

# **"A Few Simple Ideas for New Language Learners...and old ones needing some new life"**

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## **1. Some Background Principles**

Who should read this?

Have you ever noticed that learning and using a new language can be emotionally demanding? That's for sure. We can make it better by good mental health practices, but we can't make it emotionally undemanding.

So we've been thinking, since it is going to be emotionally demanding no matter what, why not make it intellectually undemanding? Now you may find that you like it to be intellectually demanding. Maybe that helps your emotions. You are an outstanding student, and your ability to learn stuff better than the rest of us is a real encouragement to you. You love languages courses, and you like them to be as demanding as possible. Or you love reading complicated grammar books and doing all the exercises. Question: Is this working for you? Are you steadily getting better in the language you are learning (as measured by your ability to use it conversationally)? Then accept the heartfelt congratulations of other readers and us, and put this paper down. We've known people who have become famous as language learners through endless hours of intense study combined with intense efforts to use the language in real life. What we have to say is for those of us who are tempted to envy them.

Or perhaps you are just hanging around with people and you are making good progress in the language. We know a guy who learned Urdu really, really well just hanging around with buddies in Albuquerque, New Mexico. (We kid you not.) We know another guy in Canada from Russia who is an excellent public speaker in English, fifteen years after starting. He refused to take ESL courses, because he hates studying languages. He noticed after nine months that he could speak a lot more English than many of his friends who had been full time ESL students for the same nine months. If you're doing great without doing any special "language learning activities" beyond communicating in real life, then accept the heartfelt congratulations of other readers and us, and put this down. What we have to say is for those of us who are tempted to envy people like you.

Whew! Are they gone? Now they are kind, well meaning people, and we love them, and are happy for them, but they intimidate us. Now we're left with the 80% or so of us who are unable to remove the emotional demands from language learning, and so we really might like to limit the intellectual demands.

Now we are a pretty traditional family. Angela bore and we raised six children. Four of them are out of the nest. What we are about to share has grown out of our recent language

learning experiences. One of us (Greg) previously wrote a number of papers on field language learning. Those reflected what Angela and Greg, and a number of colleagues in the Language Project of the Church of Pakistan, learned about language learning between 1986 and 1990. For people who have read those essays, this can be taken as a partial update. Those papers contain a lot of detail. That is one reason for the present paper. Getting started in language learning shouldn't be so complicated. What we have to say here is based on our recent experiences in what Greg has elsewhere called a "challenging" language learning situation: the early months of learning Russian in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. At the outset of this project our ages were 13, 47, 10, and 47, respectively. It has been nearly 100% a joint project. Learning Russian is part of our shared family experience.

### **1.1. Four cute language learning principles you won't forget**

We often see requests for information which go something like "I want to start learning language X. Can someone please recommend a good textbook?" Or "Does anyone know if there are courses in language X taught in my area?"

#### 1.1.1 Communing

A language is not an academic subject. A language is something that happens between people in flesh and blood. That is where it is. That is what it is. No more. No less. Individuals experience the world individually. That is called perception. Communities experience the world together. That is called language. Thus the first cute principle is Communing. And here is a golden rule to go with it:

Golden Rule C ( for "communing"): Join with people around experience using language.

For example. If you are a beginner in Language X, and someone points to various objects in the room, and says what they are called, then you are joining with that person around experience using language. This is sometimes called here and now language. Or suppose you are more advanced in language X, and are showing someone a photo of your father's store. You attempt to describe parts of it to your friend. She has trouble understanding you and tries to help you clarify what you are saying. But you then need her to clarify what she said in her attempt to help you clarify. Back and forth you go, until she has figured out what you are trying to say. Or perhaps she has the photo and you go back and forth figuring out what she is trying to say. Same difference. It is sometimes called negotiating meaning. In negotiating meaning around the photo you are joining with people around experience using language. Or suppose you are more advanced yet, and someone is telling you a lot that you didn't know about events in your new community during the previous ten years. That is the experience of the community. Communities have lots of experience that is only shared largely indirectly by means of language. Person A has the experience. Person B shares in it only because person A told him about it. And person C, who has never even met person A, shares in this experience too, because person B told her about it. Now you are getting people to share the community's experience and knowledge with you. You are still joining with people around experience

using language. From beginning to end, progress comes as you join with people around experience using language.

Come back to all those people who say, "I want to learn language X; where can I find a textbook?" What would be a better first question for them to ask? Try "I want to learn language X; where can I find some speakers of language X?" How rarely people ask that. How odd.

### 1.1.2 Understanding

The second cute principle is the principle of understanding. You need to understand things that people say in language X. And that gives us the second golden rule.

Golden Rule U (for 'understanding'): Pay attention to large doses of things that people say which you can understand.

