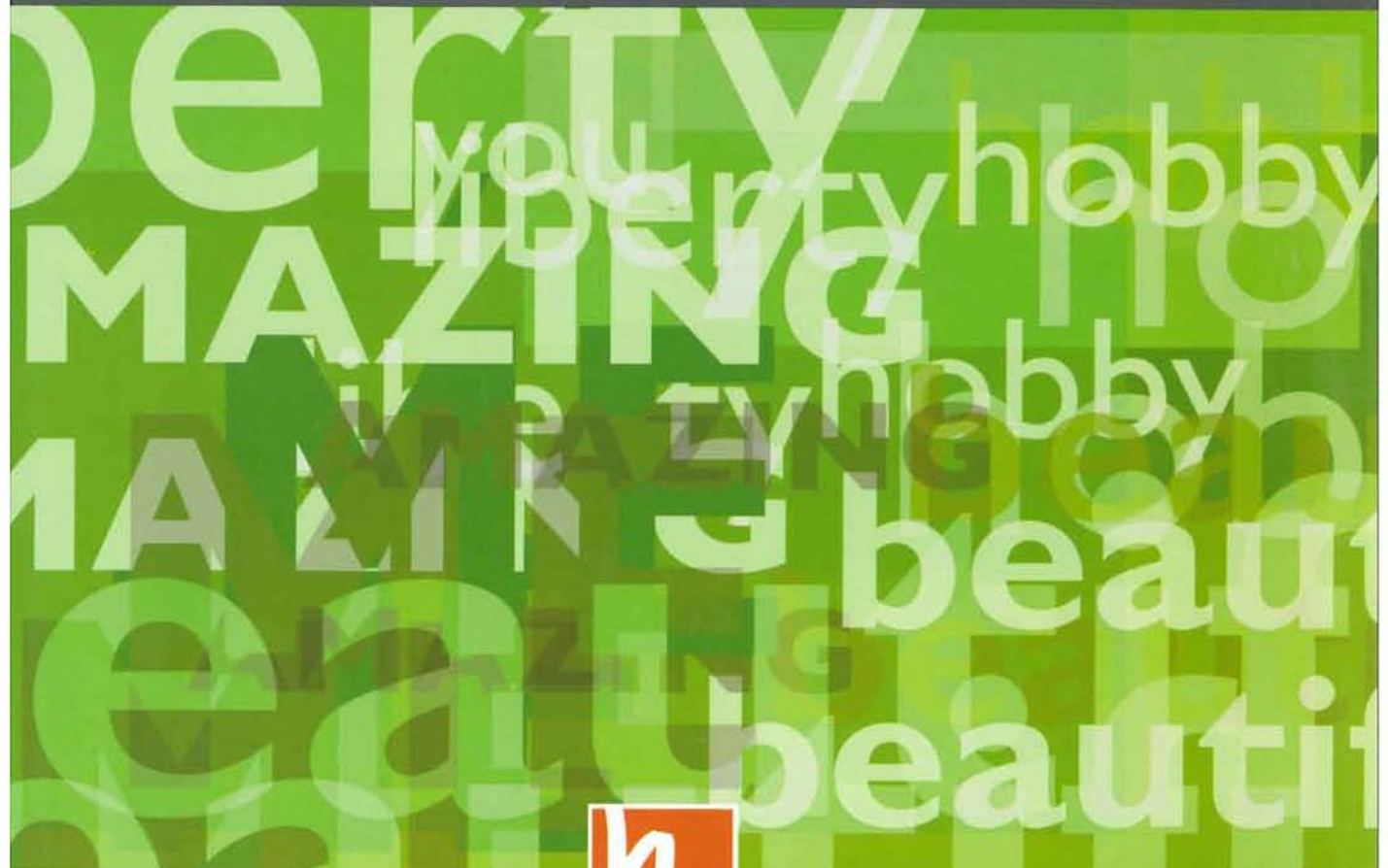


Sample

Tim Murphey

Language Hungry!

An Introduction to Language Learning Fun and Self-Esteem



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CHAPTER 1

The Roller Coaster of Your Language Learning

"You can't stop the waves, but you can learn to surf."

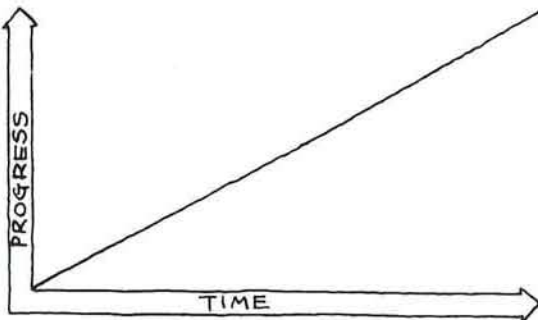
J Kabat Zinn

Think about it first!

1. When do you feel as though you're improving and doing well?
2. When do you feel as though you're forgetting and not doing so well?
3. How can you control your emotions more?
4. How can you have more good days to enjoy, and relax during the not-so-good days?

