

Reflections on being a beginner again

Keith Heywood

Homerton College, University of Cambridge

The interest in being a total beginner is that, after making a little progress, one can think back and analyse *how* one achieved it. A recent visit to Finland gave me the opportunity to start to learn a language of which I had no prior knowledge. It was to be a holiday and I was determined not to do any formal learning, so I deliberately didn't find out anything in advance about the grammar, pronunciation or spelling. All I knew was two words (*sauna* and *Suomi*) and that Finnish has 17 cases. I decided to ask my hosts, Tiina and Matti Kaartina, to say one new item each day which I would repeat, memorise and use. I had of course seen words at the airport (exit, baggage reclaim, taxis etc.) and heard some words on television (news, minus 5 degrees), which I guessed but had not re-used and they were forgotten within minutes if not seconds, because most of them bore no resemblance to any language I knew.

EXPLANATION OF ANNOTATIONS

Gr indicates points at which I asked for grammatical explanations.

NG indicates points at which I learnt grammatical examples without explanation.

A1, A2 etc. refer to insights into the learning process, in the footnotes at the end of the article.

B1, B2 etc. refer to insights into motivation, also in the footnotes.

I started with 'thank you' (*kiitos*). There was a lot to learn about it:

- How to approximate the pronunciation of each syllable
- Which syllable to stress
- Which letters represented a sound not used in English
- Not to be surprised by quite a long reply which presumably meant something like "you're welcome".

I didn't learn whether it was one word or two,

formal or casual, a verb or a noun or a pronoun or an amalgam of these (**A1**). I used it frequently, with our hosts, in shops, on the street, when visiting. It gave a remarkable amount of pleasure to me because the hearers were always so pleased to hear it, and because I was able to show, at the end of a conversation conducted in English and often exclusively for my benefit, that I appreciated the help given and didn't take it for granted that others spoke English (**B1**). Not all items were as useable as this one, and some were very hard and humbling to memorise. Here are the items in the order I received, deliberately imitated and used them:

<u>Day</u>	<u>Finnish + English</u>	<u>Effect; How used</u>
1	<i>Kiitos</i> – thank you	delight; functional, no idea of grammar
	<i>korvapuusti</i> – cinnamon cake	how will I remember it?

I really liked these small cakes; we were given a small supply of them as a present and it mattered to our hosts that they knew what they had given us (**A2**). But there are not a lot of opportunities to say the word, so after several memory failures over a period of a few minutes, I had to resort to a mnemonic. The beginning sounded like 'corn'. That only helped me to remember the beginning! Then I realised I needed a mnemonic for each syllable, and any apparently tenuous link seemed to help. I went for French '*va*' (=go) and German '*Puste*' (slang for 'breath'), the idea being that you eat *corn* when you are *going* and are out of *breath*. It also ends in *-i*, but then many Finnish words seem to, so that was easy to remember. Totally corny (**A3**). Excuse the pun, but it did in fact work, and now, some weeks later, I use the word *korvapuusti* without thinking of that mnemonic (**A4**).

"I realised I needed a mnemonic for each syllable"

<u>Day</u>	<u>Finnish + English</u>	<u>Effect: How used</u>
2	<i>anteeksi</i> – excuse me NG	just didn't sound right; I was embarrassed because it reminded me of Andrex toilet rolls.

I thought I needed it for going into town. It proved satisfying soon after, when Matti didn't know the way and wound down the window to say to a pedestrian '*Anteeksi Missä on*' (name of a road)'. Later that day it also cropped up in the middle of a conversation in a TV soap (B2).

I used it to attract people's attention, before asking whether they could speak English. It took most of a week(!) before I associated it in my mind with kind helpful replies rather than shock at the mention of toilet rolls out of the context (A5).

missä on veeseen – where is the WC NG. The Finnish for 'toilet' was too difficult to learn quickly. I still didn't find 'veeseen' easy until I realised it was like 'WC', which was not obvious due to stress on the first syllable.

