

## Six Principles for the Beginning Expat Language Learners

By Aaron G Myers

As an expat language learner, an EFL teacher and now a language coach I have come to see a few important principles that apply to creating an effective and efficient language learning environment in the beginning stages of the language learning journey. These are particularly true for the expat moving into the host country. No matter what road you take to learn the language, applying these few principles at the beginning will help maximize your learning by creating a rich language environment, making the whole process less frustrating and more fun. I suppose this meager list reflects more than anything the reading I have done on the subject as well as my own personal learning style and the systems I have created to learn both Turkish and Spanish. This is by no means an exhaustive list, but for what they are worth, here are my Six Principles for Beginning Language Learners.

### Principle 1: Control the input

Second language acquisition theory tells us that languages are learned through hearing or reading *comprehensible input* - messages that we can understand.<sup>1</sup> It is reasonable to conclude then that the more comprehensible input we receive, the faster and more efficiently a second language can be learned. Input in this sense is any message that you hear or read. It can range from the “way to fast” speech of your new next door neighbor to the signs on the doors of the small market on the corner. But our goal as language learners is not just input, but rather to hear or read *comprehensible input*. And while comprehensible input does not grow on trees, there is much that we as learners can do to make sure and maximize daily opportunities to find it. As you begin the journey of acquiring a second language, this is extremely important as there is little in the real world that you now live that is at first comprehensible input. Every time you step out the door in your first days, very little you hear makes any sense at all. When the first shop owner begins conversing with you, it may indeed just sound like an endless tide of gibberish. So how do learners take control of the input received? The first way to do this is to have good tools. Tools in this sense being activities and exercises that make it possible to create a learning environment giving the learner control over the majority of what is being received as input. Of course there will never be complete control, nor should there be. But there can be far more control than would seem possible. Think of your daily interactions as either controlled - the learner sets the parameters - or uncontrolled - the learner gets whatever comes his or her way. As a beginner then, it is important to set the parameters as much as possible. As command of the language and culture grows, so to will the need to give more and more time to uncontrolled interactions. But in the beginning, control is important and control begins with good tools.

There are many great tools, activities and exercise, that have been designed to be used both with a language helper and in the community. The use of a language

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<sup>1</sup> The idea of comprehensible input comes from Stephen D. Krashen's Language Acquisition Hypothesis and is widely accepted in the field of second language acquisition.

helper is a great way to create dedicated times to receive maximized. A language helper is not a teacher or a tutor. A helper is a native speaker of the language who will patiently speak and speak and speak as you work through activities and exercises that elicit comprehensible input. A helper could be a friend, a neighbor or a college student. They just need to be a native speaker and they just need to be available as often as you want and are able to meet. A few hours a day with a helper will provide more comprehensible input in one week than you might receive in a month with out one. And while there are many activities that can be used with a language helper, there are also many other activities that are designed to be taken out into your community to be used to maximize your time at the market, sipping tea with a store owner or sharing a meal with a neighbor.

While I cannot give an exhaustive list of activities and exercises in this writing, I will offer a few of the better known ways to create opportunities for maximizing comprehensible input. One of the best know and most effective method to use with a language helper is called Total Physical Response (TPR). Created by James Ascher, TPR creates a learning environment that is rich not only in input but also in interaction with the language. There are many great resources about how to use TPR on the internet and in print. Another simple activity that can be used in the community is the Dumb/Smart question. I learned of this method from Dwight Gradin's PILAT training materials<sup>2</sup> which are all found in Peter Pikkert's book, *Field Manual for th LACE Method of Language Learning*<sup>3</sup>. It is a dumb question because you will already know the answer. It is a smart question because it gives the you the opportunity to take control of what you hear, your input. Let me explain the Dumb/Smart question by way of an example. After you get settled in your new community, you one day find the post office. From the post office, you walk around the corner and down the block just a bit and then find a native speaker and say something like, "excuse me, but could you tell me where the post office is?" Now, you know exactly where the post office is so you have stacked the deck in your favor by giving yourself substantial background knowledge. After they explain, thank them and begin to head toward the post office. After the first person is out of sight, head back to the same area and repeat the process with another native speaker. You again will hear the same general directions and will catch a bit more this time than the first. After you go on your way, you may want to write down what you think you hear each time. Repeat this process four or five times and then try it from a different location a bit further away. It is a great way to take fifteen minutes and give yourself several months worth of the "receiving directions" type of input and in this context, it is comprehensible because you already know the answer. The Dumb/Smart

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<sup>2</sup> Dwight Gradin developed the Program in Language Acquisition Techniques (PILAT) training program which is one of the most innovative pre-expat learning programs around. PILAT along with Wheaton College's Institute for Cross Cultural Training (ICCT) are two language learning preparation programs that are without rivals. For most expats however there is very little in the way of getting this kind of excellent training as these programs are both run for Christian workers entering overseas service.

