

THE WORD Brain



MicroEdition

The Word Brain is about adults who want to speak and understand another language and, in particular, be able to

- read essays and newspapers
- understand TV news and documentary programmes
- understand everyday conversation

In order to achieve these goals, you have to **fight two major battles**: 1) learn up to 15,000 words and 2) listen attentively to human speech for 1,000 to 2,000 hours. Everything else comes essentially for free: writing as a bonus of reading, reading as a bonus of word learning, and good pronunciation as a bonus of listening.

The major battlefield is **word learning** and will absorb up to 80% of your total effort. For unrelated languages, for example when Europeans learn Arabic, Hindi or Chinese, 15,000 words need to be absorbed. In other circumstances – Italians learning Spanish – many words are similar between the two languages and the number of *truly new words* to be imported into your word brain is around 5,000. At 10 words per hour, adults should anticipate 500 hours to 1,500 hours of word learning. If you are young and your memory is at its peak, you will be able to compress this timeframe.

The second battlefield is **comprehension of speech**, which poses a triple challenge: 1) slicing speech into words (where do single words begin? where do they end?); 2) endowing these words with meaning by matching them with tens of thousands of words stored in your word brain; and 3) doing all this in real time and without giving it a second thought. (In comparison, reading is a *promenade* because you can take all the time you need, lingering on single words and going back and forth through a sentence.) In order to develop ultra-fast ‘speech sequencing abilities’, prepare for 1,000 to 2,000 hours of listening. You have two options: either you emigrate or, if you stay at home, you have to listen to the audio files of language manuals, audio books, podcasts, etc. What is the secret of your success? **Listening to the audio files 50 or 100 times!** Save precious time by listening in parallel to performing other activities such as commuting, doing sport, cooking, etc. In addition, stop watching TV in your native language and start watching TV in your future language.

For a start, don’t speak, just listen. Most languages have unfamiliar sounds, and to reproduce them faithfully takes time. During the first few months, concentrate on absorbing words, sounds and sentences. Only when you are familiar with your audio files should you start repeating the words and sentences. Imitate the sounds, in particular the length of the vowels and the melody of the sentences. Later, repeat the sentences in real time, with an interval of just one second. Use the same procedure – listening to and

reproducing speech with a one-second interval – with sentences from other sources such as audio books or TV.

Language teachers are less important than most people think. The thousands of words you need to learn are currently *outside* your word brain and must get *inside*. Nobody, except you, can do this job. Teachers won’t be helpful with speech recognition exercises either – audio books, Internet news and TV have supplanted teachers as prime speech sources. In today’s environment, the best role for a language teacher is probably that of a coach who prepares individual time schedules; recommends books, audio books and podcasts; demonstrates pronunciation pitfalls; and teaches successive grammar rounds. Your coach should have an intimate knowledge of language learning and must be a polyglot. Contrary to common belief, language teachers do not need to be native speakers. Make sure that you receive grammar lessons in your native language – your native language is by far the best tool for grasping and understanding new concepts.

To get the words you need, you will: 1) study one or two language manuals; 2) learn a compilation of frequently used words; and 3) spend at least 100 hours looking up new words in a dictionary. First, **learn the words of your manuals and check your knowledge**. The definition of *knowing a word?* Successful recall after one month of non-exposure. Most words need as many as 5 or 10 rehearsals. Compose two-column lists, putting your new and your native language face to face, and memorise the words again and again. Alternatively, use index cards or electronic word trainers (www.hiv.net/link.php?id=28). For difficult words, **spaced repetitions** can be useful: you discover a word on Day 0 and repeat it on Day 1, 3, 6, 10, 17, and 31. Any ‘failure to recall’ relegates it to Day 0.

Once you have finished your language manuals, buy a **compilation** of the most frequently used words and study the book at least twice (example of a 7,000-word compilation: www.hiv.net/link.php?id=16; all compilations should offer audio files with the pronunciation of the words). Learning thousands of words out of context is not an exciting prospect; however, the alternative, extracting 10,000 words from dictionaries, isn’t sexy either.

Finally, read essays, newspapers or novels. Reading is full immersion *par excellence* – a paradise for word brains. Underline the new words, search for them in a **1-kg-dictionary**, write them down and learn them. (20 to 50 words per day is a feasible long-term goal.) Don’t forget to mark the words you have looked up – you may decide one day to repeat the words that you are supposed to know.

The major burden of language learning is word learning. The time needed for word learning is quantifiable. As a consequence, **language learning is a variable of time**. People can decide that they have no time to learn another language, but they can’t say anymore that they have no talent for it. These findings might motivate people to learn new languages.