

THE LANGUAGE FACTS AUDIO RECORDING: AN AID TO STUDENT MEMORY

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The second language learner is confronted with a host of tasks. In general terms one speaks of mastering the phonology, morphology and syntax of a language. Upon closer scrutiny it soon becomes apparent that the ability to master any of these components has one very important prerequisite—the ability to store and retrieve information, i.e. memory.

Retention is especially a problem in the initial stages of language acquisition¹ when the learner is faced with what some call the unpleasant-ries of language learning—the rote memorization of what must appear to the student as a virtually infinite number of “language facts,” examples of which include the meaning of basic vocabulary items, gender and plurals of nouns, principal parts of verbs, etc., not to mention the rules on how and when to use them.

The significance of memory in the acquisition of a foreign language is perhaps best demonstrated by the fact that two parts of a widely used foreign-language aptitude battery, the Modern Language Aptitude Test (MLAT), require an element of memory (Carroll and Sapon, 1959). In part one of the MLAT (Number Learning), the examinee is taught an artificial system of number expression via a tape-recording utilizing non-sense syllables. He is then asked to write the Arabic numeral equivalents of a list of three-digit numbers in the artificial system as they are spoken on the tape at a fairly rapid pace. In part five of the test (Paired Associates), the examinee studies a list of twenty-four “Kurdish-English” vocabulary equivalents for two minutes. In the next two minutes he practices recalling the English meanings. In the final four minutes he completes from memory a multiple-choice test of the presented vocabulary (Pimsleur, 1966).

On the basis of research conducted in the last fifteen years, Valette (1970) concludes that rote-memory (in addition to grammatical sensitivity and auditory ability) may be one of the three factors which determines aptitude for second language learning. Brown (1972) maintains that retention, or long term memory, is the crucial determiner of whether or not something has indeed been learned. And Pimsleur (1967) goes so far as to say that probably no aspect of learning a foreign language is more important than memory.

A glimpse at instructional materials, typical classroom teaching procedures, and evaluation and grading policies, also verify the importance of both short-and long-term memory. Textbooks at the elementary level are

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normally based on carefully-constructed lexical inventories and word frequency lists, a high percentage of which must be committed to active use if the student is to gain a reasonable degree of comprehension at subsequent stages. Many classroom activities—from structural drills to answering questions on a reading assignment—demand recall or language facts and information. And finally, it is difficult to imagine quizzes and tests which do not require a good deal of memorization.

All of this prompts the question of whether printed materials alone are sufficient to help students memorize what is expected of them. In an effort to supplement the printed page for Elementary German students at Purdue University, the writer has developed a series of spoken vocabulary lists and labelled them "language facts audio recordings." The advantages of these recordings are as follows:

1. Students are given the opportunity to employ two modalities to assist them in the memory process: both sight (the printed page) and sound (the spoken word). This redundancy is important for several reasons. In German, students often ignore or overlook diacritical markings such as umlauts for plurals of nouns or for changes in verb forms. But perhaps even more important is the fact that some students have a modality preference and would rather learn through listening than through reading, i.e. they are ear-minded rather than eye-minded (Chastain 1975, Pimsleur, Sundland and McIntyre 1966). An audio recording gives students the opportunity to exploit this preference.

2. Vocabulary items which must be committed to active memory are normally printed in an organized fashion—alphabetically and out of context. For systematic study and for ready reference, alphabetized vocabulary lists are both desirable and necessary. The language facts tapes add an audio dimension in a compact format to the same materials. Up to this point tape recordings of vocabulary have appeared only within the context of drills and reading selections. Camouflaged in this manner, word and syllable junctions have tended to become obscure, creating a source of frustration for students. (Need we be reminded of the era when learners were forced to memorize nonsense syllables, and teachers thought that students were learning dialogues?)

It should be pointed out, however, that since the ultimate goal for students is comprehension in context, many items are recorded in isolation and also in short sentences on the language facts tape. (For examples, see the tape script below.) Hearing words in isolation and in context is crucial for vocabulary entries such as verbs with separable prefixes, which are printed in their infinitive form with the prefix attached to the stem, but which in real speech often appear separated.

