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# Language Learning in the Real World for Non-beginners

by Greg Thomson(1)

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[Keywords: advanced learners, developmental approach , intermediate learners ]

## Summary

This book is a continuation of the developmental approach to language learning language learners by Greg Thomson started in Kickstarting your Language Learning. It gives suggestions for intermediate and advanced language learners on how to go on beyond a basic knowledge of a language to become truly proficient in it, by learning from a speech community. This essay can be particularly helpful for people wanting to continue to develop their knowledge of a language beyond elementary proficiency.

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## Chapter 1. Introduction

So you've learned a language?

"Sort of," you respond.

Yes, you can sit around with people and make attempts at conversations, but it is hard work for you and it is hard work for them. And you have trouble discussing any but the simplest topics. What's more, when you overhear a conversation between two native speakers, you are often unable to make heads or

tails out of it.

Now if I hear you speaking your new language, since I don't know it at all, I will get the impression that you really can speak it pretty well. You're not so sure, yourself. As you say, you speak it—sort of. But the part of the language that you don't know still seems pretty formidable, if not overwhelming.

I don't know the road by which you have reached this point in your language learning. You may have spent a year in a language school. Or you may have taken language courses for several years, always as one academic course among many. Or perhaps you have been living among people who speak the language, and have been forced to start speaking it in order to survive. You may have memorized “grammar rules” and “verb forms” and vocabulary lists, and then applied your knowledge to constructing sentences as you conversed with people, until you got so you could construct new sentences relatively quickly and easily. Or you may have used a self-directed language learning approach, such as the one I proposed in Thomson (1993a), where I outlined ways to become a “basic speaker” of a moderately difficult language in about two months. Whatever the road by which you have come this far, you feel you have a long way left to go. Where do you go from here?

## Chapter 1.1. Key principles of design for an ongoing language learning program

[Keywords: language learning program, principles of language learning]

Language learning is at once complex and simple. When I think of the complexity of language learning, I'm amazed that people succeed. As a linguist, I have spent much of my life puzzling over the complexities of language, and I feel I still understand so very little about any language. Yet people do learn new languages, not only as children, but also as adolescents and as adults. Observing that process only increases my sense of wonder. People learn far more than they are aware that they are learning. How do they do it?

Fortunately, the bulk of the complexity of language learning is handled by your brain, without your even being aware of it. You simply need to give your brain the right opportunity, and it takes over from there. That is where language learning becomes simple. “Giving your brain the right opportunity” can be boiled down to three principles which are easy to grasp, easy to remember and easy to apply:

- **Principle I: Expose yourself to massive comprehensible input.** That is, expose yourself to massive doses of speech (and perhaps writing) that you can understand, while gradually increasing the difficulty level.
- **Principle II: Engage in extensive extemporaneous speaking.** That is, engage in extensive two-way conversational interaction, and other speaking and writing activities.
- **Principle III: Learn to know the people whose language you are learning.** That is, learn all you can about their lives, experiences, and beliefs. Do this in and through the language.

I'll keep coming back to these three principles. First I will elaborate on them, but that is only so that you can come back to them and remember them as three simple principles. Then I will illustrate ways you can apply them. You may find that the techniques and activities I suggest will appeal to you. But if they do not, they should still help to solidify your grasp of the three basic principles, so that you can go on and devise techniques or activities of your own which apply the three principles. Any techniques and activities which apply these principles will work, if they are conducted on a large enough scale for a long enough time. Mind you, those are big “ifs”.

## Chapter 1.2. Principle I: Expose yourself to massive comprehensible input

[Keywords: comprehensible input, techniques for language learning]

As you read this sentence, you are exposing yourself to comprehensible input. If you are reading it, then it is input. If you are understanding it as you read it, then it is comprehensible input. If you are still in the process of learning English, then the reading you are doing at this very moment is contributing to your ongoing language learning, since it is providing you with exposure to English that you can understand, that is, it is providing you with comprehensible input. If you are a native speaker of English, what you are reading right now is not helping you to learn English, but it is nevertheless comprehensible input. In the case of spoken language, anything you listen to is input. If you understand what you are listening to, the input is comprehensible input.

Stephen Krashen (1985), (1987) has suggested that the way people acquire languages is, practically speaking, incredibly simple. Instead of three main principles, he boils it down to only one: people acquire language automatically as a result of *understanding messages*. This is known as the *input hypothesis*. It is a daring hypothesis, and it has not won wide support in its extreme form. However, it is helpful to realize that simply understanding messages in the language you are trying to learn is a major factor, possibly the major factor, in acquiring that language.

In Urdu, there is a certain construction that is referred to as past perfect or pluperfect. In one language school, the students are taught that this is equivalent to the English past perfect, which is illustrated in the following sentence:

I had eaten all my food.

The idea expressed by the English construction is that the event described by the verb (the eating of the food) occurred before the time under discussion. That is, we are discussing some time X, and my eating of the food occurred prior to that time, and at time X, I had no food left. As a linguist studying Urdu, I noticed that the so-called past perfect in Urdu did not usually have this meaning. Rather, the meaning was that I ate the food exactly at time X, as opposed to any other past time. In other words, it indicates a specific past time rather than a general past. The details aren't important. What is important is that I observed graduates of that language school using the form correctly, rather than using it in the way that they had been taught to use it. More significantly, they were not aware that they were doing anything different from what they had been taught.

This small point about learning Urdu illustrates a large point about language learning in general: however much you may learn about a language in a school, if you ever come to really speak it fluently and extensively, a large portion of what you will be saying will go beyond anything you were taught. No matter how people begin their language learning, in the end, if they really learn the language, it will be in large part because of all the language that they absorb unconsciously. When do they absorb the language unconsciously? They absorb it unconsciously while they are hearing it (or perhaps reading it) with understanding, which is what Krashen means by "understanding messages". If you hear the language being spoken, but what you hear is a big blur to you, how can you expect to absorb it? But as you hear thousands of hours of speech that you can understand, you will become thoroughly familiar with the language as it is actually spoken (or written). That is one of your main goals: become thoroughly familiar with the language through hearing (and possibly reading) vast amounts that you can understand.

The trick will be to find ways to expose yourself to speech that you can understand. Before learning the

language everything you hear is a blur. It is like reading the following sentence in some unknown language:

agsondmhaeoubrgsjnysxgvbclwaqkehqtzzxufirofzlhycsprziutxswkmlk.

There is no way to tell where one word ends and the next begins, much less what the words mean. At least in this written sentence you can recognize the letters, because they are familiar to you, drawn from a fixed set of twenty-six letters that you already know (though you don't know exactly what sounds these letters stand for in this language). And the letters just sit there on the page and let you stare at them. By contrast, the sounds of spoken language are not only strange and unfamiliar, but they whiz by and vanish as quickly as they appear. Getting beyond the stream of strange sound and hearing meaningful words, and understanding the message they are intended to convey is no simple matter.

In Thomson (1993a) I point out how a person with no knowledge of a language can begin understanding that language, provided what is said is supported by pictures, objects or actions. The pictures, objects and actions help to break the stream of sound up into meaningful words, and you are able to relate the words to the message because you can see with your eyes what the person is talking about. This is typical of the first stage of language learning. Since I am assuming that you are beyond that stage, I won't repeat that material here.

At each stage of your language learning, there will be certain kinds of speech that you cannot understand very well, and other kinds that you can understand reasonably well. If you want to keep hearing masses of language that you can understand, you will need to have some control over the types of speech you are exposed to. Of course, if you are living in a community that uses the language that you are learning, you will also be exposed to a lot of speech that you have no control over. In the more advanced stages of language learning, that exposure will be profitable to you, since you will understand much of it. In the early stages, you will only receive a large amount of *profitable* exposure if you have some control over the input you are getting. When I discuss language learning techniques and activities below, I will be discussing ways in which you can exercise the needed control.

Your language learning experience can be divided into four phases. As I say, during the first weeks of your language learning, you were able to understand speech provided it was well supported by pictures, objects or actions. For example, if you were learning English, and I merely told you, "The bump in the middle of my face is my nose", with my hands folded in my lap, and a blank expression on my face, you would not have had a clue what I was saying. But if I pointed at my nose, and said "This is my nose", and then pointed at my mouth and said "This is my mouth", and then at my ear and said, "This is my ear", and then back at my nose and said, "This is my nose," there would have been a good chance you would understand the meaning of "This is my nose", etc. That is because the meaning of what you heard would be made clear by what you saw. In the same way you would quickly come to be able to understand simple descriptions of pictures. That's life in Stage I.

Even though you are now beyond Stage I, you will still find that, other things being equal, it is easier to understand someone's description of a picture if you can see the picture than if you can't. That would even be true if you were listening to your mother tongue, but it is much more the case when you are listening to a language that you are still learning. In the case of your mother tongue, even when you can't see a picture that is being described, you can clearly recognize the words that the speaker is using, and understand the spoken sentences in a general way. In the case of your new language, seeing the picture that is being described may mean the difference between being able to hear the words clearly and being unable to catch the words at all. So pictures are still helpful to you in making input more comprehensible, or more easily comprehensible. You might want to refer to Wright (1989) for numerous

suggestions as to ways non-beginners can use pictures as an aid to language learning. Still, at this point in your language learning, the advantage of seeing what you are hearing about is not as dramatic as it was during your first few weeks, so I won't say much more about the use of pictures during Stage II.

During Stage II, you can understand speech if the content is fairly predictable. The main contribution of pictures during Stage I was that they made the content of what was being said partly predictable. But, in listening to statements about pictures, you were typically hearing only single sentences, or at best short sequences of sentences. Assuming you now have developed some skill in understanding isolated sentences and short sequences of sentences, you need to start working on learning to understand longer sequences of sentences. However, in order for you to understand long sequences of sentences at Stage II, the content still needs somehow to be predictable. Here is a simple example of how that is possible. Consider the story of Goldilocks. If you grew up in the English speaking world, you probably know this story well. At the beginning of Stage II you can have someone tell you the story of Goldilocks in your new language, and to your delight, you will find that you can follow what is being said with good understanding of most sentences right as they are spoken. And so you are indeed able to follow a long sequence of sentences with good understanding. You have thus moved from understanding isolated sentences and short sequences of sentences to understanding long sequences of connected sentences. We will have more to say below regarding ways to do this.

At Stage II then, you are able to understand long sequences of sentences provided the content is fairly predictable. Getting comprehensible input at this stage may mean continuing to expose yourself to speech which is supported by pictures, objects or actions, but it can also mean exposing yourself to a large amount of speech which has this property of predictability, as illustrated by the story of Goldilocks.

Also at Stage II, you can understand input which occurs in a conversation in which you are interacting with a sympathetic speaker, who will go to the trouble of making the input comprehensible, and who will work with you in helping you to express the meanings that you are trying to express. We will have more to say about this in the next section. Along with listening to predictable stories, and other predictable discourse, engaging in conversational interaction with cooperative conversational partners is a major source of comprehensible input during Stage II.

At Stage III, you are able to follow long sequences of sentences that are less predictable, provided you are familiar with the general topic, and you don't get lost along the way. For example, if you are a welder by background, and you listen to a local welder discuss his work, you will be able to follow most of what he is saying. In order to follow a discussion of a familiar topic, you will first need to be keyed in on what the topic is. In addition, you will often need the full context of what is being said, or your comprehension will suffer. That is, if you come into the middle of a conversation, or a story, or a sermon, you will understand less of what you are hearing than if you had been there from the outset. There is a sense in which this is true even if the language is your mother tongue. However, in the case of your mother tongue you can at least catch the words and get a general meaning of each sentence even if you don't know the context. With your new language at this point, if you hear a sentence out of context, it will often be difficult to catch what is being said at all.

Since, in addition to the language, the culture and local history is also new to you, there will be many topics which are common, familiar topics to all native speakers of the language, but which are unfamiliar topics for you. Even fairly straightforward accounts of recent events may baffle you because you are unfamiliar with the general nature of such events, and with the general beliefs associated with such events. Thus you will want to spend a lot of time during this stage making yourself familiar with new topics and types of events that are common in the culture. As you do this, you will increase your

ability to understand speech to which you are exposed. I will provide suggestions as to how to do this below. But in the broadest sense, your goal remains the same: get massive comprehensible input. That is, expose yourself to masses of speech (and possibly writing) that you can understand.

Eventually you will reach the point where most of the speech that you hear around you in most situations is reasonably intelligible to you. That is Stage IV. At that point, continuing to receive massive comprehensible input will be a matter of lifestyle. If you choose a lifestyle which largely isolates you from people speaking the language, your progress in acquiring the language will slow to a snail's pace, or cease altogether. But since you are well aware of that, you will put a lot of thought and effort into finding a lifestyle which will support your continued progress in the language, right?

So that is Principle I. Expose yourself to massive comprehensible input. With the right techniques, you can insure that you get a lot of input that is appropriate to any stage of language learning. As you are exposed to lots of comprehensible speech appropriate to the stage you are at, your ability to understand the language will continue to grow, with the result that you will reach the next stage, where you will use different, more advanced techniques, so that you can become skilled at understanding more advanced types of input. You move from 1) being able to understand speech that is well supported by pictures, objects or actions, to 2) being able to understand long sequences of connected sentences that are fairly predictable as to their content, to 3) being able to understand less predictable speech on familiar topics (provided you have the full context), to 4) being able to understand just about any speech whatsoever. You will progress from stage to stage, provided you are exposed to a lot of speech appropriate to each stage while you are at each stage. Simple, isn't it?

## **Chapter 1.3. Principle II: Engage in extensive extemporaneous speaking.**

[Keywords: conversation]

In my own experience, Krashen's input hypothesis has been enormously helpful. Yet it appears that few scholars agree with the hypothesis in its entirety. That is because Krashen doesn't just claim that comprehensible input is the most important factor in second language acquisition. He claims that it is the only factor!

### **Chapter 1.3.1. Comprehensible input is not enough**

[Keywords: immersion, negotiating meaning]

Merrill Swain (1985) examined the French ability of children who had been in a school immersion program for seven years. These children, who were from English speaking homes, had received all of their elementary education in French. Yet after seven years of receiving truly massive comprehensible input in French, they still did not control the French language like native French speaking children did. Why not? Probably there were a number of problems, but an obvious one was that the students didn't have much opportunity to *speak* the language. They mainly listened to the teacher. When they spoke to one another informally, they used English. When they spoke to the teacher they used French. But then, how much class time is devoted to any one student speaking to the teacher? And the only children they ever heard speaking French were their class-mates, non-native speakers like themselves, and that only happened when their classmates were addressing the teacher. You certainly couldn't say that the children used French in a very rich variety of life situations, or that they used French for a very wide variety of communication purposes. It appears that, since they didn't speak French very much, their speaking ability did not develop as well as we might have hoped. Even their ability to understand

French appears to have suffered from the fact that they did not speak it very much. That's not to say they didn't learn French quite fluently. But Swain conjectures that they might have done better if they had been speaking French extensively, in addition to all their years of listening to comprehensible input.

You may know children of immigrant parents who can understand their parents' language quite well, but cannot speak it at all. Nancy Dorian (1981) noticed that although she had learned to speak Gaelic in the course of her research, young people with Gaelic speaking parents, although they could not *speak* the language at all, could often *understand* it better than she could. They had grown up with massive comprehensible input, and had developed a high degree of comprehension ability, but little or no speaking ability.

So it appears that massive comprehensible input can result in people having the ability to understand a language without necessarily being able to speak it well, or even to speak it at all. It appears that in order to learn to speak, you have to put a certain amount of effort into speaking. Somehow, I don't find that surprising.

You might ask whether it is possible to learn to *speak* without receiving much comprehensible input. Some linguists have told me that their speaking ability exceeded their comprehension ability, at least for a long time. Recently one told me that he could plan and execute a very complicated sentence in a certain African language, but that if he heard the same sentence in natural speech he would have difficulty understanding it. My experience in learning Blackfoot was similar. For a long time my speaking ability exceeded my comprehension ability. That is not a very good way to learn a language, for a number of reasons. For one thing, if you can say a lot more than you can understand, people will misjudge your general level of ability in the language, and speak to you in such a way that much of what they say will go over your head. This can make conversational experiences embarrassing and stressful, and discourage you from spending a lot of time conversing with people. So you want to keep the horse of comprehension ahead of the cart of speaking, while bearing in mind that comprehensible input in and of itself is not enough. You also need to speak.

In particular, it appears that you will need to put a reasonable amount of effort into conversational speech. Sure, you could concentrate on monologues, say by making long speeches to large audiences, but you might not know whether anyone understood you. By contrast, when you engage in one-on-one conversational interaction with people, it will often become obvious that you have failed to communicate, or have miscommunicated. What is more, the people with whom you converse will be able to help you to find ways to say what you are trying to say. It seems reasonable to think that this would contribute to your language learning.

Conversational interaction is an important source of comprehensible input as well. When you are involved in conversing with people, they will tend to adjust their speech to your level of ability. They may speak more slowly than normal, and use simpler vocabulary and simpler sentence structures, and repeat themselves a lot, and reword their sentences whenever you appear to be having trouble understanding them. Listen to yourself the next time you are talking to someone with limited English ability. You will probably find that you make these types of changes in your own speech in order to help them to understand you. Michael Long has demonstrated that the types of changes people make in their speech when they talk to foreigners really do make a significant difference in the ability of the foreigners to understand them (Long 1985).

