

A Critical Review of Pimsleur Language Learning Programs

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Abstract

As one of the most popular distant language learning programs today, Pimsleur® has received an abundance of reviews from language learners and bloggers online. While these reviews provide a thorough view of the programs from the learner's perspective, reviews of Pimsleur from a second language acquisition (SLA) perspective are rather scarce. In light of addressing this gap, this review investigates some of the major strengths and weaknesses of Pimsleur from an SLA standpoint. Accordingly, several suggestions are made for possible improvements.

Overview

In the 1960s, Dr. Paul Pimsleur developed an auditory teaching method based on his research in psychology and adult second language (L2) learning. Pimsleur proposed a pioneering concept called *graduated interval recall*, i.e., when a teacher recalled a linguistic item frequently after it was first introduced with decreasing frequency in the succeeding lessons. He stated, “[E]ach time a memory is ‘boosted’ it retains its strength longer than the time before” (Pimsleur, 1967, p. 75). Pimsleur (1980/2012) also championed *organic learning*, i.e., learning a new language through conversations as opposed to rule-based learning. As a language professor himself, Pimsleur (1980/2012) believed in setting pronunciation as the point of departure. He argued, “Contrary to what most people believe, pronunciation is not the hardest feature of a language to master... human beings are limited in the speech sounds they can produce” (p. 24). Ultimately, the underlying assumption here is that the acquisition of grammar and vocabulary would develop organically through language use. Altogether, these claims lay the cornerstone for the Pimsleur® language learning programs.

Today, Pimsleur offers up to 50 foreign languages for English speakers, and English as a second language (ESL) programs for English learners in 14 foreign languages (see Appendix A). The program sampled in this review is Chinese Cantonese I, which consists of 30 lessons. Each lesson is about 30 minutes long, beginning with a brief dialogue between two native speakers under a given social scenario (e.g. greetings, asking for directions, ordering food, etc.). After the dialogue, which typically contains six to eight functional phrases, a tutor begins his instructions in



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English. The instructions generally follow a listen-respond-repeat sequence. The tutor is primarily responsible for the following: (1) Translating the dialogue into English (e.g. *Here's how you say X in Cantonese.*); (2) calling learners' attention to forms (e.g. *Notice the low-level tone of Y.*); (3) recalling the previously introduced items within the lesson (e.g. *How do you say X in Cantonese?*); and (4) recalling the items with decreasing frequency in the following lessons (e.g. *Do you remember how to say Y?*) (see Appendix B).

As one of the most popular self-study language learning programs today, Pimsleur has received an abundance of reviews online by learners and bloggers who discuss the method's pros and cons based on their own learning experience. For instance, some regard the method as very efficient in terms of guiding the learners to produce native-like utterances. Some claim that the recalls are helpful for longer memory retention of the target items (Wheelock, this volume). On the other hand, some find the method to be very dull, and importantly, the materials seem to be irrelevant to the learners' needs. While these reviews provide a sound grasp of the programs from the learner's perspective, reviews for Pimsleur from a second language acquisition (SLA) perspective are rather scarce. In light of addressing this gap, this review investigates some of the major strengths and weaknesses of Pimsleur from an SLA standpoint. Suggestions are made accordingly for possible improvements.

Analysis

As an audio-based language learning program, Pimsleur employs various techniques to strengthen its efficacy. In each lesson, the input (dialogue between two native speakers) is first translated into English before being broken down into smaller units (i.e. a phrase or phoneme). Then, each unit is enhanced through multiple replays with an emphasis on intonation and stress. These are known as input enhancement (IE) techniques (Sharwood Smith, 1993), which are designed to make the input more salient to the learners. The tutor also provides metalinguistic information regarding the phonetic features (e.g. *the different tones indicate different meanings*). From a SLA standpoint, oral enhancement techniques like repetitions, intonation, and stress can increase chances of noticing while metalinguistic information can raise learners' awareness (Lyster, 2007)—both of which are “necessary and distinct parts of the L2 learning process” (Winke, 2013, p. 325). Although it is important to recognize that noticing does not guarantee acquisition (Han, Park, and Combs, 2008), it is nevertheless a precondition for intake (Sharwood Smith, 1981).

