

Introduction to the Socio-cultural Dimension of Language Learning

Introduction to the Socio-cultural Dimension of Language Learning

By Greg Thomson, Version 1.0, March 2006

Language learning in the first dimension.....	1
Living by means of tools: physical, verbal, mental.....	5
Our lives as lived stories.....	10
Not language and culture, but languaculture.....	14
Languacultures as multigenerational living creations.....	22
Adult Language Learning as Growing Participation.....	23
Zone of Proximal Development and Host People as Nurturers.....	26
Changing Relationships: From Paid Nurturers to Communities of practice.....	32
Developing identities.....	37
Experiencing my language learning as a new kind of story.....	44
How Language Learning Happens In The Sociocultural Dimension: An Example.....	47
References and Further Reading.....	52

Language learning in the first dimension

For school-educated people around the world, understanding language learning from a socio-cultural viewpoint requires quite a change in thinking. [\[1\]](#) So get ready! In fact, I find the issues in this dimension of language learning much more difficult to grasp initially than those connected with the Cognitive Dimension. I recommend to the reader that you construct your own understanding of the things I am about to say. Over time, if we interact more, in person or in writing, our two understandings will come closer together (which is not to say we'll agree). You may even choose to delve into this area by reading extensively on your own. In any case, your initial understanding of this section will, I believe, be of much value to you, as my initial understanding of the sociocultural dimension was of great value to me, and the value continues to increase as my understanding continues to sharpen.

(This article is written especially for participants in our Language Learning Advisor Workshops—LLAWs—and even more especially, for the trainers in those workshops. I hope it will be of interest and benefit to others as well.)

What and Where Is Language? The Traditional, Cognitivist Understanding

From a traditional perspective, “language,” as a topic of discussion, is an impersonal thing, containing parts of speech, (nouns, verbs, etc.), grammatical relations (subjects, predicates, etc.), grammatical patterns (phrases, clauses, sentences, perhaps declensions and conjugations), and so on. People talk as if this “thing” that they call “language” is “out there” somewhere (maybe in textbooks, maybe in individual people’s heads), and that language learners need to get this “thing” into their own heads. Others view language as an individual brain function, existing separately in the head of each person who has learned it. These ideas illustrate cognitivist understandings of language learning, as opposed to the socio-cultural views which I will introduce in this article. You are most likely a cognitivist! Socio-culturalists are still relatively rare.

Cognitivist assumptions go unnoticed in the bulk of writing on second language “acquisition” (SLA), as when two researchers state, “...we hypothesized that authentic experience [of the language being learned] is important” (Leaver & Atwell, 2002). Maybe it *is*, maybe it *isn’t*. Need to find out. But obviously, to those authors’ way of thinking, something else *is* important! That something else seems to be textbooks and classroom activities that focus on getting the language into the students’ heads. Taking that much for granted, they hypothesise that, in addition, social life with host people might be important!

In this article, by contrast, I take the position that if one had to choose to neglect a dimension of language learning, it is better to ignore the cognitive than the sociocultural dimension. But better still to ignore neither.

What and Where Is Language? Life in Community

For me, the proper place to look for language learning is *in the fabric of the life of the language learner living in a host society*. For many of us growing up, language learning was something radically smaller than that. It was seen as something that happens in a classroom far from any community that used the language that we were “studying”.

The fact is, language learning takes a long time. Someone has estimated that a child spends about ten thousand hours getting to a basic level of ability in its language. For adults too, learning a language to a nearly normal level of ability is not a short-term prospect. Leaver & Atwell (2002), had access to a large number of adults who regularly function in second languages that they have learned after childhood at what we’ll call a “near-normal” level^[2]. They could not find any who reached that level of ability before the ages of “30-50”. Generally, those they did find were people who rely heavily on

the language in question in their day-to-day work, and spend a lot of time in the host country of that language, or otherwise with native users of that language.

All of these people believed that the traditional language courses they took when they were just starting out were indispensable to reaching their “high” levels of ability. Yet only a fifth of them went to a language school to improve their ability at later stages (though most believed they should have). A huge amount of growth happened in them over many years. That is the only way to become “near-normal” as a host language user (for both sociocultural and cognitive reasons). It’s a long road indeed. A minute portion of the growth happens in the classroom. Most of it happens in life. (Although for the overwhelming majority of people who undertake to learn another language, most of the growth on the road to near-normal doesn’t happen at all.)

In this article I emphasise the long journey. Of course, we are interested in what happens in the classroom, too, but I recommend we look at the big picture, and make the classroom be the servant of what happens in the bigger picture, rather than letting the tiny classroom picture be the lord of the big picture. Thus it seems to make sense to treat the sociocultural dimension of language learning as primary, and the cognitive dimension as subservient.

Language Is All About People

In fact there is little about human life that isn’t at least partly about other people if we analyse it closely. We are extremely social creatures. There are some bacteria that form tubes that they use to attach themselves to other bacteria and swap genetic material (such as the gene that makes them immune to penicillin). It’s an automatic biological process for them, but I like to think that they have an urge to become part of one another. People are like that. A wife comes in from an outing, and she spends a few minutes passing key bits of the experience to her husband. Now her experience is also in his memory. People have an urge to connect and become part of one another.

When people fulfil the urge to connect and become part of one another, the results are relationships, communities and cultures. But besides talking (we’ll get back to that) most human activity is social in nature. Choosing to not litter, for example. Driving. Crossing the street. The jobs we do all day.

Even things that seem private are often social. I spray bathroom freshener with the bathroom door shut (and quickly open the door and shut it again behind me as I exit). That is social (sociable!) – consideration for relationships. The most private thing we do, *thinking*, is a social activity, according to Vygotsky (1987) and his followers, who show us that thinking is merely social interaction turned inward (and Bakhtin, who showed us that our thought life is commonly conversational in character— See Wertsch, 1991).

My mother was part of a big world of human life when I first arrived on the scene. I wasn’t. She (and other older people) participated in my life. She talked me through situations, including helping me to solve my little problems by talking to me. I started little by little to get the hang of how she did that,

and soon when I had a little problem, I would talk myself through it. Over time, my outward talking became more and more chopped down, until another person wouldn't hear it at all. I continued talking to myself all the time, on the inside, doing what my mother had first shown me how to do on the outside. "Hmm," I think to myself, "Where is the coffee? Maybe in that cupboard? Yeah." I may not "hear" the words with my mind's ear.

Psycholinguists have accumulated overwhelming evidence that the sound of a word in our mind, and the concept belonging to that word, are separate things, and one can be active without the other being active. So using language to think doesn't mean "hearing the words" in our mind, but it at least means using the concepts belonging to the words, such as the concept of coffee, or cupboard, or the concept of a policeman or of a golf ball. It seems, though, that the more intensive our mental talking becomes, the more we also "hear the words" in our head that we are using to help us think.

Both the sound of the words in our minds, and equally or even more so, their concepts, are social in their origin, the result of people interacting with us out loud as they helped us navigate through early life experiences.

Living by means of tools: physical, verbal, mental

Human life, according to Vygotsky is "mediated" —that is, we use *means* to do the things we do. This fact profoundly distinguishes humans from animals. Our ability to create things and use the things that we create in order to create more things and to mould our experience are essential to the whole experience of being human. However, this is not a matter of the creative acts of isolated individuals, but the heritage of collective action, and the ongoing process of human interaction that produces the richness of human life.

Human Experience "Mediated" By Tools

Human life, then, is not experienced directly, but by means of intermediate instruments. A baseball (or cricket) bat is the means for striking the ball. The bat and ball are the means for playing the game. The game is the means of entertainment; entertainment activities are a means of emotional refreshment, and so on.

Animals interact directly with their environment. For example, they walk around and bite edible bits off of trees, or eat smaller animals. The only means the deer uses to chew her food are her teeth. People, however, use tools — other means aid the process of chewing food, including knives and meat grinders and pots to boil things in and so on. Animals are directly connected to their environment, while people live primarily via means — "intermediate" things.

