

## A SURVIVAL LANGUAGE LEARNING SYLLABUS FOR FOREIGN TRAVEL

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This article presents a language syllabus containing approximately 120 items which represents an easily achievable goal for people wishing to visit a foreign country for a month or more. The syllabus is the result of needs analyses involving interviews with learners, analysis of guide books, and personal experience. In addition, the items in the syllabus have been checked for frequency, coverage, and combinability. The syllabus is divided into eight categories, greetings and being polite, buying and bargaining, reading signs, getting to places, finding accommodation, ordering food, talking about yourself, and controlling and learning language. The article concludes with advice for learning the items in the syllabus.

This paper addresses a question that has been posed many times and for which many answers have been found. That question is “What is the language knowledge that learners first need when they learn a language?” Previous answers to the question have generally focused on specific grammatical structures or vocabulary that were considered useful. The major exception to this is the Council of Europe work which has defined a Threshold level (Van Ek and Alexander, 1975), and a lower Waystage level (Van Ek *et al.*, 1977), in terms of communicative function—what people need to do with language.

The study starts with the simple fact that millions of people throughout the world, in temporary informal social contact with speakers of another language, learn enough of that language to conduct initial communication. The study attempts to tap this phenomenon of successful initial language learning. Specifically, it asks what things do people typically need or want to say in the initial stages of contact with an unknown language and what resources serve them best?

We were particularly interested in the very first contact and how much learning could relate to that contact. This would apply to the language learning of many people—tourists in a country for a short time, professionals visiting a country for a short assignment. Such people often shy away from contact with the language, and yet if they learned a little, they would almost certainly profit more from their visit and would possibly be encouraged to take the learning further. We are thus looking at what guidance can be given to people who want to cross the very first threshold—the threshold of using the language for the first time.

A typical resource with which to approach this threshold is a book of useful words and phrases. Such phrase books are generally intended as reference books: a resource that you look up when you are in communicative difficulty. The aim of this study is to provide a list based on a principled approach that will give learners an immediate and useful return for the effort of learning. A quick survey of introductory course books indicates that their syllabus content provides poor short term return for someone with limited time to invest. There is usually too much material in the early lessons that is not relevant to immediate needs. The first chapters often deal with topics like the indefinite article, pronouns, or adjectives, before coming to something that can be immediately used. The following interview (Dickie, 1989) with a young foreign language learner highlights this.

*Gareth is in his fifth month of learning Japanese in the first year of secondary school. He is speaking to the researcher.*

“Tell me something in Japanese, Gareth.”

“O.K. You ask me questions in English and I’ll answer in Japanese.”

“Were you born in New Zealand?”

“We haven’t got up to ‘yes’ yet.”

“All right. I’ll try something else. How old are you?”

“Do you want me to say the whole sentence because I can only say the number?”

“That’s fine. Just tell me the number.”

“ . . . . .”

“That sounds good. Here’s another question. What do you do at school?”

“No, not that kind of thing.”

“Sorry. What sort of thing should I be asking you?”

“Well all the regular things like ‘This is a pen’ and ‘The book is red’. That kind of thing.”

### THE PURPOSE AND LIMITS OF THE SURVIVAL SYLLABUS

The content of the present survival syllabus has been selected considering the situation of someone who is going to stay in another country for somewhere between one and three months. This is long enough to make it worthwhile learning something of the local language and yet not long enough to justify a sustained intensive course. No consideration has been given to special needs that the visitor may have as a result of the particular reason for visiting that country, such as to do academic research, to arrange a trade deal, or to get married. Rather, attention has been focused on survival, travel and social needs which would be common to any visitor to another country. This includes getting the necessities at a good price and basic social courtesies (so you can get the necessities at a good price!).

Pimsleur (1980: p. 16) describes this as 'the "courtesy and necessity" speaking level', and suggests that 'this type of mastery can be achieved in less than sixty hours, which comes to only an hour a day for two to three months—an excellent return for a limited effort.' This contrasts with the 240 hours needed to reach the elementary proficiency level in an 'easy' language or 360 hours in a 'hard' language (Pimsleur, 1980: p. 15).

