

The Birkenbihl¹⁾ Language Learning Method and Its Practical Application for Learning English and German at IBU

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- 1) This approach stresses the use of both the left and right hemispheres of the brain and employs information from theories of multiple intelligence, suggestopedia, neuro-linguistic programming, and other areas in brain research.

Vera F. Birkenbihl, the originator of the Birkenbihl Method, is the head of the “Institut für gehirn-gerechtes Arbeiten” (Institute for Brain-Friendly Working) in Germany. She is the well-known author of many best-sellers, gives lectures, appears often on television, and holds regular workshops about brain management, creativity, communication, and personal development in Europe. Her Internet web site can be found at <http://www.birkenbihl-insider.de>.

Awareness, observation, and mindfulness are essential conceptual tools for making learning and teaching brain-friendly. The Birkenbihl Method is based on the idea that learning a language need not be difficult. In the Birkenbihl approach, learners fully understand the meaning of the content, and are thoroughly familiar with the sound patterns of a text, before they actively start practicing reading, speaking, and writing. The method is divided into four easy-to-understand steps: (1) Decoding, (2) Active Listening, (3) Passive Listening, and (4) Active Reading, Speaking, and Writing. In the first step, each lesson is presented with a word-by-word translation so the meaning of any word in the text can be understood easily and quickly. In the second step, the learners read the word-by-word translations in their native tongue while listening to the script and focusing on the foreign sounds and the equivalent meanings in their native language until they understand every word without the help of the word-by-word translation. In the third step, learners listen passively, or subliminally, to the recordings of the lessons, while simultaneously engaging in other activities. While learners listen passively, the subconscious mind — the right brain — becomes very familiar with the sound patterns of the target language. This step imitates the learning phase in childhood in which children are surrounded by the sounds of their native tongue. In the fourth step, learners practice speaking, reading or writing the target language, depending on which abilities they wish to acquire.

Key terms: language learning, brain-friendly, word-by-word translation, passive listening, teacher-facilitator

Some General Thoughts about Education and Learning and Teaching Languages

This has no connection to what is generally known as the traditional approach to language learning in Japanese public school education. Therefore an open mind and further research is necessary on the part of those who experience Japanese public school education.

When one's attention is focused on a narrow area, it is good to keep a broad perspective in the back of one's mind:(1) Many — not just a few — roads lead to Rome ¹³⁾!(2) Quantum physics asserts that the world is not as it seems and each person is not as he may think he is. Not everything that is perceived with the physical senses is what it seems to be.^{15,16)}

Arguably, the chief goal of education is to send out to the world students who are independent, integrated people and who are able to cope responsibly with the challenges of life ⁷⁾.

The purpose of teaching is to promote learning. One could say that learning is the insatiable curiosity that drives the mind to absorb everything that is seen, heard, or read about a topic that is significant and has inner meaning ¹⁴⁾.

Fred Alan Wolf looks at learning — the process of change — from the point of view of quantum physics and says that the world is filled with constant change. Quantum physics shows us that our observations bring the world into existence and as such provide us the opportunity to change both the world and ourselves ^{15,16)}.

Ellen J. Langer thinks that effective learning is possible if teaching and learning are approached mindfully. Mindful learning is an attitude — a state of mind. It involves:(1) openness to novelty;(2)

alertness to distinction;(3) sensitivity to different contexts;(4) implicit and explicit awareness of multiple perspectives; and(5) orientation in the present. Each leads to the others and back again. For example, when one considers several possible ways of responding to problems even if they seem improbable or impossible, the chance of successful solutions being found increases enormously. Conversely, mindless learning is also an attitude of the mind and involves(1) entrapment in old categories,(2) automatic behavior, and(3) operating from a single perspective ¹²⁾.

Jere Brophy ⁴⁾ suggests that learning, with the support of teaching, is more effective if the focus is on learning results. What is also important is the recognition of the need for a caring and supportive classroom climate and positive student attitudes towards schooling, teachers and classmates. Brophy offers twelve guidelines based on his extensive research:

- (1) The function of the teacher is to facilitate the individual learning processes of the people in a course.
- (2) Students learn best in a classroom climate which is cohesive, caring, and supportive.
- (3) Students learn more when most of the available time, which is already limited, is used constructively so learners have a better chance at reaching the goals of a course.
- (4) If all the components and elements of a course can be aligned and integrated cohesively, the chance of actually accomplishing intended goals is greater.
- (5) Teachers as facilitators can help their students prepare to learn by providing an initial structure that clarifies intended outcomes and desired

learning strategies.