Consider the nature of a conversation between a sympathetic native speaker and you as a language learner. You have a meaning you wish to express. You make a stab at it, but the person with whom you are conversing is either unsure of what you meant, or wonders whether you really meant what you

appear to have meant. So she helps you to clarify yourself. Likewise, when she says something to you, it may go over your head, and so you get her to clarify her meaning. This back and forth process of a language learner and a sympathetic native speaker working together to achieve success in conversational communication is referred to as the *negotiation of meaning*.

During Stage II, the most convenient context for conversational practice may be in structured language learning sessions, where someone is consciously helping you to learn the language. If you have one or more persons who are employed to help you on a daily basis, those people will be accustomed to speaking with you. They will have a good feel for your current level of ability, and thus will be in a good position to make sure that what they say to you is comprehensible. There is a low stress level involved in conversing with a familiar person in a familiar setting, when compared with conversing with all the people you happen to encounter out in the world at large.

In addition to formal language sessions, you will increasingly be able to engage in conversation with friends. For them, conversing with you is hard work at this point, so it requires some commitment on the part of your conversational partners. But again, people who know you well will be able to communicate with you far more effectively and easily than people who do not yet know you. With time, you can systematically expand the number of regular conversational partners with whom you visit (see Thomson, 1993c). So once you are past the very early stages of language learning, an obvious way to increase your comprehensible input is to engage in a lot of social visiting. You may not be a person who normally does a lot of social visiting. If so, it will help if you can view social visiting as part of your daily work routine.

Not all of your early speaking efforts need to be in the form of two-way conversation in the strictest sense. As a matter of fact, while you are first trying to loosen up your tongue and develop some fluency in the language, you will benefit a great deal from activities in which you do most of the talking. These activities are probably best carried out in formal language sessions, where you are employing someone who understands that she is there for the purpose of helping you learn the language. I'll have more to say about these activities below. Once you gain a degree of fluency through such structured activities you will be increasingly comfortable with unstructured social visiting as a means of getting conversational practice on a grand scale. You can use your formal language sessions as a means of preparing for your general social visiting. For example, when you learn to discuss some topic in your language sessions, you can then make a point of discussing that same topic during informal social visits. You can even tell your friends, "This is what I have been learning to talk about with so-and-so", and then go on to talk about the topic with your friends.

To sum up, Principle II is another way of saying that you learn to talk by talking. You might say that you learn *how* to talk by being exposed to massive comprehensible input, but ultimately you only learn to talk if you talk.

Given what we have said about Principle I, and Principle II, we might consider the following formula to come close to the truth:

$$\text{Massive comprehensible input} + \text{Extensive conversational practice} = \text{Powerful language learning}$$

Assuming you have a strategy for getting comprehensible input, and for getting conversational practice, the path to powerful language learning could hardly be more simple.

### Chapter 1.3.2. You can't speak well unless you can speak poorly.

[Keywords: accuracy, approaches to language learning, communication strategies, interlanguage, mistakes]

Now you may be thinking that I'm ignoring your main concern. You feel that no matter how you struggle, you are unable to get the *grammar* right. If you have been learning the language through a formal language course, mastering the grammar may seem to be the central challenge. Perhaps you even got low marks because of all your errors of grammar. Well, I have good news for you. Errors are great! From here on in, you get high marks for errors, at least in my book, and hopefully, in your own book, too. If you're not making errors, you're not breaking new ground. The pathway to accurate speech is through error-filled speech. I therefore suggest that you move your concern for grammatical accuracy away from center stage. Concentrate on getting comprehensible input and conversation practice, and watch your grammatical accuracy improve without your even focusing on it. I will later suggest ways that you can focus on grammar, as well, but that will be more with a view to mopping up persistent problem areas.

When I was in High School, a language learning method came into vogue which was based on the belief that from the very outset students should speak the language perfectly. My high school French teacher responded to a student's complaint with the comment "I didn't write the textbook, but if I had I'd be a millionairess." Such was the enthusiasm of many teachers for the new method. That enthusiasm was followed by disappointment, when it turned out that few students developed much ability to use the language extemporaneously for real communication.

Have you ever observed a real person learning English as his or her second language? If you have observed such a person over an extended period, you will have noticed that s/he began by speaking English very poorly, and gradually improved until, hopefully, s/he came to speak English well. It *always* works like that in real life. Granted some people do better than others both during the early weeks, and in terms of their overall rate of progress, and ultimate attainment, but nobody starts out speaking perfectly. Developing good speaking ability is always a gradual process. I can't understand why my high school French teacher and others like her hadn't noticed that.

When you are first learning a new language, your personal version of the language is very different from the version used by the native speakers. Let's suppose you are learning Chukchee, and your native language is English. The new "language" that you speak, say, after a couple of months, is sure not English. But is it Chukchee? It doesn't appear to be Chukchee in the strictest sense. However, it is obviously derived from Chukchee, and not from English. Six months later you will be speaking another "language", which is much more like Chukchee in the strictest sense than the "language" you speak after two months. After a couple of years, the language you speak may be enough like that of native speakers that you can justifiably call it Chukchee. However the "language" you spoke after two months, and the one you spoke after six months, were quite different from Chukchee in the strictest sense. What were those "languages"? Chukchee speakers could understand you when you spoke to them, and you could understand a lot of what they said when they spoke Chukchee. What you spoke was a real language (despite all of my scare quotes). More precisely, it was a series of languages, each one more like real Chukchee than the last. You invented these languages as you went along, on the basis of the Chukchee you heard. I have to say you invented these languages, because they were unique to you. You didn't hear anyone else talking like that, so you can't really say that you learned them. No. You invented them, using as your source of building blocks all of the comprehensible input you were exposed to.

You may prefer to think that you didn't invent anything. Rather, you may say, you only *learned*

something. You learned Chukchee, only you learned it poorly at first. But if we may return to the example of someone learning English we'll see that there is quite a bit of inventing going on. Wode (1981) examined the forms of negative sentences used by people learning English. Learners first learned to use the word "no" in response to questions or statements. Then they started adding it to sentences, so that if they wished to say that someone had not finished doing something, they might say "No finish." Later they would use the word "no" in slightly fuller sentences, as in "That's no good", meaning what you would mean by "That's not good." Later they would learn to add a form of the helping verb "do", and say something like "You didn't can throw it" (all of these examples are cited in Cook, 1991, p. 19 ). I think it is fair to say that sentences like "No finish," and "You didn't can throw it," come from an invented language. They are not simply *copied* from normal English. Rather the speakers know bits of English, and use those bits to invent their own language. These invented languages that are derived from the language being learned, and which gradually become more and more similar to the language being learned, have been called *interlanguage* (see especially Selinker, 1992).

The existence of interlanguages is one of the main reasons we know that brains know how to learn languages. The interlanguages of people learning a given language, let's say, learning English, go through similar stages, regardless of their mother tongue. For example most people go through this same sequence of patterns in learning to form negative sentences in English. Why do different people's interlanguages go through the same stages while learning English negation? The answer is that when it comes to learning a language, your brain has a mind of its own. It will invent the interlanguages, and refine them, until it has succeeded in reinventing the language as it is spoken by natives, or at least some reasonable facsimile.

I say all of this to reassure you that if you keep exposing yourself to comprehensible input, and keep persisting in conversational practice, your speech will keep getting better. Some perfectionistic people don't like this. They would prefer to speak perfectly, or not at all. Well, if you are such a person, swallow your pride. Speak badly. The way to come to be able to speak well is to speak badly for an extended period of time.

So then, speaking the language imperfectly is essential. There is a whole body of research on how people manage to cope while they are still not very good at using their new language. They use a variety of strategies in order to communicate, strategies which have been labeled, appropriately enough, *communication strategies*.

There have been a number of efforts made at classifying the strategies people use when communicating in a second language (these are surveyed in Bialystok, 1990 ). One well-known system of classification makes a distinction between *reduction strategies* and *achievement strategies* (Faerch and Kasper, 1983b, 1984), summarized in Ellis 1986). When you use a *reduction strategy*, you may simply avoid trying to say something that you would like to say, because you can't think of any way to get your point across. Or you may find a way to say something which is related to what you wanted to say, but not really the same. For example, you may wish to say that you are *worried* about something, but realizing you don't know how to say that, you may resort to simply saying, "I don't like it."

In using an *achievement* strategy, you will find a way to express what you wish to express, even though you don't know the normal way to express it. For example, you may not know the word for a *crank* on a machine, and so you say "this thing" while making a circular motion with your hand. Some people are probably better than others when it comes to using communications strategies. I mention them here to reinforce the point that it is normal to speak "poorly" first, and gradually improve. That is the name of the game. If you put high demands on yourself for premature excellence, it will discourage you from speaking as much as you need to, and thus hinder your progress. So get out there and start making

mistakes. And give yourself extra credit for extra mistakes.

## Chapter 1.4. Principle III: Learn to know the people whose language you are learning.

[Keywords: interacting with people, principles of language learning, speech community, techniques for language learning]

It would be easy to think of a language as an isolated body of knowledge. The idea would be that you learn all about a large but fixed set of vocabulary items and grammar rules, and once you have done that, you know the language. Such a view would be sadly mistaken. Suppose you come from a place where Christmas is unknown, and you are learning English. This mistaken view of language learning implies that *Christmas* is simply a vocabulary item that you learn as one of many thousands of building blocks that you can then use to construct sentences. But what does it really mean to know the word *Christmas*? It means that you can relate the word to a very elaborate and rich area of the experience of members of the English speaking speech community. Merely sharing a lot of vocabulary items and grammar rules is not what enables members of the same speech community to communicate with one another. Of course, sharing the same vocabulary items and grammar rules is necessary. But successful communication is also based on people sharing a huge body of knowledge and beliefs about the world. Understanding the speech you hear around you, and speaking to people in such a way that they can easily and correctly understand you, requires that you come to know all that they know, or at least a lot of it. I don't mean that you come to know all that any single person knows. But there is a general body of knowledge that is shared by all members of the speech community, and you will not be able to properly understand normal speech until you acquire a large part of that body of shared knowledge.

Principle III says that you *must learn to know the people whose language you are learning*. All three principles are interdependent. Principle III, like Principle II, is closely related to Principle I (i.e., expose yourself to massive comprehensible input). Take vocabulary building. Other things being equal, if you have a large vocabulary, you will be able to comprehend more language than if you have a small vocabulary. In other words, increasing your vocabulary results in increasing the quantity of comprehensible input that you receive. But as we saw in the case of the English word *Christmas*, learning vocabulary means learning about the areas of human experience to which the vocabulary relates. Or take the word *bottle*. What if I say, "She screamed and screamed until her mother stuck a bottle in her mouth"? Or how about, "If my husband doesn't get off the bottle, I'm leaving him"? Or perhaps, "We found a note in a bottle". What rich areas of cultural experience, knowledge and belief are linked to this word *bottle*! Even a simple word like *rain* is associated with the experience and beliefs of the speech community which uses the word. Knowing vocabulary, which is a key to comprehending input, cannot be separated from knowing the world of the people who speak the language you are learning.

Principle III is also relevant to Principle II, (i.e., engage in extensive extemporaneous speaking). You want to learn to talk about any topic that people talk about. The more you know the right words and phrases, the less you will have to rely on communication strategies. And it is not just a matter of knowing the right words and phrases, and the areas of human experience that these relate to. As you get to know the people well, you also come to know the sorts of things that people talk about, and the ways that they talk about those things.

In another essay (Thomson, 1993c), I explain how that to learn a language is to become part of a group

of people. Every language defines group of people, namely, the group of people who accept that language as their contract for communication. When people share a language it means that they agree with one another on a grand scale, and in very deep rooted ways, with regard to how to communicate. Take words for colours. While one language may divide the spectrum into seven colours, another may divide it into only three. Thus while the colour of grass and the colour of the sky may be called by different words in one language, they may be called by a single colour word in another language. Of course, all normal people can distinguish the same hues of colour. Think of all the hues that you can refer to by means of the word *green*. If you need to make finer distinctions you can do so. Likewise, if a language uses the same word for the colour of the sky as for the colour of grass, the speakers are capable of distinguishing those hues if they need to do so. However, for most purposes they don't, just as for most purposes you don't distinguish between the hues of green. Now you belong to a speech community (the English speaking speech community) which thinks of the colour of grass and the colour of the sky as basically different. So that is how you think, as long as you are participating in that speech community. Suppose you are in the process of becoming part of a speech community which thinks of the colour of grass and the colour of the sky as basically the same. If you are going to use the new language in a way similar to the way its normal users use it, then, while you are using it, you too will be thinking of the colour of grass as being basically the same as the colour of the sky. You may feel that you could never think that. Then you are in for a surprise. You really are going to learn to think in new ways. In learning a new language, you learn to think the way the language's normal speakers think. In other words, coming to know a language means coming to know how people think, and being able to think like them at a very basic level.

Vocabulary involves idioms in addition to single words. A good example of an *idiom* is provided by Spradley (1979) from the language of tramps. The idiom *make a flop* might be translated into ordinary English as "bed down for the night." However, the concept is much richer than this, as Spradley discovered. Tramps in Seattle shared the knowledge of more than a hundred ways to make a flop. Spradley found that to learn a language—in this case the language was a variety of English shared by the speech community of tramps—is to learn a culture, and to learn a culture is to learn a huge body of shared knowledge and experience, including strategies for surviving.

The collection of all the words and idioms known to speakers of a language is what linguists refer to as their mental lexicon. In everyday English, a lexicon is a book, but for a linguist, it is something in the human mind. In connection with the mental lexicon, Givon (1984) goes so far as to say,

"The bulk of generic ('permanent') cultural knowledge shared by speakers/hearers is coded in their *lexicon*, which is in fact more like an *encyclopedia*." (p. 31).

So then, learning the lexicon means learning much of what people know and think about the world. I have not even begun to explore all the ways in which learning words and idioms will involve you in learning whole areas of local culture, knowledge and belief. There will be discoveries awaiting you at every turn.

Big as the issue of vocabulary learning is, there is more to getting to know the people whose language you are learning. It should be easy to see that in a more general sense, knowing what goes on in people's life experiences is essential to being able to understand their speech. Suppose I want to tell you of an incident in my life. Let's say it involved getting a traffic ticket. Here is an example of such an account of an incident that occurred in my life, told as I might tell it to a normal speaker of North American English.

One time a friend was driving my pick-up while I dozed off, and this cop stopped us because a tail-light

was burned out. It wouldn't have been anything, except that my friend was so short that she couldn't see out of the rear-view mirror, and after several blocks he finally used his siren to get our attention, and he wanted to know what was going on. I apologized profusely, but he was still a bit on the grumpy side when he handed me the ticket, although, to my relief it was just a warning.

Imagine that you are a rural share-cropper in a third world country and have never driven a car, or been pulled over by a police officer. Suppose in addition that you have had some moderate opportunity to learn English, and that you know all of the words in my account (including *profusely!*), and suppose that I spoke slowly and clearly as I told you this account in these exact words. I can pretty well guarantee that the account will whiz by you in a blur, and you will not be able to make much sense out of it. That is because my story assumes that you share a whole area of life experience with me that you do not in fact share. Notice that in telling the story I left out many essential facts. As the reader, if you are a North American, or from another culture which is similar to North American culture in the relevant respects, you will have filled in the missing details, and will have created a complete picture of what had happened. In your picture, the police officer followed my pick-up truck with his coloured lights flashing. He became upset over the fact that the driver didn't pull over. The ticket might well have involved a fine, but fortunately, it didn't. None of these parts of your picture are mentioned in my story. Yet they are crucial to making sense of the story as a whole, and making sense of the story as a whole is crucial to making sense out of the sentences and words which make it up.

That is how stories work. If you are to understand a story, you must create the whole picture from whatever bits of detail you are given. Assuming you share my knowledge of how traffic tickets are given, as soon as you hear me say the words, "this police officer stopped us" a whole lot of additional detail becomes available to you, since you know what typically happens when a police officer stops a driver. The police officer followed my vehicle on a motorcycle or in a squad car with his lights flashing, and the driver pulled over. You can take all of that to be the case even though all I said was "this cop stopped us" You also assume that the police officer got out and walked to the driver's window of my pick-up. There are a whole lot of details that go into a typical incident of a police officer giving a motorist a traffic ticket. This typical sequence of events has been called a *schema*. You understand my story easily because you and I, as members of the same culture, share this schema. I take the schema for granted in telling the story, and you use the schema as an aid to understanding the story. This schema, which you can think of as a basic skeleton of the typical traffic ticket incident, is something that you and I share because it grows out of our common experience, either as ticket recipients, or as friends of ticket recipients who have shared their stories with us. As members of the same culture and speech community you and I share countless schemas which arise out of our shared experiences. Examples would be the schemas for a day in an elementary school class, a trip to the supermarket for groceries, a baseball game, and a wedding ceremony. It is widely recognized that the use of such schemas is essential to successful communication (see Rost 1990; Singer 1990).

Now, your new language belongs to a different speech community with a different culture, and different shared life experiences. You may share some of the schemas (or, if you prefer, schemata) which arise out of their life experience, but there will be many that you do not share. The more different the new culture is from your old one, the more serious this problem becomes.

In addition to schemas, there are other kinds of knowledge shared by everyone in the new speech community, such as knowledge of famous people, well-known places and events, etc. The fact that your past life experience is different from that of the speakers of your new language makes it difficult for you to make sense out of much of what you may hear being said around you. The only solution is for you to acquire a large part of the common knowledge that these people already share. This can be done partly through discussing their life experiences with them, but to be done effectively, you also need to share in

that life experience.

