

The Birkenbihl-Approach to Language Learning

Let's begin by contrasting it with traditional language learning.

I. The Classic Approach: 4 Steps

Please note that many so-called “modern” methods involve some of the same problems (for instance when learners are supposed to speak from the first moment). Therefore most “modern” approaches (including “Superlearning”) present some of the same difficulties to the learner.

Step 1: Learning vocabulary

Problem: Learners are supposed to pronounce (at least to mumble) new words of which they do not yet know the proper sound.

Typical Examples: Germans learning English might pronounce silent letters, learning [KNAIF] for “knife” or [WRAIT] for “write”.

Words containing new phonemes

(e.g. the “th”) might be totally butchered. One of my seminar participants told us how he had originally learned to say [ALTUF] for “although”!

Danger: wrong pronunciation leads to two disadvantages:

1. When learners hear the word later they cannot recognise it (because the correct pronunciation is unknown).
 2. Learners will not be understood later (due to wrong pronunciation).
- Please keep in mind that it is very difficult to unlearn and retrain later, once certain typical mistakes have been identified.

Step 2: Attempt to understand the lesson

Problem: Learners experience difficulties because even if vocabulary has been learned well, the words have been learned as individual units (e.g. “put” with several possible translations into the native tongue of learner) while now in context only one of these possibilities describes the meaning. Which one is it this time?

And if learners have not learned the vocabulary well they will feel helpless, frustrated, even “stupid” and conclude firstly: language learning is very difficult, and secondly: “I have no talent for languages”.

Danger: This creates negative expectations which will later become “true” (self fulfilling prophecy) and thus reinforce such beliefs.

I repeat: It is very difficult to unlearn those beliefs later. That is the reason why it is much more difficult to get people started with the Birkenbihl-Approach than to keep them going later (while normally the opposite is true: people start with enthusiasm which fizzles out rather quickly).

Step 3: Attempt to pronounce (read out loud)

Problem: Learners are supposed to pronounce right from the start. Either during the learning of vocabulary or during class (speaking the target language from the first moment). While this approach is believed to be particularly “modern” it is not brain-friendly. Consider that babies listen to language for months before they try to imitate some of the sounds heard over and over while we expect language learners to immediately imitate sounds they are not yet familiar with.

Danger: Learners will not only pronounce badly (or wrongly) they will also associate the uncomfortable unfamiliarity with feelings of frustration and failure. These unpleasant feelings are then closely associated with the target language (or with language learning per se) creating the “negative learning attitude” so many teachers/parents describe as the prime reason for bad results.

Step 4: Practice (Grammar exercises)

Problem: Learners are supposed to “enjoy” exercises of a nature that they generally despise.

N.B. Less than 8% of the people ENJOY grammar exercises – even in their native tongue.

Danger: Further experiences of inability and frustration deepen dislike of target language (or language learning in general).

II. Basic differences of the Birkenbihl-Approach to the traditional methods:

1. Learners have familiarised themselves with each particular aspect BEFORE trying it actively for the first time.

For example: Learners will pronounce anything for the first time in the FOURTH learning step, after learners fully UNDERSTANDING the meaning (Step 2) and being THOROUGHLY FAMILIARISED with the sound (step 3 - passive learning, see below).

2. Learners are always engaged with only ONE single aspect of learning at any given time: in Step 1: Understanding the MEANING of the words in context (no isolated words).

in Step 2: Associating the SOUND of the words with their MEANING.

in Step 3: Anchoring these sounds firmly in the SUBCONSCIOUS during a PASSIVE LEARNING PHASE: Learners listen to small portions of the lesson over and over while doing other things. They are NOT to listen actively: PASSIVE LISTENING is a BACKGROUND ACTIVITY which does not take up precious time. Passive listening can go on while watching TV, reading, learning other subjects etc.

3. Learners only learn what they WANT to learn. The minimum goal is:

- Understanding the spoken language

and for some people this is enough (e.g. for watching satellite TV).

Each learner decides individually which of the following three skills they are interested in learning too:

- Speaking the language

- Reading the language

- Writing the language.

