think that we cannot do certain things. Psychologists call it "self-limiting beliefs". As the name suggests, whatever you think you cannot do, you cannot do it. However, it is not a truth; it is just a belief. The only thing you need to do is to change it. Yes, I mean change your belief!

So, is it difficult to learn a new language? I cannot answer it but I am sure that learning a new language is a skill, not an art. An art, such as painting, might require talent at some level, a skill does not. Everyone can learn a skill. For example, if you've never done push-ups, chances are that you would not be able to do it more than ten. But if you practice regularly, within one month, you could manage to make it 50 – 70; some people can even make it a 100! However, imagine if I do not tell you this and if suddenly you see someone do 100 times push ups, you would think he must be *special*, wouldn't you? Many people who have heard me speak English with an American accent have assumed that I must have been in the US for years. When I tell them I have studied there for six months, they think that I am quite *special*. They do not know that, not long ago, I had been very *normal*.

Many people do not achieve success in learning a new language due to one reason: they do not know the *secret circle* of any project. The secret circle can be described in the following figure:

**Step 1: Start up**

**The "Secret Circle" of any project**

**Step 2: Face some obstacle or failure**

Come back to step 3

**Step 3: Make adjustment**

**then start again**

**Face another obstacle**

**Step 4: Achieve a small success**

**Step 5: Achieve your target**
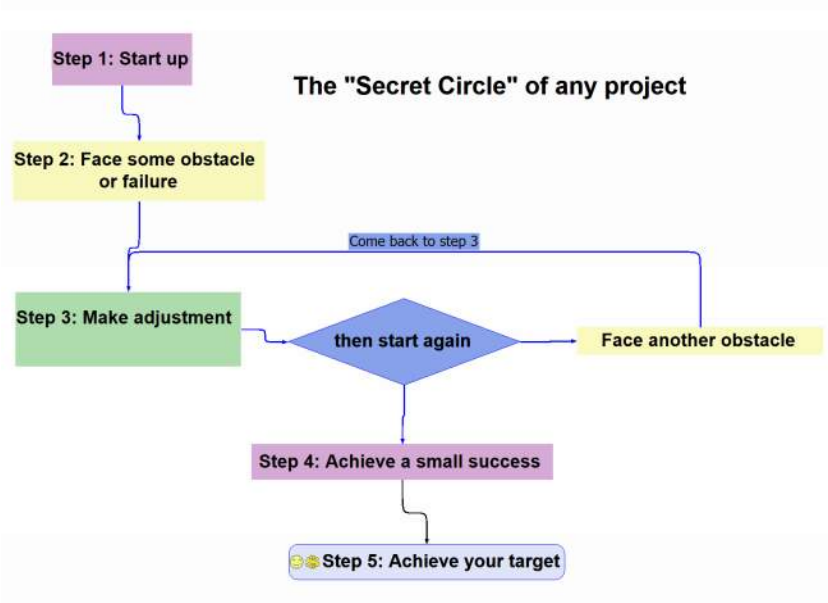
As you can observe, most people assume there would be no failure or obstacle on their journey. When they do face one (in Step 2), they get frustrated, their initial enthusiasm and high energy quickly go down. Some people do go to Step 3 where they make some adjustment and try again, but they quit after facing another obstacle. Some others do go to Step 4 where they achieve success of some kind. But then, they simply get satisfied with what they have achieved and stop putting more effort. Only those who go to the final step will achieve their target.

This circle applies not just to studying language but to almost any field. If you get through all the steps, you can definitely learn any language. And you can learn it fast with the tools and techniques I am going to share with you in this book.

## You need a big enough reason

Sometimes, people are not very clear about why they need to learn the language they are aiming to. Maybe, you learn it

because your friends or your parents tell you to do so. Maybe, you just want to put one more language on your CV believing that it will make some difference. Many expatriates work in another country and think that they should learn the local language. Whatever reason you have, a foreign language is something you cannot learn if you do not want it badly enough.

What I recommend you to do right now is to leave your book, have a cup of coffee somewhere and ask yourself: why do I need to learn this language? Think a bit further about what you want to get in the future. Think about your dreams, wishes and your plan. Where does the language stand in your plan? What does the language have to do with your dreams? Do you really need that language, and what benefits will you have if you master it? Your brain is awesome, but it needs a good enough reason in order to perform a difficult task. If you want to quickly master the language you want to learn, start with a dream. The moment you decide language is not something that can stop you from making your dream come true, you have almost done half of the journey.

# Pareto Principle and Core Vocabulary

*"Learning without thought is labor lost; thought without learning is perilous."*

*- CONFUCIUS*

If you have made the decision (and I hope you have), congratulations! I have never seen anyone who has decided to learn a language fail. In this chapter, we are about to discover one of the most important factors that decides whether or not you can learn a new language in a short period of time.

When it comes to language, most people will agree with me that vocabulary is at the top of the priority list. Without vocabulary, you definitely cannot hear, speak, or write. You are still able to communicate without proper grammar or with poor pronunciation. But you can do nothing without words. Language is formed by words and the way words are put together logically.

Nevertheless, have you ever asked: "How many words do I need in order to speak well?" Not everybody asks that question. Most people just start right away without realizing how far they will have to go and how long it will take to get to the end of the road. That is not very good when you have a long journey. You will be more likely to reach the target if you have a map in your hand, or know the way you have to go.

There are approximately 600,000 different words in English. This figure varies among languages from 400,000 to 1,000,000 or even more. Let's take a look at a dictionary. You will find that an average one will have 300,000 – 400,000 different words.

You could have been learning a foreign language for sometime now. I do not know how many words you've got, but I am very sure that the number of words you have studied is much larger than the number of words you've retained. It may seem that there is a "hole" in your mind through which new words keep leaking out. Even though you have been trying to pick up new words every day, what you retain doesn't seem to make the effort worthwhile. With 600,000 – 800,000 different words, even if we assume that you keep learning new words everyday and retain about 20 words per day (this is not a bad result at all!), it results in 7,300 words a year (365 x 20). You do the math!

Fortunately, life does not have to be that hard! Things in our world are arranged by an interesting principle called the 80/20 principle. This was found by an Italian economist named Vilfredo Pareto. That is why it is also called the Pareto principle.

Pareto observed that 80% of the lands are owned by 20% of the population. He found that this number is true in many other fields, as well. For example:

- 20% of the input creates 80% of the result

- 20% of the workers produce 80% of the result

- 20% of the customers create 80% of the revenue

- 20% of the bugs cause 80% of the crashes

- 20% of the features cause 80% of the usage

- And on and on…

In fact, the rate of 80/20 is rather a symbol than an exact number. In many cases, it could be 90/10 or 95/5.



## Pareto Principle
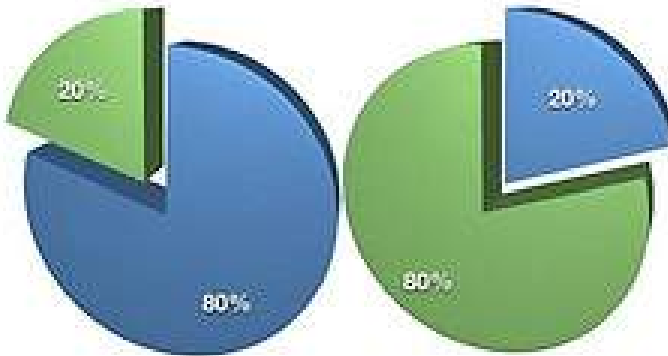
20% of the input (time, resources, effort)
accounts for 80% of the output (results, rewards)

This principle became well-known because thanks to it people could decide what to put their efforts (time, money, resources…) into in order to get the most results. Simply put,

work less and gain more. Don't you want to spend less time but get more results in learning a new language?

The great thing is that the Pareto principle is also true in learning a new language. Even though the total number of different words in English comes up to 600,000, only a small portion of that number is used in American daily lives. Shakespeare is known to be an author who used a wide variety of words and phrases in his works. If you ever read him, you will find many words that you would never use or even think of in your life. Yet, statistics shows that he has used only a total of approximately 20,000 different words in all of his works put together.

How about that number in our daily lives? As early as the 1930s, George Zipf (1935) had made influential proposals about the statistical distributional properties of the lexicon, widely known as Zipf's Law. He researched various languages, including English. He found that each word has a different frequency of occurrence. In English, the word "THE" tops the frequency ranking with 7.5%, "OF" following with 3.5%, and so on. Amazingly, just 130 words make up 50% of occurrences.

Other studies show that Americans use around 2500 – 3000 most common words in their daily lives. The good news is that these 3000 common words build up more than 95% of the content in any conversation, telephone call, e-mail or even books and newspapers.

In other words, instead of learning 600,000 different words, you can focus on 3000 most common words but still understand 95% of all conversations, e-mails, newspapers and books. If you take 3,000 and divided it by 600,000, the result is 0.5%. These most common words belong to what we call the core vocabulary. Some linguists believe that the core vocabulary should contain 4,000 instead of 3,000 words. Others think it should be 2,000. But I think the exact number is not very important, because the bottom line here is that you will be able to master communication in your new language by focusing on this core vocabulary.

Some of my students feel rather uncomfortable with this recommendation, as they want to fully understand (100%) all of the content they are exposed to. They do not want to lose the remaining 5% content by understanding only 95%. Yes! I totally agree with them. I am not saying that you should understand only 95% of the language you're learning. I am talking about where to focus first. After mastering the core vocabulary and understanding most of the language, no one can stop you from discovering further to enrich your vocabulary. However, if you seek perfection in the very beginning, you will be scattering your time and effort in a wide area. Unfocused effort will lead to no results for too long and make you tired. Long ago in China, Sun Tzu, a well-known strategist, talked about a technique for the minority to defeat the majority. The technique was to focus all the effort on the weakest point of your enemy. You should use the same strategy for learning a new language.

Another reason for you to focus on the core vocabulary is that in order to remember and be able to use a specific word you will have to be exposed to that word several times. Many linguists believe that a person will need to get exposed to a

word 5 to 10 times to master it. That is why it is not a good idea at all to spread your efforts thin.

Basically, almost every language in the world follows the same pattern in that a small percentage of the total number of words make up the core vocabulary of any particular language. However, different languages may have different total number of words leading to varying sizes of their core vocabulary. Below is an illustration of the word frequency distribution and core vocabulary in Russian (source: www.how-to-learn-any-language.com).
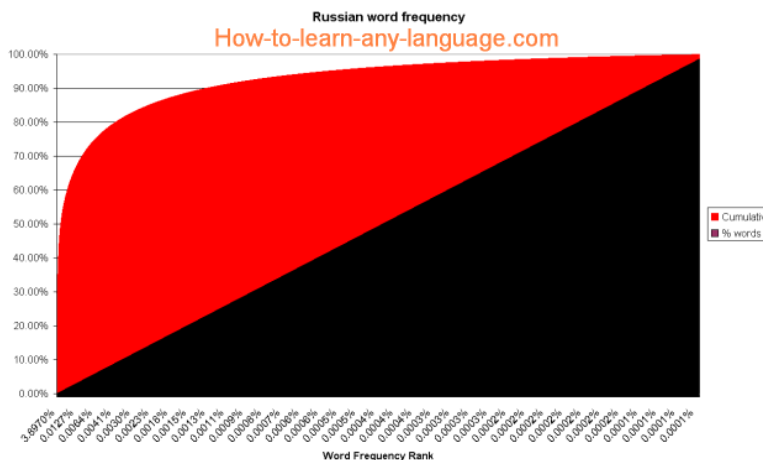


The result is that:
the 75 most common words make up 40% of occurrences
the 200 most common words make up 50% of occurrences
the 524 most common words make up 60% of occurrences
the 1257 most common words make up 70% of occurrences
the 2925 most common words make up 80% of occurrences
the 7444 most common words make up 90% of occurrences
the 13374 most common words make up 95% of occurrences
the 25508 most common words make up 99% of occurrences

Okay, so you have got the first secret in my second language learning process. However, I have only mentioned the size of the core vocabulary. We do not know yet what words go in there. Well, if you run a search on the Internet or look at some language learning book, you would probably find lists of words that form the core vocabulary for your target language. On [www.wiktionary.org](http://www.wiktionary.org) people even have frequency lists for various languages. A friend of mine collected a list of 1500 most common words in English as he was trying to improve his English skills. If this is the first time you are seeing such a list, chances are that you might be tempted to learn by purely memorizing it. Well, you can try doing so if you want. But I am sure that **it will not work!** Memorizing a list of words out of context is one of the worst methods in learning a new language. Being able to memorize it does not mean you can use it. And when native speakers talk to you, you might not understand even though they speak using those words! A number of second language learners do know about the existence of core vocabulary, but they do not know how to exploit it effectively. They do not know how to approach it properly. The main reason is that you need to *acquire* a language, not purely *learn* it, and you absolutely cannot memorize a language. Please don't worry about the concepts "acquiring" and "learning" yet, I will explain them later in the next chapter. Now, please be a bit patient, as I seem to be rambling on about this topic. This idea is so important that I would like you to fully get my point before introducing you to the next step. In the next chapter, I will be instructing you how to acquire the core vocabulary of the language you're learning and to master it confidently.

Before moving to the next chapter, I would like to introduce a concept somewhat similar to core vocabulary – **core phrases**. As its name suggests, core phrases are the most common ways of putting words together. In other words, they are the most common sentences and phrases. This is the second reason why you cannot learn a language by just memorizing its core vocabulary list. The idea is simple: you cannot speak a language

if you know the words but don't know how to put them together. Core phrases are just as important as core vocabulary. They will help you master the listening, speaking and writing skills in a new language more quickly by recognizing and mastering whole phrases instead of individual words. Let me give you an example:

In everyday English, you would normally say: "I'll be right back". It means that you are about to go somewhere and will return shortly. You rarely use any other way to express this idea when you speak. If a learner of English tries to memorize individual words and then tries to remember how to put them together, it will not be as efficient as memorizing the whole phrase. In fact, it is easier to memorize and recall a long phrase or sentence than a single word. This fact is especially true when developing listening skills because you will be more likely to recognize and understand a long phrase than a single word. It is just like listening to a song. If I play only a few sounds, you might not be able to recognize which song it is. But the job will be much easier if I play a longer piece of melody.

The same thing happens when you speak. If you use common phrases when you speak, native speakers will be more likely to understand what you want to say although your pronunciation may not be really good yet. For example, if I asked an American: "is your health good?" as an opening remark, he would not understand. It is simply because Americans do not say it that way, even though the sentence is correct in terms of grammar. In other words, the sound in this case is not familiar to them in this particular context. However, if I say: "how are you?" or "how are you doing?" people will understand immediately no matter how bad my pronunciation is.

In short, learn the way native speakers speak; learn the common phrases and sentences they use. That is the fastest way to communicate effectively in a new language. I call it "take the whole bundle" technique. Now, let's move on to the next chapter and discover how you can quickly ***absorb*** the core vocabulary!

# Build a Natural Language Acquiring Mechanism

*'A journey of a thousand miles begins with a small step"*

- LAO TZU

I n the previous chapter, we talked about the 80/20 rule. Now, you have got some idea about the workload, which is not as huge as you might have thought. In the following pages, I am going to answer your question: How do you learn vocabulary? Where do you find those common words? How do you approach them?

Here is my answer: We are going to build a mechanism so that you can acquire the common words in the core vocabulary of the language you want to learn in a natural way. In other words, we are going to build a system that can attract the core vocabulary you are exposed to. It sounds like hype, doesn't it? Before going into the details of the system, I would like to explain a bit more how the human brain learns a language, the difference between *learning* and *acquiring*, and the concepts of *input* and *output*.

## How does your brain learn a language?

In his book *Second Nature Brain Science and Human Knowledge*, Nobel Prize winning author Gerald Edelman reveals a lot of interesting findings about the human brain. A particularly interesting revelation was the mechanism on which brain functions. When comparing the human brain with the computer, he found that the two worked on very different mechanisms. Unlike computers, our brain cells (neuron) function by a mechanism that he called "pattern recognition" and "association" and not on logic.

In the beginning, these concepts might confuse you; they certainly confused me. You can think about "pattern recognition" and "association" as the way in which the brain starts to draw a new *map* as you learn a new language. The input signals you get via your eyes (reading) and ears (listening) stimulate the cells in the language processing area of your brain. As you continuously receive inputs, repetitive signals create "marks" or "traces" in your cortex. The sets of traces and marks

then form something like a "language map" in your brain. When a guy speaks a new language fluently, it means his new "language map" has been clearly formed. As he hears or reads something in the language, his brain recognizes the input signals by "associating" them to the map in his brain.

This mechanism explains a very common situation in which a learner fails to hear a certain word or phrase while listening to native speech. When he looks at the transcript, he surprisingly finds that he has already learned the word or phrase before. It frustrates the learner, as he does not know why he cannot recognize the word or phrase, even though he has learned it. If you are in such a situation, you would likely think: "listening to a foreign language is so difficult!"

In most cases, the problem lies with your input. The two most common problems are:

1.  You have learned the word only in its written form but have missed the sound form. In this case, your input lacks the "sound" component. Therefore, the language map in your brain is missing one part of the "data". So, when you listen to the "sound" spoken by a native speaker, there is no "source data" in your brain for it to "recognize" and "associate" what it just heard, and you fail to hear the word or phrase.

