

# Notes On Learning A Foreign Language From An Informant

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## 1. Read Over Any Available Grammar On The Language:

Use the grammar as an initial guidebook to familiarize yourself with the overall picture of what you are likely to find in the language. It can also serve to clarify and explain certain syntactic forms and lexical items as they are encountered in the process of learning the language. Some grammars offer a useful plan for language study if supplemented by some of the methods mentioned below. Do not learn (memorize) words, phrases, sentences, etc., from the grammar without checking first on their correctness as well as pronunciation with your informant.

## 2. Obtain A Variety Of Practical Expressions:

Make a collection of useful, everyday phrases which you feel will come in handy, i.e. be able to speak frequently in daily conversation (e.g. greetings, farewells, where is \_\_, what is \_\_, how much does cost, what is your name, can I help you, I did not understand, please speak more slowly, etc. etc.) Write these down on separate note cards and drill them often. Go, over these expressions carefully with your informant, consciously mimicking his pronunciation, tone of voice, tempo, as well as any other characteristics of his speech that you can pick up. You will of course notice more and more as you progress. Record your informant on tape so that you can compare your speech with his, at any time. Try to group such phrases for learning according to meaningfully related topics (e.g. food, cooking, travel, buying, directions, gardening, language learning, etc.). It is essential that you make use of these expressions on every possible occasion, even if you have to create the situation.

## 3. Practice All Expressions Until They Are Up To Normal Speed:

Proper speed of utterance should be practiced right from the beginning rather than being left to the later stages of language learning. One helpful method of forcing oneself to speak at the proper speed is to make a tape recording of phrases and sentences with a blank stretch inserted between each item of slightly longer length than the initial utterance, which should be spoken by the informant. As soon as the student hears the expression, he must repeat it up to speed in order to be ready to hear the following one. Also try recording your voice after the sentences spoken by the informant for close comparison and correction.

## 4. Construct Substitution Drills:

Substitution frames are sentences or phrases which allow the replacement of some element by a related part of speech (e.g. subject, verb, object, modifier, etc.). The portion which remains unchanged may be thought of as the "frame", and the part which changes is the "substitution." A multiple substitution frame is one in which more than one element is replaced. An alternating frame is one in which a different part of speech is substituted in successive sentences. Here are some examples:

- Simple - The man (woman, father, son, teacher, dog...) was sick yesterday.
- Multiple - The boy (girl, mother, servant...) went to the store (market, house, school).
- Alternating - The book fell on the table.  
The ball fell on the table.  
The ball fell on the floor.

The ball bounced on the floor.

Learning to build up sentences in this way is a basic feature of language study. It helps one to master the grammatical structures (e.g. concordial agreement patterns in Bantu languages) and at the same time builds a strong vocabulary through the continued use of words in a natural context. In almost any traditional foreign language textbooks every lesson can be expanded into scores of such drills by using the illustrative sentences and exercises provided. Additional drills may be constructed out of the expressions learned under point 2. Whenever possible, go through and practice these drills in the presence of your informant so that he can correct your pronunciation (and ensure that you are forming grammatically correct and meaningful sentences in the first place!)

## 5. Criticism Of Pronunciation:

It is not easy to get native speakers to correct your speech.. The prestige of being a missionary or the honor of being a guest often makes people reluctant to point out errors in pronunciation and wrong grammatical forms. One cannot, however, permit laxity about matters of pronunciation especially, for grammar mistakes can usually be set right quite readily by the listener, but the bungling of sounds can make entire sentences unintelligible. So it pays in the long run to genuinely encourage corrections of your speech, including the . minor details, even though this takes time and interrupts the session. This time is well spent. The main thing is to avoid showing irritation or impatience with your informant when he corrects you. That is the quickest way to end all feedback from him (and others as well).

## 6. Supplementary Vocabulary:

The vocabularies listed in many textbooks are poorly designed since words are often selected because of their grammatical form (e.g. noun class) rather than because of their meaningful relationships. There are two main things to remember about the learning of vocabulary:

a) Choose meaningfully related words.

Words should be chosen and learned according to their association. Set up initial vocabularies which are grouped around a certain subject or theme (e g. clothing, body parts, animals, plants, Christianity -way of salvation, kinship terms, time, place, numbers, spirit world, and so forth).

b) Drill vocabulary items in phrases.

Words should never be "memorized" in isolation, but they must be assimilated in meaningful combinations. Incorporate the words into sensible phrases so that they may be drilled and ultimately used in this natural form (cf. substitution drills, point 4). There is no practical value in knowing words for things if you can say nothing about such things or are unable to understand the typical statements made about them.

## 7. Make A Personal Dictionary:

Even though a dictionary already exists in the language, it is useful to make your own edition so you can specialize in your own particular areas of interest and need. Writing down new words in a personal dictionary will help to fix them in your mind, and a frequent review of these makes for a rapid building of vocabulary. When writing down a new entry, however, be sure to include a complete sentence so that the word may have a context. Often additional usages will have to be recorded so that you have the entire range of meaning. All types of idiomatic expression should be listed under a key word or words, for no language is fully learned until its idioms (including proverbs) have been mastered.

