

Working with Language Helpers

Second Language Acquisition

Introduction

- Names in “the tradition”:
informants (too political?),
language helpers (too demeaning?),
language resource person (too technical?)
language associate (too nondescript?)
nurturer (too ‘wimpy’?)

Do Labels Matter? (WLAC: World Language Acquisition Centre)

“When seeking a nurturer, we have found that they will define themselves by their idea of what you want, unless you *choose the name and role* for them. It is best to choose a role of a family member, referring to them as your 'big brother' or 'aunt', rather than 'tutor' or 'teacher'. Other roles used have been language “helper” or conversation practice partner. It also helps to *refer to your sessions* with a term that is not linked to school or study, but rather, practice or visit or conversation.”

A. Characteristics of Good Language Helpers

- A valuable language helper is one who:

Know (Knowledge)	Be (Character)	Do (Behavior/Skills)

- With the above in mind, tell people (colleagues/nationals) the type of person you want and depend on others to help you find that person. In many societies, doing all the recruiting on your own is not acceptable. If people know what you want, they can help. (Note: A teacher may not be the best helper.)

Here are some guidelines to follow when you evaluate potential LHs. You will want several to help you in different ways.

- Role: Some people are good storytellers, others are good at defining words. Some people may have lots of social networks and will be eager to help you become acquainted. If they are teachers or leaders of the community, they might be good at correcting you.
- Clear pronunciation: No speech defects, missing teeth, hearing problems.
- Age differences:

Older people	Younger people
You get a rich exposure to the traditional culture and language	You might be more comfortable practicing with children at first. Young people may use more borrowed vocabulary, etc.

- Educational differences

Educated people	Uneducated people
They will be able to write materials, and may be able to explain their language. They may have more confidence in correcting your errors.	They tend to use more “natural language” and can give you lots of good cultural information.

But, remember that education is not the same as intelligence

- Men versus women? This may vary depending on the culture. Generally it is better to work with the same gender, unless you are working with your spouse.
- Christian versus non-Christian? The non-Christian may be more open to tell you about the underlying belief system.
- Cultural insider versus cultural outsider? The ones who are most eager to work with you may be on the fringe of their own culture and may not be acceptable language helpers.
- Prestige versus available? You may not want someone who has many interests in other areas such as politics, religion, etc as a primary language helper. They may be just too busy.

B. Securing Community ‘Language Helper’ Friends (PILAT §D)

Goal--To establish yourself in the community as a serious and aggressive language learner with a select number of people, who are always at a certain location.

You want people who will be willing to have you stop by on a regular basis. They will patiently give you lots of language practice and you will give them lots of ‘cheer’!

To get the number of ‘friends’ you want, you must contact lots of people. The following projects will help ‘break the ice’ and make it easy for people to talk to you. The purpose for doing these is to begin to find those that seem most willing to help you, those that you could follow up on as you establish your language practice route.

Other than getting over your inhibitions, your biggest challenge may be that you can’t communicate at all. So what do you do?

Simple Statements: Well, you need some simple statements to use when you approach a total stranger in the public arena. Learn these: Make a proper greeting. Then say something like, 'I am learning (or trying to learn)_____. Can you help me?' If they agree, do one of the following two projects:

a. **Simple projects for them to read (if they are literate)**

Never mind if you already know these or have already done them with lots of people. Right now it's **people-finding**, not language-learning, remember? Have these **written out on separate cards** ahead of time. You will naturally want to repeat after them, so go ahead and do it. Say: 'Please read this.'

- 1) The alphabet
- 2) Numbers 1-10 (or 1-20)
- 3) The days of the week
- 4) The months of the year

b. **Simple pictures for them to name (if they are not literate)**

Have sets of 5 pictures with you. Instead of 'Please read this', say, 'What's this?' Say it after them.

- 1) 5 animals
- 2) 5 birds
- 3) 5 fruits
- 4) 5 vegetables
- 5) 5 colors

Then be sure you know how to express thanks appropriately and what to say when you leave.

Don't hang around too long unless there is some reason to stay. **Go on to other people** and do the same projects. Get to as many people as possible.