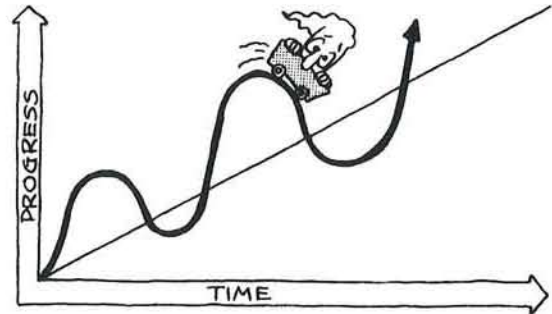
Do you sometimes feel as though your language learning has slowed down, or stopped? Or even begun to nosedive dangerously? Have you forgotten what you thought you knew? Nearly all language learners have these feelings at some time. Language learning has ups and downs, and understanding why allows us to relax a bit and find ways to change the direction of the roller coaster when it's going down.

It is a popular idea that when we strive to learn we make steady progress through time. A diagram of it would look something like this:

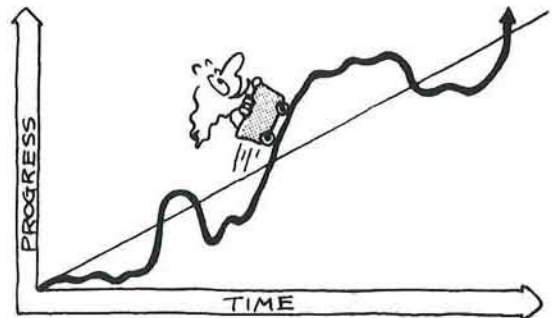


But making such steady progress is rare. More often, progress takes a much more exciting, and at times frustrating, course.

Graphically, it would resemble an irregular roller coaster that nevertheless probably follows the ascending line of our first diagram. If we superimposed the two, it would look something like this:



Depending on you and your context, through time the roller coaster will have its own particular shape.



Take a moment and think in which direction your roller coaster is going at the moment. One thing is sure - there will be moments when you feel as though you're going up (progressing) and others when you're going down (regressing). Even if the curve flattens out into a plateau you may have the impression of going down, because of the contrast with the recent thrill of going up. Let me describe what I think happens. You can see for yourself if it fits your experience.

First of all, roller coasting is natural in our learning; we all have progression, levelling out, and going backwards. We have all experienced the euphoria of realizing we've made a leap in learning, as well as the frustration of having forgotten, even if momentarily, what we thought we knew. ***Going down, forgetting, is part of the natural swing of progression. We all seem to have, and perhaps need, downtime. What is crucial is sustaining the motivation and interest while we're in the slumps.*** Let's also understand that there are several roller coasters rolling at once. In the space of just an hour, learners may have several cycles of feeling: "I can! – I can't! – I'm good at this! – I'm stupid!" These cycles can be more long-term as well; they can last for weeks, months, or years.

There are several reasons why our learning may seem to go up and down, momentarily or for a longer time. Here are a few:

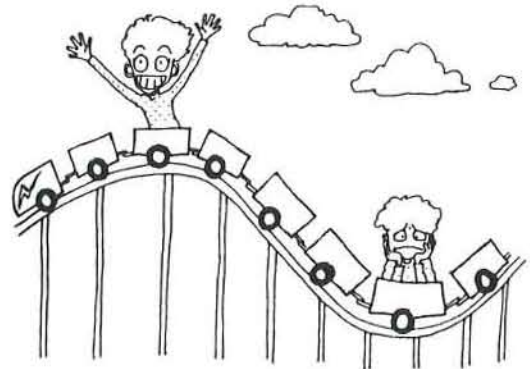
Lack of understanding: When one understands only a little of the language being used, then frustration may set in and our impression of progress seems to backslide. In a classroom, if teachers don't make the effort to find out what their students know, they risk giving input that is too high (and frustrating students) or too low (and insulting them). It feels good to be with people who know how to adjust to your level and talk about things you know how to talk about. But if you don't understand, let your partners and teachers know this. Then they can adjust to you.

Negative emotions: When we don't like the subject, the teacher, or the physical environment, or if we feel a threat to our security (for example, that we'll make a fool of ourselves), we are not very open to learning. In this situation, even if we can understand the input, we spend most of

our energy defending ourselves instead of being open to learning. So instead, it's better if we can find people who make us feel good when we speak, and situations that allow us to make mistakes and yet still succeed in communicating.

We can pause and compliment ourselves, too. Give yourself a pat on the back when you realize you've really learned or communicated well. Too often after succeeding, we just turn the page to something new, and continue until we are burnt out. But it's good to pause, instead, to reflect on what we've accomplished; it reinforces our confidence and helps us work more effectively in the long run.

Fatigue: If we're too tired to listen to new information, even if it's easy, enjoyable, and non-threatening, the information just won't go in. When we don't get enough sleep, especially if it's because we've been studying late at night, we may not be alert in class. It's a good idea to get enough sleep and rest when we can. We can also take frequent short breaks, and that way learn much more comfortably.



Information overload and not enough time for recycling: Even when we find the information understandable and we are motivated and rested, our minds still have a limit to the amount of new information that they can easily process. To try and absorb too much new information becomes frustrating in the long run.