

Review of Barry Farber's "Do-it-yourself" Learning of Any Language

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by

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Wow! A fast way to "Learning Any Language" is an exciting promise. I wondered how Barry Farber would accomplish this important skill that everyone would like to acquire—and do it without a teacher.

It was a two hour long program and I stayed with it to the end because Barry is an entertaining speaker. I had the feeling he could sell anything from automobiles to Bibles.

Within a few minutes it was apparent that he was selling a renovated version of grammar-translation. The audience of smiling faces imagined themselves speaking Italian or German or French. As Barry spoke, they became more impressed that, "Yes, I can do it if I just follow Barry's formula for success."

At the breaks, the viewer watched people explain how their understanding of Greek or Italian or Spanish enriched their experience in other countries. We never heard, however, that any of those giving a testimonial acquired the foreign language with Barry's approach. In fact, we are not sure that Barry acquired "26 foreign languages" with the grammar-translation formula. We are not sure he acquired even one of those languages because, except for a few isolated words, he did not speak in any language but English.

Barry plays against a "straw man" which he calls the "drill and kill" approach in school that "does not work."

Barry's formula for success

Barry recommends the following shopping list of "tools" for "do it yourself" learning of another language:

1. A grammar book

Get a grammar book and learn the first five lessons because grammar is the "glue" that holds vocabulary together. Grammar makes sense of the individual words. Those grammar patterns are important, which I can certainly agree with.

I did not quite understand how one gets a grammar book and then assimilates grammatical patterns without understanding the phonology of the alien language, that is, how words and phrases are pronounced. But apparently it is easy because Barry dismissed this task with a wave of the hand and moved on to the next item.

2. A good dictionary

This is essential for the next item on his list which is a newspaper or magazine in the target language. Be sure the dictionary translates from the foreign language into English or the reverse.

3. A newspaper or magazine in the foreign language.

Now he advises the smiling faces in the audience to read the first paragraph only. That is, attempt to read the first paragraph. You will discover, he explained, that most of the words are strange to you but that is fine because it was written for the native speaker. This is great because it does not “condescend to the beginner” the way textbooks and instructors do. It does not try to communicate in “baby talk,” so to speak.

Now, because the words are unfamiliar, highlight each with colored marking pencils and then look up the item in the dictionary. Don't be surprised if you do not find the words exactly as they appear in print. For example, the word may be “vivimous” in the newspaper but it is “vivar” in the dictionary. Don't despair. This is the fun part of it, trying to decipher the meaning.

4. Flashcards

This is the “lasso for throwing a rope around words, pulling them in and making them your own.” Write the foreign words on one side of the card and the English translation on the other side.

Harness hidden moments

Now here is a secret that will make you welcome the wait in any line. For example, while others are in line grumbling and weaving back and forth on one foot and then the other nervously waiting at the super market checkout, you are shuffling through your flashcards internalizing more words in the target language. Barry says, “I look forward to waiting in lines and so will you.” This is really a creative suggestion that will work, in my opinion, if one is able to pronounce the foreign vocabulary items.

Another hidden moment is the time you dial a phone number and there is a wait time for a technician or customer representative. While others are tapping on the desk with a pencil or their fingers as they wait, you are assimilating more vocabulary with your flash cards.

Don't memorize it

Here Barry recommends a fine book that I also recommend by Harry Lorraine and Jerry Lucas called “The Memory Book.” I have often said that asking people to memorize is a left brain task that will require multiple trials. A better strategy is to achieve one-trial learning by shifting from the left to the right brain, which is the secret of “The Memory Book.”

The trick here is to create a link between the foreign word and the meaning with a picture, the wilder and crazier, the better. For example, the word for fork in Spanish is “tenedor.” One scene you might create is this: Picture a door with 10 A printed in large letters and below the image of a fork. The right brain is looking for pictures and patterns. If you can create this link, the item can often be internalized in one exposure.

Finally Barry closes with the upbeat advice to “Use the language and have fun with it!” to which I say, “Absolutely” and “Amen.”

Summary

Every tool Barry is recommending will work beautifully if students are prepared with a silent period of a few weeks enjoying instant success in understanding any language with my Total Physical Response or TPR. That is the missing element in Barry's grammar-translation program. A flash card approach without TPR is slow-motion word-by-word understanding of the target language that does not work for most people!.

Without TPR to help people of all ages immediately internalize any new vocabulary or new grammatical feature, the evidence is that 96 percent will experience failure and conclude, "I guess I am no good at foreign languages. If only I had the patience to continue with Barry's formula, maybe I could have learned another language."

* * * * *

An Invitation to the Reader

If you've tried Barry's formula for learning a language or any other commercial program for learning another language on your own, please tell me about your experience.

- What program did you buy?
- Did you have a specific need for the language?
(What was it?)
- Did you complete the program? If not, why not?
- How would you rate your skill in the new language after working through the program?
- How old were you at the time?
- Would you recommend the program to a friend?
- Any other comments or suggestions for others who want to learn a language on their own?
- Do I have your permission to quote you?

Thanks for sharing your experience!

Sincerely,
James J. Asher
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