E.P.I. Handbook

An unofficial guide to Extensive Processing Instruction and the MARS-EARS cycle

~2 sec
to get a sentence into working memory (1s for an image)

3–4 items
working-memory capacity at 16 (2–3 at age 11–12)

6–8 then +30
encounters for basic word knowledge, then to retain it

95–98%
minimum comprehensible input — non-negotiable

~2,000 words
the top high-frequency band → 85–90% of any text

PART 1 — THE EVIDENCE BASE

Why we teach this way

Conti's starting point: language learning is hard because of how memory and attention work — and today's classroom makes that harder. The method is a direct response to the science.

The new cognitive environment

ATTENTION

Attention is the gatekeeper — you have about **2 seconds** to get a sentence into a student's working memory.

WORKING MEMORY

It's tiny. A 16-year-old can juggle only **3–4 new items** at once; an 11–12-year-old, 2–3. Overload it and learning stops.

REPETITION

A word needs **~6–8 meaningful encounters** for basic knowledge, then ~30 more to stick for good.

THE ENVIRONMENT

Phones train fragmented attention, low tolerance for ambiguity and a craving for instant reward — the opposite of what language learning needs.

What drives uptake

The single strongest predictor of students choosing and succeeding at languages is **self-efficacy** — the felt sense "I can do this." The engagement crisis isn't that lessons aren't fun enough; it's that too many students leave feeling they failed.

Self-efficacy

Engineer success; prevent repeated failure experiences. Every student makes correct sentences from lesson one.

Enjoyment

Meaningful, not shallow, fun — games with a genuine learning purpose.

Relevance

Make the language matter to the student — relevance also lowers cognitive load.

The principles that follow

1. **Less is more.** Teach less, recycle more. Depth beats coverage — build a pool of 8–10 high-power "golden chunks" per term and reuse them everywhere.

2. **High-frequency + relevant.** A curriculum on the top ~2,000 words lets students understand 85–90% of any text by the senior years.

3 **95–98% comprehensible input.** Non-negotiable. Prepare students before any text so almost nothing is unknown.

4 **Teach chunks, not single words.** Single words still force the grammar load; chunks carry the grammar for free.

5 **Multimodal recycling.** Revisit the same language many ways. The brain recalls under the conditions it learned — so vary the activity, not the content.

6 **Practise, don't learn, at home.** Vocabulary should be practised at home, not first met there — or you widen the gap (the "Matthew Effect").

PART 2 — THE METHOD

What is E.P.I.?

Extensive Processing Instruction is Conti's method for taking learners "from modelling to spontaneity." It follows what the brain actually does, and its motto is **"less is more."** These are its building blocks.

Sentence builders

The cornerstone. A grid of chunks (columns of sentence parts) students mix and match. The teacher reads L2 sentences aloud; students write the English. Models vocabulary in context and builds depth.

Comprehensible input

95–98% understandable language. Below that, students overload and disengage.

Input flooding

Massive, repeated exposure to the target chunks across listening and reading *before* any production.

LAM & RAM

Listening- and Reading-as-Modelling: receptive tasks whose real job is to *model* the language, not to "test" comprehension.

Pushed output

Highly structured tasks that force students to produce every target item many times — the bridge from recognition to production.

Pop-up grammar

Grammar is raised briefly, in passing, *after* students have met the pattern through use — not front-loaded as abstract rules.

PART 3 — THE SPINE OF EVERY UNIT

The MARS-EARS cycle

PHASE	WHAT YOU DO	GO-TO ACTIVITIES
1. Modelling MARS	Introduce the unit's chunks through the sentence builder: say sentences from it, and have students show the meaning (e.g. English on mini-whiteboards). Stories and songs work here too.	Sentence builder read-aloud · Mini-whiteboard translation · Bingo
2. Awareness-raising MARS	Briefly draw attention to the sound, spelling or grammar features you want students to notice — a short "pop-up" explanation, not a lecture.	Right or wrong? · Echo and fade
3. Receptive processing MARS	Lots of listening and reading that students can almost fully understand (95–98%), with the same chunks coming back again and again. Stay here until recognition is secure.	Narrow reading · Narrow listening · Dictogloss · Find someone who
4. Structured production MARS	Turn recognition into production with tightly structured speaking and writing tasks that make students produce every target chunk many times, with support gradually removed.	Paired translation drill · Quick-fire translation · Delayed dictation · Faulty translation
5. Expansion EARS	Now explain the grammar inside the chunks students already use, and combine them with older language so both keep coming back.	Unjumble the sentence · Translation grid
6. Autonomy EARS	Students use the language without the builder, in familiar situations. This continues across the year as older units are recycled.	Describe a photo · Information-gap task · Guided then free writing
7. Routinisation EARS	Build speed: repeat tasks with less time or more pressure so retrieval becomes fast and automatic.	4-3-2 fluency talks · Timed retell · Disappearing text

