Learning languages by ear with The Hofsö Method™

- a question of science and experience

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Author Note

The author is Communications Manager at So To Speak.

This white paper is based on interviews with Karl Hofsö.

Abstract

It may be argued that Karl Hofsö, the Scandinavian inventor of The Hofsö Method™ for learning languages "by ear" stumbled over the method by accident. In his youth and out of pure curiosity he wrote down in long-hand the lyrics to songs by Elvis Presley and successive artists. Catching English words, phrases and sentences on the fly became second nature. The habit soon spread to other languages.

Sounds, and therefore words, are volatile. Once spoken they are gone. They need to be grasped, identified and understood during the very short span of time between their articulation and the onset of the following word. Using massive repetition, listeners get a correspondingly large number of opportunities to practise that skill. That is fundamentally what Mr Hofsö's method is about.

During some thirty years of using languages as a business tool and as a social facilitator, Mr Hofsö developed, refined and packaged his experience into a formalised teaching method which is today known as The Hofsö Method™. This paper looks at both the scientific basis for the method and the accumulated anecdotal evidence that supports its successful deployment.

Keywords: *linguistics, language, language acquisition, Noam Chomsky, Universal Grammar, Steven Pinker, The Language Instinct, Michael Merzenich, massive exposure, massive repetition, Anders Hansen*

The science

In the beginning there was Noam Chomsky. His main thesis is that all humans are born with a "hard wired" faculty to learn languages intuitively by ear. Although controversial for many years, his theory, labelled "Universal Grammar", has stood its ground and is widely accepted as the bedrock of linguistics.

His adept, Steven Pinker, a famous scientist in his own right, has named the same faculty "The Language Instinct" which is also the title of his popular book on the subject.

Professor Michael Merzenich of the University of California San Francisco has gone on to show how "massive exposure" – in language acquisition "massive repetition" - opens hidden or dormant automatic mechanisms in the brain, such as correct and immediate combination of words into grammatically correct sentences. The crucial factor here is that this massive repetition not only works in restoring lost or damaged capabilities of the mother tongue but equally well in establishing second and third languages.

Scientific understanding of the brain's plasticity is constantly evolving.

The Swedish psychiatrist and doctor of medicine, Anders Hansen has in his television series on the workings of the brain and how artificial intelligence builds on those workings, suggested a comparison with a motorway network which is constantly enlarged in width, length and number of exit and entry points. As is known from the famous example of calculating the shortest itinerary for a travelling salesman, the number of possible combinations soon becomes infinite. The speed of the signals travelling on the brain's road network is measured in nanoseconds. It is therefore not easy to act according to the idiom "Think before you speak".

The experience

A collection of anecdotal evidence does not add up to scientific rigour. It may come close, however. Anecdotal evidence of the efficiency of what we today call The Hofsö Method™ has piled up slowly but surely.

The first generation of Karl Hofsö's "learning by ear" technique involved using audio cassettes. At first those were marketed directly by Mr Hofsö, doing sales work in an area that could be covered by car in one day.

Some of the first customers to give feedback were people with dyslexia. They would call Mr Hofsö by phone and express gratitude for being able to learn English without having to struggle with books.

As the method became known locally, Mr Hofsö was contacted with a demand for classroom teaching. Classes were filled. A lady brought her son, a boy of eighteen who risked not passing his school exam in French. Could he be helped? Massive listening training and conversation practice over three months did the trick. He passed.

A cooperation with Sweden's *Folkuniversitet* followed. One case from the first year stood out. A Finnish couple working at a local scientific institution had enrolled in a French class. Finnish has very little in common with French, so it was a big leap to adjust their pronunciation to resemble the sound of French. The lady in particular struggled with pronunciation. Halfway through the course she suddenly sounded authentically French. She received spontaneous applause from the class.

Some of the researchers at the same institution wanted to pick up some everyday Norwegian. One of them was a nuclear scientist from the state of Oregon in the USA.

Whatever he said in Norwegian during the first few weeks sounded more American than Norwegian. After a pep talk following class one day he went home and did some serious homework for two weeks. Then in class during a reading practice he read aloud from a text in flawless Norwegian: "*... og hun löp inn i den store skogen…*". Before that it had persistently sounded like "*oh hoon lope in i den stoore skoogen*" with a deep American R sound in "*stoore*".

And so it went on. Every class had a few students who worked harder than the rest, literally listened more than the rest, and became fluent.

The most outstanding transformation was a lady aged 72, a grandmother in a family who was going to visit relatives in Minnesota, USA. She had never been taught English at school and was a total beginner. Over there in Minnesota, another family member explained later, she listened for a few days, saying nothing. Then she tried out a few sentences for a couple of days and to everybody's amazement, she then began to speak and converse. It was as if she had won big time on a slot machine. All the coins came rushing out at once. She could speak.

This was a perfect example of massive repetition. When asked "How?" she had explained that she had gone to class once or twice a week – but also when working in the kitchen she had played Mr Hofsö's audio cassettes day in and day out for four months!