3. Hearing words in isolation gives the learner some clue regarding proper stress and helps alleviate problems of mispronunciation which are observed in many beginning classes.

4. The audio recording provides a convenient means for learning new and for reviewing old material. At Purdue University, students can listen to language facts recordings on campus in the independent-study language laboratories and in the library listening center, or they can have copies made (both on cassette and open reel) promptly and inexpensively to take home. Since many students own or can borrow recorders, there is a brisk demand for tape duplication service. For students who are products of a push-button society, easy access to instructional materials is becoming increasingly important.

5. The language facts recording is an avenue for helping students overcome problematic aspects of a given lesson or word, such as sound-symbol correspondence, especially when there is a low or marginal degree of phonetic fit between the student's native and the target language. Examples in German include **b**, **d** and **g**, which become voiceless and aspirated in a word-final position. Thus, when a student hears the word "Lied" pronounced (li:t), a simple explanation that **d** at the end of a word or syllable is pronounced (t), clarifies this apparent anomaly.

6. Individualized study is greatly facilitated. Students who prefer to work independently and at their own pace can easily do so.

Let us now look at a few representative entries from a vocabulary list as it appears in the student textbook (Moeller and Liedloff 1974, page 142), and then at the script of the corresponding language facts recording. Attention to these examples along with special notice of the instructions to the student, will give readers interested in producing their own language facts tapes sufficient information to do so.

With respect to the audio-format of the recordings, auditory codes were recorded on the language facts tape to delineate subsegments of the recording as recommended by Smith (1972). Smith reviews three methods of marking audio exercises, so that when the tape is cycled in fast forward or rewind, these low-frequency tones are heard as "beeps." In a subsequent article Smith and Wigent (1974) describe in detail how to build and use an inexpensive, portable audio-oscillator to code audio tapes with these tones.

PARTIAL VOCABULARY LIST²

Vokabeln: aktiv	daher	for that reason
SUBSTANTIVE	denn (conj.)	for, because
der Bekannte (noun declined like	gar nicht	not at all
adjective) acquaintance	lange	long
das Gedicht, -e poem	morgens	in the morning

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der Körper, -	body	voll	full
der Kranke (noun declined like adjective)	ill person	BESONDERE AUSDRÜCKE	
das Lied, -er	song	seit kurzer Zeit	recently
die Mutter, 's	mother	um . . . zu	in order to
die Natur	nature	Vokabeln: passiv	
der Professor, -en	professor	SUBSTANTIVE	
der Wald, 'er	woods	der Anfang, -	beginning
VERBEN		die Einladung, -en	invitation
an.fangen (â), fing an	to begin	die Gesundheit	health
aus.sehen (ie), sah aus	to look, appear	VERBEN	
backen (â),	to bake	heilen	to heal
helfen (i), half (+ dat.)	to help	zusammen.hängen, hing zusammen	
kennen.lernen	to meet	to be related, have a connection	
schlafen (â), schlief	to sleep	ANDERE WÖRTER	
ANDERE WÖRTER		braun	brown
bekannt	acquainted, well known	künstlich	artificial

It should be noted that the word list above is organized in an ideal fashion—first it is divided into active and passive vocabulary and then, within these two groups, into word categories. The language facts tape preserves these features and adds the element of active participation and self-evaluation wherever possible, as for example by directing the listener to provide the correct gender and plural of nouns and by changing the tense of verbs within the context of short sentences.

PARTIAL SCRIPT OF LANGUAGE FACTS AUDIO RECORDING

(This corresponds directly to the word list printed above)

Deutsch heute, Kapitel 7, Seite 142 "Beep"

Vokabeln: aktiv

SUBSTANTIVE. Procedures: With your book open, listen and repeat as the nouns are read with the definite articles and the plurals supplied. Plurals will be given only when plural indicators are given in your book. Let's begin. Listen and repeat.

-der Bekannte (pause) die Bekannte would be a female acquaintance. Since this noun is declined like an adjective, a male acquaintance would be: "ein Bekannter," and a female acquaintance would be: "eine Bekannte." You will learn more about how these endings are formed later. Don't worry about them now.