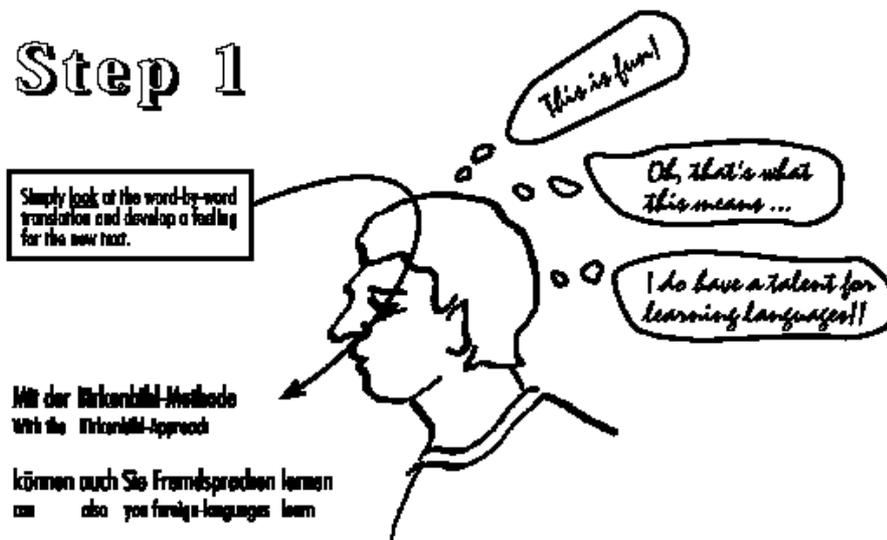
These three learning tasks will NOT happen before the fourth learning step, after UNDERSTANDING the MEANING and RECOGNIZING the SOUND of a particular text (lesson) has become EASY.

next III. Birkenbihl Approach: 4 different Steps

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Step 1: UNDERSTANDING THE MEANING OF THE WORDS

Step 1



PROCEDURE: The lesson is presented with a word-by-word translation whereby the translation appears below the word. Example (target language: Italian, source language: English):

Parla italiano?
you-speak Italian ?

The task of the learner is simply to read the word-by-word translation (optimal: highlighting it with a felt tip marker) to get the overall feeling for the lesson and visualize its contents (integrating both hemispheres of the brain in the learning process). Thus learners learn the CONTENTS of the lesson in their native tongue before attempting anything else. N.B. If learners already have considerable knowledge they may highlight only those passages which they DID NOT understand immediately, “jumping” to the word-by-word translations here while reading the target language where understanding is already easy. But the beginner will at first concentrate totally on the word-by-word translation because none of the words of the target language are familiar at this point.

Advantages:

1. INSTANT COMPREHENSION creates positive feelings. The word-by-word translation makes the new language transparent (in more ways than one).
2. The STRUCTURE OF THE TARGET LANGUAGE can be understood without any grammar rules (analogous to the process of learning the first language). In the example given above (you-speak Italian?) the learners learn “subconsciously” NOT to expect the typical “do” of their native English (Do you speak Italian?). Thus they will later NOT try to force the English structure onto the Italian language.
3. The word-by-word Translation is something like a crutch which will have its use only to “get the learner going” and can be “thrown away” later while traditional language learning “glues together” the word pair (e.g. Tisch = table) so that years later learners still “hang onto” the translation. With the word-by-word translation, however, learners learn very early to THINK in the target language so that the native “equivalent” will be “forgotten” quickly as learners progress. Thus they not only learn to think in the target language quickly but they have also thus created the necessary platform for later when they will THINK, FEEL, SPEAK, READ and/or WRITE IN THE TARGET LANGUAGE without constantly clinging to their native tongue.
4. The Pseudo-Translation CAN BE QUITE FUNNY. The rule of thumb says: **Either** a sentence (phrase, idiom) is similar to the native language **or** it is funny. Thus: If a structure seems particularly funny to the learners they recognise the structure of the target language clearly. This process of learning “happens by-the-way” without any conscious “work” on the part of the learner.

