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Does anyone finish the Berlitz tapes?

A novel measure of perseverance for commercial language courses



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Introduction

Method comparison research in foreign language education has typically focused on classroom instruction, with relatively little attention paid to a large number of the foreign language acquirers who are self-taught (but see Krashen, 1991; 1996). Many of these acquirers attempt to use self-instructional language courses popular in the United States and other countries, published by companies such as Berlitz, Pimsleur, Living Language, Rosetta Stone, and others. These courses usually consist of tapes or CDs, often accompanied by a book of transcripts, readings, and exercises. The courses are aimed at adults who wish to pick up a foreign language for travel or pleasure, and are organized in a sequence of lessons designed to take the acquirer to progressively higher levels of proficiency.

While no sales figures are available, the popularity of such courses can be attested to in part by the number of titles available in bookstores, libraries, and on the Internet. Independent courses in the form of language podcasts (McQuillan, 2006) are among the most popular types of self-instructional media available on aggregation software such as iTunes, even warranting their own category. A typical book in this genre, Spanish for Dummies, had an Amazon.com sales rank of 2800 at the time of this writing (November, 2007), more popular than the sales of a former president's memoirs (Clinton, 2005).

Despite the popularity of these commercial products aimed at the independent language acquirer, there as been little to no evaluation of their effectiveness or use. An exception is Harris Winitz's Learnables (2003), which have been subjected to several empirical examinations (Winitz & Reed, 1973; Winitz, 1982, 1996).

Reaching the Promised Land: Perseverance as a Measure of Success

Certainly one measure of a language course's success is perseverance or resilience in study. Do students make it to the upper levels of language proficiency, or even the later chapters of the book? Dupuy (1998) was one of the first researchers to look at perseverance as it pertains to university-level foreign language classes. She monitored the number of students who reached intermediate and upper-level language courses, and determined what the characteristics were of the "survivors." Her results showed that only a small percentage in fact make it beyond the early levels of language instruction to what she refers to as the "Promised Land" of upper-division courses, and those who do make it have usually benefited from extensive exposure to the language outside of school, such as in a study abroad experience. It seems reasonable, then, to expect that a foreign language education program aimed at beginners be effective and motivating enough that its students actually reach the intermediate level.

One difficulty in measuring the success of commercial language courses is that, by their very nature, they are used by independent learners where experimental or even simple observational research is much more difficult. To identify and survey individuals who have purchased and attempted to use such courses would be a difficult task for researchers. Short of purchasing and distributing the course to a sample of students, measuring these courses' success will always be

problematic. Fortunately, there are unobtrusive or "non-reactive" ways of examining the behavior of independent adult acquirers, precisely as it bears on the question of student perseverance.

Non-reactive Measures in Research: The Wear and Tear Index

My own attempts at using self-instructional materials to acquire French and Italian led me to see that a "Wear and Tear Index" might provide an indication of the average progress of commercial language course users. Most of the books I checked out of my local library had well-worn page edges, indicating heavy use, but only for the first sections of the text. This "wear and tear" was an artifact of the general use patterns of previous library patrons, indicating in effect the perseverance of the average user.

....it is difficult to escape the conclusion that many commercial language courses do not appear to be utilized by independent acquirers for very long.

The use of something akin to a Wear and Tear Index of behavior is not an original idea; it was advocated by Webb (1966) as one example of an "unobtrusive measure" of human behavior in a public space. Webb describes a class of non-reactive "natural erosion" measures that can indirectly indicate patterns of use and behavior by a target population. The greater the "erosion" of the physical features of an object used for a certain purpose, the more use that object has had. From these observations one can determine how people behave by looking at the artifacts of their actions, much like an archeologist would do for an ancient civilization. For example, museum officials interested in determining which exhibits were most popular could examine the rate of tile replacement in front of different exhibits, since the "erosion" of the tiles would be a likely result of heavy foot traffic. A related class of data analysis is the use of "accretion measures," where some deposit or residue indicates unobserved behavior. Debois (1963, cited in Webb) cites a study from 1934 on the use of fingerprints and smudges on a newspaper to indicate which advertisements were read by readers paging through the publication.

Both erosion and accretion measures can be used to indicate the extent to which library books are read and studied. The amount of dust on a library volume can be used to test whether it has been removed for use, especially useful for reference or reserve volumes. While circulation records can tell us how often a book is checked out, only erosion and accretion measures can reliably indicate the extent to which the book itself was read. Moestller (1955, cited in Webb), for example, looked at the use of the International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences at three academic libraries by examining the number of finger smudges, dirt, and underlining in different parts of the book. From such evidence he determined which entries were the most popular and more widely read.

