

# Learning to Speak an Unwritten Language

Major Research Paper

by

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## Introduction

By acknowledging general language learning principles and the unique challenges and benefits of learning to understand and speak an unwritten language, a literate mother-tongue<sup>1</sup> speaker of English can anticipate becoming a functioning member of a linguistic community whose language does not have a written form.

*The Ethnologue: Languages of the World* (Gordon, 2005) provides a comprehensive list of all the known living languages in the world (currently 7,299), as well as limited information about these languages, such as existing publications and materials. “Statistics on the number of languages that have a written form are not available. However, the script used for written materials is given if known (Gordon, 2005, p. 13).” “The world currently has no systematic way to collect data on the number of communities which are developing their languages, what stage they have reached, whether existing writing systems are actually used, or whether attempts have been made to develop writing systems that are not in use.”<sup>2</sup> A writing system is defined as the “visual representation of spoken language on paper or other media.”<sup>3</sup> Most of the world’s unwritten languages, those without a writing system, are spoken by relatively small populations in Africa, Asia, the Pacific, and Latin America, but a few groups in Africa and Asia have over one million speakers.<sup>2</sup> These linguistic minorities are often marginalized people groups living in the shadow of major languages or are isolated from urban centres of greater wealth, educational opportunities, and health care. Having a

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<sup>1</sup> The 1996 Canada Census defines mother tongue as the first language a person learned at home in childhood and still understood at the time of the census. (The Atlas of Canada Website). <http://atlas.nrcan.gc.ca/site/english/maps/peopleandsociety/lang/officiallanguages/mothertongueenglish/1>

<sup>2</sup> [http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL\\_ID=28301&URL\\_DO=DO\\_TOPIC&URL\\_SECTION=201.html](http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL_ID=28301&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html)

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.language-archives.org/REC/field-20060406.html>

writing system can help to bring internal and external prestige to a linguistic community, as well as increased opportunities for cultural expression and economic development by improved education and expanded access to knowledge through the mother tongue. A locally endorsed writing system might be considered the minimum criteria for defining a written language. More, however, should be in place to distinguish a written language from an unwritten language, such as dictionaries, personnel and materials to sustain an ongoing literacy program, a growing pool of authors, various kinds of literature, and readers.<sup>4</sup>

UNESCO<sup>5</sup> and SIL International<sup>6</sup> promote the linguistic study of unwritten languages in order to produce linguistically sound materials for mother-tongue literacy programs.<sup>7</sup> This requires that field linguists spend a significant amount of time living within a given language community to learn the local language well. My husband and I look forward to undertaking this endeavour soon among the Mpongmpong people, one of Cameroon's 270 linguistic groups. Most of the 45,000 Mpongmpong speakers live in small villages in the rain forest in the East Province, far from the capitol city of Yaoundé.<sup>8</sup>

Having anticipated this new assignment for several years, I have always assumed that I will be minimally successful in learning the Mpongmpong language, for three reasons: Cameroonian tonal languages with many noun classes are difficult to learn, my age is against

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.sil.org/literacy/faqs.htm>

<sup>5</sup> United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

<sup>6</sup> SIL, originally founded as the "Summer Institute of Linguistics," is now officially registered simply as SIL International.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.sil.org/literacy/lit90/mothtong.htm> p. 1. [UNESCO 1976, 192-193].

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.sil.org/africa/cameroun/index.html>

me, and I am not a gifted language learner – even after years of studying French, I’m still not fluent. This negative prediction reflected a misunderstanding on my part of who can and can’t learn to speak another language; now, however, after doing this literature review, I am approaching the challenge with greater confidence. Researchers in second language acquisition have shown that almost anyone who spends sufficient time and effort in using appropriate strategies can indeed learn a second language (Dickerson, 2000a<sup>9</sup>), including people like myself who’ll be entering a particular language and culture-learning situation.

## **Scenario**

This situation assumes that (1) the learners are living in the target linguistic community whose speakers’ preferred and/or primary mode of communication and learning is oral, (2) the learners have had some training in language learning techniques, (3) they may or may not have a language coach (4) they share a common language with some speakers of the target language, (5) they are mother-tongue speakers of a written language with experience in learning a second written language, (6) and consequently they are used to visual and literate methods of language and culture learning<sup>10</sup>.

## **Advantages and challenges of learning an unwritten language**

This language-learning scenario is characterised by many unique advantages and challenges. To begin with, in talking or writing about the language, one must decide which name and spelling to adopt – a long-established government form, one assigned by outsiders (an anthropologist, a linguist, a neighbouring ethnic group), one taken from a linguistic atlas,

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<sup>9</sup> In many cases throughout this paper it is not possible to cite a page number because the format of the electronic article does not have page numbers. From now on, an asterisk [\*] will indicate when this is the case.

<sup>10</sup> From now on, the phrase “language and culture learning” will be shortened to LACL.

or as in my case, from *The Ethnologue: Languages of the World* (Gordon, 2005). In this edition, the 9,021<sup>11</sup> entries list 24,989 alternate names. One reason a language name may not have a standardized spelling is that, as in the case of Mpongpong, a writing system has not yet been established by the language community.

For literate language learners, whose culture and training naturally engenders a dependence on visual print, the biggest disadvantage to learning an oral language is that dictionaries, grammars, textbooks and laboratory resources are non-existent. “[O]ne of the most effective ways to build a large vocabulary is to read voraciously” (Leaver et al., 2005, p.166), so that will not be an option. Neither will it be possible to continue language learning in solitary situations by reading, which can serve as a break from more demanding oral communication. “[Hearing] word boundaries may be accomplished better, especially if you are a visual learner, by reading a script as you listen to an oral script” (Leaver et al., 2005, p.157). Again, this is not an option when learning a language that does not yet have an established orthography with word breaks already determined. Both reading and writing offer quiet, solitary individually paced activities, but normal speaking and listening activities do not. Languages lacking literature are not languages taught as school subjects, subsequently, formal classes with experienced teachers are unavailable. This means no access to formal classes with experienced teachers who know how to minimize stress and provide initial security by reducing information overload and tempering language input. Experienced language teachers are not available to correct errors, explain rules, and provide graded language practice (Rubin & Thompson, 1994, p. 25). “Displaying good manners is very

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<sup>11</sup> The reason this number is higher than the 7,299 languages cited earlier is that a language name is listed again for each different country in which that language may be spoken.

dependent upon knowing what is considered good manners in your target culture. Your teacher will know, and there are many books dedicated to this topic” (Leaver et al., 2005, p. 191). Again, this statement does not hold true for learners of oral languages.

These disadvantages, however, are offset by many advantages unique to learning an oral language, the biggest being countless opportunities for meaningful authentic communication, something which is often the greatest weakness of formal language-learning classes. While the situation may have improved in recent years, Chastain wrote in 1988 that “each student receives a surprisingly small amount of practice in a language class” ( p. 278). Teachers do two thirds of the talking, choose what is discussed, ask 94% of the questions and rarely give time for students to answer (White and Lightbown, cited by Chastain, 1988 p. 284). In our typical scenario, we can talk and ask as many questions as we like; we can also expect that most people will wait to hear our answers to their genuine questions.

