

A survey of self-taught foreign language courses

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A Survey of Self-Taught Language Courses
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Scope of the Survey

- I limited the study to book/audio courses because including computer-based courses would have expanded the breadth and increased the cost of the survey considerably.
- I did not use ESL or EFL materials because the target learners in my audience are English teachers who are putting themselves in the learner's shoes. Thus almost all of the materials examined are designed for English speakers.

Table 1 **Formats of Self-Study Courses**

Format	Products
All-audio	Pimsleur Michel Thomas Berlitz _____ Guaranteed Berlitz _____ 2
Audio-based with booklet/transcript	Teach Yourself _____ Conversation Speak _____ with Confidence Collins Easy Learning _____ Learn in Your Car Living Language All-Audio _____ Barron's _____ on the Go Drive & Learn
Balanced/integrated (i.e., you need both)	Teach Yourself Teach yourself Instant _____ Oxford Take Off in _____ Collins Speak _____ Berlitz Basic _____
Book with audio accompaniment	Berlitz _____ in 30 Days Assimil _____ with Ease Hugo _____ in 3 Months Conversational _____ in 7 Days

All-Audio Courses

- A lot of English commentary on the CD (taking the place of textbook explanations).
- Some use a cognitive building-block approach while others are built on situational dialogues.
- Hesitant to rely on audio alone (explanatory booklets or online transcripts and exercises).

All-Audio Courses

Course	Pimsleur	Michel Thomas	Berlitz Guaranteed
Attribute			
Syllabus	Basic conversations broken down, manipulated and recycled	Builds up from simple phrases, recycles vocabulary	Built around conversations broken down, explained, repeated
Principles	Anticipation, graduated interval recall	Relax, don't try to remember, use the pause button	Effortless, works anywhere
Special Features	Dozens of languages offered, several levels	Friendly atmosphere, teacher uses jokes and mnemonics, real students on the CD	Goes over the dialogues, checking with English questions
Comments	Somewhat old-fashioned language and situations, a bit of humor	A bit expensive, very clear	Starts really basic, but gets hard fast, probably better as a refresher

Audio Courses with Booklets

- Usually dialogue-based.
- Some are like audio phrasebooks.
- Booklet tends to be a transcript.
- Some cultural notes.
- Difficult without background knowledge.

Audio Courses with Booklets

Course Attribute	On The Go	Teach Yourself Conversation*	Learn in Your Car	Easy Learning	Living Language All-Audio	Drive & Learn
Syllabus	Basic dialogues	Situational dialogues	Situational phrasebook	From simple sentences to basic dialogues	Situational dialogues	Basic phrases in song
Principles	Audio-based	Travel situations	Vocabulary clustered by topic, aural repetition	Gradual buildup, recycling	Listen and repeat, grammatical explanations	Connecting music and memory
Special Features	Humor in English commentary	Running story	Color-coded translations in booklet,	Cultural notes, recap of previous lessons, periodic review lessons	Booklet with dialogues, vocabulary list and grammar summary	Songs mixing English with target language
Comments	Not bad for review	Can be interesting and useful if you have previous knowledge	Just a phrasebook with audio	Well-organized	Completely deductive, verb conjugations on audio?	Very cheerful, Lots of English

Integrated Courses

- Generally cover all four skills.
- Some elements are only in the book, some are only on the audio, i.e., you need both.
- Sometimes hard to follow as a result.

Integrated Courses

Course Attribute	Teach Yourself	Teach Yourself Instant _____	Oxford Take Off in _____	Collins Speak _____	Berlitz Basic _____
Syllabus	Mixed Situational and Grammatical	Based on situational dialogues	Situational	Dual track: situational and grammatical reference	Mixed Situational and Grammatical
Principles	Natural speech, simulated authentic materials	Simplified contents, limited time, rewards	Coordinated book and CD, emphasis on listening and speaking	Multipronged attack	Centered on Dialogues, but all four skills addressed
Special Features	Lots of written exercises, difficulty moves quickly from zero to intermediate	Metacognitive motivational strategies, points and stars, good news grammar	Running story, cultural information, tests, grammar summary	Separate track for vocabulary and grammar reference, glossy photos, extensive English notes	Plenty of written work, separate listening and speaking component
Comments	Somewhat dry on the surface, but the content is fairly involved	Dialogues quite long, point system appropriate for certain types of learners	Interesting stories, cultural content	Managing the two tracks can be confusing, gap between CD and book exercises	Thorough, but possibly too much going on at once

Books with Audio

- Vary dramatically in style.
- Audio usually only for dialogues.
- Usually available without CD.

Books with Audio

Course Attribute	Berlitz _____ in 30 Days	Assimil _____ with Ease	Hugo _____ in 3 Months	Conversational _____ in 7 Days
Syllabus	Situational	Grammatical	Grammatical	Situational
Principles	Everyday situations and basic grammar	Audio-lingual approach, repetition, manipulation	Traditional grammatical approach	Mix between a phrasebook and a text, just the basics for each situation, but with practice
Special Features	Running story with humorous twists	Two-phase system with cyclical repetition of units, lots of corny humor, recycled vocabulary, sentence manipulation	Reading practice at the back	Running story of travelers over one week in different situations, color photos, cultural tips, reference vocabulary lists
Comments	OK as a refresher, lacking in exercises	Layout confusing at first, seems old-fashioned, but sticks in the memory.	Very dry	Obviously impossible in 7 days, but a nice step up from a phrasebook

In Conclusion

Various types available.

Some quite well-researched, well-organized.

Some still quite old-fashioned.

Figure out your style and needs, find one to match.