



Unconventional Wisdom

The Power of our Minds

September 2008

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Dear Reader,

We hope you'll find the unconventional wisdom we share in this newsletter as fascinating as we do. Thanks for taking the time to read it, and let us know if you have any questions. We'd love to hear from you! info@englishbythehour.com

In This Issue

[How Brain Plasticity Influences Accent Acquisition](#)

[Keys to Performance](#)

[How Learning Helps Us Stay Young](#)

How Brain Plasticity Influences Accent Acquisition: by Rebecca Linquist



Common theories in second language learning contend that as adults, we can no longer acquire a language the same way we did as children. Before age 9, as those of us who spend time with children know, it's a simple process to make new sounds and pronounce words. Many children in the Silicon Valley are multi-lingual, fluent in several languages they have never formally studied, acquired merely by listening to family and friends or traveling.

As adults, the story changes. We attempt to learn another language and find it takes years, often still not yielding a satisfactory result. For many it's a daily struggle with children taunting and teasing adults as they practice. No wonder many of us give up and decide, "This is the way I talk -- Oh, well."

That was standard logic in language learning, but has recently been challenged by those who believe in "brain plasticity." This isn't new. Norman Doidge in his New York Times bestseller tells us that adults can make remarkable changes in their lives based on "neuroplasticity." That is to say that one sense can replace another, leading to amazing results.

In [The Brain that Changes Itself](#), Doidge gives example after example of empowering and lasting change: stroke victims who learn to talk, a woman labeled "retarded" who heals herself, monkeys and

rats who rewire their brains, and those with memory problems who learn to recall information even at an advanced age.

As a linguist, this led me to question: what are the implications on American Accent Acquisition? How can we enable adults to more quickly and more effectively learn to speak in a new way?

Neuroplasticity provides a multitude of possibilities, including the following:

- Sensory substitution (using one sense to compensate for another): our brains restructure themselves in response to input from the simplest tools, such as a rubber band.
- We can reorganize our sensory perceptual system: awareness can create change.
- "Neurons that fire together, wire together" (p. 64) - creating new connections! Modeling and exaggeration can create lasting behavioral change.
- Plasticity exists throughout our lives - even adults can learn to "rewire" their brains and create new connections, enabling change.
- Important, surprising events create learning moments that change the brain, specifically the "nucleus basalis".
- Our "brain maps" can be rewired. We can strengthen areas of our brain we did not formerly imagine could be changed.

The greatest take-away from this book is the following: at any age, brain plasticity will allow fundamental, critical and empowering changes to occur in the brain --- leading to the formation of neurological connections that didn't exist before. This will enable the brain to process information differently, creating lasting change.

In a sense, this is nothing new at English by the Hour, where our Coaches have been using these techniques and strategies in our 1-1 personal coaching sessions for years to enable change in 10 hours. This study lends credence and creates greater applicability for what we already know to be true, despite conventional wisdom. Adults can change their accents with the right exercises and focused attention to brain plasticity as it applies to modifying our "brainmaps" and reinforcing new patterns.

Rebecca Linqvist
August 2008

Work Cited:

Doidge, N. (2007). [The Brain that Changes Itself](#). Penguin Books: USA.

**Keys to Performance: Knowledge, Skill and Desire
by Bud Everts**



In his best-selling book [The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People](#), Stephen Covey eloquently defined a habit as the intersection of:

1. Knowledge,
2. Skill, and
3. Desire.

He further explained that Knowledge is the "What To Do and the Why"

Skill is the "How To Do", and
Desire is the "Want To Do."

In order for behavior to be a habit, all three are required.

Since many of you have recently seen the 2008 Summer Olympics held in Beijing, let's look at Michael Phelps as a young boy learning how to swim to illustrate this in a real-life situation.

KNOWLEDGE

Like many young children, he was introduced to swimming by going to the pool and taking swimming lessons.

At these lessons, his swim instructor gave him the knowledge of telling him how to swim and indirectly addressed why this was important in order to avoid the danger of drowning.

SKILLS

With this knowledge, he was armed with the basics of swimming, but he needed to acquire the skill of swimming, including how to breathe, stay relaxed in the water, and master the coordination needed to not just stay afloat, but also to propel himself through the water.

DESIRE

When he was first taken to the swimming pool, little Michael hated to get his face wet and reluctantly began swimming the backstroke to counter this fear. He certainly didn't start out with the "Desire".

Through building the Knowledge and Skills of how to swim, plus having the example of his older sister, who had tried out for the Olympic Team but fallen short of her dream, his desire to compete and win grew stronger and stronger until he accomplished winning 8 Gold Medals at one Olympic Games, more than any other athlete in the history of the Olympics!

NURTURING THESE KEYS

If any of the three "Keys to Performance" were lacking, Michael Phelps would not have attained the heights we just witnessed.

As great as he is, Michael Phelps could not have accomplished these goals without the support of his family and coaches who nurtured all three of these keys through their instruction, feedback and emotional support.

APPLYING THESE TO OUR OWN LIVES

Taking responsibility ("the ability to respond") for our own lives, it is absolutely essential that we take an honest look at performance, whether our own or others' with whom we work, and compare it to what we want to accomplish.

The road to improvement begins with determining whether improvement in one, some or all of these areas (Knowledge, Skill and Desire) is needed, and then seeking the needed support and committing to developing the needed habits.

Bud Everts
August 2008

Work Cited:

Covey, S. (1989). [The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People](#). Free Press: USA.

How Learning Helps Us Stay Young by Lara Willing



Our brain accomplishes every thought we have, every movement we make, through a complex order of firing neurons. When we repeat the same thoughts or actions, our brains form something almost like a "groove"- a neuronal pathway; it becomes easier and easier to follow the "known path" and harder and harder to create a new one. So, as we age, our brains become less and less able and willing to learn something new, think about something from a different perspective, or move our bodies differently than we are used to.

In order to age gracefully, it is important for us to continue using our brains in new and different ways. Every time you push yourself to move in a new way, study a new subject, or consider a new viewpoint, you are helping your brain stay pliable and flexible. By doing new things, you keep the possibility open of creating new neuronal pathways. It's like exercise for the brain.

Studying or improving our language skills is one way to challenge our brains to think in new ways. The muscles of our mouth, face and diaphragm are pushed to learn new ways to move. Our minds are challenged to think using different words. We have to work harder to

express our ideas. We form millions of new neuronal pathways to incorporate everything we learn.

So study or improve a language. Take up a new type of exercise. Learn about points of view you haven't been exposed to before. What a wonderful way to age gracefully.

Lara Willing
August 2008

Thank you for your interest and support. When you think American Accent, think [English by the Hour!](#)

Sincerely,

Rebecca Linqvist, Lara Willing, Bud Everts, Lisa Braley, and the entire English by the Hour Team