



How To Win Any Language Learning Contest

Exclusive interview with Sam Gendreau

<http://www.magneticmemorymethod.com/mindset-memory-and-motivation-with-sam-gendreau/>

Anthony: Sam, thank you for being on the Magnetic Memory Method Podcast a second time. It was really great the first time. I am grateful for the opportunity to catch up with you again. Not so long ago you won something called the KBS World Korean Speaking Contest. What is the story behind how you got involved with that?

Sam: Well first of all, thanks Anthony. It is a pleasure to be here for a second time. Indeed, I won the KBS World Korean Speaking Contest in 2014 so it's been a couple months now. The reason why I got involved in the first place is in fact I was just following an organization on Facebook.

I saw that they were advertising this new contest organized by KBS. For those of you who might not know, KBS is the largest broadcasting corporation in Korea. It's the equivalent of CBC in Canada or the BBC in the UK. I just looked at that, and I thought that maybe I could have a good chance of winning if I were to apply to that contest.

The contest was split into three different parts. The first stage was essentially all of the applicants were submitting a video of themselves speaking in Korean for about three minutes and you had a particular theme around which you had to structure your video.

Following this phase, I essentially made it to the top ten. The second phase entailed the ten participants having separate interviews with a professional Korean radio announcer. You essentially had to talk over Skype with this announcer in Korean. They were testing your speaking abilities just to see whether, as opposed to just recording yourself, in a more natural setting you are able to hold a conversation. I made it to the top three.

The third phase was to submit another video in Korean. I finally made it to the first prize. I was invited to spend a week in Seoul, Korea. I was on the national radio. I visited the KBS headquarters. It was quite an experience and certainly a memorable one.

This year there is going to be a second KBS World Korean Speaking Contest so I encourage people who might be interested in participating this year to certainly register. There

is a Facebook page so you can have a look at it and it should be a popular contest this year.

Anthony: What interests you in Korean in particular, and at what stage were you already when you entered the contest?

Sam: My interest in Korean was sparked when I was living in Australia over 7 years ago because I met some Koreans there for the first time actually. I really had never had any interest in Korean in particular, but then I made a couple of friends there in Australia.

That is basically just how it got started. I got to know about Korean food, about some Korean culture and eventually I started to learn the language very gradually. I just purchased one of these little phrase books that you find on the shelves of bookstores. Slowly I started to learn the language, the script Hangeul and after a couple of years, I registered in classes in university. For the most part, I really just learned on my own. When I applied to the contest last year, I mean it is always a subjective thing to gauge your own level, but I guess I was probably at a C1 level, so a fairly advanced level at least in terms of speaking abilities.

How To Use The Key Learning Strategies To Develop Fluency In Any Language

Anthony: Given that level you reached primarily on your own,

what have been some of the key learning strategies that you have used with Korean and specifically with respect to speaking at that level?

Sam: That is a very good question. I think, first of all, what is more important even than any strategy or technique is really to **keep yourself motivated**. I think the primary reason why most language learners do not reach an advanced level of proficiency in a foreign language is usually just because they just give up after a few months or years.

The question is how can you keep yourself motivated and I think it boils down to **curiosity, pure interest and really being curious about the culture and about the people who speak your target language**. That is what has really been able to keep me going for that many years. I have been really fascinated by the culture. I have been really interested in movies and music, and the history of the country. I am also a fan of international affairs and international relations. That is my major. I am also very much interested in the international relations of Northeast Asia.

The Secret Of Using "Massive Input" To Build Build A "Self-Propelling Language Learning Engine

Studying about Korea and about the region, learning more about it has acted essentially like a **self-propelling engine** if

you want to put it that way. The more I got to know about the region and about the country and the culture the more I wanted to learn the language. That is the first thing I would want to emphasize is the importance of keeping yourself motivated.

The second thing, in terms of reaching this level of speaking ability, in my case it has been really about the **massive amount of input**. I have watched a huge amount of movies in Korean, a huge amount of TV series, dramas as they call them in Korea, lots of music as well.