- (6) To facilitate meaningful learning and retention, content is explained clearly, delivered in a variety of ways, and developed with emphasis on its structure.
- (7) Students need sufficient opportunities to practise and apply what they are learning, and they need to receive positive and encouraging improvement-oriented feedback.
- (8) The teacher-facilitator provides whatever help and assistance students need to enable them to engage in learning activities and to practice skills effectively and productively.
- (9) The teacher-facilitator both teaches students how to learn, and helps them to develop self-regulation strategies.
- (10) As in real life outside the classroom, students naturally interact with each other in pairs and small groups when it is appropriate.
- (11) The teacher-facilitator uses not just one, but a variety of formal and informal assessment methods to monitor progress towards learning goals. Teaching, learning, monitoring, and assessing must be aligned in order to support the learning process in a positive and constructive way.
- (12) The teacher-facilitator establishes a brain-friendly and relaxed learning atmosphere in the classroom and focuses on positive expectations and learning results ⁴⁾.

Premises, Principles, and Guidelines of the Birkenbihl Language Learning Method

The Birkenbihl Language Learning Method ^{1, 2, 3)}, is based on the idea that learning a language need not be difficult nor take an inordinate amount of

time. The method is based on the following two premises, which are easily observable:

- (1) If young children manage to learn their first language, which is the most difficult, without learning lists of vocabulary, without grammar, and without formal teaching, there should be a way or method which imitates this learning process for adults.
- (2) Adults have an enormous advantage over children: they have already mastered one language, namely their mother tongue. This advantage is taken into full account in the Birkenbihl Language Learning Method.

The method is further based on the following six principles and guidelines:

- 1. To remember lists of unrelated words is forbidden.** This principle is based on the fact that no child acquires his or her mother tongue by remembering isolated words.
- 2. Students may learn whatever they wish to learn** because each person has different needs. When they have reached the minimal goal of comprehending the target language, they can then decide whether or not they also want to master reading, speaking, or writing.
- 3. Remembering grammatical rules is not necessary.** The basis for this principle is the fact that only relatively few people, anywhere in the world, enjoy learning grammar, so there is no need for students to deal with abstract grammatical rules unless they wish to do so. Children all over the world learn their own native languages by imitating the people who are always around them. They do not learn their mother tongues through grammar instruction.
- 4. Students do not need a teacher in order to learn.** Learning a language is an individual and per-

sonal process. A teacher-facilitator can only facilitate this process. No one can do the learning for another person.

5. Valuable class time to do Step One, Step Two, and Step Three is not needed because learners can do these steps individually in their private time. This means that they can practice these three steps anywhere at any time. However, class time does become beneficial until learners move on to Step Four, when they actively practice reading, speaking, or writing. At this point, learners practice with one or several partners and the teacher-facilitator assists them and provides feedback as needed.

6. A large part of the learning process is delegated to the right brain or the subconscious mind. Students listen passively to audio recordings, which are almost inaudible to the conscious mind, while doing other daily activities. Step Three is necessary in order to become thoroughly familiar with the sound patterns of the language of a lesson. Another advantage is that students need not spend as much time actively learning.

Some Difficulties Learners Often Experience in Normal Language Learning Situations

Difficulties which students experience when they learn a new language, usually in a classroom setting, are not so much in the language itself, but arise more from the way learning and teaching are perceived and how they are organized and implemented in practical terms.

Pronouncing Vocabulary Without Being Ready

Students are often supposed to say new words without having had the time and opportunity to familiarise themselves with the proper pronuncia-

tion of the new words.

A German person, for example, learning English might pronounce silent letters and say [KNAIF] instead of [NAIF] for knife, or [WRAIT] instead of [RAIT] for write.

Incorrect pronunciation leads to the following two disadvantages.(1) When learners hear a word spoken correctly later, they may not recognise it because the correct pronunciation is unknown to them, and(2) they may not be understood later due to their incorrect pronunciation.

These are serious disadvantages because, once typical mistakes have been learned, it is very difficult to correct them later.

