

A Little Invitation to the Growing Participator Approach

Starting point is not “the learner”, but the host people

The starting point for understanding Growing Participation is not “the learner”. Rather, it is the host people. This is the vantage point from which the GP *chooses* to view the process. It is other centred. It is always asking, “Who am I in their experience now?” The starting point is thus not something abstract and theoretical, but an actual, literal community of right-now, living, breathing, walking, talking, densely interconnected, interacting people. That community’s members mediate their shared experience and thinking by means of their particular shared symbols and tools. Their joint life is also an ongoing lived story, continuously under construction (and reconstruction) and dependent on the unique, shared story-construction pieces the community has at its disposal. Their lived story is a stream of goal-directed human action, enabled by their shared practices. Many of the actions involve talking and listening, which in fact dominate the stream of human action in many ways, though they are inseparable from the stream as a whole. Growing participators following the GPA want that community to take them into itself, making them right-now, living, breathing, walking, talking participants in it. Only members of that community can do that, by granting GPs the status of “legitimate peripheral participants” and interacting with them in their growth zones (see “zones of proximal development”).

First dimension is the sociocultural one

Growing participation begins when one or more members of that community are confronted with a newcomer who has no ability to follow their practices, their lived story, and thus who is unable to participate in the host world, but who want to do so. Host people will succeed in nurturing newcomers into their world if they interact adequately with them in their growth zone. Trained GPs know how to facilitate the host people’s efforts. (It begins with “play” and ends with “serious business”!)

Host people initially experience the newcomer as a relative non-entity in their lived story—someone who can be a limited topic within the story, but not a participant in its continuing construction. The newcomer presents a relatively “blank face” to host people within their story, having little *identity* among them beyond whatever stereotypes there are for this particular variety of outsider. As host people nurture the newcomer into their world, that relatively blank face increasingly takes on unique personal features and character. Slowly a special person emerges and evolves into a full-blown participant in the construction of the host story.

As a second *dimension* (and not a second *component*), the cognitive dimension is thoroughly sociocultural throughout

Host people themselves primarily came to know their languacultural world in early childhood because older people talked to them, and around them, about the contexts in which they found themselves. GPs following the GPA want host people to talk to them about much that they observe in the host context. Until host people have talked to the GPs adequately (in the host language, not

the GPs language), GPs are simply converting what they “observe” in the context into the meanings that those “observed” objects and events would have in their own home worlds. The GP needs to be nurtured into host mental life, which is inherently and thoroughly social. Early on, being talked to by host people in host ways (and understanding what they hear!) is the path into host mental life for GPs. In time, hearing host people talk to one another will also provide much of the path to further mental growth.

In the cognitive dimension, comprehension processes are primary

For that reason, and also because listening to and understanding host people is an act of love and self-giving, *comprehension ability*—the ability to hear speech and grasp the story that it arouses in host hearers—comes first in the GPA value system. *Spoken production ability* is secondary and derivative. In the very early days, in fact, the GPA advocates learning to understand speech while personally remaining silent and responding nonverbally to the nurturer. This is another facet of centering growing participation around the host people and their needs and gifts: listening first!

Among the wide range of host practices, their use of a massive stock of words and common word combinations is central. Each word is a host practice! Therefore whenever GPs are learning to understand host words and word combinations, from the very first moments of growing participation, he is seriously appropriating key practices of the host people—*aspects of their speaking practices* that will be open the way to so much further growth.

Conversational interaction comes next

Since *conversational interaction ability* is second in importance only to *comprehension ability*, during the early days of growing participation, the GPs soon add two-way spoken interaction to their efforts at appropriating host practices by listening alone. Two-way conversation in which host people meet the GPs in their growth zone is the engine of the GPs’ development of their own internal host mental life. If you listen in (with understanding!) on a GP and a nurturer interacting in the GP’s growth zone, you’ll “see” the GP’s mental development happening right out in the open. A GP’s mental development in this new world is, as a minimum, a two-person process. Internal to the GP, there is a process of “resonance” going on in all conversations: As the GP and host person engage together in discourse in a particular area, the GP’s speech in that discourse area is being moulded in the direction of the nurturer’s speech. For example, in conversing about weather, over time the GP is drawn to talk about weather more and more similarly to the ways in which the nurturer talks about weather—and so on with a wide variety of discourse areas.

