

Monday, December 31, 2007

Book Review

Book Title: How to Learn any Language

Author: Farber, Barry ISBN: 1-56731-543-7 Format: Hardcover Pub. Date: 1991 Publisher: NY: Barnes and Noble Books
Pages: 172 Cost: \$ (List) Available: Amazon at as low as \$7.00 new, 2002 edition) \$2.94 (used) - \$1.24 at eBay #8482;
(as an eBook) Subtitle: Quickly, easily and On your Own! The Books' Topics: This book describes the following: How the author came to be fluent in 18 languages

The system that the author uses to learn languages The author also describes the relationships and quirks of many languages in the world, and provides an abbreviated grammar primer. The central themes of this book are: The traditional high school and college approaches to learning language are ineffective

A systematic, multi-pronged approach to learning languages is effective

Practicing a target language in every spare moment brings language mastery Keywords: Language Learning

Multiple-Track Attack

Hidden Moments for Review and Reinforcement

Magic Memory Aids Main Idea: The author describes a system that pieces together a textbook, grammar book, phrase book, dictionary, cassette program, flashcards and a newspaper to develop a sustained focus for learning a language.

The author points out that the study of a language needs consistency, and resolve; plus the ingenuity to fill every spare moment with study.

The author downplays the need to learn (boring) grammar before diving into the study of a language, and he provides a short summary of all the grammar that a language learner needs to get well along on the path to mastering a foreign language. Quotes: "Common sense also tells us that we can't enjoy communicating in a foreign language until we learn it. This means years of brain-benumbing conjugations, declensions, idioms, exceptions, subjunctives, and irregular verbs. And here common sense is wrong, completely wrong. When it comes to learning foreign languages, we can start with the dessert and then use its sweetness to inspire us to back up and devour the main course." (p. - 5)

"Up to now, grammar has been used by our language educators to anesthetize us against progress. If it's grammar versus fun, we're going to minimize grammar and maximize fun. We're going to find more pleasant ways to absorb grammar." (p. - 5)

"All of us 'spill' enough minutes every day to learn a whole new language a year! Just as the Dutch steal land from the sea, you will learn to steal language-learning time, even from a life that seems completely filled or overflowing. What do you do, for example, while you're waiting for an elevator, standing in line at the bank, waiting for the person you're calling to answer the phone, holding the line, getting gas, waiting to be ushered from the waiting room into somebody's office, waiting for your date to arrive, waiting for anything at any time." (p. - 6)

"Expertise is a narcotic. As knowledge grows, it throws off pleasures to its possessor, much like an interest-bearing account throws off money." (p. - 22)

Myths:

"I'll put on my language cassettes while I work around the house and learn the language as easily as I learn lyrics to popular songs." (p. - 38)

"Since I'm not in school anymore, time isn't important. I'll take my time, skip a day, skip two days; the language will still be there when I get back to it." (p. - 38)

"I'm never going to pose as a native speaker of the language, and I'd never be able to pull it off if I tried so why bother to develop the right accent?" (p. - 39)

"Americans have grown up believing learning languages is hard. It is not hard! It merely seems hard because language instruction in American schools and colleges has until lately been so exasperatingly dull and unrewarding." (p. - 42)

"I've long entertained the fantasy of putting the old orthodox grammarians on trial for war crimes, the specific charge being assassination of the fun that flows from gaining command of another language. Their defense will be predictably be 'Bah humbug. You can't immerse, converse, rehearse, or even play around with a foreign language without a good foundation in grammar!'" (p. - 43)

"Grammar is an edifice that you build on your property. But it doesn't have to be done all at once." (p. - 44)

"It may be strange to some (and wildly objectionable to others) to recommend do-it-yourself language cassettes starring you in the language you are trying to learn. Orthodox language teachers are likely to consider this something akin to doing your own eye surgery." (p. - 57)

"It's better to know the word; its meaning, its spelling, its use in sentences; even if you have to listen to it in your unskilled accent, then not to know the word at all." (p. - 58)

"The language student should reach for a fresh stack of flash cards before he leaves home in the morning as instinctively as a policeman reaches for his badge. The flash card, more than any other tool, can help the student take advantage of the day's 'hidden moments,' the secret weapon upon which the promise and premise of this method is

based."(p. - 58)

"We have some magic, all right, tricks and tactics that literally shovel the language into your head, as opposed to your high-school Spanish class that tea spooned in in or didn't bother getting it in at all. The system, however, won't work unless you do. There's going to be pain, but you will have something—plenty—to show for it…The promise here is not gain without pain. It's the most gain for the least pain."(p. - 60)

"Attempting to master a language with a grammar book alone is too boring;" with a phrase book alone, too superficial; with cassettes alone, too fruitless (except with Pimsleur!); and with dictionary and newspaper alone, impossible. The multiple track attack makes your work pay off(p. - 61 & 62)