2.  You have heard the "sound" of the word when you learned it, but the "sound" you heard was not correct as it was spoken by a non-native speaker. It means that the "map" has been incorrectly drawn. So, your brain still cannot recognize it when you hear the word spoken by a native speaker.

I am not going to discuss listening skills further in this section (although I know that listening is one of the most irritating parts of foreign language learning for many). We will talk more about it later. Now, let's discuss further our super weapon, the brain.

After gaining some understanding of the human brain, linguists conducted further research on the various ways to approach a new language. They found that there were basically two approaches - *learning* and *acquiring*.

*Learning* happens when a learner consciously puts his or her efforts into studying or memorizing some detail, such as a word, phrase or grammatical structure, of the new language. He or she might review it sometime later or never (I belong to the second category ☺). Below is an example of a typical *learning* approach that we can observe in many foreign language learning classes.

Teacher says:

- Listen to me and then repeat (normally the whole class repeats altogether)

- Let's identify where the subject is, where the object is and what tense is used…

- Open your book, page number… and do the exercise number…

- Today, we are going to learn and memorize the following words (it is normally a list of words)

- Open page number… in your book and translate the first paragraph

- Let's underline the subjects (and/or objects) in this paragraph.

And on and on…

The *learning* approach has the following disadvantages:

- It does not create excitement; excitement is an important factor in studying a new language.

- If the teacher is not a native speaker, the "sound" input may not be 100% correct.

- Although lectures might be sophisticatedly prepared, many words introduced and explained in a class may not

be the most common words. The reason is that when the whole class is assigned a paragraph for translation, the teacher would normally explain all the new words emerging, no matter whether they are common words or not. Students then try to memorize all of them. This process, therefore, takes time and is not efficient.

The *acquiring* process is different. It happens when learners are exposed to a **large amount of input** through reading, listening, observing or getting involved directly in the new language environment. The learners then unconsciously remember the details that attract their attention or that they feel are important. In other words, acquired details are the ones that remain in the learners' mind after they get exposed to a certain amount of the new language. The acquiring process is similar to the way kids learn their mother tongue.

However, not everything can be learned effectively using the *acquiring* approach. Some topics, such as sentence structure, could be learned more effectively using the *learning* approach. In the next chapter, you will see that most of the techniques that I use are arrangements of both *learning* and *acquiring* approaches.


# Input and output

No matter which approach you use, learning a language consists of two basic parts: input from reading and listening and output in the form of writing and speaking. Several years ago, I joined an English class taught by a teacher who was a native speaker of the language. She was focusing on making the students talk to each other in English, whether in groups or in pairs. She also arranged time to talk directly to us in English. In the beginning, the class was quite exciting as we felt that we could start to talk using a new language. However, since we did not have much vocabulary to express more complex ideas, we soon got bored repeating the same simple sentences, such as "it is raining", "have you had dinner?" "the weather was nice yesterday"… We

could not express more complicated ideas just by practicing with each other.

Some recent studies on language learning techniques help me understand why the method used to teach us in that class did not work. It was not efficient because students in the class did not have enough input yet. When we did not have much input, forcing us to produce too much output was not a good approach. If you observe the way a kid learns to speak his mother tongue, you will notice that he starts receiving inputs long before he can speak the first word. The evidence points to the possibility that kids may be able to understand their parents from a very early stage, much before they start to speak. So we must acquire input before being able to produce output. This finding may make you conclude that we should focus on getting input by reading and listening for a period of time, then move on to writing and speaking skills. This is not wrong and many learners actually do so. But is it the best approach? I do not think so. First, I believe that working this way makes the learning process longer as you have to separate the two processes. Second, you are not sure how long you've to wait until you can start producing output. Will the output come automatically as it happens with the kids? I believe it will not. Kids produce output automatically because they have no choice other than their mother tongue and they have to produce output in order to communicate. While learning the second language, we are not in the same situation.

Getting input and producing output have a mutual impact. In other words, if we organize input and output well, we can expedite our learning process. Basically, producing output helps the learner quickly consolidate what he has got from acquiring input (reading, listening and watching). In the next chapters, you will see how we can focus on both input and output strategically.

# Massive input and selective acquisition

As we have mentioned, one of the biggest mistakes that learners make is to try to memorize a list of words or phrases in the new language. Memorizing a list will not help you retain the words for long. No matter how hard you try, you will forget them quickly.

When it comes to learning a new language, getting massive input is the key. When you get massive input, your brain will do its job to acquire the most common words and phrases. The basis here is quite simple. In order to possess and master a word or phrase, you must have the following factors:

- the context in which the word or phrase is placed

- the content and topic to which the word or phrase is related

- the emotion and/or sense of the speaker

- the other common words that go along with that word or phrase and the way they are put together (common structures)

It is very hard to have the above factors in place when you use the *learning* approach. Even if you proactively use a comprehensive dictionary, it is time consuming and inefficient. In addition, examples in dictionaries do not belong to a focused topic. It just does not work.

Our basic theory here is that when we are exposed to massive input, the factors listed above, such as context and topic, will naturally come to us. These factors help us clearly understand the meaning and usage of words and phrases and help us remember them for a longer period. If my explanation here is not easy to follow, please don't worry too much about it. You don't need to understand its essence; just follow my techniques and you will see the results.

If you observe those who can speak a second language fluently, you will notice that they did go through the massive input getting and selective acquisition process. I have a friend who stays close to the Chinese border. Every day, she'd go to the marketplace on the border where Chinese and Vietnamese people trade with each other. She has no problem speaking Chinese at all. However, I assume that you do not have that kind of environment. Even if you do have such an environment, it will still take you quite a long time to learn a new language in a **purely natural** way. It will definitely be much longer than the period of 6 months that I am promising.

If so, what do I really mean by getting massive input?

As I mentioned earlier, when you are learning a new language, your brain is "drawing" a new language "map". Our strategy is to expedite the process by proactively "drawing" it without waiting for the brain to draw the map in a natural way. You make the "marks" and "traces" clearer by going back and forth over those "traces" until they become a clear map. The most common words are like the big intersections where various traces pass through. In the early stages, this map will not be clear yet, but after getting more and more inputs, the map will emerge clearer. Then, you will easily ***recognize*** the roads, which is the essence of **listening**. When the map becomes clearer, you can "show people the way" to go somewhere. In other words, you can express your ideas by **speaking** in the new language.

***Therefore, getting massive input continuously for a short period of time is the basic step to acquiring the most common words and phrases. In other words, exposure to massive input is how you can penetrate the core vocabulary treasure.***

In fact, this concept is not new and is applied not only in the field of language learning but also in other subject areas. I still recall the time when I was studying at the university. It was very difficult for me to remember the details in those information

rich subjects, such as History of Economics, Religion and Philosophy and so on. I tried to memorize the information in the text books without success. As recommended by a friend, I stopped trying to memorize the textbook and went to the school library. I looked up several other books on the same topic. Amazingly, after reading three or four more books on the same subject, I could easily remember all the information in the textbook. The good thing was that I did not have to memorize facts; I just read the books in a painless way. Let me illustrate this for you. If I gave you a shovel and asked you to dig a hole 10 feet in depth but only 5 inches in diameter, you would not be able to do it. You would need a bigger diameter in order to dig in deeper. The same thing happens when you want to memorize things. You need more information in order to remember a little. If you want to memorize a book, read four more books on the same topic!

Let's come back to our language learning issue. Once you understand the idea of getting massive input, you will start thinking about where to get it. Below are some of the most common sources I have used when I learned English. Such sources are available in other languages too:

- Foreign television channels

- Books and newspaper written in English

- Foreign radio channels

- Online forum communicating in English

- Expatriates living in my home town. You can easily make friends with them. If you don't know how, I have some tips for you in the Chapter 10

- Friends online

In the Internet age, the problem we are facing is not the lack of information but too much information. You receive too much information everyday about courses, documents, reports, websites, forums, etc. The important thing is to select and use the information effectively. A good source of input for learning

a new language should have one or more of the following attributes:

- be on a topic that interests you, preferably a topic you are passionate about.

- be up-to-date so you can relate to things that are happening.

- provide useful information. Why limit yourself to learning only the language? Gather more knowledge at the same time!

- contain hot news

- not be too hard for you to understand.

## Take advantage of your favorite field or topic

So far we have discussed the basis and mechanism of how you learn a new language. We have also talked about the potential reasons why you may have learned it in an inefficient way and what approach we should use. Right from the next chapter onwards, we will actually look into the techniques I've mentioned off and on earlier. However, the first thing you need to do is to select your favorite subject area and topics. Actually, this is very important to a language learner because motivation is the key to success. If you do not like what you learn, you will be less likely to succeed. Selecting favorite topics in your field will keep you be excited and motivated every time you sit down to learn. In addition, it will be more interesting when you get more information in your area of expertise.

Your concern might be: "But I want to speak the language in general; what happens if I focus just on a specific field? How can I speak on another topic?" Don't worry about it yet! Once you can master a topic, such as "commerce", you will easily be able to master other topics. It is just like if you can ride a bicycle, it will take you only a few more days to ride a motorbike. Or if you can ride a motorbike with automatic gears,

you can easily master manual gears with a little practice. So, if you've chosen your favorite topics to study, let's launch into the techniques.

CHAPTER FOUR

# 1ˢᵗ Input The *Free Reading* Technique

*"Some people know how to teach, and some know how to do."*

- LINDA PIERCE

If you have selected your topic as instructed in the previous chapter, it is time to start right now. In the next pages, I will instruct you how to get the 1ˢᵗ input by using a technique that I call the *Free Reading* technique.

# Free Reading Vs. Comprehension Reading

As its name suggests, this technique is different from the Comprehension Reading section that you usually find in a textbook. A typical Comprehension Reading section is a half-page paragraph, sometimes longer or shorter depending on the intention of the composer. When reading it, you are required to underline new words. In many books, the author might already do this job for you. You would usually check the meaning of these words, try to memorize them. There could be several questions underneath the paragraph for you to answer. You would probably translate this paragraph into you mother tongue and on… and on…   Basically, this method is more a *learning* approach.

To give you a closer look at the Comprehension Reading technique, it is best to use an example for illustration. Please note that all of my illustrations are in English, as English is my second language. If you are an English native speaker looking to learn any other language in the world, this technique (and the other techniques, as well) will still be valid. Now let's consider the following example:

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

*She's not normally* **camera-shy** *but a tired-looking Sarah Ferguson avoided reporters on her arrival at Los Angeles airport. And again later when she was due to be the star of a Hollywood* **red-carpet event**, *honoured by a childrens' charity for her* **humanitarian work**. *But her efforts to help others have been* **overshadowed by** *her attempts* **to help herself** *and Ms Ferguson* **sneaked in** *to collect her award.*

*She has said she's sorry after a newspaper secretly filmed her offering access to Prince Andrew for half a million pounds. There's no suggestion he knew of her plan.*

*In the past Sarah Ferguson has been an author, TV presenter and film producer. But her media company recently* **collapsed with large debts**. *She* **admitted money problems** *but said they were no excuse for* **a**

**serious lapse in judgement**. *This attempted deal, though not illegal,* *may* **have gone too far**.

*Rajesh Mirchandani, BBC News, Los Angeles*

<u>*Vocabulary*</u>*:*

*camera-shy*
*red-carpet event*
*humanitarian work*
*overshadowed by*
*to help herself*
*sneaked in*
*collapsed with large debts*
*admitted money problems*
*a serious lapse in judgement*
*have gone too far*

\*\*\*

This is a language learning section I borrowed from the site Learning English published by BBC Vietnamese. This website is dedicated to helping Vietnamese people to learn English. Overall, this is a useful website. I am not doing a critique here. My intention is to show you the difference between the two reading techniques that we have been talking about so far. As you can see in the example above, the words that are considered "important" are underlined or in bold, then followed by notes explaining the meaning of each word. If I were to study this reading section in my English class, the teacher would write these words onto the board, explain their meaning, instruct how to pronounce them etc. This method is very common from the beginner to advanced levels. When using this approach, the teacher assumes that you already know all other words. The underlined words or those in bold are focused upon because they are supposed to be more complicated and more difficult for the learners.

Okay, now let me ask you a question: **are you sure that all those difficult and "important" words listed in the example are worth your time and effort?** Recall what

we talked about the Pareto principle (80/20 rule) and core vocabulary in Chapter 2: our strategy is to focus on the core vocabulary which constitutes just 5% of the whole vocabulary but brings in 95% results. If so, you want to make sure that the words you spend time on should be the most common words, not the most uncommon ones. Coming back to the example, you could now see that the Comprehension reading method tends to drive you to focus on the most **difficult** words. My next question is: are the difficult words the most common ones? Unfortunately, the answer is no! Most times, the shorter and simpler words are more common than the long and complicated ones. To double check this judgment, please visit the website http://wordcount.org/main.php. This website provides rankings based on how common a certain word is. Although I cannot vouch for its reliability, at least it can give us a rough idea.

In the "Find Word" box of the website, enter the word you want to check. If you try some word like "humanitarian" (from the list in the example above), you will see it's ranked 11507. This rank tells you that the word is far less common than those of the core vocabulary (which are the 3000 most common words).

If you want to explore word frequencies more, you can visit http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/Wiktionary:Frequency_lists. However, this site does not contain a search box for you to type in the word you want to look up, so you must find it manually. But if I were you, I would not waste time on this issue any more. I would care more about how to get my core vocabulary and how to master it.

Let's come back to the example and see how we can approach it in a more efficient way. We are going to remove all bolds and underlining from the words in the passage.

\*\*\*

*She's not normally camera-shy but a tired-looking Sarah Ferguson avoided reporters on her arrival at Los Angeles airport. And again later when she was due to be the star of a Hollywood red-carpet event, honoured by a childrens' charity for her humanitarian work. But her efforts to help others have been overshadowed by her attempts to help herself and Ms Ferguson sneaked in to collect her award.*

*She has said she's sorry after a newspaper secretly filmed her offering access to Prince Andrew for half a million pounds. There's no suggestion he knew of her plan.*

*In the past Sarah Ferguson has been an author, TV presenter and film producer. But her media company recently collapsed with large debts. She admitted money problems but said they were no excuse for a serious lapse in judgement. This attempted deal, though not illegal, may have gone too far.*

\*\*\*

Since this paragraph is quite short, I am going to search for another article about the same topic to make my point clearer. Thanks to Google, I have found the one below:

***

Sarah Ferguson was caught on tape accepting cash from an undercover journalist in exchange for access to her ex husband, Prince Andrew, Britain's special representative for international trade and investment.

"Five hundred thousand pounds [approx $750,000] when you can, to me... [to] open doors," Ferguson, 50, says on videotape during a meeting at a swanky London apartment, according to the British tabloid News of the World, which also printed a transcript of the conversation.

"Then you open up all the channels, whatever you need, whatever you want... We can do so much," she went on. "If you want to meet him in your business, look after me and he'll look after you."

Ferguson, a former Weight Watchers spokeswoman, appears to ask the reporter, who is posing as an international tycoon, for $40,000 in cash, and $720,000 by wire transfer "if you want a deal with Andrew... and then you meet Andrew."

After a pile of money is show on a coffee tape, the duchess puts her head in her hands (it's unclear if she's smiling or crying), and then moments later, hauls away a black computer bag stuffed with the cash, which is described as a fee for "doing the big deal with Andrew."

Ferguson says that Andrew was aware of the deal, but the newspaper says he was not.

"I will listen to the friendship talk between you two. And then I do it... You two talk. I listen. Then I activate," she said. "He meets the most amazing people. And he just throws them my way."

Ferguson wed the Duke of York, who is fourth in line to the throne, in 1986, but they split 10 years later. They are parents to two daughters, Beatrice, 21, and Eugenie, 20.

"He's so amazing," Ferguson says on the videotape. "We're the happiest divorced couple in the world."

The royal family was unavailable to comment. Fergie said in a statement that she had money problems but "that is no excuse for a serious lapse in judgment, and I am very sorry that this has happened. I very deeply regret the situation and the embarrassment caused."