“The learner’s most fundamental resource for learning a new language in its own setting is the mass of individuals who speak it as their mother tongue” (Larson & Smalley, 1972, p. 88). “Grammar books and dictionaries can’t teach you to speak or write a language” (Nida, 1957, p. 39). “The main resources that we need to learn language and culture are “people who speak the language and know their culture, ourselves and our own willingness to learn” (Howell, 1990, p. 18). “If you really want to achieve proficiency, you will expose yourself to the language as much as your circumstances permit” (Leaver et al., 2005, p. 207). This possibility, as well as the motivation to communicate will be greater for us than for students in a typical classroom. Another encouraging reality, despite the lack of trained teachers, is that most people adjust their speech so that foreigners can better understand (Chastain, 1988, p. 200); our focus will also be on real communication rather than on the

grammar of an irrelevant message. Modern LACL<sup>12</sup> classrooms are moving away from a teacher-controlled grammar approach, to a more learner-centered communicative one, something that is for us a daily option (Rubin & Thompson, 1994, p. 24). We can enjoy what university students have wished for: more language-use situations of interest, goals that are not grammar based, less correction of minor grammatical errors, teachers who care about them as people, and more culture study (Chastain, 1988, p. 180).

### **The role of the brain related to language-learning theory**

Neuroscience continues to uphold the theory that learning is an active process involving physical electrical and chemical changes in the brain “by neurons that connect the sensory inputs and motor outputs with centers in the various lobes of the cortex (Freudenrich, 1998-2006<sup>13</sup>, p. 7).” The cortex, one of the major divisions of the brain, also known as the cerebrum, “integrates information from all of the sense organs, initiates motor functions, controls emotions and holds memory and thought processes (Freudenrich, 1998-2006, p. 3).” “Learning by the brain is about making connections within the brain and between the brain and the outside world (Genesee, 2000, p. 1).” This current thinking appears similar to what Chastain wrote about twenty years ago: “The more [scientists] learn about the brain the more their knowledge supports the earlier theories of the cognitive psychologists who hypothesized that learners process comprehended material and store it in chunks of related knowledge” (Chastain, 1988, p. 17). New information is processed and stored in stages, linking it to something familiar already existing in the brain (Chastain, 1988, p. 38).

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<sup>12</sup> Language and culture learning

<sup>13</sup> The website gives a time period, rather than a single year for the copyright date.

Now, there is direct evidence that when learning occurs, neuro-chemical communication between neurons is facilitated, and less input is required to activate established connections over time. New evidence also indicates that learning creates connections between not only adjacent neurons but also between distant neurons, and that connections are made from simple circuits to complex ones and from complex circuits to simple ones (Genesee, 2000, p. 1).

These findings confirm that learning takes time and practise. The more often that certain input connects to formerly activated neural circuits, the less time is needed on subsequent occasions to activate neural networks connected to other places in the brain.

Scientists used to believe that different parts of the brain performed various functions based on the inherent structure of the region. Research now suggests that different regions of the brain perform different functions based on the kinds of input received. The implication for learning is that various parts of the brain should be stimulated simultaneously, creating and activating many neural networks throughout the brain. “When we actively process and organize information, we engage the frontal, temporal, and parietal lobes—thus strengthening the connections among them and enhancing recall (Markus, 2003, p. 5).”

These findings promote a holistic approach to teaching, providing for simple and complex forms of input to the different parts of the brain that register sounds, sights, smells, and tastes. For example, new sounds should be learned within the context of meaningful words and phrases expressed in environmentally rich contexts, as opposed to bits of language being learned in isolation (Genesee, 2000, p. 2). For myself then, learning to talk about Mpongmpong fruits would be more effective by creating learning opportunities which involve hearing and attempting to say meaningful things about fruit, while also handling, smelling and tasting it. “Studies show that combining words and pictures in our heads improves recall and understanding. Moreover, visual memories actually survive longer with

age than language-based memories (Markus, 2003, p. 3).” “To be truly effective, memory has to be linked to meaning and purpose (Markus, 2003, p. 6.)”

This is similar to what Chastain wrote in 1988, that for new information to be stored long term in the brain, it first must be consciously processed and connected in a meaningful way to previously stored categories of information, which are called schemata (Anderson 1980, p. 129 quoted by Chastain, 1988, p. 42). Storage and retrieval is enhanced when incoming data is comprehended, organized in a meaningful way, linked to significant emotion, perceived as purposeful, and efficiently processed with appropriate strategies (Anderson, 1980, Hunt 1982, quoted by Chastain, 1988, p. 42).

LACL can be greatly enhanced by learners consciously applying the best strategies to process new information and by attempting to regulate their emotional states. This implies a controlled effort on the part of the learner that will in turn facilitate the subconscious processing and analysis of the new language system (Claussen, 2001\*). Language students can enhance learning by applying metacognitive knowledge – understanding how learning takes place, and more specifically, by being aware of one’s personal learning abilities, such as reflecting on my own limited ability to recall seemingly insignificant details. Also helpful are metacognitive experiences in which learners are conscious of their own cognitive or affective states, such as recognizing when they are feeling too tired or distressed to absorb anything new (Dickinson, 1987, p. 34).

“Listening is probably the most used language skill. It is not a passive skill, as many people assume. Rather, it is an interactive process of interpretation using knowledge from several sources to make sense of communication” (Claussen, 2001\*). While Chastain also argued that “learning is never passive nor can it be” (1988, p. 38), others have claimed that

“passive listening in large doses is of crucial importance” (Larson & Smalley, 1972, p. 79). Nida described passive listening as the “the absorption of a language without the conscious effort which usually characterizes our attempts at boning, cramming, memorizing, drilling, and mastering a language” (1957, p. 27).

The brain does apparently absorb and process information in a subconscious manner, even while we are sleeping (Rising, 2001a, p. 240). People attest to waking up understanding study material that was hazy or confusing the night before. According to researcher, Reto Huber, “Slow brain waves appear to consolidate and reinforce freshly learnt matter (2004, p. 2).” During sleep, larger, slower brain waves were observed in the area of participants’ brains where specific learning was known to have taken place, “the first evidence that sleep plays an important role in learning processes (Huber, 2004, p. 2).”

Without our conscious cooperation, the brain does seem to register, sort, and classify thousands of impressions. For example, when I first came to Africa ten years ago, everyone looked alike to me. Now, without ever having intentionally studied the physical traits of Cameroonians, I can sometimes tell which part of the country someone is from or to which ethnic group they belong. Subtle impressions have gradually become salient features. This does suggest a possible benefit to exposing oneself to as much aural language as possible even when not listening carefully or giving it full attention. Some people, however, may only be distracted or frustrated by this background noise; another danger is that one may actually be training the ear and brain to tune out language input. Constant passive exposure to speech seems to be a less efficient and effective approach to LACL than engaging the mind with comprehensible input for specified periods of time.

## Adults learning a second language

According to Chomsky, every human has the innate capacity for learning language. (Christophersen, 1973, p. 44). Many people assume that language learning comes quickly, easily and painlessly for children, but is this really so? For adults beginning to learn a second language, it may be interesting to keep in mind that infants are generally immersed in language for about two years before they understand what is being said to them and can start talking intelligibly; prior to this time they have cried a lot in order to communicate the most basic of needs. Adults can probably anticipate greater progress and less discomfort during their first two years of LACL.

Adults may be encouraged to realize that children entering primary school still have limited lexical and semantic competence in their mother tongue, and not until early high school have they finally mastered grammatical rules in speech (Christophersen, 1973, p. 45). General learning of one's first language continues throughout life, and there is no evidence that the learning of a second language is any different in this respect (Christophersen, 1973, p. 48). "Learning a language takes a long time" (Chastain, 1988, p. 247), even for children learning their first language. Adults should bear in mind that learning a first or second language is a complex and difficult task, for younger or older learner alike.

