



The Pareto Principle and Language Learning

The 80-20 rule applied to language learning

ownership: *owning or having something*
pod: *the green container that peas grow inside*
roughly: *approximately*
to carry on: *to continue*
to be prone to sth: *to tend to do it sth*
hardly ever: *very rarely, not often at all*
exposure: *having contact with something*
idioms: *expressions or sayings in a language*
given: *if there is, as long as there is*



Some of you might have heard about the Pareto Principle, also known as the 80-20 rule.

After having observed numerous phenomena ranging from land **ownership** to pea **pod**s, Italian engineer and philosopher Vilfredo Federico Damaso Pareto came up with what is now known as Pareto's Law: for many events, **roughly** 80% of the effects come from 20% of the causes. In other words, in the context of work or study, 20% of the effort brings in 80% of the results.

In the context of language learning, by understanding 90 to 95% of the most commonly used words in everyday life, which is roughly the degree of comprehension required to **gather** what is being said in a language, you'll be able to guess the remaining 5 to 10% of words through context. While the numbers do not quite match the 80-20 rule, the principle is similar: only a small fraction of your efforts will obtain the greatest results.

After having developed good comprehension skills in a language, I believe it's time to drop the dictionary and **carry on** learning through context and good guesswork. After all, you do it every day in your own language!

Developing Good Guessing Skills

An article published in The Telegraph, entitled "Learning a foreign language: five most common mistakes" highlights "Rigid Thinking" as one of the most common mistakes learners are prone to:

"Linguists have found that students with a low tolerance of ambiguity tend to **struggle** with language learning. The type of learner who sees a new word and reaches for the dictionary instead of guessing the meaning from the context may feel stressed and disoriented in an immersion class. Ultimately, they might quit their language studies out of sheer frustration."

Rigid thinking is in fact extremely common among language learners, and extremely uncommon when it comes to your mother tongue! Think about it - how often do you **reach** for a dictionary when reading in your native language? My guess is **hardly ever**, despite the fact that you don't know the meaning of all of the words you **come across**.

Good guessing skills are truly important when it comes to acquiring a foreign language. You will eventually learn words through repeated **exposure**, in different contexts, and at different **stages**. This should be your language-learning aim.

Let me give you this example sentence: "We put in a **tremendous** amount of effort to finish this project, and we finally succeeded." Now, let's say that you understand everything here except for the word "tremendous". Chances are you get a rough idea of the meaning of "tremendous" through the context given here. You understand 92.5% of this sentence (14 words out of 15), and the remaining 7.5% can be understood contextually. Keywords include "effort", "project", and "finally succeeded", and through guesswork, it's not that hard to **come up with** a meaning that will be similar to what you would find in a dictionary. Perhaps the hardest part is trusting in your own ability to make these deductions.

Assimilating the Language

Now, of course simply knowing words does not equal perfect understanding of what you listen to or read, since there is also grammar and the existence of **idioms** to consider, and these can provide wonderful barriers to understanding. You could very well know every single word in a sentence and still not understand what is being said because of unfamiliarity with these aspects of the language. **Nevertheless**, most of the time, by knowing 90 to 95% of the words in a sentence, **given** sufficient context, you should have very few problems understanding and communicating in the language.

Adapted from <http://www.lingholic.com/how-many-words-do-i-need-to-know/>

Weekly English Practice



10th March 2016

English Coaching Projects S.Coop.

weeklyenglishpractice.wordpress.com

www.englishcoachingprojects.net Calle San Ignacio de Loyola 15 bajo
info@englishcoachingprojects.net 01001, Vitoria-Gasteiz, Araba-Alava



“iLook, iThink, iSpeak” Express yourself better!

“Let’s chat about that!”

(read the article on page 1)

- *How many words do you think you need to know to communicate in a language?*
- *How many words do you think you know in English?*
- *Do you think you are the type of learner “with a low tolerance of ambiguity”?*
- *How often do you reach for the dictionary when reading? Why?*
- *What other areas of life can the 80-20 principle be applied to?*
- *What methods do you have for learning new vocabulary... and using it?*

Can you **guess** the meaning of these words from their context in the text on page 1?

gather **struggle**
reach **stage**
come across
tremendous
come up with
nevertheless

Come to our next LIVE!English event:

Journey toward the Rising Sun

Viaje hacia el sol naciente - Eki-bidaia sortalderuntz



A talk with photographs by Aitor Ahedo on his travels around Turkey, Iran, Japan and the Philippines

“Three years ago we started to travel as a family. Malen was just a year old. Over time, we have learned that children are not an obstacle to seeing the world, but quite the opposite. Together we have discovered other towns, met lots of people and stayed with them on countless occasions. In 2015, we crossed Turkey and Iran by land, then flew to Japan and ended our trip in the Philippines. Will you come with us?”

Where: English Coaching Projects S.Coop
C/ San Ignacio de Loyola 15 bajo

When: Thursday 17th March at 20:30