Another prominent feature of the program lies in the *graduated interval recalls* (Pimsleur, 1967). To some degree, the recalls are like practice in that both are repetitious and designed to assist learners in acquiring certain skills. In this context, it refers specifically to L2 oral skills. According to psychologist John Anderson's (1993) *adaptive control of thought-rational* (ACT-R) model, acquiring a skill involves the conversion from declarative knowledge to procedural knowledge. Practice, moreover, plays a fundamental role in stimulating this process. SLA scholars who adopt this view believe that L2 acquisition also transpires in a similar way—from explicit to implicit; and with good practice, one would be able to achieve automaticity (VanPatten and Benati, 2010).

As Lightbown (2008) wrote, "[I]n general, long-term retention is better if there are multiple, spaced exposures rather than a single study session, even if the overall time devoted to learning is the same" (p. 31). The recalls in Pimsleur's method are multiple, distributed, and mixed, representing an ideal practice that promotes longer memory retention.

Pimsleur's emphasis on pronunciation also seems to have received many supports from later studies in working memory research. Beginning with Baddeley and Hitch's (1974) proposed model of working memory, in which the notion of *slave systems* for short-term memory restoration is introduced. The system that is relevant here is called the *phonological loop*, which is responsible for temporarily storing speech based information (e.g. speech sounds or phone numbers) via repetitions. Other recent studies have also identified a strong correlation between phonological memory and adult L2 learning. For example, phonological memory may promote L2 oral fluency gains (O'Brien, Segalowitz, Freed, and Collentine, 2007), L2 grammar and vocabulary (Martin and Ellis, 2012), and potentially, L2 reading (Luo, Johnson, and Gallo, 1998). All in all, these findings lend indirect support to Pimsleur's claim that pronunciation can play a facilitative role for the acquisition of other language domains.

There are, however, several noteworthy limitations. The biggest one lies in its input, which is extremely impoverished and self-contained. The use of scripted dialogue not only hinders the learners from expressing their own thoughts or emotions, but also fails to capture the micro details of real-life conversations (e.g. transitioning, turn-taking, and topic shifting) (cf. Wong and Waring, 2010). Although a learner may be able to produce immediate target-like language simply by following the instructions, the output is utterly restricted to a prescribed, rigid discourse. Doughty and Long (2003) proposed that adult L2 learners need rich input, which is "not just a matter of linguistic complexity, but of quality, quantity, variety, genuineness, and relevance" (p. 62). Despite the fact that the input in Pimsleur is functionally oriented, the scarcity of quality, quantity, variety, and authenticity prevents the learners from developing higher communicative and interactional competence. So if the goal of acquiring an L2 is to go beyond the ability to utter simple functional phrases, then using Pimsleur exclusively is indeed insufficient.

Another notable weakness lies in the arrangement of recalls. Within each lesson, the tutor frequently employs recalls of items that are introduced many lessons ago. These recalls are interwoven with the tutor's instructions and given out at random; therefore, the response triggered by each recall is decontextualized from the current discourse. In other words, even if an item has been recalled, it is not used in context. As psychologists Craik and Lockhart (1972) suggested, "long-term recall should be facilitated by manipulations which induce deeper or more elaborative processing" (p. 680). The recalls in Pimsleur not only appear as abrupt, but they also fail to engage learners in a higher level of processing other than by retrieving a rote memory. Such recalls, also known as free recalls, have a tendency to induce *negative recency* (Craik, 1970), i.e., recently introduced items are harder to retain due to fewer occurrences.