Children may be more successful in acquiring a perfect accent in a second language, but with the help of specialized phonetic instruction, adults too can achieve near perfect pronunciation (Christophersen, 1973, p. 47).

"In important respects adults have superior language learning capabilities" than children (Walsh and Diller, 1978, cited by Schleppegrell, 1987\*). They are better at learning new vocabulary and grammatical structures; they have more highly developed cognitive

strategies, more life experiences, and more schemata or neural networks to which new data can be linked and stored in the brain. Adults may also be highly motivated by their reasons for undertaking LACL later in life, such as to be integrated into a new host culture and/or to accomplish a given task.

The notion that the brain of an older person gradually becomes less capable of supporting second-language learning is unsubstantiated. “Attaining a working ability to communicate in a new language may actually be easier and more rapid for the adult than for the child. If older people remain healthy, their intellectual abilities and skills do not decline” (Ostwald and Williams 1981, quoted by Schleppegrell, 1987\*). A recent study has shown that in vocabulary, spatial orientation, verbal memory, and inductive reasoning, middle-aged adults actually scored higher than younger adults. In this study, the ability of adults between the ages of 53 and 60 was shown to be stable or slightly diminishing (Hale, 2005, p. 1).

What may contribute to the idea that language learning is more difficult the older one gets are external variables linked to aging. Older people may be more set in their ways and already have a strong sense of group affiliation or personal identity, thereby undermining motivation to learn a second language for integrative purposes. Also, adults generally have less time than small children to interact in immersion settings. Coming from cultures that value production, they may succumb to internal or external pressure to quickly get on with whatever prompted the need or desire to learn another language. In addition, negative experiences in the past may cause older learners to become anxious and fearful in new LACL endeavours. They may also be more prone to give up if they have internalized the myth that it is not possible for older learners to succeed in language learning (Hale, 2005, p. 3).

“Although middle-aged adults tend to experience some short-term memory loss, some decline in the ability to retrieve items from the long term memory, and a slowing of processing speed, these losses are gradual and are not severe enough to rule out second language learning (Hale, 2005, p. 2).” Adults can benefit greatly from being able to set the pace for their own learning and from receiving specialized training for developing LACL skills and strategies. “[S]tudies by the National Institute on Aging (NIA), part of the National Institute of Health (NIH), have demonstrated that adult brains may be just as resilient and adaptable as the rest of their bodies, given the necessary resources and proper training. (Markus, 2003, p. 2).” Regular exercise and proper nutrition have also proven effective in counteracting natural aging processes (Markus, 2003, p. 2).

Hearing loss, sleep deprivation and other physical ailments related to aging that could inhibit learning an oral language should be treated whenever possible. For optimal language learning opportunities, background noise should be avoided for those with hearing loss (Hale, 2005, p. 3).

## **Listening first**

In talking about wanting to learn a language, we generally say we want to speak that language, without specifying the implied, that we also want to be able to understand it. This deletion does reflect a tendency to focus too much on speaking, while not paying enough initial attention to the skill needed first, namely listening. “We need to consciously make an effort to keep developing our listening comprehension ahead of our speaking since listening is what we do most in life and the channel through which we learn most” (Kidd, 2002a\*). To reach the primary goal of integration into a new culture, listening and learning is more necessary initially than speaking. Speaking implies, “I have something to tell you, to teach

you.” Listening implies, “You have something to teach me, and I want to learn.” “Not doing things in the right order (listening, speaking, reading, writing), as a child learns, can spoil LACL (Howell, 1990, p. 12).

Learning Mpongpong does seem rather daunting because it is a tonal language with possibly up to 20 noun classes. French, with its two genders, or German, with its three seems hard enough. A consolation, however, is that my ability to understand Mpongpong will be affected much less by its complexity than will be my ability to speak it (Thomson, 2002a\*). I can therefore confidently aim at becoming a very proficient listener, while also working at becoming an intelligible, albeit inaccurate, genuine speaker (Thomson 2002a\*).

Greg Thomson is a firm believer in delayed oral production and in focusing primarily during the first month on learning to *understand* the language. Early speaking is not disallowed, but recommended to be kept minimal, and limited to using only those words that one has first learned to comprehend in speech. “Often learners in informal settings go through a silent period; they just listen to the new language and do not speak until they feel ready” (Rubin & Thompson, 1994, p. 24). Thomson maintains that by first putting a lot of focused attention on listening, within one month a person will have learned to recognize hundreds of words and sentence patterns, which become the foundation for speaking. On the other hand, “While rote memorization has limited value in language learning, it is very important in the mastery of ritualized expressions and short, useful texts at the very beginning (Rubin & Thompson, 1994, p. 142). Thomson’s disclaimer is that this approach does not guarantee being able to comprehend those very same words in the normal speech of native speakers. Secondly, he maintains that one is not ready to comprehend the possible answers or responses, resulting in embarrassing and stressful situations that discourage

further communication attempts (Thomson 2002b\*). I remember pronouncing very well in French the question, “Where is the train station?” The kind pedestrian, assuming I could “speak” French, rattled off instructions that were totally incomprehensible to me.

Thomson maintains that the first most important principle to support language learning is to expose oneself to massive amounts of comprehensible speech. Referring back to the earlier discussion on how the brain works to facilitate learning, new information should be understandable and linked to previously stored data in the brain, which is an active, rather than passive process. One should begin by listening to speech that is visually reinforced with pictures, objects, or actions. One then progresses to understanding sentences that have predictable content, before moving on to everyday speech topics with less predictable content. Eventually one begins learning to understand complex speech that is also unfamiliar. One should systematically work on gaining listening skills at each stage before moving on to the next more difficult stage.

Another practical approach for beginners with non-existent or limited speaking ability is to focus one’s attention on intonation patterns and tone. This necessary step in language learning may actually be easier in the earlier stages before one is even capable of being distracted by meaning. Selective hearing can be practiced by initially listening to just one feature, and then gradually adding others (Healey, 1975\*). Again, this is not a passive listening activity. One starts out by blanking out everything except the tone or intonation of words, phrases or sentences. One can then make line drawings and mimic these contour patterns by humming or whistling. One should continue performing this exercise, with or without taped recordings, in varied contexts to discover intonation patterns for different kinds of speech: for example, normal conversation, narratives, exhortations, arguments, anger,

scolding, excitement, ridicule, baby talk, joking, complaining, and calling out (Healey, 1975\*).

One could also do selective listening and mimicking of unfamiliar or unusual sounds that are heard often, before focusing on particular words or phrases (Healey, 1975\*).

Listening goals can become increasingly detailed, like moving from just getting the gist of a conversation to recognizing main points, to eventually understanding the logic of specific arguments (Claussen, 2001\*).

## **Speaking a lot**

While exposing oneself to incrementally more difficult massive comprehensible input, Thomson's first principle of LACL, one should also apply his second principle, "Engage in extensive extemporaneous speaking" (Thomson 2002c\*). Listening alone will not produce fluent speakers. Immigrant children, myself included, have developed proficient listening skills in their parents' mother tongue, without ever learning to speak the language well. In the same way that one learns to play a piano by practising, the only way one learns to speak a language is by practising speaking. Perfectionist tendencies, such as waiting to speak until one can say a sentence perfectly, will slow down LACL. To be able to eventually speak well, one must start off by speaking badly for some time (Thomson, 2002c\*). Perfect speech is not even a prerequisite among native speakers for learning to speak their mother tongue (Chastain, 1988, p. 278).