In conversational interaction, comprehension ability continues to hold a special place.

Comprehension saves! As long as the GPs *understands* what is said to them by a host conversation partner, they can find some way, by hook or by crook (using “communication strategies” and “negotiating meaning”) to respond to the conversation partner so as to get their point across. However, if the GPs are unable to understand much of what the host person is saying, they are “up a creek without a paddle” (stuck) in the conversation. Embarrassing!

As comprehension ability enables conversational interaction, so conversational interaction is also of major importance in the development of comprehension ability. It is an upward spiral. Host people relate to GPs conversationally in ways they can handle (in their growth zone). They also assist (“scaffold”) the GP in responding intelligibly.

“Accuracy” (We prefer to say, “host-likeness”.)

The GPA encourages GPs to pay attention to host patterns of conversational turn-taking, issues of appropriateness (pragmatics), style (for example, talking as host people *talk*, not as they *write*), etc. At the level of individual sentences, the GPA holds that sounding host-like in narrow terms of grammar and pronunciation is less important than sounding host-like in those broader ways. The speech of most GPs will forever contain non-host-like “errors,” even in the case of GPs who happen to be obsessed with grammar. In addition, they will always speak with an accent. Mercifully, the frequency of “grammar errors” can decrease over time. The GPA advocates strategies that facilitate movement toward host-sounding grammar in spoken production. These include input flooding, structured input and “record yourself for feedback” and “focus on form”. Such activities, without abandoning the spirit of two-way interaction with the nurturer, strongly draw much attention to grammatical form, thus raising awareness, leading to gradual improvement. However, we keep in mind that the first role of grammar for host people is in *comprehension*, not in *spoken production*. (Grammatical elements are primarily comprehension cues.) To the extent that grammatical features come to function in host-like ways in GPs’ *comprehension processes*, the GPs will become increasingly sensitive to ways in which their own speech is not host-like, since their own speech will clash with their own comprehension processes.

A similar principle applies to pronunciation. The GPA encourages GPs to work toward host-like *hearing*, as the biggest contributors toward more host-like pronunciation. Considerable progress in the intelligibility of GPs’ pronunciation needs to be made early in the process of growing participation. Ideally, some specific coaching in pronunciation will also be provided by a language learning advisor. Still, learning to *hear* well will have an impact over the long haul, and that can be achieved without a phonetics coach, by using “sound discrimination” activities that involve live interaction with a nurturer.

Literacy and bi-languaculturalism or multi-languaculturalism

In some people groups, host practices will involve reading and writing in various ways. In line with the role and importance of literacy practices in host life, GPs will be nurtured into them at the optimal time.

The host practices may also involve host people’s participation in the languacultural world of neighbouring people groups or the larger national community (bi-languaculturalism or multi-languaculturalism). As life goes on and time permits, GPs are nurtured into these aspects of host life as well (for example, nurtured into using a “national language” for functions that host people use the national language for). Growing participation is a long road. That brings us to...

The time dimension is more than a footnote in the GPA

The GPA makes much of time. The GPA paints a picture of change over time in both the Sociocultural and Cognitive Dimensions. The way host people experience GPs, and the GPs' roles and identities in the host story, should change *steadily* from the time of arrival to the end of the sojourn. The GPA tries to be realistic about how much can happen how soon, while also providing a roadmap and (when combined with the [Six-Phase Programme](#) or a similar one) a detailed set of activities to perpetuate steady change.

The GPA is concerned that GPs reach a path of self-sustaining growth, where they cannot stop growing—as long as they don't stop participating—because they understand almost everything they hear host people say and observe host people doing, so that what they hear and see is always feeding their further growth. Until they clearly reach [Phase 6](#), GPs need to keep employing “supercharged participation sessions,” with special host people—usually nurturers who are paid for their time. As special nurturers, and other host people with whom GPs share life continue to nurture them into the host world, increasingly the fruits of those host people's nurturing efforts are a spring of pleasure to them! Growing Participation, after all, starts and ends with them, not with me.