Example: The Japanese use certain particles which follow nouns according to certain grammatical rules. If we forget the rules we simply want to get used to them in their proper position so that after a while "little words" will "feel" as natural for us as for a Japanese speaker. In the Birkenbihl-Approach we simply retain these particles in the word-by-word-translation. The sentence "Do Japanese speak Japanese?" presents itself like this:

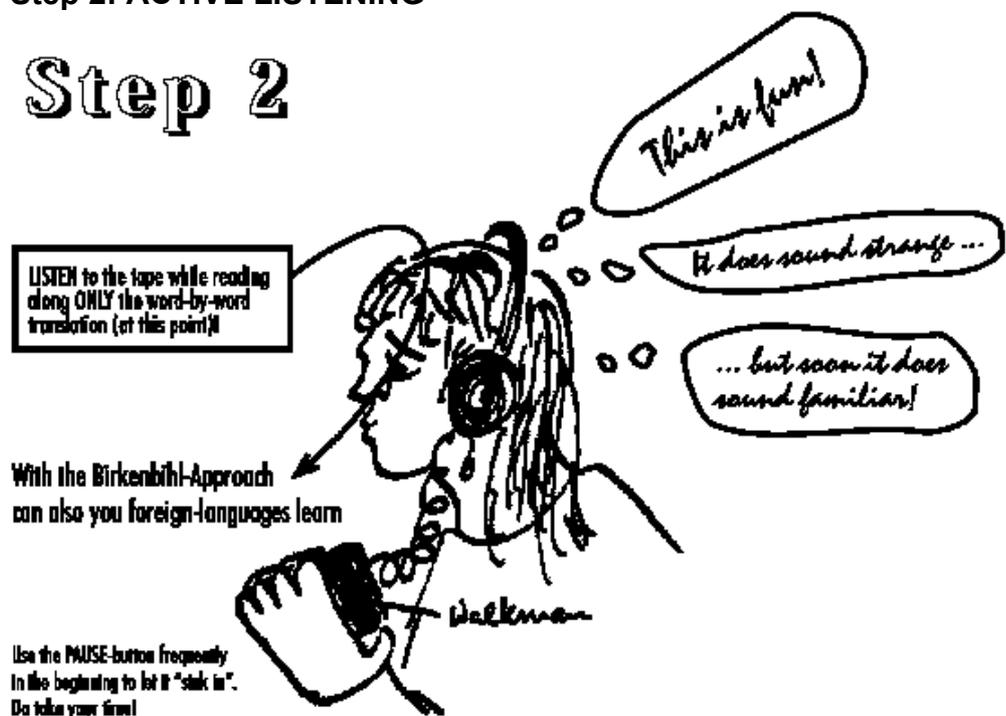
日本人は日本語をはなしますか

Nihon-jin- wa nihon-go- o hana- shimas ka?

Japan-person(s) WA Japanese- language O speak- do is-that-so?

Step 2: ACTIVE LISTENING

Step 2



With the Birkenbihl-Approach can also you foreign-languages learn

Use the PAUSE-button frequently
 In the beginning to let it "sink in".
 Do take your time!
 The time you seem to "waste" now
 you will save a thousandfold later! Take it easy. Relax! Enjoy your growing confidence!

PROCEDURE: The learner NOW LISTENS TO THE TEXT FROM TAPE while reading "along" the word-by-word translation and visualising the content.

In other words: Learners only read words in their native tongue at this point. They will not simultaneously try to consciously register the spelling of the foreign words. Thus a learner might read "table" and hear the foreign sound [TISH] simultaneously.

Step 2 (Active Listening) means listening phrase-by-phrase, frequently pushing the PAUSE-button to let the just heard sound "sink in".

Repeated Active Listening is easy and accompanied by steadily growing feelings of success because learners rapidly understand more and more.

As words and phrases begin to SOUND FAMILIAR learners will push the PAUSE-button less and less until they can listen to the whole lesson without any stops.

Active Listening is "finished" when the learner UNDERSTANDS EVERY WORD WITHOUT THE HELP OF THE WORD-BY-WORD TRANSLATION.