To be frank, I had not had the chance to speak Korean a lot throughout the years because I lived for the most part either in Australia or Canada and so the only time I really got to practice my speaking skills was when I lived in Korea for about a year. Even then it was not like I was speaking all the time but it certainly helped.

I think having this massive input like really listening to the language all the time has helped a lot and reading the news. I really tried to make the language a part of my life so I tried to use read the news every day in the language, read blogs in the language. Whatever kind of interests me in English or in other foreign languages, I can also do it in Korean. I have tried to make the language part of my life and just as an interesting experience overall.

The Exact Definition Of Fluency According To ...

Anthony: Wow, well that is an amazing accomplishment. Real quick, just for people who may not be familiar with what C1 is, maybe you can just explain that and put it into context with the different levels that are B1 and B2 and so forth.

Sam: Certainly. I think that is the [European framework of language proficiency](#). I am not sure if that is the exact term. Essentially, you have six different levels. You have A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, C2, the A's being either low beginner or high beginner and B1 being a low intermediate, B2 high intermediate and so forth. A C1 level is typically what would be considered as a low advanced or advanced level. C2 would be native proficiency.

Obviously, before you can reach any type of C2 in a foreign language it's really many, many years of study. It's typically a level that's fairly hard to reach. C1 is obviously below a native proficiency but it is still an advanced what you could call a professional proficiency in the language.

Obviously, this also depends. You have different skills in the language. You have writing skills, you have reading skills, and speaking skills. You might be C1 in writing, for example, but you might not be C1 in speaking. These blanket statements like, "Oh, I'm C1 in that language," it always depends on which skills you are looking at, but certainly, if you pass an actual exam, that might help you to determine whether you are a C1 or a B2 or whatever if that is what you really want to know.

How To Speaking And Reading Skills - Even If The Language Uses Crazy Characters

Anthony: I think it is good to have a framework if people aren't familiar with that, so that's great. I'm curious, what is the relationship between being able to speak and being able to write and read the character set?

Sam: In Korean they use an alphabet just like in English we do or most European languages. That's certainly very easy to learn. Hangul I think if you study for a few days you can certainly learn it. In that respect, Korean is very easy to learn to read and write. The complicated part is really to understand what you are actually reading.

The relationship between writing and speaking or reading I think obviously the more reading and listening you do the better you will be able to structure your own sentences and so forth.

When it comes down to speaking, I think practice is definitely central to gaining improvements in proficiency. Things such as even reading aloud I think can help a lot. I've done that certainly at many instances. [Practicing over Skype with native speakers, having language exchange partners](#), or if you can afford it or you have the opportunity, just going to the country and actually living the language and speaking with natives on a

day-to-day basis I think that can definitely help.

The Practice Of Pronunciation 101

Anthony: A lot of this has to do with pronunciation, and I'm curious to what extent you have just learned pronunciation from hearing and speaking or if you ever used any sort of memory techniques or mnemonics to help with pronunciation as a kind of guide from inside your mind?

Sam: In terms of [pronunciation](#), for Korean it has been mostly just about exposure to the language. The way I see it, pronunciation is really more of something you need to practice rather than memorize, and so in that respect I've never really approached it from a mnemonics prospective.

I'm not sure in what way it might help. Maybe you could clarify that with our listeners, but I mean I see the use of mnemonics more for actually memorizing words or characters in the case of Chinese for example. In terms of pronunciation, my personal experience has been just to really listen, pay attention and try to imitate the native speakers.

I think pronunciation is not just about the physical. It's not just about the way your mouth moves and so forth. A lot of people recommend that you learn the International Phonetic Alphabet also known as the IPA. They recommend that you kind of map your mouth and you really understand which part of your

mouth is being used for which consonant and vowels. I think that can be very helpful.

Another aspect that is often not as much talked about, about pronunciation is that of **the psychological side** of it. I think a lot of people fail to really gain a very good accent in a foreign language because they don't like to hear themselves sound foreign. There have been a couple of studies done about that.