*Fergie has lost millions in business ventures (including the closing of her promotional firm, Hartmoor, last year, which she poured $2 million into), but still preferred to travel first class and in a chauffeur-driven Bentley.*

*Her $3 million contract with Weight Watchers expired in 2007, and according to the Times of London, she had to scale back her lavish 50th birthday party to a family meal because she couldn't afford it.*

\*\*\*

Now, if you screen these two articles manually, you will find some words that appear 2, 3 or even 4 times. They are *reporter, attempt, newspaper, film, access, deal, family…* The phrase *say on the videotape* shows up twice. So that you can find them quickly, let me underline them in the articles as below:

\*\*\*

*She's not normally camera-shy but a tired-looking Sarah Ferguson avoided* **reporters** *on her arrival at Los Angeles airport. And again later when she was due to be the star of a Hollywood red-carpet event, honoured by a childrens' charity for her humanitarian work. But her efforts to help others have been overshadowed by her* **attempts** *to help herself and Ms Ferguson sneaked in to collect her award.*

*She has said she's sorry after a* **newspaper** *secretly* **filmed** *her offering* **access** *to Prince Andrew for half a million pounds. There's no suggestion he knew of her plan.*

*In the past Sarah Ferguson has been an author, TV presenter and* **film** *producer. But her media company recently collapsed with large debts. She admitted money problems but said they were no excuse for a serious lapse in judgement. This* **attempted deal***, though not illegal, may have gone too far.*

\*\*\*

*Sarah Ferguson was caught on* **tape** *accepting* **cash** *from an undercover journalist in exchange for* **access** *to her ex husband, Prince Andrew, Britain's special representative for* **international** *trade and investment.*

*"Five hundred thousand pounds [approx $750,000] when you can, to me... [to] open doors,"* Ferguson, 50, **<u>says on videotape</u>** *during a meeting at a swanky London apartment, according to the British tabloid News of the World, which also printed a transcript of the conversation.*

*"Then you open up all the channels, whatever you need, whatever you want... We can do so much,"* she went on. *"If you want to meet him in your business,* **<u>look after</u>** *me and he'll* **<u>look after</u>** *you."*

*Ferguson, a former Weight Watchers spokeswoman, appears to ask the* **<u>reporter</u>**, *who is posing as an* **<u>international</u>** *tycoon, for $40,000 in* **<u>cash</u>**, *and $720,000 by wire transfer "if you want a* **<u>deal</u>** *with Andrew... and then you meet Andrew."*

*After a pile of money is show on a coffee* **<u>tape</u>**, *the duchess puts her head in her hands (it's unclear if she's smiling or crying), and then moments later, hauls away a black computer bag stuffed with the* **<u>cash</u>**, *which is described as a fee for "doing the big* **<u>deal</u>** *with Andrew."*

*Ferguson says that Andrew was aware of the* **<u>deal</u>**, *but the* **<u>newspaper</u>** *says he was not.*

*"I will listen to the friendship talk between you two. And then I do it... You two talk. I listen. Then I activate,"* she said. *"He meets the most amazing people. And he just throws them my way."*

*Ferguson wed the Duke of York, who is fourth in line to the throne, in 1986, but they split 10 years later. They are parents to two daughters, Beatrice, 21, and Eugenie, 20.*

*"He's so amazing,"* Ferguson **<u>says on the videotape</u>**. *"We're the happiest divorced couple in the world."*

*The royal* **<u>family</u>** *was unavailable to comment. Fergie said in a statement that she had money problems but "that is no excuse for a serious lapse in judgment, and I am very sorry that this has happened. I very deeply regret the situation and the embarrassment caused."*

*Fergie has lost millions in business ventures (including the closing of her promotional firm, Hartmoor, last year, which she poured $2 million into), but still preferred to travel first class and in a chauffeur-driven Bentley.*

*Her $3 million contract with Weight Watchers expired in 2007, and according to the Times of London, she had to scale back her lavish 50th birthday party to a **family** meal because she couldn't afford it.*

Again, if you want to double check whether these words are really common, check it out on http://wordcount.org/main.php. Here, if you type the word "attempt" in the search box, you will get the frequency ranking of 882.



This result shows that "attempt" does belong to the group of the 3000 most common words. Logically, the words that appear more frequently in a group of articles should be the more common words. On the contrary, the words that are in bold or underlined in the Comprehension Reading section of a text book, such as *camera-shy, red-carpet event, humanitarian work* are difficult but not common words. With my experience, I am quite sure that you would rarely use them in many conversations.

Now that you have got a rough idea about the approach I am going to share with you, you might be wondering how to really catch those common words. Screening reading material to find

the repeated words as I did in the example above is doing it the hard way. We are going to use a much better method that I call the Free Reading technique. In this technique, there will be no questions underneath a paragraph, no translation into your mother tongue, no underlining… Yet, **it is designed to bring to you the most common words**. If you follow this technique, you must be prepared to read a lot. While reading, you might not understand 100% of the content. You might feel a little bit uncomfortable as you will be tempted to understand the whole content. However, you will shortly adapt to this new method and then start to acquire a huge amount of **core vocabulary** brought in by this technique.

## The *Free Reading* Technique

Now, to practice the Free Reading technique, please go through the following steps:

<u>Step 1</u>: **Select appropriate materials for you to read.**

There are many sources of language learning materials available out there on the Internet and in bookstores. We are not going to use any of them. We will be using materials that are used by native speakers in their daily lives and not those specifically designed for learning purposes. These materials include:

1. ***Academic (or non-fiction) books:*** Just look for books that belong to your area of expertise or interest written in your target language. For example, my area of expertise is business administration, so I looked for books on marketing, selling, management and so on written in English, my target language. If you cannot find one at the local book stores, please do a search on the Internet. Since my target language was English, I could easily find many options on online bookstores, such as Amazon or Barns & Noble. However, if your target language is some thing like Chinese or Korean,

you may need to look for an online bookstore in that language. For example, simply run a search for: "online book store in Chinese", and you would easily find a useful website, such as http://www.hanban.ca/bookstore

2. ***Fiction books:*** If you are a fan of stories, this will be a great source for you. The biggest advantage of stories is the compelling content of the book itself. As I've mentioned earlier, motivation is the key to learning a new language. Reading compelling stories would excite you much more than reading boring paragraphs in language textbooks.

3. ***News***: This is also a great source as it has updated and useful information. It helps you relate to your daily life and get the sense of the content. In addition, hot news normally comes along with comments and replies that you can utilize to really get involved in the topic and practice your output (writing and speaking).

4. ***Online forums:*** You can opt to be a member (for free) of an online forum discussing your favorite topics. You just need to know the name of the topic written in your target language; then, do a search on Google. There should be plenty of options for you. When I was studying English, because I loved photography, I went to sites like:

www.the**photoforum**.com/**forum**.

www.**photoforum**.com

www.**photo**zo.com/**forum**

…

Because I was going to open my own business, I also went to forums like:

www.young**entrepreneur**.com/**forum**/index.php

www.**entrepreneursforum**.net

…

You can do the same in your target language.

5.  ***Other sources***: You can look for types of sources other than the ones already mentioned. However, to be a good source, it should satisfy the following criteria:

    -   It should be written by native speakers.

    -   It should have one or more of the attributes of good input mentioned in Chapter 3.

    -   Its content should be large enough, at least, 3 – 4 pages on one topic. As you can see, the sources mentioned above are all materials with massive content, such as books and stories. News can also be considered massive material, as you can bundle related news into a group so that it becomes massive. Similarly, articles or posts on forums are normally updated and commented upon by forum members. Since the strategy we use is based on massive input, I don't prefer reading materials in language textbooks because they are usually quite short and belong to unrelated topics. This does not support the massive input concept. In addition, reading materials in textbooks may not match your area of interest. It probably makes you feel bored.

**Step 2: Relax and just… read.**

Okay, let's say I am going to read news, and I am interested in doing business. Since my target language is English, I will run a search on Google for business news. Well, I find the "Business Week".
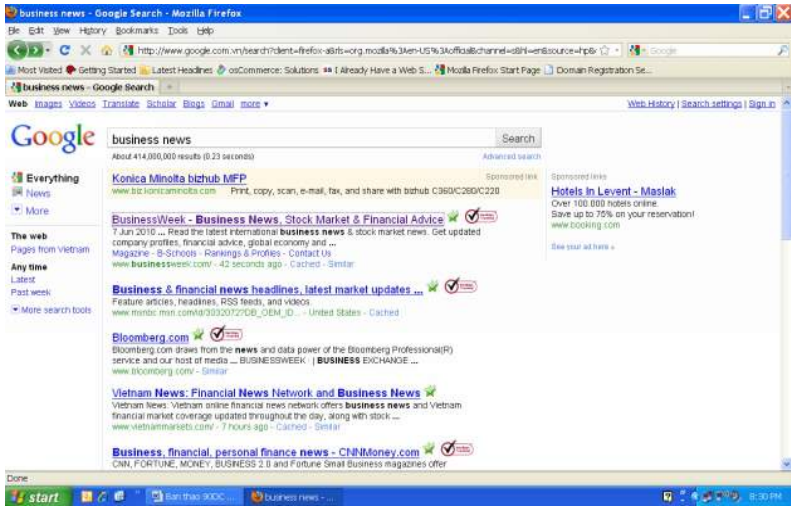
Business Week is a renowned source; it must contain interesting information on business. Why don't I just give it a try?
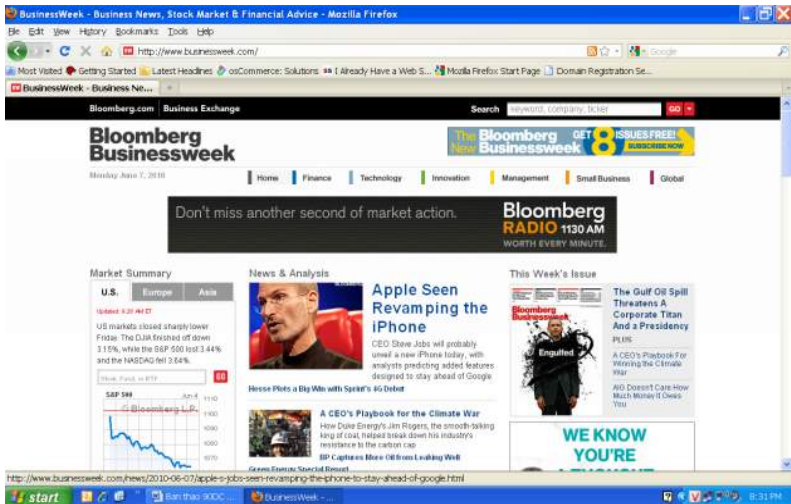
Information on this website is categorized under various sub-topics, such as Finance, Technology, Innovation, Management, Small Business and Global. Since I am an entrepreneur, I will take a look at the "Small Business" section. In this section, I pick up an article named "Use storytelling to maintain customer interest", hoping it could give me some tactic to sell more of my products and make more money. Remember to put your area of interest at top priority; **you want to read something that is useful and compelling to you**.
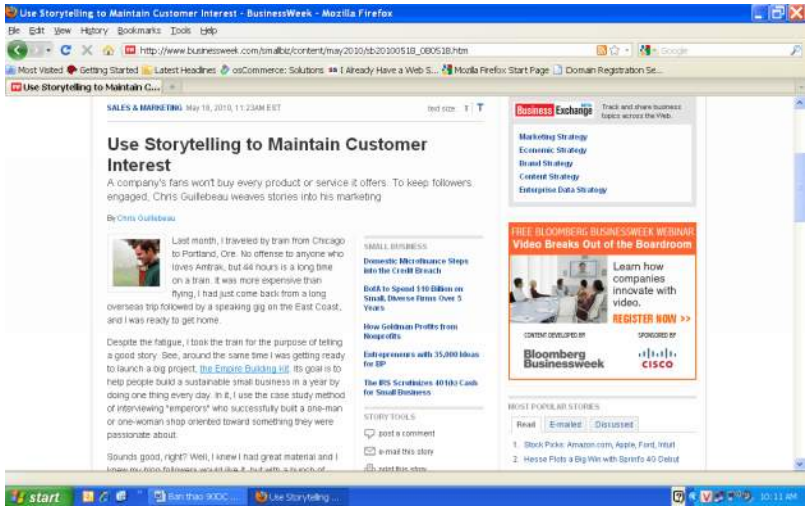


Before reading, please have your dictionary software ready to use. Here, I am suggesting you use a CD or online version of a dictionary for checking word meaning, as you want to do it as quickly as possible. Please do not use the regular book version of a dictionary, as it will slow down your reading speed. Another favorite tool of mine is a software piece called "Click & See", which I use to see the meaning of a word in my mother tongue in just one click. If you can get a similar one, utilize it.

Now that you are ready, let's start to read from the beginning. Every time you face a new word (or a word whose meaning you do not remember), use your dictionary software to check its meaning quickly and then continue to read. Here are the big DON'Ts when you are reading:

- DON'T take note of any word (including new words, difficult words, long words...). Just don't take any note.

- DON'T force yourself to remember any word.

- DON'T underline or bold any word.

Again, do not take any note! Just read, check the meaning of any word you want to and do nothing else! Then, you want to read as fast as possible. While you are reading, sometimes you do not understand some word even after checking its meaning. It is fine; a dictionary cannot help you understand everything. In that case, you just go ahead and ignore that sentence. After reading a few sentences (maybe, just 1 or 2 sentences), you might see a certain word that you have just checked the meaning of a minute before. However, you might not remember its meaning (because you didn't take note). Well, no problem! Just relax; go ahead and check its meaning again using your software. Then, continue to read. You will likely see that word again, and you may still not remember its meaning. Just use your dictionary software again and… continue to read.

Well, after seeing a certain word 3 – 4 times and checking its meaning over and over again, I am sure you will remember it the next time you see it. And then… guess what happens? You would have learned a word from the core vocabulary. Here is the key: **those words that you have seen over and over again are the most common words.** The methodology here is very simple; the most common words must show up repeatedly.

After reading a long piece, you will forget many words and retain some words. Those that you forget are uncommon words, while those that you retain are more common.

## Why could you get so much from the two simple steps of the Free Reading technique?

I call it the art of simplicity. It is so simple that some of my students even doubt its effectiveness. However, one does not need to be very smart to see the benefits that this technique can bring to learners.

**Firstly**, the Free Reading technique naturally drives your focus to the most common words and phrases, and at the same time, helps you save time by not making you struggle with the uncommon ones.

**Secondly**, following this technique, you don't need to force yourself to memorize vocabulary. You would naturally retain vocabulary when:

- you see a certain word over and over again

- you meet a certain word in various contexts and in different sentence structures. This helps you understand the real meaning of that word and gives you a sense of it

- sometimes, you find that a certain word usually occurs prior to or after another word. This helps you remember how to use it in combination with another word.

We have already mentioned the factors that you need in order to really possess and master your vocabulary. To repeat them here, you need:

- Context

- Content and Topic

- Common structure

After practicing the Free Reading technique, you will realize that it brings to you all three factors listed above.

**Thirdly**, this technique allows you to freely choose any content you want to use as your reading material. Whether you are

interested in science or art, entrepreneurship or stock exchange, you will find tons of reading material on the Internet, and many of them are free. This will keep you excited every time you sit down to study. You would no longer feel tired and bored. Every time you find a phrase or structure repeated over and over again, you achieve something and this motivates you to learn more. You don't have to force yourself to think or memorize; you just learn in a painless way. Most of my students tell me they could learn for hours using my technique without getting tired. To me, this is the most important thing needed for you to learn a new language quickly.

## FAQ about practicing the Free Reading technique

### 1. Why did I feel like starting from the scratch again when switching from reading my books to reading news?

Different types of materials, such as academic books, stories, news articles, do not have the same tone of writing. For instance, the way a reporter writes in an article is different from the way an author writes in his book. The common words in different types of material could, therefore, be slightly different. However, they still share a common core vocabulary intersection. This can be illustrated in the figure below:

News

Academic
Books

Stories
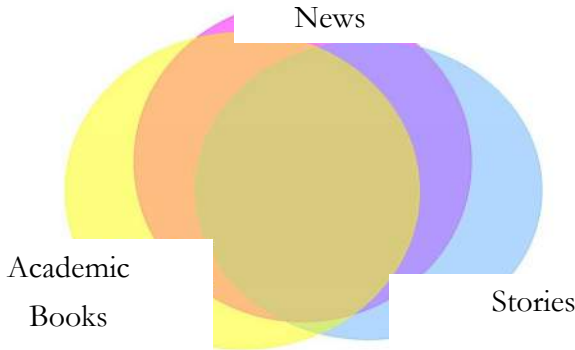
When switching from one type of material to another, you will probably have to spend sometime getting familiar with the different tones. However, it will not take much time.

### **2. There are sentences I do not understand, even though I have checked all the words using my dictionary. What should I do then?**

This happens all the time due to the following reasons:

- You could have come up against a grammar problem. Let's use an example to illustrate this idea. In the sentence: "I have just come back", the two words "have just" form a grammar structure that indicates that an action happened right before speaking and not long ago. However, if I check the words "have" and "just" separately in my dictionary, I will not have the correct answer. So, I will not be able to understand this sentence. Fortunately, this case is quite easy to recognize because each language uses a set of typical words to make up grammar. For example, in English, this set of words include have, would, could, should, must, be… put together in certain ways. So, every time I meet a word like this, I would stop to check in my grammar book to see if there is a grammar case here.

- You could have met a phrase or an idiom. It is a group of words that have a meaning different from the meaning of all the individual words put together. Each word has a different meaning when going separately; together, they usually have an unrelated meaning.

In both cases, try exploring more in your dictionary. When you check a certain word, a comprehensive dictionary should contain the common idioms, phrases and grammar structures that are related to that word. Therefore, you could probably find the answer in your dictionary if the one you are using is comprehensive enough. However, it is very important to keep your reading speed at a high level because our concept here is Massive Input. Therefore, if you cannot find the answer, just ignore it. If you do not see that phrase or idiom again, it is worth forgetting. If you see it again, then you can be sure that it is worth your effort to explore more about it. In my experience, the Internet community is a great way to find your answer. When I was studying English, I would usually search for the answer using Google; it brought me to sites or forums, such as:

http://forum.wordreference.com/forumdisplay.php?f=6

http://www.englishclub.com/ref/index.htm

The logic here is that you are not the first person who wants to learn the language, so, there should be someone out there who has had the same question and someone else must have already posted an answer for it.

## 3 steps to read a book written in your target language

In the last section of this chapter, I would like to share with you an experience of mine in reading books written in my target language English. It's a great experience when you manage to read an entire book in a new language. After accomplishing such a task, your vocabulary would be amazingly significant.

However, as many of my students face obstacles practicing my Free Reading technique, I have developed three steps to help them overcome it and read a book entirely. The steps are as follows:

- Step 1: Read the first half of the first page. Take a break.

