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Learning Tones – Practical Tips: Part 2

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Gesturing pitch patterns

Instead of drawing pitch patterns with pen and paper, you can “draw” a pitch pattern in the air, similar to the way a conductor would conduct an orchestra.

Learning phrases like songs

Sometimes it may make more sense to learn a phrase by heart as a chunk rather than break it down into its individual words and tones. This is particularly useful for those phrases that you will need a couple of times every day, like greetings, names, or phrases like “What is this?” or “Give me that thing, please.” So try not to think about those phrases too much, just learn them as you would learn a song and you might find that they will roll off your tongue much more easily.

Songs

This may or may not help you but in some songs the melody actually resembles the tones of a word. In Yoruba, for example, there is a song to learn the days of the week, and since I learned it I can actually remember the days of the week and their tones.

Working with native speakers

Working with native speakers can be extremely helpful and extremely frustrating. Bear in mind that native speakers don't really look at their language in the way you do. They can speak it perfectly well and there is a good chance that they never even waste a thought on the fact that their language even has tones. If you asked them “Excuse me, is this a high tone or a fall?”, it'd be a bit like a learner of English asking you “If I want to express doubt while saying “no”, do I do that with a slight rise or a fall?”

What native speakers can do though is just speak the language around you, and you tune in to what they say. This is very useful for picking up high-frequency phrases for your everyday language and for learning phrases as chunks. Also, native speakers may be able to hum words for you or tell you if two words sound the same or different.

This is exactly what I found in Nigeria. No one has problems pronouncing their tones correctly, and they don't get mixed up when they hear words that only differ in their tonal pattern. But ask them whether a word has a high tone or a low tone (or has *do*, *re* or *mi*, as they are taught in Yoruba lessons in Nigerian schools) and at least half of them will not be able to tell you. If you have access to such a “tone-deaf” native speaker they may not be able to explain to you what exactly it is that you are doing wrong and how to do it correctly. But they can still help you if you know which questions to ask, and it is your job to find out which questions work best.

Trying it out and hearing yourself speak

And in the end, you just have to speak it, speak it, speak it, and then say it again and speak some more!

Produced by Michalis Sivas, formerly at SOAS Language Centre