Follow-up Project

The above projects are plenty the first time. However, you need another visit or two to check to see if your hunch is right; that is, that they are indeed glad to have you come. So here are other things to do on a second visit. This time ask them, 'Can you help me again?' Then point to the following and ask, 'What's this?'

- a. Parts of the body
- b. Clothing
- c. Items near the person you're talking to
- d. Other foods

Reminder: It is the **relationship/friendship possibilities** that are in focus here, not the words or the project itself. When you get back to your home after doing these, you should not say, "I've had practice learning these words (or got such-and-such written down)"; but rather "I've jotted down these places where I think people are willing to have me come back." (If it's the words you want, you can more easily get them out of a dictionary or from a bi-lingual speaker.) What you want here are **community friends**.

C. Securing a Language Helper (from WLAC unless [p] = PILAT)

1. Hiring Etiquette

- [p] If a 'friend' finds someone for you, it may be difficult to suggest a trial period, because people don't like to be put on trial. See if it's possible, nevertheless. Try for 1-2 weeks. It's a ticklish process, but you do want someone that you can work with, and the only way to find out is to try it.
- [p] Find out how agreements are made culturally. Don't impose a Western contractual system if it doesn't fit. Contracts are useless if they are not their way of life.

2. Payment issues

- Inquire how that culture provides compensation—with money or another way, daily/weekly/other, directly given to the person or sent, etc. Don't decide on your own what he/she might be worth. In both overpaying and underpaying, you will lose respect.
- Survey what fair local salaries are and pay by local salary scale rather than salaries from your home country, pay people by the month for a set number of hours per week rather than by the hour, pay based on a salary for a semi-skilled worker [not university professional].
- Don't ask another foreigner for advice on this, don't ask a relative of the one you want to hire for this, ask generically about local salaries rather than asking, "How much should I [the foreigner] pay for language lessons?"
- Be cautious regarding trade for English lessons, it is often hard to keep this balanced, and you may not have the time for this.
- Base on friendship (more usable when advanced and have many relationships),
- 2-5 people can share a nurturer, especially for beginner phases, also, 2-3 people could hire one person full-time and divide up the hours.
- At the level of ethnographic interviewing - exchange favors (say 'yes' when they ask for something), rather than paying for the lesson.
- They may regard it as an honor that you are asking them to help you with language.

3. Termination Etiquette

Find a culturally appropriate way to do this, as well as to give feedback. Often you cannot just say 'don't come back'.

D. Working with Language Helpers

1. **Your helper is the *source of data*, not the *analyst*.** Most native speakers are not 'linguists' and have never asked objective questions about their language; they just talk. So:
 - Don't put your helper on the spot. Ask **what, how, and when**; but be very careful with **why** ("Why do you say it that way?"). Most of the time, why is a challenge-question and puts people on the defensive. (Language teacher-- "Americans are so **cause-oriented**; they want an

explanation for everything, even when no explanation exists!”)

- If teachers/helpers can't explain **why**, they tend to feel either **stupid** or **angry--stupid** in the sense that “there must be an answer to this and I don't know what it is” or **angry** in the sense that “there isn't any explanation for this but this person keeps bugging me for one.” Sometimes helpers may give a ‘lame’ explanation so as not to lose face or to get you off their back. So lay off! Don't put your helper through that. On the other hand, do have an inquiring mind!
- Be careful with the terms you use (e.g., “Is there a glottal stop at the end of that?”). Indeed, later you may ‘teach’ your helper the name of a sound (glottal stop), but at the beginning, ask, “Where is your tongue?” or “What are you doing in the back of your mouth?”
- Keep the onus on you if your helper isn't doing what you want. Don't say to your helper, “I don't think you understand yet.” The problem is you; you haven't made yourself clear.

2. Your helper has more than language in mind when he works with you. He is also very sensitive to relationship. Therefore:

- He will be ‘checking’ to see if your guard is up regarding correction. Does your face show that you want it? Does correction upset you? If the ‘message’ to him is that it does, he will back off, because relationship is more important than language. He puts his relationship with you on the line every time he corrects you, because he does not know how you will respond.
- Constantly express appreciation for correction and keep soliciting more. You may have to tell your helper not to be ‘spooked’ by your frustration when you can't (yet) say something right--that you are only upset with yourself. (Good helpers will provide correction, but only as long as they see improvement.)