Last but not least, Pimsleur's method lacks two other essential, interconnected components of L2 development—interaction and negotiation. Because all lessons in Pimsleur are pre-recorded, learners are prohibited from engaging in a spontaneous interaction with the tutor. According to Long's Interaction Hypothesis (1996), negotiation for meaning facilitates L2

acquisition "because it connects input, internal learner capacities, particularly selective attention, and output in productive ways" (pp. 451-452). Pica (1994) also advocated for optimizing chances for interaction and negotiation in language classrooms. In particular, she believed that negotiation can assist and improve L2 comprehension, bring learners' attention to the gaps between their interlanguage and the target forms, and serve as a source of feedback. A few years later, these theoretical claims are reaffirmed by Mackey's (1999) empirical study in which she demonstrated that negotiation can, in fact, facilitate L2 development.

Conclusion

As discussed above, Pimsleur's method showed major strengths in promoting noticing, awareness, and longer memory retention. As well, his claim that pronunciation should be the point of departure for second language (L2) learning has also received supports from later empirical studies. However, without providing enough input, employing meaningful recalls, or engaging learners in negotiation for meaning, learners are merely reproducing the prescribed dialogues. On that note, several suggestions are made in hopes of seeking future improvements in Pimsleur while keeping the integrity of a self-study language learning program. (1) For richer input, invite native speakers to conduct a role-play under a given scenario. The underlying assumption here is that when native speakers participate in a real and spontaneous interaction, they are more likely to produce authentic dialogues. (2) The primary function of recalls should be aimed at helping the learners to "recycle" previously learned material, not just simply to "remember" an isolated word or a phrase. Therefore, the recalls should be scenario-fitting rather than given out at random. This can be achieved by carefully selecting a list of recalls, all of which should be fitted and applied to the current context. Finally, (3) create a space for learners to practice speaking and pronunciation by embedding speech recognition software similar to that of Apple's Siri® (cf. Molden, 2015). Such software allows the learners to engage in a computer-mediated, synchronous communication, which often requires both accurate use and pronunciation of the target language. Potentially, this could increase the chance of negotiation for meaning. This, at the very least, is a step closer to a spontaneous interaction where learners are provided with more opportunities to practice what they have learned.

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Appendix A **Lists of Pimsleur® Language Learning Programs**

Foreign language courses (listed in alphabetical order):

Note. Free sample lessons are available upon e-mail registration.