We can talk of the *means* as the *pieces* from which we build much of our human world. A *bed* is a piece of our world. So is a *hammer*. So is a *street*. We don't just connect directly to our environment

as it presents itself to us. We *build* much of our ultimate environment out of means for living in the raw environment.

It also helps to think of these *means* as the *tools* by means of which we live our lives. A *hammer* is a tool for making things from wood. A *bed* is a tool for sleeping. A *street* is a tool for driving.

Human Thought Mediated by “Tools”

The really surprising thing that Vygotsky shows us is that *human thought is mediated*. At one level thinking is a physiological process, part of the biological world we live in. However, we don't connect to those physiological processes directly, but rather we use *means* for thinking! Now it might take some effort to bend your mind around this idea. What are some tools (means) that we use for thinking? Well, we might count on our fingers (if you want to call fingers tools), or we might count by tying knots in a string. The string is a tool that is helping us to think about how many there are of something (quantities).

I was trying to solve a puzzle about three cats and three chickens who were travelling together and needed to cross a river in a rowboat, but the rowboat could only hold two animals. If the cats ever outnumber the chickens on one of the two shores of the river, the cats will eat the chickens. How can they all get across the river without any chickens being eaten?

I took out some coins, three quarters and three pennies. The pennies were the chickens, and the quarters were the cats. Moving them across an imaginary river in pairs, I was able to quickly solve this problem. The coins were tools for thinking, for problem solving. I just couldn't succeed in thinking my way through the problem without tools! My thoughts were *mediated* by the coins.

The term *mediate* does give the impression that the means are something in between me and my thoughts, as though the thoughts exist apart from the means. But the *mediational means*, in this case, the coins aren't just something in between me and my thoughts: they partly *determine* the thoughts that I end up thinking (in this case, the story of how the river was crossed), just as tools in general (means in general) partly *determine* much of the world as we experience it, rather than simply bridging between us and an already existing world of experience.

Vygotsky argued that beyond infancy, human thinking is normally and fundamentally *mediated*, that is, carried out with, and radically altered by, the use of means. People might use a tool such as a knot in a string, a calculator, or a computer as mediational means for thinking about quantities (how many jelly beans in a jar). However, having *words for numbers* is an enormously powerful tool for thinking about quantities. In fact, by far the biggest bag of tools by which we *mediate* our thought life is *language*.

How Language Mediates Our Thought and Experience

What are some things we do in our thought life? We choose what to pay attention to, we recognise objects and actions, we commit things to memory, we recall things, including whole connected sequences of events, we figure out solutions to problems, we make plans, and so on (see Nelson, 1996). In all of these mental activities language provides a huge set of indispensable tools for thinking.

But the way in which language mediates thought and experience goes deeper still. And this next step in our story is the hardest step to bend our minds around: to say that we mediate our thought life by language is really to say that we mediate our experience of everything by language. And note that this does not mean that there is a world of experience just sitting out there, and we can use language to describe it. Neither does it mean that we have fully formed thoughts which we can use language to express. The tools of language actually have a huge role in forming the world as we experience it and the thoughts that we think.

Now that opens up a very different understanding of language from the one most of us are used to. We are enormously reliant on how people talk about the world in order to experience it the way we do, and we make sense out of the world by applying (socially given) word concepts to it. We don't see a physical object with various colours and curvatures, but rather we see a *policeman*, or a *golf ball*. There is little left of the world we experience once we take away the concepts that come to us through talking about the world. Take the word *policeman* away from me, and now you've taken away all the things that have been said to me since infancy about policemen (or nowadays, police officers), all the stories that included them, all the beliefs formed about them and so on. Not much of life is left when ways of talking are removed, when this bag of tools for living is removed. Ways of talking mediate between us and our lives, not as though our lives are just there to be talked about by the mediational means, but in fact, creating the particular life that we experience in all its richness. (A time of reflection is encouraged if this idea seems difficult.)

The fact that the meaningful pieces of our world are closely tied to the words used to talk about them affects our understanding of language learning. Each language is a different bag of tools. Therefore the world experienced by members of each language group is a very different world from the world experienced by members of other language groups.

In our old way of thinking about languages, we may have seen there to be a single world, with different languages just being different ways of talking about that very same world. In that story, learning vocabulary in another language is a matter of removing the old set of labels that are attached to the objects, actions, etc. in this shared world and attaching a new set of labels. In our socioculturalist story of language learning, by contrast, we see that the labels don't attach to things already there, but are used to help create what is there. Consider the object we call a *policeman*. All that is really there in the world is a man (if that). Our language—the word *policeman* and all the stories we've heard about policemen and other things we've been told about them (all of the

discourses we've heard about policeman), and the resulting *policeman*-concept that we share as users of the same language—gives us an “object” to perceive and talk about and react to that is much more than just a man. Our ongoing experience of policemen, aided by the word concept, in turn further influences that concept. Word concepts (and other pieces of language, such as common phrases, proverbs, myths, textbooks, etc.) are the tools that make our world the way it is. And as noted, each language is a different collection of world-making tools, making a different world.

Consider a single physical object, produced in China and exported to America as a *bathrobe*, or exported to Russia as a *khalat*. Physically they are indistinguishable. But they are different tools, and their roles in building American life versus building Russian life are different roles. For Americans to mediate their experience of life with bathrobes, and to mediate their thoughts about life with the word *bathrobe* is a different matter from that of Russians mediating their experience of life with *khalats*, and their thoughts about life with the word *khalat*.

So far we have said that a language is a bag of tools by which we create/live/experience life. Alternatively, we can say that the “pieces” of language are the pieces available to us for story making. Different languages build different stories because they have different pieces available to them for story building. Americans have bathrobes and Russians have *khalats* to build their stories out of, even though to the naked eye (that is, the eye without language) the bathrobe and the *khalat* are the same physical object.

Our lives as lived stories

An American in Russia may exclaim, “I keep seeing women going to the neighbourhood convenience store in their bathrobes.” That, to them, is a noteworthy observation. To the Russian women, they are in the store in their *khalat*, not a noteworthy observation. Now if they got up to give a lecture in a *khalat*, that would be noteworthy. When things happen as we expect them too, we don't take notice. When they happen as we *don't* expect them to, we *do* take notice. When we take notice, we commonly talk about what we noticed, often to others, but at least to ourselves. What we notice seems interesting, worthy of comment. So we tell a story about it: “Today I was in the convenience store and I saw a woman in her bathrobe.” Jerome Bruner (1990) found that when four-year-olds heard a story with an unexpected feature (say, with mention that a child was crying at her birthday party), they would retell the story by adding an extra sub-story to account for the unexpected features (why the girl might have been crying). That is what we commonly do with unexpected parts of stories: tell another story within the bigger story.

Stories are a far more important part of life than many people realise. (After all, they are just what is expected.) Think of a story. It is not just a sequence of pure, observable events (remember that our world doesn't have such events—events are experienced through the mediation of our languages). I probably won't say, “The palm of her hand made contact with my cheek”. I might say, “She held my cheek in her hand,” or “She patted my cheek”, or “She slapped my face” or “Her palm happened to

strike against my cheek.” In other words, our way of saying “what happened” doesn’t just present what happened in the simplest sense of a pure physical event. Rather what I say tells you both of the event and of my *understanding* of the event. Well, some might ask, “What *really* happened?” Would that life were always so clear-cut, and also independent of our ways of talking/thinking about it.

Hands and cheeks are meaningful parts of your and my world, and events involving them often have motives and reasons and causes and effects, which connect them to other events in one’s story, and to other events in the big story of one’s people. The verb “slap”, when combined with the object “face” is both a report of a simple physical event, *and* an interpretation of that event which says a lot about the participants in the event and their relationship at the time. A human doesn’t report what they see in the way a camera does. A human is always telling a story with a lot more to it than a camera can care about. And when we try to sort out competing “versions of the same event”, we often find it impossible. That is, there are various points of view of the event, but not much left if we try to just have the event without the points of view; and life teaches us that it is often not the case that one point of view is simply true and another simply false. Would that it were always so. Would that we always had access to “the real story” of which the versions were versions. But alas, so often it seems the versions are all we can have. (I would say that God’s version of events is the only absolutely “true” version, and it includes, among other things, all of our versions, as part of His big story about all of us! It helps to have God, doesn’t it?)