The studies show that some language learners are essentially scared to sound funny. They don't want to sound foreign to themselves. It also has to do with your own identity and the groups to whom you belong. It is fairly complicated, but in my case I really tried to imitate how native speakers speak and I've really tried to immerse myself in the culture and haven't been scared to sound foreign or what not so I think that helped. Certainly looking into the psychological aspects of pronunciation I think can be a good way maybe to clear some roadblocks.

Anthony: That is interesting what you say about being afraid to hear yourself with an accent or with poor pronunciation that certainly has been something with my girlfriend where she can't stand the sound of her German accent in her English and that makes her not want to speak it.

Sam: That's interesting.

Anthony: It's a shame because she speaks very well. I had never heard anybody phrase it like that, the way that you mentioned it so that just came to mind. You were talking about how that

there's a psychological element to it and that gets mapped onto the actual biological requirements of the body or the mouth and things of this nature. What I am curious about, is if you think there's an overall relationship between learning a language and getting fluent and memory at all or is it just a sort of organic thing that grows and doesn't really have that much to do with memory in your experience and opinion.

How To Memorize Thousands And Thousands Of Words By Using Mnemonics And Context

Sam: Well, I mean language learning is primarily about memorizing a lot of words. I think that's for sure. Especially the case of a language that's far away from your own, that's in a different language family for example, you really have to start from a blank slate. In the case of Korean, I mean there are very, very few words that sound similar to English and these few words happen to be English loan words.

In every other case it's really about learning a totally different word than what you are used to in English. Whereas, the case of Spanish or French, a lot of words are actually very similar because they come from the same Latin root.

In that respect yes, language learning is about memorizing a huge amount of words. Native speakers use on average, I think it is at least 3,000 words a day in their day-to-day vocabulary. However, if you are looking at their entire vocabulary of an

educated native speaker, the active vocabulary it's usually around the amount of 20,000 words depending on the languages. A passive vocabulary, which means the vocabulary that you can recognize but not necessarily produce yourself is typically double that, so 40,000 words.

Obviously, if you do want **to reach a very high level of proficiency in a language, you need to memorize a huge amount of words.** I think looking at it from that perspective, mnemonics and memory techniques can certainly really help to make that process easier.

That being said, I think there a lot of different ways that you can manage to increase your retention, context being one of them. Reading and learning words through context and not just using lists of words that are decontextualized. I think it is very important to learn new words as you come across them as they are used in sentences and not individually.

Other techniques involved, for example, memorizing sentences rather than words. Rather than sentences, you have groups of words that typically go well together. These are techniques you can use to facilitate the acquisition and retention of words. To answer your question, definitely, I think memorization and memory plays a huge role in acquiring a foreign language.

Anthony: Do you have one go-to method for memorizing words that you find very, very reliable and rarely fails you?

Sam: You know, I would say the short answer to your question

is no, because I think every language is different.

Again, it depends on your target language. If your target language is from the same language family as your native tongue, then I think you don't necessarily have to put as much effort into really consciously memorizing the words and I think you could very well do with learning through context and through massive exposure. So reading the news, listening to movies, I think that is certainly something that can work.

If you are learning a language that is very far away from your own native language, for example, if you're a speaker of a European language and you want to learn an Asian language, then you are going to find it a lot harder to memorize words because they sound totally different. In these instances, I think using memory techniques can be very valuable because it's going to make the process of memorizing all of this new vocabulary a lot easier.

The Short Term And The Long Term Game Plan Of Using Mnemonics As Part Of Learning A Language

Just a caveat here. I think of people are reluctant to invest the time necessary to essentially learn about memory techniques and mnemonics. Obviously, it is an investment that you have to make because it is not something that is going to come right away. You have to invest in coming up with these mnemonics,

and it can seem like a large investment in time or something that is a little bit cumbersome, but it certainly is something that pays off I think over time. While you are not likely to see the return on your investment, put it that way, very quickly, **over the long-term it's certainly going to be a huge return.**

Just to put that in perspective, I think a lot of people say, “Well I don’t want to learn all of these mnemonics and make a story for each word I’m learning. It’s going to take me too much time.” However, if you look at it from a longer-term perspective, I think it is certainly worth it.