## 8. Selective Listening:

A good way for a learner to become familiar with the sounds and forms of a language is to listen "selectively" first to one feature and then to another for a certain period of time. Such linguistic features would include:

- a) tone of the voice - whether it goes up or down (sharply, gradually, etc.) or remains level in statements, questions, commands, exclamations, and so forth;
- b) individual vowels and consonants, especially those sounds which are strange to you or very similar to each other (e.g. in Zambian languages: k-g , f-h, c-ch, c-j, n-ny, l-r-d);
- c) words and phrases in context in order to determine their exact area of meaning and proper usage;
- d) grammatical forms, such as concords, tenses, mood, voice, word order, dependent clause markers, and any other features which may cause difficulty or confusion.

Naturally, it is best to listen selectively at times when you don't have to reply or are under no special obligation to remember the content of what is being said (e.g. political speeches, radio programs, public meetings, etc.) One should also listen selectively to a recording of his own speech and then carefully compare it to that of a native speaker of the language (which can also be recorded). This procedure helps you to correct your pronunciation and greatly increases your "Schprachgefuehl."

## 9. Reading Aloud And Listening To Reading:

One useful way to get acquainted with a language is to read aloud while the informant listens and corrects your pronunciation. The informant may then read the same section or a different one while you listen closely to note his pronunciation and to pick up as much of the content as you can. Newspapers and magazines (if available) usually provide a lot of good material for the language learner. Another important source of reading matter is to be found in elementary and secondary school textbooks. Begin with the simplest lessons and progress on up through the higher grades. Not only is such listening valuable in assisting one to develop an "ear" for the language, but also the subjects covered in these articles, lessons, stories, etc. provide excellent topics for conversation. Use the language to ask for an explanation of some word, idiom, custom, belief, or whatever, and try to get your informant to explain it, if at all possible, in the foreign language and not in English.

## 10. Listen To The Spoken Language As Much As Possible:

Where it is not possible or practical to go out and live among the people, one must make other arrangements - to hear the language as the people (of all kinds: men - women - children, old - young, educated - uneducated, urban - rural, etc.) actually speak it in daily life. The use of a tape recorder can help a great deal in filling this need. It can be used in three principal ways:

- a) Getting practice in listening effectively to the language.

It is very beneficial to listen over and over again to taped stories, sermons, conversations, speeches, and radio programs. The repetition of the same material enables one to isolate and study a high percentage of the meaningful units of a certain passage (cf. selective listening, point 8). Listening to longer segments of language also trains one to derive meaning from the overall context and to recognize fundamental patterns of discourse structure (i.e. how to put a story, speech, etc. together).

- b) Studying the intonational patterns of sentences and related groups of sentences.

Often one misses the sound of natural speech if he must have his informant repeat an expression several times. This happens because normal intonation contours usually change in the artificial process of dictating slowly or of repeating the same phrase several times. This is especially true in the Bantu languages which are called "tone" languages because every syllable of a word has its own distinct pitch. A recording, which can be stopped and replayed at will with no appreciable effect on the sound quality, eliminates this difficulty.

- c) Making a recording of one's own speech for comparison.

This procedure will highlight one's larger errors of pronunciation, intonation, sound-quality, etc., and he can then concentrate on removing them from his speech. One of the best types of recording for this purpose is that of a conversation between the learner and his informant. A taped comparison will quickly reveal any differences in sound characteristics, word usages, and grammatical formations.

### **11. Thinking: In The Foreign Language:**

One must learn to gear his way of thinking to that of the language he is studying so that when he listens to it or wants to speak it he will not first have to mentally translate from English to the languages. Ideas and concepts must be converted directly into the foreign language and vice-versa with English playing absolutely no part in the process. This will take a great deal of conscious effort, but unless one can think in the language, he certainly will not be able to express himself freely in it, idiomatically that is. As one aid toward this goal, try "inner speech" - in other words practice thinking in the language about different topics and situations when there is no opportunity to use the language orally (e.g. driving the car, mowing the lawn, working in the garden, etc.)

### **12. Using The Language At Every Opportunity:**

All the drilling, listening, recording, memorizing, and so on that we have been discussing will be of little benefit unless one goes out and actually puts what he has learned to use in speaking the language. As soon as possible begin conversing with the informant in his language: asking questions about the lesson, about himself, about his people, or about any other topic that comes to mind. Often such conversations will have to be planned out in advance, especially at first. Another effective way of forcing oneself to use the language is to go visiting - make evangelism calls, visit the sick, etc. At the initial stage it may be well to take a native speaker along (perhaps all the time, depending on the local custom) so that if one's vocabulary peters out, the companion might "fill the gap". After "getting the feel" of the language a bit more, one might think about teaching a simple instruction class alone (e.g. *Arise and Be Baptized*). Prepare in advance what you are going to say, and with the help of the translated lesson, you should not have much difficulty. The people are usually more than willing to assist if you get stuck. Note that a smile on their faces does not necessarily (or even usually) mean that you have made a mistake - they are probably so tickled to hear a white man really trying to communicate with them in their language that they just cannot help but be happy about it. Preaching a prepared (in consultation with your informant/evangelist) is another good way of making progress along the road toward self-sufficiency in the language.