Now you may be thinking, how can you understand a language that you haven't learned yet? Piece of cake. We'll see later that you can set up activities which will get people to say lots of things to you that you can understand. And we'll just suggest a few simple activities.

Can you see why this golden rule is important? You want to learn to speak Language X in a manner similar to the way that its current speakers speak it. Well then, you have to hear what they are saying. No language could ever be captured in a textbook. If you go on and on in this language, eventually you'll have understood people speaking it for many thousands of hours. You will "pick up" an awareness of the kinds of things people say. Even quite early you'll often be saying to yourself, consciously or unconsciously, "Oh, so that's how they say that." If you haven't started yet you might find that hard to imagine. But let us get you there.

You may notice we haven't said anything about memorizing words and sentences. Memorizing is a great activity for certain purposes. But for most people it is time consuming, and time spent on memorizing is time taken away from communing and understanding. You can progress more quickly if you skip the memorizing and get on with the communing and understanding.

### 1.1.3 Talking

The third cute principle is the principle of talking. There are various ways the third golden rule can be formulated. How about this?

Golden Rule T (for talking): To become good at speaking you need to speak a lot, putting your own ideas into your own words.

There is an additional step to get from being able to understand something to being able to come up with it when you need to say it. If you do things right, then your language ability will be something like the following diagram, at least for the first few years:

Figure 1: [picture graph where comprehension is greater than production]

Now language learning doesn't always work this way. If this same learner, instead of communing, understanding, and talking, had chosen to memorize "useful expressions" and vocabulary and "model sentences" and rules, and subsequently to talk, and then commune, and then understand, then her abilities might be better expressed by the following diagram:

Figure 2: [picture graph where production is greater is comprehension]

Now we can't prove that this is true, but that is what some of our language learning felt like, and we know plenty of others who describe their experience in similar terms. (There are exceptional people who do really well this way, but we told them to stop reading after the first paragraph or two.)

#### 1.1.4 Evolving

The final cute principle is evolving. By this we mean that your ability to use the language changes over time, and along with it, you will want to change your approach to communing, understanding and talking. Thus the final golden rule is as follows:

Golden Rule E (for "evolving"): Adapt your language learning activities to your current level of language ability.

Which brings us to the topic of what are the few simple things to do to learn a language.

### **1.2. Things to do to learn a language**

First, what are the key resources you need to locate? A textbook, you say? Bzzzz! Ah, but you knew better. A human, you say. Chime! One or more fluent speakers to join with around experience. Next, you need some time to meet with those people. Third, you need some experience to join around.

One of the authors has written quite a bit about how to find people, and the kind of people to find in the paper "Leave Me Alone! Can't You See I'm Learning Your Language" But we continue to see repeatedly that a key to organizing your early language learning is the way your native speaker friends understand their role as your helper and co-communer. Explain to them that you need a friend, not a teacher. People base new roles on ones they already know. "Teacher" may seem to them to be the obvious one. Don Larson reminds us that "mother, father, uncle, aunt, older sibling" are closer to what you actually need. You need someone who will talk to you in such a way that you can understand her, and who will help you along as you struggle to put your own

thoughts into words. That's all you need. If the person can read English, let her read this very paragraph if you'd like. She will be "teaching" you in a sense, but not in the sense that she is likely to have in mind. So it is better to call it something like "language practice". And call your language sessions "visits" rather than "lessons". The youngest of the authors emphasizes that even the word "sessions" gives too serious a tone to what we have in mind by "visits". We find that in meeting with three different friends there is one with whom we are more formal in that we tape recorded the visit. The other visits are just visits.

### **1.3. Now what do you do with your resources?**

So now you have people, or at least one person, and you have agreed to meet for, let's say, one hour three times a week for language practice. Next, what experience should you join around? Well, let's start with the physical objects of everyday life. Of course, these will vary from culture to culture. But every aspect of life is full of objects. Think of rising in the morning in the authors' culture. Objects: bed, pillow, blanket, sheet, pajamas, robe, belt, slippers, door, bathroom, toilet, sink, soap, washcloth, towel, shower, water, razor, toothbrush, toothpaste, hairbrush, curling iron... The point is, life is full of objects.

People can recognize objects. You have some memory of what it is that beds look like, and you use that to recognize beds when you see them. Let's call this memory of what beds look like a "mental image" of beds. You also know the sound of the word "bed", so that you can recognize that word when you hear it spoken. To know the word "bed" is to have a link in your brain between the memory of the sound, and the memory of what a bed is when encountered in the world. So you want your language activities to lead to forming many such links between the sound form of words and the mental image. Perhaps the best and quickest (to say nothing of funnest) way to do that is to have the actual objects present when they are talked about. It also enables you know what is in fact being talked about!