- Step 2: Read the second half of the first page and the entire second page. Take a break.

- Step 3: Read the entire book

Okay, I know you are questioning why I created these three steps. It looks ridiculous. Why didn't I just group these three steps into one? Let me explain.

As you start reading the first page, your reading speed will be very slow. It might take you hours to read and understand the very first lines. In my experience, it took me an hour to read half of the first page. You would then feel tired and frustrated. It is OKAY! What you should do then is to take a break and relax. After your energy comes back, try to finish the first page. If your vocabulary is few, it might take two or even three hours to finish just the first page. As a result, you might think: "Oh no! This book contains more than a 100 pages; how long would it take to finish them all?" Just calm down; it will not take as long as you think. Continue to read the next page. You will see that you'll finish the second page in just 50% – 60% of the time you spent for accomplishing the first page. Then, your reading speed will increase dramatically after the first 5 to 10 pages. If there is nothing special, after accomplishing about one third of the book, you will be able to read seamlessly without checking your dictionary at all or, at most, just very little. The reason is that most of the words contained in a book repeat over and over again.

Unfortunately, not many learners know this. I cannot remember the number of students or friends of mine who borrowed my English book to read, yet most of them never read to the third page.

They quit too early without knowing that success was waiting for them right around the corner!

# 2<sup>nd</sup> Input
# The *Sound - Mapping* Technique

*"Language is the means of getting an idea from my brain into yours without surgery."*

- MARK AMIDON

Congratulations! You have made it through almost half of the journey!

I hope you have spent some amount of time practicing the Free Reading technique. If so, you must have observed how

quickly your vocabulary has been accumulating everyday. As you practice, for the first few days, you will have to use your dictionary like crazy. I had to check the word meaning for every sentence. Sometimes, I even had to check two or three times for just one sentence. Therefore, in the beginning, you may feel a bit silly about what you are doing. Be patient and recall what I have told you about the 3 steps to reading a book in your target language. After about two weeks of practicing the Free Reading technique, you will absolutely be thrilled by your progress.

In this chapter, I am going to share with you a listening technique. This is probably the most expected section because the listening skill seems to be a problem for every language learner.

Just like you, I have gone through the uncomfortable experience of trying to figure out what people were speaking on the tapes for learning listening. I felt tired, bored and frustrated. However, it does not have to be that way. Listening can be much simpler and painless if we understand how our brain works and have an appropriate approach.

## Why can or can't you hear what people speak?

In the chapter 3, I mentioned the "language map" in your brain. There is both good and bad news about this. The bad news is that there is a "text map" and a "sound map" located separately somewhere in your brain. This is the reason why many learners can read and write pretty well in their second language but are very bad in speaking and listening. Now, you will have to accept the fact that you must draw an additional "map" if you want to be able to listen well.

The good news is that you can learn the listening skill in a way similar to what we have done with the reading skill. The difference here is that acquiring a language by reading is like drawing the map with lines and signs. But acquiring it through

listening is like drawing the map with real images. As you may have noticed, sometimes we don't need to remember street names to drive without losing our way if we are familiar enough with that area. The same mechanism works when people learn a language. That is why kids can speak and listen before they know how to write. Some linguists even designed courses in which people learn a language purely by listening and speaking without learning text. Pimsleur is one of the famous scholars in this school. I once tried his course for Japanese. In my opinion, it does work but takes quite a lot of time. I believe that his approach will work very well if the learner is staying in an environment surrounded by native speakers. It means the method is appropriate for those who have a chance to interact with native speakers everyday.

In the listening technique that I am going to share with you, you will find that text is actually a good tool to shorten your learning curve. However, before we go into the details of this method, let's go back to the question above: "why can or can't you hear what people speak?" To give you a hint, let's think about the times you have talked to someone who has a speech disorder. As you may have noticed, if the person spoke your mother tongue, chances are that you would have understood what he or she said even though the words may not have been very clear. Why would that be? You would say: "I could guess what he said". My question is: "why can't you guess what a foreigner says even if he or she speaks very clearly using words that you have learned before?" The answer is: "in the first case, the person with the speech disorder used the same words, phrases and sentences that you have been hearing over and over again". So, the fact is that **_you cannot hear what you have never heard before_**. That is the reason why trying to listen to tapes containing many new words that learners have not learned nor heard before is a waste of their time and effort.

If so, what is the mechanism here? When you listen to something, your brain tries to **recognize** what you have just heard. The language processing area **compares** and **associates** the sound you have heard with the "source data", which is the

"sound language map" in your brain. To illustrate this process, think about the work of the police when they screen through the finger print source data to recognize the owner of a specific fingerprint they want to identify. Sometimes, the fingerprint they've got might be blurred or incomplete, yet the computer is able to select the source datum which matches it the most. What happens if the source data do not have any print that matches the specific fingerprint? Well, in that case, the police do not get to know the identity of the owner of the fingerprint yet. They would have to call on another method.

If it is still not clear, think about when you've tried reading a doctor's handwriting. Your brain tries to screen through the "standard word patterns" to recognize what is in the prescription. Chances are that you will not be able to recognize everything the doctor has written in it. However, as you bring the prescription to the pharmacy, the pharmacists have no problem recognizing every detail in it. Why is that? Is that because the pharmacists have better eyes than yours? Absolutely not; it is simply because pharmacists already know all types of pills. They already have the "source data".

A similar mechanism works when you are listening to a language. If you don't have the "sound map" yet, you won't be able to identify the sounds clearly and, therefore, the words. If the "sound map" is not correct because you were taught by a non-native speaker, the same thing happens. So, our strategy here is to proactively build (draw) this map until the map is clear.

## The *Sound* - *Mapping* listening technique

With the method that I am going to share with you here, you will be enjoying a painless and stress-free learning process. Since the core idea of the technique is also based on the concept of "massive input" and "selective acquisition", you need to think about where to get your input first.

**Where to get your listening material?**

Similar to the Free Reading technique, you are not restricted to any book or lecture. You are free to select any material that you are interested in. The only thing you should note is that it should come along with a transcript. When you read, you need a dictionary to check the word meaning. Similarly, as you listen, you need a transcript to check what you cannot hear. The transcript here plays the role of a dictionary. Basically, you can use one or more of the following sources:

### 1. *Audio books and audio stories*

Audio books are a common thing in the US, UK and countries that speak major languages in the world, such as French, Russian, etc. This is a great tool for learning a foreign language. It is also handy as you can listen to it in your idle time, when you are driving or waiting in a queue. To find an audio book online, you need to know the words for "audio book" in the language you want to learn. For me, since I was learning English, I could use a search query, such as: "audio book"+"business", if I wanted to look for an audio book about business. Or I could type "audio book"+"Harry Potter" if I wanted to look for the Harry Potter audio stories.

### 2. *Video or audio news*

Although it is good listening to news on TV or radio, the disadvantage of this source is that it does not have a transcript. However, you can try searching on the Internet to find websites that contain both clips/audio and its transcript.

### 3. *Movies*

Yes, you absolutely can practice your listening skills using movies with subtitles in the target language. In this case, we don't have a transcript, but we can use the subtitles instead. Just in case you don't know, you can select the subtitle mode using your remote control. For example, if you are learning Chinese, buy a Chinese movie. Then select Chinese subtitle mode. Please

note that you don't want to listen to action movies because conversations in it are often mixed with sound effects.

Movies have a big advantage because they contain a lot of conversations, which are spoken by various voices. Practicing with this type of material helps you get familiar with conversations in the target language. However, practicing with conversations alone is not enough. You still need to practice with the various sources mentioned above.

Whatever listening material you are using, please note the two following points:

- Please keep in mind that our strategy is based on the concept of Massive Input. Therefore, your listening materials should be at least 15 minutes in length.

- I don't know which language you want to learn, but it might contain more than one variant/dialect. For example, in English, you have the American and British variants. Do not try to learn two variants at a time; it will confuse you and slow down your learning process.

**How to practice the *Sound - Mapping* listening technique?**

In this section, I am going to describe the steps to practicing your listening skills with a tape or any other type of audio, such as a movie, online news, etc. Please do NOT skip any action.

Step 1: ***Listen to the first sentence; then imitate exactly what the speaker said***.

At this step, you probably cannot catch all the words yet. You might not understand what the speaker said. However, just ignore the meaning and imitate the sound like a parrot. At this step, you don't need to understand the meaning. You don't need to know which words the speaker is saying either. Just try to repeat out loud what you can hear. There might be one or two sounds, which are clearer than others. If so, focus on the

clear sounds and ignore the blurred ones. You don't need to repeat many times; one time is enough. Sometimes, the sound you hear is too hard to imitate. In that case, just go to Step 2.

At Step 1, you can work with 2 – 3 sentences at once if you feel comfortable doing so. You can also rewind the tape to listen to the sentence one more time but not more than two times in total. Listening to it over and over again is a waste of time. I usually listened only once. Please keep in mind the concept of Massive Input; you need to cover more minutes of audio in a short period of time to get as much input as possible.

## <u>Step 2</u>: *Look at your transcript to check the words.*

If you've already caught what the speaker said, skip this step. In case you are using a movie with subtitles in the target language, watch it on your computer and drag the movie window a bit lower to hide the subtitle for Step 1. After listening to a sentence, maximize the movie window to see the subtitle and check out the meaning.
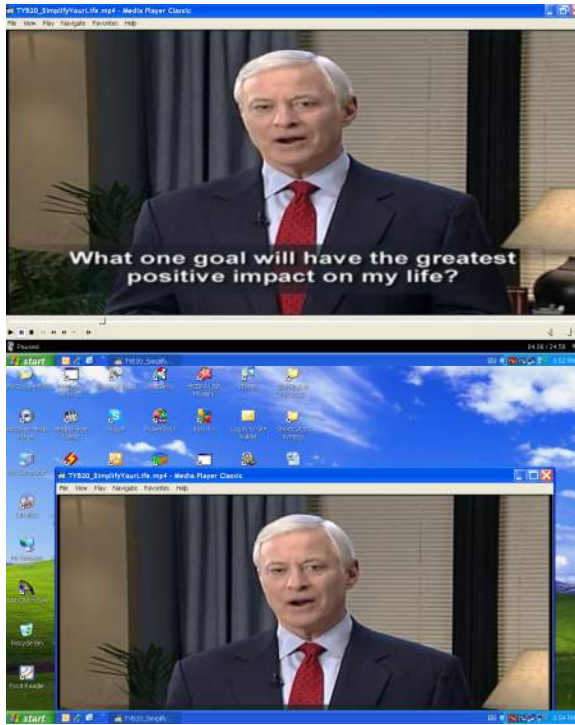
**Step 3**: **Listen to the sentence again, repeat it out loud and, at the same time, visualize its meaning.**

At this step, you already understand the meaning of the sentence as you checked it at Step 2. Do not look at the transcript at this step! Normally, as you have just looked at the script at Step 2, the text tends to pop up in your mind. You need to dismiss the text and try to visualize its meaning with your imagination. Try to think about what is happening according to the sentence you have heard. For example, when I was practicing English, as I heard the sentence: "he is walking on the street", I would try to imagine the following image:

instead of the letters:

"H e   i s   w a l k i n g   o n   t h e   s t r e e t"

In the beginning, this technique could feel a little bit difficult for you. But you will soon get familiar with it. Visualization is a simple skill that basically everyone can do.

Similar to Step 1, you need to repeat out loud what you can hear. Since this time you have already looked at the transcript, you will feel more comfortable. However, please note that you need to imitate the sound you hear, **not read the transcript**. It means you follow the speaker exactly where he stresses a sound, where he skips another sound, where he raises his voice, etc. In short, REPEAT JUST LIKE A PARROT.

You can hear the sentence one or two more times if you like. Again, just keep in mind Massive Input.

After finishing the first sentence, move on to the next one and repeat the same 3 steps, and then the next… and so on until you finish a paragraph. How long should this paragraph be? 5, 7 or 10 sentences? My answer is: it depends! It depends on how long you can remember what the speaker has said. After accomplishing one paragraph, you can move on to Step 4.

### Step 4: *Listen to the whole paragraph without looking at the transcript while visualizing the meaning.*

In this step, you will listen to the whole paragraph that you have just heard (each sentence separately) again. While listening, try to visualize; imagine the content that flows as the tape is running. Do not look at the transcript! If there is a sentence that you did not catch, just skip it. Just like in Step 3, you will try to replace the text that tends to pop up in your mind with visual images.

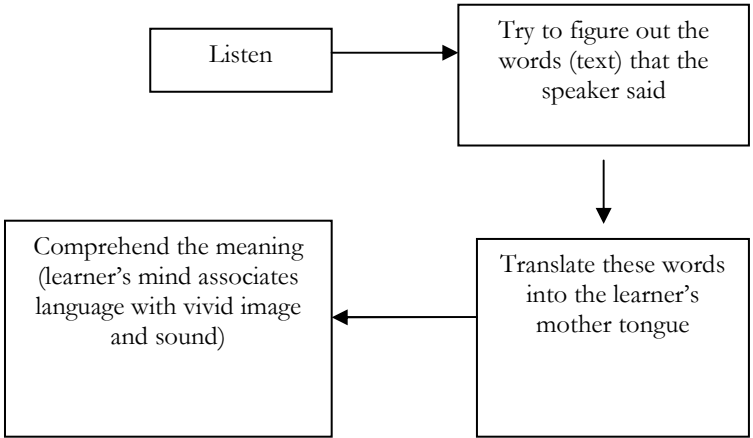After finishing Step 4, you will move ahead to a new paragraph and start with Step 1 again.

### The magic of the *Sound* - *Mapping* technique

The first thing you realize is that you will get a large amount of input for every 1- or 2-hour practice. Similar to the Free Reading method, you will see the most common words and phrases repeating over and over again, so you would have no difficulty recognizing them. Further, these common words and phrases will appear in different conversations, which means in various contexts, and in different voices. This mechanism helps you easily acquire the sound map of the language.
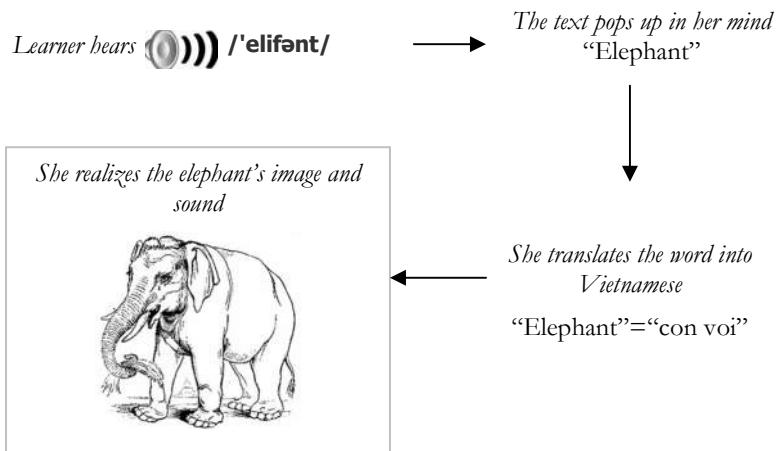
When you **repeat out loud**, it is like you are making the sound bold in your mind. This helps you proactively create the "sound map" quickly. Although speaking out loud when studying a foreign language is recommended by many textbooks and teachers, it is often overlooked by learners.

In Step 1, you need to **imitate the sound before checking your transcript**, why? Normally, a learner will be tempted to look at the script so that he is more comfortable at repeating the sentence. However, doing so will prevent you from pronouncing properly. As you look at the text, you will tend to pronounce the words according to their appearance rather than following exactly the speaker's voice. In addition, isolating sound from text will help you do the visualization in Steps 3 and 4 more easily.

By doing Step 3, you will gradually form a <u>direct</u> <u>connection</u> between sound and meaning. Why is it so important? It is because many language learners fall into the "indirect" comprehension process when they are practicing their listening skills. The "indirect" comprehension process can be described as below:

```
┌──────────────┐        ┌──────────────────────┐
│              │        │ Try to figure out the│
│    Listen    │───────▶│ words (text) that the│
│              │        │    speaker said      │
└──────────────┘        └──────────────────────┘
                                   │
                                   ▼
┌──────────────────────┐  ┌──────────────────────┐
│ Comprehend the meaning│  │  Translate these words│
│ (learner's mind       │◀─│  into the learner's   │
│ associates language   │  │   mother tongue       │
│ with vivid image      │  │                       │
│ and sound)            │  │                       │
└──────────────────────┘  └──────────────────────┘
```

To make it clearer, let's take a look at the example below in which a Vietnamese is listening to English:



*Learner hears* /ˈelifənt/ → *The text pops up in her mind* "Elephant"

*She realizes the elephant's image and sound*

*She translates the word into Vietnamese* "Elephant"="con voi"

The above figure illustrates the "indirect" comprehension process in which the learner goes through a long process. In "direct" comprehension, the process is much shorter as shown below:

*Learner hears* 🔊))) **/ˈelifənt/**

*She realizes the elephant's image and sound*
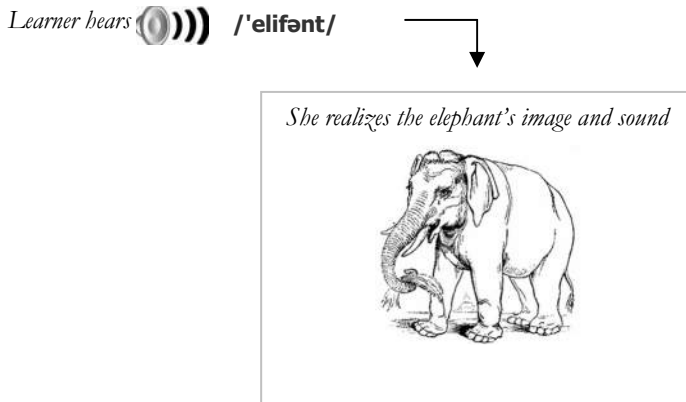
As you can observe, in the "indirect" process, learners have to use two tools, which are "text" and "mother language", to complete a listening comprehension section. This is the reason why many people face obstacles listening to a **long** paragraph. Many students tell me that they have no problem listening to sentences individually, but they cannot catch up when we play the whole paragraph at once. It is because while the leaner is still digesting the first sentence, the tape has already moved to the next one. The learner's brain has spent a long time processing the meaning of the first sentence so that he cannot concentrate on listening to the next one.