8. Spontaneity EARS	Unfamiliar situations with little or no preparation, spread across the year.	Role-play with a surprise question · Class debate

Recycling never stops: MARS gets the language in securely; EARS keeps bringing it back until it is automatic and spontaneous.

PART 4 — PICK WHAT FITS YOUR CLASS

The activity bank

Common, widely used classroom techniques, grouped by where they fit in the cycle.
★ = core go-to. Step-by-step instructions are in “How to run the activities”.

Modelling & awareness

ACTIVITY	SKILLS
★ Sentence builder read-aloud	Listening, Reading
★ Mini-whiteboard translation	Listening, Writing
★ Right or wrong?	Listening
★ Bingo	Listening
★ Echo and fade	Speaking
Odd one out	Reading
★ Match-up	Reading
★ Missing letters	Writing
Anagrams	Reading, Writing

Receptive processing

ACTIVITY	SKILLS
★ Narrow reading	Reading
★ Narrow listening	Listening
True or false	Listening, Reading
★ Which picture?	Listening
Stand up, sit down	Listening

★ Dictogloss	Listening, Writing
★ Running dictation	Reading, Writing, Speaking
★ Find someone who	Speaking, Reading
Spot the difference	Reading
★ Fill the grid	Listening, Reading

Structured production

ACTIVITY	SKILLS
★ Paired translation drill	Speaking
★ Quick-fire translation	Speaking
★ Unjumble the sentence	Reading, Writing
★ Faulty translation	Reading, Writing
★ Delayed dictation	Listening, Writing
Text reconstruction	Reading, Writing
★ Disappearing text	Speaking, Reading
★ Translation grid	Writing
Board games (Connect 4, noughts & crosses)	Speaking
★ Guided writing from a table	Writing

EARS (expansion → spontaneity)

ACTIVITY	SKILLS
★ 4-3-2 fluency talks	Speaking
★ Timed retell	Speaking
★ Describe a photo	Speaking
★ Information-gap task	Speaking, Reading
★ Role-play with a surprise question	Speaking
Class debate	Speaking
Survey and report back	Speaking, Writing
Listen and summarise in English	Listening

★ Read and respond	Reading
★ Guided then free writing	Writing
Message exchange	Writing

PART 5 — FROM COMMUNICATION BACKWARDS

Planning a unit

Start with the end and build the spine. Map the unit across the eight phases and use that sequence as your blank canvas.

The build order

1 **Start with the end**
Decide the unit's communicative goal and what excellent work looks like — a model text plus success criteria. Be laser-specific.

2 **Make the sentence builder**
Choose high-frequency, relevant chunks. This grid is the unit's spine.

3 **Modelling & awareness-raising**
Flood students with examples of the builder in use; pop up the grammar features to notice.

4 **Receptive processing**
LAM & RAM tasks — input-flood until receptive knowledge is solid. Don't rush to output.

5 **Structured production**
Pushed-output tasks (listening/speaking, then reading/writing) that force every item out, weaning off the builder.

6 **Expansion & autonomy**

Unpack the grammar; check students can retrieve without the sentence builder.

7 **Routinisation & spontaneity**
Build speed; finish with a task that forces real-life use of the unit's language.

Across the year: recycle & interleave old and new language constantly (EARS never really stops) · run a buffer lesson every ~5 weeks to remix what isn't sticking · keep quick wins little and often (do-nows, exit tickets, cumulative tests).

Authoring the sentence builder

- **One function per builder** — built around a single communicative goal.
- **Keep it small** — ~30–40 words total; start beginners on about 12 chunks.
- **Short sentences** — no more than 9–10 words (fewer for absolute beginners).
- **≤3 chunks per cell** — don't overload any column.
- **Gloss literally** — put the "dodgy" literal English in brackets so meaning is transparent.
- **Enhance the input** — use colour and font to make the target pattern jump out.
- **Model agreement implicitly** — split masc/fem rows so grammar is shown by use, not taught yet.

