

The secrets of hyper-polyglots

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Polyglots and theory

1. Dealing with case histories
 - a. you have to look at a lot of them
 - b. in terms of hypotheses about language acquisition – one counterexample enough to disprove a hypothesis.
2. Major current hypothesis: The 40 years' war
 - a. The comprehension hypothesis:
 - (1) we acquire, develop literacy when we understand messages
 - (2) vocabulary, grammar the RESULT of acquisition
 - b. Skill-building hypothesis
 - (1) "learn" rule, "practice" via output
 - (2) correction change conscious version of rule
 - c. comparison of comprehension/skill-building
 - (1) cause and effect
 - (2) research results
 - (3) reactions

CI perceived to be pleasant. Grammar study no: Jean & Simard 2011: about 1000 high school students of French, 1000 students of English in Montreal. FSL percent who like grammar a lot: 1.3, like it: 9.2; ESL percent who like grammar a lot: 5.4. like it: 19.5
 - (4) the role of consciously learned grammar – CH versus SB

Skill-building hypothesis – consciously learned rules = the core, causal
Comprehension hypothesis – consciously learned rules play no role in acquisition- limited use

 - as Monitor, or editor
 - severe conditions for Monitor use
 - (a) Know the rule
 - (b) Have time
 - (c) Think about correctness
3. Other important findings
 - a. Language acquisition is gradual: results of vocabulary research
 - b. The compelling CI hypothesis: the case of "Paul"

Armando picked up Hebrew "by observing and listening to co-workers and friends" in an Israeli restaurant.

1. 2-3 years until comfortable in conversation even though he heard Hebrew all day on the job.
2. never forced or pushed himself with Hebrew.
3. had friendly relationship with the other restaurant staff, with owners, and Hebrew-speaking customers.
4. never learned to read Hebrew did not study Hebrew grammar, had no idea of what the rules of Hebrew grammar were, did not think about grammar when speaking. He said that he received about five corrections a day, but none of these were aimed at grammar; it was all vocabulary.
5. Evaluation of speech sample by native speakers: rating from "very good" to native.

Indigenous people of the Vaupes River (Sorenson)

1. 24 languages among 10,000 people in 1960's.
2. Must marry someone who does not speak your languages
3. Not all languages related; they do not exaggerate their competence (Sorenson)
4. **SUCCESS:** Children: parents' languages, but during adolescence “actively and almost suddenly” begins to speak the two or three other languages he or she has been exposed to. “In adulthood he may acquire more languages; as he approaches old age ... he will go on to perfect his knowledge of all the languages at his disposal” (p. 678).

Speaking a result, not a cause: “The Indians do not practice speaking a language they do not know well yet. Instead, they passively learn lists of words, forms, phrases in it and familiarize themselves with the sound of its pronunciation... They may make an occasional attempt to speak a new language in an appropriate situation, but if it does not come easily, they will not try to force it.” (p. 679-80). Sorenson was told that “it takes from at least one to two years to learn a new language fluently” (p. 680).

Correction: “It is rare for speakers to correct one another, and then it is usually only done with embarrassment” (Jackson, cited in Grimes, 1985, p. 392).

plenty of CI.

- little or no forced speech
- rarely corrected
- **BUT:** conscious learning of “lists of words, forms, phrases ...” before attempting to speak.

Daniel Tammet: Documentary, *Brainman* 2005. Born on a Blue Day.

- savant syndrome, a form of autism characterized by “an obsessive need to order and routine”
- extraordinary ability to deal with numbers. linguistic abilities: After ten days of study of Icelandic, Tammet was able to converse in the language with two native speakers for 15 minutes.
- holds the European and British record for memorizing pi, at 22, 514 digits. (fifth in the world; <http://www.pi-world-ranking-list.com>).
- Knows ten languages. Clearly uses BOTH systems
- Lithuanian, while working as an English teacher in Lithuania, hired a teacher: “I wrote words down as I learned them to help me visualize and remember them” (conscious learning) and read children’s books ... (acquisition)” (p. 134).
- Icelandic: he read texts outloud so his teacher could check his pronunciation (conscious learning), but: “the large amount of reading helped me to develop an intuitive sense of the language’s grammar (acquisition)” (pp. 208-209).
- “When I’m learning a language there are a number of things that I consider essential materials to begin with. The first is a good-size dictionary. I also need a variety of texts in the language, such as children’s books, stories and newspaper articles, because I prefer to learn words within whole sentences to help give me a feeling for how the language works” (p. 161). (combines acquisition and learning.)