In most people, the two "indirect" steps might gradually disappear as they become more fluent in speaking and listening. However, it will take them a very long time to erase these "indirect" steps from their minds. Therefore, it is much better if we do it properly right from the beginning. You will be able to listen to and understand a long paragraph without having to take notes.

Be patient when practicing the *Sound - Mapping* technique; it may take 1 – 2 days for you to get familiar with the steps. Sometimes, if you feel tired after a long practice session, reward yourself relaxation by watching TV in your target language. Or you can let the tape run freely while you are doing some other work. This technique is called "language bathing". It helps expose you more to the target language unconsciously. However, you should take this "language bathing" as a supplementary method; don't take it as your main technique. Because listening unconsciously will only have some minor effect, it won't help you much. You do need to spend time and effort studying seriously in order to be successful.

## Listening and Reading – a perfect couple

Before closing this chapter, one more thing you should note is you can optimize the language acquisition process by practicing both listening and reading on the same topic. That is why I suggested you use materials like audio books, audio stories and series of news articles.

Usually, your reading speed will be greater than your speed in listening, so you should arrange appropriate chunks of time for practicing the two skills. Depending on your needs, you can decide to spend more time reading than listening or vice versa. Either way, you should often alternate practicing the two skills to maximize the learning effect.

Now, before continuing to read this book, grab your favorite book, story, movie or whatever and start practicing it!

# Writing – a Great Tool

*"The idea is to write it so that people hear it and it slides through the brain and goes straight to the heart."*

- MAYA ANGELOU

Usually, you'll find that language learning courses (except writing courses) tend to spend quite a lot of time instructing students in grammar and vocabulary, how to read and listen… However, very few courses mention the writing skill. And if they do, learners tend to skip the section. Most learners assume that writing is a "high level" skill, and it is

only devoted to those who are in advanced language classes. When I was teaching English, most students who were interested in this skill were seeking writing certificates, such as TOEFL writing, IELTS writing…

If you have never paid attention to writing, I regret to say that you have been ignoring one of the most powerful tools that can help you quickly master a language. It can assist you in various aspects of the learning process. In this chapter, I am going to discuss a number of simple methods to exploit the benefits of writing. You will see how writing can help you **save what you have learned into your long-term memory** and why writing can be a preliminary step to developing your speaking skills.

Everyday, after a session of practicing your reading and/or listening skills, you need to spend time writing down anything you can remember from that session. This is one of the best ways to get extremely high effectiveness in learning a new language. As you practice listening or reading, the common words, phrases and structures are saved into your temporary memory, which is also called short-term memory. If this information is not saved into your long-term memory, a majority of it will vanish by the next day. One of the best ways to move this information from your short-term to long-term memory is by recalling it. As you write, you will have to recall what you have just read and listened to. You will have to pick up words and arrange them in a proper way to build sentences. By doing so, you start using and controlling your new language. If you spend 15 – 20 minutes writing, you have a chance to retain 80% – 90% of what you have just learned.

Another important role of writing is that it acts as a preliminary step towards developing your speaking skills because, when you are writing, you are actually doing a part of the speaking process. As you know, humans have two basic ways to express ideas—writing and speaking. These two methods have the same first step, in which your brain initiates the following activities:

- Selecting words

- Putting the selected words together in a proper way to build sentences.

Therefore, when you can write comfortably, you have done almost half of the speaking process.

In writing classes, teachers tend to focus on issues, such as writing structures (opening, body, conclusion), logic, grammar structures and so on. However, I am not talking about that type of writing here. The writing practice that we are discussing here has two basic goals. Firstly, it should reinforce the words and phrases that you have got through listening and reading. And secondly, it should pave the way for you to speak more easily. Therefore, you will be writing in a free style, just like chatting on Yahoo or Facebook.

What do you write? After reading or listening to a topic, try to write anything you can remember or know about that topic. You can describe briefly the information you have read or listened to. While you are writing, do not worry about logic, arguments or structure of your writing. Just try to write as much as possible. As you write, you start to recall the most common words and phrases in the learning material. The most important thing about this technique is you are not allowed to use dictionary. If you do not recall a word you need for a sentence, try using another word or try a simpler way to express your idea so that you do not have to use a dictionary. In case you still cannot express the idea you want, skip it and move on to another one. Often, when you first practice this writing method, your product will likely be a whole bunch of messy sentences and unrelated ideas. It is fine! It will improve as you know more words and phrases and get familiar with sentence building. There is only one case in which you can use your dictionary. It is when you remember the word but do not remember exactly how to spell it. If so, you can check the dictionary to spell it correctly.

In the beginning, you will likely make a lot of mistakes. Sometimes, you are not sure if you are writing a sentence

properly or not. In that case, you need to accept making a mistake and just go ahead as far as you can remember. Don't go for perfection! Again, if you want something to be perfect right at the beginning, you will end up frustrated and are more likely to give it up. It is just like when you learn dancing. It is very difficult for you to follow the steps properly and, at the same time, pose beautifully on the first day. You need to learn it step by step. The same thing happens with learning a new language. In the beginning, you may remember the main words. Then you remember which preposition goes with which word. Gradually, you can build a sentence correctly and quickly, and so on.

If you are still concerned that your writing is bad, even when writing in your mother tongue, please note that I am not asking you to write a piece of art work. Just write as you speak. Start with 5 –10 sentences. Use simple sentences with one subject and one object. Do not make things complicated with long sentences.

If you are still wondering about what content you will put into your writing, you can use the questions: Who? What? When? How? Where? Why? What happens if…? How much…?

For example, let's say you have just read a series of articles about the oil spill in Mexico (I am quite sure that articles on this topic are available in many languages). You can then write a short piece on it by answering questions like:

- What happened? (an oil spill)

- Where and when did it happen?

- Who did it?

- When can people solve this problem?

- What happens if they cannot solve it quickly?

- What are the potential effects to the environment?

- What is your opinion?

- What is the best solution?

and so on…

You can answer the above questions by using simple and short sentences. If you have a complicated idea, break it down into several short sentences. There! You have your article (or journal or whatever you call it).

In fact, many learners know the important role of writing in learning a new language. But they start to feel bored after practicing it for a few days. It is understandable because writing just for you to read is really boring; you have no motivation. It will be different if you share your information to the world out there. As you share it, you communicate with others your ideas, opinions or problems. Therefore, you should not just write on to a piece of paper only to throw it away or save your writing in some corner of your computer. Try sharing your writing with others, so they can see how quickly you improve each day. Below are some effective ways:

- **Blogging**: If you are writing your blog in your mother tongue, give it one more entry to write in your target language about the content you have just learned within the day. Of course, you are free to write about anything else you want. Make these entries public so that everyone can see it.

- **E-mail**: If you don't want to write a blog, you can simply e-mail your writing to your friends, your language teacher, and especially your foreign friends who are native speakers of your target language. If you don't have such a foreign friend yet, you should start to make friends with some. If you don't know how, I will talk about it in Chapter 10.

- **Write and post on forums**: If you have joined some language learning forum, you can post your writing there. Language learning forums have the advantage that you could receive support and motivation from those who have the same goal as you. However, it has the disadvantage that it is not dedicated to any specific topic. When its only focus is language issues, it might become boring, too. You can, instead, write and post on a forum that focuses more on the

topic that you have just learned. For example, on the topic "Mexico oil spill" mentioned above, you can go and search on the Internet for environment forums. Of course, you need to search for forums in your target language. Then, you can post your opinion on the topic in the target language. Don't worry about your current writing or language skills. Basically, every forum welcomes content. The more content you post, the more they like you. When you join and post on a forum, people might reply to you or write comments. In that way, you would be really **communicating in your target language.** This process gives you motivation and excitement to write more (to reply to your audience). By doing so with native speakers, you can quickly improve your vocabulary, word choice and sentence building skills… If you still remember, in Chapter 4 I mentioned topic specific forums as a source where you can practice your Free reading technique. If you are using this source for your reading, you can practice writing by simply posting your thoughts to the forum. Even if you do not have enough vocabulary to write a long post yet, try to post a few sentences to proactively join the communication.

- ***Build the habit of writing in your target language any time you can:*** This is also very powerful. Try to use your target language when you write your own work plan, or when you take notes or anything else. It helps you immerse yourself more into the target language. Please note that you don't need to write everything in the target language. Doing so might be hard for you. If your vocabulary is still small, you can mix your mother tongue anytime you don't know a word in your target language.

In my experience, sometimes learners are quite reluctant to post their writing on their blog or on a forum. They are afraid that their foreign language skills are not good enough to be made public. So procrastination and fear of criticism is something you should be aware of. If you do not want to post because you're afraid someone might criticize your foreign language skills, let

me ask you this question: "If someone does criticize you, what difference will it make to your skills?" Nothing, right? Your foreign language skills cannot be changed because of someone else's thoughts, but it certainly can be changed by your thoughts. If you act boldly, things will change. When it comes to learning a new language, you can be sure that there is no activity that can make your skills worse; all activities can only improve it to a great or small extent. It is only bad when you do not do anything, so please don't worry about any negative comments and practice your writing confidently.

CHAPTER SEVEN

# Develop Your Speaking Skills

*"If there is no struggle, there is no progress."*

\- FREDERICK DOUGLASS

One of the biggest reasons why a language learner cannot speak fluently is that he does not practice speaking. Speaking seems to be the hardest part of learning a new language. Somehow, many learners hesitate to speak. It is understandable. First and foremost, speaking is not a simple process. To express an idea verbally, the speaker has to coordinate various parts of his body from the brain to the

tongue, the mouth, the lips, the breath and so on. You may not be aware of this complexity with your mother tongue because you have already overcome it when you were a child. If you recall the time you first practiced riding a bicycle, you will see how awkward you were when you tried to coordinate your eyes (to see the road), your hands (to control the handlebars) and your feet (to control the pedals). It took you a certain amount of time practicing it over and over again to make it go smoothly. But once you mastered it, you rode freely without consciously coordinating your body parts. It now happens automatically. The same thing happens when you first try to speak in a new language. You may fumble and feel awkward in selecting words. You may not be sure how to put them together properly. You may not be able to get your body parts to work together exactly as you want. This fact may frustrate you and make you hesitant in speaking up.

Another reason why learners are reluctant to speak is they are afraid of making mistakes. In fact, everyone faces this fear at different levels. Psychologists call it the "fear of failure". If you notice, this fear exists everywhere. For example, when I was a child, many times I knew the answer to a question asked by the teacher, but I did not dare to speak up. Maybe, you have experienced a similar situation. Every time, you start doing something new, such as invent a new machine, compose a new song or start a business, you would face this fear of failure. So what do you do to overcome it? Ralph Waldo Emerson said: "Do the thing you fear, and the death of fear is certain". I cannot agree more; just go ahead and speak up.

Sometimes, people just do not know where to start. Maybe, they do not know who to talk to and what to talk about. In Vietnam, those who want to learn English are always struggling to find a "speaking environment" where they can practice their new language skills. Many of them spend their hard-earned money to join expensive language classes where foreigners are hired to talk to them.

We will solve the above problems step by step. But the most important thing is that if you want to be able to speak in a new language, you have to speak, at any price!

## How many words do you need in order to speak well?

Most language learners tend to delay practicing their speaking until they feel that their vocabulary foundation is solid enough. "My grammar is still bad", "I know very few words"… are some of the common excuses I usually hear. The thing is they cannot determine how much grammar and vocabulary is "enough". Therefore, speaking tends to be delayed forever. So, how much vocabulary do you actually need in order to speak a language fluently? Let's take a look at the following example:

Writing article no. 1:

\*\*\*

*A business plan serves two purposes: It's an organizing tool for you, to help you simplify and clarify your business goals and strategy. And it's also a document that sells your business idea and demonstrates that your product or service can make a profit and attract funding.*

*"A completed and well-thought-out business plan also acts as a touchstone or litmus test against the reality of your business operations once you open its doors. It should be a guidebook for your business…telling you what you should be doing and how well you're doing it," says Frank Fiore, author of Write a Business Plan in No Time (Que Publishing). "A business plan also acts as a dry run for your business even before it starts. It's actually a written description of your business' future."*

*As a selling tool, your business plan should sell others on your business and give you confidence that your hard-earned money will be well-spent on an idea that can succeed. Over the long term, your plan is likely to be read by potential investors, lenders, strategic partners, and even management candidates, Fiore says.*

### The Vital Ingredient

*As such, it certainly should reflect your company's unique style and sales proposition, says Linda Pinson, a business-plan software developer and author of Anatomy of a Business Plan (Dearborn Trade Publishing).*

*"A business plan doesn't have to be dry at all. The whole idea is to write statements that are powerful and tell who you are. If you want to get across that your company will be a fun and valuable place, your business plan should reflect that," Pinson says. "There's nothing that precludes you from building your personality into the business plan. In fact, if you're the vital ingredient, and you fail to inject yourself and what you're bringing to the business, it won't be a proper business plan."*

*Although the text you write can build in a playful but smart tone that presents your style, remember not to skimp on the numbers and charts that are essential to proving your concept. "When it comes to the financial part of your plan, that's where you'll take the personality out and let the numbers speak for themselves. They should reflect what you said in the text and translate that tone into the revenues your company can earn," Pinson says. Good luck!*

<p align="center">***</p>

Now, I am going to rephrase the content above in everyday speaking style with simple words and sentences. See the transcript below:

<p align="center">Speaking transcript no. 1:</p>

<p align="center">***</p>

*Today, we are going to talk about a business plan, what it is and how to make a good one.*

*So, why do you need a business plan? Well, there are basically two reasons for that. Firstly, it is a tool. It helps you be clear about what you are going to do with your business. When you write things down, everything is going to be very clear, for example, what your goals are, what your strategy to achieve your goals is and so*

*on. Secondly, if you want to have other people put money into your business, a business plan will tell them about your idea, your products or services and how you can make profit for them. Of course, they want to get profit in the future; otherwise, they won't put their money into your business, right?*

*If you write your business plan carefully, you can use it to compare with reality when you are actually running the business. It tells you where to go, what to do and how well you are doing your business. A business plan will also help you rehearse before you start. It is actually a written description of your business future.*

*As a selling tool, your business plan shows other people how you (and they) would be able to make money with the business. In the future, the plan might be read by those who want to put money into your business, such as a bank or a fund.*

*Because of these reasons, a business plan should tell you about the style of the business. And it has to answer the question: "What is the selling point?" A business plan doesn't have to be dry at all. The idea is to write something powerful and to tell who you are. If you want to tell people that your company will be fun and valuable, you should talk about that in your business plan. You are free to put your personality into your plan. In fact, if you are an important part of the business, you should include yourself in the plan.*

*Even though you can have your own writing style in the business plan, please remember that numbers and charts are very important to show people why your business idea will really work. When it comes to the financial part of your plan, that's where you'll take the personality out and let the numbers speak for themselves. Those numbers need to support what you said earlier and tell people how much your company will make.*

<div align="center">***</div>

When comparing Writing article no. 1 and Speaking transcript no. 1, you will find that a greater number of different words is used in the Writing article than in the transcript. In the article, there are 168 different words. In the transcript, this number is 147. At the first look, these two numbers are not very different. However, a non-native English speaker would find that the transcript uses simpler words than in the article. To make this point clearer, let's take a look at one more example below.