Perseverance in speaking, mistakes included, is the only way to improve speaking proficiency, as attested to by many authors. "The learner who can deal freely and openly with his mistakes will most certainly make better progress than the one who is either afraid to speak or unwilling to look at his limitations objectively" (Larson & Smalley, 1972, p. 129).

“When your tongue is good and loose in your new language, you can start worrying about decreasing your errors” (Thomson, 2002a\*). “Most people make many allowances for error – at least in the beginning – so don’t be afraid to try something out while noting reactions” (Rubin & Thompson, 1994, p. 39). “Good language learners make their mistakes work for them” (Dickerson, 2000a\*).

A way to make good use of one’s mistakes in LACL is to try out new words, structures or gestures in different contexts with different kinds of people, while watching for reactions or while specifically asking for feedback (Broersma, 2001a, p. 2.).

Thomson’s third principle for LACL is “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” (Thomson, 2002c\*), which brings us to our next topic.

## **The inseparability of language and culture**

Separate departments of linguistics and anthropology exist in universities to study various topics, including specific languages and cultures, such as French. While such an externally imposed delineation may facilitate research and teaching, the question remains: Can language and culture exist outside of each other? As Thomson seems to suggest in a recent article (2005), language does not exist outside of a given culture, and culture does not exist outside of a given language. The two are one. A single utterance is a series of sounds fitting into grammatical categories and semantic fields; the meaning is further determined by who is speaking, to whom, for what purpose, and in what time, place and manner. I need language, English or French, to even begin thinking or talking about an object or an event in Mpongpong culture. I begin seeing Mpongpong culture through the filter of my Canadian English and culture or through French, a second language and culture. The problem is that I

will be imposing a word and its inherent culturally imposed meaning onto what seems to resemble a closely related object or event. For example, I might learn the Mpongpong word for banana, without ever knowing the Mpongpong concept of banana, which is likely different from my own. The significance of this point is difficult to imagine because the item (banana) and a word to name it exist in both Canadian and Mpongpong culture. The significance is more apparent when a given concept and word do not exist in two different languages. For example, the Dutch word “gezellig” does not have a one-to-one correspondence with a single word in English. A descriptive sentence is needed in English to try get across the idea of the single Dutch word describing a pleasurable feeling derived from being in a particular place, with or without people, which has a certain ambiance. “Cozy” is perhaps the closest translation, but a very poor one, because in situations where a Dutch person would say “gezellig” a Canadian in a similar situation in Canada would not say “cozy.” The point is that a word is not just a word, it is a world. I might learn to pronounce perfectly the Mpongpong word for “banana,” but unless I get into the Mpongpong world, I am not saying the same word that an Mpongpong speaker is hearing or thinking about. Thomson brings out this idea when talking about “languaculture.”

Certain facts lead us to the conclusion that there can be no such separate things as *language* and *culture*: Language-action is governed by shared practices of one's community, just like any other actions; all human action, language or other, is organised like discourse; without our specific bag of language-tools, the world which we create and experience, that is, the stories we live, wouldn't exist. Thus rather than there being separate realities of *language* and *culture*, there are our shared practices, in which the actions involving noises we make with our mouths have an extremely pervasive role. This set of shared practices, organised in discourse-like ways is what Agar (1994) called our *languaculture*. (Thomson, 2005, p. 8.)

This is still a novel approach to talking about language and culture learning, reflecting a continuing progression away from a problem that Chastain described almost

twenty years ago: “The primary goal and dominant focus of attention in most classes continues to be language, to the detriment of achieving desirable cultural objectives” (Chastain, 1988, p. 305). This is characteristic of some older LACL materials that were designed for learning oral languages in order to develop a phonology, an orthography, and a grammar. Larson and Smalley’s book, *Becoming Bilingual: a guide to language learning* (1972), has a particularly strong linguistic bent, unlike a “problem-solving approach to language learning in which culture is a central component of the course” (Chastain, 1988, p. 305).

In *A Daily Guide for Language and Culture Learning* (1990), Allison Howell sees language learning as the means or tool for the concurrent purpose of culture learning. Illustrating well the inseparability of language learning and culture, Howell uses the metaphor of woven cloth to represent a community: the vertical threads are the language and the horizontal threads are the ideas, beliefs, and values of the people (p. 4). One learns the culture “to make friends, to understand the rules people have, to learn about problems and issues, and to introduce things people need to know” (p. 9). This last step can only be undertaken after a good degree of integration into the community has earned the language learner the right to be heard or accepted into any significant decision making processes (Larson & Smalley, 1972, p. 22).

In Howell’s method, with the help of a native speaker, the language learner’s lesson or day consists of creating and practising an oral text that is centered on a cultural research theme. The text ends with a question eliciting a response from native speakers regarding the content, either by confirming, elaborating, or disagreeing. Afterwards one reflects on the entire process. This method incorporates Stephen Kidd’s GLUE technique: G - Get the script

you need, L - Learn the script you've gotten, U - Use what you've learned, and E - Evaluate what you've used (2002b\*).

Herbert Purnell (1993) has an especially balanced approach to LACL by simultaneously integrating a language topic and a culture topic for each weekly assignment. Topics are sequentially arranged, beginning with more simple observation of culture and simple linguistic forms. For example, Language Assignment 1 is *greetings and farewells*; Cultural Assignment 1 is *making a map of the village*. Gradually one builds towards a more sophisticated use of language by questioning and interviewing. The method is similar to Howell's - building, practising, and then using a text with various people in the community. Purnell and Howell both seem to aim for LACL that will help a person to acquire cultural proficiency:

[a person with cultural proficiency] has a sound knowledge of the people's way of living and their view of the world, has accepted the validity of their perspectives, even if they are not true, and has developed a genuine appreciation for the way of life of the people and for many of their values. Such a person will have ties of trust and friendship among the people equally as strong as those in his/her homeland. (New Tribes Mission, 2004, p. 1)

In the past, traditional LACL programs have tended to emphasise formal linguistic competence (correctly using linguistic structures), to the exclusion of what others have described as three other important competencies: (1) strategic competence (handling communication breakdowns and enhancing communication through verbal or non-verbal techniques), (2) discourse competence (fitting together the smaller parts of a given speech act) and (3) sociolinguistic competence (culturally appropriate language for a given social situation) (Dickerson, 2000a\*).

According to this view, sociolinguistic competence is different from general cultural competence. It refers more specifically to culturally appropriate use of language, making this a narrower focus of general culture learning that includes all aspects of life in general (Broersma, 2001a, p. 192). “If your grammar is excellent, you will be judged all the more severely for sociolinguistic gaffes,” making it especially important to devote special attention to sociolinguistic competence in order to develop good relationships (Broersma, 2001a, p. 192). Socio-linguistic competence, in my view, however, is essentially competence in what Thomson refers to as “languaculture.” Knowing the language and culture are not two separate skills but fundamentally a single proficiency. A linguist might know a lot about a language and an anthropologist might know a lot about a culture, but only someone who learns both concurrently can hope to become a more integrated participant in the community.

Part of what makes learning an oral language so difficult is the need to simultaneously adapt to a new way of life. LACL can be severely hampered by anxiety related to culture shock, when doing things the way we’re used to doing them no longer works in the new context, and by culture stress, which is a more long-term situation related to identity crises (Larson & Smalley, 1972, p. 42/3). Howell highlights the need to let a helper know that while seeking to reduce “the differences that make you unacceptable as a friend to people in the community . . . you also want to find a way to do things so you can be yourself” (1990, p. 125). Encouragement to be true to oneself, while seeking to adopt new cultural norms, is helpful advice for reducing cross-cultural stress. The ability to communicate meaningfully with people is a major stress reducer; for this reason, it may be

less stressful in the long run to plunge into LACL, even though language learning itself causes stress (Larson & Smalley, 1972, p. 43). Specific LACL strategies that reduce stress can be applied.