The syllabus thus has two focuses

- (1) a focus on spoken language on the assumption that in the mainstream tourist areas of a country communication will be in a spoken form.
- (2) a focus on vocabulary. Research on vocabulary learning (Nation, 1982) has shown that it is possible to learn a large amount of vocabulary in a short time with good long term retention. There is much more involved in language learning than memorising words, but a carefully chosen vocabulary that takes account of the patterns words occur in can be an excellent basis for planning short term learning. The size of the syllabus (approximately 120 items, consisting of roughly 150 words) takes account of learning rates revealed by this vocabulary learning research and Pimsleur's time limits, and makes it about one-quarter of the size of Waystage syllabus prepared for the Council of Europe for initial language learning. (Van Ek *et al.*, 1977)

Table 1, using part of Munby's (1978) framework for needs analysis, shows how limited the communicative context is for the foreign traveller.

Table 1. The communicative needs of a temporary visitor

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*Purposive domain*

Tourist, temporary visitor

*Setting*

Foreign city, used occasionally, culturally different, recreational, urban, unhurried

*Interaction*

Consumer, customer, non-native, guest

*Instrumentality*

Spoken dialogue, face to face

Very low on size of utterance, complexity, range of forms, delicacy, speed.

Middling on flexibility.

High tolerance of error, stylistic failure, reference to a dictionary, repetition, hesitation.

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## THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SURVIVAL SYLLABUS

### *Criteria for selecting the communicative content*

The syllabus should contain useful items which also provide a good starting point for further learning and which are easy to learn. To make sense of this, criteria were set up to help

decide whether an item should be included in the syllabus or not. Table 2 lists the criteria in order of importance. The second column shows what information was used to apply the criteria. The criteria and sources of information are discussed below.

Table 2. Criteria for choosing content for the syllabus

Criterion	Source of information
Need	Needs analysis
Frequency	Eaton (1940)
Coverage and combinability	Viberg (1989), Substitution tables
Learnability	Higa (1963), Nation (1982)

*Need.* The first needs analysis was done by interviewing 10 people who had recently returned from a visit to another country. Each interview took approximately 45 minutes and required the interviewees to recall who they used the language with, in what situations, and what was said. After this open-ended interview each interviewee was asked to look through a list of words and phrases and to indicate whether they used any of the items in the list. This list was made by one of the researchers and was added to after each interview. This provided a good check on the information gained from the interview. All of the people interviewed were at a low level of proficiency in the language. Some had done a course before going to the foreign country, others picked up what they could from phrase books and dictionaries. The countries visited included China, Italy, Japan and Turkey.

The second needs analysis was done by surveying 10 guide books which included lists of useful words and phrases. The guide books included some from the Lonely Planet series, Frommer's *Europe on \$30 a Day*, Baedeker's *Japan*, APA Productions' *Thailand*, Cadogan's *Italy* and a range of other guides. Several guide books in the same series used the same list. In such cases the list was surveyed only once. Guidebooks were used because it was assumed that each one represented the experience of at least one well travelled person. The information from the guide books was tabulated separately from the interview material, because guide book lists can also contain items to consult in an emergency rather than to learn for everyday use.

An item was included in the first draft of the syllabus if it was mentioned by at least two of the people interviewed, or by one of the people as well as occurring in more than three of the guidebooks.

The third needs analysis involved one of the authors using the syllabus on extended visits to three different countries—Finland, Greece, and Thailand. During the visits (each longer than a month) a careful record was kept of what was used from the syllabus and what needed to be added.

*Frequency.* Frequency was checked by using Eaton's (1940) *Word Frequency List* which collates the frequency of items in four European languages (English–French–German–Spanish). Eaton found a very close correspondence in frequency level among the high

frequency words of those languages. For example 662 of the items which occurred in the most frequent 1000 words of English corresponded to items in the most frequent 1000 words of French, German and Spanish, and most of the remainder of the first 1000 words of English occurred in the first and second 1000 words of two of the three other languages in the study. The great majority of the words in the Survival Syllabus were in the 1st 1,000 words of Eaton's (1940) list. The age of the sources of Eaton's list accounts for some of the lower frequencies, *photo* (4th 1,000), *telephone* (5th 1,000). Eaton's list is based on written text, which may account for the frequency of *Goodbye* (3rd 1,000). *Toilet* does not occur in Eaton's list!