I had actually wanted to say, "Excuse me please. Could you tell me where the toilet is?" but that was too much to learn at one go. If this short version was preceded by '*anteeksi*' and an apologetic smile, it didn't sound abrupt (A6). I needed mnemonics again, but I won't bore you with them.

Now it felt like a breakthrough, because I started feasting my linguistic appetite practising asking the way to all the names of buildings I recognised as we drove along (*pankki* – bank, *posti* – post office) Gr. Only after that did I check how this comes to mean 'where is the...?' It doesn't, because '*missä*', which sounded like two words, is one word meaning 'where', and '*on*' means 'is' (or 'has!'), and Finnish does not use articles. That was really satisfying to find out (B3).

So I had adapted and re-used a structure without needing to analyse it (B4).

I tried the question out as soon as we arrived at the family we were visiting. The lady smiled and pointed, but suggested I ask her 8-year-old daughter, for practice. She didn't show any surprise or appreciation, and of course why should she? At the age of 8 it must be the most natural thing in the world for everyone to speak your language. I was quite disappointed (A7). In the TV soap I recognised '*Missä hän on*' and it obviously meant 'Where is he?' GR. I asked about the word order. Apparently it sounds odd to end a sentence with a pronoun.

päivää - good day

I really appreciated being able to start a conversation with this in shops, but after not using it for a few hours I couldn't remember it. I couldn't think of a mnemonic and felt quite ashamed that I couldn't remember the equivalent of '*Guten Tag*' (A8).

yksi, kaksi - one, two

I decided to learn numbers 1 to 10, but it was too many and I remembered less than if I had been more modest (A9).

<u>Day</u>	<u>Finnish + English</u>	<u>Effect: How used</u>
3	<i>kolme</i> - three <i>päivää</i> - good day	I had had difficulty on Day 2 because the initial consonant sounded more like 'h' than 'k' (A10). heard several times, and I now learnt it.

Most of days 3, 4 and 5 I apparently learnt nothing. - we were busy (skiing, sauna and snowbaths!) and there was less time for reflection - but it transpired in the evening of Day 5, when I started making the notes on which this article is based, that my passive knowledge had increased considerably through being exposed to a lot of target language:

<i>Karoliina</i> -	Caroline
<i>Juha</i> -	male first name
<i>Tarja</i> -	female first name
<i>tee</i> -	tea
<i>kaksikymmentä markkaa</i> -	20 marks (currency). Seen on banknotes.
<i>viisikymmentä markkaa</i> -	50 marks. Ditto
<i>kirkko</i> -	church. Seen on postcard
<i>rak</i> -	1400 - built 1400. Ditto
<i>Jeesus otetaan ristiltä</i> -	Jesus is taken from the cross (description of mural) NG (A11).

Day 5 Gr I now asked about the grammar of the above sentence. There appears to be a passive form of the verb; '*ristiltä*' is an example of one of the 17 cases in Finnish - each case seemed simply to be a suffix which had the meaning of a preposition. That removed considerable dread from my mind - no genders, no articles, what bliss! (A12)

It was at this point in time that I decided to write this list. Strangely, from here onwards I made far less effort to ask for language. We were now living in a college, and often in large groups, most people speaking English for our sakes, but Finnish always being encountered (spoken by the catering staff, by people we met briefly, and on television and public notices). It would have disturbed conversations to ask for help, and events were often unexpected - you don't try to speak Finnish when you want to know if the hoofmarks in the snow are from a wild elk, or if the ladder into the frozen lake is safe!