Method

Public libraries provide free use of a variety of materials, including language courses. Drawing from Moesteller and Debois, I used a combined erosion and accretion measure, the Wear and Tear Index, to determine the extent to which library patrons actually used a sample of commercial language courses. If erosion and accretion measures correlate with actual use, then it should be possible to determine, on average, how much patrons used the courses and the extent of their progress through the use of these materials. If students complete the entire course, or reach the final steps of an instructional program, we should expect to find wear of the book extending to the later chapters, especially in sequential language courses.

For the purposes of this study, I created the Wear and Tear Index for examining the library materials. The Index consists of noting the last page where any one of the following three indicators were found:

1. The separation of the pages on the binding,
2. Fingerprints or smudges on the pages or the corners, and
3. Worn or wrinkled corners likely caused by page turning.

Ten courses found on the shelves of a Los Angeles Public Library neighborhood branch were randomly selected from the shelves for analysis. Although circulation data was not available for the materials, all had been in circulation for at least one year, and all had covers and bindings which showed the likelihood of frequent use by numerous patrons.

No direct measure was made of audio materials, although all but two of the courses that were examined contained either an accompanying CD or cassette tape. There is no easy way to detect the extent or frequency of CD use, other than nicks and scratches to the back surface. Although cassette tape usage can be gauged by whether the tape was stopped at some point, there is no way to know if more diligent patrons rewound the tape. Also, no phrasebooks or "traveler's" courses were examined, since they are designed for reference use, and are organized by theme or topic rather than sequentially as a course.

Results

Table 1 shows results of the analysis. For each course, the title, publisher, year of publication, last page used, total pages, and the percent of use are shown. All ten courses were examined in a single afternoon; audio-only courses were excluded from selection.

Discussion

A number of objections can be raised concerning these results. First, it could be argued that the situation is not unique to commercial language course, that the first chapter of most instructional books are the most worn, and that few users "complete" their instructional sequences. Users may also need to review early chapters more frequently. While this may be true, it is still not very encouraging that patrons don't move beyond the first chapter of such texts, regardless of the topic covered or necessity of review.

Second, it may be that more appealing or effective books and tapes are in constant demand at the library, and hence would not likely appear on the shelf the day we conducted our analysis. A survey of the Los Angeles Public Library catalog revealed, however,

Table 1

Use of Commercial Language Courses by Library Patrons

Course Title (Publisher, Year)	Last Page Used	Total Pages*	Percent Read/Used
E-Z Spanish: A Beginner's Course (Barron's, 2001)	35	328	11%
Teach Yourself: Spanish (McGraw-Hill, 2003)	86	318	27%
Learn Spanish the Fast and Fun Way (Barron's, 1997)	37	264	14%
Rush Hour Spanish (Berlitz, 2003)			
	21	104	20%
Spanish Now! Level 1 (Barron's, 2005)	80	505	26%
Portuguese for Dummies (Wiley Publishing, 2006)	20	304	7%
Learn German the Fast and Fun Way (Barron's, 1997)	15	252	6%
Chinese for Dummies (Wiley Publishing, 2005)	38	314	12%
Teach Yourself Beginner's Italian (NTC/Contemporary Publishing, 1999)	44	193	23%
Teach Yourself Cantonese (NTC/Contemporary Publishing, 1995)	56	254	22%
		Average	16.8%

* = excluding glossaries or bilingual dictionaries at the end of the volume

there none of the more recent language courses were so popular as to have a waiting list of users, and most all of the courses carried by the branch were on the shelf.

Third, patrons may have not had time to finish the course before the end of the loan period. While this is certainly possible, at this library patrons have three weeks per check-out, and can renew twice for a total of nine weeks if the course has not been requested by another patron. While some patrons may have run out of time, it seems unlikely that the average user would be in this situation.

Fourth, there is a potentially more serious problem of student motivation when measuring the use of essentially "free" courses available through the public library system. It could be argued that students who actually purchase the materials for individual use are likely to finish more of the course and move on to higher levels. Follow-up surveys of buyers could help confirm that that was the case, and it is possible that the commercial course producers themselves have data on this question. Such data are not currently available to us for comparison, but we do have some additional indirect evidence from the commercial producers themselves on the success of their own courses – the number of intermediate and advanced courses they publish. If the beginning courses were successful, students would want to continue on to higher levels. But very few companies produce intermediate materials for self-taught language students, indicating that either most students (a) have no interest in moving beyond a basic level of proficiency, or (b) are not completing the beginning courses with an ability sufficient to advance to the promised land of more advanced study.

Despite the potential weaknesses of the Wear-and-Tear Index, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that many commercial language courses do not appear to be utilized by independent acquirers for very long. It appears more likely that they abandon their efforts fairly quickly, perhaps reflecting the same rate of steep attrition in university language courses. Certainly the teaching methods used in most courses – concurrent translation, emphasis on grammar rules, rote memorization of vocabulary – are among the least successful when used in a classroom context (Krashen, 2003). It remains to be seen whether such courses can in fact be designed to take into account current research and pedagogy in foreign language education, and be motivating enough to allow students to get beyond the first chapter.

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