- das Gedicht (pause) die Gedichte³ (pause)
- der Körper (pause) die Körper (pause)
- der Kranke (pause) Note that you can also say: "die Kranke" referring to an ill female. As "der Bekannte" above, this noun is also declined like an adjective, so if "ein Bekannter" is a male acquaintance, what would "ein Kranker" mean? (pause) I hope you said an ill man or male. And what would "eine Kranke" mean? (pause) Right, a sick lady or female.
- das Lied (pause) die Lieder (pause) Notice that **d** at the end of a word or syllable is pronounced (t). At the beginning of a word or syllable it is pronounced (d) as in English. Listen to the two words again: das Lied (li:t) die Lieder (li:deR).
- die Mutter (pause) die Mütter (pause)
- die Natur (pause) No doubt you noticed that the main accent on the word "Natur" is on the second syllable, not on the first as in the English word "nature." Listen again: "Natur."
- der Professor (pause) die Professoren (pause) Note the accent change from the singular to the plural. Listen again. Singular: "der Professor," plural: "die Professoren."
- der Wald (pause) die Wälder (pause)

You may want to stop your recorder and review with your book or rewind the tape to the "beep" and do this part again before you go on. If you think you know the gender and the plurals of the nouns, please continue. "Beep"

You will now hear the nouns **without** the definite articles and **without** the plurals. During the first pause give the gender of the noun. After you hear the cue: "PLURAL" give the plural of the noun. The correct response will be given after each pause so you will know if you gave the correct answer. Let's begin.

- Bekante (pause) der **or** die Bekante
- Gedicht (pause) das Gedicht, PLURAL (pause) die Gedichte⁴
- Körper (pause) der Körper, PLURAL (pause) die Körper
- Kranke (pause) der **or** die Kranke
- Lied (pause) das Lied, PLURAL (pause) die Lieder
- Mutter (pause) die Mutter, PLURAL (pause) die Mütter
- Natur (pause) die Natur
- Professor (pause) der Professor, PLURAL (pause) die Professoren

Did you get the accent on the correct syllable?

-Wald (pause) der Wald, PLURAL (pause) die Wälder "Beep" VERBEN. First you will hear the infinitive of each verb. With your book open, listen and repeat them as they are given. Then very short sentences will be formed in the present tense using "ER" as the subject. Listen and repeat them also. Watch for the vowel changes in parentheses. And don't forget, if the ER-form of the verb has a vowel change in the present

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tense, the DU-form always will too. Finally these short sentences will be put into the simple past tense. Listen and repeat them also. Remember: infinitive, present tense with "ER," simple past tense with "ER." Repeat all three of these. Let's begin.

- anfangen (pause) Er fängt heute an. (pause) Er fing heute an. (pause)
- aussehen (pause) Er sieht gut aus. (pause) Er sah gut aus. (pause)
- backen (pause) Er bäckt Brot. (pause) Er backte Brot. (pause)
- bekanntmachen (pause) Er macht die Herren mit uns bekannt. (pause)
Er machte die Herren mit uns bekannt. (pause)
- helfen (pause) Er hilft mir. (pause) Er half mir. (pause)
- kennenlernen (pause) Er lernt ihn heute kennen. (pause) Er lernte ihn heute kennen. (pause)
- schlafen (pause) Er schläft noch. (pause) Er schlief noch. (pause)

You may now want to stop your recorder and review with your book, or rewind the tape to the "beep" and do this part again. If you think you know the simple past tense of the verbs, please go on. "Beep"

You will now hear these same short sentences again. With your books closed, provide the simple past tense in the pause provided. The correct response will be given after the pause so you will know if you gave the correct answer. Let's begin.

- Er fängt heute an. (pause) Er fing heute an.
- Er sieht gut aus. (pause) Er sah gut aus.
- Er bäckt Brot. (pause) Er backte Brot.
- Er macht die Herren mit uns bekannt. (pause) Er machte die Herren mit uns bekannt.
- Er hilft mir. (pause) Er half mir.
- Er lernt ihn heute kennen. (pause) Er lernte ihn heute kennen.
- Er schläft noch. (pause) Er schlief noch. "Beep"

ANDERE WÖRTER. You will hear these as they appear in the book and then in short sentences. Listen and repeat. Let's begin.