Day 8 There was a good opportunity for questions during the less exciting parts of the cross-country Olympic skiing on television.

huomenta - good morning Gr: I asked if this contained the word for 'good' or for 'morning, and

"I started feasting my linguistic appetite"

was told that it was the partitive of ‘morning’. I then desperately searched my memory for a word that I could make partitive, and came up with:

korvapuustia - a piece of cinnamon cake. It proved recognisable, but my spelling had to be corrected (B5).

teetä - some tea. The spelling again had to be corrected, and they told me this word was irregular. The spelling change was due to the need to change vowel sounds to make them closer to the sound of other vowels in the same word. I didn’t feel able to take this on board yet because there were not enough examples for me to see what was the rule and what was the exception (B6). Gr I asked about ‘from the cross’ (*ristiltä*), and it was confirmed that *-iltä* was a suffix meaning ‘from the’. I tried to say ‘from the bank’ and it was nearly right:

pankkilta (no accent if the suffix follows ‘a’ in the stem). They then gave me:

pankista - out of the bank

teehen - with the tea

teesä - in the tea

teestä - out of the tea

NG These were little help to me, because there was no clearly discernible pattern, and I realised that if I had not been ‘talking grammar’, I would not have come across such a collection of words all at once. What happens when we meet words naturally in conversation, is that we either see a grammatical phenomenon in *one* new word which is the same as the phenomenon in one or more other words we already know, or that we see an exception to a previously noted grammatical phenomenon in *one* new word (B7).

As the judges awarded points for the skiing on television, I noticed numbers that I recognised, and also many ending in *-kymmentä*, but by the time I noticed the *-kymmentä*, the sound had gone and I couldn’t recall what preceded it, in order to work out what the whole utterance meant. But it kept on happening and eventually I realised it was the equivalent of English *-ty* on twenty, thirty etc. (B8). How humiliating! I had ‘learnt’ it on Day 5 and written it down (in fact I had only learnt to read and copy it), but only after repeatedly hearing it did I learn to listen to it (A13). (On reading this article, you may cope better than I did, because you are *reading* it in both instances. Furthermore, you have *read* it twice in quick succession, whereas I read it on my Day 5 and *heard* it on my Day 8.)

Equally amazing is the fact that I also noticed at the same time, *and equally quickly*, that many numbers ended in *-tojstä*, even though I had not previously read or written it, and worked out that this is the equivalent of the English *-teen* in thirteen, fourteen etc. So reading and writing *-kymmentä* had not made it easier to recognise in listening than *-tojstä* which I had not written or read (A14).

seetsämän -

seven

kadeeka - eight

ydeeka - nine

tojstä - ten

Day 9 *nellia* - four

I learnt ‘six’, and counted with it several times, but did not write it down, and now it is forgotten (A14).

I asked how to say “I’m going to the sauna” (future): *meneen saunaan*. Then I couldn’t resist asking for other persons of the verb and writing them down:

****meneet saunaan* - you’re going to the sauna

hän menee saunaan - she / he is going to the sauna

menemme saunaan - we are going to the sauna

menette saunaan - you (pl.) are going to the sauna.

The pronoun can be used but is not necessary, except in the 3rd person.

minä -

I

sinä -

you

hän -

he / she

me -

we

te -

you (informal plural); you (formal singular or plural)

he -

they

hän on menyt saunaan

he went to the sauna

hän on menossa saunaan

he is going to the sauna at this moment (present continuous)***

Everything listed between the two *** symbols was given to me orally and spelt for me in response to me asking how to say, ‘I’m going to the sauna’. As I type it up now, 25 days later, I realise that I do not remember a single one of the items between these symbols, except *‘minä’* and *‘sinä’*, which as I read them remind me of my host Matti saying and getting me to repeat *‘sinä ja minä’* for ‘you and me’ when he produced two cartons of juice on the cross-country skiing trip. On the other hand, I *cannot* remember ‘six’, which I learnt orally and used several times in counting. So reading enabled me to recall *‘sinä ja minä’* which I had met by listening and repeating and writing, but I could not recall ‘six’ which I had met by listening and repeating, but not written down. I know that listening helped me to recall what I had learnt by listening and repeating, and I am sure that if I heard the Finnish for ‘six’ now in a helpful context, I would recognise it (A14).