Writing article no. 2:

*** 

*More than half of all U.S. businesses are based at home. These companies often are dismissed as quaint hobbyist ventures, but new research suggests that's a mistake. An estimated 6.6 million home-based enterprises provide at least half of their owners' household income. Together these "homepreneurs" employ one in 10 private-sector workers, and by many measures they're just as competitive as their counterparts in commercial spaces.*

*Ask Stephen Labuda, the 35-year-old president of Agency3, a Web development firm he runs from his home in Cambridge, Mass. A former programmer at Deutsche Bank (DB), Labuda started building Web sites as a side job in 2003 and took the venture full time three years later. Agency3's revenue is in the millions, and Labuda is about to hire his fifth employee, who will work remotely, like the rest of the staff and the slew of contractors he taps. "I'm not intending to go rent office space," he says.*

*You can trace the rise of home-based businesses to the early days of telecommuting in the 1980s and the mass adoption of the Internet in the 1990s. Cloud computing, online collaboration, and smartphones have accelerated the trend, and recent research clarifies the economic significance of companies like Labuda's. "We're seeing more and more home-based businesses that are real businesses," says Steve King, who coauthored the new report with his wife, Carolyn Ockels. (The couple runs Emergent Research, a small research and consulting shop, from their home in Lafayette, Calif.) The pair analyzed U.S. Census data and Small Business Administration research, along with data from the Small Business Success Index, a survey of 1,500 companies sponsored by Network Solutions and the University of Maryland's Robert H. Smith School of Business.*

*In some of these companies, the operations are concentrated in the owner's home. Others use their residence as a headquarters but do most of their work at clients' homes or offices. The variety of home-based businesses cuts across industries, but the top sectors are business and professional services, construction, retail, and personal services.*

*A few trends are driving the growth of sophisticated home businesses. First, technology has made it easier to start and run a business from anywhere. But just as important, there has been a change of consciousness in the business world to recognize home-based enterprises as legitimate.*

*Labuda has seen that shift at Agency3. "When I first started, I really felt compelled to go rent an office. I felt like in order for me to be taken seriously as a business, I had to have an office that my clients could come to," he says. It didn't matter—clients didn't want to visit him. Labuda meets most of them at their businesses or at coffee shops. He also uses on-demand office space, where he can rent a conference room by the hour, if needed.*

*Now, Labuda never feels that his working from home damages Agency3's credibility. Instead, it's a selling point. "It's reflected in our pricing that we don't have the same kind of infrastructure costs and fixed costs that some of our competitors do," he says.*

*King predicts that as large companies try to reduce their fixed costs by outsourcing business functions, small home-based enterprises will play an even larger role in the economy. "Over the next 20 to 30 years, you could see the percentage of people who are self-employed and home-based double, potentially," he says.*

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And below is the transcript in everyday talking style.

## Speaking transcript no. 2:

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*More than half of all U.S. businesses are based at home. People often think that these companies are not serious. Many even think that they are doing it for fun. That's not true! There are about 6.6 million companies like these in the US, and their owners are making really good money. Half of their family income is actually coming from these home-based businesses. One in ten employees of private companies in the US are working for home-based businesses. In fact, research shows that these types of businesses are just as competitive as companies working out of office buildings.*

*Stephen Labuda is the 35-year-old owner of Agency3. He has a website building company running at his home in Cambridge, Massachussets. He used to work for Deutsch Bank. Labuda started building websites as a side job in 2003. He started his company three years later. The business is now making millions of dollars, and Labuda is going to get his fifth employee. Just like the company's owners, many employees in Agency3 do not work at the company office; they can*

*work from home or anywhere they want to. The new employee is going to do the same. Labuda says that he is not going to have an office.*

*The number of home-based businesses increased very fast in the 1980s. As people used the Internet more and more in the 1990s, the numbers kept increasing even faster. "We are seeing more and more home-based businesses that are real businesses", says Steve King. Steve King and his wife did a study using data from the US Census, Small Business Administration and Small Business Success Index. They also used data from the survey of 1500 companies by Network Solutions and the University Maryland's Robert H. Smith School of Business.*

*In some of these companies, they do most of the work at the owner's home. Others use their home as headquarters and do most of the work at the customers' home or offices. These home-based companies are normally business and professional services, construction, retail, and personal services.*

*Because of many reasons, there are now more and more home-based businesses. Firstly, technology has made it easier to start and run a business from anywhere. Secondly, people have changed their thinking about this type of businesses.*

*Labuda has seen that change at Agency3. "When I first started, I did want to rent an office. I was thinking that to make my business look serious, I need an office that my customers could come to", he says. But in fact, it was not that important. His customers did not want to go to see him. He normally goes to see them at their offices or in a café. Labuda also uses office service that he can pay by the hour, if needed.*

*Now, Labuda thinks that working at home does not affect his credibility. In fact, it is a good selling point. "As we don't have an office, we can lower our costs compared to other companies that are running in office buildings", he says.*

*Steve King thinks that big companies now want to reduce their costs by having other companies do some parts of their work for them. And these parts of work can be done by home-based companies. That is why there will be more and more new home-based businesses. The number might increase two times in the next 20 or 30 years.*

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

After reading Writing article no. 2, you will find that there are quite a few words (195 to be exact) that had not appeared in Writing article no. 1. In other words, there are 362 different

words in total taking the two articles together, while in Speaking transcript no. 2, we have got only 78 new words compared to transcript no. 1. It means there are only 225 different words in total between the two transcripts.

What you can observe here is that the number of new words keeps increasing over the articles. On the contrary, this number sharply decreases between the two speaking transcripts. In this book, I only show two typical examples in order not to waste your time. However, when I actually did this experiment with a few more examples, I got a pattern as below.

Number of words
used

Writing

Speaking

Amount of content to be expressed
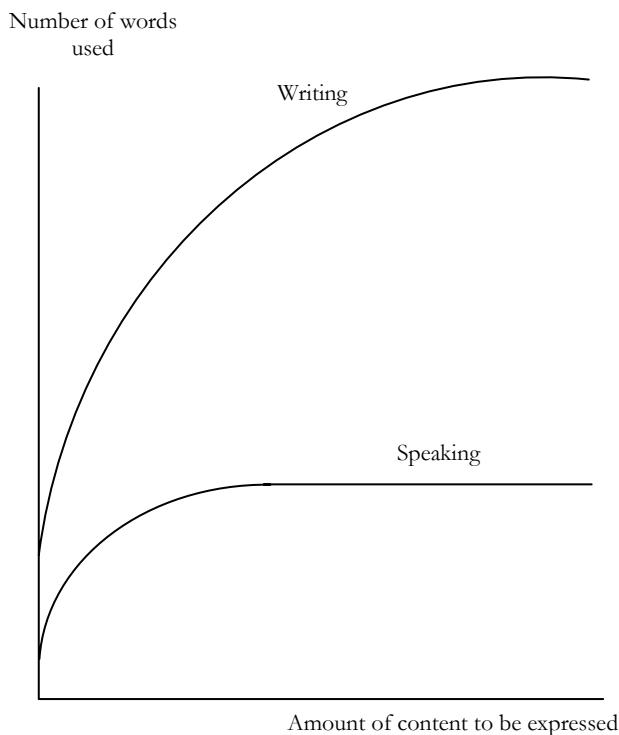
What does this figure tell you? It tells you that in order to express your ideas you don't necessarily need to know a lot of different words. As illustrated in the figure above, you need to know a certain number of words in order to speak fluently. But this number may not be as large as you thought because you can

use the same words over and over again to describe different contents. I have not counted exactly how many English words I normally use. But in my estimation, when I talk to my overseas partners using my second language, I use somewhere between 600 – 700 words, whether it is a face-to-face meeting or a teleconference call. Yet, I can discuss fluently everything from introducing my new projects to negotiating a deal.

It is true that in order to read and listen to something, you need a lot more vocabulary than when you speak. It is because when native speakers write articles or speak on the television, they tend to use various synonyms to make their works sound more compelling. In the example above, you can see that the author has used four different words meaning the same—*company, firm, enterprise, business* — while I would normally use only *company* or *business*. Your question then may be: "If I have to learn and know 3000 words of the core vocabulary anyway, why would I use only six or seven hundred?" Well, the answer is already there in your question. There is a gap between "knowing" and "using". To make it clearer, being able to "recognize" a word and being able to "use" it proficiently are different stories. Being able to "use" a word is at a more advanced level than "recognizing" it. That is why many language learners can read and hear proficiently but are still very bad at speaking. Such a situation shows that these learners can "recognize" a certain number of words but are not yet able to "use" them. They have not "mastered" the words yet. Unfortunately, most learners do not know this. They tend to think that they fail to speak fluently because they do not know enough words. As a result, they try to learn more and more words without knowing that doing so will not help them to speak more fluently. When I share this idea with my students, many realize that their vocabulary is actually quite large already. I am not exaggerating when I say that the ability to speak a new language fluently has already been there inside them, just waiting to take off. If you are one of them, congratulations! You will soon be able to speak fluently by practicing the techniques I am going to tell you shortly.

## Fluent speaking and great pronunciation are two different stories

Before explaining what the above headline really means, let's review what we have understood up until now. Firstly, I have introduced you to "core vocabulary" and have instructed you how to acquire it via reading and listening. Then, we discussed the writing tool and its role in developing your speaking skills. In the first half of this chapter, you have learned that you can speak without having to know too many words but you must be proficient with the words you do know. Now, we are going to move on to the next level— the level at which you can speak fluently and confidently, a level that many language learners may struggle for years to achieve. You won't have to get a headache trying to find the right words anymore; you will speak in a comfortable way.

The title of this section may have already given you a hint about what's coming up. Yes, the biggest thing that prevents learners from developing their speaking skills is that they do not know how to break down the problem into simpler steps. They do not realize that ***fluency and pronunciation are two different stories***. I discovered this when I was learning to dance. And I discovered something in common between learning to speak a new language and learning to dance. When I watched people dance, I wondered how so many people could be sliding beautifully on the dance floor while I was struggling with those basic steps. One day, I joined a Cha Cha course. As you might know, this Latin dance requires flexible hip motions. Surprisingly, the instructor told us (me and other learners) to bend our elbows with hands on hips in an akimbo. Then, he instructed us to follow the Cha Cha steps, which is 1, 2, cha cha cha; 1, 2, cha cha cha… While we were doing the steps, he required us not to move our hips at all and to raise our legs high as if we were soldiers walking in a parade. On the first day, we practiced this "parade Cha Cha dance" on the teacher's count and then with music. For the entire first day, he did not teach us any hip movements. But by the end of the day, we were able to follow the steps correctly according to the music while talking

to each other at the same time. We could dance freely (the "parade Cha Cha") without worrying about the steps at all.

The next day, the teacher started to instruct us how to move our hips without stepping. So we just stood on our spot and practiced our hip motions. At the end of the day, he spent 10 minutes instructing us how to do the hip moves with the "parade Cha Cha" that we learned the previous day. It was amazing how we could dance — somewhat close to what those professional dancers usually did on the television. Explaining his method, the teacher said that it would have been very difficult for a beginner to practice both stepping and hip moving at the same time. Learners would likely be distracted, and they might step incorrectly if they were worrying about their hip movements and vice versa. Their feet would do the wrong steps, they'd fail to catch up with the rhythm of the music, and they'd pose awkwardly. "Following proper steps and moving hips beautifully are different stories", he concluded.

Now, let's come back to our topic. The same thing happens when we speak a new language. As I mentioned before, you have to do two tasks when you speak:

- Firstly, your brain has to find suitable words and put them into a proper order to **build a correct sentence**.
- Secondly, you have to coordinate your mouth, your lips, your tongue… in order to **pronounce** the sentence beautifully.

Right after the very first sounds are released, your ears hear them and immediately you think: "Oh! It seems that I am not pronouncing very well!" Unconsciously, this thought has a negative impact on the first process so that you are distracted from selecting and sorting your words. In turn, this distraction interferes with your second process and makes your mouth, your tongue and your lips move less smoothly. As a result, you end up picking wrong words, putting them in a wrong order and failing to pronounce properly.

To solve this problem, we will apply a method which is similar to the "parade Cha Cha" described above. I call it the 3-step speaking technique. Like other techniques that I have shared with you, this one is also very simple to follow. With this technique, you will develop your speaking skills in three steps.

Step 1: **Develop your fluency**

In this step, you will be working only on your fluency. Its core concept is that you need to set aside the pronunciation issue when you speak. When practicing your speaking, you do not need to worry about your pronunciation. Just speak the way you feel comfortable the most. Think about the "parade Cha Cha dance". You can speak with the accent of your mother tongue if you want. You do not have to worry whether you put the stress properly or not. In short, you will **fully focus on selecting the right words and putting them into the right order**. Some people might wonder if this speaking style could affect their pronunciation in the future. My answer is: "No, it won't." I have used this technique myself and have shared it with hundreds of my students. I've not seen any negative impact on our pronunciation.

If you recall what I shared with you about writing in Chapter 6, you will see that this step is the very next step after writing. As you write, you pick up words and put them in an order. Now, you just do the same process, but instead of writing, you will speak it out aloud. It does not look very difficult, does it?

Step 2: **Practice your pronunciation separately**

In this step, you will focus more on polishing your pronunciation. Of course, you don't need to put this step on hold until you are proficient in Step 1. You can practice the two steps in the same period of time. But keep in mind that we have to separate the two processes in order to develop the speaking skill effectively. To focus only on pronunciation and set aside the sentence building process, you can **practice reading aloud** rather than speaking spontaneously. When you read, the

sentences are already there; you don't need to worry about selecting words and putting them into a correct order. This makes it much easier for you to develop your pronunciation skills. In the next chapter, I will talk more about how to pronounce like a native speaker.

Step 3: **Put the two things together**.

As you must have already guessed, after building sentences comfortably and acquiring a pretty good pronunciation, it is time to put them together. Of course, it is easier said than done. But you need to be determined to practice hard, and you'll achieve the results quickly.

If you look back at all the previous chapters, you will see a framework that I have built up in a step-by-step manner. The framework can be described as following:

1. Acquire the most common words and phrases by the Free reading and Sound-mapping listening techniques.

2. Start the first stage of speaking by practicing your free writing. The more you practice, the more quickly you will be able to pick up words and sort them into a proper order.

3. Develop your fluency first by practicing speaking without worrying about pronunciation. If you can write it down, you can speak it out.

4. Develop your pronunciation skills separately by practicing reading aloud.

5. Polish your speaking with pronunciation.

As you can see, speaking a new language looks difficult, but as we break the task into easier steps, it looks very doable, doesn't it? Now, you might be tempted to jump to the next chapter to see how you can pronounce like a native speaker. Just hold on; we need to discuss a few questions a little bit more – Where do you practice your interactive speaking? Who do you talk to? What do you talk about?

# Who to talk to, where and what about?

Living in Vietnam, I have myself experienced quite a lot of obstacles learning English. Unlike in multi-cultural countries, it is hard to see someone who can speak English fluently in Vietnam. It was hard for me to find someone with whom I could practice my second language. Leaving the evening language classes, English learners hunger for a chance to practice. In the following pages, I am going to show you why opportunities to practice your target language are always close to you.

**Self talk—the secret weapon**

Most people believe that they need someone in front of them to practice speaking. That is why very few learners practice themselves at home. Sometimes, when learners cannot find a native speaker to talk to, they may start practicing with each other. I have not done any research to judge the effectiveness of practicing speaking among non-native speakers. I believe that doing something is always better than not doing anything. However, I am very sure about the effectiveness of practicing with oneself. It even has some advantages over practicing with a native speaker.

*Firstly*, when you speak to someone, unconsciously, you are under the pressure of time. You would be concerned whether you are making your audience wait too long for you to speak out some words. As a result, you would try to speak faster. This will negatively affect the sentence building process in your mind. You would also be under pressure trying not to make mistakes in both grammar and pronunciation. In case your audience does not understand what you are speaking, you would especially lose confidence.

*Secondly*, when you practice with someone, you do not fully control the content of your conversation. It might be driven by your partner. As a result, the conversation may have nothing to do with practicing the new words and phrases you've learned.

On the contrary, when you practice with yourself, you are under no pressure. You can fully control the content and topic in order to optimize the previous learning sessions (which may be reading, listening or writing).

Your obvious question here will be: "If I practice with myself, who will fix my mistakes?" Your concern is reasonable. However, this problem is not easy to solve even if you are practicing with a native speaker. When you make a mistake, your partner would probably not correct it; he would only try to understand what you are talking about. Many native speakers even believe that correcting a non-native speaker is impolite, unless you've hired them to specifically fix your mistakes. But then, it is quite costly to do so. In addition, many linguists believe that correcting learners' errors too much might demotivate them from speaking. The solution here is to practice without worrying too much about making mistakes. As you improve, the number of errors will decrease.

So, how do you practice self-talk? Right after a writing practice session, as I instructed in Chapter 6, try to speak out loud what you have just read, listened to, and written. Just like when you practice writing, do not check your dictionary and accept mistakes. Try to speak loudly and don't worry about pronunciation yet. Every time you don't know what to say, think about the questions who, what, when, how, where, why… Remember to apply Step no. 1 in the 3-step technique described earlier. The goal of this stage is to help you develop your fluency.

## Make your learning process more interesting

Just like when you practice writing, speaking will become very boring if you don't have some kind of interaction or sharing with someone else. Therefore, you need to record or videotape your speeches and share them with other people. Of course, you don't need to act as a professional speaker. You also don't need an expensive camera; just a webcam or a cheap microphone will do. You can post your video or audio to some

language learning forum so that people can help correct your errors. More importantly, you can keep track of your everyday improvement, and that is a huge motivation. In my experience, people are more interested in videos than in audios. So, please don't be shy. One of my favorite websites to post my video is Youtube. The beautiful thing about Youtube is that it has a very high rate of comments and replies; you should try it out.

To make your language practice more meaningful and less boring, try to make them valuable in terms of content. For example, if you are good at using Photoshop (a software to edit photos), think about posting a video in which you speak in your target language instructing others how to edit a photograph. You might receive comments and compliments like: *"That's awesome!"* or *"Your clip is really useful, thank you!"* Someone may even ask: *"Could you please tell me more about…"* It will make you much more excited about learning your new language.