(Don't take the mental image business too literally if you are relating the word "dog" to a dog that you can see, or even a toy dog that you can see, or a stuffed dog, or a picture of a dog, then you are making the right link. Later when you hear the word it will call up the "image" even though you may not experience any vivid mental picture.)

Switching from beds to dogs, the following diagram is an attempt at illustrating the way the word for "dog" will be represented in your head. Learning this word is a matter of getting two things to become very strong: item 1 in the diagram, the memory of how the word sounds; and item 2, the link from that memory to the mental image. We are assuming that the mental image itself is already there, though this may not be the case when there involve new cultural objects or actions. And there is a further matter of using the word in your own speech once it is strong enough that you can retrieve it and speak it as you need it. This is a matter of getting what comes out of your mouth to match your memory of what the word sounds like (that is to match item 1 in the diagram).

Figure 3: [Picture of sound waves on the left, representing "memory of the sound form of the word representing 'dog'". Picture of a dog on the right, with a line connecting the two.

Initially your memory of the sound of the word (1 in the diagram) is likely to be weak, and the link between the memory of the sound and the mental image (2 in the diagram) is likely to be weak. But something will have changed in your head, just the same. With some words, your memory for how they sound may become strong first, while the link to the mental image remains weak. You hear the word, and think, "I recognize that word, but I can't think of what it means". In other cases the link to the mental image may be strong, so that you start to say the word to express that meaning, and suddenly you realize that you are not exactly certain of how it sounds when spoken. Eventually both the memory of how it sounds and the link to the image become strong, and then, once you have used that word a few times in your own speech, it will be a secure part of your language ability.

Names of objects are by far the easiest things to learn first, so "go to town". Gather up a whole bunch of the objects of everyday life, and take them to your native speaker friend for your language learning visit. And collect more at her house. (We actually think it is better at first to have her come to your house, but this is not essential.) Or go outside with her to find objects galore, some of which, of course, cannot be gathered up. This brings us to the simple activities. All language learning activities, whether for beginners, or for advanced learners, have one or both of the following purposes:

- to enable you to hear (with understanding) how native speakers talk
- to encourage you express your own thoughts in your own words as best you can in your new language

## **2. The Simple Activities**

What follows contains the main meat of this paper. It is the part that you may want to come back to.

### **2.1. Simple activity 1: learning names of objects:**

Take twenty objects and put them on the table in a clump. Remove two from the clump. Your friend tells you, "This is a glass and this is a spoon". You are now understanding the language. She then asks "Where (or which) is the spoon? Where is the glass?" You respond by pointing. Then you take a third object from the heap, add it to the first two, and continue in the same way. Pretty soon she is asking you randomly to point at any of the twenty objects. You now have a (weakly implanted) vocabulary of twenty words.

#### **2.1.1 Interlude -- Some commercial resources for extending simple activity 1:**

There are many variations of this activity. And it feeds into others, such as the Lexicarry activity (simple activity 2). They are easy for your friend to learn, and what you are doing quickly comes to make perfect sense to her. It may come across a bit like a "teaching 119

activity, but not a familiar one. You will find more natural ways of building vocabulary later by simply conversing about objects and pictures, and yet you can profitably come back to this activity whenever you feel discouraged about slow vocabulary growth. Are you an intermediate level learner who has grown discouraged feeling you haven't made much progress for a long time. Then grab one of the tools listed just below, and conquer a few hundred new vocabulary items. That ought to give your spirits a lift.

The following books are sure winners. If you visit the ESL (English as a Second Language) center of a major university you may find others.

Lexicarry: An illustrated Vocabulary Builder for second Languages, by Patrick R. Moran (1984, 1990) Pro Lingua Associates, 15 Elm Street, Brattleboro, Vermont 05301. PH.: 802-257-7779

Action English Pictures, by Noriko Takahashi; text by Maxine Fauman-Prickel (1985, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs 07632)

The Basic Oxford Picture Dictionary, by Margot F. Gramer. (1994. Oxford University Press.)

This is better for early language learning than the New Oxford Picture Dictionary.

Actionlogues, by J. Klopp. (1985, 1988. Sky Oaks Productions, Inc. P.O. Box 1102, Los Gatos, California 95031. Ph.: 403 395 7600)

Longman Photo Dictionary, by Marilyn S. Rosenthal and Daniel B. Freeman. (1990, Longman)

Word by Word, by Steven J. Molinsky and Bill Bliss (with Germadi G. Borbatov for the English/Russian version. 1996, Prentice Hall.)

Picture It! Illustrated by Richard Toglia, no author listed. (1978, International communications Incorp., Tokyo; 1981, Prentice Hall)

Most of these are designed for ESL, and so they have editions available in various European (and sometimes Asian) languages. But that is neither here nor there, since we are interested in the words in our friends' heads, and in their communal sharing of experience. For our purposes all that matters is the pictures (and our friends-- who matter infinitely more than the pictures).