Anthony: One thing that really fascinated me that I was reading on your website is something you wrote about the [Hedwig von Restorff](#), and I wonder if you could just go into that a little bit and what she concluded in that topic you were writing about.

Sam: Yes, I think if I remember correctly in that article I mentioned the so called [von Restorff effect](#) and so that’s the isolation effect that essentially she discovered through some of her research. I believe she is a German psychiatrist who did a number of studies on memory and these kinds of things.

What she found was that it’s kind of a standout effect. Things that really stand out from others, they’re typically going to be a lot easier to remember.

How To Make Words Stick Out Like A Sore Thumb

This can come in the form of humor, for example. When you go and you listen to somebody talk (maybe it's a TED talk, maybe it's just professor at school), if that person suddenly in the middle of his or her talk makes a huge joke, then everybody starts laughing and the joke is related to some material being covered in that talk, then you are more likely to remember that particular episode in the talk. Whereas, the rest is more monotone and everything, but if something really stands out, then you are more likely to remember it.

That applies to a lot of different areas or contexts. For example, even if you have a grocery list of things that you want to buy and one of them is highlighted in green or in pink or whatever, then because this, by its nature, will stand out to you, then you are more likely to remember it.

I think that it can help when you are creating mnemonics for yourself to create stories that really stand out that are really different. **You have to be creative.** When you are imagining a mnemonic of a kick, you can imagine it the size of your cell phone or really make it stand out so that you remember it and that really actually works, trying to make things stand out.

When you are creating your own mnemonics, just play with your imagination and don't bind yourself to existing sizes and shapes as you see them, or even flavors or smells. You can just experiment with your imagination and throw in some stuff in there so that it really stands out and that should make it easier

for you to remember whatever it is you're trying to memorize.

Can Grammar Be Memorized?

Anthony: That is a great principle. Using these sorts of strategies to memorize individual words is one thing and I think we can see how that all that works. Certainly many of us have had that experience, but I'm curious if you can think of any ways to apply mnemonics and this kind of principle from von Restorff to memorizing grammar rules, something so abstract that it's almost like a mathematical formula. Do you have any idea how we get those principles to stick out in our mind as if we had marked them with a green highlighter?

Sam: That's a good question. I mean typically, from my own experience, I have been using mnemonics fairly lightly, but mostly for vocabulary or memorizing things like Chinese characters. In terms of actual grammar rules, I've never really felt the need to use mnemonics in that case. As you say, it's a little bit more abstract. It's more like a formula.

For example, I don't know, in French maybe you're going to have feminine words, which end with a certain vowel and plural words are going to end with an "x" or an "s". I mean, these are the kind of rules that, frankly, I think would be more easily assimilated through exposure, through just going through texts and assimilating the grammar rather than just memorizing it. I

think that would be the best.

From my own experience, I found that **when you're learning grammar, a winning strategy is to be exposed to the language first.** This is going to bring you a couple of questions. You're going to be wondering, "Okay, why is this word coming there? Why is this word ending in such consonant?" When you're actually going back and you're learning about the grammar, you're going to have these "aha" moments, because you are finally going to figure out, okay now I understand why what I read was like that.

Most people essentially do it the bottom up approach. They learn the grammar rules first before being exposed to the language. I think that is a mistake because unless you are exposed to the rules and to the language, even if you tried to remember these grammar rules, you're not going to have any context to put them in, and it is not going to be very meaningful.

Once again, I would like to emphasize that personally I found it works a lot better if you get exposed to the language first and then you go and try to understand the grammar rules. You read about them and then you are going to be able to memorize them a lot easier.

Anthony: Basically back to context.