In view of such observations, we can say that we are each “living our own story” (see Kanno, 2003; McAdams, 1993; Harre & Gillett, 1994; Harre, 2001). When we tell a story from our past, we tell it with a selectivity for details and the ways they are understood that hopefully puts the events and situations in the light that we want to put them in. We give interpretations of what happened (saying “slapped” for example, instead of “happened to strike”) at every point, connecting each part with the other parts, and with the big story of our entire life to the extent that the person we are talking to knows that big story. But we don’t just make such a story when reminiscing. Rather, we are making all of the interpretations and connections, attributing motives, causes, effects, and other meanings to the events we experience right as we experience them. In a real sense, we tell ourselves the story of our lives *as we live it*. This all comes back to the way we think as we live, and the process of thinking goes back to how people have talked to us. The story we live is mediated by tools, especially language, and we are limited in living our story by the story-building pieces that language gives us to work with, whether bathrobes or *khalats*, or whatever.

In the encouragement principles that we teach elsewhere in the LLA Workshop, we see that encouraging a discouraged co-worker in part involves helping them to find different stories to tell about their situation. There are many possible versions of any situation. Some of them work worse than the co-worker’s current version. Others work better. It is the latter that we help them to look for.

In fact, the whole LLA Workshop is aimed at giving you new story-building pieces for building the story of language learning in general, as well as the stories of your own experiences with language learning

and with helping fellow language learners. Some people complain that in introducing new terms we are needlessly multiplying the labels available for our old ideas. It is always easiest to attach a new word form (the phonetic form of the word or phrase, or its written form) to an existing concept. In that case, the new term truly would not give us new story building tool in any helpful sense. The practice of attaching old concepts to new terms is so common that I feel we should coin a term for it! Let's call it *label switching*. When we propose new story-building tools, if you can respond by mere *label switching*, then you will go on making the old stories with the new label. Or you may decide that, yes, there are some new concepts, but the old terms work fine for those new concepts, too. Well, again, you may be under great pressure to revert to the old concepts when using the old terms to try to build the new stories. We really do aim to give you new pieces for building your language learning story. This should not only broaden your options for understanding what has happened in the past and what is happening in the present, but also allow you to live a different future into existence than you might have done with more restricted options for building the language learning story (experiencing the language learning experience). At the end of the workshop, we hope you can retell the story of your own field situation, the language learning experiences within it, the challenges you currently face, etc. using an enriched set of life-creating mediational means, such as the idea that we live our life as story built in large part from the story-building pieces our culture gives us in our language, or more accurately (I would claim), we create the life we experience with others in large part by means of our *languaculture*. Now if your reaction to the word in italics is "Hmmf! Languaculture! That is just another way of saying that language and culture are inseparable, and we all know that already," then you have just engaged in label switching!

Not language and culture, but languaculture

We used to talk of cultures as "grids through which we can view the world", or "looking at the world through different coloured glasses" or "different lenses", etc. But that goes back to the idea that there is a world out there, independent of the ways our cultures give us to think about it, just waiting to be viewed through different glasses, as members of different cultures gaze upon it. The idea of mediation changes this fundamentally. Without our "way of viewing it", not much of "it" will be observed. There will be neither an American bathrobe, nor a Russian *khalat* to observe. Not even an item of clothing. Just nondescript shapes and colours and other generally vague, nondescript physical properties. Most of the sharpening, the recognition of specific kinds of things, the understandings of what they mean, what it all means together, what lies behind it, and what is likely to follow it, people add, enabled to do so by their mediational means. A bathrobe is a piece of life that we know from how it is used, and how it is talked about, and having a label "bathrobe" lets it be a "kind of thing" that may be encountered in many forms. A bathrobe, in my story, is mainly a covering for whatever one wears in bed, worn when one is *not* in bed, but either has recently been in bed, or is planning to be in bed soon. It has other, less frequent functions. When I see a bathrobe I see all of that. Similarly, an Indigenous Amazonian without previous contact with "the modern world," will not experience a

policewoman when looking at a person whom I would see as such, nor will they see a golf ball when I do. We see the world in terms of the concepts we have of it, and these concepts are tied to the ways we talk, and our talking mediates our thinking about them.

Ongoing discourses of life

Going back to how I learned to think via other people beginning to talk me through life, I didn't quickly learn to tell stories. At first, my talk was tied to what was going on in front of me, and wasn't yet a mediational means for picturing stories I hadn't experienced, or imagining stories that hadn't happened, perhaps as part of planning my future. The mediational uses of speech become more complex over time. But as part of my early experience, I started to notice that people did tell stories. Perhaps I heard Mommy tell Daddy a story that I had lived through with her earlier in the day (Thomson, 1995; Wang 2004). This began for me the experience of *discourse*. The word *discourse* has many meanings, but centrally, it refers to the normal connected speech of human interaction. Each part of a discourse is there because of what has gone before. As some say, each thing we say is *occasioned* by what has gone before (Edwards & Potter, 1992), and influences the possibilities of what will follow. Now it isn't just speech that is like that. Harre (2001) has suggested that the best metaphor for understanding human mental life is as a *conversation*. And that applies to human *action* in general. Not just what I *say*, but what I *do* is *occasioned* by what has gone before, and often I intend that people around me respond to my action in not totally unexpected ways. The action might be holding the door for someone, or passing a hockey puck in a certain direction. It shouldn't be surprising that human activities are organised like discourses, since language is a major tool for living/constructing life. But then, in fact, the distinction between acting and talking disappears. I don't expose certain body parts by the way I dress when going to give a lecture. That is feature of my action. I also don't name body parts using non-technical words in a high school biology lecture. That's part of talking, but really, still just part of acting. *Who* talks *when* to *whom*, *where*, and about *what*, *how* they talk, and for *how long* are all governed by our shared ways of doing things, just as are the issues of *who* sits in the presence of *whom*, *when*, at *what distance*, in *what orientation*, for *how long*. Action is action.

Scholars who talk about discourse often talk about the various "discourses" that go on in a community. As a small child, after I discovered that life is a story, built from pieces my language gives me, I noticed that there are many "conversations" going on in the big adult world: Mommy and her friends' ongoing conversation about cooking, which they often took up again when they got together (even with totally different mommies); my teen-age siblings ongoing discussions of popular music; etc. Within the current larger adult community, there may be a discourse about unemployment going on, a discourse about the upcoming election, the long-standing discourses about babies and their care, discourses that go on within particular occupational groups, various discourses about sports or leisure activity. The list goes on and on and on. This idea of discourse is also modelled after the idea of a simple (!) conversation. Imagine coming upon some friends who are having a conversation. You might listen in for a while until you are with the flow of the conversation, and then participate yourself. You might

even ask them what they're talking about so that they go back to the beginning and briefly catch you up. Or you can just barge straight in and start participating in the conversation as though you're a part of it, when you aren't. Well, now think of what I just called various "discourses". Two guys are talking about hockey, and I'm there from the beginning of the conversation, but I still don't have a clue what they are talking about! It's because this is part of the ongoing discourse about hockey that most Canadians participate in, but not all. It is like an ongoing conversation that can be picked up afresh between any two people who are longstanding participants in the discourse about hockey. As for me, even though I've been in the room since the beginning of this particular conversation about hockey, and followed it carefully for the past hour, even now, if I try to participate I'll come across as an outsider just barging into a conversation that he is not a party to. In a small, face-to-face society, everyone is party to almost all of the ongoing discourses of the society, and my job as a newcomer is to get into the flow of all of those discourses. In a complex society, different people are parties to different discourses, but there are some discourses that virtually everyone is assumed to be a party to at some level, such as discourses about shopping or getting a tooth filled. The group that is party to a discourse, like the ongoing hockey discourse, can be called a discourse community. As we noted, an activity such as the game of hockey itself also has all the features of a discourse, as does any activity in which members of a society participate according to shared expectations (for example, driving, eating, using clothing, etc.), and so the hockey game has its own "discourse community" (those who can step in and participate in the game appropriately). Again, in that sense, language is just one activity among many, governed by shared expectations, but also the main tool used to create, understand and guide other activities.