## **Relating to people in the community**

The idea of wanting to learn to understand and speak a language should go hand-in-hand with wanting to develop relationships with the speakers of that language, since the function and purpose of language is to enable people to share life together and to impact the world around them. Believing this, a language and culture learner should choose to live close to the people with whom he or she hopes to begin communicating and building friendships. “Your initial contacts with the people in the community where you are settling are crucial” (Thomson, 2002c\*). Anyone who drops by during that initial busy time of setting up a home should be made to feel genuinely welcome and important. “Socializing is not something in addition to your work. It is a crucial part of your work” (Thomson, 2002b\*).

One should begin by cultivating relationships with at least one or two bilingual speakers of the target language. Initially speaking the mediating language will make it easier to explain the techniques one may like to use for LACL (Thomson 2002b\*). Making appeals for help in LACL is best made to groups, rather than to specific individuals, “as self-selection tends to result in wonderful helpers” (Thompson 2002b\*). Ideally, these people should have had some cross-cultural experiences, but remain closely linked to the home community; they should also be mature communicative individuals with good reputations who don’t have any speech impediments (Larson & Smalley, 1972\*).

In exchange for help in acquiring a language and culture, there should be a fair trade. Thomson discusses exchange theory, in which every transaction has a cost and benefit

(Homans, 1958, cited by Thomson, 2002c\*). To learn Mpongpong, I will need a lot of patient people willing to spend countless hours conversing with me, a task that will be hard work for them, as well as for myself. One should not assume that money is the only possible exchange for concentrated one-on-one interaction in the language. Gift giving will likely be a more culturally appropriate method of exchange, or non material things such as “greetings, civilities, jokes, information,... child-minding services, or assistance in times of sickness or poverty” (Thomson, 2002c\*). Thomson writes,

I had the opportunity to participate in a rich system of rights and obligations, and I opted to pay minimum wage as the easy way out. Mind you, I’ve known people who didn’t want to pay their [Language Resource Persons] minimum wage, but neither did they want to give rides or make “loans.” I suspect if I had done things the way I should have, it would have cost me more than paying minimum wage, but it also would have “bought” me far more than I got by paying minimum wage. (Thomson, 2002b\*).

Having short-term informal arrangements that allow for input from a variety of people is better than having one or two long-term commitments that could be difficult to terminate if things do not go well.

It is advantageous if as a learner, one has no role in the community other than learner (Larson & Smalley, 1972, p. 91); having a prestigious function from the outset could make it harder, if not impossible, for people from many walks of life to feel free to communicate, to give advice, or to correct. After getting to know one or two people really well, and gaining some basic listening and speaking skills, one should move beyond that comfortable safe place to begin building a larger network of people to spend hours of time with “to receive massive comprehensible input, to engage in extensive extemporaneous speaking, and to get to know the people who speak the language” (Thomson, 2002c\*). Since “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,” Thomson suggests asking your one or two friends to introduce you to their friends and relatives. These additional contacts will be more interested in being helpful and treating you well because of your mutually shared relationships which are governed by a system of rights and obligations. This principle can be followed by always reaching out to people connected to individuals with whom you have already started building a relationship (Thomson, 2002c\*). This helps the community to adjust to the learner, as well as helping the learner to adjust to the community. One might even choose to adopt a family, to live with them, or to invite some people to share a home (Larson & Smalley, 1972, p. 22). One should be careful to form genuine loving friendships, finding out quickly how friendship is expressed in the local culture so that people will not feel they are being exploited as a tool for language learning (Healey, 1975\*). People to avoid are fellow foreigners who habitually ridicule or criticize the host culture, as they will undermine efforts to become an integrated member of the community (Thomson, 2002c\*).

Gradually, but resolutely, one should shift from speaking the mediating language to speaking the target language more and more with the people one relates to most, even if it only starts out in 30 or 60 minute intervals. By jotting down notes of things one could not express during that preset period, one can always discuss them afterwards. (Thomson, 2002a\*)

## **Learning styles, strategies, and affective factors**

“Recent research (Ehrman & Oxford, 1988, 1989; Oxford & Ehrman, 1988) suggests that learning style has a significant influence on students' choices of learning strategies, and that both styles and strategies affect learning outcomes” (Oxford, 1989\*). Every person has a learning style, a unique set of tendencies or patterns for processing information, for engaging

in learning and for preferentially selecting some learning opportunities and strategies over others (Lawrence 1984, cited by Oxford, 1989\*). Greater success in LACL can depend on selecting learning strategies that best fit the task at hand.

At least twenty dimensions of learning style have been identified (Parry, 1984; Shipman & Shipman, 1985, cited by Oxford, 1989\*) and researched relative to language learning. Some of the 20 are listed here: (1) Cooperation vs. competition: in studies where students were taught specifically to be cooperative, results revealed vast improvement in language skills as well as increased self-esteem, motivation, altruism, and positive attitudes toward others (Gunderson & Johnson, 1980; Sharan et al., 1985; Jacob & Mattson, 1987, cited by Oxford, 1989\*). (2) Tolerance for ambiguity: “students who can more readily tolerate ambiguity often show the best language learning performance” (see Chapelle & Roberts; 1986, Naiman, Frohlich & Todesco, 1975, cited by Oxford, 1989\*). (3) Right brain vs. left brain; right brain tendencies – informal, spontaneous, creative, guided by intuition and feeling, better at learning intonation and rhythms of the target language, prefer working with others, event oriented, less competitive; left brain tendencies – theoretical, logical, organized, disciplined, guided by plans and facts, good at analyzing grammar, prefer working alone, time oriented, competitive (Leaver 1986, cited by Oxford, 1989\*). (4) Extraversion vs. introversion, (5) sensing vs. intuition (6) thinking vs. feeling, and (7) judging vs. perceiving (Myers & McCaulley, 1985, cited by Oxford, 1989\*). (8) Levelling vs. sharpening of detail, (9) reflectivity vs. impulsivity and (10) constricted vs. flexible thinking (Parry, 1984, cited by Oxford, 1989\*), (11) field independence vs. dependence, those with good analytical skills, able to distinguish details from a busy backdrop vs. those less able to do so (Hansen &

Stansfield, 1981; Chappelle & Roberts, 1986, cited by Oxford, 1989\*), (12) deductive vs. inductive, (13) random vs. sequential.

Strategy preferences correlate with particular dimensions of learning style, cultural and educational experiences, ethnicity, age, attitudes and beliefs, motivation, the type of task, and gender differences; females in general tend to use more strategies than males (Oxford, 1989\*). Research shows that while all language learners use strategies, not all realize they do so, nor do they carefully select strategies to maximize learning (Chamot & Kupper, 1989, cited by Oxford, 1989\*). Strategies are classified in different ways. Metacognitive strategies involve reflecting on and planning one's learning; affective strategies take into account emotions, attitudes, and beliefs; social strategies guide relations with others in the learning process; cognitive strategies facilitate memory and recall; compensation strategies help one to cope with limited ability or negative situations.

Carol Orwig describes many different strategies using the following classification: (1) Comprehension strategies, including Selective Attention, Inference, Top-down Processing, Deduction Analysis Transfer, (2) Memory strategies, (3) Word Association Strategies, including Visual Association, Action Association, Grouping Imagery, Contextualization, Repetition, Recombination, and Structured Review, (4) Production strategies, including Mimicry and Rehearsal, (5) Communication strategies, including Circumlocution, Message Adjustment, and Code-switching (Orwig, 1999a\*).