### 2.1.2 Extending simple activity 1 -- simple activity 1a

Some of these books also come with instructions as to how to use them. We ignore those instructions and use them in ways that suit us. Now the pictures in these vocabulary books will function as the objects did in simple activity 1. Your native speaker friend can first tell you what is happening in two pictures: "This man is waking up. This man is

getting out of bed." Then she can ask you, "In which picture is the man waking up? In which picture is the man getting out of bed?" (Or she might simply say "He is getting up. He is getting out of bed.") You can respond by pointing. Then she adds another picture. Then another. Before you know it she has you responding by pointing to any of twenty pictures which she asks you about randomly.

Now these vocabulary building techniques are supposed to be simple, and they are. Some snootie language learning specialists will say condescendingly, "But those aren't information questions. They are merely display questions." But if you can acquire, without drudgery, many hundreds of vocabulary items in a few weeks, what do you care what they say? Just think what you are accomplishing. First, you are forming a strong memory of the sound form of each word. Second, you are forming strong links from the memory of the sound form to the mental image of the item or action. (Review the diagram above if this is unclear.)

By the way, verbs appear to us to be considerably more difficult to acquire than nouns. This doesn't surprise us. To acquire the word for "dog", "cat", or "man", you need to link the sound form of the word to the mental image of a dog, cat or man. By contrast, you can't have a simple mental image of "running". You must have an image of a dog, cat, or a man (or the like) first, and then you can have it be running. So linking the sound forms of action verbs to their mental images is naturally more difficult than linking the sound forms of concrete nouns to their images. We think it helps to act out the verbs as you hear them some of the time. (The reasons are a bit complicated.)

But be patient. Whenever you are understanding your native speaker friend as she talks about objects and activities, learning is occurring. Learning often does not go through to completion all at once. Each time you understand a word used in reference to an object or situation, your memory for the sound form of that word gets a little stronger. And your link from that sound form memory to the mental image of the object or situation also gets a little stronger. Time spent understanding language is never wasted. Don't get discouraged if you cannot recall a lot of words when you want to use them. That will come. You just have to understand them enough times to make them strong enough. And as we say, by means of simple activity 1 (including 1a), you can quickly come to understand many hundreds of concrete nouns and verbs used in simple but natural utterances. And we have (only) a few more simple activities.

### 2.1.3 How do you get enough repetition with these simple activities?

It may take many times hearing a word and associating it with the mental image before both the memory for the sound form and the link to the mental image will be strong. At first, your native speaker friend will have a hard time believing how many times you need to understand a word in a meaningful context before it becomes strong enough in your head to function properly there. We have found certain ways to increase the amount of exposure we get to whatever we are learning. For one thing, since there are four of us, two adults and two kids, our native speaker friend can do everything once with each of us, while the others watch and listen intently. Then we can engage in a "race": Our friend

says the word and we race to see who can point the most quickly. This provides a lot more repetition. Finally, we can have more than one friend whom we visit, and do the same activities with different friends. Or we could let our friend read this section, and then take our word for it that we need a lot of repetition. There is a Russian proverb which says that repetition is the mother of learning.

O.K So far we've been building a large vocabulary of words that we can at least understand when we hear them in context But obviously, we need to be able to say some practical things too. Simple method 2 will help us with that.

## **2.2. Simple activity 2: talking about stuff in Moran's Lexicarry**

It might seem odd, when we have such a small number of simple activities to share, that we should devote a whole activity to a single book that you'll have to order if you want to do the activities. But Moran's Lexicarry (details above) is the best single all in one language learning resource that we have come across. Now the nay sayers will rise up and shout, "But it is too culture specific". Well, as soon as they produce better tools that are more appropriate to specific parts of the world, we'll stop recommending Lexicarry for those parts of the world. For reasons we can't figure out, we decided to demand considerably less than perfection in such matters. And actually, the pictures are plain enough that in many instances culture specific changes could easily be made using a pencil.

The first lengthy portion of Lexicarry contains comic style strips. Typically there are three frames per story, and the stories have comic style bubbles with the words missing. The stories illustrate approximately sixty common language functions and communication situations. During our first month, we like to concentrate on learning to understand, and so we can use the story strips in the manner of simple activity 1. Our native speaker friend begins by telling us what each person might be saying in the stories and then asks us questions like "Who is saying, 'May I help you?'; who is saying, 'I'm sorry?'". In a few moments, by using activity 1 with the Lexicarry, we can recognize ten new useful expressions.