- bekannt (pause) Der Professor ist hier bekannt. (pause)
- daher (pause) Daher dürfen wir nicht bleiben. (pause)
- denn (pause) Wir wissen, daß sie hier sind, denn wir sahen sie. (pause)
- gar nicht (pause) Sie hilft mir gar nicht. (pause)
- lange (pause) Ich sah dich schon lange nicht mehr.
- morgens (pause) Morgens arbeiten wir.
- voll (pause) Der Koffer ist voll. "Beep"

BESONDERE AUSDRÜCKE. You will hear these as they appear in the book and then in short sentences. Listen and repeat. Let's begin.

- seit kurzer Zeit (pause) Sie ist seit kurzer Zeit krank. (pause)
- um . . . zu (pause) Er bleibt in der Schule, um sein Gedicht zu lernen. (pause) "Beep"

Vokabeln: passiv

SUBSTANTIVE. Listen and repeat with your book open if you wish. Plurals will be given whenever plural indicators appear in your book.

- der Anfang (pause) die Anfänge (pause)
- die Einladung (pause) die Einladungen (pause)
- die Gesundheit (pause)⁵ "Beep"

VERBEN. In addition to infinitives, you will again hear the verbs embedded in short sentences in both the present and simple past senses. Listen and repeat all three forms. Let's begin.

- heilen (pause) Die Zeit heilt alle Wunden. (pause) Die Zeit heilte alle Wunden. (pause)
- zusammenhängen (pause) wie hängt das zusammen? (pause) Wie hing das zusammen? (pause) "Beep"

ANDERE WORTER. You will hear these as they appear in the book and then in short sentences. Listen and repeat. Let's begin.

- braun (pause) Ihr Haar ist braun. (pause)
- künstlich (pause) Ist das eine künstliche Blume? (pause)

END OF TAPESCRIPT

As can be seen from the partial script above, this language facts recording is quite straight-forward and absent of frills. Nevertheless, since the content was meaningful and relevant, student response to it was favorable. In the future an effort will be made to add features to the recordings which will make them even more attractive, such as humor, vocabulary games, riddles, music and other sound effects.⁶ Changes are also being contemplated in terms of format:

1. Dividing the recording into shorter segments—perhaps into amounts which could be used for a day's assignment.
2. Selecting nouns in various cases, rather than only in the nominative case as they appear traditionally on vocabulary lists.
3. Offering nouns with different determiners, rather than only with the definite article as they usually appear in print.
4. Using a variety of subjects in the verb section for more effective subject-verb agreement practice. (The third person singular subject "ER" was chosen intentionally for this lesson, since many verbs in it had vowel changes in the present tense.)
5. Including a higher proportion of questions as compared to declarative statements.

If past experience is any indication of future success, it appears safe to say that the language facts audio recording holds the promise of becoming a valuable instructional tool and motivational device for all languages. Perhaps it will some day be a standard component of foreign language instructional materials.

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- ¹Rebecca M. Valette, **Modern Language Testing: A Handbook**, Chicago: Harcourt, Brace and Jovanovich, 1969, page 49: "Retention, which is a serious problem for beginners, seems to present less of an obstacle for the intermediate and advanced students."
- ²Reprinted with the permission of the publishers.
- ³Plurals are given by a second reader. This adds a bit of variety to the recording, exposes students to another speaker and clearly separates the two tasks facing the student—learning a) the gender and b) the plural of the nouns.
- ⁴Speaker one gives the cues (nouns without articles and "PLURAL") while speaker two provides the correct answers.
- ⁵Since this is passive vocabulary, there is no second phase which asks students to provide genders and plurals of nouns. The same holds true for VERBEN and ANDERE WORTER.
- ⁶For the creative production and use of audio recordings see: Michael Agatstein, "Individualization of Language Learning Through the Cassette Recorder," **NALLD Journal** 6, ii (1971): 27-32.