Finally, learning to know the people whose language you are learning means learning what is appropriate behaviour, and what is inappropriate behaviour. This opens a huge area of complexity which I can't explore here. A trained anthropologist is an expert observer. But a trained anthropologist observing the culture is in the same position as a trained linguist observing the language. True, s/he will notice a lot which the rest of us will not notice. Nevertheless, what s/he can consciously observe and describe is far less than what s/he needs to acquire in order to behave appropriately. Like language, behaviour in general is too complex to learn by first understanding all the facts about it and then applying that knowledge of those facts as you consciously understand them. Here too, an input hypothesis must have some validity. As you are exposed to an enormous quantity of human interaction and behaviour, you acquire the complex cultural system which governs the behaviour.

Getting to know people means getting to know how they act toward one another, including how they act by means of language. Think for a moment about the following two sentences:

If I may make the suggestion, the \_\_\_\_\_ is popular here.

Well there's the \_\_\_\_\_.

These examples are adapted from Munby (1978), who provides twenty different ways to make a suggestion in English, of which these are two. In fact, there are a lot more than twenty ways to make suggestions in English, but let's just think about these two. Who would say each of them? To whom? In what setting? We might imagine the waiter in a fancy restaurant using the first one with a customer. The second one might be said in the same restaurant by one spouse to another. Or the second one might come from a waitress in a diner who has been asked for a suggestion. Isn't it interesting that we can work backwards from the form of a suggestion to an idea of who might have said it to whom, and in what setting?

This example falls into the category that linguists refer to as *politeness phenomena* (Brown and Levinson, 1978). Certain things people do with words involve some social risk either to the speaker, or the person spoken to, or both. People choose their words carefully based not only on considerations of social risk, but also based on considerations such as the relative social standing of the speaker and the one spoken to, the setting, the topic that is being talked about, and so forth. Thus to be able to speak well, you need to relate what you are saying to complex new facts about social relationships. You do it all the time in your mother tongue. You fine tune your speech depending on who you are talking to, how well you know them, their status relative to yours, etc. In your new language you do not yet have much of a feel for how to do this. Among other things, you need to develop a feel for how people view social relationships. Fortunately, this is another case of complexity which you mainly acquire through massive exposure to, and involvement in, social interaction. But it is another illustration of how learning the language means learning to know the people who speak it. You can also use role-play as a means of focusing on the appropriate use of language in specific situations, as we will see below.

There is much that people will tell you about how you should and should not behave. Be aware, that the cultural value system is more complex than those who follow it are aware of, and often the "rule" you are told will be an oversimplification. So you need to keep observing as well as listening. You should record your observations in a journal. Be very wary of learning clear-cut, simple rules of behaviour from fellow foreigners who consider themselves to be experts on the local culture. Your behaviour, like your speech, will start out strange and gradually become more native-like. Don't expect to behave like a

native from day one. On the other hand, you need good friends who will speak up at times when you are being unacceptably weird by their standards. And whenever you experience friction or conflict, you will want to discuss it in detail with a sympathetic friend and find out how you might better have behaved in the situation.

This may seem to be getting away from the topic of language learning, but it really is not. The shared body of beliefs which is essential to understanding speech includes many assumptions about how people should and should not behave. If you reexamine my account of the traffic ticket, you should be able to discover examples of such assumptions.

So then, a basic ingredient of successful language learning is learning to know the people who speak the language, learning to know them in depth, and in detail, learning a large body of knowledge and belief which is shared by all normal speakers of the language, learning about the types of social relationships that exist, and learning values that govern behaviour, including speech behaviour. Some of the techniques and activities discussed below will be in part motivated by Principle III.

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## Chapter 2. A few practical concerns

You now know the three basic requirements for continued progress in language learning:

- Principle I: Expose yourself to massive comprehensible input.
- Principle II: Engage in extensive extemporaneous speaking.
- Principle III: Learn to know the people whose language you are learning.

Though I've elaborated on each of them, I'd rather you remember the simple principles than all the other things I have said so far. My elaboration was merely intended to make the principles more meaningful. As I discuss language learning techniques and activities below, these three principles should become more concrete. In the end, if all you remember is the three principles, and if you apply that knowledge systematically, you'll do all right. You should apply these principles in planning your overall approach to language learning, in designing specific activities, and in evaluating the effectiveness of your language learning strategy.

It should be obvious that I am assuming you want to do more than “just let it happen”. Some people feel they will be successful language learners if they simply “hang around with the people” enough. Or some linguists may feel that if they analyze the grammar and sound system of the language linguistically, they will learn to understand and speak the language without giving it another thought. Such people will experience varying degrees of success, ranging from near zero, to fairly high, depending on a variety of factors (see Thomson 1993d).

The fact that you are reading this makes me think that you yourself would like to put some special thought and effort into your language learning, and to do the best possible job given the constraints of your situation and opportunities. Therefore, I have been assuming that you would recruit a speaker of the language to help you on a regular basis, hopefully even on a daily basis. That will allow for a lot of flexibility in your use of language learning techniques and activities. It may be that the language you are learning is relatively easy, in the sense that it is quite similar to a language which you already know well. To make matters better still, it may be that there are extensive resources for getting comprehensible input—newspapers, television, etc. In such a case, it might not be essential that you

have someone help you with the language in regular, structured language sessions. But the more difficult the language, and the more distant the culture, the more important this becomes.

A person who meets with you regularly for the purpose of helping you improve your skill in the language is what I call a Language Resource Person (LRP). If you are to make good use of your times with your LRPs, you will need to spend some time daily in planning and preparing for the sessions. You will also spend time afterward going over tapes you made during your sessions, and reflecting and evaluating what you did, as a basis for further planning. You will probably want to do some record keeping in order to stay organized, and to evaluate your progress. The records will be of several types. You may keep a daily journal in which you describe your experiences in using the language that day (in both listening and speaking), along with cultural observations you have made that day. You will want some sort of planning notebook in which you store the results of needs analyses (see below), and a growing list of social situations and topics from which you will choose when planning your language sessions. Since you will be accumulating a lot of tape recordings, you will want to keep an index of what is where on which tape. If you are a linguist or anthropologist, you will want to be keeping a notebook of linguistic observations, and/or more formal and extensive anthropological notes appropriate to your research project. These can easily be integrated into, or better yet, grow out of, your daily language learning activities.

Now I have made numerous references to language learning activities without describing any of them. I will get to that momentarily. However, before I do, a few final practical concerns need to be addressed which will have a major impact on the scope and intensity of your language learning activities.

## **Chapter 2.1. How much time do you have?**

[Keywords: language learning program, language sessions, planning, time allotted for language learning]

I have suggested elsewhere (Thomson 1993d) that if you intend to participate meaningfully in the society which uses your new language, and if you are starting out from absolute zero ability, then you should plan, if at all possible, to concentrate on language learning for at least the first fifth of your total stay in the location where the language is spoken. If you have done some language learning before arriving, you can shorten this period, though it still would do you no harm to spend this amount of time on additional language learning. The more concentrated time you can devote to it the better. Five hours per week for a hundred weeks is less effective than twenty-five hours per week for twenty weeks. For many people, twenty five hours per week of heavy-duty language learning is exhausting enough to be considered full-time, especially at the beginning. Others may thrive on forty or sixty hours per week. However you define “full-time”, the key is that you be largely free of other work responsibilities, so that the bulk of your mental and emotional resources can be devoted to language learning. How much progress you will make in a given amount of time depends partly on what language you are learning and how similar it is to languages you already know well. In the case of difficult languages, you could realistically spend a lot more than twenty percent of your total time in the country on initial language learning. However, in practice this is rarely possible. In any case, your language learning should continue on a part-time basis for as long as you live there.

If you are unable to do full-time language learning, then the challenge will be to keep your motivation high. Some people have done great language learning while holding down another job, but those people were motivated enough to work at it for a few hours every evening. If you are not able to devote the major part of your time to language learning, then you can still follow my suggestions, though where I

speak in terms of actual time spent on activities, you will need to make appropriate mental adjustments. Even if you have only limited time for language learning, I would still encourage you to have explicit goals as to how much time you will devote to language learning activities of the types I will discuss, or other activities that you may prefer.

When I speak of X number of hours spent on language learning, I am referring to three types of activities. The central activities involve structured language sessions in which a speaker of the language works with you in *communication activities* which help you to increase your ability to understand and to speak the language. You should tape record some or all of what goes on in your session in order to listen to it later, and possibly to go over parts of it in a subsequent session.

The second set of activities are private ones. For example, you may spend a lot of time listening to the tapes that you made in your sessions. You may also write up your observations regarding how the language works, and add vocabulary items to your personal dictionary. If there is a body of literature in the language, you may do extensive reading in it as a private activity. You may also watch television or listen to the radio. So long as you can understand what you are hearing, this will contribute to your acquiring the language. You may also spend some time reading books or articles *about* the language. Reading about how the grammar works can benefit your language learning in various ways.

The third set of activities are those involved in developing and carrying on a social life. For some people this comes easily. For people like me, it doesn't happen unless I make it happen. Therefore it really helps if social visiting and other social activities can be made a part of my daily work goals. Thus if I spend thirty hours per week on language learning, these thirty hours might include ten hours spent in language sessions, ten hours of private activities (including the time spent planning and preparing for the language sessions), and ten hours of social visiting and other participation in social activities. Different people will have different blends of these three components, but you should devote reasonable attention to each.

To summarize, the three components of your language learning program are

1. Formal language sessions with someone who is providing comprehensible input and opportunities for extemporaneous speaking.
2. Private activities in which you listen to tapes, read, write, and plan.
3. Social activities in which you use the language, either in understanding messages, in uttering messages, or both.

Suppose your time is limited. Let's say that you can only work on improving your language skills in the evenings and on Saturdays. An important question will be how much interaction you have with speakers of the language in your daily life. If your work involves interacting with people in the language many times every day, then the third component, the social one, will be less crucial, and thus you will want to devote more of your designated language learning time to the first two components. As we will see, you can design your formal language sessions so that they feed into your daily life communication situations. To some extent, you may be able to carry out your private activities while doing other things. In particular, you can listen to tapes made during your sessions while you are washing the dishes, or driving your car, or jogging.

It would seem then, that if your designated time for language learning is limited, the best use of what time you do have will be for formal language sessions, that is, times in which you meet with someone for the purpose of tailoring the communication activities so that they clearly contribute to your progress

in language learning.

## Chapter 2.2. Whom do you have?

[Keywords: goals (proficiency), language associates, resources]

To become a speaker of a language is to come into relationships. In the broadest sense, you come into a relationship with everyone who speaks the language, in that a language can be thought of a contract which all its users have tacitly agreed to follow. But you will have many specific relationships that are essential to your language learning progress. You cannot learn a language without the right relationships with people. For example, you cannot learn a language very well if your main source of input is television and radio, though these can be valuable resources in a balanced language learning program. From the standpoint of your language learning, the important relationships are of three types:

1. Language Resource Person(s) [LRP s].
2. Other people with whom you spend a fair amount of time communicating—friends, fellow employees, your parole officer, etc.
3. People with whom you interact in very specific types of encounters, such as the postman, the butcher, or the judge.

In Thomson (1993c) I outline a strategy for increasing your network of friends, and recruiting LRPs. With regard to increasing your network of friends the principle is quite simple. Keep meeting people until you find a few who seem to appreciate your company. Become their friends. Then, once you have a few friends, become friends of the best friends (and/or close relatives) of your friends, and then become friends with the best friends (and/or close relatives) of your friends' friends (and/or close relatives). It is easier to become friends with the friend of a friend than with someone who has no reason to give you the time of day. If you can tell Bill, "Hi. I'm a friend of Joe's", and Joe happens to be Bill's best friend, then Bill is likely to be nice to you. Probably Joe has already mentioned you to him anyway, and he is glad to meet you. Once you're important to a bunch of people who are all important to each other, you're a believer. If you haven't yet found an LRP, you should be able to at that point.

Recruiting LRPs is a point at which I personally experience anxiety and internal resistance. Even though I am usually offering to pay people, I still feel that I am somehow asking a major favour, and I guess I'm not a very assertive person. It helps to realize that there are people who really enjoy being LRPs, and that if you ask around enough, and people come forward, the people who come forward are coming forward not because you are imposing on them, but because your request has struck a responsive chord in them.

It is a good idea when first recruiting LRPs that you not even so much as hint at any long term arrangements until you have seen that the person works smoothly with you. So initially, you request help on a one time basis. If things go well, you can request help again from the same person. If you are getting "one time" help from several people, and then settle on one or two as regular LRPs, you will avoid causing anyone to lose face.

You may be saying, "Whoa! This is more than I bargained for. I don't want to hire or otherwise recruit someone to help me on a regular, scheduled basis! Sorry. That's just not how I work." Well, I find I can have far more effective communication experiences during the first months of language learning if I can spend time with someone who knows that the reason we are together is for me to improve my language

ability. You may manage to do many of the things I will discuss without resorting to this. For me, having regular LRPs helps to make life predictable, and insures I will stick to my intended goals. If you react against this, it may be O.K., unless it is part of a general reaction against getting involved with people. Perhaps you were thinking that you could learn the language as a recluse. Read Thomson (1993c) if you don't think that "recluse" and "language learner" are a contradiction in terms.

The third category of people whom you need, those with whom you interact in specific kinds of encounters, will be built into the situation. It is important that you evaluate your situation in order to determine all of the specific types of encounters in which you interact with people. Then you can use part of your time in formal language sessions with your LRP to improve your ability to interact in specific types of encounters.

In pursuing relationships of these three types, there is a big advantage in relationships with people who don't know English (or any other language which you already know well). Since I am assuming that you are already able to speak the new language at least minimally, I would suggest that you consider mainly recruiting LRPs from among such people. In addition, aim to build your network of friendships so that it includes many such people. In many parts of the world, you will find that some people want to spend time with you in order to practice their English. You may want to make an exchange with these people—you spend so much time speaking English with them and they spend an equal amount of time speaking their language with you. However, you might find it difficult or unnatural to speak the new language with someone who already speaks English fairly well. With determination you can overcome your feeling of unnaturalness, but it may be easier if you mainly relate to people who can only speak to you in the new language.

When I learned Blackfoot, there were very few people to talk to who did not speak fluent English. That is an extremely challenging context in which to learn a language. Elsewhere I have presented a strategy for coping with this challenge (Thomson 1993d). In such a highly bilingual situation you are only likely to develop fluency if you employ a well thought out strategy such as the one I discuss there. I repeat the relevant portion here:

After you have a vocabulary of many hundred common items, and can construct a reasonable variety of sentences, it is time to bite the bullet. This may be a month or two following the onset of your full-time language learning. You will tell your language helper something like, "Next Thursday, we will not use any English for a full hour." Come Thursday, you spend an hour during which all communication is in your new language. At times you will get stuck and be unable to get your point across. Jot it down. At times your helper will be unable to get her point across. She jots that down. After the hour is over, you go over your jottings together, and try to learn what it was you lacked which made communication difficult. Repeat these "monolingual hours" once or twice a week until you and your helper are comfortable with them. Then tell her something like, "Week after next we will see if we can go a *whole week* without using any English."

Just as your monolingual hours seemed uncomfortable at first, so your monolingual week may seem awkward. After all, you still communicate only with great difficulty in the new language, and it would be easy or effortless to carry on in English. But after you are comfortable with an occasional monolingual week, do a monolingual month. Then try a monolingual week, not just with your helper, but with all the other bilingual friends you now have. Do that a few times, and then try a month with your friends. All this time, you are steadily increasing your comprehension ability, perhaps by methods like those I outline in Thomson (1992, 1993a). Even though the community to which you have access is 100% bilingual in English (or some other language you know well), you will find that you reach a point where you can largely abandon English once and for all (in your dealings with the speakers of your new language, that is).

While I'm on the topic of people who are important to you in connection with your language learning (and hopefully, important to you in general), I should mention one other category of person: fellow-language learners. Many aspects of language learning require a lot of will-power, and I find that it makes things easier if I am not all alone in my struggles. There may be people of a similar cultural background to yours who are at a similar stage in learning the same language that you are learning. If not, there may at least be people of a similar cultural background who are learning some language or other. As you get together with people, you can share ideas and frustrations. You may be amazed how this can increase your sense of contentment and motivation.

In the earliest weeks of language learning, I think it is best if you can have one or more co-learners who participate with you in your sessions with your LRP. This adds flexibility to your communication activities, and may make those activities more entertaining (or less boring) for the LRP. However, you are now an intermediate language learner, and it may be better most of the time if you work by yourself with your LRP, since no two people's interests, needs, or rate of progress will be the same. If you do have the opportunity to work with other language learners, a word of warning is in order. Competitiveness can be counterproductive (Bailey, 1983). If you are making better progress than your friend, why don't you hold back a bit during your language sessions. Language learners can have a lot of emotional ups and downs. You don't want to contribute to somebody's downs.

Finally, if at all possible, you ought to stay in touch with a language learning specialist. Such a person will be able to give you special help in evaluating your program and your progress. If you relate to such a person while setting concrete goals, this can provide a tacit relationship of accountability. Such accountability can be tremendously helpful in keeping your motivation high. As a matter of fact, even if no language learning specialist is available to you, as is often the case, you should consider working out some sort of mutual accountability system with a fellow language learner.