"Tradition-bound teachers would have problems with that kind of 'ice plunge,' a naked leap into a foreign language newspaper after only five lessons of grammar with nothing for help but a dictionary, which in many cases can't help because you won't know the various disguises (changing forms) of many of the words."(p. - 68)

"America is a nation of people who make straight A's in intermediate French and then get to Paris and realize they don't speak intermediate French!"(p. - 68)

"Are you presently armed with the right cassette course?…Unless your cassette was mislabeled and carries lessons in a language other than the one you'd like to learn, it's a good learning aid. It may not be the best. It may be far behind the best, but so what? It will offer you words and phrases in your target language with native accuracy in pronunciation."(p. - 71)

"Harnessing your hidden moments, those otherwise meaningless scraps of time you'd never normally think of putting to any practical use, and using them for language study&8212;even if it's no more than fifteen, ten, or five seconds at a time—can turn you into a triumphant tortoise."(p. - 74)

"Hidden moments will heal your deficiencies soon enough, but first let's talk about the unhidden moments", the study time that you've arranged to commit to your endeavor…Successful self-teaching is our objective. If you can take a whole hour every day and devote it to your studies, you're in an excellent position to make satisfying, even dramatic, progress. If you can devote a half hour a day, you're still poised for success…If you can't commit a regular block of time, if the best you can do is an hour here, a half hour there, and maybe a three hour block of time over the weekend, that's satisfactory, provided you keep it up and maintain momentum. Gardens unattended [sic] go to weed. Apples bitten into and abandoned turn brown. Likewise, your collection of language data—words, phrases, rules, and idioms—will dissolve into a worthless mass if not kept up.…Apportion as much time as you reasonably can and as regularly as you can, and then enjoy the magic as the hidden moments kick in.(p. - 75)

"Arrange your life so you will never be caught without something to study in your target language."(p. - 77)

"When you encounter a native speaker of your target language, and when you start a conversation in that language, three things are certain. YOU will be stuck for words you need but don't know. He will use words you don't understand. And you will make mistakes. Get in the habit of exploiting these moments to the hilt."(p. - 103)

"Native English speakers have more to gain from studying other languages than everybody else. Honor, love, cooperation, respect, advantage—they all shower on people in inverse proportion to their need to learn a language."(p. - 110)

"Two, four, six, eight years of high-school and college study in a foreign language, and still our American graduates can't tell whether the man on the radio speaking the language they 'learned' is declaring war or recommending a restaurant."(p. - 114)Issues Addressed by the Book:

This book address the problems with language learning that are encountered in high school and college classes, i.e., the approach is slow, boring and doesn't work.

Instead, the author proposes a system of self study that uses many tools and learning aids, especially the ones that the person already has, to develop a review and reinforcement system.

The most important issue is whether readers are sufficiently motivated to set up a system for learning a language, and then going through the expense of purchasing all the learning tools that the author recommends.The Book's Shortcomings:The author clearly knows what it takes to study and master a language. But, he doesn't say what a language teacher needs to do to help a classroom full of recalcitrant students.

Of course, the book is written for people who don't have the time or money to take a college or community education class. But, the book could have addressed how a language teacher might approach teaching language skills in the framework of our public school system.

In addition, the book could have addressed issues concerning how we should talk to children who speak a foreign language, rather than just how to talk to adults. This is important as many teacher now find children that speak languages other than English in their classrooms.

The last missing element in this book is a focus upon knowing the culture of the target language.

The author's focus upon the vocabulary and mechanics of language learning keeps us too busy to study the culture that adds richness, depth and meaning to that language. Comments:The "all out assault" on the learning of a language that the author recommends is probably beyond the motivation of most people.

Still, the concept of a multiple-track attack on the study of any subject is something that

And, if teachers promoted the multiple-track attack to all students so that students could pick their preferred learning styles, many students would learn a lot more.

Although this edition of the book is outdated in terms of the technology, the basic principles of language learning remain

valid and reliable.

The only things that might have changed are: The Internet provides all types of language resources

The computer can be used to record language pronunciation practice

CDs and MP3 players have replaced cassette programs

Digital Voice Recorders work better than tape recorders

But, despite technological advances, personal commitment, personal daily practice, and personal motivation remain the prime factors in learning a language. Summary: The author demonstrates a passion for learning languages that inspires learners of any content area. The author's philosophy of 1.) using every method and modality of learning, 2.) finding connections between what is already known, 3.) using every spare moment for learning and 4.) measuring progress provide a model for all types of learning.

Teachers that show their students how to make use of the personal learning styles for learning practice will provide their students with a life-long learning skill.

Barry Farber also lets his passion for languages show, and his passion is contagious. This is also the type of contagion that teachers need to infect their students with. Rating (Four Point scale): Useful - 4

Applicable - 4

Relevant - 4

Innovative - 2

Original - 2

Interesting - 3

Overall Rating - 3.2

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