Tammet's teaching method: (<http://www.optinnem.co.uk>). clear orientation toward grammar: The focus of each lesson is a point of grammar, e.g. possessives, reflexive sentences, comparisons, “this/that/those/these,” etc.

Before we conclude from this case that the best approach is a combination of acquisition and learning, we have to remember that Daniel Tammet has memorized pi to 22,514

places

Lomb Kato (17 languages) and Steve Kaufman (16 languages): Both grew up monolingual

A. CRUCIAL = CI, not "IMMERSION"

Lomb Kato: lived in Budapest, not much foreign language; Steve Kaufman: lived in other countries. Both note that "immersion" is not useful for beginners.

LOMB KATO "When you are abroad – especially as a tourist – it is rather difficult to make the acquaintance of someone patient, intelligent, and available enough to help you practice your foreign language skills. With the energy it requires, one can normally achieve the same results while staying at home" (p. 111). Suggestions: guided tours, movies. First listen to news in a language you are familiar with. (Alkire, p. 20).

STEVE KAUFMAN: – create your own language world, - "a world of meaningful language content for me to listen to and read with pleasure" ... "essential" when you are not in the country (p. 68) and even when you are: "a new language can be difficult to understand"

B. THE IMPORTANCE OF FINDING TRULY INTERESTING COMPREHENSIBLE INPUT

STEVE KAUFMAN: "We can only learn to use a language from interesting and meaningful content."

While taking Mandarin classes "the best sessions were those when the teacher would just talk about some interesting subjects. I did most of my learning at these more informal conversational sessions ..." (p. 38). "I still remember my lunch-time conversations in Mandarin with my teachers ... These informal gatherings were my most pleasant and relaxed learning experiences. The teachers would talk about their childhood in China or other interesting subjects" (p. 37).

LOMB KATO: "A character's fate becomes the reader's fate ... Genuine readers sail with Robinson Crusoe, throw themselves under the train with Anna Karenina, and die of tuberculosis with the Lady of the Camellias. Afterword, luckily, they come back to life." (p. 21).

The Core Novel Method: Always buy old books, and two at once; this increases the chance that at least one will be comprehensible" (Alkire, p. 19).

C. NOT SKILL-BUILDING, BUT ACQUISITION

STEVE KAUFMAN: "Occasionally I would consult grammar books ... Sometimes the explanations helped and at other times they did not I would usually remember grammar rules or explanations (if I understood them) only for a short period of time and then forget them. In the end it was only through enough exposure to the language that my grammar improved." (p. 100).

"I deliberately ignored explanations of the theory of Chinese grammar, because these theoretical explanations made no sense to me. Instead, I just accepted the various structural patterns of sentences in Chinese as normal. I knew that with enough exposure they would start to seem natural to me. I found it easier to learn the structure of a new language from frequent exposure to phrase patterns rather than trying to understand abstract grammatical explanations." (p. 42).

"Sentence structures that were strange and difficult at first eventually felt natural if I encountered them often enough in my reading and listening." (p.100).

"Do not spend your time in a vain attempt to master the language from grammar rules and word lists. You will not enjoy this tedious form of study, and it will not work." (p.90).

LOMB KATO: "What lets you avoid mistakes is not memorized laws of grammar but the right form seen, heard, and said (sic) to such an extent that it has become second nature."

"Perusing books frequently and listening to the radio diligently allow us to encounter the right forms again and again. If our interest gets our heart and mind to accept these patterns, we can recall them quickly when we need them." (p. 93).

Recommended optional grammar for adult students, but only the simple forms. Teaching grammar to children is "absurd" (Krashen and Kiss, 1996).