But simple activity 2, really kicks in once we start talking more (in month two). You can still begin the Lexicarry activity as with activity 1, but then adding a talking step. You learn to understand half a dozen new story strips (the number that can typically be viewed at once). You each take your turn at pointing in response to your friend's questions. Then you have your race. Finally, and this is the new step, you can each take a turn at trying to tell each of the half dozen story strips. You don't tell them verbatim from memory. Rather, you tell them in your own words as best you can. It is a struggle, but your native speaker friend helps you out at every step by expanding or recasting your broken utterances. For us, once again, we get to do this four times, if we wish, each taking a turn while the others watch and intently listen. If you are all alone, then you really will want to have three or four separate friends to visit and do this with. And/or you can tape record your visit and listen to the tape over and over.

That's it for activity 2. Simple, eh?

So now you're growing this huge vocabulary of concrete nouns and verbs (and adjectives too), using activity 1, and you're learning all sorts of useful things to say in activity 2. But the world of experience that you are communing around is not just a matter of objects and actions, or nice things to say in social situations. It is a story in the making. And so you might as well start learning to relate language to stories. But they need to be stories that unfold as you talk about them. You are not nearly at the point where you can cope with stories about what you cannot see.

### **2.3. Simple activity 3: working your way through books monolingually**

This is the simplest activity yet. You go through children's picture story books, page by page, with your native speaker friend. You verbally point out anything that you can describe in your own words in the new language (even if you can only make a stab at it). You ask about things you cannot say, (by month two you can easily say "What is this?" or "What is s/he doing?" in your new language). Set your timer or stopwatch and tell your friend, "For the next twenty (or thirty) minutes we are only going to use your language." After the twenty (or thirty) minutes are up, you can use another language that you share (such as English) to ask about things that puzzled you. For but for those twenty minutes, no matter how much of a struggle it is, you do not depart from the new language.

You may question the importance of sticking to the target language. Well, we find it extremely helpful. As soon as we let English in, the whole exercise goes out the window. We must be forced to try hard to do as much as we can in our new language. Otherwise it quickly becomes a conversation about the language rather than one in the language. Now once you are gaining some fluency this may be less of an issue. But while you are seriously needing to develop some fluency, it is an issue.

For this activity you need to collect children's books. At least we've not yet seen an adult book that serves the purpose. The ideal books have a sequence of pictures which tell a complete story without words. If there are lots of words, even if the pictures are wonderful, the pictures alone will probably not tell the whole story. You want the pictures to tell most or all of the story by themselves. Actually, the best book we found for getting this started did have words, but very few, and we covered them with Post It note papers. The title was Hallo! How are you? It was the story of a little bear who was on his way home from somewhere, attempting to greet all and sundry. Various other events occur along the way and at home.

This is really a month two activity, when you already have a vocabulary of a few hundred items, and have been understanding them in context in simple sentences for a month. You may not be sure exactly how much you know or how well you know it, but whatever it is, you want to put it to work as you get into serious talking. You should be able to come up with children's books either by visiting bookstores (there are tons of children's books in bookstores in Pakistan, for example), and by raiding the collections of friends whose kids have outgrown the books. We found Hallo! How are you? in a city library book sale.

New children's books can be quite expensive, but you might be able to share with other language learners. Two of our early books were

Hallo! How are you? By Shigeo Watanabe, illustrated by Yasuo Ohtomo. (1980, The Bodley Head, London, Sydney, Toronto; first published by Fukuinkan Shoten, Tokyo.)

The Big Fat Worm by Nancy Van Laan, illustrated by Marisabina Russo (1987, 1995, Alfred Knopf.)

A book we spent two or three hours in was a version of Goldilocks:

The Three Bears, by Paul Galdone. (1972, Houghton Mifflin)

Then we were able to talk much more readily about the following book:

Deep in the Forest, by Brinton Turkle. (1987, Dutton Children's Books)

It is a completely wordless book which happens to have the story of Goldilocks in reverse. It is about a little bear who goes into the house of three humans who are off on a walk to let their porridge cool.

Other good wordless books include the following:

Pancakes for Breakfast, by Tomie dePaola (1978, Harcourt, Brace & Company)

Good Dog, Carl, by Alexandra Day (1986 also, other books in the Carl series. Simon & Schuster)

And these Puffin Pied Piper Books by Mercer Mayer

Frog on his Own (1973)

Frog Goes to Dinner (1977)

A Boy, a Dog, a Frog and a Friend (With Marianna Mayer, 1971)

One Frog Too Many (With Marianna Mayer, 1975)

Hiccup (1976)

Ah Choo (1976)

Oops (1977) (Dial Books for Young Readers, 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014)

(We don't recommend that you use Mercer Mayer's Frog, Where Are You? since we have a secret purpose for that, which would be fouled up if you were to use this as a language learning book.)