A language learner can try out many different techniques or activities listed under Orwig's different strategy categories. The Series Technique is an example of an Action Association Strategy in which one observes and listens to a native speaker who is simultaneously carrying out and describing the sequential steps of an everyday activity. This

speech event can be recorded and video-taped, to be listened to, watched, and mimicked several times.

In formal classes, teachers and textbooks may cater to certain learning styles and strategies; the independent language and culture learner, however, can adapt every lesson every day to suite or compensate for his or her learning style strengths and weaknesses. “If you stick only to strategies that are consistent with your learning style, you are likely to find your learning quite limited (Leaver et al. 2005, p. 87). Certain styles and strategies may fit better with learning either a written language or an unwritten language, so it may be necessary, as Leaver suggests, to intentionally modify one’s normal tendencies in order to enhance learning in different environments or situations. Deductive learners, for example, want to apply their learning after being provided with the necessary information. This learning style fits well in a language classroom where textbooks provide grammar rules and vocabulary lists. Inductive learners, on the other hand, enjoy discovering things on their own by examining a given context, something that would go well with learning an unwritten language where grammatical rules need to be discovered (Leaver et al., 2005, p. 101).

By reflecting on how one’s learning style may be facilitating or hindering progress in a certain area, the language learner can appreciate and take advantage of strengths, and explore ways to compensate for weaknesses. Random learners are inclined to pick and choose and change the order of learning activities, whereas sequential learners like to systematically follow a pre-set pattern arranged by someone else. By not breaking free of this latter inclination, one could be working against one’s own best interests. In some cases it may be better to choose a different topic or activity that the brain is more ready to accept or that current circumstances dictate as more appropriate (Claussen, 2001\*). One advantage in

learning an oral language is that the independent learner with a bent for randomness is free to set his or her own order of linguistic and cultural topics to study. The sequential learner is also free to select from among specially designed programs with pre-arranged topics, such as Howell's *Daily Guide for Language and Culture Learning* (1990) or Purnell's *Language and Culture Learning Program for Independent Learners* (1993). Purnell cautions against too much random selection of the provided topics because careful thought has been given to their sequencing. For example, "how to appropriately ask questions"\* is suitably arranged as one of the earlier topics. The random learner, however, should feel free to shift topics around to meet personal needs, because there is no one-and-only right way to do LACL. For example, if in wanting to follow Purnell's advice to consider compensating a language helper with gifts as opposed to wages, one might want to shift "Cultural Assignment 39: Gifts and their exchanges"\* to an earlier week in the program rather than week 39.

People also need to consider how their personality plays a role in either helping or hindering LACL (Claussen, 2001\*). Hindrances may include being easily embarrassed about making mistakes for fear of being laughed at, corrected, ridiculed, or compared to others; such fear could make one reticent to even trying speaking (Chastain, 1988, p. 290). One can learn to apply reframing strategies that will change how one thinks, and subsequently, feels about something (Leaver et al. 2005, p. 97). By analyzing and understanding the causes for language-learning failures in the past, one can avoid repeating those same causes. Positive and truthful self-talk can counteract debilitating negative self-images, making it possible to approach new LACL experiences with confidence (Rubin & Thompson, 1982, p. 11, Chastain, 1988, p. 279). One can think about which particular LACL situations arouse anxiety and thereby inhibit learning; by reflection and planning one can intentionally apply

strategies to reduce that anxiety. For example, if shopping for meat in an open-air market feels like an especially intimidating place for speaking, one can reflect on what may be causing the discomfort. Is it negative attitudes towards local standards of sanitation and the kinds of meat being sold? Is it a lack of vocabulary in the appropriate semantic domains – haggling, money, butchering and animal body parts? If it is any or all of these possibilities, before going to the market, one can work expressly towards changing attitudes, knowledge and skills. A friend could go along to do all the talking and negotiating until one feels ready to move from being an observer to an active participant (Symonds, 2001, p. 283). In the security of a quiet place, away from the market, one can talk about local customs, and practice the vocabulary by observing and then participating in role-plays.

With some reflection, imagination and determination, one can learn about strategies and techniques, and even invent new ones that can help to maximize learning in different contexts. Introverts and extroverts will need to consider where and how their tendencies towards certain strategies are especially useful or harmful, and compare the worth of being frustrated by using less effective strategies that come naturally, to the discomfort of growing and changing by trying new and possibly more effective strategies. Introverts may need to intentionally reward themselves in special ways for engaging in a predetermined time of group social activities, whereas extroverts may need to promise themselves enticing rewards for taking the time to sit alone and plan a learning contract. People with perfectionist tendencies may need to adopt appropriate strategies for coping with the inevitable need to make mistakes in order to learn.

## The role of the independent language and culture learner

Even though LACL is a life-long task, one does not expect to spend the rest of one's life attending formal language learning classes; one needs to become an independent self-directed language learner (Claussen, 2001\*). Current trends in LACL call for more of a focus "on the learner since the crucial element in the entire process lies with him or her" (Tarone & Yule, 1989; Scarcella & Oxford, 1992, cited by Purnell, 2001, p. 91). Classrooms are becoming more learner-centered; teachers are doing less of the talking, and students are moving at their own pace, selecting activities and content, and becoming more responsible for their own learning (Purnell, 2001, p. 92). This ideal is the only reality for those of us wanting to learn an oral language while living within the community. To be successful in learning the local language and culture, we will need to plan, organize, implement and evaluate our own learning. (Dickerson, 2000b\*). There may be certain basic expectations put on us by our sending organisations, but essentially, we have the freedom and necessity (1) for autonomous learner-centered self-instruction, (2) for planning and creating our own program and (3) for controlling our own learning (Dickinson, 1987, p. 152). While autonomous learners work independently, this does not imply isolation (Dickinson, 1987, p. 13). "Recent theorists elaborating on self-direction have suggested greater roles for mentors and coaches and a recognition that autonomy in learning does not preclude a valuing of interdependence, depending on the learning context" (Grow 1994, Nah 2000, cited by Zieghan, 2001\*).

Without proper training on how to become an effective autonomous learner, one runs the risk of becoming overwhelmed and discouraged by the enormous challenge of LACL (Leaver et al., 2005, p. 206). This is all the more true when attempting to learn an unwritten language with its many inherent challenges. Once engaged in LACL, one should continue to

review LACL principles, to read materials specifically aimed at facilitating self-directed LACL, including anthropological articles so that one continues to think about learning the culture and not just linguistic form (Healey, 1975\*). One needs to seek personally relevant ways to be constantly encouraged and motivated in the difficult task of LACL. Healey suggests surrounding oneself with positive sayings. A good one might be, “A journey of a thousand miles must begin with a single step.”(Lao-tzu, 604 BC - 531 BC)

Independent learners need to have realistic expectations about their LACL based on the amount of time available to them for LACL, the difficulty of the language, and one’s aptitude and goals for language learning. For example, I may need to ask myself how important perfect pronunciation and accurate grammatical form are in relation to my future role; this will help me to set goals appropriate to my needs rather than to someone else’s (Chastain, 1988, p. 280).

To be an independent learner, one should make use of techniques for self-assessment and needs analysis (Dickinson, 1987, p. 26). Needs analysis techniques are helpful in determining the content and sequence of learning, and constitute a plan to guide learning over a given period of time. The first step is to list all the situations and activities for which the language and a particular competency will be needed within a certain time frame. Each need is then ranked according to frequency, urgency or personal importance. This in turn determines what should or can be learned first (Kidd, 2002a\*).

