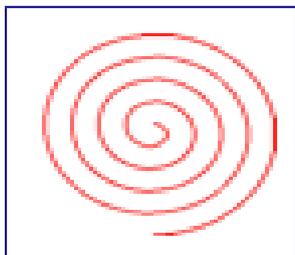


Spiraling Outward



What Is Important To Learn First?

(A Spiralling Walk Outwards) (version 2.0)

by Greg Thomson

What is Your Goal?

Some language learners wonder which words and skills are important to learn first.

First of all, let's agree that you want to learn language to a *high* level of ability. If your goal were to learn just enough language for a one-month vacation in the country, you might approach matters quite differently. That is, the first forty hours of learning "a whole language" might be different from forty hours aimed at learning "just a bit of a language" and no more. Our concern in this training is to teach you how to start down a path of learning a *whole language*.

About Frequency, Commonality

As you go about learning a whole language, during your first 300 hours of language sessions you might hope to learn 1,800 or 2,100 vocabulary (that would be an average of 6-7 words for each hour of language session). Now if someone were learning his/her first 1,800 English words, and asked you to rate certain English words as to their importance, how would you rate the words "sneeze" and "bindery"? Probably everyone would agree that "sneeze" is an essential word to know, while "bindery" is something you might know only if you acquire quite a large vocabulary, let's say, 20,000 words. "Sneeze" is a word that any four-year-old child would know. "Bindery" is a word that even many high school students might not know.

No doubt, "sneeze" is used more frequently than "bindery". However, when was the last time you actually said the word "sneeze" in everyday speech? In fact, many people may not have said it for a month or more. Unfortunately, though, in order to be able to carry on reasonable relationships in your new language, you will constantly need to be using words that you might only use once a week, or once a month. There are relatively few words that you use constantly, and some of those you cannot really learn at the beginning.

The English word "the" is an example. The use of "the" and "a" in English comes with a high level of English ability, and so even though they are extremely frequent, they aren't too useful to learners at first. On the other hand, words like "and", "or", "but", "so", "because" are relatively

frequent. However, those are words that join other words together, so before you can use them, you at least want to know a handful of words that they can join! There are other very high-frequency words that may be “easy” to learn, such as question words like “Who, where, why”. For the most part, however, you need invest the effort to learn the names of the common objects, actions, attributes (like color, size) of objects, words for feelings and emotions, and other highly concrete, experiential words.

It would be great if today you could learn only words that you for sure were going to need to use later today and tomorrow. However, there really is no way to avoid the need to learn hundreds of basic words that will allow you to talk about the *most common aspects* of everyday life and experience. Thus the big pay-off comes after learning hundreds of words, not after learning twenty. Sorry.

Simple Strategy to Learn the New World



It helps to have a strategy for covering the words of everyday experience in your learning. This strategy should spring out of the essence of language learning: ***“Don’t learn the language. Rather, relearn the world as it is known and shared by the people whose language you are learning.”***

Begin by trying to think of which words every four-year-old would know. These will be the words that everyone in your new culture will be using every day.

One way to discover these words is to allow your mind to walk in a spiral, starting from your own body, in your own home, with your own family and friends... then walking in wider and wider sweeps, gradually spiraling out through the world around you, experiencing life in your host community, and learning to talk about it.

What is Important to Learn First?

Walking in an outward spiral



1. Basic words for people.
2. Words about my body.
3. Feelings, emotions, values.
4. Objects, experiences in this part of the house.
5. Objects, experiences in the whole house.
6. Common objects, experiences outside.
7. Objects, people, experiences in the neighborhood, shopping, working.
8. Objects, people, experiences in the region.
9. Things, experiences more removed in space and time.
10. Abstract, outside of things we touch, see, feel.