At a later point, some books by Japanese children's illustrator Mitsumasa Anno will provide an enormous number of language learning opportunities. The one we have used is Anno's Journey (1977, Putnam & Grosset, 200 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016).

But these are just ideas. We're sure you can come up with children's books that we'll wish we had come up with.

#### **2.4. Simple activity 4: Role cards**

For this you need a partner, or other helpful person, in addition to the native speaker friend with whom you are going to be practicing the language. If you are a solo language learner, you can adapt it. In the form we do this one of the learners writes on two cards. One card is then given to the native speaker, and one to the other language learners. A simple example might go like this:

Figure 4: [Native speaker's card: "You own an ice-cream store. Your chocolate ice-cream is very popular, and you have just run out." Language learner's card: "You are craving chocolate ice-cream. Go and get a cone at the ice-cream shop."]

It is crucial that neither the native speaker nor the language learner know what is on the other one's cards. Now here is another one which we used for Russian:

Figure 5: [Native speaker's card: "Olga: You live in Moscow. You do not know even one word of English. In the apartment next to you a Canadian widow and her two friendly sons recently moved in. They speak broken Russian. You want to get them to help you learn Engl. Call on them now. Arrange to visit with them every day for the purpose of learning English." Language learner's card: "Angela, Ambrose, and Chad: You have recently moved to Moscow. You need someone with whom to practice Russian for one hour every day. Your neighbor Olga is very sweet, and she does not know one word of English, which makes her an ideal person for you to arrange to talk with. Arrange to meet with her for one hour every day to improve your Russian."]

The basic concept here we have taken from Strategic Interaction, by Robert J. DiPietro (1987, Cambridge University Press). The role cards have some shared information and some unshared or conflicting information that will add a problem that must be solved in your new language. Our ice cream example could be used quite early. At advanced stages, the role cards can be as complicated as you like.

At all stages, once you have finished the activity you can trade role cards to see what the other person was trying to achieve. Then discuss what both of you did (early on, this discussion can be partly in English or some other language that you and your native

speaker friend know well.) It is helpful if you taped or videoed the activity. Then you can go over the tape or video with your native speaker friend and tell her "This is what I was trying to say at this spot. How might I have better expressed myself?" And she can explain things to you that she had said during the activity and you were unable to figure out, even with her best efforts to clarify for you. But the activity itself should be strictly carried out in the new language as a way of forcing you to talk.

## **2.5. Communicating across information gaps**

Simple activity 4 is really the first of our four which incorporates the important principle of the "information gap". That is, this activity creates a need which can only be fulfilled through the exchange of information in the new language. We do other activities which meet this condition. For example, we sometimes have two identical sets of objects on the opposite sides of a barrier (such as a cardboard box). Learners on one side of the barrier arrange the objects. The native speaker describes what they do, and the learners on the other side of the barrier attempt to arrange their objects in the same way based on what the native speaker tells them. We do the same thing with something called TPR kits (described in the catalogue of Sky' Oaks Productions, P.O. Box 1102, Los Gatos, California, 95031 1102). These contain a plastic picture, for example, of the interior of a two-story house or the main street of a town. In addition there are reusable plastic stickers of many objects and people found in such locations. Again, we ignore the instructions that come with the kits, and just use them for information gap activities. That means we always need two of each, although you might find ways to achieve the same thing with a single kit.

At a later stage, we do our information gap activities in such a way that the native speaker is on one side and the learners are on the other. The learners have information which the native speaker needs in order to perform the task. In addition to arranging objects behind barriers, or TPR kits, you can use simple line drawings. Make two drawings that are partly the same and partly different. Your native speaker friend must ask you questions to find out all the ways in which your drawing is the same or different from the one you gave her. We find it is less demanding if the native speaker is the one needing the information to perform the task, and the learners are the ones providing the information in response to the native speaker's probing. This provides a lot of opportunity to understand language that you have never heard before, and thus to notice ways that native speakers express themselves. At an even later stage, you can reverse these roles, and the balance will shift from this being more of an understanding activity to being more of a talking activity.

## **3. Odds and Ends**

The main meat of this paper is over. But we feel we need to address a few questions readers may be wondering about.

### **3.1. Can technology help in all of this?**

Some helpful tools for enriching and extending the above activities are tape recorders, cameras, and camcorders. If you tape record many of the activities above while they are being performed, you will be able to add many hours of listening pleasure to your few hours each week with your native speaker friends. This can be a wonderful reinforcer, increasing the rate at which those sound forms and links to mental images become strong in your brain. For example, you can go to bed half an hour early, and listen to the conversation you and your native speaker friend had over one of your children's books. You can also have your native speaker friend tell the stories (in the straightforward sense) of any children's books you have worked through, and record those as well.