Independent learners should also consider in advance alternate plans and coping strategies, in preparation for the inevitable frustration of failed plans (Leaver et al., 2005, p. 203). One should reflect ahead of time on where to look for possible solutions or help for when they will be needed (Leaver et al., 2005, p. 207). An independent learner’s LACL

program should have an eclectic approach that keeps changing, because no one method works best all the time for any one person. Thomson suggests a good variety of possible methods. (Thomson, 2002a\*) “Individual preferences are so diverse that no one method can be prescribed as optimal for all learners” (Dickerson 2000b\*). Using a one book approach, such as Howell’s *Daily Guide for Language and Culture Learning* (1990) or Purnell’s *Language and Culture Learning Program for Independent Learners* (1993) could eventually become quite boring, and would fail to meet all the requirements of a balanced LACL program.

In developing a personal program, the independent adult learner should borrow or buy LACL resources having as many of the following criteria as possible: (1) relevant and feasible behavioural objectives that can be measured, (2) meaningful language input, (3) exercises and activities, (4) flexibility, (5) intelligible instructions, (6) LACL advice, (7) assessment of reaching objectives, (8) methods for keeping records and indexing information, and (9) reference materials (Dickinson, 1987, p. 82/83).

## **Planning a language and culture learning program**

How long should one plan on doing concentrated LACL? Two years is the generally accepted guideline for how long a person should plan on doing concentrated LACL in preparation for a long-term assignment. After two years, one has essentially just laid a good foundation for what should be an ongoing endeavour for as long as one continues working in the linguistic community (Dickerson, 2000b\*).

Following Thompson’s suggestion, one-fifth of the total anticipated time in a project should be set aside for fulltime LACL. Therefore, in a five-year project, one should spend a year in LACL; in a two-year project, five months of LACL; for a yearlong stay, 10 weeks of

LACL; for a one-month commitment, one week of LACL (Thomson, 2000b\*). The investment of time will make people more effective and contented in their future work. “It is better . . . to suffer for two years than to cripple an able man for forty” (van Meter, 2001, p. 285). I have also heard an illustration demonstrating the value of taking time to sharpen one’s axe, to avoid working harder with less effectiveness.

Learner contracts are a good way of providing structure for the independent learner. (Dickinson, 1987, p. 99). These should specify a skill area (listening or speaking), proposed resources, strategies and activities for meeting specific objectives, a fairly short time frame with an exact target date for completion, and ways to demonstrate successful achievement of the objectives. Before the contract is undertaken, it should be discussed with a LACL coach, a colleague, or a family member with some experience in LACL. That same person should discuss and initial the contract soon after the target date. Designing and fulfilling the contract is the task of the learner who takes responsibility for his or her own learning (Dickinson, 1987 p. 100). Talking about the contract and the LACL experience can be a valuable time of evaluation and reflection, and a source of encouragement, providing objectives have been met or solutions have been proposed for making objectives more achievable (Dickinson, 1987, p. 103). Contracts are a good tool, not only for planning learning, but also for monitoring progress. Within our organisation, Strategic Planning and Review (SPAR) sessions, involving consultants and language and culture learners, result in formal written contracts that are evaluated and rewritten once a year. A learning contract can also be a less formal, simple oral or written agreement between two colleagues. For example, I recently asked a colleague to write me after a two-week interval to find out if I still knew 45 French

idioms that I had previously memorized. Her letter prompted me to spend time reviewing the idioms before testing myself.

## **Measuring progress**

Unlike students in formal study programs, people independently learning an oral language cannot leave evaluation up to a teacher, nor should they choose to ignore it.

One useful technique for monitoring progress of listening skills is by continuing to use the same criteria to compare what one can comprehend now in a given setting with what could be understood in a similar setting at a specified time in the past. For example, “three months ago, when sitting with the neighbour ladies around their cooking fire, I could understand none, a few, some, many, or all the words, phrases, sentences.” This form of evaluation would be considered assessment if beforehand I had prepared a contract that described specific activities for learning vocabulary in the semantic domains of cooking or other specific topics that women discuss while cooking.

A diagnostic tool for listening can determine my gaps of background knowledge or misunderstandings when listening to a given conversation. I could have a bilingual friend sit with me listening to a recorded conversation around the cooking fire. Afterwards, she could ask me questions to see how well I understand what the women were discussing. Using the mediating language seems quite warranted as a means for testing listening comprehension in the early stages of learning the target language, especially when speaking ability in the target language is quite limited, and generally lags behind listening.

A good diagnostic tool for evaluating speaking ability could be to record oneself telling a story, engaging in a conversation, giving a short speech, or describing the steps in a certain activity (Thomson, 2002b\*). Before recording the speech act, one should determine

the kinds of errors or omissions that the language helper will point out and correct, for example, the pronunciation of certain sounds, the use of a particular tense or grammatical structure, or the use of more complex vocabulary. If the activity is videotaped, the focus could be on gestures, facial expressions, or body posture. Afterwards, the language helper goes over the recording, pointing out mistakes, corrections, or advice related to the predetermined focus. By repeating this exercise at regular intervals, one can also monitor progress by comparing current and past performance, the purpose being to bring encouragement by noticing the signs of growth and learning, and to stimulate thinking about how one can continue to improve.

Keeping track of new vocabulary items, as well as contracts focused on reaching new vocabulary objectives in listening and speaking, are useful for both planning and monitoring purposes. A reasonable goal for some beginners might be to *understand* 150 new words per week, resulting in about a thousand words after two months (Thomson, 2002a\*).

Language proficiency can be tested by using classified guidelines listing real life tasks or functions a person can do. The FSI scale, originally developed by the United States Foreign Service Institute, is useful for measuring speaking tasks. The American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages has modified the FSI scale, to include five levels in the skill areas of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Both the Novice and Intermediate levels are further subdivided into three categories; Advanced has two subdivisions. Superior, Distinguished, and Native have no further subdivisions. The ACTFL scale is especially good for beginners because of the increased number of stages through which one can progress at the lower levels. This might be more rewarding or motivating than the FSI scale, in which it takes more time and skill to move up a level.

Most people do not progress beyond Level 3 (working professional proficiency) of the FSI scale, equivalent to Superior in the ACTFL scale: “Able to speak the language with sufficient structural accuracy and vocabulary to participate effectively in most formal and informal conversations.” The lists of language functions at each level are useful for setting LACL objectives, to plan strategies and activities, and to measure progress (ACTFL).

Diaries or journals are also useful tools for monitoring progress, providing a forum for reflection on one’s LACL. “The discipline of diary writing will help you to maintain a high level of self-awareness, which is important in the ongoing process of planning and self-evaluation” (Thomson, 2002a\*). A diary is a good place for reflecting on what is going well, what isn’t, or for asking questions, such as “are you spending enough time with people” (Healey, 1975\*)? Diaries can serve an even greater purpose if the contents are shared with an understanding colleague or coach, with whom one can discuss particular ups and downs of LACL.

If one is discouraged about an apparent lack of progress, one could do some troubleshooting by journaling and talking about responses to the following questions: how reasonable is my progress considering the hours I’ve spent on focused LACL, the difficulty of the language, and my own aptitude? Am I having meaningful exposure to the language? Are there emotional blocks to my learning? Is there a mismatch between my learning style, preferred strategies, and the learning context? Do I need more external encouragement and accountability? Am I lacking motivation, and why? Do I need a better plan? Is what I am feeling perfectly normal (Orwig, 1999a\*)? “Self-directed learners who reflect on their learning will have a sense of where their growing edge(s) of language learning and needs are.