1. Albanian

<http://www.pimsleur.com/learn-albanian>

2. Arabic (Eastern)

<http://www.pimsleur.com/learn-arabic-eastern>

3. Arabic (Egyptian)

<http://www.pimsleur.com/learn-arabic-egyptian>

4. Arabic (Modern Standard)

<http://www.pimsleur.com/learn-arabic-modern-standard>

5. Armenian (Eastern)

<http://www.pimsleur.com/learn-armenian-eastern>

6. Armenian (Western)

<http://www.pimsleur.com/learn-armenian-western>

7. Chinese (Cantonese)

<http://www.pimsleur.com/learn-chinese-cantonese>

8. Chinese (Mandarin)

<http://www.pimsleur.com/learn-chinese-mandarin>

9. Croatian

<http://www.pimsleur.com/learn-croatian>

10. Czech

<http://www.pimsleur.com/learn-czech>

11. Danish

<http://www.pimsleur.com/learn-danish>

12. Dari Persian

<http://www.pimsleur.com/learn-dari-persian>

13. Dutch

<http://www.pimsleur.com/learn-dutch>

14. Farsi Persian

<http://www.pimsleur.com/learn-farsi-persian>

15. Finnish

<http://www.pimsleur.com/learn-finnish>

16. French

<http://www.pimsleur.com/learn-french>

17. German

<http://www.pimsleur.com/learn-german>

18. Greek

<http://www.pimsleur.com/learn-greek>

19. Haitian Creole

<http://www.pimsleur.com/learn-haitian-creole>

20. Hebrew

<http://www.pimsleur.com/learn-hebrew>

21. Hindi

<http://www.pimsleur.com/learn-hindi>

22. Hungarian
<http://www.pimsleur.com/learn-hungarian>
23. Icelandic
<http://www.pimsleur.com/learn-icelandic>
24. Indonesian
<http://www.pimsleur.com/learn-indonesian>
25. Irish
<http://www.pimsleur.com/learn-irish>
26. Italian
<http://www.pimsleur.com/learn-italian>
27. Japanese
<http://www.pimsleur.com/learn-japanese>
28. Korean
<http://www.pimsleur.com/learn-korean>
29. Lithuanian
<http://www.pimsleur.com/learn-lithuanian>
30. Norwegian
<http://www.pimsleur.com/learn-norwegian>
31. Ojibwe
<http://www.pimsleur.com/learn-ojibwe>
32. Pashto
<http://www.pimsleur.com/learn-pashto>
33. Polish
<http://www.pimsleur.com/learn-polish>
34. Portuguese (Brazilian)
<http://www.pimsleur.com/learn-portuguese-brazilian>
35. Portuguese (European)
<http://www.pimsleur.com/learn-portuguese-european>
36. Punjabi
<http://www.pimsleur.com/learn-punjabi>
37. Romanian
<http://www.pimsleur.com/learn-romanian>
38. Russian
<http://www.pimsleur.com/learn-russian>
39. Spanish (Latin American)
<http://www.pimsleur.com/learn-spanish-latin-american>
40. Spanish (Castilian)
<http://www.pimsleur.com/learn-spanish-castilian>
41. Swahili
<http://www.pimsleur.com/learn-swahili>
42. Swedish
<http://www.pimsleur.com/learn-swedish>
43. Swiss German
<http://www.pimsleur.com/learn-swiss-german>
44. Tagalog
<http://www.pimsleur.com/learn-tagalog>
45. Thai
<http://www.pimsleur.com/learn-thai>
46. Turkish
<http://www.pimsleur.com/learn-turkish>

47. Twi
<http://www.pimsleur.com/learn-twi>

49. Urdu
<http://www.pimsleur.com/learn-urdu>

48. Ukrainian
<http://www.pimsleur.com/learn-ukrainian>

50. Vietnamese
<http://www.pimsleur.com/learn-vietnamese>

English as a second language (ESL) courses:

1. English for Spanish Speakers
<http://www.pimsleur.com/learn-english-for-spanish-speakers>

2. English for Mandarin Chinese Speakers
<http://www.pimsleur.com/learn-english-for-mandarin-chinese-speakers>

3. English for Russian Speakers
<http://www.pimsleur.com/learn-english-for-russian-speakers>

4. English for Portuguese Speakers
<http://www.pimsleur.com/learn-english-for-portuguese-speakers>

5. English for Italian Speakers
<http://www.pimsleur.com/learn-english-for-italian-speakers>

6. English for Arabic Speakers
<http://www.pimsleur.com/learn-english-for-arabic-speakers>

7. English for French Speakers
<http://www.pimsleur.com/learn-english-for-french-speakers>

8. English for Vietnamese Speakers
<http://www.pimsleur.com/learn-english-for-vietnamese-speakers>

9. English for Farsi Persian Speakers
<http://www.pimsleur.com/learn-english-for-farsi-persian-speakers>

10. English for Korean Speakers
<http://www.pimsleur.com/learn-english-for-korean-speakers>

11. English for Cantonese Chinese Speakers

<http://www.pimsleur.com/learn-english-for-cantonese-chinese-speakers>

12. English for Haitian Speakers

<http://www.pimsleur.com/learn-english-for-haitian-speakers>

13. English for German Speakers

<http://www.pimsleur.com/learn-english-for-german-speakers>

14. English for Hindi Speakers

<http://www.pimsleur.com/learn-english-for-hindi-speakers>

Appendix B
Extract from Chinese Cantonese 1, Unit 6

Tutor (T)

Native Speaker 1 (NS1)

Native Speaker 2 (NS2)

[00:00:02-00:06:12]

T: This is Unit 6 of Pimsleur's Cantonese I. Listen to this conversation.
In it, you'll hear the word:

NS1: 'dou'.