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*.

Note that traditionally, people talk about "language" as "influencing culture" and "culture" as "influencing language" as though they are two "things" that are separate from one another, even if they affect one another. But we have just seen that there are no such separate "things". There are ways of acting. (We don't expose certain body parts in inappropriate contexts; we don't use non-official anatomical names of body parts in teaching high school biology.) There are ways people act expectedly, or unexpectedly (the latter warranting the telling of a new story about them). These may be ways of walking (John is tracking mud into the house—he must be inconsiderate) or ways of talking (John keeps interrupting me—he must be inconsiderate.) We use language as a bag of tools for experiencing both the talking and the walking, and even for doing the talking and walking

(understanding how we use our language to do the walking may require some reflection).

Languaculture is clearly not *language* and *culture*!

Different languages, different lives: They and we

This brings us back to the harsh fact that people in different language groups have a different set of tools for living the lives they live, and hence live different lives. Suppose I live *my* life, *my* story, in Russia, using my Canadian languacultural tools. Suddenly, I experience a woman wearing a bathrobe in the store. That is probably the main way that most people experience other languacultural worlds that they come into proximity with—as just weird parts of their own world, their own ongoing story built from their own story-building pieces. Since wearing a bathrobe in the store is indeed noteworthy, I feel the need to tell a story: “I was in the store downstairs and this woman came in wearing a bathrobe.”

If you live abroad along with other people who share your own languacultural world, then you constantly are hearing these “they stories” (stories that result from observing “them” as just another part of our life story). They must be told, because we are living our story, and so many things are happening that are unexpected in our story, i.e., that are noteworthy, that require that a little sub-story be added to our main story of life. Eventually, we come to expect “those people” to act in certain ways, and then some formerly unexpected events no longer warrant a little story. But in fact, we’ll probably never outlive the appearance of yet more unexpected features of what “those people” do. We’ll always have “they stories” to tell. In fact, some of our well-worn “they stories” will continue to warrant telling and retelling. “Guess what happened again... [for the thousandth time]”. Foreigners living abroad typically start swapping “they stories” about their “weird” experiences, sooner or later, whenever they get together. They shouldn’t be condemned. They are just using the tools available to them to build stories of the world they are experiencing. They are just following their urge to connect with their friends and become part of one another, each putting their experiences into the others’ memories. It’s just how people be people within a single languacultural world. There are stories that need to be told. People who live abroad for a long time interacting mainly with people like themselves (those whom Agar, 1994 calls “old hands”) become thoroughgoing experts in the “they discourses”. (Sometimes relative newcomers abroad will feel expert as well.)

Fortunately, some “they stories” work much better than others, in that they make the “weird” more “sensible”. Anthropologists, for example, try to go into the languacultural story being lived by the people they observe, and live in that story a bit themselves. Then they come back to their own language-world and enrich it by telling “they stories” to other anthropologists. The difference is, these “they stories” make a whole lot more sense than the everyday variety. They give us a feeling that *we’re understanding* something, that something is being *explained* in ways that aren’t obvious at the outset. The unexpected called for a story to explain it, and people can tell an insightful explanation from a banal one. But the anthropologist is still telling us a story about *them* using *our* tools to tell us.

To a certain extent he may enrich our tool set, for example adding the word-tool *khalat* to our discourse. But he can't really give us the Russian *khalat* word-tool. That is a bit of life that must be lived in ongoing discourses (verbal discourses and the discourses of nonverbal actions) with Russians when they talk about and use *khalats*. I haven't heard many discourses including *khalats*, but I've lived with Russians some. Now I might tell you that I think that *khalats* are sometimes worn in place of one's (nicer) dress or whatever, in order to spare the latter for use away from the home and immediate environs, (where "immediate environs" includes the store downstairs). In fact, if I had time to engage in lots of discourses with Russians about *khalats*, I would be able to tell you a much better "they story", but still making what "they" do a part of your and my Anglophone languacultural story (understanding of the world), albeit a more sophisticated "they story" than that of the expat who runs in the door and exclaims, "I was in the store downstairs and this gal came in wearing her bathrobe." Still, I must emphasise that although you feel slightly more enlightened by my version than by his, you still do not truly know what a *khalat* is in the languacultural story being lived by the wearers. I suspect that you're understanding is still pretty closely tied to bathrobes.

What we are suggesting as LLAs is that workers abroad put as much effort as they can into growing into *their story* (that is, the host people's story), rather than making our observations of them part of *our story*. However, the question arises as to whether or not it is possible for peoples of different languacultural lives to understand each other without participating for years in one another's stories. It depends on what *understand* means. Recently I was listening to a fictitious children's story being told in Kazakh that was a "translation" from English. I've never heard the English story, and so I was just happily envisioning the settings in the story and the people as all part of Kazakh life. After all, an *aezhi* is just not a *grandma* as one would have in the English story. And that's just for starters. For me, it was a story using Kazakh languacultural tools/pieces, and somehow it suddenly struck me that I was experiencing *such* a different story from the one I would have experienced listening to the English original. Translations are like that. They create new stories. But if the stories they create are long and complex, but nevertheless hang together well and end up making a sensible whole, then we can say the translation is successful. Translation is possible because we find *analogies* between the languacultural worlds. I made the American bathrobe an analogy of the Russian *khalat*, and in many contexts, saying something like, "She wore her bathrobe because she was washing her only dress" would make a successful story in English. In fact, in some Anglophone languacultural worlds there is a story-building piece called a *house-coat*. Now, I didn't grow up in a story that included house-coats, but my wife did. It makes a slightly better analogy to Russian *khalats* than bathrobe does (though characteristically, a house-coat is worn *over* one's clothes to protect them).

An explanation of how intercultural communication can often be fairly successful is complicated, and must await a later writing. In the end, a translated story is based on the possibility of what I call *approximate functionally compatible analogues* (AFCAs). The more the story-building pieces of Languaculture-A approximate compatibility on the conceptual level with the things in Languaculture-B, the more my translated story will hang together as well the original did. The number and closeness

of the AFCAs will depend on the two languacultures involved and the types of discourses (say, scientific discourse versus religious discourse).

Thus, “intercultural communication” is about making successful stories based on events in other languacultural worlds, making them seem coherent and sensible. But as long as it is INTERcultural, it still involves looking at a languacultural life built with one set of life-building tools, as though it had been built with a set of life-building tools belonging to a different languacultural life.

The alternative to telling “they stories” as part of our story, even good “they stories”, is to join their story, to begin experiencing their tools and their uses of those tools, until “they” are no longer “they” but “we”. Then we will find ourselves less and less telling those hilarious “they stories” that bring gales of laughter from our fellow foreigners. We might even start to find them painful to listen to, as though our expat friends abroad are holding not “they”, but “us” up to ridicule.

I find the thought a bit sobering and profoundly humbling that I can’t accurately understand lives that are lived by means of another languaculture unless I personally participate in that languaculture for a long time and even then, any way in which I report back what I have learned to members of my native languaculture will be partially (often seriously) misleading. At the same time, I do believe it is the intention of our Creator that different languacultures should in fact “talk” to one another, learn from one another, share with one another, know one another. If this, realistically, can only be approached with a sense of profound humility, that is not a bad thing. If it is humanly impossible, that is not a bad thing either, as long as it is possible.