## Chapter 2.3. What should you learn next?

[Keywords: communication situations, Needs analysis, planning]

Perhaps you have all the time you need, and all the help you need in the form of LRPs, and plenty of friends to visit, and other language learners to encourage you, and you have made yourself accountable either to a language learning specialist or to a fellow language learner. You also grasp the three key principles: you need to expose yourself to massive *comprehensible input*, to engage in extensive *extemporaneous speaking*, and to *get to know the people* in depth. You feel pretty secure. Then suddenly a question occurs to you: What do I learn?

A popular catch word in the field of foreign language education is *proficiency* (see Higgs, 1984; Omaggio, 1986). By proficiency is meant the ability to use the language for authentic purposes in real-life communication situations. A proficiency oriented course will thus be organized around real life communications situations. You might wonder why anyone would want to learn to use the language for any other purposes.

Strange as it may seem, I believe that it is easy to misapply this concept. I knew someone who said that the language learner living in the second language community should never learn anything that s/he does not specifically plan to use in communication. This person offered the example of a friend who had needed to buy shoes. The friend therefore spent several hours memorizing some specific sentences for use in buying shoes, went out and said the sentences from memory to the shoe seller, and returned home excited at having used the language for an authentic purpose. The problem is, how often do you buy

shoes? Perhaps some of the sentences will carry over to other situations, but still, it probably isn't realistic to spend several hours memorizing specific sentences for narrowly defined communication situations. There is simply too much to learn and too few hours available for learning it.

There is a related movement for learning languages for specific purposes (Widdowson, 1983). It is recognized that learners will be more motivated to learn material which relates to their area of special need or special interest. For example, if a man is planning to work as a nurse in Thailand, then he will be more motivated to learn if the material he is learning is going to be useful in talking to patients and to other health professionals. Once again, a word of caution is in order. I once heard a nonnative English speaker fluently lecture and answer questions related to his special academic field. While answering one of the questions he started to talk about a party he had recently been to, and quickly became tongue-tied. He could talk about his specialized field almost like a native speaker, but he was not nearly as capable of talking about everyday life. Consider our nurse once again. Once he is in his hospital in Thailand he will be getting extensive exposure to the language of nurses and doctors as they talk to patients and talk to each other on work related matters. Obviously he will want to have some basic ability in dealing with such communication before starting work, but you can pretty well guarantee that, in the course of his day to day work, the nurse will have extensive opportunity to improve his job-related speaking ability, even if he develops little ability to use the language for any other purpose. So then, if you have extra time off the job to devote to language learning, there is much to be said for using some of it to improve your general speaking ability, rather than working further on your job-related speaking ability.

What I am getting at is that it is important to take a broadly based approach to learning the language, while also emphasizing your specific communication needs. It is a matter of balance. Yes, you should let your specific needs be a source of ideas as you design your language learning activities. No, you should not limit yourself to your most specific needs. So let's think about analyzing your specific needs. But let's also think about learning the language in more general terms.

### **Chapter 2.3.1. Specific Needs**

[Keywords: Needs analysis]

There is a lot written about *needs analysis* for language learners (see, for example Munby, 1978; Brumfit and Johnson, 1979). A simple, practical approach to needs analysis was devised by Allwright (described in Dickinson, 1987). You may find it helpful when you are trying to decide what to focus on in your language learning.

Here is an adaptation of that approach. The first step is to come up with a list of purposes for which you have needed to use the language in the past, or currently need to use it, or expect to need to use it. It is recommended that you begin with a group of fellow language learners and brainstorm together. After the group discussion, you go off by yourself and make your own list. Try to be specific. For example, you could say that you use the language "for shopping." But you could also break this down into specific types of shopping, and within the context of shopping, there will be more specific communication needs, such as asking for help in finding what you want. Some of the situations reflected in your list may only require listening ability. For example, you may wish to be able to understand sermons in church, or the news broadcast on television. Many of the situations will involve two-way interaction such as bargaining over a price. Your goal is to come up with a long list of purposes for which you have wished to be able to use the language in the past, or wish to be able to use it in the present, or expect to want to be able to use it in the future.

Let's suppose that your list of 101 items includes the following five needs:

1. Respond to a marriage proposal.
23. Hire a domestic employee.
37. Listen to sermons in church.
51. Explain to a stranger my reason for being in this country.
52. Explain to an immigration official my reason for being in this country.

Once you have produced your list, go over it, and give each item a numerical rating for the frequency with which the need arises. You can use a rating scale of 1 to 5. If a need occurs with extreme frequency, give it a 5. If it hardly ever occurs, give it a 1.

<b>Description of Need</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
1. Respond to a marriage proposal.	2
23. Hire a domestic employee.	1
37. Listen to sermons in church.	1
51. Explain to a stranger my reason for being in this country.	3
52. Explain to an immigration official my reason for being in this country.	1

Now, in addition to frequency, you can rate each need with regard to how essential it is. For example, you may have been able to use a go-between to hire a domestic employee. On the other hand, you have heard that winning the favour of the immigration official may depend on your ability to use the language. Again, you can use a scale from 1 to 5.

<b>Description of Need</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Urgency</b>
1. Respond to a marriage proposal.	2	5
23. Hire a domestic employee.	1	1
37. Listen to sermons in church.	1	1
51. Explain to a stranger my reason for being in this country.	3	2
52. Explain to an immigration official my reason for being in this country.	1	5

Then you will want to consider each item in terms of how important it is to you personally. That is, is it something you place a lot of value on, apart from its urgency? Having such a rating allows you to bump something up in importance even though the need is neither frequent nor urgent.

Description of Need	Frequency	Urgency	Personal Importance
1. Respond to a marriage proposal.	2	5	5
23. Hire a domestic employee.	1	1	1
37. Listen to sermons in church.	1	1	5
51. Explain to a stranger my reason for being in this country.	3	2	2
52. Explain to an immigration official my reason for being in this country.	1	5	4

Now go back and total up the three ratings, to get a composite rating.

Description of Need	Frequency	Urgency	Personal Importance	Total
1. Respond to a marriage proposal.	2	5	5	12
23. Hire a domestic employee.	1	1	1	3
37. Listen to sermons in church.	1	1	5	
51. Explain to a stranger my reason for being in this country.	3	2	2	7
52. Explain to an immigration official my reason for being in this country.	1	5	4	10

You're not done. You have determined the importance of each of your communication needs, but you next need to determine the extent of your current lack in communication ability in relation to each need. For each item, decide what level of ability is demanded of you in order to fulfill the need. For example, in dealing with the immigration official, you may feel you need to have exquisite communication ability. When it comes to responding to marriage proposals, you may be happy to simply get your point across emphatically. Once you have decided what level of ability you need or desire, decide what level you already have, and subtract it from the level of ability you need or desire. Again you can use scales of 1 to 5, where 5 means exquisite ability, and 1 means very limited ability.

Description of Need	Current ability	Desired ability	Difference
1. Respond to a marriage proposal.	2	2	0
23. Hire a domestic employee.	1	3	2
37. Listen to sermons in church.	1	4	3
51. Explain to a stranger my reason for being in this country.	3	3	0
52. Explain to an immigration official my reason for being in this country.	3	5	2

Now, compare your two sets of results. In terms of the rating of needs, your strongest need is item 1, followed by item 52. Items 37, and 51 are tied for third place, although in your full list this might not be the case, since there might be other 10s, 9s, or 8s. But let's assume there are not. Now you might cross item 23 off the list on the basis of its only being a weak need. Item 1 is a strong need (the total rating is 12), but the need is already adequately met by the current ability (the difference between current and desired is 0). So scratch that from the list. Item 37 stays on the list, since it shows the greatest lack (that is, the greatest difference between current and desired ability). Item 51 gets scratched even though it is a fairly strong need, because, as with item 1, there is no lack (difference = 0). Item 52 stays on the list, even though the lack is only moderate (difference = 2), since the need is a strong one (total = 10). So we are left with items 37 and 52.

In practice, each time you perform this sort of needs analysis, you may end up choosing four or five items as the ones most deserving of attention. You may want to repeat the process periodically if you are having difficulty thinking of specific communication needs to work on.

### Chapter 2.3.2. General communication ability: Topics and language functions

[Keywords: communicative functions, planning]

So much for *specific* communication needs. I have noticed that when people do this type of personal needs analysis, they typically include a need such as “general conversational ability” or “ability to make small talk with my neighbors and visitors”. Of course, that doesn’t really constitute a specific need. What it does is to indicate that learning to communicate in connection with *specific* needs is not enough. You also need to be developing general communication ability. That is, you would like to be able to easily talk about all the things that a typical native speaker can easily talk about. You would like to know all the vocabulary that is known to a typical native speaker. For example, the need for you to know the word for the human navel may not yet have arisen. You have no way of predicting when that need will arise. But the word is one that is known to any four-year-old child, and it is a word that any full-fledged speaker of the language must know. That is, the first time someone uses it, and you indicate ignorance of its meaning, it will be clear that there are still very basic vocabulary items that, for some strange reason, you don’t know. It is not a good idea to wait until you hear such vocabulary in real-life communication before worrying about learning it. A large portion of the vocabulary that confronts you in real life will be in this category, and you’ll be better off if you have made the effort to become familiar with it in advance. That will increase the percentage of input that is comprehensible, and decrease your dependence on communication strategies. So in the case of the word for the human navel, why not become familiar with it during a session with your LRP when you deliberately spend a lot of time discussing the human body and most of its parts, and some of their functions. Then the first time that the word for navel arises in real-life communication, say in a story you are listening to, you will already know it, and your comprehension of the story won’t suffer as a result.

There are countless topics that fall into the category of everyday topics. One of the best ways to come up with a list of such topics is to frequently walk through the community and take note of items and activities which any typical speaker of the language would be expected to be able to discuss. You can keep this list in the same notebook as your needs list, and refer to it as you plan your daily language learning activities. Van Ek (1975) provides an extensive list of settings and topics which would be important to an adult language learner in a European country. It is reprinted in Brumfit and Johnson (1979) and Finocchiaro and Brumfit (1983). In other parts of the world you will need to come up with your own list. Van Ek (1975) also provides a list of the functions which language fulfills (e.g. describing, warning, consoling, etc.). It is also reprinted in Brumfit and Johnson (1979) and Finocchiaro and Brumfit (1983), and in the U.S. Defense Language Institutes modified form, as applied to Greek, in Omaggio (1986). This list can be taken as more universal, although the details of how the functions are carried out will vary from language to language. A very important source of ideas for settings and functions is Larson (1984), since it is built around a concept of a language learner who is in the process of becoming integrated into a new society.

One useful collection of language functions is found in Moran (1990), where each language function is illustrated by a cartoon strip with empty bubbles. The cartoons are somewhat based on a European setting, though many of them would be applicable in most parts of the world. The functions of language represented in Moran’s cartoon strips include greetings, leave-takings, interrupting, apologizing, answering the door, begging, refusing, declining an offer, offering help, requesting help, consoling,

thanking, warning, making an introduction, responding to an introduction, asking directions, complimenting, expressing condolences, extending an invitation, expressing distaste, answering the telephone, expressing delight, expressing displeasure, congratulating, expressing pain, expressing fear, requesting permission, getting someone's attention, asking for repetition, expressing ignorance, encouraging, accusing, seeking reassurance, expressing fear, remembering, welcoming, asking about health, requesting permission to speak, reprimanding, expressing disappointment, expressing affection, and calming someone down.

When considering such functions you need to bear in mind that there may be a large number of possible ways to fulfill each function, and your choice among the possibilities may partly depend on

1. your social standing relative to the person you are talking to,
2. how well you know the person,
3. who is listening, and
4. the circumstances under which the communication occurs.

In other words, as you work on specific language functions, don't expect to simply memorize a single sentence for each function! You might consider role-play as a means of exploring language functions as they are carried out with a variety of speakers and hearers in a variety of circumstances.

In summary, as you plan the content of your language learning activities you should be moving forward on two fronts. On the one hand, you should be learning to deal with the specific areas of communication that are most important to you. On the other hand, you should be learning to discuss all the areas of life which a normal speaker of the language is able to discuss, and you should be learning to use the language for all of the functions for which it is normally used.

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### **Chapter 3. Things to do to keep on keeping on**

In discussing comprehensible input, I referred to four stages of language learning. It is a good idea at any given point to gear your overall approach to language learning to your current stage. My assumption has been that the first stage is just behind you. To review briefly, the four stages are as follows:

1. At Stage I, you had difficulty understanding speech that was not clearly supported by pictures, objects or actions.
2. At Stage II, you have difficulty understanding speech unless the content is fairly predictable, or else is carefully and tediously negotiated with a sympathetic native speaker.
3. At Stage III, you have difficulty understanding speech unless the topic is one with which you are familiar, and you have the full context, or the meaning is negotiated with a native speaker.
4. At Stage IV, you are able to get at least a general understanding of just about anything you hear, even if it is totally out of context, and you merely happen to overhear it as you pass by.

Now it may be that you are actually past Stage II. In any case, if you are planning to devote a fair portion of your time to language learning for the next two years, you will spend most of that time in Stage III, provided you have an effective means for moving quickly through Stages I and II. In Thomson (1993a) I

proposed a program for moving through Stage I and getting well into Stage II. Here I will assume that you are just barely into Stage II. Some of the ideas from Thomson (1993a) are repeated here, since I want to start at the beginning of Stage II.

## Chapter 3.1. Stage II language learning activities

[Keywords: activities for language learning, language sessions]

You have now learned to recognize many hundreds of common words together with a variety of sentence patterns. You can use a steadily increasing number of these words to construct sentences of your own. But you still don't feel that you can say very much. We'll approach the language learning activities in terms of the three basic principles:

1. Some activities will be aimed at providing comprehensible input at an appropriate level of difficulty.
2. Some activities will be aimed at providing the opportunity for extemporaneous speaking, and
3. Some of the activities will be aimed at helping you to get to know the people in the ways that are necessary for you to speak and comprehend the language easily.

Often, two or three of the principles are combined in a single activity.

In terms of comprehensible input, some of your activities in Stage II will be aimed at exposing you to *long sequences of connected sentences in which the overall content of what is being said is fairly predictable*. In the process, your vocabulary will continue to grow, and your ability to comprehend speech will continue to improve. In terms of extemporaneous speaking, the main concern in Stage II is to *loosen up your tongue*, and get you into the habit of managing to get your point across, often by means of achievement strategies. In terms of getting to know the people, among other things, you will be learning about many simple daily activities—how they are conducted and how they are described.

Recall that your language learning activities are carried on in three settings: some activities you conduct on your own, some you conduct in structured sessions with your LRP, and some you conduct as a part of social visiting or other outside social participation. Sometimes all three settings are used for closely interrelated activities. For example, during your private time you go over earlier language sessions and plan the next one; during your social visiting, you often tell your friends all about what you have been learning to talk about in your formal sessions; during your sessions, you specifically prepare for outside social participation; etc.

### Chapter 3.1.1. Getting lots of comprehensible input in stage II

[Keywords: audio recordings, comprehensible input, intermediate learners, language sessions, stages of language acquisition, vocabulary]

At this stage, comprehensible input can start to take off. Perhaps you can comprehend many snatches of the speech that you hear around you, but it does not provide you with *massive* comprehensible input. To get comprehensible input in large quantities you need to get people to talk you in such a way that the content of what they say is fairly predictable. You may benefit from other input as well. Already, there will be various highly routine events which you have learned to participate in, and to talk about. But in terms of input which will be both comprehensible, and moderately challenging, and which will steadily

increase your vocabulary and your ability to understand speech in general, it will be the long stretches of relatively predictable speech that will help you the most. You will probably depend largely on your LRP to provide this concentrated comprehensible input, though other friends can help out.

A typical pattern will be to have your LRP talk to you in your session, and record what she says on tape. You will then listen to the tape on your own time, noting parts you do not understand or have questions about. Then you will go over the tape bit by bit with the LRP in a subsequent session, discussing what she said and getting your questions answered. By that time you will be thoroughly familiar with the taped material and can listen to it again on your own time, repeatedly, with full or nearly full comprehension. A final step might be to attempt to retell the material in your own words. You could do this first with your LRP in the language session, and record your effort. Then, together with your LRP, listen to your recording, and get her to give you pointers on ways you might better have expressed yourself. Finally, retell the material in your own words to various friends during social visits. This basic pattern—tape the LRP, listen to the tape privately, go over the tape with the LRP, listen to the tape privately, retell the material in your own words to several people—can be used with many of the activities I discuss here. So let's get on with getting some comprehensible input.

The first category of comprehensible input has been illustrated already when I talked about having someone tell you the story of Goldilocks. You may not know the word for bear, but I bet you'll catch on to it quickly and remember it permanently. The same will be true of a variety of other new vocabulary and possibly even some new sentence patterns. But just a minute. What if your LRP doesn't know the story of Goldilocks? Well, if she can read, you may be able to provide the story in another language for her to read. If not, you can get a fellow language learner to help out by telling such stories to a bilingual LRP in whatever other language she knows. You can return the favour by telling the bilingual LRP stories which she can retell to your fellow language learner in the same way.

When your fellow language learner has told this bilingual LRP the story of *Goldilocks*, or *Little Red Riding Hood*, or *The Three Pigs*, the LRP doesn't need to let you know which story it is. When the LRP begins telling you the story in your new language, you will get to guess which story it is. Likewise when you have told the bilingual LRP a story for retelling to your fellow language learner, you can sit and observe as s/he attempts to identify the story.