Two unit blueprints

UNIT	SUB-UNITS → FINAL TASK
Describing people	hair & eyes → personality → clothes → jobs → fluency. **Final:** "auction your classmates" — describe people on the spot (unplanned).

Let's organise a party	five sub-units in the future tense (who / what / where / when / food…). **Final:** a video advert + an impromptu conversation.

Assessing the E.P.I. way

Governing principle (Transfer-Appropriate Processing): assessment must **mirror training**. If you train spontaneity, assess spontaneity; if students only ever did controlled tasks, a spontaneous exam is unfair. Test the way you taught.

Little & often

Prefer low-stakes, repeated-measure tasks over one big high-stakes test.

Don't grade fluency work

Track speed/accuracy over a term (e.g. timed reading/writing) rather than grading every attempt; use can-do self-assessment.

Task-based end points

Define each task (one/two-way, open/closed, planned/unplanned, familiar/unfamiliar) and run priming → routinisation → spontaneity.

Note: pair these task designs with your own syllabus and school marking schemes.

Your unit-build checklist

Tick as you go — your progress is saved in this browser.

- [ ] Decided the unit's communicative goal + what excellent looks like
  Step 1 — start with the end
- [ ] Built the sentence builder (one function, ~12–40 chunks, literal glosses)
  Step 2 — the spine
- [ ] Planned modelling & awareness-raising (flood + pop-up grammar)

Phase 1–2

Planned receptive processing — LAM & RAM input-flooding

Phase 3

Planned structured production — pushed output, weaning off the SB

Phase 4

Planned expansion & autonomy — unpack grammar, retrieve without the SB

Phase 5–6

Planned routinisation & a spontaneous end task

Phase 7–8

Made assessment mirror training (task-based, little & often)

Transfer-appropriate processing

Built in recycling & interleaving across the term

Across the year

PART 7 — CUT THE WORKLOAD

Using AI the E.P.I. way

AI removes the workload that always made E.P.I. resource-heavy — especially listening, the "Cinderella skill." Use it in two phases.

PHASE 1 · ANALYTIC AI

Build the unit "spine"

- Map the syllabus → identify teaching focuses and which content strands are covered.
- Rough out the assessment idea only — finesse it near the checkpoints.
- Ask AI for a full teaching & learning sequence (a thinking partner, not gospel); tell it the unit length.
- Bake in the principles: receptive→productive, comprehensible input, grammar only where needed.

PHASE 2 · GENERATIVE AI

Make the resources

RESOURCE	HOW
Vocab & phrase lists	High-frequency vocab + collocations, one list per week, foregrounded before context. Master Excel → Education Perfect / Quizlet; gamify with Blooket / Gimkit.
Narrow reading / listening	"Create five narrow reading texts for A1 learners on [topic]." Constrain to your vocab list; avoid repetitive structures; include one differing opinion.
Listening / audio	Text-to-speech: Clipchamp (free), Narakeet / ElevenLabs (control). Ask for ~20-sec clips, reduced pace, pauses, stage directions.
Songs	Turn a vocab-constrained poem into a song with Suno; use stems for karaoke.
Multimodal	Talking-head avatars (Descript); illustrated stories (Gemini Storybook).

The one rule: always constrain AI to **YOUR** vocab list and weekly progression — that's what keeps it E.P.I. and stops it inventing language students haven't met. And beat AI

cheating by setting **speaking** homework.

APPENDIX — QUICK REFERENCE

Glossary

E.P.I.
Extensive Processing Instruction — Conti's method.

MARS-EARS
The 8-phase cycle: Modelling, Awareness-raising, Receptive processing, Structured production / Expansion, Autonomy, Routinisation, Spontaneity.

Sentence builder (SB)
A mix-and-match grid of chunks; the unit's backbone.

LAM / RAM
Listening- / Reading-as-Modelling: receptive tasks that model language.

Comprehensible input
Language that is 95–98% understandable.

Pushed output
Structured tasks forcing production of target items.

Pop-up grammar
Brief grammar awareness raised after exposure, not before.

Interleaving
Mixing old and new language so it keeps coming back.

Research Conti cites: Sweller (cognitive load) · Bjork (desirable difficulty) · Cepeda (spacing effect) · Marsden & Taylor (drivers of uptake) · the Matthew Effect.

E.P.I. and the MARS-EARS cycle are the work of Dr Gianfranco Conti — The Language Gym (gianfrancoconti.com). Unofficial, independent guide; not affiliated with or endorsed by Dr Conti. Examples and activity write-ups are original.