Languacultures as multigenerational living creations

We have now seen that we have a whole system of making stories out of the flow of experience in our lives in the world. The system of meaning includes knowledge of objects (like cheeks), that have many meanings (like a locus for tender or angry events, etc.); and persons, who aren’t just men and women, but servants, priests, farmers and cops and robbers; and meaningful places (the city dump), and spaces (breathing down my neck), and on and on. All this stuff is there for us in our social world, and we use it to build the story of our life. It is not really there physically in the things and events, but in the understandings we compulsively create of things and events.

Where did this system of meaning come from? Well, people living shared lives based on shared languacultural tools *lived* it into existence socially, growing out of what was socially *lived* into existence by those before them, and so on. What you started with was already there in your community when you were born. The use of the languacultural tools followed the pattern of the shared *practices* of the community. We can say that communities are defined by their *practices*, how they understand that they should act together and interact with one another (relying on their shared languacultural story-building, experience-building, life-building tools). We were born into a community with such shared practices and allowed to *participate* in those shared practices until we too shared them. People

allowed us to participate in the big story of them all, of which our own personal story was a part, even though we couldn't participate very well at first. That is, we couldn't fluently live our own lives (which includes fluently listening and talking a lot, in appropriate ways) the way people older than us did. But the story building of life is itself a group activity, as we noted when we discussed the social nature of thought earlier. Thus the story building of life is not accidental, but typically carried out by people interacting and participating in this life together. In our case, people older than us joined with us in the activity of living (and talking about) life as a story, and thus gave us the opportunity to participate ourselves in these practices, even when we could hardly manage it. Eventually, by participating, we became capable story builders ourselves, and story lovers, just like those before us. We entered the social world of our families, and later other social groups, as apprentices among experts. By participating among the experts, we gradually became experts ourselves. Then we have our own babies, and let them participate in our lives as we participate in theirs, with them as the new apprentices. They carry out the activities of the "trade" alongside the experts until they are also experts (Rogoff, 2003). (The "trade" is the trade of human existence, always carried on by means of some languacultural system of practices within a languacultural group.)

Adult Language Learning as Growing Participation

It should be clear now that a language is not the sort of tool we find and pick up, as we might find a stone for cracking nuts, and then keep that stone in our possession for cracking more nuts forever. That is more like the cognitivist idea of language learning as "acquisition". Oh, to pick up and own Russian, you might need to major in Russian in university for four years, and by the end, you've "got the language". Now it's just a matter of "using" "it" for "communication". Sford (1998) has made a distinction between the cognitivist view of learning as "acquisition" and the socioculturalist view of learning as "participation". She urges that socioculturalists not make this distinction an absolute one. Although sociocultural participation is the primary framework in which to understand the learning process, in Vygotskian terms, "participation" leads to individual, personal *appropriation* of the practices that were participated in and hence *internalisation* of what were at first mainly external practices. My argument up to this point makes language learning a matter of participating in life with people who are using that language as the primary tool for living their lives jointly. However, there is a lot going on in the brain, too. Languacultures use brains (and other materials inside and outside of the bodies) to carry out and pass on their practices. However, without what is going on in the shared lives as lived and experienced, human brains are no more interesting to me than many other physiological systems (such as bacterial conjugation)! What makes people so interesting is the lives they build, not the brains they happen to use as a major means of building those lives, in my opinion, at any rate. The nature of brains needs to be taken into account ultimately (to the extent that they are understood), but it is hardly the starting point. We do turn to brains when we turn more to the cognitive dimension, but we do it without losing sight of the people and communities using those brains.

That was a long preamble to the following remark: We take participation, rather than acquisition, as the more central metaphor for understanding language learning. The language learner's main challenge then, is to find the right host people to participate with, and the right ways to participate with them, all along the way. The idea of language learning as participation helps us, among other things, to keep the long-term view that we talked about in the beginning (years, decades, thousands and thousands of hours of understanding and interacting). Language learning only ends when participation ends. Participation starts when language learning starts (or at least it should). A language learner is an ever-growing participator (GP). Since in most people's languacultural stories, "language learning" is primarily cognitive, individual and intellectual, using the old term, "language learner" for the concept of GP always encourages misunderstanding. Therefore we use the term GP very frequently, meaning that person who (in the ideal scenario, for thousands of hours) is being apprentice into deeper and deeper levels of participation in more and more complex ways, sharing in all the major discourses of life, and changing the "they" into a "we", by living into the flow of the host languacultural story as it is experienced by those living it, because the GP is in fact, living it. Some may react by saying "growing participator" is just another way to say "language learner" (or at least, "language and culture learner"). Well, yes and no, but again, it is always easy to fall into *label switching*, attaching old concepts to new terms, rather than participating in the present discourse and appropriating the story-building tools that are being used. In many contexts, however the term "language learner" may be an AFCA (approximate functionally compatible analogue) for the term "growing participator". The story that results from replacing "growing participator" with "language learner" will often work, in that it will be a coherent story—but not the same story. In fact, many "language learners" hardly seem like they should be called "growing participators". I'd like to say that they are GPs, even though they may not know it, and may think they are just "getting the language" into their heads.

Norton's (2000) research participant, Eva was attempting to grow into an Anglo-Canadian languacultural world especially through her co-participation in life with fellow workers in a fast food restaurant. She was unofficially barred from meaningful participation, and hence unable to grow until changes took place which allowed her to participate, after which she grew steadily. It is easy to see how the description "growing participator" applies to Eva's experience. No participation—no growth. Participation—growth. Growth by participation. Participation *is* growth. In our LLA Workshop you participate in what we call Phase 1 growing participation activities. It may not seem so obvious to you that you are participating in another languacultural life-world at that point. I mean, the host person says *imitaa*, and you point at the dog, because you feel that *imitaa* means the same thing as "dog". We argue though, that this host person is really starting to give you a toe-hold in their languacultural world by beginning to let you participate in it at the only level at which you are able to participate and grow. That will be key from that point on: continuing to participate a level at which one *can* participate, and in a way that one *will* grow. In Vygotskian terms, that level at which one is currently able to participate well, and grow well, is their *zone of proximal development* (ZPD).

Zone of Proximal Development and Host People as Nurturers

The Vygotskian (1978) concept of the ZPD is central to the socio-cultural perspective on language (culture) learning and on learning in general. It also provides a useful concept for helping coworkers to find a way forward when they feel they are not growing in their participation. The original concept related to child development. Psychologists estimated a small child's intelligence based on the child's ability to solve problems independently. Such an idea may be tied to the Western concept of the self as an autonomous unit which we refer to further below. Vygotsky and others found that estimating a child's intelligence in that way misses a lot. One child might solve a puzzle independently, while another totally fails. The two children appear radically different. However, there may be much more going on in the second child than meets the eye. That child may have a lot of ability that only becomes apparent when someone prompts them or otherwise provides just a bit of assistance. That is, what goes on with the aid of social interaction with the child shows us much more of where the child is, developmentally, than what goes on when the child functions in isolation. (We can also add that there will be a difference depending on *with whom* the child gets to interact, what their previous history is together, or how much the older person is used to interacting with small children.) Now Vygotsky used a spatial metaphor. There is an area of ability that a child could display operating independently. Then, there is an area far enough beyond the child's ability that even with hints, prompts and other help the child could not perform what is asked of them. In between these two areas is the ZPD, the area of those things that the child can almost, but not quite, do on their own, but can do with just a bit of help. It is the child's growing edge. It is where the best growth can happen.

The ZPD and adult growing participators

This concept readily extends to the learning involved in growing linguacultural participation by adults and older children. Consider the newcomer's growing ability to understand host speech. There are various ways a host person can provide help to a newcomer who is struggling to understand them: use photos, make drawings, use simplified language, slower speech, etc. (see, for example, Gibbons, 2002; Cary, 2000). In everyday life situations, it may just be a matter of the host person being an extra thoughtful conversational partner with the newcomer, although in the very beginning of growing participation that wouldn't be enough in and of itself.