Sam: Exactly. I think context is really king in language learning. You definitely have to make good use of it. I think it's a good

strategy.

How To Develop A Mindset That Matters

Anthony: One thing that I really like on your website, and just talking to you, and the previous interview that we did and this great achievement with the world Korean speaking contest, is that everything seems a lot to have to do with mindset. The success that you've had comes from a way that you think about language learning and you think about languages themselves.

I wonder if you have any advice for people who don't have the – well right or wrong is not really the answer – but they don't have an optimal mindset. How do you go about developing that and keeping yourself motivated as you earlier suggested is such a key critical component of language learning?

Sam: That's a very good question. I definitely agree that mindset is really going to set the foundation for success in language learning and in fact in many other areas of your life. I think, first of all as I was mentioning before, it boils down to curiosity and that's something that you can cultivate, but it's not necessarily going to come naturally but you have to – it depends I guess from people to people – but it's about really getting interested in learning, in knowledge and in new things. Seeing things from a different perspective and learning about a different culture.

A lot of language learners see language learning as a very mechanical exercise where they are just learning grammar tables and lists of vocabulary and they see it as a chore. They forget that **learning a language is about having fun and really discovering something absolutely new.**

I always like to remind myself that it's an exercise that is really mind opening and that really brings a lot of different opportunities. It's an opportunity to learn about new things and to enlarge your vision, to enlarge your world, to expand your comfort zone.

One thing that I've been using often to motivate myself has been listening to other successful language learners and motivational speakers. One thing that I like is listening to TED talks for example. That has been a strong motivator not only for language learning, but also for a host of other things, but essentially **listening to successful people who have gone through the process and who speak many languages I think can be certainly a strong motivator.**

The Only Person On The Planet You Should Compete With When Learning A Language

Ultimately, what you have to do is to challenge yourself and compete with yourself rather than with other people. I think that's important because there's always going to be people who are better than yourself. The question is can you be better than

yourself the next day, the next month, and the next year. It is about competing with yourself and trying to push your own boundaries rather than pushing somebody else's boundaries, because if that is what you are trying to do then you're obviously going to be failing and that can be a demotivation certainly.

Another thing, as I say, I think it boils down also to the culture and having this interest in learning more about the people. What is their mindset? What is their world? Everybody sees the world from a different perspective. I think different cultures and different nations also see the world from a different perspective based on their own historical understanding of the world and based on the way they've been brought up by their parents and by the society in which they live in. Trying to understand these things, I think, can really bring an interesting ingredient into language learning.

You can watch documentaries about the language that the people speak. You learn about the history. You can purchase books about history. There are so many things on the Internet available these days that it's just amazing. Just be curious. **Learn about the culture, learn about the people who speak your target language, keep an open mind and just see it as an enjoyable process rather than as a chore.** I think this is going to go a long way in keeping you motivated.

Dealing With Frustration, Demotivation And

Irritants When Learning A Language

Anthony: I wonder, given all you have said and the powerful advice that you have given and insight, what is something that has frustrated you with language learning that you've been able to overcome and maybe it still frustrates you when you are studying the language that you have a tool for overcoming when it arrives?

Sam: That's a good question. One of the things I've come across in Korean, and I haven't come across this in any other languages so far is, well first of all Korean uses two types of words. One is pure Korean words and one is [Sino-Korean vocabulary](#), words that are rooted in Chinese. Essentially, you have two different words for almost everything. Whether it's a chair, whether it's a collar you will have the Chinese-rooted word version of it and you are going to have the pure Korean word version of it.

That's quite interesting because in more casual and everyday conversations most people will use the native Korean words, the pure Korean words. Whereas when you read the news and more technical material, they use the words that are rooted in Chinese.

I was even speaking to a Foreign Service officer who had been through extensive language training in Korean and what she told me was that even after these years of study and she had been working at an Embassy in Seoul for many years, she told

me that she had these black holes. In everyday conversation, she could understand everything, but then suddenly she could be reading the news or maybe she could go to a talk that was a little more technical topic and suddenly she would not understand anything. That is something I have come across in a number of instances in Korean. That's been quite frustrating.