This is an important reason for encouraging learner's to reflect on their learning" (Dickinson, 1987, p. 8).

## **A literate person learning language from oral communicators**

A big difference between learning a written language and an oral language is that one can choose to do a lot of the former in isolation with books, videos, language tapes, radio, and television. However, to learn an oral language, the only source is people. LACL in an oral context requires integration in the community through relationships with oral communicators (Thompson, 1996\*). Oral communicators depend on people and relationships for learning and teaching, whereas people from more literate societies can educate themselves in isolation. What are the implications of a literate person like myself learning language from oral communicators?

To answer this question, it may be helpful to first compare the worldview<sup>14</sup> of oral communicators with my own generalized worldview as a literate learner. Oral communicators highly value oral communication in much the same way that I highly value written communication; we value what we do, or we do what we value. Oral communicators learn by hearing voices, whereas I generally learn by seeing print. They learn through observation, imitation, repetition, rituals, proverbs, parables, stories, games, songs and drama; I tend to learn through electronic print and books, and by studying, examining, classifying, comparing, and analyzing. Oral communicators think and talk about events, more so than about words, definitions, and concepts as I like to do. They value events and discussing complex things with people more than they value schedules or punctuality

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<sup>14</sup> A worldview is typically a detailed description of the way people within an ethno-linguistic people group or homogenous unit act, think, believe, live and function. (Evans 2004:9<sup>37</sup>).

(Ziegahn, 2001\*). I value how time is used and spent to accomplish tasks and to produce products. They store much information in their brains, embedded in stories, while I store a lot of information in printed form, outside of my brain. They can recite long genealogies; I access them in printed form. They retain information passed down to them from the past, while I look more to the future for new information. They appreciate tradition and history, while I appreciate new ideas and change. They can think about things for a long time within the context of dialogue; I can think about things for a long time when I am able to write them down. They prefer to look at principles embedded in a whole; I like to break things apart, to extract and analyze the principles. They tend to spend more time talking in groups and strive for group effort, harmony, and knowing one's place in society; I spend more time relating on an individual basis, and strive for greater self-reliance, equality, and autonomy. Speaking for them can be entertainment; I often view it more as a means of conveying information. They seek to excel in competitions of praise, insults, riddles, and jokes; I seek to impress with the written word. They like processing and holding ideas in stories and symbols; I like to do so in charts, diagrams, and three-point outlines. They learn from older people whom they know; I can learn from people younger than I am, including strangers (Epic Partners International; Evans, 2004; SIL International, 2005; Thompson, 1996; Ziegahn, 2001).\*

Essentially, oral communicators are highly relational and very proficient at using verbal means to process, retain, and recall information in a sequential fashion. I, on the other hand, am more individualistic and proficient at accessing random information stored in printed form.

[C]ultural differences may influence the development of brain functions, for example, children in societies that do not have formal, book-oriented educational systems have more

highly developed spatial and visual memories than children in industrialized societies who attend schools and learn from books (Chastain, 1988, p. 30). There is much emphasis in educational and language-learning literature on *teaching* in culturally sensitive and appropriate ways; “As cultural beings, our teaching is always based on cultural values, regardless of our awareness of their influence (Heimlich and Norland 1994, cited by Ziegahn 2001\*). When we require oral communicators to respond to Western or print-based teaching styles, they just don’t measure up! The fact is, in a world of oral communicators, we are the learning disabled (Evans, 2004\*). “Diversifying teaching methods should be a dynamic, interactive process with learners that enriches all of adult learning” (Ziegahn, 2001\*)

There is not much explicit mention, however, in educational and language-learning literature on *learning* in culturally sensitive and appropriate ways, other than the emphasis on adopting new learning strategies to suit different contexts. Thomson does warn against the danger of imposing cultural views onto language learning while using my first language (English) or second language (French) to learn a minority language (Thomson, 2002c\*). In the scenario we have described, it will no doubt be necessary as literate learners to change our culturally ingrained methods of learning to adopt forms more typical of oral learners in a non-western culture.

Perhaps some of the frustration and stress of LACL learning in true immersion settings stems from not adopting more culturally appropriate methods of learning; attempting to do so, however, could also be anxiety producing since changing behaviour that is based on core values and years of practise is very difficult. While people from oral societies and literate societies have different tendencies, one should keep in mind that some individuals from literate societies may actually be quite inclined towards characteristics attributed more

to oral societies (Matikainen & Duffy, 2000\*). If that is the case, there should be less tension and trouble adopting strategies that suit an oral context. If people are seen to fit somewhere along a oral-literate learner continuum, those with a learning style at the extreme end of the literate side may struggle more than others who find themselves a little closer on the continuum to oral learner.

I will surely need to get used to learning more spontaneously, regardless of time of day or location, away from my computer, maybe sitting for hours under a tree or by a cooking fire, rather than at a table or desk. Perhaps I can learn to ask people to tell me stories that teach cultural values, rather than asking direct questions related to culture. I will need to work at holding aural information in my short-term memory, resisting the urge to write down every pertinent thing I hear. To get things into my long-term memory, I may need to take advantage of more culturally appropriate strategies that involve reciting short songs, ditties, proverbs, or chants, starting with very short ones, and gradually developing better oral learning skills that do not depend on print. I will need to learn vocabulary by talking more about pictures and concrete items, rather than about words. I should avoid always being seen holding a pen and note book; perhaps recording speech events and videotaping language learning activities will be most appropriate, especially if I let others sit in groups with me to hear and watch the recordings. I should probably aim to make my LACL a community project, rather than thinking of it as a private and personal endeavour. I will need to develop my observation skills and patience, and be willing to practise things over and over in public, imitating what other women are trying to teach me, becoming more of a tactile learner as opposed to predominantly a visual learner. I will need to compensate the people who patiently teach me in locally appropriate ways, resisting the easy way out of paying minimum

wage. It may actually take time for Mpongpong people to know what to do with a visual learner from the West who is struggling to apply oral learning strategies.

## **Conclusion**

The literature review undertaken to write this paper has increased my confidence in approaching the challenge of becoming a proficient speaker and integrated member of the Mpongpong community in East Cameroon. The disadvantages inherent in learning an oral language, as opposed to a written language, are more than compensated for by the many advantages of learning a language within the heart of the linguistic community. Rather than working against me, my age and life experiences are a tremendous plus. I am more adept than children in thinking about learning and in applying appropriate learning strategies. I have a greater range of diverse schemata in my brain to which I can link new language and culture data. In taking personal responsibility to plan, monitor, and evaluate my own LACL, I can create and follow an individualized program that will best suit my learning style, goals, strengths, and weaknesses. By intentionally exposing myself to huge amounts of comprehensible input, I can anticipate becoming a proficient listener and learner. By being willing to start speaking as a less-than-perfect speaker, I can look forward to eventually becoming competent, providing I organize my life around countless speaking opportunities through an expanded social network of friends. By developing an individualized LACL program that integrates language and culture each step of the way, I can look forward to developing good relationships within the Mpongpong community. Finally, by being willing to adopt practices and LACL strategies that are more suited to an oral culture, I can perhaps anticipate greater input from the Mpongpong community and satisfaction on their part in teaching me their language and culture.

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<sup>15</sup> The website gives a time period, rather than one year for the copyright date.

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