Now, a host person can talk to me just as though I am another host person. Understanding them will be far beyond my ability. Or they can go to the other extreme and say only the simplest things that I can immediately understand ("all by myself"). In between these two extremes, they can talk to me in a way that challenges my ability to understand, and requires them to interact with me to assist me in understanding what they are trying to say. When they do that, we say they are joining me in my ZPD and interacting with me there, helping me to participate in their world. A host person can also join me in my ZPD when I try to talk. There are many things I start to say, and can't quite manage, but with just a bit of help, I do manage. It is interesting to me that many Westerners abroad report that they resent

it when a host person “completes my sentences for me”. This may again reflect our Western individualist way of thinking: “I could have done it myself, but he didn’t give me the chance to show what I can do.” From a sociocultural perspective, however, the issue is not about “showing what I can do”, but about life as collaboration. Communication is understood to be collaborative — people working together to construct a common understanding. The person completing my sentence is joining me in my ZPD, helping me to grow. Growth happens in pairs of people (or groups). *My* growth is not an *I* thing, but rather a *we* thing.

Weighing the trade-off: commitment vs. difficulty of interaction

There is a natural *trade-off* between *how difficult it is for a host person to function in my ZPD* on the one hand, and on the other hand, *how committed to me any particular host person is*. A host person who is my taxi driver doesn’t feel an enormous commitment to me. A host person who is, let’s say, my fiancée, will feel a greater level of commitment to me. There are many gradations of commitment in between. In terms of the commitment-difficulty trade-off, even if interacting with me at length in my ZPD is extremely difficult, my fiancée will be committed enough to make the effort. Once interacting with me has become relatively easy, the taxi driver may unknowingly be making the effort to meet me in my ZPD, helping me to participate/grow.

When I am a brand new growing participator, I’m indeed extremely difficult to interact with in a way that spells rich participation/growth for me. If such interaction is to happen much at all, then the host person’s commitment to me may need to be enormous. Often it will be the case that only paid “teachers,” “tutors” or “language helpers”, are likely to take the time I need, and put out the effort for me to fruitfully participate/grow. Note that we are not viewing such “teachers” in traditional terms, as people who are imparting knowledge from their head to ours, but rather as ones who are steadily *nurturing* more deeply into their languacultural life. They see us trying to be more like them. They model their practices and assist us in our efforts to follow those practices by interacting with us in our ZPD. Rather than “language helpers”, “teachers” or “tutors,” therefore, I like to refer to them as *nurturers*. The word *nurturer* tells the story of growing participation that I want to live. The word “teacher” tends to tell a different story. As times goes on, a nurturer might be someone whom society calls a teacher, or it might be my neighbour dropping in for tea.

Over time, the types of relationships where the level of commitment outweighs the level of difficulty will keep changing: As I become easier to interact with, a lower level of commitment will be. Rank the following people in terms of their predicted level of commitment to a growing participator: a shop-keeper, a taxi-driver, a neighbour one passes on the walk often, someone one sees at church and can talk to there, one’s house-hold employee, someone who comes to visit one occasionally at their own initiative, a paid nurturer, a host co-worker in one’s place of employment, a total stranger on a park bench, members of the host family one lives with, a total stranger cleaning the street, a neighbour with whom one has already chatted a few times.

Actually, in order to rank these people in terms of their committedness to the growing participator, more information would be needed. Aveni (2005) describes a couple, “Bob and his wife”, who lived with a Russian host family whose members would not make the effort to interact with them in their ZPD: “I’d ask her to slow down, she would take a deep breath of exasperation and keep right on talking just as fast as before” (p.47). Bob and his wife increasingly isolated themselves from their host family. After a few months in Russia they moved to a different host-family situation. The first night in the new location, they stayed up with the host family until 12:30, socialising and watching movies together. The new host family would talk to them in speech that they could partly understand, and they found themselves spending more and more time interacting rather than isolating themselves. The difference between the first host-family situation and the second probably had to do with both factors of the trade-off: The second family by nature felt more of a commitment to their guests than had the first; and Bob and his wife were somewhat easier to interact with by the time they moved in with the second family than they had been when they moved in with the first family. The combination of *enough commitment* on the part of the host people and *enough interaction ability* on the part of the newcomers shifted the balance enough that Bob and his wife now found there to be a host family in their ZPD for many hours a week. As a result, they found that their ability to interact was growing steadily. Simultaneously, we assume, they would have found their relationship with the host family deepening and broadening, leading to an even stronger level of commitment, at the same time that they were becoming easier and easier to interact with. Thus the scale would shift farther and farther, and participation/growth would become richer and more frequent.

Applying the trade-off concept as an LLA

If one of your fellow growing participators abroad feels that their participation isn’t growing, you might help them to consider how many hours per week there are host people interacting with them in their ZPD (as opposed to just talking over their heads, and not really trying to understand what they say). Then they can consider the relationships currently or potentially available to them. Let’s return to the list of relationships you ranked earlier. I would tend to rank them as follows:

a paid nurturer > a house-hold employee > a host co-worker in one’s place of work > members of the host family one lives with > someone who comes to visit one occasionally at their own initiative > a neighbour with whom one has already chatted a few times > someone one sees at church and can talk to there > a shop-keeper > a taxi-driver > a neighbour one passes on the walk often > a total stranger on a park bench > a total stranger cleaning the street. (The day may come when we can strike up a rich participation/growth conversation with an unknown street cleaner!)

You might have ranked them differently, and as noted, the real ranking would depend on other factors (such as sociability, previous experience with foreigners, and many more). The fellow growing participator whom you are counselling can think concretely about how much rich, fruitful interaction

in their ZPD happens in such relationships, and what changes in lifestyle, schedules, and goals might increase the amount of such interaction.

Imagine now that you are my LLA. I am presently a growing participator in Russian and Kazakh languacultural worlds. When I give a lecture in Russian, my students meet me in my ZPD, often helping me to express what I am trying to express, and I grow in the process so that the next time I lecture on the same topic it goes more smoothly. Students have enough of a commitment to their teacher to make that effort! In general, in Russian I can have free ranging conversations about whatever I want to in everyday life situations, and for host people, interacting with me requires quite a small amount of special effort. I encounter people in all sorts of situations, we participate in each other's lives, and I am growing in the process. (I don't want it to sound as if I participate in order to grow. I participate to participate, but with an eye on growing.) In the case of Kazakh, attempting to give a lecture would be way out of my ZPD. As far as just conversing readily as much as I want about whatever comes up, that is not true of me in Kazakh. Occasionally I'm with people who really want to communicate with me, and enjoy putting the effort into it. More often I am not. For people to interact with me in Kazakh for several hours a week in ways that allow me to participate/grow will be a big job for one or more Kazakhs. Who will be that committed to me? Well, I find that Kazakh co-workers in my workplace are, but over time, I've come to spend less and less time in my workplace. There are certain people that I have opportunity to interact with in our living situation. They are happy enough to interact with me, but talk to me in a manner that keeps them far out of my ZPD (I can't understand much of what they say to me.) My life is full of responsibilities that keep me from interacting more with host people. For example, my primary work assignment is a service to other foreigners, not to host people.

In solving the problem of my not growing well in the Kazakh languacultural world, we can look at changes to make in my life, my places of work, my place of living, initiatives I might take to spend more time with people who appear committed to me, and finally, whether I might just go back to hiring paid nurturers for several hours a week. Once I get back to having people spending many hours with me per week in my ZPD, I'll move toward the point where other relationships with lower commitments become better participation/growth times.

Changing Relationships: From Paid Nurturers to Communities of practice

What the would-be GP needs, then, is social contexts—specific personal relationships—that enable her to *participate* in ways that allow her to *grow*. Nobody grows into a whole society directly. That is, we don't have separate connections with everyone in the society. In fact, we have relationships with only a small portion of the members of the society, unless it is a very small society. We are born into a micro-community (our family), and through life, we function in many micro-communities. We do relate to scattered individuals, too: waitresses, the postman, bus drivers. But much of our life is lived

in groups. The richest contexts of participation and growth are groups that have been called, *communities of practice*.