"Many excellent philologists who with impressive confidence in the most abstract realms of a foreign language need an interpreter to buy a streetcar ticket or order lunch." (p. 91)

D. CORRECTION.

LOMB KATO: Correction can make you "sick to your stomach." She recalled one situation, when, as an interpreter translating into English, she said "unorganic" instead of "inorganic," clearly a slip (Dr. Lomb had a Ph.D. in Chemistry). Even though the translation was successful, she was haughtily corrected by another interpreter. After that, she said, "I was lost." (Krashen and Kiss, 1996).

But elsewhere: "Uncorrected mistakes are very perilous! If one keeps repeating wrong formulas, they take root in the mind and one will be inclined to accept them as authentic" (Alkire, p. 21). In other words, the fear is that we can acquire from our own imperfect output.

E. KNOW EVERY WORD? (GRADUAL ACQUISITION)

STEVE KAUFMAN: "You can ... expect to forget whatever you look up in a dictionary pretty quickly." (p. 133).

LOMB KATO: You don't need to know every word you see – don't need to look up every new word: ...do not get obsessed with words you don't know or structures you don't understand. Build comprehension on what you already know. Do not automatically reach for the dictionary if you encounter a word or two you don't recognize. If the expression is important, it will reappear and explain itself; if it is not so important, it is no big loss to gloss over it." (131-2).

F. PERFECTION (Over-use of the Monitor)

STEVE KAUFMAN: "I became fluent in French by giving up the traditional approach of trying to perfect my grammar. Perfection did not matter anymore, only communicating did. I no longer disliked language learning. I read what I liked even if I did not understand it all. I spoke with people who interested me..." (pp. 13-14)

"Try to force yourself from the desire to achieve perfection, which is vanity and will hinder your progress. Instead, seek to communicate naturally and enjoy yourself. Your improvement will be constant although uneven." (p. 89).

"You will often feel that you are struggling, when in fact you are communicating quite successfully. The key to successful communication is to try to relax and enjoy the experience. Focus on the meaning you are trying to communicate, not on how well you are doing. Do not think that your grammar and pronunciation are being judged ... your listeners want to understand you." (pp. 128-9).

LOMB KATO: "If you feel that you must speak like a native... you will be inhibited."

"... language is the only thing worth knowing even poorly ... Propagation of half-truths is not an advancement of science but a hindrance. For the language learner, however, it would be a pity to fall silent because he or she doesn't know with certainty whether a form will hit home or not" (p.111).

G. IS THERE A GIFT FOR LANGUAGES?

LOMB KATO: "The duration and intensity of activity in a language is what is crucial, not a mystic gift for languages" (p. 77). "A gift for languages is not a matter of intellect but of character." (p. 79), "self-confidence and openness" (p. 79)

STEVE KAUFMAN: "The successful foreign language speakers take for granted that they will have to communicate in another language, and do not feel that it is an unusual thing. It is natural to them." (p. 96) "Accept the fact that you were born with the ability to learn to speak a new language..." (p. 95).

H. LANGUAGE PARENT

STEVE KAUFMAN: "My closest colleague at the Canandia Embassy in Tokyo was the Japanese Commercial Officer, Mr. "Nick" Yazaki. He was a major help ... He (was) inclined to express himself in a most careful, painstaking and long-winded way ... Finding a native speaker who is patient and supportive can be invaluable in learning a new language."

Conclusion

Table one presents the cases discussed here. The only column that perfectly correlates with success is the first one, comprehensible input.

Table 1

	CI	Correction	Grammar	forced speech
Armando	Yes	No	No	No
Vaupes	Yes	No	?	No
Tammet	Yes	?	yes	?
Lomb Kato	Yes	Yes	some	?
Kaufman	Yes	No	some	?

1. **CI is the main source of fluency & accuracy: reading and listening**
2. **Grammar is ignored or secondary**
3. **No forced production, silent period**
4. **Correction not done or only a little**
5. **High interest/compelling input**
6. **Many ways of making input comprehensible**
7. **Patience**

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