Comprehending Vocabulary Within a Context

Learners may experience difficulties comprehending words in context, because, even if vocabulary has been learned well, the words have been learned oftentimes as individual units. For example 'put' can have many meanings, but within a specific context it has only one of those many meanings. Which one is it this time? As a result students may feel helpless, frustrated, or even stupid and conclude that language learning is difficult and that they have no talent for it.

This may create negative expectations which may later be realized as self-fulfilling prophecies — the beginning of a vicious circle. Negative beliefs are not only hard to get rid of, but they also inhibit clear perception of other options making it almost impossible to find better ways of learning.

Reading and Speaking Aloud from the Start

Students are supposed to read a text and pronounce what they read right from the start. While this approach may be particularly modern, it is not very brain-friendly. Consider babies who listen to

language for thousands of hours before they even try to imitate some of the sounds they have heard over and over again. On the other hand, language learners are supposed to be able to produce sound patterns with which they are not yet familiar. As a result, they may not only pronounce incorrectly, but they may also associate this uncomfortable unfamiliarity with feelings of frustration and failure. These unpleasant, negative feelings are then closely associated with the target language or with language learning in general, creating a negative learning attitude.

The Four Steps of the Birkenbihl Language Learning Method

The Birkenbihl Language Learning Method is divided into four easy-to-understand steps: (1) Decoding; (2) Active Listening; (3) Passive Listening; and (4) Active Reading, Speaking, and Writing.

STEP ONE: DECODING

Each lesson is presented as written material with a word-by-word translation. The translation of a word or phrase into the first language (L1) appears directly below the translation of a word or phrase into the second language (L2).

Here are examples using Italian, German, and Japanese. The upper line is the target language (L2) and the lower line is the native language of the learner (L1).

Italian: **Parla Italiano?**

English: (You)-speak Italian?

German: **Sprechen Sie Deutsch?**

English: speak you German?

Japanese: 英語 は 話せますか?

English: English は speak(can)?

The task of the students is simply to read the word-by-word translation (perhaps assisted by highlighting important parts of the translation with a felt-tip marker) to get the overall feeling for the lesson and to understand its contents. This process integrates both hemispheres of the brain in the learning process. Students learn the meaning of the lesson first in their native tongue before attempting anything else.

If students already have considerable knowledge they can focus on reading the target language, and only jump to the word-by-word translation when they do not immediately understand. However, students at the beginner level, at first, concentrate on the word-by-word translation because almost all of the words of the target language are unfamiliar at this point. This results in four advantages:

(1) Students Experience Positive Feelings through Quick Comprehension

Because the word-by-word translation provides the meaning of a word or phrase of the target language, in the same spot, instant comprehension occurs and creates positive feelings in the learner.

(2) The Word-By-Word Decoding Reveals the Structure of the Target Language

Because word-by-word translation necessarily follows the word-order logic of the target language, the grammatical structure is more or less mirrored in the source language and can be grasped and understood without any grammatical rules. This is similar to the process of learning one's native language. In the Italian, German, and Japanese examples given above, the students understand subconsciously not to expect the do which is typical in English. The benefit is that English speakers will

later not try to force the English structure onto the Italian, German, or Japanese languages.

(3) The Word-By-Word Translation is Simply a Temporary, Convenient Aid

The word-by-word translation is only a convenient temporary aid which allows students at almost any level and age to make progress in the target language. When they have become familiar with the meanings in the target language this aid can be ignored or completely removed.

With the word-by-word translation, students learn very early to think in the target language because the focus is on its grammatical structure. Thus students not only(1) learn to think in the target language quickly, but they also(2) create the necessary solid grammatical foundation which will enable them later to think, feel, speak, read, and write in the target language, without constantly clinging to the structure of their native tongue.

(4) Word-By-Word Translations of the Target Language Stimulate Interest and Amusement

In general, one can say that a sentence, phrase, or idiom in a target language is either similar to a student's native language or so different that it appears to be amusing, wrong, or even downright stupid because the logic of the target language seems illogical compared with one's native language. The stranger the translation appears to be, the more learners can recognise clearly that the structure of the target language is different from their native language. The good news is that this learning process takes place without any conscious work on the part of the student. For example, Japanese people use certain particles(は、を、に、で、へ) which follow certain words according to certain grammatical rules. Instead of using imprac-

tical and often incomprehensible abstract rules, the particles are simply retained in their proper places within the word-by-word-translation, allowing learners to acquire a feeling of using them correctly without thinking.