There won't be a large number of stories that are as familiar as Goldilocks, but you can easily familiarize yourself with a number of simple stories from children's books or other sources which can be used for this purpose. On one occasion my LRP was familiar with Bible stories, as were my co-learner and I, and he used this technique with us. This allowed for some very lengthy stories, such as the Old Testament story of Joseph. (If a modern idiomatic translation of the Bible or any other familiar book exists in the language you are learning, you will find that regular reading provides a good source of comprehensible input, and you can also have someone read such material aloud into a tape recorder for you to listen to privately.)

Such stories are a good means of getting started in understanding long sequences of connected sentences. In addition to fairy stories and stories from long ago, recent events in the community or in the world may be well known to both your LRP and you. Also, you and your LRP can engage in various activities together. For example, you might attend some spectators' event, or a wedding, or go planting or hunting together, or make a trip to the market, or to the big city, or to some special attraction in the big city. Afterward you can get your LRP to tell a fellow language learner, in great detail, all that you and she did together. This may not be all that comprehensible to your fellow language learner, but it will be great comprehensible input for you. Since you are well aware of everything you did together, what she says

will be predictable enough to make it good Stage II input.

A well-known language learning method dating from the nineteenth century will be most fruitful during Stage II, since it provides predictable spoken input. This is the Series Method. It can be used for practicing speaking or comprehension, but my main focus at this point is on comprehension. Have your LRP provide you with comprehensible input by telling you in great detail each step in many familiar processes and activities. Such a sequence of details, or steps in an activity or process, is called a series. Consider the example of washing one's hands. How do you do it? First you turn on the cold water tap. Then, you turn on the hot water tap while feeling the water. If it gets too hot, you turn down the hot water or turn up the cold water. Then you hold your hands in the running water. When your hands are wet, you pick up the soap. You rub the soap all over both hands. Suds form on your hands. You put the soap back down. You then rub your hands all over each other, briskly. Then you rinse the soap off your hands. You pick up the towel. You rub the towel briskly over both hands. Then you hang the towel back up.

Another example might be all the steps in making a pot of tea. Moran (1990) provides a sequence of pictures for this particular series, which may help to prime your LRP. However, it seems likely that you could come up with a lot more steps in the process than are illustrated there. The same is true of Romijn and Seely (1988), which provides series-like sequences for use with Total Physical Response; that is, the language learner is actually supposed to act out the series, as each instruction is given by the LRP. If you have a hard time coming up with ideas for series, keep a running list of everything you do throughout an entire day. You will end up with enough ideas for series to keep you going for awhile. For additional ideas, take a walk, and make notes of the human activities that you observe. Some of them will be familiar to you, being similar to activities in your own culture, and others will be unfamiliar. It is the familiar ones that are most useful to you at this point, since they are predictable to you. The unfamiliar ones are more appropriate at Stage III when you will work at becoming familiar with new topics.

If you put a little thought into it, you can use the series method in a variety of ways. To use the example of washing hands, you can have the LRP simply tell you how she does it in general: "First I turn on the cold water tap. Then, I turn on the hot water tap...". But you can also have her do it right while she performs the activities (or mimes them), "I am turning on the cold water tap. Now, I am turning on the hot water tap...". Or you can have her tell you how she is later going to wash her hands before eating: "First I will turn on the cold water tap. Then, I will turn on the hot water tap...". And you can use various complicated patterns: "First I turn on the cold water tap. After I have turned on the cold water tap, I turn on the hot water tap. After I have turned on the hot water tap, I pick up the soap. After I have picked up the soap...". Get all the mileage you can out of this method in terms of increasing your ability to understand specific types of sentences. What those sentence patterns will be will depend on which language you are learning. But as a new pattern comes to your attention, the Series Method will sometimes provide a means of exposing yourself to a lot of comprehensible input which highlights that pattern.

Recall that you are tape-recording all of this comprehensible input. That way you can listen to it numerous times. There is another important use of these tapes. They will contain a lot of new vocabulary. You can go through them with your LRP and spot each new vocabulary item in context. As you do this, make a second tape—a vocabulary tape. In the vocabulary tape, the LRP first says the vocabulary item, and then repeats the entire sentence in which it occurred, and then says the isolated vocabulary item again. If you are a full-time language learner, and your sessions with your LRP (or LRPs) are two hours long or longer, you may be able to add twenty-five or thirty new vocabulary items to this tape every day. You can privately listen to the new items of the day several times, along with some review items. You may be surprised how easily you learn the new vocabulary and how well you

retain it. The LRP may need to choose some basic form of a vocabulary item to use when saying the word in isolation. For verbs, this might be an infinitive form (*to slurp*) or a first person singular form (*I slurp*) or a third person singular form (*s/he slurps*), or perhaps the imperative form (*Slurp!*). For nouns it might be the third person singular form that is used when the noun functions as the subject of a sentence, as does the word *alligator* in the sentence *Two alligators chased my cat away from the bank*. In this case, the tape would go as follows: “Alligator. (Pause) Two alligators chased my cat away from the bank. (Pause) Alligator.” If finding the right form of the word to use in isolation gets confusing, then the LRP can simply use whatever form of the word occurs in the sentence. Note that there is no translation of the new vocabulary item (that is, of *alligator*). Having the full sentence with the new item in context will be enough to remind you of the meaning, and you will be reinforcing the item in your memory as a part of the new language, rather than as a translation of some English word.

In addition to the types of relatively predictable speech I’ve been discussing, there will be other sources of comprehensible input during Stage II. Conversational interaction, both with your LRP during language sessions, and with friends in general, will be a major source, so in the next section, when we talk about extemporaneous speaking in Stage II, we’ll still be talking about comprehensible input. If you are learning a major world language you might consider watching a movie which has been dubbed from English into that language. First watch the movie in English. Then watch it in the other language. (I’m assuming you can rent the videos.) You may find that the speech in the movie becomes increasingly comprehensible with repeated viewings. (Movies with printed captions are a poor substitute.)

For some languages there may be commercially prepared tapes which were intended for Stage I language learners. In general, these are more appropriate as comprehensible input for Stage II language learners! When I was learning Urdu, I was given a tape with perhaps a hundred “useful expressions” that was intended to be memorized. Memorizing all of that would have eaten up a lot of the time I had available during Stage I for actually learning to comprehend, and to a lesser extent, to creatively speak, my new language. At Stage II it was easy to listen to the tape, understanding what I was hearing. At that point many of the forms of expression were easily absorbed and naturally used. For many languages there are a variety of commercially prepared tapes, either designed for travelers, or designed to accompany text books. You can use these as additional sources of comprehensible input during Stage II. It may be that the variety of language used in such tapes is overly formal, and not what is used for everyday purposes. Why not listen to such materials together with your LRP and discuss them (in the new language, of course)?

### **Chapter 3.1.2. Getting your tongue loose in stage II**

[Keywords: communication situations, communication strategies, extemporaneous communication, production, reverse role-play, role-playing, stages of language acquisition]

During Stage I, your ability to speak the language was extremely limited. During Stage II you will reach the point where, by using communication strategies, you can usually succeed in getting your point across to a sympathetic friend. At the end of Stage I, you felt like you did not have a lot of freedom in communication. By the end of Stage II you will feel that you do have a lot of freedom. This change will come as a result of extensive efforts at extemporaneous speaking.

You know many hundreds of the most important vocabulary items, and you are familiar with a wide range of basic sentence patterns. Yet it is a struggle for you to say very much. Here is an exercise. Think of one of the most interesting events from your childhood. It must be one that you have not yet related to anyone in your new language. Find a sympathetic listener. Your best choice would be your regular LRP

during your regular language session. Inform her that you are going to tell her a story from your childhood, and that you will absolutely refuse to revert to English (or any other language that you both know well) for even a single word. It is important that you do no advance planning or preparation. Don't spend several days imagining how you will express yourself. You should do this absolutely cold. As you tell the story, make a tape recording of yourself talking. Don't listen to that tape recording, but store it in a safe place.

Done? If you are at the beginning of Stage II, you probably found the experience stretching, to say the least. Now forget about that story. Don't try to tell it again to anyone for a few weeks. Then, as you are getting into Stage III, tell this same story to someone else, again taping it. Now compare the new tape with the earlier one. You will notice that your tongue has really loosened up. How did it loosen up? Through lots and lots of extemporaneous communication.

So what you need are activities that will keep you talking. Telling stories from your own past is one good way to do a lot of talking. You may think you have nothing interesting to tell, but you should nevertheless have plenty to tell. You might start by thinking through your whole life story to date. Spend an hour or so making lots of notes. You may find that you will have enough to keep you talking for several language sessions. Whenever you engage in conversational practice with your LRP you should tape record it. I have found that a stereo tape recorder which accepts two microphones is useful for this. Lapel microphones work well, since they stay relatively close to the sound source without being a distraction. Tell your LRP that you want to learn to talk all about your previous life experiences, and also to learn about hers. You can give your family's background, and talk about your earliest memories, describing the setting, and the general details of your early life. As you get stuck, your LRP will attempt to help you. It is good if you don't break into English (or any other language that you both know well) at these points. Rather, you can come back to them afterwards. You and your LRP can listen to those parts of the tape. If she is bilingual, you can tell her, say in English, what you were trying to say, or wanted to say in her language. She can then tell you how you might have said it. You can tape all of this discussion. It shouldn't be too long before you are consistently able to negotiate the desired meaning without resorting to another language. Early on, you may find this helpful at times. But it is better if you do it after you have finished the story, so that you have the experience of extended extemporaneous speaking without reverting to another language.

At the spots where you did have difficulty getting your point across, you need to identify the nature of the problem. If the problem was that you lacked the necessary vocabulary, have the LRP record the relevant word or idiom on your vocabulary tape in the manner described earlier: first she says the vocabulary item in isolation, then she says the whole sentence which contains the item, then she says the item again. You can record this right onto the tape of your language session and later dub it onto your ever growing vocabulary tape. (I find that I use at least two tape recorders for all the things that I do with tapes, usually a small stereo one for making tapes, and listening to them as I travel about, and a larger double cassette for dubbing, and listening to tapes at home.)

Getting back to your trouble spot, the problem may not have been related to vocabulary. It might have resulted from your not knowing a particular sentence form. Then you can create a communication situation in which you can hear that form over and over as comprehensible input. For example, suppose you needed to be able to express the idea of *one person making another person do something*. You might have your LRP talk about many situations where one person makes another person do things: school teachers make children read aloud; traffic police make people stop; parents make children be quiet in church; the government makes people pay taxes; etc. After she has come up with many examples, you might come up with many more of your own, attempting to formulate your own sentences.

In the case of some sentence patterns, the Series Method will provide a ready-made means of emphasizing the detail that you wish to focus on. In the discussion above I showed how it can be used to provide a lot of repetition of a particular sentence pattern.

As you cover various phases and details of your life, you can encourage your LRP to share similarly. Much of what she says may be a challenge for you to understand, but you can replay those parts of the tape to her. Rather than simply asking, “What does that mean?”, why not attempt to explain to her, in the new language, of course, what you think she might have meant, and let her correct you, also in the new language.

Another important source of ideas for discussion in the language is your day to day life while you are learning the language. It is a good idea each day to tell your LRP or someone else everything you did the day before. Tape record your account, and then go over the tape with your LRP or friend. Stop at spots where you had difficulty, and decide whether the difficulty was due to a lack of vocabulary, or sentence patterns, and then handle the problem area in the ways already suggested. You might get your LRP to also give an account of her previous day’s activities, and go over that with her.

Remember, it is a good idea if you follow up on whatever you converse about with your LRP by conversing about the same thing with a few friends whom you visit or who visit you. Remember, if you are a full-time language learner, such social visiting should be viewed as part of your ordinary work day. If you have been working at developing relationships, there should be a small number of people who know you well enough that they can communicate with you successfully. As I say, there is a big advantage to communicating with familiar people as opposed to strangers. You will be more relaxed with them, which will make it much easier for you to process and respond to what they are saying. And they will have a good feel for your current level of ability, and will therefore be able to communicate with you at a level that you can handle. Whereas much of what a stranger attempts to say to you initially may be unintelligible to you, your good friends will be able to rattle on and on to you in language that you can understand. It is not that they will speak at the same level that you do. Rather they will speak at a level at which you can comprehend, which will be beyond the level you speak at. As you are exposed to speech which is beyond your current speaking ability, but within reach of your current comprehension ability, you will be receiving precisely the level of comprehensible input that you need for your speaking ability to continue to grow beyond its present state.

Part of your learning should be related to your specific needs list, as discussed above at some length. These needs may be framed in terms of topics you need to be able to discuss, or in terms of real life situations in which you need to be able to communicate. If a need is stated in terms of a topic, you can use an approach similar to the one I suggested for telling stories from your life. Suppose you want to be able to discuss child care. Make some notes (in English) on the topic of child care. Then attempt to talk about child care to your LRP. You might discuss the topic of child care as it is carried out within your own culture, and ask your LRP for reactions from the standpoint of her culture, tape recording the entire interchange. Then go over the tape, and focus on places where you had trouble communicating in either direction. If the communication problem was due to your lack of vocabulary or sentence patterns, you might focus on these. If the communication problem was caused by your lack of knowledge of this aspect of the culture, then you will want to discuss this area of the culture (in the local language) at some length. Now, having discussed this topic thoroughly with your LRP, you are in a better position to discuss it with friends while on social visits. By the time you have discussed the topic of child care with four or five friends, you should find that your ability to discuss this particular topic has improved markedly.

Others of the needs in your needs list will be stated in terms of situations in which you need to

communicate, such as “responding to a proposal of marriage”. For starters, there is much to be gained from treating these situations as topics, that is, learning to talk *about* these situations and talking about them extensively with a number of people. Another good technique for learning to communicate in specific situations is role-play. In any communication situation there are at least two roles: the role you have, and the role of the person with whom you interact. For example, your role might be that of a bank customer, and the other person’s role might be that of a bank teller. Now you want to learn to talk like a bank customer, not like a bank teller. Therefore, in role-play, you should take the role of the bank teller.

“Just a minute”, you say. “How will I learn to talk like a bank customer if I take the role of a bank teller?” Well, how else do you expect to learn? If you start out by taking the role of bank customer, assuming you are doing this because you don’t yet know how to talk like a bank customer, you won’t know how to talk. True, you don’t know how to talk like a teller either, but that is less important, since that is not what you mainly want to learn. But as you play the role of teller, your LRP or friend will talk to you in the role of a customer. Now you will hear how a customer talks, and even make a tape of it. Of course, you may foul things up by not behaving like a proper bank teller. But now that you have some idea of what a customer says, you can trade roles, and get some idea of what a teller actually says. Then switch back, and have a somewhat more authentic role-play in which you hear a better example of what a customer says, which is what you mainly want to learn. You do also want to learn the sorts of things you might expect the teller to say, since that will make it easier for you to understand the teller in real life. You can repeat this role-play with a number of friends. It is good if you can record any role-play with a number of people, since you want to get a general idea of how to talk in a given role, and what you will have to respond to, rather than just memorizing a single example of how somebody did it during a single role-play. You can listen to the tapes many times.

One special type of role-play is called Strategic Interaction (see Di Pietro 1987). In Strategic Interaction, each role-play is centered around what Di Pietro calls a scenario. In a scenario, there is some complicating factor which demands creative communication. For example, in the case of the bank customer and teller, the bank teller might be given a record of the customer’s account which says that it is overdrawn, and the customer is given a play bank book which shows that there is still a healthy balance. The two records could differ in terms of both deposits and withdrawals. The problem might be that there are two account holders with the same name, but different account numbers, and the teller is unknowingly looking at the account record of the other person. The account number is conspicuous enough that it will eventually be noticed by either the customer or the teller. Through spoken interaction they would first become entangled in the problem and eventually find the solution. Obviously, this would require the help of a third party (such as a fellow language learner) who would invent the scenario so that the nature of the complicating factor would be unknown to the participants. An excellent approach to any type of role-play is to first observe pairs or groups of native speakers performing the role-play before you attempt to do so yourself. This should be especially productive in the case of Strategic Interaction.

An excellent way to find weaknesses in your general speaking ability is to attempt to do on-the-spot oral translation of written material. This prevents you from using avoidance strategies, forcing you, rather, to develop new areas of language ability. A wide variety of printed material can be used for this purpose. In Pakistan we found a book that contained a number of first person accounts of people’s daily work. Each account was two or three pages long. They were written in English, but the subject matter dealt entirely with life in Pakistan. The idea of this technique is not to translate simultaneously while reading. Rather, you read several sentences which form a natural unit, perhaps a paragraph. When you have grasped this whole unit, look away from the printed material, and tell your LRP or friend what you have just read. You may prefer to think of this as *retelling* rather than translating. But you are reading the

material in a language that you know well, and retelling it in the language that you are learning. In the book about people's daily work in Pakistan, there was one account of a fisherman. At one point the fisherman says that the fish are either sold by weight, or at auction. Consider the phrases *by weight* and *at auction*. Both of these could be a challenge to a Stage II language learner. The language learner may initially get the meaning across using achievement strategies. That is, s/he may give descriptions or examples of what s/he means, expressing the ideas in roundabout ways (try it). S/he would then ask the LRP for the correct way to express these meanings. The advantage of translating is that it forces the learner to relinquish control over what s/he is going to say, and to break new ground when the need arises. Otherwise, s/he can get into the habit of staying in comfortable, familiar territory. Being forced to express every meaning on the page that is translated can be a helpful, stretching experience. This technique is appropriate once you are well into Stage II, and in Stage III.