Advantages:

1. At this point in time it is EQUALLY EASY for the learner to listen to this text in the target language as it would have been to hear it in his native tongue. THIS TOTAL COMPREHENSION is normal (with the Birkenbihl-Approach) while with traditional methods

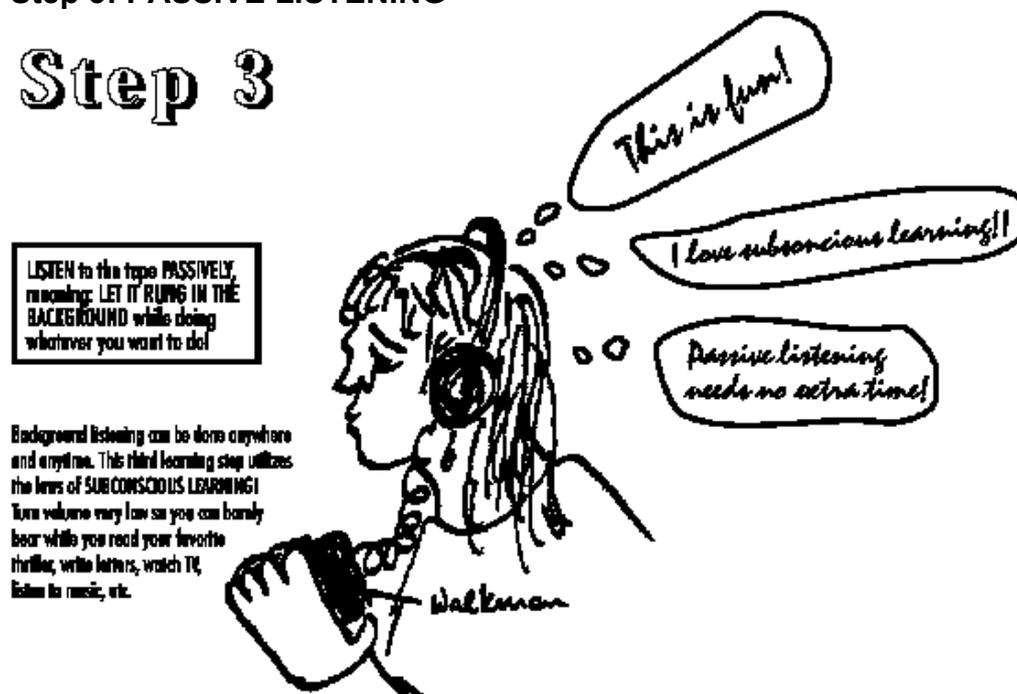
total comprehension is an unrealistic goal, seldom reached. That's why billions of students worldwide are unable to understand languages they've supposedly learned for years, (often investing 6 to 14 hours of their precious time per week).

2. All words have been learned within a meaningful context (as once when learning the first language). If the word "put" appears with one specific meaning in line three and if the same word appears 10 lines later (and again in the following lesson) in another context the learner gradually recognises the many meanings of "put" without ever trying to learn the word with a number of its meanings outside of context as in traditional learning (e.g. "to put" = (hin-)setzen, (hin-)/(ab-)legen, (auf-)stellen, (an-)bringen ...)

3. It is extremely gratifying to watch the growing SELF-CONFIDENCE of the learners. Within very little time they are able to understand more and more of the target language thus learning on the meta-level that they ARE ABLE TO LEARN FOREIGN LANGUAGES. Our experience has shown that most learners not only progress rapidly in their chosen target language but that soon they even start a second and third foreign language because it makes them feel good to prove to themselves how capable they are. Some of our clients call it "getting high on learning!".

Step 3: PASSIVE LISTENING

Step 3



PROCEDURE: Short portions of the text are listened to repeatedly but "passively", meaning, without consciously listening at all. During that time the learner is engaged in other activities.

N.B. We produce special audio cassettes for our clients which offer three minutes on each side so that they can copy three or six minute "portions" of their lessons and then "run" them endlessly with auto-reverse players (walkman on the go, hi-fi at home). In the meantime courses began to appear on **CD** so that it has become even more convenient to repeat a certain part without making working copies onto tapes. The tapes with the material for passive listening will run in the background. The volume will be so soft that one can barely hear the tape (independent of other sounds in the room such as TV, music or whatever).

Advantages:

1. The subconscious will be able to get used to the pronunciation by constant exposure. This step imitates the phase in which we were surrounded by our native tongue in our childhood.

N.B. Each phase of passive listening is like a miniature vacation into a country where our target language is spoken. The more time we listen passively the quicker we will gain

mastery of the target language.

2. Learners do not have to “invest” one minute of their precious time for this passive listening. They can listen by-the-way-ish while doing certain routine jobs (cleaning the house, going shopping, etc) or they can actively do other mental work like studying for an academic subject (we call it PARALLEL-LEARNING) or they can read their favorite novels or even watch a thriller on TV.