<sup>3</sup> A free download of this book can be found on the Articles Page of The Turkish Listening Library website.

question can be used in countless situations and will maximize opportunities to hear more comprehensible input<sup>4</sup>.

Along with good tools is the need to prepare. My father in law is a farmer and often uses the saying, "An hour in summer is worth two in winter," when encouraging getting things done ahead of time or lamenting time lost. Abraham Lincoln too thought much of preparation saying, "If I were given ten hours to cut down a tree, I would spend the first six sharpening the saw." And so it is with language learning, and especially language learning in the community. Preparation goes a long way to making your time out in the language community more effective, efficient and helps to maximize learning opportunities which you have control over. Too often we drift rather than sail through our language learning journey and much like a child at play are left to the whims of others to dictate the input we receive. A child does learn language quickly, but they have no control over what they hear, or rather, they take no control - they just play. But as adults with cognitive abilities far exceeding those of a child we are able to take control of our input and with a bit of preparation, to vastly increase the amount and quality of input we are receiving. And so it is that controlling the input you receive is both based on having correct tools and activities, but taking the time to plan out how to implement and use those tools. That said, it would be my encouragement that everyone create some sort of system for tracking your daily activities each week so that you are able to think as a language learner and plan accordingly. So, if groceries are needed on Tuesday, Monday evening can be a time to take five to ten extra minutes to think about the aspects of language that you want to learn or work on and to make a plan of how you will do that. Doing so will enable you to get the very most out of every interaction so that you can learn faster, be frustrated less and have more fun. I am not sure who said it, but remember, "the cost of discipline is always less than the pain of regret."

## **Principle 2: Culture learning is indispensable**

It is easy to think of learning a second language as simply learning to speak, listen, write and read the language, but to leave language learning there is to leave out one of the most important pieces to the puzzle - Culture. Learning the words and grammar of the language is not enough. Learners must press in to learn the inner workings of the culture of the language. Language and Culture are inseparable. Knowledge of cultural norms is known as sociolinguistic competence and in many ways has to do with appropriateness. Messing up a grammar construction will often lead to a learner being seen as ignorant. Messing up a cultural norm may leave native speakers thinking the learner is rude, dishonest, two-faced or uncaring<sup>5</sup>. The implications of sociolinguistic mistakes are often far larger than those mistakes in grammar or word choice. Becoming a student of the culture is something that must begin at the start of the language learning process and the responsibility to learn these cultural norms must lie

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<sup>4</sup> For more of these types of learning activities to be used with a language helper or out in the community, visit my blog or youtube site, both found at The Turkish Listening Library.

<sup>5</sup> Broersma, David H. (2004) *Helping Learners Develop Sociolinguistic Competence?* ICCT Coachnotes. Found at: <http://www.wheaton.edu/bgc/icct/>.

with you the learner. Language schools in general do not teach sociolinguistic competence. Text books do not teach sociolinguistic competence. Only time and an observant mind can begin to delve into the realities of each cultures unwritten rules, traditions, mindsets and attitudes. Good language and culture learners must become cultural detectives, observing interactions, taking note of the little things and the big things that make up the full range of a language groups culture<sup>6</sup>.

### **Principle 3: Touch all bases every day**

If language proficiency consists of understanding and using appropriately the skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing, then it is important that our journey toward this goal touches on each of these skills every day. Doing this does much more than just provide practice in each of these areas though. It creates a learning environment that is rich in opportunity to constantly be reviewing and recycling the words, expressions and grammar that we are learning. Too often language learning programs consist of a language school class or a grammar book that covers a lot of ground, but gives very little opportunity for the language to percolate, for our minds to touch again and again the language elements being learned. In this manor, language learning is both sterile, comprised primarily of language elements that have no contextual bearing on our immediate lives and short sited, offering very little in the way of consistent review and reflection. Its a bit like a PE coach who demonstrates a left handed layup once, asks his or her students to complete a few layups on their own and then moves on to other skills. But no one learns to be competent at layups in this manor. There needs to be review and reflection, modeling and emulation and of course practice. Making sure that we are reading, writing, listening and speaking every day is the best way to ensure maximizing the chances to do just this and increase the amount of “touches” our brains make with the language. By way of example, lets say we have been learning about the present tense construction in our new language. Reading children’s books or comic books will most definitely include a lot of the present tense. It will also include many words that we are learning or have learned. Taking some time to journal about the day will allow us to use the present tense again and touch again on the many new words we are beginning to use. Sitting down with a native speaker to correct these journals will ensure that they are grammatically correct even though they will not be “authentic” and give valuable feedback on how the language is used. If these journals are then recorded, they become excellent listening material that once again revisits all the elements that we have been learning. And now is the time to practice speaking, using the now not so unfamiliar present tense. By incorporating all four aspects of language into our daily learning program, the number of “touches” the brain makes with the language is greatly increased by the rich learning environment we have created.