*Coverage and combinability.* Coverage is the capacity of a word to take the place of other words. A word which has good coverage can be used as a superordinate term in place of other words (*go* can be considered a superordinate of *run*, *walk*, *drive* etc.), can be used to paraphrase or define other words (*thing* is an especially useful word in this respect), and can combine with other words to make new words (*foot* as in *footpath*, *football*, *footstep*). As Viberg (1989) shows, frequency is a close correlate of coverage. However coverage can also be checked by comparing items in a list to see if one can replace others. This did not result in any changes to the syllabus, but it is a point to consider when the syllabus is translated into another language. For example, *How much?* in English can be used for both cost and quantity. It is more economical to learn this one item than two or three different ones.

*Learnability.* Higa (1963) investigated the effects on learning of the types of meaning relationships between words. He found that grouping synonyms, opposites, or free associates together made learning more difficult. The related items interfered with each other. The Survival Syllabus was checked to remove such items where they were not considered strictly necessary.

#### *What the syllabus does not include*

An item that only one person found very useful was not included. This is of course a reflection of the variation in circumstances in different countries, the variety of reasons why people go to another country, the variety of things that happen to them, and the many things they can do while they are there. Here are a few examples of excluded items. *Cheers!*, *Are you married?*, *I don't want meat* (for a vegetarian), *What is my size?* (for clothes), reporting a theft, dealing with illness, and talking to an official found searching your room. What is learned following this syllabus, therefore, will need to be supplemented by the use of phrase books and dictionaries to meet particular circumstances by almost all people who use it. But, all the items in the appropriate sections of the syllabus will be worth learning and as a whole will put travellers over the threshold of initial communication.

Most people interviewed expressed the desire to be able to chat with people in the foreign country. This is an ambitious aim and is far beyond the goals of this syllabus. One of the people interviewed had studied the language for a total of more than 250 hours of class-time. In spite of this, he still found it very difficult to maintain conversations with three or more turns.

## THE SURVIVAL SYLLABUS

The syllabus has been divided into eight sections on the basis of information revealed during the interviews. The sections have been ranked and numbered according to the number of interviewees indicating that they used items in the sections divided by the number of items. So the section *Greetings and being polite* was the most useful one. Items which occur in more than one section are indicated by numbers in brackets. So, *I want . . .* in Section 2 also occurs in Sections 4, 5, and 6. The slash (/) indicates alternatives.

1. *Greetings and being polite*

Hello/Good morning etc. + reply [there are many cultural variants of these, including *Where are you going?*, *Have you eaten?*]  
How are you? + reply e.g. Fine, thank you.

Goodbye

Thank you + reply e.g. It's nothing, You're welcome.

Please

Excuse me [sorry]

It doesn't matter

Delicious (6)

Can I take your photo?

2. *Buying and bargaining*

I want . . . (4, 5, 6)

Do you have . . .?/Is there . . .?

Yes (8)

No (8)

This (one), That (one) [to use when pointing at goods]

There isn't any

How much (cost)? (5, 6)

A cheaper one (5)

NUMBERS (5, 7) (These need to be learned to a high degree of fluency)

UNITS OF MONEY (5, 6)

UNITS OF WEIGHT AND SIZE

How much (quantity)?

half

all of it

(one) more

(one) less

Excuse me [to get attention] (4)

Too expensive

Can you lower the price? + reply (Some countries do not use bargaining. In others it is essential.)

NAMES OF IMPORTANT THINGS TO BUY (These may include stamps, a newspaper, a map.)

### 3. *Reading signs*

Gents

Ladies

Entrance/In

Exit/out

Closed

### 4. *Getting to places*

Excuse me (to get attention) (2)

Can you help me?

Where is . . . ? (5)

Where is . . . street?

What is the name of this place/street/station/town?

Toilet

Bank

Department store

Restaurant

Airport

Train station

Underground

Bus station

Hospital

Doctor

Police

Post-office

Telephone

Market

I want . . . (2, 5, 6)

How far?/Is it near?

How long (to get to . . .)?

Left

Right

Straight ahead

Slow down (Directions for a taxi.)

Stop here

Wait

Ticket

When

### 5. *Finding accommodation*

Where is . . . (4)  
Hotel

How much (cost)? (2, 6)  
A cheaper one (2)

I want . . . (2,4,6)

Leave at what time?  
NUMBERS (2, 7)  
today  
tomorrow

### 6. *Ordering food*

How much (cost)? (2, 5)  
The bill, please

I want . . . (2, 4, 5)

NAMES OF A FEW DISHES AND DRINKS

A FEW COOKING TERMS

Delicious (1)

### 7. *Talking about yourself and talking to children*

I am (name)  
Where do you come from?  
I am (a New Zealander)/I come from (New Zealand)

What do you do?  
I am a (teacher)/tourist

You speak (Chinese)!  
A little/very little

What is your name? (Especially for talking to children.)  
How old are you? + reply  
NUMBERS (2, 5)

I have been here . . . days/weeks/months

I am sick

### 8. *Controlling and learning language*

Do you understand?