Cameras are also a wonderful tool. On one occasion in Pakistan we were able to take about 100 photos of normal every day life settings and activities in two hours. With a little planning, most of the simple activities above can be adapted for use around photos.

Camcorders have an even richer potential for making sound to experience links available for repeated exposures. But although the potential is impressive, we don't want to push this beyond many of our pocketbooks and living situations.

### **3.2. Grammar and pronunciation?**

Some people will have a hard time believing that doing these simple activities will result in language learning unless there are also grammar lessons. In fact there may be mild evidence in support of a limited role for "focusing on form" as a means of improving one's accuracy in the new language. However, grammar may be more important than this for some people, since they seem to have a psychological barrier to language learning without grammar study. For such people, we recommend our paper *Kick Starting Your Language Learning: Becoming a Basic Speaker Through Fun and Games Inside a Secure Nest*. People with this need can also read grammar descriptions in addition to their normal language learning activities. However, if there are no descriptions available, they will need to postpone producing one until they learn the language! They might keep brief notes of the aspects of grammar that they notice while learning the language.

If some people feel a need to "understand the grammar", other people are in the opposite position. Rather than the absence of a focus on grammar being intimidating, they find that grammar is intimidating. They will be relieved to know that language learning can proceed steadily through the above activities without their "learning the grammar".

You might have wondered where grammar fits into the above picture of mental links between sound forms and mental images. We talked as though you understand a noun by connecting it to a simple mental "picture" of sorts. What is popularly called "grammar" involves aspects of language that are used 1) to organize simple images into simple "scenes", and 2) to orchestrate "movies" that are built out of connected sequences of simple scenes (what is you get when you understand a story, for example). Your language learning cannot depend on your understanding how this works, because no one really does. You mostly need to trust your brain, believing that it will sort this all out. And for the most part it will, without a lot of help from you, as you keep improving your ability to

understand increasingly difficult speech. It is a natural growth process, at least for the most part.

As for pronunciation, it is important to develop a thorough and crisp awareness of what the language sounds like when spoken by native speakers. People who attempt to learn languages by memorizing and drilling tend to do a lot of speaking before they are hearing the language clearly. Their own pronunciation then becomes the basis for the memory of the sound forms of the language. We don't recommend that. We think that throughout early language learning understanding should predominate over speaking, and especially during the first month. This way you can at least be aware of the fact that your speech differs from that of native speakers, and gradually tune your instrument. Beyond this, some training in phonetics is great, especially if it is oriented toward the language you want to learn. If you do not have such training you might benefit from the help of someone who does, and who has learned this language as a second language. However, not having phonetic training in no way cripples you.

### **3.3. Reading and Writing?**

We are a bit unusual here. We distinguish between language learning in the narrow sense, and second language literacy and composition skills. Certainly the development of literacy and composition skills are closely tied to, and significantly affect, language learning in the narrower sense. Reading often feeds directly into speaking, provided you are at the point where you can figure out new words from context, and the writing system is fairly closely tied to the pronunciation system. And literacy and composition skills may be essential (eventually) for you as an educated member of your new speech community. For beginners, you may have difficulty finding any reading materials appropriate to your level of language ability. We see no need to rush into reading at this stage. Once you know more language you can develop reading fluency more quickly, primarily by just reading a lot. If the language has a complex writing system, then you might prefer to postpone reading and writing a few months anyway, until you know enough of the language to understand what your literacy teacher is saying. We don't recommend receiving your literacy instruction in English (or any other language except for the language you are learning). But these are topics for another day.

### **3.4. These activities are impossible in your situation?**

Now, you tell me, the speakers of the language you are learning are all monolingual, and they cannot understand pictures or photos, plus they believe that photos steal people's souls, and therefore they kill photographers, as well as people who make tape recordings (they torture people who make videos). Furthermore, it is against their cultural rules to talk to you until after you know their language.

A few thoughts on situations where structured language learning activities are impossible. Our first thought is that it is a characteristic of severe discouragement to feel that "all is hopeless; everything is impossible; and nothing can possibly work." If you are in this condition, then I wouldn't pressure you. Think about what you have read, ruminate over

it, pray. Go fishing (and reread this when the fish aren't biting). You may come up with some small solutions which will grow into big ones.

But no. You aren't at all discouraged. You just know that structured language learning activities are not possible in this monolingual situation. This need not be tragic as long as you stick to the principles of communing, understanding, talking and evolving. People will talk to you in ways that make it possible for you to understand what they are saying with the help of what you see, and the general context. So just engage in such communication for many hours a week. You will progress.