Apart from such focused communication activities, a good part of your speaking efforts will occur in uncontrolled social situations where you have to attempt to cope with whatever comes your way as the need arises. Your ultimate goal is to be able to do just that, easily, and in any situation. However, by employing somewhat structured and focused communication activities with an LRP as a means of improving your ability, you will find that you can progress more quickly than if you leave your communication experiences entirely to the whims of fortune.

### **Chapter 3.1.3. Keeping organized during stage II**

[Keywords: comprehensible text corpus, language sessions, planning]

It should be obvious that you need to spend a reasonable amount of time in preparing for your daily sessions with your LRP, and you may also want to put some thought and preparation into your informal social visiting as well. Your ideas for your next day's session will partly emerge as you go over what you did in today's session, and you can supplement this with ideas from your needs list. All of this planning would occur during your private language learning time, which might consume two hours altogether, during which time you will also engage in various other private activities, as I have discussed. Then you might spend two hours working with your LRP, and two hours in social visiting. You can spend additional time listening to comprehensible tapes while you are washing dishes, showering, cycling, skiing, or sleeping. And hopefully, you will be keeping your journal up to date, recording your daily experiences as a language learner and participant observer in the new culture. Make special notes of times of tension or conflict, and of times of communication difficulty or communication breakdown. You may also think of things to add to your needs list while writing in your journal.

The use of your tape recordings brings me back to your concern for massive comprehensible input. As you listen to tape recordings of your language session, it is good if you use a double cassette to dub important bits of the session onto another tape. Periodically, say once a month, you can dub samples of your own speech onto another tape in order to observe the improvement in your performance. Every day you will want to dub key portions of the speech of your LRP or other native speakers onto a more condensed tape. For example, every time your LRP uses the Series Method and tells you all the minute steps in some common activity, you will add this your condensed tape. In general, any stretches of speech by your LRP or other native speaker which contain new content, and which you can understand, should be added. If there are stretches that you cannot understand, you can dub these onto yet another tape, and later go over them with your LRP.

Going over difficult segments will provide the basis for a lot of extemporaneous conversational practice in subsequent sessions. With the help of your LRP, you will come to understand these difficult segments,

and will then be able to add them to the collection of material that you can comprehend. The collection of taped material that you can comprehend is what I have elsewhere called a “comprehensible corpus” (Thomson 1992). The term *corpus* is used by linguists to describe their entire collection of speech samples for a language they have studied. Your comprehensible corpus is an ever growing collection of taped speech segments with which you become familiar by discussing them with your LRP as necessary, and by repeatedly listening to them. By the end of your full-time language learning period, you may have a comprehensible corpus of forty or fifty hours. Being familiar with such a large sample of speech will contribute to your general feel for the language. This general feel for the language will be the basis for continued progress in your ability to speak it yourself.

#### **Chapter 3.1.4. Principle III during stage II: getting to know the people who speak the language you are learning**

[Keywords: social visiting]

Most of the activities discussed so far contribute to your getting to know the people who speak the language you are learning. Take the Series Method. On one occasion I wanted a Pakistani man to demonstrate the Series Method to a group of people, using his village language, which we had all been learning for a few days. In order to give him the basic idea of the Series Method, I ran through a series in Urdu. It involved making tea, and I had all of the ingredients and the pot there with me to use as props as I spoke. After I had gone through all of the steps in making tea, describing what I was doing right as I did it, I asked this man if he would now do the same thing using his village language. To my chagrin, he responded, “Is it O.K. if I make the tea the way we do it here in Pakistan?” I then saw the steps I *should* have followed. Thus the Series Method led me into sharing this area of human experience with Pakistanis in general.

Or consider the use of familiar stories like Little Red Riding Hood. These may not tell you a lot about how local people think. However, after hearing the version which you already know, you might ask the speaker to retell the story in a localized version, as though the events of the story had occurred in that part of the world, within that culture. This may be necessary even at the first telling in some cases. For example, I found the story of the three little pigs in a published Urdu booklet, but the pigs had been changed to rabbits, since most Muslims are uncomfortable talking about pigs. (The pictures were still pictures of pigs, but in the written story they were always referred to as rabbits!)

As your LRP or friends tell you of familiar recent events, or of activities you have shared together, you will begin learning to see local events through local eyes. And as you relate your past life experiences to the life experiences of your LRP and friends, or discuss topics such as child care, or whatever, you will be expanding your awareness of the world in which your new language is used. Role-play will further contribute to your learning the language as a vehicle of local thought and life, rooted in local experience.

##### **Chapter 3.1.4.1. Focusing on Social Skills**

[Keywords: culture shock, interactional skills, journaling, role-playing]

During your daily journal writing or at other times of reflection, you will be making note of times when you experienced interpersonal tension, discomfort, or conflict. These are part of a universal phenomenon among language learners who are living in the second language community: culture shock. Furnham and Bochner (1986) are leading experts on this topic. They observe that culture shock is often discussed as if it were some sort of mental illness, or, in their words, an intrapsychic pathology. They

argue that the source of culture shock is not inside the individual. Rather it lies in what happens between people. It is not intrapsychic in origin, but interpersonal. The key to overcoming it, in their view, is to discover the interpersonal causes. The interpersonal causes of culture shock can be understood in terms of specific *social skills* which you need for functioning in the new society, but have not yet acquired. Social skills are the skills you need for behaving appropriately in interpersonal interactions. Furnham and Bochner believe that to some extent, social skills can be consciously learned and practiced.

For example, there may be specific social skills related to warding off flirtatious advances. You lack these skills, since you did not grow up in this culture. But you can learn them through role-play. In reflecting on times of interpersonal tension, discomfort or conflict, you want to be especially concerned with *recurring* causes of interpersonal stress. The fact that a problem frequently recurs is a dead giveaway to the fact that you are lacking a social skill. You can learn a lot about the problem area simply by discussing it with a variety of people and learning their perspective on the situation. But you can also work on developing the specific skill through role-play. In this application of role-play, you might perform in a given role in the manner you typically do in real life. Your LRP can thus see how you approach it. Then your LRP can show you how she would handle the situation. Finally, you can perform the role-play using the LRP's approach. Bear in mind that in any culture, different individuals have different levels of social skills. At this point, however, even people with relatively poor social skills probably have better ones in that society than you do.

#### **Chapter 3.1.4.2. Conversational-interactive skills**

[Keywords: conversation, interactive skills]

There are certain social skills which are involved in carrying on a conversation. These differ from one culture to the next. For example, in an English conversation, there are a variety of ways the current speaker can continue to "hold the floor", and a variety of ways the current speaker can give up the floor. To use a simple example, if the speaker says, "Do you know what happened next?" it means that s/he will continue to hold the floor, though you may insert a quick "Mm-hmm", or some other appropriate word or phrase, while earnestly shaking your head. On the other hand, if the speaker says, "What would you have done in that situation?" the effect is to relinquish the floor to the listener, who then becomes the speaker. One way to give up the floor is to simply fall silent. But how long does the speaker need to remain silent before the listener is free to start talking? That depends entirely on the language and the culture. And there will be some way to hold the floor while you grope for words. Languages have what are called *hesitation devices*, such as the ubiquitous English "uh". These can be most helpful to the language learner! Languages and cultures will differ with regard to the acceptability of interrupting, or talking while the other person is still talking, and each language and culture will have its own ways of interrupting. You will notice that the listeners in a conversation follow social rules. Rather than sit there looking dead, the listeners will respond in various ways, either with words or other vocal sounds, or with non-verbal communication such as head movement and facial expressions, or with both verbal and non-verbal communication. An example occurred above when the listener said, "Mm-hmm."

Like other aspects of language and culture, you can learn a certain amount about the rules for conversational interaction by careful observation. However, again as with other aspects of language and culture, you will acquire a large amount subconsciously through massive exposure to people who are conducting conversational interactions.

#### **Chapter 3.1.5. Focusing on special aspects of the language**

[Keywords: accuracy, drills, grammar, paradigms (grammatical), passive voice, tenses]

If you're at all like me, you probably keep wondering when I will get around to talking about learning the *grammar* of the language, and improving the accuracy with which you speak the language. How do you find your mistakes? How do you overcome them?

Actually, I haven't been ignoring this issue. First of all, I pointed out that the vast majority of grammatical features of the language, and rules for interaction in the language, you will absorb from comprehensible input in your language sessions and real life situations. As you become thoroughly familiar with the language, you will naturally acquire the ability to use the language correctly with respect to countless details. You will not be aware of most of those details. If you are a linguist, you may be aware of a lot of details. But even if you are a linguist, you will acquire far more than you will be aware of, simply by becoming thoroughly familiar with the language, through massive exposure to comprehensible input.

Secondly, I have talked about things you might do when communication is difficult or when it breaks down. This may happen, for example, while you are relating your activities of the previous day to your LRP. In that case the breakdown may occur because you lack certain vocabulary or sentence patterns. Similarly, if you are unable to understand part of what your LRP or friend says to you, it may be because you lack vocabulary or sentence patterns, or it may be because you lack some area of knowledge regarding local life and culture. When the problem involves a sentence pattern that you have not learned, I suggested that you engage in some communication activity that will provide you with a large amount of exposure to that pattern. For example, Carol Orwig recently told me of learning Nugunu, an African language in which there is a special verb tense form that is used for events which occurred on the previous day, as opposed to events further in the past. It was easy for her to get a lot of exposure to this form by getting people to recount their previous day's activities. And it was easy to get a lot of practice using this form by recounting her own previous day's activities.

Most grammatical details will naturally occur with high frequency in specific kinds of speech. With a small amount of ingenuity you should be able to think of a way to engage in communication which will contain a large number of examples of the particular sentence form you wish to focus on. Or you can just make a point of using a particular form even if it is somewhat artificial. For example, one linguist who was learning Japanese spent a half day per week in the home of a Japanese couple. Part of the time they devoted to using English in order to benefit her hosts' language learning, and part of the time they devoted to Japanese, for the benefit of her own language learning. She would sometimes have a particular sentence pattern in mind and try to use it as often as possible. For example, one week she focused on passive sentences in Japanese. So instead of saying, "Someone helped me", she might say, "I was helped". This gave her a lot of practice with the sentence pattern, but it may have led to an unnaturally high incidence of this pattern in her speech, or she may have sometimes used the pattern when it was inappropriate. Nevertheless, it was like a game between her and her hosts, and it contributed to her ability to use difficult sentence patterns. (This story is told in Stevick 1989, chapter 7).

If you don't have a lot of background in grammar, you may find this discussion intimidating. You may not remember what *passive* means. Fortunately, knowing the name of a sentence pattern is not necessary. When communication breaks down because the person speaking to you uses a form you don't understand, or because you need to use a form which you don't know how to use, you can summarize the problem on paper in your own words, or by writing out examples of the sentence pattern. Suppose the sentence causing the difficulty is *I was helped*. You can focus on this pattern without knowing what it is called. Engage your LRP or a friend in communication about times when you, the person you are talking to, and others known to either of you, were helped, as well as times when you or they were hurt, robbed,

tricked, etc., etc. While discussing these things, attempt to use the *I was helped* pattern, that is, avoiding mention of the person who did the helping (or hurting, robbing, tricking, etc.).

A good exercise for you at this point would be to record the speech of someone who doesn't speak English well. Find each place where the person spoke in an unnatural or incorrect way, and design a communication activity which highlights the problem sentence pattern or vocabulary items. You might want to consider using pictures as a conversational aid in some cases. If you go through this exercise, I think you'll get the hang of designing communication activities which highlight particular areas of grammar or vocabulary. You might also consult Thomson (1993a) where I illustrate communication activities which highlight a large variety of possible sentence patterns from the standpoint of learning to comprehend them.

Something else you will want to consider is reading about the grammar of the language, either in textbooks, if there are any, or in linguistic monographs or articles. You may not in general be motivated to read about grammar, but since learning this language seems to dominate your whole life, you may find that such materials are suddenly interesting and rewarding to read. You may not understand all of the technical jargon, but the fact that you already know a lot of the language will help you to figure out the meaning of the jargon from the language examples that are provided as illustrations of what is being described by the jargon! By the way, don't believe everything you read, especially if the writer was not a fluent user of the language for a number of years.

Now you may have the opposite problem. You may love grammar, and feel uncomfortable if you are not trying to consciously think of every aspect of the grammar of the language as you learn it. But remember that in principle that is impossible. And practically speaking, what advantage is there to spending a lot of time thinking about aspects of the grammar that don't cause you any problem? For example, in English the typical word order in a simple sentence is Subject-Verb-Object, as in "John helped Mary" (here the subject is *John*, the verb is *helped* and the object is *Mary*). In Urdu, as in many languages, the typical order is Subject-Object-Verb (as if we said "John Mary helped", meaning that John helped Mary). In observing many native speakers of English who were learning Urdu, I did not see a hint of evidence that anyone had any problem with the basic word order, nor have I seen any evidence that native speakers of Urdu who are learning English have any trouble with the basic English word order in simple sentences. People seem to learn the basic word order pattern effortlessly. So then, it wouldn't be a good use of time to focus on it for several hours. And myriad details of the language you are learning will fall into this category. However, there will be times when you discover that you do not know some sentence pattern that you need in order to express a particular meaning. You can focus on that pattern by using it in communication.

**Note:** [Parenthetical note for linguist readers: Many linguists have told me that they can only learn to use something in speech once they have consciously analyzed it. Since they must know that it is logically impossible to become truly fluent under such a restriction, I take this claim as a hyperbolic way of saying that they find linguistic analysis to be beneficial to their language learning. That is certainly true of me, and I would always encourage someone facing a difficult, previously unstudied language to get some linguistic training. The most important area of analysis for the language learner is probably the obligatory closed class inflectional morphemes marking categories such as tense/aspect/mood, person/number/class agreement, and case. Most linguists will find it helpful to organize forms into paradigms. Still, learning the paradigms and learning to use the morphemes in extemporaneous communication are very different activities.

Now, if any non-linguists are reading this note, please don't start getting nervous. Just go ahead and get your massive comprehensible input, extensive extemporaneous speaking practice, and

knowledge of the people, and you'll learn the language better than many readers who understand expressions such as "obligatory closed class grammatical morphemes", but who ignore these three key principles of language learning.]

People learning English typically have difficulty with the word order that is used in questions. Instead of saying, "Who has John been helping?" they may want to say, "Who John has been helping?" For such people, there may be some benefit in focusing on this sentence pattern. For example, someone learning English could have her LRP ask her hundreds of such questions about photographs which they are jointly viewing, and then the language learner could ask hundreds of these questions of the LRP, as a means of practicing the troublesome sentence pattern in the context of real, extemporaneous communication. But the point is, only put this sort of special effort into grammatical features that you have trouble with. Much of the grammar will come to you automatically, without you worrying about it, or even thinking about it, if you are exposed to massive comprehensible input, and engage in extensive extemporaneous communication.

There used to be a widespread belief that the learner would benefit from drilling in various ways on particular sentence patterns in the abstract, apart from using the patterns meaningfully in communication. The benefits of such pattern drills have been generally called into question. Your goal is not to be able to produce the pattern as an end in itself, but to use it in communication. You can get just as much practice using a pattern in communication as you can manipulating it in a meaningless pattern drill. Also, designers of pattern drills tended to have the students drill on patterns regardless of whether or not they were ones that caused difficulty. In current language courses, such drills are not used nearly as much nor as widely as they once were, since it is recognized that students need to be learning to communicate extemporaneously in the language. When the students' ability to communicate is hindered by their lack of familiarity with a particular sentence pattern, then it is common practice to stop and focus on that pattern. Or if students consistently make certain errors, there may be some focus on the problem. But the more common concern nowadays is to get the students using the language extemporaneously, both as listeners and as speakers.

Closely related to the issue of grammar is the question of whether you should get people to tell you whenever you "make a mistake". There is a near universal belief among language learners that it is desirable to have every error corrected right while they speak. They may tell people, "Please tell me whenever I make a mistake." But does this really make sense? Remember, it is normal to start out speaking very "poorly" and gradually get better and better. How can people correct every mistake? For a long time, unless you only say things that you have memorized, almost everything you say will be a "mistake" in the sense that you will not say it in the best or most natural way. But you'll get better if you keep talking and talking, and keep being exposed to language that is correctly formed, and within the range of what you can currently understand. The widely accepted view today is that you should mainly concentrate on communicating. Concentrate on understanding people, and on getting your point across. If you do that, your speech will improve. But if people really were to correct your every "mistake", you would get very little communicating done, since you would spend most of your time talking about the form of the language, rather than using the language as best you can to convey your desired meaning.

Having said this, I want to nevertheless offer a reasonable approach to discovering weakness and problems in your speech. I say this approach is reasonable because it doesn't take you away from real communication. What you do is communicate something to your LRP and record it as you talk. If you've been following my suggestions above, you'll be doing this anyway. But perhaps once or twice a week you might go over a tape of your own speech with your LRP specifically for the purpose of noting ways in which you might have said things more naturally, more precisely, or with greater grammatical

accuracy. Suppose you have made a recording of yourself telling a story to your LRP. Play it back, a sentence at a time, and each time ask the LRP if she can think of a better way to say that sentence. Often she will have no amendments to suggest. When she does suggest an alteration, write it down in your notebook. The page should be divided into three columns. In the first, write your original sentence as you said it extemporaneously while telling the story. In the second column, write the LRP's improved version. In the third column write out what you perceive your mistake to have been. In the process you will learn new ways to express old meanings. Some of the discoveries will feed into your own speaking ability at once. In other cases, you may wish to design communication activities which emphasize a particular sentence pattern or grammatical element, providing many examples of the pattern or element in comprehensible input, and many opportunities to use it in extemporaneous speaking.