## Practice with an article written in your mother tongue

This is a very effective technique in case you have nothing to talk about. Simply select some page of a book or an article written in your **mother tongue** that has something to do with the reading, listening or writing session that you have done for the day. Then, you practice by telling others what is in the article **using your target language**. When you practice this technique, please keep in mind that you are **not translating** the article from your mother tongue to your target language. You are also not allowed to use a dictionary. You need to force yourself to use all the words you know to express what's in the article so that your audience could understand what it talks about. You don't need to deliver the exact content. Just try to describe it in your target language as closely as you can. The power of this technique is that you don't need to worry about what to say when practicing. So the learning process is less bothersome and more enjoyable. Please note that you don't need a real person in front of you in order to practice this method. I used to practice it with my puppy. What I did is I

bought a Harry Potter book in English to practice my reading; then, I bought the audio version of this book to practice listening; and finally, I bought a Vietnamese version of this book to practice my speaking. Every time I told the story to my puppy, he looked very excited ☺. Whether or not he was excited, my English improved dramatically.

By now, you will have got a hang of my whole language learning process. Let's imagine that in the morning you read 4 – 5 articles about the mortgage crisis; in the afternoon, you listen to the news about that crisis; then, you visit some finance forum and write a post discussing the topic, and finally, you post a video on Youtube to express your opinion about the problem. What do you think will happen? I am very confident in saying that, after you've done all this, you will have mastered words, such as *debt, loan, asset, mortgage, bank, crisis, economy, negative impact, losing jobs, unemployment…* and so on. You will also soon be able to speak fluently!

# Polish Your Pronunciation

*"Whether you believe you can do a thing or not, you are right."*

- HENRY FORD

This could be the part that most of you have been waiting for. In this chapter, I am going to tell you why someone's pronunciation is good but someone else's is not. In fact, there are many people who still have poor pronunciation, even though they have got a chance to go to the country of native speakers. In the following pages, we are going to discover the important factors that make a language learner pronounce well and how you could practice pronunciation.

Pronunciation is always a hot topic that language learners are interested in. When people hear a foreigner speaking their language, they usually judge his speaking skills based on his pronunciation. There may also be disputes among learners about how to properly pronounce certain words. However, before we go further into details, let me ask you a question: "In which area do people pronounce English the most perfectly?" Is it North America, UK or Australia? Pronunciation even varies among native speakers living in different areas of one country, which is referred to as local accents. In Vietnam, there are at least 5 – 6 different local accents. Some of them are really difficult to follow even for a Vietnamese native speaker like me. This is true of many other languages in the world. As you can see, it is hard to define "perfect pronunciation" for a language. We may not be "perfect" even with our own mother tongue. As the world becomes flatter, people are more tolerant of imperfect pronunciation. When I was studying in the US, there were three teachers who were non-native English speakers—one of them was a Chinese, another a Czech and the third was from South Africa. They all spoke with very heavy accents. But it seemed not to affect their credibility at all. The reason why I am telling you this story is that seeking perfection is not a good idea; rather seek improvement.

## Sound stressing – the basic element of good pronunciation

When I was working at my old company that did global trading business, I had a chance to work with many Singaporians and Indians. What was interesting to me was that, although these people spoke English with very heavy accents, Americans still understood them quite easily. On the contrary, they seemed to have difficulty understanding Vietnamese people speaking English. Observing Singaporians and Indians speaking English, I found the reason behind this difference. The basic factor here is ***sound stressing*** (or ***sound emphasizing***). English uses stress or emphasis on sounds to differentiate words—for

example, conTENT and CONtent are different words with very different meanings, and the only indication is the placement of stress or emphasis. Stress wrongly and the listener will not be able to make out which word you're saying. I found that even though my Singaporian and Indian partners pronounced several sounds incorrectly, they still kept stressing the sounds properly. Vietnamese and Chinese have a different system altogether. Like in music, these languages use pitch variation to differentiate words. There are five different "pitches" in Vietnamese and four different "pitches" in Chinese. Due to this difference between his mother tongue and English, when a Vietnamese speaks English, he tends to address the sound stressing improperly. A similar problem may happen when an American learns to speak Chinese. Shifting from stress variation to pitch variation will be rather difficult for him.

**Sound stressing directly creates intonation.** When we stress sounds properly, it will naturally create a specific up and down pattern for the sentence we are pronouncing, which is referred to as **intonation**. If the stressing of sounds is wrong, the intonation then will be different. Intonation creates the melody of a language. Intonation of sentences and pronunciation of words are the two basic factors that help the audience recognize what we are saying.

**Sound stressing has a direct impact on the quality of your word pronunciation**. In order to pronounce a word correctly, you need to get three factors correct—the vowels, the consonants and the stresses. As mentioned earlier, incorrect sound stressing can change a word totally.

**Sound stressing helps you speak at the native speaker's speed**. If you address the stress properly, you can speak with a native speaker's speed. When I was learning English, I wondered how Americans could speak so fast. Then I found that in each sentence they would emphasize some word and quickly slide through some other words, even skipping some words entirely. If they were to pronounce every single word, they would not be able to speak so fast. Many language

teachers recommend their students not to speak fast. I think it is right when we talk to a foreigner. In that case, our goal is to make sure the audience can understand us. Therefore, we need to speak slowly and clearly. However, the story is different when we practice with ourselves. In my experience, trying to catch up with the native speaker's speed brings two benefits:

- Firstly, it helps us better our listening skills because speaking fast helps us get familiar with the normal speed of the native speakers. If we can speak as fast as they do, we will more likely be able to hear and understand them.

- Secondly, practicing at the native speaker's speed forces you to address the sound stressing correctly. When we speak slowly, we will tend to have no stressing at all. But as we try to catch up the speed, we will naturally mimic the intonation at the same time.

As you see, with proper sound stressing, you will have all three factors: quality of word pronunciation, intonation and speed.

## How to practice your sound stressing?

Since sound stressing is so important, I have developed steps for you to practice it. You will need to set aside around 30 minutes. Select 5 to 10 sentences in a listening material. Depending on your ability, you can practice with fewer or more sentences. Since I do not know what language you are aiming to learn, I will use my example when I was learning English to illustrate the steps. Let's say we are going to practice with the sentence: "*I am trying to solve this financial problem*". The steps are as follows:

Step 1: Underline the stressed sounds.

*I'm <u>trying</u> to <u>solve</u> this <u>financial</u> <u>problem</u>.*

Step 2: Listen to the tape.

Pay attention to how the speaker stresses these sounds. If you hear a sound stressed more strongly than other stressed sounds, it could be the stress for the whole sentence. Please underline (or bold) that sound. For example: *I'm <u>try</u>ing to <u>solve</u> this <u>fi</u>nancial **pro**blem.*

<u>Step 3</u>: Imitate exactly what the speaker says.

Try to imitate as closely as you can. Stress where the speaker stresses, raise your voice where the speaker raises his voice, skip the words that the speaker skips… Practice several times until you can pronounce the whole sentence smoothly and properly. Do not look at the transcript. Forget everything you have learned about those words in the sentence; just imitate the speaker.

<u>Step 4</u>: Try to catch up with the speaker's speed.

As mentioned above, this is a key to developing a native speaking voice. In this step, you will rewind the tape several times and try to catch up with the speaker's speed. Try to match your sound to the speaker's sound so that you start when he starts and stop as he stops. The very first attempts may be quite difficult. If so, you can skip the non-stressed sounds entirely and only speak out the stressed sounds. With the above example, I would only say:

<u>try</u>          <u>solve</u>                    <u>nan</u>                    **prob**

In that way, you would say it much more easily. Once you are able to catch up with the speaker's speed, add the minor sounds. In my example, I would add some more sounds:

<u>try</u>ing              <u>solve</u>            <u>nan</u>cial **pro**blem

After practicing several times, I was able to say the whole sentence at the native speaker's speed and with correct stress on sounds.

*I'm <u>try</u>ing to <u>solve</u> this fi<u>nan</u>cial **pro**blem.*

In my experience, this is the most difficult step, but it is extremely powerful. When choosing your listening material to practice this technique, you need to make sure to select material in which the speaker speaks at his or her daily normal speed. Do not use those speed-reduced listening material as it will make this technique ineffective. In the beginning, be prepared to practice up to 50 or 60 times per sentence! Well, good pronunciation does not come accidentally; it requires serious effort.

You may be wondering: "Oh no! If I have to repeat 50 – 60 times one sentence, how long will it take to practice thousands of sentences out there?" Just calm down! If you practice everyday, it will take you 2 – 3 weeks to get familiar with the native speaker's rhythm and speed. You don't need to practice all the sentences you learn because there are only a limited number of types of intonation which tend to repeat over and over again.

After 2 – 3 weeks of practicing this technique, it will be time for fluency and pronunciation to come along together. Use your "native-like" speaking voice to practice Step no. 3 in the 3-step speaking technique in Chapter 7. Record your speech and see how it shines!

## How to get rid of your local accent

There are two basic causes why language learners unconsciously stick their local accent to their foreign language speaking voices. Being aware of them will help you get rid of your local accent when speaking the new language and make it sound more like a native speaker.

The first reason why many learners fail to pronounce properly is that they are fooled by the way a word is written. When we read a word, we tend to be affected unconsciously by our mother tongue transcription. Also, most English vowels and

consonants, such as θ, ð, æ… do not exist in Vietnamese; but it has vowels and consonants, which are relatively close to these English sounds. Therefore, when a Vietnamese person reads an English word, he would unconsciously apply his Vietnamese vowels and consonants to that word and pronounce it incorrectly. In my English class, when I asked my students to pronounce some long words, such as "miscellaneous", "extraordinary" or "entrepreneur", they were less likely to pronounce properly if they kept looking at the word in their books. Then when I asked them to stop looking at their books and focus on listening to the native speaker's voice, they felt it much easier to imitate the word. Now, you can understand why I ask you not to look at the script in all of my listening and speaking techniques.

Another cause is that learners tend to use their mother tongue vowels and consonants as the "standard" to adjust and position their pronunciation. This happens when a learner hears the sound of a new word, for example, when a Chinese native speaker learns the word "*down*", which is pronounced as [daun]. Since this sound does not exist in his "language map", he would "screen" through his "data source" and find a Chinese sound that is pronounced very closely to the sound of the word he is learning. The problem here is that the vowel [aun] of the English word and the Chinese equivalent are not exactly the same, so when he uses the Chinese vowel as a base to adjust his pronunciation of the English word, he has unconsciously developed what we call the local accent in speaking the foreign language. The sad thing is that many non-native teachers instruct their students to do so. You may have heard some teacher say things like: "This word can be pronounced similar to the word… in our language". Such a method seems to be the easiest and quickest way of explaining how a word is pronounced. However, the drawback is that it will stick the learners' local accent to their new language speaking voice. To solve this problem, you need to have a zero-based thinking. Every time you learn to pronounce a new word, forget your mother tongue. Learn it as if you were a baby. Of course, it is

easier said than done. But if you discipline yourself to do so, you will be able to take your local accent off your voice and make it sound like a native speaker's tongue.

## Three steps to polish your pronunciation even further

By practicing only the sound stressing technique described above, you will have mastered the most important part of pronunciation, which will help you to confidently communicate in your target language. However, if you are seeking to improve your pronunciation further to make it sound more like a native voice, here are three steps to polish your pronunciation and make it shine.

### Step 1: *Recognize the "core" sound*

You cannot imitate the sound of a word correctly if you are not crystal clear about what you have heard. The first time you hear a native speaker say some word, you seem not to be able to hear it "clearly" enough. Any language learner faces this issue. Let me show you an example to illustrate this point. Let's assume that you have not yet learned Chinese characters. Now, let me show you a handwritten Chinese character below and ask you to copy it.

This word in Chinese means "be patient (adj)". Before you read any further, grab your pen and try to copy it! If you have finished copying, what did you realize? You cannot copy it 100% accurately, is that right? Since it is someone's handwriting, you simply cannot copy the shape entirely. If a Chinese guy looked at your work, he would immediately recognize that it was "drawn" by a person who does not know Chinese. The reason why you faced obstacles writing that character is because it included the writer's personal handwriting style. Therefore, when looking at the image, you were not able to determine which strokes were modified by the writer's handwriting style and which strokes formed the basic shape of the Chinese word "be patient". In other words, you failed to determine the "core pattern" of that Chinese character. Now, let me show you some other versions of the same word but written by different persons.



Okay, if I now tell you to write the word "be patient" in Chinese, would you feel more confident? Having observed several different handwritten versions of the word, you are able to recognize their common pattern. In other words, you could recognize the basic pattern of the Chinese word "be patient".

The same thing happens when you first hear a new word. You would have a similar "unclear" feeling. You seem not to be able to hear the sound clearly even if the speaker repeats it several times. It is because the sound created by the speaker has been mixed with his own personal voice. Each person has his own specific set of vocal chords. Therefore, different people create

different mixed sounds when they speak, like the various handwriting styles illustrated above. That is why it could be hard for you to recognize the "core pattern" that forms the proper sound of a new word. Consequently, if you fail to recognize it, you will likely fail to imitate it.

The solution here is simple—**to determine the "core pattern" of a word, you need to hear it from several different voices**. If you remember my basic philosophy, which is based on "massive input", you will see that my listening technique encourages you to expose yourself to massive listening material. If you follow my technique, you will have a chance to hear the most common words and phrases spoken by various speakers. Doesn't it already solve the problem of this step?

### <u>Step 2</u>: *Imitate the sound you have heard*

At this step, you simply imitate the sound of the word you've heard as I have described in the listening technique. Don't look at the script; just mimic the sound. As you pronounce the word out loud, your ears will hear the sound you have just produced and compare it with the native speaker's sounds. If you find that the two sounds (yours and the speaker's) are too different, you will want to try it again. However, there will probably be a problem here you need to be aware of. The sound you hear as your voice will not be exactly how it actually is. It is because the sound goes through your skull to your ears, so the skull will affect the way it sounds to you. This explains why many people are surprised when they listen to their own voice played by a recorder. They would say: "Oh! Is that my voice? It sounds strange?" Due to this problem, we need to have our third step.

### <u>Step 3</u>: *Record it, hear it and adjust it*

In Step 1, you got the "standard" sound to compare your voice with. In Step 2, you have produced your own sound. In this step, you will need to record and hear it to see if your pronunciation is close to the "standard" sound yet. Craig

Valentine, the 1999 World Speaking Champion, said: "**get recorded, get rewarded**". Only as you record your voice, would you be able to address your mistakes. Therefore, what you do in this step is to fine-tune your pronunciation by recording your speech, listening to the recording and then correcting your pronunciation until it shines.

Although you will definitely have to spend time on this, there are only a limited number of different vowels and consonants for you to practice. So don't think that you will have to do these three steps for every single word you learn.

Before closing this chapter, I would like to share with you my personal experience. Many students have asked me how to pronounce well. I usually ask them back: "How much time do you spend each day practicing pronunciation?" Well, as you can guess, very few people do it seriously on a daily basis. And my answer to their question is: "practice, practice and practice"; otherwise, the miracle will never happen.

# Viewing Grammar From Another Aspect

*"An essential aspect of creativity is not being afraid to fail."*

- EDWIN LAND

Have you ever asked yourself these questions: "Why do I have to learn grammar? What will happen if I don't learn it? Are those linguists making things complicated? Why can we speak our mother tongue fluently without learning grammar?" In fact, many people (including

me) have admitted that they could not distinguish grammar terms, such as adverbs, adjuncts, attributive adjectives, definite article, indefinite articles… until they learned them in foreign language grammar sessions. The question is: can we speak a new language if we do not learn its grammar?

In this chapter, I am going to show you a more practical view about grammar. I'll tell you how to approach it effectively and how to utilize it as a tool rather than an obstacle in learning a new language.

Yes, grammar was not meant to bring trouble to you. As humans around the world developed their languages and made it a more and more sophisticated communication tool, they tried to find ways so that people can "speak less but express more". We all know that by mutual consent among people certain combinations of sounds have come to represent certain meanings. These combinations of sounds are called words and phrases. As the need for expressing more meanings arises, people add more words and phrases onto their list. Today, new words keep emerging to express new concepts, such as "blog", "social media", "cloud computing"… However, to prevent the dictionary from becoming thicker, people try to find ways to express more concepts without having to add more words. So, they use methods, such as changing word forms, switching word positions (for example, as in English questions), adding one or two letters at the end of a word (for example, adding letters "s" or "es" to express plural in English)… These methods are a part of what we call grammar. As you see, grammar helps us express more content without having too many words. When I started viewing grammar more positively, I found that grammar helps us express our ideas more precisely, profoundly and sophisticatedly. It can help us describe a situation or an action more clearly in terms of its time and space. While grammar helps you express your ideas better as you speak, it also helps you understand others' ideas better as you listen.

I am not going to teach you grammar here; there are a whole bunch of grammar books out there, which have beautifully done this task. I just want to share with you that grammar is a good friend, not something that always tries to puzzle you.