STEP TWO: Active Listening

The learner now listens to the recording while reading the word-by-word translation. At this point, learners read the word-by-word translations and focus on the foreign sounds and the equivalent meanings in their native language. Active listening in Step Two means listening to one phrase after another, frequently pushing the pause button to allow one to focus on the sound just heard. Repeated active listening is easy and accompanied by a steadily growing feeling of success because learners rapidly understand a greater amount of the target language. As words and phrases begin to sound familiar, learners will push the pause button less frequently, until they can listen to the whole passage without stopping.

The active listening step is finished when the learner understands every word without the help of the word-by-word translation. Active listening has the following advantages:

(1) Instant Comprehension Rapidly Improves

Through active listening learners rapidly acquire the ability to listen to the spoken text of the lesson in the target language and comprehend almost everything they hear, as if the content had been spoken in their native language. The fast acquisition of this near-total comprehension is one of the main advantages of the Birkenbihl Method, unlike in traditional systems where total comprehension is an unrealistic goal and seldom attained.(This is probably why many students are often unable to

understand languages they have supposedly studied for years.)

(2) **Students Learn All the Words Within a Meaningful Context**

All words are learned within a meaningful context, just as is done when a first language is learned. For example, if the word 'put' appears within a specific context and later in another specific context, the learner gradually recognizes the many meanings of 'put' without ever trying to learn all the many possible meanings outside of these contexts.

(3) **The Self-Confidence of the Learners Grows**

It is extremely gratifying to watch the self-confidence of learners grow through this approach. Within a relatively short time, learners are able to understand more of the target language. In addition, students realize that they are actually able to learn foreign languages rather easily.

Experience has shown that most learners not only progress rapidly in their chosen target language, but often start studying a second and even a third foreign language out of satisfaction, confidence, and pleasure.

STEP THREE: Passive Listening

Learners listen passively to short portions of a lesson or text, without making any conscious effort to listen or understand. While learners listen passively, or subliminally, they engage in other activi-

ties. During passive listening, the sound volume is so soft that the recorded voices, independent of other sounds, can barely be heard. Passive listening has the following advantages.

(1) **Learners Become Very Familiar with the Sound Patterns**

By constant exposure to the new sound patterns the subconscious mind becomes very familiar with the musical nature of the target language: intonation, rhythm, stress, and pronunciation. This step imitates the phase in which children are surrounded by their native tongue in childhood. The more frequently learners listen passively the quicker they will gain mastery of the target language.

(2) **Students Save Time Through Parallel Learning**

Students can listen to recordings while doing routine chores — cleaning the house. They can also perform other activities which require conscious mental effort — studying an academic subject, reading their favorite novels, or even watching a televised drama.

(3) **Learners Gain Increased Confidence in the Learning Process**

Despite the fact that students do not consciously listen during passive listening periods, they will sometimes comprehend words or phrases. During those moments the learners often notice how the material seems increasingly familiar. This strengthens their confidence in the learning process. These brief moments are often accompanied by intense feelings of joy and self-confidence.

As a result, former beliefs such as, "I cannot learn!," are gradually replaced by new ones such as, "I can learn!" Experience has shown that these new feelings of success often get transferred to



other learning tasks because the learner is gaining considerable self-confidence in the process.

STEP FOUR: ACTIVE READING, SPEAKING, AND WRITING

Students are now very familiar with the following aspects: a) they can understand the meanings of the words as heard from the recordings(Step Two), and b) they have internalized the sound patterns of the target language(Step Three). They are now ready to produce the target language actively by practicing reading, speaking, and writing. Preferably, learners decide themselves which particular abilities they wish to acquire. From Step Four onward there are numerous possibilities regarding how to practice these language skills, depending on the learner, the teacher, the language, circumstances, and the learning objectives. Because there are so many possibilities as to how to acquire the four language skills, only a few will be mentioned.

LISTENING

Although listening in different ways has been the main learning activity until now, this doesn't mean that there is no more listening to do. Listening can be done in numerous ways and styles.