3. Native speakers tend to talk differently to non-native speakers than to other native speakers. They pay no attention to rate of speed, idioms, contractions, colloquialisms, etc., when they talk to each other; but they must when talking to learners. Your helper may feel that rough, colloquial speech should not be what you should learn first; and indeed maybe you shouldn't. On the other hand, you don't want to sound stilted either. Strive for balance.

4. When working on pronunciation, be careful about asking, “Am I saying that right?” It's very difficult to answer that question. What do you mean by ‘right’? That you are saying it like a native? That there is no room for improvement? If your helper says yes, what does he mean? That as long as he can figure it out, it's okay? Rather, it's better to assume that you are not saying it like a native, that you are in process and that you will improve over time. By the way, if your helper says yes, he gets himself off the hook; he doesn't have to correct you.

Remember

1. Expect to be 'totally out of it'

You will find in doing this that people will say things to you and to each other that you don't understand (any of it!). You may have to say, 'I don't understand.' But stick with your project(s) and a short time frame.

As you begin to select certain people, shops or stores, keep a record of your new friends' names and family members. Have a page for each one.

2. Reciprocate

For those who become your informal helpers, look for ways to contribute to their lives if possible--non-monetarily. See if there is a way to get into their personal lives or tune in to their personal situation. Inquire about personal needs, family concerns, problems they have, issues they are facing, good things they are experiencing, hopes they have, discouragements.

Look for possible (culturally appropriate) ways to help, sympathize, rejoice with, encourage, counsel, and pray for. Of course this assumes facility in the language and you're a long way from that, but do have in mind some way you can reciprocate.

E. Some Voices of Experience: World Language Acquisition Centre (WLAC), GPA

<i>what didn't work</i>	<i>what worked</i>
thinking the right nurturer happens by chance or "luck"	pray for God to provide the right person. Then even if the other qualifications aren't met, you can trust that this relationship is from God for this time.
informants, someone with very strong ulterior motives	trustworthy referral, someone with good judgment
un-teachable teacher	teachable ex-teacher
	teacher who has worked with foreigners before (usually are nurturers, since they have chosen this line of work) - some of them are eager to apply new techniques to their other teaching.
from wrong people group, social status, city vs country	person from appropriate social network
leaving commitment open-ended (and they have expectation of permanent position)	make initial short agreement for the arrangement, this helps you avoid awkward terminations
unreliable (can't count on them showing up) - of course, you need to explore why they are acting unreliably, in case it is your cultural mistake causing them to do so	reliable (comes according to their word)
when you are beyond beginner level, if nurturer has never had life experience, or has not explored life or left home, may not be able to help you gain language you need.	when you are beyond beginner level, it helps to have a helper with maturity, life experience
'drill sergeant' type personality	patient, nurturing personality
someone who wants to learn English (or your home language)	university students, may be more language aware, may need part time job, be more interested in other ways of thinking
someone who favors the boss, the man, the eldest	someone who treats learners equally
older people (may be more set in ways, you want to learn how your peers are talking)	someone with energy, not inhibited (willing to do whatever it takes to get idea across), personality match
a marginalized person, already isolated from communities of practice	local, connected to family and community, so he/she can connect you with communities of practice
speech impediment, no teeth, too many gold teeth	people who speak clearly and well
young men who speak slurred or too slangy	trained announcer
chews tobacco during class	
someone with whom you have a prior relationship, which might be damaged - better to recommend them to another foreign friend who needs a nurturer	
having one nurturer for too long, who doesn't help you move out of your zpd (zone of proximal development)	multiple nurturers - to get variety
a nurturer who wants to teach book language, the 'proper' way [rather than the way normal people talk]	a learner who understands that you want to learn to understand those around you
someone who wants to talk about the language and culture in English, rather than in the host language	at least for the beginner phase, a helper who understands, but doesn't speak your native language
someone who won't let you talk	
just trying to find a nurturer through connections of friends when new in a big city	putting out an ad in the neighborhood [preferably written in host language]