3. Despite the fact that learners will NOT consciously listen during passive listening periods they will sometimes catch some phrases (e.g. during a silent moment in the TV-film one is watching). During those moments the learner notices how the material seems more and more familiar which strengthens his/her CONFIDENCE in the learning process.

These short moments are often accompanied by intense feelings of JOY and self-confidence. Thus the “old programmes” of traditional learning (I am unable to learn) will gradually be replaced by “new programmes” (I can too!) which will resolve psychological blocks in the mind.

Experience has shown that these new feelings of success will often generalise into other learning tasks because the learner is gaining considerable self-confidence in the process.

Step 4: Further learning activities

Step 4

Depending on WHAT YOU WANT TO LEARN you will now actively:

- speak the target language
- read the target language and/or
- write the target language



With the Birkenbihl-Approach you only learn what you want to learn. IF LISTENING (you understand) is enough for you (e.g. to watch satellite-TV) steps 1-3 will be enough. If you want to SPEAK and/or READ and/or WRITE the target language, you will learn those abilities in step 4 (since you are usually in contact with the material). Thus you are only in contact with one single aspect of any given moment. Thus it's ALWAYS EASY and FUN.

As mentioned above the learner has now totally mastered the following aspects: a) understanding the MEANING of the words as heard(from tape) and b) familiarising oneself thoroughly with the SOUND. If understanding is all one wants, the first three steps (per lesson) are enough (e.g. to watch satellite TV).

Advantage: The final fourth step will teach speaking, reading and/or writing the target language, whichever abilities this particular learner wishes to acquire. There are numerous possibilities, let me just mention a few:

e.g. SPEAKING the target language

a) The CHORUS-Method:

Step 4a: speaking



Listen to the lesson with headphones while speaking “in chorus” with the tape. At first the volume of the speakers is turned high while you speak softly “along”. Then after some practice you gradually lower the volume of the native speakers in your ear while you speak with growing certainty and louder until in the end you do not need the natives (on tape) anymore.

Incidentally: At this point learners are generally able to recite the lesson by heart. This means: Anything anybody in the lesson might be saying (or thinking) our learner is able to say (or think) with absolute certainty in the target language!

Some learners wish to record what they speak onto another cassette. Please do so only at the end of your fourth learning step (when you think you have mastered this (part of) the lesson). It is important not to record too early (as it is done in traditional language laboratory exercises) because the native speaker on tape must remain your MODEL (not your own first attempts).

b) SHADOW SPEAKING

If learners do not “dare” to try the chorus method they might like to try Shadow Speaking: They will listen to the tape and speak approx. one to two syllables later than the native speakers they are listening to.

N.B. Learn this technique first in your native tongue. It takes a few minutes to get used to it. The process is similar to the way a translator speaks when “chasing” the voice of the person whose message he is translating.

The technique of Shadow Speaking is particularly helpful when the target language is totally different in tonality from the native language (e.g. when English speakers want to learn Chinese).

c) FILL-IN-THE-BLANKS (speaking)

Photocopy interesting parts of the lesson and paint over some words with tipp-ex. Later recite the text filling in the blanks.

Experience has shown that this exercise leads to very satisfying feeling of success because it's so easy (due to the great preparation of steps 1 – 3 beforehand)!

e.g. READING the target language

ACTIVE LISTENING WITH A DIFFERENCE

Learners will repeat step 2 but this time they will – for the first time – follow the words in the target language with their eyes (not the word-by-word translation). This time the translation

will be seen “from the corner of the eye” while the attention lies fully on the word in the target language.

In the beginning learners will stop as often as it feels comfortable; after a while no stops are necessary. Finally learners can READ ALONG in the target language with the original text (without the word-by-word translation) and after that they can READ the text without listening to the tape while a) understanding everything and b) knowing the proper sounds of the words even if they do not (at that time) practice speaking actively.

e.g. WRITING the target language

a) DICTATION: Use tape for dictation exercises

b) FILL-THE-BLANKS (in writing) Photocopy interesting parts of the lessons and paint over some words with tipp-ex. Later copy the text by hand and try to fill in the blanks. At first you'll have to check the words in the original text but soon you will be able to fill in the blanks quite nicely.

Experience has shown that this exercise leads to very satisfying growth of the feeling of self-worth.

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