

Title	Close Your Textbooks
Author(s)	J.ナイティンゲール
Citation	聖学院大学総合研究所 Newsletter, Vol.22-No.3, 2013.3 : 2-5
URL	http://serve.seigakuin-univ.ac.jp/reps/modules/xoonips/detail.php?item_id=4489
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Close Your Textbooks

Justin Nightingale

Background

I have to admit, I'm a bit of a language geek. I've studied 7 languages which sounds impressive until you realise the fact I've forgotten 6 of them (a little disheartening.) As an example, I not only studied French for 6 years as an adult but I lived in the south of France for a year. Can I speak it now? Not a mot. Really. On the few occasions I have tried I've been amused to discover that only Japanese comes out. It's as if my brain has decided that anything foreign is now Japanese. This proved to be most entertaining during my experimental French classes a few years back, as you can imagine.

Many a time while traveling on the train to work, I see young, secondary school children fervently trying to absorb vocabulary from scarily titled books such as "6000 words you need to know" but besides being necessary for their exam, I wonder if it has any meaning in the real world. And anyway, like me, will they not have forgotten everything after a few years have passed by?

As someone who loves learning and teaching languages I always want to try something that is more effective at home and work with the limited time that is available in both settings. Although there are major differences in the way a motivated learner and a room full of genki children receive foreign language languages I'm keen to find something to make the most out of the 80 minutes I have with my students every week.

Options

As an experiment, I decided to learn Mandarin (if you're going to jump, jump big) with the vague notion that my shaky kanji knowledge may help smooth the inevitably bumpy ride that is to come. Instead of going down the tried and tested textbook and CD route, I wanted to try something new with the hope that this "new" would be something I could use in the classroom.

To do this, I'd need to study. Let me say from the start, I don't like studying. I've only ever bought one Japanese learning book and that was one too many. I fear my students are of a similar opinion. The knowledge that each of the following techniques could be used on an iPad without a textbook was the light at the end of the tunnel that pulled me through.

After a little Googling, three names consistently appeared:

1. Rosetta Stone

I purchased the Mandarin levels 1-5. This course is big, expensive and all encompassing. Just the fact that you have 15 months of Skype video lessons with a native speaker (a frightening prospect in itself) makes this course unique. The content has all the usual suspects: vocabulary, grammar, understanding and pronunciation with a (rather suspect and overly forgiving) voice recognition system.

The whole course depends on pictures so there are no actual English explanations (in fact, there's no English at all) of what you are learning,

everything is inferred and you're expected to surmise the meanings yourself which aren't always immediately obvious.

It was fun to use and pick up a few words but it was nothing new compared to what I'd done at home or in the classroom. It's reasonably motivating to progress through the levels but not all that different to a good old textbook and CD. I fear the high price is used to fund slick marketing more than ground-breaking content.

2. Pimsleur

The Pimsleur method has been around for more than 40 years and is purely an audio course. It uses SRS (spaced repartitioned study) to aid retention and relies heavily on a parrot "listen and repeat" study style. Very much like Rosetta Stone it has bold marketing claims ("Learn Spanish in 10 days") but after a little research, it wasn't a method that appealed to me.

3. The Michel Thomas Method

I purchased the Introductory, single audio CD, Mandarin course. I was so impressed I bought the whole course because it really does do something new, as I shall explain.

The Michel Thomas Method

A decorated war veteran, Mr. Thomas (1914-2005) was a polygot linguist who developed a way of learning that stands out from all the others for one simple reason: he doesn't want you to study. No books, no word lists and no endless repetition of phrases. Nothing. Your learning "is the responsibility of the teacher, not you, so relax."

This would be easy to dismiss as an cute

advertising gimmick if it weren't for the fact that big name celebrities are singing his praises (Woody Allen said he was able to converse in French with just a weekend of one-to-one lessons with Michel) and his CDs are selling very well thank you very much.

The focus is not to learn what to say but to understand what you're saying using his technique. Learning a phrase is easy but retention is finite. On the other hand, if you understand something, you'll never forget it. Everything centers around understanding which is why 95% of the CD is in English.

Imagery, Understanding and backtracking

When I first turned on the CD I thought I'd mistakenly bought a "Hypnotising For Dummies" CD such was his tone: "Relax, don't think about studying, just enjoy your time....relax...." but once the ball got rolling and he started to explain a few gems about how the Chinese language developed and why tones are so important you're pulled in.

This is his mission. Understand why it is this way and attach imagery so it's easy to recall. Nothing is difficult if you understand why. You understand that pedals turning move a bicycle forward so you never forget what pedals do.