## Is grammar a must if I want to speak a new language?

There have been many disputes on this issue. Some linguists state that you can speak without learning grammar just as you did with your mother tongue. Other linguists argue that in essence people actually unconsciously acquire grammar when they learn to speak their first language, although they may not clearly define grammar terms, such as articles, prepositions, the perfect tense… Personally, I think they all have their own reasonable arguments. In my opinion, there are two extreme positions on this issue. The first is to learn the new language without learning any grammar rule. In this extreme, learners will have to memorize many more words, as they don't have any rules to follow. For example, let's say I apply this extreme to English, and I am learning the verb "do". I will have to memorize all its cases, including: *I do, we do, you do, he does, she does, it does, I did, we did, you did, he did, she did, it did…*The other extreme is to learn all the rules as taught in those grammar textbooks. For the same example, I will have to memorize the following rules:

- *I* is the 1st person singular pronoun

- *We* is the 1st person plural pronoun

- *You* is both 2nd person singular and plural pronoun

- *He/she/it* are 3rd person singular pronouns

- *They* is the 3rd person plural pronoun

- The verb "*do*" in the *simple present tense* has the following forms:

- o  "*Do*" if the subject is 1st or 2nd person (singular or plural) or 3rd person plural

- o  "*Does*" if the subject is 3rd person singular

- The verb "*do*" in the *simple past tense* has only one form for every case: "*Did*"

- And on and on…

If you follow the first extreme, which is learning without rules, you will have to memorize a larger amount of information since you have to remember everything individually. The other extreme, learning with rules, can help dramatically reduce the workload. In certain languages, people are even able to squeeze all grammar rules into just a few pages. This is the undisputable advantage of learning grammar with rules. However, learning by rules has its own drawbacks. The first disadvantage is that the rules may not be easy to memorize. They are just like mathematical formulae. Some people even have to integrate the rules into poems to memorize them. I agree that using poems to remember the rules could be a great solution for your language grammar exam. But the story is different in real communication. Have you ever been in situations in which you failed to apply grammar rules when you were speaking? Does it seem like it is too hard to integrate those grammar rules into your daily verbal communication? This is the basic disadvantage of learning language through rules. Imagine a non-native speaker talking to his American friend. He wants to ask her if her boyfriend is going to marry her soon. His brain will have to go through a complicated process like this:

- To express a question about someone's plans in the near future, he should use the structure: *to be + subject + going to + verb infinitive + object*

- "*He*" is *3rd person singular pronoun*

- The form of the verb "*to be*" in *3rd person singular* should be "*is*"

- With the above rules, the guy should ask: "*is + he + going to + marry + you?*"

This is too much data for his brain to process while he is speaking. As you can guess, he would likely be awkward and fumbling with his words. And his friend may not be patient enough to continue talking to him. Does it happen to you? This problem may happen not only as you are speaking but also as you are listening. If it takes you too much time to process the meaning of the grammar structure that the speaker is using, you might not have enough time to catch the next sentence.

So, what should we do to cope with this problem? Do you remember the concepts of "recognizing words" and "using words" that we mentioned in Chapter 7? The philosophy here is quite similar. You can use one way or another to learn a language—with grammar rules or without them. But knowing and remembering grammar rules does not mean you can use them fluently. The first extreme, learning grammar case by case without rules, therefore, has the advantage that you won't have to think much when you speak. You would simply pick up grammar just as you pick up words. The problem here is how to reduce the workload if you have to remember case by case? Or how to simplify the complicated process if you remember and use rules? That is not an easy question. In the following pages, I am going to share with you my experience in this issue. Although it may not yet be a perfect solution, it would help you utilize the advantages of both approaches.

## Learn grammar in a simpler way

**Do not memorize the grammar formula; memorize the simplified samples.**

Let me use an example from my studying English. One of the most confusing grammar rules that I (and other English learners, too) have ever learned is the three types of conditional sentences. The *if clause* and the *main clause* use different tenses

and they vary across types 1, 2 and 3. Each of them has a different meaning. I not only have to memorize how to use the correct verb form in the *if clause* and the *main clause*, but also have to remember which type of conditional sentence to use in practical situations. It was really hard! However, things have been much easier since I started using simplified samples rather than the dry and confusing rules. What do I mean by "simplified samples"? Let's use a conditional sentence as an example. One of the three types has the following rule:

*(if clause) If + subject + had + verb in present perfect tense + object, (main clause) subject + would have + verb in present perfect tense + object*

Honestly, it would take me a whole minute to use this structure in conversation. Now, if I use a simplified sample, it will look like the one below:

*If you had done this, you would have done that*

Firstly, this sample is much easier to memorize than the long rule above. It is shorter and less dry. When I want to apply this sample in practice, it is easier for me to do because I have fewer spots to be replaced. I can simply replace "done" with the verb I need. And because "done" is in the present perfect tense, it reminds me to use the verb in the same form. Then, I replace *you* and *this/that* with the subjects and the objects that I need. In this way, my brain will have to process less workload when I apply the sample in real speaking. Further, samples are still representatives, so they help reduce the amount of information to be memorized compared with learning and memorizing everything case by case. You will still need to practice seriously in order to use and apply these simplified samples.

**Don't care about the names of grammar rules**

When linguists compose grammar textbooks, they name the rules so that learners can distinguish them. However, these names are scientific and, therefore, difficult to remember. For example, in English, there are three types of conditional

sentences—type 1, type 2 and type 3. However, even when I can speak English fluently and use conditional sentences comfortably, I cannot remember exactly which type I am using. When you speak, I am sure you don't want to waste time recalling which number you should use in a certain situation. My suggestion here is you should relate the simplified sample to another parallel sample in your mother tongue. In other words, ask yourself: how would I express a simplified sample in my mother tongue? And to make a deeper sense of grammar, you can attach it with a specific example. For instance: "*If you had stayed at home, you would have met her*".

**Do not translate the grammar**

In a grammar textbook, the author is responsible for describing the grammar structures in a scientific and logical way. It is just like people drafting a contract. Sometimes, when learners apply the explanation in a grammar book, they try to "translate" the grammar structure. For example, if an English learner reads or hears the sentence: "*If I had stayed at home, I would have met her*", he would try to translate the grammar like this:

- This sentence has the form of a conditional sentence type 3

- That means both the "if clause" and the "main clause" are unreal and the context happened in the past.

- Therefore, the speaker was actually not at home and he did not meet her.

This explanation is correct, but it is quite stiff and complicated. It may make the original sentence obscure and may confuse the learner. In the above example, the speaker could have expressed a sense of regret. In other words, maybe, he wished he were at home. But the learner may miss this sense if he applies the grammar explanation stiffly. To avoid this mistake, when you are exposed to a grammar structure, ask yourself: "What does the speaker really mean? What sense does the speaker want to deliver?" By asking these questions, you will get to the speaker's

real message. As you get familiar with samples, you will no longer have to check your grammar book every time you see a difficult structure.

At the end of the day, grammar is a set of different ways of arranging and coordinating words so that they can express different meanings, context and senses. By getting massive input through reading and listening, you will get exposed to repeated grammar structures in various contexts. In such a way, it will be easier for you to acquire grammar structures and understand their meanings than by merely memorizing the grammar formulas in textbooks. And finally, knowing the grammar structures is one thing; using them appropriately is a different story. You will need to practice, practice and practice.

# Other Techniques for You to Accelerate

*"Action is the foundational key to all success."*

- PABLO PICASSO

# The power of a single united force

Sun Tzu is the best known strategist in the history of China. One of his famous strategies is to form a single united body to be a whole to penetrate the enemy's weakest part. This strategy can help an army's few to defeat its enemy's many. You can apply a similar philosophy to learning a new language. By using your various tools and methods, such as reading, writing, speaking, listening, watching (TV)…, as a single united force to penetrate into a specific topic, you would be able to quickly conquer all the common words and phrases related to it. As you are able to read, listen, write and speak confidently about a certain topic, you will gain huge energy and momentum to move forward.

I have a student who works as a real estate broker. He applied this method quite successfully in learning English. Every morning, he would spend half an hour reading the book "How to make money in real estate". Sometimes, he was so attracted by the content that he would forget to go to his office on time. At noon, after a quick lunch, he would relax playing the game "Simcity", an interesting computer game in which the player plays the role of a mayor building a new city. Although this game has a Vietnamese version, he used the English version instead. To play the game effectively, he would read and listen to the instructions in it so that he could arrange all the virtual buildings, cafes, libraries, schools… in a profitable manner. Leaving his office in the afternoon, he would spend another 30 minutes watching the real estate news on CNBC or on the website [www.rentv.com](www.rentv.com) (a site providing commercial real estate news). He would absorb the information from this news pretty well because most of the words and phrases it uses have already appeared in the book and in the game "Simcity". Every evening, he would visit the site [www.realestateforum.com](www.realestateforum.com) to read or write a post, share his comments with other brokers all over the world. The knowledge he got from the book, the game and the forum was very beneficial to his job. He even became an expert in his field. Several times every week, he would videotape

himself updating real estate news in his city and sharing his ideas about investment strategy. Many of his customers liked his videos and followed him on Youtube and Facebook. He was not merely **learning** English; he was **using** the language in his field.

You can do the same with your area of expertise. Whatever it is, find a book, a computer game, a TV channel, a forum… and give this tactic a try. Do not learn your target language in a painful way; try to exploit its benefits. Keep in mind that motivation and excitement is the key.

## Learn continuously and intensively

Learning a new language is like riding a bicycle up a slope. Guess what will happen if you climb up to the middle of the slope and then… pause? You will slip down, right? Then, if you start to climb again and pause somewhere in the middle, you will slip again. In fact, many people are wasting time doing it that way. When it comes to learning a new language, intensiveness is a very important factor that determines your efficiency. If you lose your focus, you will not be able to retain the words and phrases you have learned. To avoid this, you should have a goal, make a plan and discipline yourself to work on the plan on a daily basis.

## Smile before every learning session

David Brooks, the 1990 world champion of public speaking, said: "When you smile, you relax – When you relax, you learn". Have you ever asked yourself why you seem to be more intelligent while playing a computer game than writing an exam. Also, when you are frightened of something, your brain freezes and you may not think of any solution.

Scientists have proved that our brain can learn new information or knowledge most efficiently when we are relaxed and/or excited. Many parents, for example, are not aware of this fact and make the mistake of being impatient with their kids as they try to help them to learn. The more impatient they are, the less information the kids can absorb. In order to learn efficiently, you need to prepare a positive state of mind. A positive state of mind has characteristics, such as: relaxation, joyfulness, inspiration, confidence… The good news is you can use some physical and psychological tactics to have a positive state of mind. Below are a number of tactics that I frequently use:

- Listen to baroque music and relax yourself before a learning session. Baroque music has a very positive impact on your mind. It can help you relax and concentrate more. Except for a language listening session, you can turn on the baroque music throughout your learning session. Many writers also listen to baroque music while they are writing their works.

- Think of your goal and your reason why you want to learn the language before a learning session. As I mentioned in Chapter 1, your brain needs a big enough reason to do a difficult task for you. If something visible can represent your reason, place it on your desk so that it will motivate you more.

- Talk to yourself positively. Tell yourself: "I am very smart!" or "I am a great Chinese speaker! (Of course, only if you are learning Chinese!)" This is a very common tactic that is used by athletes prior to a game, by politicians prior to a speech, sales persons prior to a sales meeting… Psychologists call it "positive self talk". Do you recall how good you've felt every time you received a compliment? Even if sometimes you know that the compliment is not honest, you still feel happiness deep inside your heart. Why is that? It is because even though your conscious mind is able to recognize a dishonest compliment, your subconscious

mind is not. Therefore, when you tell yourself: "I am smart", your subconscious mind will accept this message, and it will boost your brain to work more effectively. Try it out several times, and you will see its effect.

## Learn while you are sleeping

When we sleep, our sleep goes through 5 stages. The fifth stage is called the REM sleep (Rapid Eye Moving sleep). Every night, we go through this 5-stage cycle several times: 1, 2, 3, 4, REM, 1, 2, 3, 4, REM, 1, 2, 3, 4, REM… Each cycle takes from 60 to 100 minutes varying among people. Scientists have done many studies on the human 5-stage sleep. They believe that during the REM stage, our brain reinforces and sorts out the information we have absorbed during the day. In other words, the REM sleep is when we are digesting the knowledge and information we've gathered. This explains why infants in their first few months spend most of their time sleeping, and 50% of their sleep is REM sleep. In fact, my title is not precisely stated. We actually do not learn more information when we sleep, but we digest and reinforce the information. However, taking advantage of the REM sleep will help boost your learning speed. Here are the steps to utilizing your REM sleep:

- Learn using various senses (reading, listening, watching, speaking) in the day

- Have a review session right before going to bed

- Have another review session right after waking up.

Since the REM sleep is the last stage of the cycle, it happens several times at night and prior to your waking up. Scientists believe that most of your dreams occur during the REM stage. That is why we usually dream right before we wake up. This is also true of me, and I found an interesting thing about it. It happened when I was studying hard to prepare for my TOEFL (Test Of English as a Foreign Language). One late evening

when I was practicing my listening session, I fell asleep while the tape was still running. In my dream, I saw myself talking to a foreigner and I understood everything he said. Waking up, I found that the conversation that I heard in my dream was actually from the tape, which kept running all night (as I had set it on the auto-rewind mode). I have tried this tactic many more times and found that it is very effective for developing my listening skills. If you want to try this technique, you can do the following:

- Use a tape/CD/mp3 player that has a timing function so that it can play at a specific time according to your setting. Of course, instead of setting it to ring, you need to set it so it will play the listening session you want.

- Set the timer one hour before your waking up time. For example, if you normally wake up at 7 a.m., set the timer at 6 a.m. Set the volume low enough so that it will not wake you up fully.

Please note that you should not use this tactic with totally new listening material, which is too hard for you decipher. You should use material, which you have listened to before. Try it out! It will be interesting.


## Immerse yourself in an environment full of the new language

You can create such an environment right in your home country. Below are ways that I used to create an English-filled environment when I was learning it in Vietnam.

### 1. Set listening material as your alarm tone

The very first minutes after you wake up every morning have a big impact on your mood, emotion and momentum. If you want to have a sad day, listen to sad music as you wake up. If you want to have a day of anxiety and worry, read those rubbish

news about robbing and killing. If you wish to develop your new language, start your day accordingly.

## 2. Read an article written in your target language when you get up

If you are like me who has the habit of grabbing the favorite newspaper before going to work, try to replace it by another one written in the new language. When I was learning English, I disciplined myself to read CNN.com instead of my favorite Vietnamnews.com.

## 3. Use your computer in your target language

Most of us today spend a huge amount of time on our computers. If you are using Windows or Macintosh in your mother tongue version, switch to a version in your target language. Every time you have a problem with your computer, try reading the instructions in the "Help" section. That is a very simple yet effective way to create the new language environment factor.

## 4. Watch TV channels in the new language

It is not too hard today to enjoy TV channels from almost any country in the world. You have plenty of choices—cable TV, digital TV, satellite TV… Remove every channel that speaks your mother tongue. Only sign up for channels in your target language. By doing so you will force yourself to get more exposure to the language you want to learn. Even when there is a hot movie, refrain yourself from watching it in your mother tongue. Please note that you also should not look at the subtitle if you want to develop your listening skills because your ears will be much less active when your eyes have already caught the meaning. So you need to cover the subtitle with a tape or something.

## 5. Proactively join online forums in the target language

When you do so, please note that you need to select those forums whose members are native speakers. Secondly, join the ones that interest you or relate to your area of expertise; otherwise, you will quickly get bored of it.

### 6. If you play a computer game, use the version in your target language

This is a very powerful tool for you to develop your new language. When you play, you have a chance to get involved in the new language context. Most games include sounds, conversations and text, which can help you practice your reading and listening skills. The interactive environment is an important factor that makes computer games an outstanding tool for learning a new language.

### 7. Make friends with native speakers in your home town

If you are learning one of the more common languages, such as French, Chinese, Spanish…, chances are that there might be native speakers living in your home town. If that is the case, don't miss the chance to make friends with them. The good news is most of them will be willing to be your friend. Why? Imagine if you go to another country to live there for a while, would you want to make friends with the native people there? You would, wouldn't you? Because making friends with them will help you a lot. You will know more about the culture, the cuisine, the language… The same thing happens when foreigners come to your town. They would be more than happy to hang out with you. Therefore, don't hesitate! Below are the two common sources to find them:

- Ask a tour guide in your town. Foreigners coming to your town will likely concentrate in some specific area where they can share and meet their common needs. A tour guide will know exactly which bars or clubs they normally go to. You can go there, buy a drink and tell them that you want to learn their language. Most people will be happy to hear someone from another country

saying that he wants to learn their language. Ask them if you can help in some way. You can offer to be their tour guide for free, in exchange for a chance to practice your new language with a native speaker. If one person does not agree to your request for some reason, it is fine; just look for another one.

- You can also find online forums where expatriates and tourists in your home town communicate. Instead of going to a bar, you can post your offer on such a forum. When I was learning English, I visited sites, such as:

  www.livinginvietnam.com,

  www.alloexpat.com/vietnam_expat_forum/

  www.expat-blog.com/.../vietnam/...

  There should be similar sites that suit your needs. Members on these sites normally share their experiences and knowledge on topics, such as: cuisine, recruitment, jobs, tourism… Take your time to go over it; then, you can show your goodwill by posting some valuable answers to their questions. Since you are a local person, you should know a lot of things that they would not. After doing so, there should be many foreigners willing to make friends with you.

I think that is quite enough for you to create an environment that favors learning your target language. The bottom line here is that if you want it badly enough, you can make it happen.

# FINAL THOUGHTS

And so, we have reached the end of "**Five steps to speak a new language".** I have handed you a whole bunch of techniques and tools that will help you expedite the learning process and shorten your learning curve. However, in my opinion, although my techniques can boost your learning engine, it is not the most important factor for your success, because ***no matter what kind of weapon a soldier is given, victory will not come until he goes off to the front line***.