### **Principle 4: Reading is indispensable**

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<sup>6</sup> For suggestions for learning sociolinguistic competence, see David Broersma’s article cited above.

As a former high school English teacher, I am I suppose a bit biased, but reading is just one thing that every language learner who is serious about learning a language well must do and do often. In a book, the learner comes across more input than can be gained from any other source of material. Books can be picked up and put down on your time schedule, they can be easily dropped in a purse or backpack and can be read again and again. Books never run out of batteries, never speak too fast and don't mind being interrupted and asked to repeat something again and again. Books inevitably cover the entire range of a languages grammar, carry the bulk of their message using the languages most used 500 or so words and can meet you at your level every time with just a bit of work. Where to start. The Archie comic book series, which is translated into most major languages, is written at the second grade level even though it is about high school kids. The pictures prime the pump and help make the input comprehensible. Young adult novels, kids serial books like The Baby Sitter Club books , The Hardy Boys, the Goosebumps series and Nancy Drew are all great sources of beginning reading. Find books you loved as a kid. Read all of the Narnia Books or Harry Potter. Read anything really, but read often and choose things you love.<sup>7</sup>

### **Principle 5: Rest increases absorption**

I have not found a lot of research on this and frankly I haven't yet looked. I haven't looked because I have seen how rest has helped me personally and have listened to others who have claimed the same. And who needs hard evidence to be convinced that we need to take a break. But what is 'rest.' For language learners, rest is when we disengage completely from the language we are learning. This is especially important for those of you who are expats living in the country of the language you are learning. For those of you taking a semester long course in an American university - skip to the next principle. If you are living in the language, if the majority of the people you know, see, pass on the street and interact with at the store every day only speak the language you are learning, then you are in need of timely rest. It seems counter intuitive to say we should quit the language completely for a period of time and that this break will actually help us know, understand and use the language better. But I think it is true. I am not exactly sure what happens in our brain, but I see it as a sort of special concoction that is being mixed. We put in a little of this grammar, a shake or two of social expressions, a whole lot of words and a bit of cultural learning too. It is all being mixed around, a great murky mess and when we rest, we take the mixing spoon out of the pot. Suddenly the motion stops and all the particles begin to settle. Slowly everything settles down into its correct spot, the denser grammar on the bottom and the light layer of culture near the top. We let it sit a bit and it all firms up and stays where it is supposed to stay. That is how it has felt for me as unscientific as that all seems. Even at the end of this summer's three month hiatus back to the states, I felt like the rest has done me good. Some things just felt more natural. Now, don't get me wrong, after a break of three months, there were a lot of things I just forgot, especially those newer grammar forms I was working on mastering right before we left. But the break

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<sup>7</sup> For more on the importance of reading and just how to make reading work for you see Stephen Krashen's short, *Foreign Language Education*, published in 1997 by Language Education Associates.

reminded me of the importance of rest. But what is optimal or suggested. I think two weeks per year. Two weeks to let your brain take a vacation from the language and the culture. And not just a break to the beach from formal studies or from the heavy language load that work may require of you, but where you still must engage others in your new language. Optimally, leave the country. Go to the nearest English speaking country. Go to a neighboring country's beaches. Just get out of the language and rest your mind and see what it does for you.

### **Principle 6: Language and Culture learning never end**

I sometimes get the picture when I talk with people that they believe there is an end point in language learning. I hear comments like, "I can't wait until language school is done so I can get on with the real work." or "Once I am at a level 3, then I can quit studying language." I understand the desire to be done, to have arrived with the language, but it is an unhelpful attitude for language learners to have. First of all, this attitude more often than not lowers the bar of achievement for the learner and many learners settle for much less than they really can achieve. Secondly, it reduces an organic, growing and dynamic language learning journey to a simple academic problem to be solved. Finally, it produces false expectations leaving many learners discouraged when they finally get to that mark they set for themselves only to find out they don't yet know enough language to do much more than survive in the country. I think a much better attitude is that of the life long learner. I chose to use the word "journey" when talking about language learning because that is indeed what learning a second language is. I think of the seventh book in the Chronicles of Narnia and the repeated call to the children, "Further up and further in," as they explore Aslan's real kingdom. It is this way that we should position ourselves and our thinking as language learners. There is no end to this journey, just endless learning and exploration. So whether you are in for two years of adventure in your new country or the rest of your life - Never stop exploring!

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