Tones

The first half of the first CD focuses around basic sentence construction and the 4 tones required, each taught with detailed imagery that really sticks in your mind. Here is a quote explaining the neutral tone:

"Imagine you're in the doctors office, the doctor

walks in. You'll notice he has green hair! You certainly can't fail to notice it. Then he asks you to open your mouth so he can take a look. As you open your mouth he shines his light. What does the Doctor say when he asks you to open his mouth?" 'aaahhhh' Green doctor = green thumb pointing up"

Every time you use the neutral tone from that point on, you hold your thumb up. Here's another tone:

"You're outside, it's a beautiful summer day, blue sky, everything is relaxed, just right. You feel great. Your cellphone rings. You answer. The called tells you, "Look up in the sky". You're eyes go up and there written across the sky are the words, "You've won the lottery!" You look up ad the blue sky and yell, "Really?" Just as your eyes look up so does your tone: "Really?"

Taken out of context this imagery may seem a little over the top and, well, just plain silly but resist the temptation to dismiss it (as I had to) because it's just part of a process that allows him to backtrack at any stage when a student doesn't know the answer ("What did you say when you looked up at the blue sky?") He builds on these 4 main stories (for the four tones) with further, shorter quotes/imagery to explain other grammatical structures and idiosyncrasies, too. It's like he's leaving a breadcrumb trail in your mind allowing him to back up at any point you don't remember something.

Sentences

The CD doesn't teach vocabulary, per se, except the vocabulary required for you to understand the

language structure. You'll learn words along the way but it's not the focus. You won't even learn how to say basic introduction questions which, as I'll explain, is music to my ears.

After learning the tones, the rest of introduction CD is devoted to using the Be verb, making a question, pronouns, using (but not learning) adjectives and verbs. In short, it gives you a language template for you to move on and fill the gaps at a later date.

This is how I first learnt Japanese which is why I can relate to this method so well. The first things I wanted to know when I arrived in Japan were not introduction questions but "Where is the verb?", "How do I make a statement into a question?" Understanding these building blocks really helped me and it's a method of learning Mr. Thomas has mastered.

I don't feel I've been studying over the last couple of weeks of listening to the CDs and I haven't seen any Chinese words but I can happily make simple questions and answers without breaking a sweat. I'm told my pronunciation isn't too bad, either, probably due to the 100% oral/aural nature of the course.

In The Field

At the primary school, I use text books, flashcards and anything I can get my hands on to bring children into my English world. I've managed to stretch the text book + CD paradigm over the years in various ways to keep, I hope, a classroom full of students who want to try and/or are awake.

Michel's way of teaching is very adaptable for

young learners because they LOVE imagery and mini stores, and they have superior miming skills. What really stood out for me was his way of teaching a sentence - relying heavily on the native language of the student - because it's a teaching style I can see as being eminently usable; an example From the CD teaching To Be:

"How do you say, 'I am British?'
How do you say 'I?' <Chinese answer>
How do you say 'am?' <Chinese answer>
How do you say 'British?' <Chinese answer>
How do you say 'Person?' <Chinese answer>

How do you say 'I am British?'" <Chinese answer>"

Adapting this to work in my classroom would mean the question on the left would become Japanese and the answer would be English. The order of the Japanese words would respect the order of the English sentence so giving the understanding of the target language in the comfort of their home language. The final sentence would then give the authentic answer in the target language (whether it would be wise and beneficial to use so much Japanese in a lesson is my only point of concern.)

If, for example, the student was unable to remember the word for British then the teacher would go back one bread crumb and help the student remember the imagery they used to remember that word - if this was a method of vocabulary learning the teacher was using. Imagery, Understanding and backtracking.

This technique is rewarding because the results are very fast but this is at the expense of time

required to build vocabulary; although I personally was confident making simple questions and answers listening to one CD, my entire vocabulary can't have been more than 15-20 words. But, I'm tempted to say that this is a sacrifice worth making if I were to fill in the (large) gaps with time spent on their textbooks and extra activities.

As you can see, I've become sold on the idea that cutting back on vocabulary learning and placing more emphasis on the understanding of sentence structure is, in the long term, far more conducive to language development in a classroom setting than the traditional paradigm of learning stock sentences and pairing with word lists. I'm not yet certain how I'd like to incorporate this into the primary school lessons at this point in time but hopefully my naive enthusiasm for this style on a personal level will, as it has so often done in the past, spill over into those 80 minutes.

(ジャスティン・ナイティンゲール 聖学院大学総合研究所特任講師)