Casual Listening

Learners who enjoy doing two things at the same time can listen to recordings while driving a car, or cleaning a living room, for example.

Focused Listening

In Focused Listening, learners stop the recording at the end of a sentence and then try to say each subsequent sentence correctly, either silently or aloud.

Reading

Students can study the lessons they have already practiced or study other texts.

Reading While Listening

Learners repeat Step Two, but this time their attention is fully on the target language. When they do this, they listen to the original text and read it without the word-by-word translation.

Reading Only

Because the students can understand everything and know the correct pronunciation of the words, they can read with confidence without listening to the recordings.

SPEAKING

Here are some ideas and suggestions for practicing speaking the target language.

Speaking in Chorus

Students listen, and at the same time, speak in chorus with the voices they hear. First they keep the volume of the recording high while they speak softly. Then, after some practice, they gradually lower the volume of the recording while they speak more loudly. In the end, they can speak without the recording because they can recite the lesson from memory. This means that learners are able to say everything in the recorded material.

Shadow Speaking

If learners do not dare speak in chorus, they may try shadow speaking. After listening to approximately two syllables they can start repeating what the native speakers say.

It is best to practice shadow speaking first in one's native language. It only takes a few minutes to master. This process is similar to the way in which a simultaneous interpreter speaks when following

the voice of a person whose speech he is interpreting. The technique of shadow speaking is particularly helpful when the target language is totally different in tonality from the native language, for example when English speakers study Chinese or Japanese speakers study German.

Filling Blanks

Students photocopy interesting parts of the lesson and erase some words and then recite the text filling in the blanks. Experience has shown that this exercise leads to feelings of success and satisfaction because it is so easy due to thorough preparation during steps 1, 2, and 3.

WRITING

Practicing writing can also be done in many different ways.

Dictation

- (1) Learners listen to the recorded sentences and write what they hear. Mistakes are acceptable. They stop and repeat as many times as necessary.
- (2) When they have finished writing the sentences they have heard, they compare what they have written with the printed text. They correct what they have written using a red pen. Then they try again.
- (3) Without looking at the text, they listen to the recording again and write what they hear. They often notice that they can already write better — making fewer spelling mistakes. When they have finished, they correct once again what they have written with the model text. They repeat this process until they can write all the sentences perfectly.

Filling Blanks

Learners photocopy interesting parts of the lessons and erase some words. Then they make sever-

al photocopies of the text and try to write what is missing in the blank spaces. At first they have to check the words in the original text, but soon they are able to fill in the blanks correctly.

Some Basic Features of the Birkenbihl Method

1. Before trying to produce language actively for the first time, students have familiarized themselves extensively with the sound patterns and the meaning of the words in context. Only after students fully understand the meaning in Step Two, and have thoroughly familiarized themselves with the sound patterns in Step Three, will they produce anything for the first time in Step Four.

2. Students are always focused on one aspect of learning at any given time. In Step One they learn to understand the meaning of the words in context, not isolation. In Step Two they associate the sound patterns of words with their meanings, and in Step Three they anchor these sounds firmly in the subconscious mind.

During the Passive Listening phase in Step Three, learners listen to small portions of the lesson over and over while engaged in other activities. They are not to listen actively. Learners can listen passively while watching television, reading, learning other subjects, or doing whatever they prefer to do at that time. Because Passive Listening is a background activity it does not take precious time away from doing other activities.

3. Students only learn in ways in which they want to learn after the first three steps have been successfully mastered. For example, simply understanding spoken language may be enough for some people because they only want to watch television. Each learner can or should decide which of the following

three language skills he would like to practice actively: speaking, reading, or writing. Learners are ready now because understanding the meaning in context and recognizing the sound patterns of a particular text or lesson spoken at normal speed has become relatively easy. In other words, this approach is extremely brain-friendly for almost every learner at any level.

The Practical Application of the Birkenbihl Language Learning Method for Learning English and German at IBU

In the near future, it is my intention to apply the Birkenbihl Method to existing materials to benefit all the people at IBU: learners, teacher-facilitators, and staff.

Materials for Learning English

For English I have chosen the Sara books ^{8, 9, 10}. It is a series of three popular children's books.