Early growth relationships

See the separate articles on the ZPD and on finding and hiring paid nurturers, and also see Thomson (1993). The latter article deals with important topics that complement those in the present article.

We noticed that in the beginning, to ask a host person to interact for many hours per week with the GP in the latter's ZPD is to ask a lot. The standard solution is financial remuneration for the effort. At this early stage, rich growing participation happens primarily in two ways: when committed nurturers spend many hours a week with the GPs, and when the GPs get out and participate in the nonverbal "discourses" that are going on, such as riding on the buses or mailing a letter. Of the two ways of growing, the former seems far more crucial for brand new newcomers—intensive interaction with someone in the GPs ZPD. The latter (participating in the nonverbal "discourses") will become more important after a few hundred hours of growing participation.

We'll next jump ahead to the kind of relationships that are needed for continued growth over the long haul, where the picture of growing participation seems clearest, and then come back to the relationships needed in the middle time period, when GPs feel they can't yet participate well in normal host social activities, but also feel a need to be growing in relationships that go beyond those with paid Nurturers to include a few ordinary "friends".

Growth contexts for the long haul: Communities of practice

So relationships are where my growing participation happens. In the beginning, my main growth relationship may be with my official Nurturer. Over time, I widen the range of relationships in which I increasingly participate. However, to grow to the "near-normal" level of languacultural functioning, I need to be in peer groups of normal functioning host people who can take me into their normal group life. We have to participate a lot in normal communities to become normal! Small communities of people with strong relationships based on much time spent together and shared goals have been called *communities of practice* (Wenger, 1998). Over the long term, these seem to be just excellent social locations for growing participators to grow in. They contain people who interact repeatedly, and are distinguished by their *shared practices*, where a *practice* includes things like "ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values, power relations" (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1992, quoted in Kanno, 2003). In fact, according to Lave and Wenger (1991), most learning of any kind happens in communities of practice (such as a family, a band of nut gatherers, an office full of co-workers, a bowling team, a choir, a study group, a small face-to-face traditional village society). The problem is, the members of a particular community of practice have a strong sense of who is in the group and who isn't. Only insiders participate.

Someone who is considered a member of a group is not just physically present, but is someone who participates appropriately in the practices of the group. A newcomer, such as a new worker in an insurance claims office (Wenger, 1998), doesn't know the practices that make one part of the group. No admittance! But how is he to ever participate and learn if only insiders are admitted? The answer is that under the right circumstances a community of practice can grant *legitimate peripheral participation* rights to a newcomer, so that he can participate enough to take up the practices, thus becoming no longer peripheral, but a fully legitimate participant.

Looking, as we are, at the whole multi-year, multi-thousand-hour process of growing participation, it appears that the growing participator needs to spend a lot of time in communities of practice. Yet research shows that people with low language proficiency are often excluded even from the right to legitimate peripheral participation (Bremer et al. 1996; Kanno, 2003; Norton, 2000). Their main contacts with host people may be with shopkeepers, taxi drivers, bureaucrats, etc., which provide nothing like the growth possibilities of communities of practice. Sometime between the time when our main interaction and participation is with a paid Nurturer, and the time I call "the long haul," when we are at least granted the rights of a *legitimate peripheral participant* in normal host communities of practice, a lot of growth is necessary—that is, a lot of participation in a growing number of relationships needs to happen. Can we get by with a little help from our (host) friends?

Between paid nurturers and communities of practice: *friends*

We are dependent on people interacting with us, and apprenticing us (in most cases unknowingly) into their languacultural life. Besides paid nurturers, there will hopefully come to be others who are willing to nurture us (see the separate article on the ZPD). We Anglophones are tempted to refer to these people as our "host friends". Well, that's O.K., since when we say that, we are telling our languacultural story about them, using our languacultural tool, the word "friend". In that story, these people are friends. That exact tool, the word "friend" is not in the host people's tool kit. In Russian, we find an analogous word, "drug". When I first knew the word *drug*, there were many people back home in Canada whom I thought of as "drug" (those whom I call my "friends" in English). However, after more experience in the Russian languaculture, I found myself referring in Russian to many of those Canadian "friends" as my "znakomye", a word more analogous to "acquaintance". Yet when I am speaking English, it sounds cold for me to call such people acquaintances. They are friends! Well, at least in Russian we can find analogues for Anglophone languacultural "friends". That may not be the case with all languacultures.

Even sticking to English, we can get greatly tangled in trying to define "friendship" (see Blieszner & Adams, 1991, Bell & Coleman, 1999). Yet we need to be aware that our complex concepts of friendship are ours. There are problems in applying it to other languacultures. We think of a friendship as a voluntary relationship, but the very idea of "voluntary" may reflect a Western idea of the isolated "autonomous self" (Kim, 2002; Carrier, 1999) that is in a position to freely choose its friends for no

reason or purpose other than affection. Carrier (1999) contrasts Western “autonomous self” with the Melanesian “social self”. He states that “Where the Western self is an autonomous... entity, the Melanesian self is constituted by and embodies others” (p. 30). He concludes that “the Melanesian self cannot have friendships of the Western sort, for it lacks the autonomous, interior source of sentiment” (p. 31). The Melanesians may have “affective relationships” (in everyday English terms, people they really like!), but that they are “unlikely to think of the relationships in terms of friendship.”

Bell and Coleman (1999) cite a study by Gulliver (1971) of the Ndendeuli of Tanzania. He surveyed seventy-three hamlets, and found that the close relationships were based on living in the same hamlet, and always involved kinship connections as well. There was only one exception: two men who we would call “good friends”, in telling our “they story” about them. However, they simply conducted themselves in relation to one another as if they were close relatives. (That is the anthropologist’s improved “they story”.) There was no “friend” concept. They carried on their lives by means of the tool they had, a kinship concept. Although they may not have outwardly talked about it in kinship terms, they lived it in those terms, because that concept was in the tool box. Growing participators want host people to find the tools in their conceptual tool box that will let those host people live in close, committed relationships with them as newcomers. Sometimes this seems to be a great challenge—other times not so great.

All of this is to urge us to not take lightly the issue of forming “friendships”. It may be that for someone to form a voluntary, amicable, devoted relationship with a newcomer would be to open their existing (non-voluntary) close relationships to question. However, people do come together for all sorts of reasons, besides pure “friendship,” and they do develop amicable relationships and become deeply involved in other people’s lives. (For accounts of this in the lives of Anthropologists and their “informants”, see Grindal and Salmone, 1995.) To be a growing participator, it is just necessary that relationships develop in which host people become deeply known to us, and we to them, as they nurture us into their world, by sharing in our lives and letting us share in theirs. How to better understand these relationships in host languacultural terms is an important question needing much further work within the [Growing Participator Approach](#).

My languacultural ability isn’t in me, but in many people!

Societies may offer us various pathways for deepening relationships, and for finding the numbers of our relationships increasing. (See Thomson, 1993, for discussion of the social network-based strategy.) The received wisdom is that the typical casual, one-time relationships offered to newcomers (for example, encounters with cashiers or waiters) are not what the growing participator needs in order to really grow (Bremer et al., 1996; Norton, 2000). In fact, we would make the issue of concrete, on-going personal relations one of some urgency. Since in the sociocultural spirit, language is not viewed as a private, individual possession, but as something inherently interpersonal, A strong case can be

made, and I believe should be made, for the view that one's ability in the new languaculture exists in the personal relationships in which one participates within that languacultural group. We can say that the GP's language ability is *distributed* over their set of host relationships, rather than being located inside of the individual GP. You'll only see my ability if you see me in my various relationships. In some relationships my ability is stronger than in others, because the level of shared knowledge and knowledge of one another is higher in some relationships than in others. The growth in language ability, then, is growth in specific relationships, the deepening and broadening of relationships, through increased co-participation in life, increased shared history, increased knowledge of one another. My knowledge of a host person and their knowledge of me reflects the range of discourses that host person helped me to participate in. It also reflects the extent to which I know each of their personal stories and they know mine, that is the *identity* we have established with one another.