But in many other difficult situations, structured activities such as those described above will make the difference between learning a language and not learning it. This is especially true if you cannot be immersed in a community where the language is spoken, and even moreso if you only have sporadic access to native speaker friends (in which case the use of the technological aids takes on some urgency).

### **3.5. But you're a language TEACHER!**

Wonderful. You probably chose that line of work because you enjoy seeing language learners succeed. You can easily apply the CUTE principles, because you're the teacher. Now in many cases, you will already have a raft of ideas for language learning activities which are similar to our simple activities and you use them regularly. You are already into "leamer-centered" ways of doing things, and you train your students to take responsibility for their own learning. Nothing more need be said.

But if you are a more "traditional" teacher, then you may want to consider re-educating your students with regard to what your role is, that is, if you decide that you would like to start helping them to join with you around experience using language. You may also want help them to develop leamer autonomy. That is, as time goes on, the students would increasingly take responsibility for how they want to join together with you around experience using language. You can begin by giving them some experiences to build on. For example, you might do simple activity one with them the first day, using a pile of objects that you provide. After that, each student can bring several objects that they would like to learn to talk about. Or students can make role cards for other students to use, either with one another, or with you taking one of the roles. Some students will have learning goals that are important to them right from the beginning. By responding enthusiastically to their goals, you can use them as models for other learners who need to learn to take more responsibility for planning their learning.

### **3.6. Or you're a STUDENT in a language school or language course?**

Depending on the nature of your course, you may want to go ahead and do something like our simple activities on your own, outside of class. If you do this, say, two hours per week with a native speaker friend, you may find that you progress more quickly in the language than is the case when you limit yourself to your course activities.

### **3.7 God bless busy moms.**

We have noticed that language learning can be a special challenge for busy moms. We feel our approach can make a big difference. For one thing, Dad can do all the work of getting language learning visits set up and prepare the language learning activities. If both desired and possible, the native speaker friends can come to the learners' home for the language learning visits. If Mom can manage, say, an hour a day for such visits, they will give her a refreshing break from other activities. Now if the baby starts to fuss right in the middle of an activity, it is up to Dad to get distracted, making sure that Mom remains free to enjoy the activities to the hilt. If the activities are tape recorded, Mom can listen to the tape later, while Dad prepares supper or does the dishes.

If there are older kids or teens, then they should participate in the daily hour (or two) of language learning activities. This means that the activities must be designed to be interesting and engaging for all ages. That is O.K, because the extra effort to make things fun and interesting may benefit the adults' learning more than the kids'. Having children involved is a good way to force yourself to do good language learning!

Now every couple and family is unique, and it may often be the case that Mom and the kids will want an equal chance to plan and direct the language learning activities. That is fine too. It is just that Mom needs to be assured that if need be, all she has to do is be present when the visits happen, and take part, and she will make good progress.

### **3.7. What it's like to keep evolving**

We think it is amazing how language ability grows. For your early language learning visits, it will take a lot of planning in order to have rich experiences of understanding and talking. But in a few months you will be hearing volumes of language that you can understand, as long as your native speaker friends are making a good effort to be understood by you. Yet even then, structured activities can be beneficial, helping you to quickly fill in gaps. But as you continue to join with people around experience using language, you will move out into the open plains of culture learning. You will find suggestions in our paper *Language Learning in the Real World for Non- Beginners*. In brief, you tend to move from being able to understand speech about the here and now, to being able to understand other language with familiar content (such as stories about events that are familiar to you), to being able to understand concrete language with unfamiliar content (such as stories about events that are unfamiliar to you), to being able to understand "fancy" language, like oratory, poetry, academic language, etc.

But don't make language learning too complicated. Simple activities 1-5 can keep you profitably busy for months, moving you steadily forward. We recommend that you at least do those activities. Some people can provide you with much longer lists of language learning activities. We prefer to suggest a smaller number of carefully chosen ones-ones that we feel are especially powerful and relatively pleasant for a wide variety of people (including some of you who were supposed to have quit reading on the first page).

When you meet for an hour or more with a native speaker friend, it is good to switch activities fairly steadily. Other activities like Total Physical Response (see the books and materials available through Sky Oaks Productions, P.O. Box 1102, Los Gatos, California, 95031 1102) offer lots of ideas. And once you're into this, you'll be inventing your own activities that fulfil the CUTE principles. Changing activities can make the time more fun and interesting for both you and your native speaker friends. Evaluate the quality of each language learning visit by the "laugh ratio".

And that's it. We have suggested five simple activities that you can use on a regular basis. Now you will need to follow the following five steps:

- 1) Establish contact with one or more native speakers.
- 2) Schedule a language learning visit
- 3) Plan your language teaming activities for your visit.
- 4) Conduct your visit.
- 5) Repeat 2-5 (and sometimes 1)

Five activities. Five steps. And you're on your way.