T: This means, 'also'. Listen.

NS1: *siu je zou san.*
(Good morning, miss.)

NS2: *sin sang zou san. nei hou ma?*
(Good morning, mister. How are you?)

NS1: *hou hou. dou je. ngo seung sic yut dee yeh. nei ne?*
(Very good. Thank you. I want to eat something. How about you?)

NS2: *ngo do seung*
(Anything is fine with me.)

NS1: *nei seung mh seung yam yut dee yeh ah?*
(Do you want to drink something?)

NS2: *seung*
(Yes.)

NS1: *hui bin dou ah?*
(Where to?)

NS2: *gai han gai.*
(Boundary street.)

T: You just heard the man ask, "Where to go?"

NS1: *hui bin dou ah?*

T: Do you remember the word for "street" in Cantonese.
(silence)

NS2: *gai.*
(silence)

NS2: *gai.*
T: Now say, "Boundary Street".
(silence)

NS2: *gai han gai.*
(silence)

NS2: *gai han gai.*
(silence)

T: Did you hear the mid, low, and high level tones in that?
Ask where the street is located.
(silence)

NS2: *gai han gai hai bin dou ah?*
(silence)

- T: It's located here.
(silence)
- NS1: *hai mi dou.*
- T: Tell her that Boundary Street is not located there.
(silence)
- NS1: *gai han gai mh hai gou dou.*
(silence)
- T: Do you remember how to ask, "How about you?"
(silence)
- NS2: *nei ne?*
- T: And how do you say, "King's Road."
(silence)
- NS2: *yin wong do.*
(silence)
- T: Now try to ask, "How about King's road?"
(silence)
- NS2: *yin wong do ne?*
(silence)
yin wong do ne?
(silence)
- T: Say, "It's located over there."
(silence)
- NS1: *hai go dou.*
(silence)
- T: Ask whether it's located here.
(silence)
- NS2: *hai mh hai hai mi dou ah?*
(silence)
hai mh hai hai mi dou ah?
(silence)
- T: Answer, "No, it's not located here."
(silence)
- NS1: *mh hai. mhai mi dou.*
(silence)
- T: Tell her that King's road is located over there.
(silence)
- NS1: *yin wong do hai go dou.*
(silence)
- T: Now say, "You speak."
(silence)
- NS2: *nei gong*
(silence)
- T: "You speak well."
(silence)
- NS2: *nei gong daht hou.*

- (silence)
nei gong daht hou.
(silence)
- T: Did you remember how to use:
NS1: *'daht'*
T: Now say, "You speak Cantonese very well."
(silence)
- NS2: *nei gwong dung waa gong daht hou hou.*
(silence)
- T: How do you say, "I can understand a little."
(silence)
- NS1: *ngo sei ting yat dee.*
(silence)
- T: Say, "I can speak a little."
(silence)
- NS1: *ngo sei gong yat dee.*
(silence)
- T: Say modestly, "I don't speak well."
(silence)
- NS1: *ngo gong dat mh hou.*
(silence)
mh hou.
(silence)
- T Do you remember how to say "hello" in Cantonese.
(silence)
- NS2: *nei hou.*
(silence)
nei hou.
(silence)
- T: Try to say, "Hello miss."
(silence)
- NS1: *siu je nei hou.*
(silence)
siu je nei hou.
(silence)
- T: What's the Cantonese word, "want to"?
(silence)
- NS1: *seung.*
(silence)
seung.
(silence)
- T: Say "something" in Cantonese.
(silence)
- NS1: *yut dee yeh*
(silence)

- T: Ask me if I want to eat something.
(silence)
- NS1: *nei seung mh seung sic yut dee yeh ah?*
(silence)
- T: Try to answer, "Yes, I want to eat something."
(silence)
- NS2: *seung ngo seung sic yut dee yeh.*

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