It's a constant reminder that you have so much more to go. **The road ahead of you is infinite** essentially because language learning is not something that is finite and there's no goal to reach that one day you're going to say, "Oh, I'm fluent and now let's forget about it." It's really a lifelong process.

You can always become more proficient even in your own native language. I mean if you compare yourself to Shakespeare, obviously I think all of us have a long way to go if we want to create this kind of work or be as proficient as this kind of artist. The question is where do you want to stop or do you want to keep going? That's been a reminder to me that I still have a long way to go.

At first, I think it was a strong irritant or demotivation because I could sometimes read through an article and I could not understand anything. It's a little bit demotivating, but the way I've tried to overcome this is essentially about finding material that is suitable to your level.

Avoid This Seductive Mistake When Learning A Language

I think some people will try and jump ahead too quickly. They are going to try and read articles maybe about international affairs or things that are, even for an educated native speaker might be hard to talk about. Then if you are trying to read this and then you don't understand 50 percent of the words that are in there, obviously it's going to be very tedious to go over single word and try to understand every single sentence.

To proceed step by step and try to find material that is really suitable to your current level but not too easy because then you get bored, but not too hard because you then you get demotivated. **It's about finding this right middle** so that you consistently push yourself, but at the same time you remain interested and you keep learning new words and you keep learning about new things. I think that's a winning strategy. Just remembering that finding material that is suitable to your level I think is important.

The Road From Here

Anthony: Is there a language that you're in love with so much you think you're going to stick with for the rest of your life, for instance Korean?

Sam: Yes, I think Korean is definitely one of those languages I will definitely keep learning it for my entire life, at least for the foreseeable future. It's not something I really see about studying. Some people really see language as studying, but once you reach a certain level I think it's just about making it a part of your life. I don't think about it as study in any kind of way. It's really just about being exposed to the material and content that I like. That can be the news or it can be movies but certainly, I don't plan on stopping to get exposed to Korean language material.

Other languages, I mean Spanish is an interesting language and it's spoken by so many people around the world that obviously I think I'm going to continue to use it and learn it in the future, but I'm very drawn to Asian, Southeast and East Asian cultures and languages. In the future, I'm looking forward to learning additional languages that are spoken in that region.

Anthony: So what's coming up next for you on with your language learning adventure?

Sam: In terms of Lingholic.com, I have been running the website now for over two years. It's been doing fairly well. I am going to continue to be active on social media. In fact, you can find me on Twitter or Facebook, and I will continue posting articles as regularly as I can handle. As of recently, I have been very busy so some of you might have noticed that I haven't able to post articles as often as I would have liked, but I'm going to keep having interviews such as with you, with other polyglots and language learners. I'm going to share my stories and the

stories of other people who are interested about language learning, and hopefully, that is going to keep people interested about language learning and that may serve as a source of inspiration.

In terms of what's ahead of me, in terms of languages I'm currently working at the [Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development](#) here in Canada. In the future, I would love to get posted in a country in Asia abroad. Certainly as I was saying, I'm very much interested in Southeast Asian and East Asian cultures and languages. That would certainly be a good opportunity to essentially immerse myself into a new language and a new culture. However, for the time being I'm going to keep learning Chinese, Mandarin Chinese, it's a very interesting language and obviously a very rich culture.

In the future, I am looking forward to learning other languages. It's definitely something that I think is going to be following me for my whole life. I think language learning is just such an enriching experience that I would recommend it to everybody.

Anthony: Thank you so much for all of this, for your great insights and for being here. I really am grateful that you could share these ideas with the listeners of this podcast, and I hope everyone goes and visits you on your site and follows you on all social media. I look forward to speaking the next time.

Sam: Thanks Anthony, it's been a pleasure to speak with you, and hopefully this has been interesting to our listeners. Once again, I'm happy to come back on the show anytime. It's always

a pleasure to talk with you.