

Pimsleur's Speak Russian in Ten Days

Speak Russian in ten days! Master the basics of Russian conversation in just ten easy lessons! The notion is tempting. Why, with the Pimsleur method of language learning, we could all be decalingual in three months time. This program's goals to give the learner a "highly practical" and "every-day" vocabulary in Russian may seem lofty, but it claims that one only has to follow the simple guidelines and complete the lessons to achieve success. This is because Pimsleur had developed his own "proven" method of language learning called The Pimsleur Method.

Geared toward the tourist, this audio series offers a custom-designed introduction to the basics of the Russian language. The general hope is that, after having a taste of Russian with this low-cost program, the student, ravenous for more knowledge, might want to buy the thirty lesson program for the low low price of \$195, which happens to be \$150 less than the normal retail price! One can't help but wonder if Pimsleur's motives lie in teaching language or in making money.

The Pimsleur Method

The Pimsleur Method is based on three basic principles. They are Graduated Interval Recall, the Principle of Anticipation and Backwards Build-Up Drills. Pimsleur is purely audio, with no reading or writing component, and it is structured to make the most of a purely audio learning system.

Graduated Interval Recall is a sophisticated, highly researched principle based on what is known about the human brain and short to long-term memory storage. Dr. Pimsleur based this portion of his method on research into the length of time we can

retain new information. He then took this knowledge and incorporated it into his programs. The first time you hear a new piece of information, you remember it for a short period of time and then it is usually forgotten. The Pimsleur method introduces a new piece of information, and then, just as you're about to forget it, it asks you to recall that information. The intervals between recall tasks gradually become longer until you have committed that information to your long-term memory.

Backwards Build-Up Drills are a method for getting language learners who are using a purely audio system like Pimsleur to get as close as possible to native pronunciation. According to Pimsleur's research, people have a hard time reproducing unfamiliar strings of sounds, like a whole word or phrase. In this method the whole word is presented, and then broken down into syllables and presented in reverse order. So for the word "certificate" for example, the instructor would first present the whole word "certificate" and then have the student learn it in reverse order. Repeating first "cate" the "fi" then "ficate" together and so on until the student can say the whole word with reasonable accuracy.

The last component is the Principle of Anticipation. This is the opposite of repetition. Instead of rote repetition and memorization, the student is asked to answer questions and interact with the lesson. For example in the first lesson, the student learns first how to say, "I am an American" then "Are you from Russia?" and later is asked to try and say "Are you from America?" and "I am a Russian." This combines with Graduated Interval Recall in later lessons, asking the student to not only recall previous information but to recombine it in a new way.

The Pimsleur method as a whole seems to be largely based on the Audio-Lingual method. Conversations are presented at the beginning of each lesson and the whole lesson is based on the principles of grammar and vocabulary needed to engage in and understand that conversation. But it is not limited to only the conversation presented and by using the Principle of Anticipation students can learn more of the language than just a structured conversation. For example, in the first lesson the student not only learns how to say “I am not a Russian” but the teacher also presents how to construct a negative sentence and the particulars of Russian word order.

Some aspects of the Pimsleur method also employ techniques that are found in Lozanov’s method of Suggestopedia. Dr. Paul Pimsleur states in the “Owner’s Manual” that comes with the language program that “to get the full benefit of each lesson” it is necessary pick a time of day when “your mind is most alert and your body least fatigued” (Pimsleur 2). This parallels Lozanov’s theories about “relaxed concentration” and his assertion that one can take in more information when “relaxed and unanxious.” However, Pimsleur doesn’t go as far as to suggest that Baroque music will lead to “superlearning” or that it is positively necessary to have comfortable chairs and incense. A relaxed mind is conducive to learning, but a super-relaxed mind is apt to fall asleep.

Advantages and Disadvantages

As with any language learning programs, there are several advantages and disadvantages. The best advantage of the Pimsleur Language Program is that a student can listen to the CDs anywhere and at any time. Because there is no script to read or follow along with, he or she can listen to the program while driving, showering, playing video games, etc. However, the best place to listen to the program is in a quiet

environment where full attention can be paid to the dialogue and questions. Another advantage is the pace at which a student can listen to the program. There are no other students to interrupt or distract from the learning process and the individual programs can be repeated as often as necessary. Furthermore, the repetition of the dialogue and certain words, as well as the prompts that require the student to respond in the target language, are very beneficial to memory.

Yet there are several disadvantages to the Pimsleur method, most notably the lack of a written transcript. This method seems to be useful only for audio learners, although there is no way to enforce the student to actually speak out loud when responding to the questions. Visual learners have no input whatsoever, and may find the dialogues to be spoken at too fast of a pace. Also it is impossible to ask questions or search for certain information as there is no table of contents or index.

In addition, the price of this program is a major drawback. The six CD basic program retails at \$19.95 but these programs only include a minimal number of introductory and traveler's phrases. The Instant Conversation programs contain 10 CDs and retail at \$49.95. The compact programs (10 CDs available in lesser spoken languages) retail between \$95 and \$115, while the comprehensive programs (30 CDs available in the world's major languages) are offered at two levels and retail at \$295 each.

The main disadvantage of this method, particularly for the Russian language, is the lack of any written material that teaches the alphabet or orthography. Russian uses the Cyrillic alphabet and contains 33 letters, many of which are not related to the letters of the Latin alphabet. Students who wish to learn Russian are advised to learn the alphabet first, as it is more difficult to learn the alphabet after having learned to speak the

language. This is because students adapt English orthography to the pronunciation of Russian words and find it challenging to switch to Russian orthography afterwards. A lack of exposure to reading or writing is a major weakness of language programs that intend to teach languages that use alphabets different from the source language.

The Pimsleur method could be improved by adding a transcript with translations as well as an index and grammar review. This method is intended for audio learners, but it should be able to compensate for all types of learners. Audio learners do not necessarily have to use the transcript, but visual learners could take advantage of it.

Pimsleur based his theory of language learning on the fact that the majority of the languages are primarily speech because they have no writing system and therefore, "the human brain acquires language as speech." But this assumption should not be applied to learning a second language without constant input of the target language. First language acquisition may be based more on speech, but there are no conclusive studies to show that second language acquisition depends entirely on it. Therefore, a variety of teaching methods (including visual, aural, written and kinesthetic) should be employed, especially if the student does not know which method will work best for him or her.

Bibliography

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