Another point at which you may want to think about the grammatical details of the language is during your daily time(s) of reflection and journal writing. As you listen to tapes of your day's language learning activities, you can write down any new observations you might have about the language. I would encourage you also to be making a simple dictionary into which you can daily add new words that you learn. This will provide you a means of keeping track of your vocabulary growth.

## **Chapter 3.2. Stage III language learning activities**

[Keywords: activities for language learning, advanced learners, fossilization, stages of language acquisition]

That was fast! You're already at Stage III. Imagine how much slower your progress would have been if you had left matters to chance. You might have eventually reached Stage III, and you might not have. You might have developed a certain level of speaking ability, and then become extremely "fluent" in speaking at that low level, without much further improvement. This is called *fossilization*. But you haven't fossilized, because you have followed a strategy for exposing yourself to concentrated comprehensible input, and for getting extensive practice at extemporaneous speaking. If in addition to using powerful strategies during Stage II, you also used powerful and appropriate strategies during Stage I, and assuming the language is of average difficulty, then you'll have only been learning it for three or four months and already you'll have reached Stage III. Stage III is a long stage. You'll be in Stage III for many months.

At all stages, the goals are the same: get massive comprehensible input, engage in extensive extemporaneous speaking, and get to know the people who speak the language you are learning. Achieving these goals gets easier as you go. In Stage I, which may not have lasted all that long (depending on how you went about it), achieving these goals required a lot of ingenuity. Therefore I needed to write at considerable length about Stage I language learning activities in Thomson (1993a), where I also took the reader well into Stage II. The Stage II activities which achieve these same three goals are far simpler, and my discussion of them here is somewhat briefer than my discussion of Stage I activities there. My discussion of the Stage III activities will be similarly brief. This is partly due to the fact that the methods discussed here provide extremely rich comprehensible input and conversational interaction without the sort of semi-artificial "gimmickry" that was needed in Stages I and II. Here in the truest sense, you learn the language by using the language rather than by focusing on the language as such.

### **Chapter 3.2.1. Getting exposure to input on familiar topics**

[Keywords: comprehensible input, context, informal language learning, meaningful]

exposure to language, pictures and picture books]

I have defined the stages in terms of what it takes for your input to be comprehensible. At Stage I, you had difficulty understanding speech that was not clearly supported by pictures, objects or actions. At Stage II, you had difficulty understanding speech unless the content was fairly predictable, or else was carefully and tediously negotiated with a sympathetic native speaker. Now at Stage III, you still have difficulty understanding speech unless you are familiar with the topic, and you hear everything in its full context. You continue to need to negotiate meaning with your conversational partners, but it is not nearly as difficult as it was at the beginning of Stage II. During early Stage II, you relied a lot on a small number of friends who were specially committed to you and knew you well, and were therefore good at communicating with you. Now you can greatly broaden the number of people with whom you can fruitfully negotiate meaning in conversation, since it is no longer such a taxing experience.

Now you need lots of input in which familiar topics are discussed. Suppose you are a physics student, and you have the opportunity to enroll in a physics course dealing with an area of physics that you would like to learn more about. That will give you a lot of comprehensible input on a topic that is already somewhat familiar to you. (You may get a 'C' in the course, but who cares?)

For most languages, taking university courses in the language will not be a possibility, but you may still be able to find people who can talk to you about topics with which you are somewhat familiar. A story that is unknown to you, but drawn from your own cultural background would also qualify as comprehensible input in Stage III. For example, your LRP could learn a story from one of your fellow language learners, or some other friend belonging to your own national background, and then tell you the story in your new language. If you are a church going person, you may find that much of the material in sermons is on topics which are familiar to you.

### **Chapter 3.2.2. Becoming familiar with unfamiliar topics**

[Keywords: stages of language acquisition, vocabulary]

However, there is something far more important than getting people to talk to you on familiar topics. There is a severe limit to how far that can take you. What is more important is for you to increase the number of local topics with which you are familiar. This takes us back to the matter of schemas, and the fact that successful communication depends on a large body of shared knowledge and experience. Recall how your understanding of my traffic ticket anecdote depended on your knowing the general schema of how traffic tickets are given in North America. Each culture has a large number of schemas that are partly or wholly unique to it. Also, there will be schemas which are important in your new culture which were far less important in your original culture. I go many years at a time in Canada without ever attending a wedding, and when I do, it is quickly over. In Pakistan, by contrast, weddings are one of the major social events. They are very elaborate, and the activities associated with engagements and weddings go on for days. Now a Pakistani learning my culture would probably think that s/he needed to quickly learn the general Canadian wedding schema. Of course, it is something s/he needs to learn, but it is far less important than s/he might imagine. A Canadian in Pakistan might likewise under-estimate the importance of learning the wedding schema. In either case, it would be a serious mistake to assume that just because the two cultures both have weddings, the schemas are the same, or even similar.

This obviously brings us back to the Principle III. Learn to know the people whose language you are learning. From here on in, Principle III is in the foreground. During Stage III, as long as you are applying Principle III in a major way, you will be exposing yourself to increasing comprehensible input (Principle I), and engaging in extensive extemporaneous speaking (Principle II) without worrying about

it.

To some extent, you were learning cultural schemas when you used the Series Method. However, your point in using the Series Method was to hear speech that was highly predictable. That assumed that in using the Series Method you concentrated on schemas that were already familiar to you. This puts them into the category of gimmicky, semi-artificial communication activities. The advantage was that it made the content predictable, and hence comprehensible, during Stage II. This enabled you to become familiar with a lot of new vocabulary, and gave you a lot of practice in listening to the language with understanding. But in normal communication, a speaker does not tell the listeners the minutest details of things they already know.

You can now use the Series Method with all kinds of schemas that are unfamiliar to you. Your goal can be to become familiar enough with these series that you can produce them yourself, in your own words. That does not mean that you memorize them. Rather, you may have several people tell you a series, and then you attempt to tell the basic series to several people as best you can. Some of “your own words” will be words that you have acquired in the process of learning the series.

### Chapter 3.2.2.1. Ethnographic interviewing

[Keywords: ethnographic interviewing, interviewing, social situation]

The Series Method brought us to the brink of one of the major Phase III learning activities—ethnographic interviewing. However, ethnographic interviewing is far more like normal everyday communication than the series method is. In authentic communication, it is commonly the case that the speaker has information that the listener lacks, the listener desires the information, and the speaker desires to give the information to the listener. This is often true in ethnographic interviewing. The LRP has information which you lack. You desire this information, and she desires to give it to you. It is still not natural communication in the sense of being exactly like the speech that goes on in conversations between two native speakers. First of all, you are being told things that native speakers would not need to be told, since they already know those things. Second, your LRP is still using careful, simplified speech in talking to you, in order to enable you to understand her more fully and more easily than you would be able to understand her if she spoke to you exactly as she speaks to native speakers.

The word “ethnography”, in its most general meaning, refers to the description of culture. When people speak of ethnographic methods nowadays, they generally have a more specific meaning in mind: coming to understand a culture from within its own frame of reference, through intensive observation and interaction with members of that culture. A professional ethnographer is first of all a skilled observer, noticing, and recording, a myriad of details in a situation which the untrained observer might miss. After making extensive observations of specific events, the ethnographer attempts to understand the cultural system which gives meaning to those specific events. From the standpoint of a member of the culture, how is each event related to other events, and how is each understood in terms of its causes and its purpose? The ethnographer attempts to uncover the organized knowledge system by which members of the culture regulate their behaviour and interaction. The crucial idea here is that the ethnographer seeks the *insider's perspective* on events and relationships within the culture. Can you see why the language learner needs a good deal of this ethnographic spirit? Spradley says that his book on ethnographic interviewing is “in a sense... a set of instructions for learning another language” (Spradley 1980, p. 21)

What you want to do as a language-learner- *cum* -ethnographer is to get people to reveal to you their knowledge of their culture, and to allow you to start seeing their world through their eyes. Often this

will mean getting people to talk about things which they know, but do not often consciously think about. You will need to keep emphasizing to people that you are really ignorant of even the simple details of their lives. Then, as people tell you things that to them are hardly worth mentioning because they are such common knowledge, you should express appreciation, reminding them that you are quite ignorant even of such mundane, common facts of life there.

A challenge you face right off is how to decide which areas of the culture to ask about. You may have already been making a list of social situations, back when you were looking for conversational topics by touring the community. A social situation, in Spradley's terms, can be understood in terms of 1) a place, 2) actors, and 3) activities. (see Spradley 1980, pp 39 to 52) . By a *place* is meant either some specific place, such as the village square, or a type of place, such as a cornfield. People use that place or type of place for a particular purpose or set of purposes. For example, the village square might be used for feasts, and for political speeches. When a place is being used for a purpose, that purpose will be defined by who the *actors*, or participants, are and by what they do. In the case of political speeches, the actors may be the chief, or some other political figure, and the crowd who stand and listen to the speech. The *activities* include the giving of the speech, which will have certain typical characteristics, and they will also include all that the members of the crowd do while listening.

In any culture there will be a large number of social situations. Think of breakfast. What is the *place*? Who are the *actors*? What are the *activities*? Or how about an interchange between a salesperson with a wagon load of goods, and a potential customer at the door of her home? Or how about a woman at the village well? Or how about two women meeting at the village well? The world is filled with social situations. Even a single day of detailed observations should provide you with a long list of social situations that can form the basis for discussion with your LRP and other friends. In addition, in the course of interviewing people, you will learn of many social situations that you have not yet observed. Your aim is always to discuss a specific social situation with people who actually participate in it. They are the ones who are certain to possess the cultural knowledge which underlies successful performance in that social situation.

The interview itself makes extensive use of questions. Spradley (1979), pp85-91, describes thirteen different varieties of questions under the general heading of *descriptive questions*. These fall into five major categories:

1. Grand tour questions
2. Mini-tour questions
3. Example questions
4. Experience questions
5. Native language questions

Native language questions are used to find out how to talk about particular experiences. For example, Spradley wanted to ask tramps in Seattle about the experience of getting arrested, but first he needed to find out their terms for *jail*, and for *getting arrested*. It turned out that a jail was referred to as *the bucket* and being arrested was described as *making the bucket*. Once he knew the correct terms, he was able to ask people to tell him all about making the bucket. Since he was interested in tapping their knowledge of their world and experience, it was important that he use their terms. Only their terms specifically refer to their experience. If he were to simply ask about "getting arrested and going to jail" he might get a lot of information, but he would be working from his own pre-existing frame of reference

rather than from the frame of reference of the tramps.

For you as a language learner, the application of this principle is straightforward. If you want to learn about the experience of using a taxi, you could simply ask about it in some way that is communicatively adequate, perhaps using communication strategies. But why not begin by learning how to ask about using taxis? Then suppose the person you are questioning uses a generic word to describe the person who hires the taxi. The generic word might mean “person” or perhaps “customer”. You should ask if that is the normal word used to describe that person. You may find that there is a more specific word such as *passenger*. Now you will be better able to ask questions about passengers using the language that is normally used in that culture. You can increase the likelihood of getting the normal expressions by asking people to use the term they would use when talking to a normal participant in that culture. Needless to say, your goal is to ask your questions, and hear the responses, entirely in the new language.

Now let’s go back to the first type of question in Spradley’s list: *grand tour questions*. You may have observed a number of social situations in the corn field, including some sort of religious ceremony, the ploughing of the field, and the planting of the corn. A grand tour question dealing with the planting of the corn might have the form, “Could you tell me everything you do during a day of corn planting?” This is what Spradley calls a *typical grand tour question*. It is called *typical* because it is not asking about a specific day’s planting, but rather about a *typical* day’s planting. This is a good starting point, because it helps you to start internalizing the general schema which will serve you as you discuss any specific day of planting. Spradley’s second type of grand tour question deals with a specific instance, and is thus labeled a *specific grand tour question*. You might ask, “Could you tell me everything that you did yesterday as a part of your day’s corn planting?” I find that I get a much fuller answer to a specific grand tour question than to a typical grand tour question. Just the same, dealing first with the answer to a typical grand tour question, and learning the appropriate language for discussing the situation, will improve the likelihood of your understanding a large part of the responses to the specific grand tour questions. Spradley also talks about *guided grand tour questions* and *task-related grand tour questions*. In answering a guided grand tour question, someone might take you to the cornfield, and describe the activities that go on there as you walk about the field together. In the task-related variety, you would ask your friend questions about the activity right as it is being performed.

Perhaps the grandest tour you can ask for is a description of a typical lifetime. Many of the events and stages that are mentioned in a description of a *typical lifetime* will provide ideas for additional grand tour questions. For example, you might hear that a major ceremony occurs when a child is six months old. Such a ceremony would provide the basis for a grand tour question. You could also ask for a specific description of a specific person’s entire life. In most cases, this would involve people telling the story of their own lives. It is good to get such accounts from people of a variety of ages and backgrounds.

In addition to asking about a typical life-time, and a specific life-time, you might ask about a typical year, a typical month or week (if it’s relevant) and a typical day, meaning a day in general, as opposed to a day during planting, a day during harvesting, or a market day. You can also ask for specific tours of such time units.

*Mini-tour* questions arise directly out of grand tour questions. Your common procedure in asking a grand tour question would be to tape record the response and then go over the tape with the person who gave the response. As you go over the recording, you will notice details that could be elaborated on. For example, when a motor-rickshaw driver gave me a grand tour of what he does when he gives a ride to a passenger, he mentioned *starting the rickshaw*. When we went over the recording, I asked how he starts the rickshaw. That was a mini-tour question. By way of response, he told me in some detail the steps he

goes through in starting the rickshaw. Like grand tour questions, mini-tour questions can be typical, specific, guided or task related. For example, I could have asked him to take me to his rickshaw and give me a demonstration, with explanation, as he started the motor. That would have been a task related mini-tour question. In addition to suggesting mini-tour questions, the responses to grand tour questions will also suggest additional grand tour questions.

Like mini-tour questions, *example questions* grow out of the answers to other questions. For instance, in discussing planting corn, your friend might mention poor cornfields, and you could then ask for some examples of poor cornfields. It may turn out that there are a variety of conditions that can make a particular field a poor one.

*Experience questions* involve asking the person to tell an interesting experience. You might ask, “Have you ever had an especially interesting experience planting corn?” It is good if you have worked through some grand tour questions and mini-tour questions on the same topic before asking experience questions. That is because the responses to the grand tour questions and mini tour questions will supply you with cultural schemas which will enable you to comprehend the stories that are told in response to experience questions. My rickshaw driver friend told of a time when a female passenger jumped out of his moving rickshaw without his knowledge because she had doubts about his intentions. This story revealed a number of values that go into defining good rickshaw driving, and also opened up wider cultural issues having to do with interactions between men and women.

There is much more to Spradley’s method than this. Asking descriptive questions is just the first step. The subsequent steps take you more deeply into understanding how members of the society experience the component parts of social situations. Spradley takes you from seeing a mere social situation, that is, actors performing activities in a place, to uncovering a cultural scene, that is, understanding the meanings that members of the culture attach to the actors and activities, and how those actors and activities are related to one another and to other actors and activities. An important concept is the *cultural domain*. You can spot cultural domains within the answers to descriptive questions when the speaker indicates, either explicitly or implicitly, something along the lines of X is a type of Y, or X is a way to do Y. Here you can see that the speaker is assuming a whole category of objects or actions within the culture. For example, in connection with corn-planting, your friend might mention that planting corn on the day someone died can cause bad luck. This might suggest two possible cultural domains: causes of bad luck, and instances of bad luck.

As you spot possible cultural domains, you should try to flesh them out. What are some other things that cause bad luck? You may be able to add to the list by questioning many people. What are some things that happen to people who have bad luck? In addition to noticing possible cultural domains while going over the tape-recorded responses to descriptive questions, you may also notice possibilities through direct observation. Sometimes simply observing complexity is enough to clue you into a cultural domain. If you observed a sweets shop in South Asia, you would notice a considerable variety of sweets. Here is a conspicuous area of knowledge which may be universally shared by members of the culture. What are all those sweets? What meanings are attached to them? You might learn that certain sweets are distributed to neighbors on certain occasions. That could clue you into a cultural domain. This domain might start out as “Occasions when people distribute the sweet called laddu to their neighbors”. Once you get a list of such occasions you can then find a better name for the cultural domain by reading the list of occasions to people and asking people for a cover term that refers to all such occasions. People might respond by saying, “Those are all examples of *times of celebration*.” Once you have the cover term, *times of celebration*, it might prompt people to come up with additional instances of the domain, that is, additional times of celebration, which may go beyond those in which the

sweet call laddu is distributed to neighbors. The distribution of laddu to neighbors might then turn out to be itself one instance of a cultural domain of *ways to celebrate*.

The label for cultural domain might be similar to one of following:

- Ways to do X
- Kinds of X
- Parts of an X
- Stages in doing X
- Places for doing X
- Reasons for X
- Uses of X

A good time to look for possible cultural domains is when you are privately listening to the tape recordings of your interviews. Not all of the possibilities you spot will pay off, but many will. Out the numerous examples of cultural domains that you find, a few will turn out to be particularly fruitful. This was the case when Spradley began learning all the *ways to make a flop* which were generally known to tramps in Seattle. It turned out that there were over a hundred ways to make a flop, and that this knowledge was generally shared by members of the tramp community. When you stumble onto such an extensive cultural domain, you know that you are dealing with an area of major concern within the culture.