Some people do not like to say anything until they are sure that all their grammatical forms are correct. This is a great mistake. One should dive right in and begin using the words and constructions he has learned as best he can to convey his intended meaning. The refinements of grammatical form and lexical usage will eventually come, but only after a good many mistakes have been made in practicing

the basic sentence structures. The man who never uttered an ungrammatical form never learned to speak a foreign language!

### 13. Writing In The Language:

One should definitely learn to write correctly in the language, but not until he has first learned to express himself orally. This is in keeping with the fundamental order of language study: first **hearing**, then **speaking**, followed by **reading**, and finally **writing**. One ought not attempt a flowery literary style, but concentrate rather on giving a simple, straightforward expression of what he wants to say. The informant can then go over the compositions pointing out any unnatural word orders, word combinations, incorrect word/idiom usages, mistakes in grammatical form, spelling errors, etc. As missionary-pastors, a great deal of our written work will be in the form of sermons or translations, both of which involve the public communication of a message to a group of people. Therefore, we will also have to work hard on this aspect of learning a language - but at the proper time.

### 14. Prayer:

This last "note" is by far the most crucial to your study program. Ask the Holy Spirit, who gives all the gifts necessary to carry out Kingdom work (1 Cor.12:1-11), for the gift of learning a foreign language. The fact that Christ sent His followers out to make disciples of "all men everywhere" (Matt.28:19) implies that this was to be done in the mother tongue of the people concerned. Pentecost wonderfully demonstrated that fact. And the promise that His Spirit would teach them everything they needed to know (Jn.14~26) includes, I believe, the knowledge of a foreign language. So ask God in the name of Christ for the ability to preach - to teach - to pray in the language you need to know in order to communicate His Gospel message. He cannot refuse (Jn.16:23)!

The knowledge of a people's language is the indispensable key which can open the door to knowledge of their entire culture - the way they think, believe and live. Real language facility not only enables one to avoid anti-social behavior and to make his message relevant to the life of the people, but it also helps to prevent those serious communication "breakdowns" which can threaten a missionary's entire ministry. Language learning is a process by which one can make vital contacts with a new community, a new manner of life, a new system of thinking and perceiving the world. The ability to make these contacts and to understand this different lifestyle and worldview is essential if one hopes to carry on an effective evangelistic and training program. Expert language ability helps to identify the missionary most with the indigenous society, and such identification is important for a truly successful ministry among them. It makes him a missionary *in* the field and not merely *on* the field.

(These notes are adapted from E.A. Nida's excellent book, *Learning a Foreign Language*.)

#### **Checklist Of Goals To Be Accomplished In A 12 Month Period Of Language Study:**

(based on a program outlined in Brewster & Brewster, *Language Acquisition Made Practical*.)

1. I can initiate and close conversations on any occasion with the appropriate greeting and farewells.
2. I have completed a thorough study of at least one grammar of the language, including all exercises, drills, vocabularies, etc., along **with** a mother-tongue speaker of the language.
3. I have a basic vocabulary of at least two thousand words.

4. I have occasion to use the language in spontaneous conversation at least five minutes per day on every day of the week.
5. I have read at least a dozen books on topics directly related to the language/culture in which I will be working.
6. I can go to any store, shop, vendor, market, etc. and buy/order anything I want, bargaining when appropriate/necessary.
7. I can give someone directions how to get from where we are to: my home, church, a friend's house, the post office, bank, market, etc.
8. I can make a proper social introduction of someone else and can give a brief speech to introduce myself (marital status, children, nationality, age, etc.) as well as my occupation or purpose for being where I am.
9. I can give a simple but adequate description of the nature and purpose of the Lutheran Church of Central Africa.
10. I can take and give messages over the telephone.
11. I can hire, give instructions to, and terminate the employment of a casual laborer (cook, gardener, nanny, etc.)
12. I feel confident that my pronunciation is nearly always intelligible.
13. I am able to handle any liturgical order of service fluently.
14. I have preached at least one prepared sermon(ette) and taught at least one instruction class (or Sunday School lesson) in an LCCA congregation.
15. I can confidently talk to anyone, anytime about the problem of sin in the world and about God's plan of salvation through Jesus Christ.

These are the basic goals to be accomplished during our formal, concentrated period of language study. You may have other, more specific objectives that you would like to add to this list:

- 16.
- 17.
- 18.
- 19.
- 20.