SARA, BOOK 1: *The Fearlessness of Friends of a Feather*
SARA, BOOK 2: *Solomon's Fine Featherless Friends*
SARA, BOOK 3: *A Talking Owl Is Worth A Thousand Words*

I have chosen these three children's books for the following reasons. (1) The books are authentic, in that they are written for native speakers of English. (2) The books are well-written and the content is very interesting and compelling. (3) The wisdom contained in the stories may help readers develop a more positive attitude towards life and towards their studies. (4) With the Birkenbihl Method, the three Sara books, containing about 200

pages each, can become accessible to almost any student. (5) I am interested in finding out whether or not the method can be used in this way.

The Books

The stories in the three Sara Books are about a young girl, Sara, who learns about life through a wise owl named Solomon. He is a wise and wonderful mentor helping Sara find answers to her important questions through her own life experiences. As Sara discovers her answers — the reader may very likely discover some of his own answers, as well. This book will awaken within readers the wisdom with which they were born, but many may have forgotten or not yet cultivated this. In any case, these are books for people of all ages.

The Decoded Text

Below are a few decoded sentences from Chapter 1 in Book 1. The last two lines are without Japanese translation. You may try translating these two lines of text.

Materials for Learning German

For German, I have chosen a textbook called "Talk Deutsch 1" because (1) it already contains all the elements necessary for the Birkenbihl Method, and (2) the textbook can be used for beginners and intermediate learners of German ^{6, 11}.

Below you will find the first unit from the TALK Deutsch 1 textbook. The questions and answers of these model sentences are decoded word-by-word in Japanese.



SARA, BOOK 1: THE FOREVERNESS OF FRIENDS OF A FEATHER, CHAPTER 1

Sara frowned as she lay in her warm bed, disappointed to find herself awake.

Sara しかめ面をした その時 彼女 横になっていた 中 彼女の 暖かいベッド 失望した 見つけて 彼女自身 目がさめている

It was still dark outside, but Sara knew it was time to get up. I hate these short winter days,

その時でした まだ 暗い 外 けれども Sara 知っていたこれ でした 時 起きるための 私 大嫌い これら 短い 冬の日,

Sara thought, I wish I could just stay here until the sun comes up.

Sara 思った 私 望む 私 できたらなあ いる ここ まで 太陽が 上がる

She knew she had been dreaming. It was something very pleasant

although she had no idea now what the dream had been about.

Do a word-by-word translation for these two lines. It's fun!

QUESTIONS	ANSWERS
Wie findest du die beiden? どう 思う 君 2人?	Sie sind glücklich. かれら です 幸せ。
Wie findest du dieses Bild? どう 思う 君 この 絵?	Es ist romantisch. これです ロマンチック
Und wie findest du dieses Bild? そして どう 思う 君 この 絵?	Nicht schön. ない きれい。
Wie findest du dieses Haus? どう 思う 君 この 家?	Sehr gut. とても 良い。
Wie findest du diese Stadt? どう 思う 君 この 君町?	Sie ist schmutzig. 彼女 です 汚い。
Wie findest du diesen Hut? どう 思う 君 この 帽子?	Er ist zu klein. 彼 です 過ぎる 小さい。
Isst du gern Kuchen? 食べる 君 好んで ケーキ?	Ja, sehr gern. はい、とても 好んで。
Trinkst du gern Wein? 飲む 君 好んで ワイン?	Nein, nicht so gern. いいえ、ない そんなに 好んで。
Spielst du gern Fußball? 遊ぶ 君 好んで サッカー?	Ja, aber nicht gut. はい、しかし ない 良い。
Was für Musik magst du? どんな 音楽 好む 君?	Ich mag Klassik. 私 好きである クラシック

Discussion and Conclusion

Language learning plays a major role in the education of students in Japan and elsewhere. Because students and teacher-facilitators invest enormous amounts of time, energy, and effort in learning languages, especially English, it is of the utmost importance to use brain-friendly learning and teaching approaches in order to make the learning process for all students as pleasant and effective as possible. The Birkenbihl Language Learning Method is a brain-friendly approach and can contribute considerably towards reaching this goal.

I intend to use the Birkenbihl Method with interested students at IBU as soon as some materials are ready for use.

I believe that the Birkenbihl Language Learning Method will prove to be successful and popular with students and if so, I would like to adapt more materials to the Birkenbihl Method. The method can easily be applied to any language.

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