For fuller details, and further steps in ethnographic analysis, you will need to refer to Spradley (1979, 1980). I hope I have whetted your appetite for using ethnographic interviewing as a major means of improving your language ability during Stage III. Ethnographic interviewing achieves the goals related to Principles I and II. Many responses to questions will be lengthy, providing comprehensible input at the time, as well as later when you listen to the tapes. You can go over the tapes in detail with the speaker, discussing what she said, and clarifying what needs to be clarified. This will stimulate a large amount of extemporaneous communication. Once you are familiar with a lengthy response to a question, you can attempt to say it in your own words. For example, suppose your LRP has given you a verbal grand tour of a wedding, telling of each event in sequence. After going over the tape, you can rewind it, and then attempt to describe a typical wedding yourself. After each few details that you describe, you can play a little bit more of the tape, and see how close your description is to that of your LRP. You would need to do this with that LRP present, so you would actually have someone to talk to.

In addition to satisfying Principles I and II (comprehensible input and extemporaneous communication), through ethnographic interviewing, you will be getting to know the people on a major scale (Principle III). As you become thoroughly familiar with an ever increasing number of areas of local experience, knowledge and belief, you will be increasing the number of topics that are familiar to you. The result of this will be that when you hear people talking in any context or situation, you will increasingly find that it provides you with additional comprehensible input. Thus eventually you will reach the point where much of what you hear said in the course of your life will directly contribute to your language learning (Stage IV).

### **Chapter 3.2.3. There are so many ways to talk**

[Keywords: comprehensible text corpus, discourse, television, varieties of speech]

I mentioned the lecturer who could speak fluent English when talking about his field of expertise, but whose speech became halting when he began talking about a party he had recently been to. This illustrated the importance of learning to talk about all of the normal topics of everyday life. But there is more involved than learning the appropriate vocabulary and idioms for a particular area of subject matter. People would normally lecture in a form of language that is different from the form in which they would chat about the events of Saturday night's party. Within a single language, there are different forms of language, known as *language varieties*. The fact that you are good at one variety does not mean you are good at them all.

It is often noted that written language is different from spoken language. Some of these differences are related to the fact that a reader has as much time as s/he may desire to process what is on the page, whereas a listener must process speech as rapidly as it is spoken, and attempt to keep up with the speaker. One result of this is that written language may use more complicated sentences. Also, a writer can be much more careful than a speaker, since s/he can slowly edit and revise what she writes. Spoken language, on the other hand, will contain many false starts and incomplete sentences and errors of various types.

But it may be an oversimplification to contrast spoken and written language in this way. Biber (1986) shows that a more basic difference has to do with whether the language used is *highly interactive*, which is more common with conversational speech, or more *carefully edited*, which is more common with writing. But some spoken language is relatively careful, as in the case of a prepared speech, and some written language is somewhat interactive in style, as in the case of a note from a child to a classmate. Another factor that Biber shows to distinguish different varieties of the language has to do with whether the content is abstract or concrete. Abstract language occurs, for example, when someone is proposing reasons for making a particular decision, or giving explanations of why something is the way it is. Concrete language deals with specific things, situations and events in the world. Still another of Biber's factors in determining the general variety of language that is used has to do with whether the speaker is discussing some particular displaced situation, as in the case of a story about something that happened at another time and place, or is talking either about the immediate here and now, or about the world in general.

**Note:** Parenthetical note: I have only dealt with one small aspect of language varieties. Other issues relate to geographical varieties (called *dialects*), male varieties and female varieties (called *genderlects*), and varieties based on the social status of the speaker (called *sociolects*), etc.

Characteristics of language of the type discussed by Biber will show up to different degrees in the different situations in which language is used. For example, a news broadcast will be quite edited, and generally concrete, dealing with specific situations, but it may contain interviews which are more interactive, and excerpts of speeches, which are more abstract. More careful, edited varieties of language, such as lectures, may seem more difficult than simple conversation, in that they involve more complicated sentences, and a larger number of distinct vocabulary items. However, less careful, unedited varieties of language may seem more difficult than careful varieties, in that they involve rapid, slurred speech, and leave the listener or reader to supply a lot of implied information. In the final analysis, different varieties of language bring their own varieties of difficulties with them, and so the key is to learn them all, by exposing yourself to comprehensible input in them all, and getting practice in the extemporaneous, creative use of the ones that are relevant to you. In some cases, as with news broadcasts, you only need to worry about comprehension ability.

You may need to look around you once again, and start making a list of the kinds of language events that occur in the community, and the contexts in which language is used. There may be somewhat different varieties of the language used for conversation between strangers, conversation between friends, conversation in a family, school room teaching, university lectures, sermons, stories by the campfire, stories for small children, telephone conversations, personal letters, business letters, newspapers, etc. You probably shouldn't worry too much about what goes into defining every different variety of language. It will have to do with a variety of features of the language including the choice of words, the used of fixed phrases and sentences, the complexity of sentences and the types of sentences and grammatical constructions. If you are a linguist, you may analyze a lot of these details, but once again, it is impossible to analyze as much as you hope to acquire, so you again must put some faith in the input hypothesis: with lots of exposure to comprehensible speech and writing in all of these different modes and situations, you will develop a feel for what variety of language goes with which situation.

Some of these varieties of language will be less important than others. You should concern yourself with the ones that are part of the shared experience of everyone in the society, and those that relate to your special areas of expertise and work. You will want to expose yourself to respectably large samples of language as used in the different situations. To the extent possible, you should tape record samples of the different varieties of spoken language.

In some cases, as with news broadcasts, that is easy. So why don't I use news broadcasts to illustrate the general strategy for learning a special variety of language. (Unfortunately, in the case of most of the world's languages, there are no news broadcasts.) If there are, and if you have not yet learned to understand them, they may impress you as representing a difficult variety of language. Record a few news broadcasts on tape and go over them with your LRP, in the normal manner. That is, discuss the recordings bit by bit, adding new words and idioms to your vocabulary tape as necessary in the manner suggested earlier, and discussing areas of culture and experience that are new to you. After going over these tapes thoroughly with your LRP, continue to listen to them privately. Once you have processed a few fifteen minute news broadcasts, you will probably find that you can now follow brand new news broadcasts surprisingly well, and can often successfully guess at the meaning of new words. So then, this variety of language turns out to be less difficult than you expected. You may find the same to be true of any variety of language you tackle.

Some varieties of language will be less easy to tape-record than news broadcasts, but it will still be worth the effort. For example, you may want to get the preacher's permission before tape-recording a sermon, and even more so the chief's permission before tape-recording his speech. Your comprehension ability has now reached the point where you can work easily with relatively poor quality recordings. It's not that you no longer care about the quality of the recordings, but you can get by with relatively poor quality ones when that is the best you can do. The hardest language to tape record is possibly the most important variety of language for you to learn. It is what Burling (1982) calls *rapid colloquial styles*. He testifies eloquently to the difficulty language learners can have with ordinary "street speech".

It was relatively easy for me to gain access to formal varieties of Swedish. I learned to read, to understand the news on the radio, and even to understand the relatively formal language of a classroom lecture, but I was often baffled by the language spoken over coffee cups (p. 95).

Burling goes on to suggest that rapid colloquial speech is probably not, in principle, more difficult than other varieties of the language. But the learner needs to tackle this particular variety. The methods I have proposed will work here too. Go over tape recordings with your LRP until you can understand them easily. Collect several hours of such speech, going over it with your LRP as each sample is recorded. Once you have thoroughly gone over a sample, and are familiar with it, listen repeatedly to the tape. In

addition, with this kind of language, as with any other, you need to continue experiencing it in brand new, real-life situations. In some cases the “informal” variety of the language may be essentially a different language from the “formal” variety. This would be the case with German in Switzerland, for example. With most of the world’s languages, the difference between varieties will not be this great.

Granted, it is not easy to tape-record the most informal colloquial speech as used in relaxed chit-chat. And it may not be necessary. But if you find that you have the problem that Burling describes above, it may be worth the effort. You might ask your friends to talk with each other in your home about topics like “my most embarrassing moment,” or “a time when I was in danger of being killed”. With the right topics people will quickly become absorbed in what they are talking about, and forget all about the lapel microphones clipped to their collars. It is also good if you can get two strong minded individuals to interact on a topic with regard to which they hold opposing views. To work on your *speaking* ability, you can yourself participate in such a lively discussion, and later, with the help of your LRP, go over your own performance as captured on tape, and find ways that you might have been more colloquial. You can do the same with other varieties of language that you use, such as lectures, sermons, telephone conversations, personal letters, stories by the campfire, or whatever.

In deciding which varieties of language to specifically work on, you can use your needs list, or your list of language events that occur in the culture, or simply reflect on your life. Is there some particular variety of language that is difficult, and for which you keenly feel your lack? Perhaps it is stories by the campfire. I’ll use this as an example, and you can make appropriate adjustments for your own situation. For example, with you the need might be to understand sermons, or soap operas. But let’s assume that you are concerned with stories told by the campfire. You do fine with rapid colloquial conversational interaction, but you really feel left out when the fireside stories begin. Then tackle fireside stories. They may be quite lengthy at times, so you might want to look for several which are reasonably short. Tape record them, in as natural a setting as possible. If you can’t record them at the fireside, try at least to have a small audience of native speakers, or at least a single native speaker, for the story teller to talk to as you make the recording. Later go over the tapes with your LRP. Each time you fail to understand something, find out why. It may be that you are lacking many of the cultural schemas which the story teller takes for granted. When you find this to be the case, stop and do a grand tour question, or a mini-tour question to help fill in this gap in your knowledge of the culture. Explore any areas of the culture which you need to understand in order to understand the stories. Work with new vocabulary or sentence patterns in the usual manner. Once you can understand most of what is on the tapes, listen to them privately many times.

As you work through tapes with your LRP, and become thoroughly familiar with what is on them, you can add any extended speech samples you record, along with the stories themselves, to your ever growing comprehensible corpus. By the end of Stage III you may have fifty hours of tape recorded speech in this corpus. You can pull any tape off the rack, and play any part of it, and listen with understanding. In Thomson (1992) I suggested that your comprehensible corpus might contain an hour of comprehensible material covering the range of what you learned to comprehend during Stage I. During Stage II you might add another four hours of the types of predictable speech which were typical of Stage II: familiar stories, accounts of recent events known to both you and your LRP, Series Method materials, etc. During Stage III, you might add another forty-five hours of material. That sounds like a lot, but fifteen minutes of material three times a week for ten months equals forty-five hours. Fifteen minutes of material from ethnographic interviewing or other sources such as campfire stories should keep you plenty busy with your LRP for an hour or two. If the language has a writing system, and scribes are relatively inexpensive to hire, you would do well to have a lot of this material transcribed, since the written variety can provide powerful reinforcement of the spoken input. If you are a linguist or

anthropologist, or folklorist, then you will clearly want to have a lot of the material transcribed, so that you can process it in various ways and archive it. As a linguist with an interest in discourse structure, you will want to attempt to collect five or ten hours of speech from people who have a reputation as outstanding speakers, speaking to real audiences of at least one other native speaker, saying things that are important to them, and which they are wanting to say to the particular audience (see Austin Hale's suggestions described in Thomson, 1992).

Friends of mine have gotten much of their comprehensible corpus by having people read written materials aloud onto tape. This way they could first practice reading, and discuss sections which they found incomprehensible, and add to their vocabulary tape, etc., as appropriate, while working on their reading skills. Then the LRP would read the material into a tape recorder. Much of the material was geared toward children's education, making this a good way for the learners to acquire a lot of the widely shared knowledge of the community.

I place a lot of emphasis on working with tapes. Obviously, most language learners in times past, if they succeeded, did so without the help of tapes. And despite my constant reference to them, you should not forget that they are a supplement to your real-life exposure to the language—conversational interaction and involvement in communication events of various types. Most of your “massive comprehensible input” will ultimately come from such real-life experiences. The value of your language sessions and your use of tapes is that they accelerate the rate at which this real-life input becomes comprehensible. But then you need to keep getting the real-life input. That is why, if you are a full-time language learner, you are devoting two hours or more per day to social visiting and other involvement in communication events. In many ways your language sessions and tapes feed into this real life language exposure. For example, if part of your real-life exposure involves listening to sermons, you use your language sessions as a means of improving your ability to understand sermons. And while you are visiting someone socially, or being visited, if you have been doing ethnographic interviewing related to “ways to catch a rabbit”, or “all that goes on in a naming ceremony”, then you attempt to engage in conversation about “ways to catch a rabbit,” or “all that goes on in a naming ceremony”. But your language sessions are not limited to things which will immediately feed into your outside communication experiences. Remember the human navel? You have a huge amount of language to become familiar with in order to be able to cope with the endless variety of unpredictable real-life communication needs that will arise. Your language sessions and tapes, in addition to feeding into specific communication needs which you face in the outside world, also contribute to your general communication ability which you constantly need in the outside world. In any case, in the midst of all of my emphasis on language sessions and tapes, don't lose sight of the fact that the main thing you are concerned about is the outside world, chock full of people communicating in this language in all its varieties.

### **Chapter 3.3. What about Stage IV?**

That naturally brings us to Stage IV. In this stage you are no longer a full-time language learner. Since most of the language you are exposed to in real life is immediately comprehensible to you, your main concern is to be sure that you are exposed to the language in a major way, on an ongoing basis, in real life. This has a lot to do with the choices you make in relation to your lifestyle. Suppose you are now going to work at a desk forty hours per week, and you have two choices. You can rent a plush, spacious, well-furnished, air-conditioned office of the sort commonly rented by the people who held your job before you did. Or alternatively, you can rent a desk in an office shared by a number of local office workers who interact in your new language off and on through the day. Then suppose you need a secretary. You can hire one with excellent English, or you can hire one who finds it much easier to

speaking your new language with you than to speak English with you. And you can choose a residence that isolates you from people, or one in which you cannot avoid interacting with people. When people try to visit you, you can drop whatever you are doing and communicate a clear message of “Right now, you are more important to me than anything else”, or you can communicate an implicit message of “You’re interrupting something important”. Such reactions will be part of what determines whether your visitors are many and frequent, or few and far between.

You may not be an office worker, but whatever you are doing, you will face similar life-style choices. If you choose a work situation, co-workers, a residential situation, and a leisure life which keep you immersed in the language, you will continue to progress in the language, since you’ll continue to receive massive comprehensible input (Principle I), to engage in extensive extemporaneous speaking (Principle II), and to get to know the people who speak the language (Principle III). But you may also become burned out before your time. Therefore, as part of your highly effective lifestyle you need to allow for adequate escapes and retreats. Have a place that you can get away to whenever you feel the need for a little peace and quiet. Have a private place where you can go to work when you must have a few days of uninterrupted, concentrated work. And have some close friends among people from your own cultural background or a similar one. Don’t spend the majority of your time with them, but do spend quality time with them fairly frequently. And when you are with them, don’t fall into the trap of talking negatively about the host society. That can quickly get you feeling down in the dumps. True, there is also a point in talking openly with such friends about your frustrations, and knowing that they won’t condemn you for it. But some people get into the habit of flippantly running down the host society, making it a major topic of conversation, whenever they are with fellow foreigners. If you have really been serious about getting to know the people who speak the language (Principle III), such talk will make you uncomfortable, since it is most often rooted in a deep lack of understanding of the host people where you are living.

I don’t want to give the impression that you will not want to get further help from someone like an LRP during Stage IV. But it will probably be more of an occasional thing rather than full time. Do you want to perfect your speech? You can continue recording yourself as you use the language in communication, and go over the tapes with an LRP. Almost anybody can serve as an LRP at this point. If you find that you are having trouble with a particular aspect of the language, you can devise a communication activity which will allow you to use the problem construction or vocabulary items repeatedly. Finally, you can work on written composition. When writing the language it is much easier to get all of the grammatical details right than when speaking it, since you have all the time you need to think about what you are writing, and you can easily go back and make corrections. So you may want to write compositions of various sorts and go over them with an LRP to discover varieties of errors you may be unaware of. Actually, it is profitable to work on written composition in this way even during earlier stages, especially Stage III. Similarly, you can benefit considerably from reading, especially if there is a large body of literature in the language. As a matter of fact, to a large extent, you become a good writer as a result of massive comprehensible input which you receive as a reader. When you have difficulty understanding portions of written material that you are reading, these can provide the basis for discussions with an LRP.

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## **Chapter 4. Conclusion (Language learning for non-beginners)**

As I said at the outset, all you really need to remember are three key principles:

- Principle I: Expose yourself to massive comprehensible input (possibly including written input).

- Principle II: Engage in extensive extemporaneous speaking (and possibly writing).
- Principle III: Learn to know the people whose language you are learning.

The rest of what I have written was intended to make these principles meaningful. First I explained some of the main thinking behind them. Then I showed concrete ways to put them into practice. One additional principle is important: the best way of putting these three principles into practice will depend on your stage of language learning. In Stage IV, merely listening to a story by the campfire provides you with comprehensible input. In Stage II, the same story would be utterly incomprehensible, mainly just a blur of sound, and therefore it would not qualify as comprehensible input.

You may come up with many of your own approaches and activities which put the three principles into practice. No one will do everything exactly according to my suggestions, and some people may end up using approaches that are very different indeed. However you go about it, if you expose yourself to massive comprehensible input, engage in extensive extemporaneous speaking, and get to know the people whose language you are learning, and if you do these three things persistently enough for a long enough time, you won't do badly. You won't do at all badly. I promise.

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## Endnotes

### 1 (Popup - Popup)

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