I (don't) understand  
 Do you speak English? (7)  
 Yes (2)  
 No (2)

Repeat  
 Please speak slowly  
 I speak only a little (Thai)

What do you call this in (Japanese)?

### ORGANISING, LEARNING, PRACTISING

Clearly the syllabus simply identifies the knowledge or language resources required. The task of acquiring this knowledge in a way that would make it accessible in communicative situations is addressed briefly in this section. The following principles and suggestions are based in part on studies of the good language learner (Rubin, 1975; Rubin and Thompson, 1982; Naiman *et al.*, 1978) and research on vocabulary learning (Nation, 1990).

#### *Principle: organise your learning*

Decide how many words or phrases can comfortably be learned each day. One effective way to learn the words and phrases in the list is to write them on small cards with a first language translation on the other side. These are then carried in bundles of fifty or so and are looked through whenever there is a spare moment. First, the learner looks at each foreign word and phrase and tries to recall the translation, looking on the back of the card to see if the recall is correct. When this is easily done for a bundle, then the first language items are looked at while trying to recall the foreign word or phrase.

Some care needs to be taken in grouping the items to be learned. Opposites like *exit/entrance, men/women, far/near, left/right* should not be learned together. This means that one of the items, say *exit*, should be learned first. When this has been learned satisfactorily the other item in the pair, *entrance*, can be studied. Similarly, words that are free associates or synonyms should not be learned together. Possible free associates in the Survival Syllabus include *bus/train*, names of foods, numbers, *today/tomorrow, street/town*. This means it is more efficient to learn the numbers, for example, one by one and to group them in a series after they have been learned.

#### *Principle: learn forms for meanings rather than meanings for forms*

A basic principle behind all learning is that the quantity of learning depends on the quality of mental activity in the brain at the moment that learning occurs. This means that the more thoughtful and deep the learning activity, the faster and more secure the learning will be. The technique of using cards is one way of making learning deep because it encourages the learner to make an effort to recall the translation equivalent of each item. Another way to do this is to use the keyword technique or some variation of it. The research supporting these suggestions is reviewed in Nation (1982 and 1990). In learning words and phrases it is particularly important to focus on meaning and visualise it in some way. Say the form as you do this. For example you may be learning how to say "too expensive".

Imagine yourself in a market holding a piece of local cloth, looking at the trader and wanting to pay less than the price suggested. With that image in your mind, say the words "too expensive".

*Principle: get as much practice as you can*

Learning the items in the Survival Syllabus does not guarantee that they will be available for use. To develop fluency, practice is needed. The essential element of fluency practice is that the learner should focus on the meaning of the message as suggested above and that there should be several repetitions of the activity.

It is particularly important that numbers can be dealt with fluently. Number dictation, where a speaker says a number and the learner writes it in figures rather than words, is an effective activity. This should be done many times and with increasing speed.

When a traveller arrives in the country there will of course be further and more meaningful opportunities for practice. The more practice there is beforehand, however, the faster the learning can be put to use.

#### SOME FINAL COMMENTS

This syllabus is reductionist in nature. Communication, even initial communication is a complex phenomenon and the syllabus, like all content-based syllabuses, reduces that to a set of discrete items. Based on experience, however, we believe that by learning these discrete items, a traveller will be able to enter the complexity of initial communicative contact and have a sound starting point for further language learning if desired.

The syllabus is clearly oriented towards production. A traveller needs to maintain the initiative in communication and has little chance of playing a responding role in any extensive communication.

The main criteria of need should make the meanings in the syllabus applicable to all travellers, no matter what language is involved, although the specific items chosen would need fine-tuning for each language according to the other criteria. The phrases and words chosen are resources used in English to get a meaning across. Other languages may use different means. For example "Excuse me" to get attention may in some languages simply require an honorific such as the equivalents of "Sir" or "Madam". For this reason, any translation of the syllabus into other languages should work from the functional meanings of the expressions and not the literal meanings.

Finally the authors would be interested to hear from anyone who tries out this list of resources in a new language experience.

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