Circumstances took Mr Hofsö to the north of Norway, to the hamlet of Karasjok in the Finmark region, with a predominantly ethnic Sami (Lapp) population. The authorities wanted to promote tourism, but those in the business spoke only Sami and Norwegian, no English, and no German. This long-neglected minority had very little formal school education. Many saw the written word as their worst enemy. Some had spent up to five years in a (Norwegian) primary school before beginning to understand what the teacher said.

They were overwhelmed by joy as they discovered that they could learn English (or German) without books. The learning went very well and led to a request to teach Norwegian to a group of about forty refugees from Kosovo in 1999. That too, went extraordinarily well (see Footnote 1). Unfortunately, proposals to several universities around the country to do a formal scientific study with control groups went unanswered regardless of how the method and results were described.

Laymen understood quite readily the workings of the "slot machine effect" as comparable to what happens in a nuclear explosion; once a critical mass of learned-by-heart sentences is reached, a chain reaction is triggered, and fluent speech ensues (see Footnote 2).

But universities would hear nothing of it.

It took another fifteen years before large-scale classroom teaching could take place again, now under the umbrella of a commercial operation called So To Speak for which Mr Hofsö was majority shareholder and lead tutor. Technology had improved thanks to the evolution of mobile phones and the world wide web, allowing So To Speak to package the training content into new formats, and for commercial ventures to be undertaken in China and Kazakhstan/Russia.

The China project got started after a meeting at Nokia's development center in Åbo, Finland in the winter of 2006. Mr Hofsö was invited to show the language course solution to the Nokia development headquarters in Beijing. They liked it but asked for a larger model of the course. A year later he was back, supported by a team of Norwegian consultants based in Beijing. Two large telecom operators were willing to market the apps in their app stores. All looked good. But then Nokia tried to launch their own, similar, learning model which they called "Bamboo" and the telecom operators pulled out. Nokia said they had adapted the concept to the "Chinese way of learning" but the launch and product flopped.

Back at Nokia in Finland, they did not like the Chinese strategy and directed Mr Hofsö instead to Nokia's operation in Almaty, Kazakhstan, where a similar cooperation with Ericsson had already been initiated. Multiple trips to Almaty and the capital Astana led to the development of courses in the Kazakh language targeted at the Russian-speaking 40% minority population in the country who, without a basic knowledge of Kazakh, could not get jobs in government or municipal organisations.

While negotiations dragged on (kickbacks were asked for) contact with the Al Farabi University in Almaty developed into a six-month project of teaching English to a thirty-strong class recruited from all over the country. A system of so-called "blended learning" was put together. Mr Hofsö went there to teach English and the acquisition method in class with Ericsson mobile phones as "textbooks", supplemented by a large screen and a whiteboard. The university wrote a favourable report on completion of the project and Mr Hofsö was set to sign a deal with Kazakhstan's Ministry of Education.

At that very moment Apple launched the first iPhone. The arrival of smartphones proved an immediate and existential threat to Nokia's Symbian platform, and investments were quickly shelved. Moving into smartphones proved slow and costly. So To Speak had to find new partners and fresh capital, with progress hampered further when Mr Hofsö was taken ill and out of circulation for a year. Nonetheless, The Hofsö Method™ was proving to stand its ground regardless of the technology used, and regardless of whether the learning was tutor-led or self-study.

The large wave of refugees from the wars in Iraq and Syria hit Europe including Sweden in 2015. An assignment for Mr Hofsö as a substitute teacher of "Swedish for immigrants" (in Sweden usually just called Sfi) at a school in Strömstad in western Sweden was prolonged and

lasted for just over four years. Sfi exam grades and other statistics for Strömstad stood out in several ways when compared with the nationwide statistics from Sweden's National Agency for Education (*Skolverket*):

1. The dropout rate in Strömstad was well below 10% compared with 50% at the national level.
2. 80 % of the Strömstad students were in work or further education two years after arrival in the country. The national average was below 50% of students after five years.
3. Study results in Strömstad were concentrated to the three highest grades, whereas nationwide the majority got results in the three lowest grades (see Footnote 3)

But again, no universities would hear of it.

Conclusion

Although the method has thus far not been subjected to rigorous academic and scientific study, Mr Hofsö and the current team at So To Speak postulate that a thirty year long accumulation of consistent, if anecdotal, evidence bears some weight, and that The Hofsö Method™ is definitely worth a try for those wishing to learn a new language “by ear”.

Footnotes

Footnote 1: Following an inspection by the UDI (Directorate of foreign citizens) it was noted that the Kosovars at the centre spoke Norwegian so well that no interpreters were needed. Indeed many spoke so well that they already held jobs, were integrated into society and contributing to the local economy. More anecdotal evidence for this is available on request.

Footnote 2: The transition in toddlers from one-word babbling into fully-fledged speech follows this pattern.

Footnote 3: Distribution of Sfi grades in Strömstad using The Hofsö Method vs Swedish national results. Local and national statistics provided by So To Speak and *Skolverket* respectively (the latter naturally a much larger control population).