At dinner Tiina suggested she should do what she had done that morning when she spoke first in Finnish, then in English, asking me if I had had a good ski, but I did not even remember that she had spoken Finnish! Presumably what she had said before the English sounded so unlike the English that I didn’t associate the two versions. It would have been different if she had asked me in Finnish again at the end (A15).

I must have started to get some linguistic

“These were little help to me, because there was no clearly discernible pattern”

bearings:

- During TV time I noticed *Italialainen*, *Kuubalainen* and several other words with that ending. It clearly was the way to describe nationality.
- Whilst travelling we passed towns called *Korkeakoski* and, later, *Valkeakoski*. Matti told me they meant High River and White River.
- Tiina said, "Have a sweet, *kaksi tai kolme*". I was pleased I had recognised two words and guessed the third, so I translated "two or three". Once I had got over my delight I realised I hadn't retained the Finnish because my concentration transferred from repeating to translating. I had to ask for the Finnish for 'or', otherwise I wouldn't have had it for this list (A15).

And finally, three delightful words given to me by Matti in English sentences:

löyly - the waft of hot air that passes over your skin after tipping water on the stones in the sauna;

siisu - the feeling of energy, optimism and enthusiasm that one can have, for instance after a sauna; and

tuulatusukinna - a tiny window, too small for burglars, which can be left open to let fresh air into the triple-glazed houses (B9).

INSIGHTS INTO THE LEARNING PROCESS

A1 One word can easily involve as many as 7 different learning points.

A2 A name for a foreign food does not convey its unique flavour.

A3 We should not underestimate the value of *any* mnemonic, gesture, symbol, sound or other association which helps pupils to remember a word or its meaning.

A4 A mnemonic is only a *temporary* crutch.

A5 When pupils find a word funny, we can be reassured that they will get over it through constant use!

A6 It isn't necessary to teach the length of utterance which we, as fluent linguists, consider natural.

A7 This must be what it feels like to do pair work which is not communicative.

A8 Even repeatedly practised words may need to be demonstrated again after a lapse of time.

A9 Three new flashcards followed by a recap, then three more, is probably more effective than 6 new flashcards

A10 It is difficult to memorise what we can't correctly pronounce.

A11 Merely exposing children to target language, provided we keep their attention, *is* a teaching activity - it actually makes subsequent learning easier and quicker.

A12 Talking about grammar too soon is *demotivating*.

A13 Listening skills can only be learnt by listening, and it means a lot of exposure is needed in order *to learn* - a reason why taped material needs to be *taught*, and why listening comprehension tests do not in themselves *teach* very much.

A14 Writing for memorisation is often essential even when material is apparently orally secure. Writing it down before it is orally secure is little help. (See A10).

A15 English translations do not so much aid comprehension as obviate it, unless the target language is repeated after the English.

INSIGHTS INTO MOTIVATION

B1 Saying a single word can give great satisfaction if it has cultural or social value.

B2 Listening and understanding only the odd word can still be satisfying if there is visual interest.

B3 It may be inconvenient to have bright children asking for an analysis of a phrase, but a *quick* explanation need not harm the others and can really get fertile minds working.

B4 It *is* motivating to adapt a grammatical structure without even knowing there is anything grammatical in it.

B5 Just one chance to make up your own item makes having found a grammatical rule seem worthwhile.

B6 Gradual exposure to a rule is easier to cope with than the whole rule before we have enough evidence of its use - and not only easier but also more appetising.

B7 Grammatical examples out of a context and in unnatural quantities are not necessarily helpful.

B8 A listening task can be an open-ended learning activity as opposed to a closed testing activity.

B9 There is a delight in learning untranslatable words, *if* their significance can really be appreciated - I had experienced both of them. See also A2.

NOTES

It has to be acknowledged that these reactions are those of a trained linguist, but if I had these feelings and difficulties, how much more will British school beginners have them in learning German or French, which are equally unfamiliar.

"We should not underestimate the value of any mnemonic, gesture... which helps pupils to remember a word or its meaning"