Developing identities

Eva (Norton, 2000), mentioned above, was in a workplace where she, though physically present, was socially marginalised. She had studied English in school, and even gone through an ESL program in Canada. She'd been in workplaces where there was little opportunity to relate to people in English. Now she was in the right kind of workplace, but she desperately needed to participate in the workplace community of practice if she was to grow further. There was no substitute. Yet when she opened her mouth and spoke (or failed to speak), it was like holding up a sign— I AM A NONPARTICIPANT! She did not even appear to merit the rights of a legitimate peripheral participant. In fact, people's perception of her was mistaken. She had a big *identity* problem. And that is one of the bigger problems that a person can have in this sociocultural world we all live in.

What makes growing participation so painful for many?

Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope (1991) offered 225 students the opportunity to join a "Support Group for Foreign Language Learning." Over a third of them requested to join. Less than half of those could actually be accommodated. The students who participated shared how they would "freeze" in class, or even linger in the hall outside the classroom, trying to get up the courage to go in. They also testified to "tenseness, trembling, perspiring, palpitations and sleep disturbances" (p. 32), which Horwitz et al. called "psycho-physiological symptoms commonly associated with anxiety". (Even the happy language learners may be anxious, as Oxford, 1999, refers to "exaggerated smiling, laughing, nodding, joking" as "masking behaviours" that are signs of anxiety.)

These reactions fed into the construction of a questionnaire on language classroom anxiety. Roughly half of the respondents accepted the word "panic" as describing how they feel when they have to speak spontaneously in class. Thirty-five percent indicated that they feel "frightened" when they can't understand the teacher.

The above research relates to anxiety that occurs when someone is using a new language among fellow students in a classroom of people in the same plight as oneself! The only representative of the host languacultural world is the teacher. But she, and one's fellow sufferers, can be terrifying at times. Outside of the classroom, growing participators in English as a nonnative languaculture often report to me feelings of embarrassment, shame and emotional pain that they experience when functioning in English in everyday life. They may continue to experience these emotions for many years. These people are from many languacultural backgrounds, including not only East Asian backgrounds, but also European backgrounds (including Latin American Hispanic, and Dutch languacultures).

Why is using another language such a big deal? We can suspect that the anxiety involved is social anxiety (that is, that these people wouldn't become desperately anxious over privately watching television in their new language), and certainly *embarrassment* is a social experience, as is *shame*. An appealing explanation is that functioning in a new language threatens our sense of *identity*. Identity is an enormous topic, which we can only touch on, but we can tie it back to the idea of our life as a lived story. As Kanno 2003 tells us, the answer to the question, "Who am I?" is a story.

A huge amount of our behaviour is geared toward influencing the story that others tell themselves about us, and the way we fit into their stories in general. Such behaviour has been called "impression management" (Leary, 1996). You can think of "Greg Thomson" as one of the words/phrases/concepts in your languaculture. (It is one tiny moon in the galaxy of tools you use to create/understand the life you experience.) Your "Greg Thomson" concept has developed out of all of the discourses in your life that included Greg Thomson (whether as conversational partner, or simply a topic, mentioned in passing or discussed at length). I seem to feel I have a great stake in other people's "Greg Thomson" concept. I attempt to "manage" the concept others have of me by my languacultural actions, such as what I wear and what I say. Much behaviour is heavily "self-presentational" in nature, but probably most of what we do around others (and even privately—thinking is a social activity) has some "self-presentational" aspect to it. (You might detect many of the self-presentational aspects involved in my writing of this paper.)

I have been talking as though one's identity is about how others know us. Actually, the term is commonly used for our understanding of ourselves. However, even that is sociocultural in origin: how we understand ourselves is strongly influenced by how others treat us. As noted, many scholars hold that native participants in Western languacultural communities have a sense of the self as individual, autonomous and private. Most (if not all) other languacultures are said to include a *social understanding of the self*: a person understands who they are in terms of the other people to whom they are connected, and doesn't function independently of them. In fact, even the strongest autonomous self seems to be still heavily involved in impression management! I don't think we should view the "autonomous self" as an exception to the general sociocultural nature of human experience, but rather as a particular version of it. That is, the "autonomous self" is nevertheless socially acquired, socially understood and socially managed. (Carrier, 1999, also claims that even in Western societies

the autonomous self is more a characteristic of men than of women.) Still, the distinction between the Western autonomous self and the more widespread social self is something to keep in mind when a Westerner is attempting to build a new self in a non-Western languacultural world, or a non-Westerner in a Western one. [3] The whole philosophy of Growing Participation reflects a social concept of the new “me” in the new languacultural world. Often, though, we may be trying to develop a Western autonomous self among non-Western, social-self languacultural groups.

My Home Identities and my Host Identities

I have observed evidence that the experience of learning a new languaculture impacts the self in two senses. First, the early “language learner” may experience language learning as part of their native languacultural identity, impacting their self-presentation in their native languacultural world. Ehrman (1996) tells of John, who experienced emotional turmoil in language school. He was used to being highly successful, operating from a position of power, and solving every problem by hard work. However, in language school, he had to be moved from a faster language class to a slower one, and found this upsetting. During breaks he would interact with his old classmates, the bright students, you might say. He was critical of his new, supposedly less serious classmates. This seems to have little to do with him building a new self in a new languacultural world, but rather with the negative impact on the sense of self that he brought with him into the language class.

Another illustration of the interaction of the language learning experience with the home culture is provided by Norton’s Felicia. Now living in Canada, she was a Peruvian who had had an upper class identity in Peru, and then resisted embracing the “foreigner” identity in Canada, preferring to maintain a social life with other (formerly) upper class Peruvians (now political refugees). She commented that “I ... never can speak English in front of Peruvian people who speak English correctly.” She would speak English to Anglo-Canadians, but not in front of other Peruvians who (she speculated) knew English better than her. Similar cases are mentioned by Aveni (2005). I personally have experienced intense anxiety over using a host language in front of fellow foreigners. Many others relate this phenomenon. Talking is our major self-presentational activity. I would suggest that people from our home languaculture are the people we most fear losing face around. Hence our anxiety over using our new language around them can be greater than our anxiety over using it with host people.

By contrast, the struggle of Norton’s (2000) Eva, mentioned earlier, seems to be primarily about the struggle to develop a new self within an Anglo-Canadian languacultural world. She was marginalised in the workplace, not granted the status of a legitimate peripheral participant, until she had the chance to begin sharing her story, becoming a fuller person with a richer identity in the eyes of co-workers. That happened at staff picnics. Subsequently she was granted the right to participate in their community of practice, and grew steadily from that point on.

I call the identity we have among our native languacultural group our *home identity*. The identity (identities) I have with other North Americans abroad is also a *home identity*, since even though we

are together abroad, they are still part of my home world, not my host world. The identity (identities) I develop in the host languacultural world while living abroad I call my *host identity*. John's identity crisis related to his *home identity*, while Eva's related to her *host identity*. Alice's story (Kinginger, 2004) illustrates the impact of language learning/growing participation on both. Alice came from what many Americans would think of as a "low class background", and she "made good", eventually, by excelling as a university French major. Her home identity was raised to new heights through this experience, as she even won a grant to spend a year in France. She went to France expecting a continuation of her rising identity, with a vision of the unusually good French teacher she was on her way to becoming. Her experience in France continued to lead to her growing more quickly in French ability than many other Americans there. However, this aspect of her home identity started counting for less, it seems, as she was largely excluded from social life among her fellow Americans in France by virtue of her age, life-history, and financial constraints. No longer was her continuing "success" with French elevating her home identity. And then the host identity began to bite, as she struggled with living a new story that she didn't know how to live, and making a fool of herself. At her low point she was close to suicide. She had bright spots when she felt she was becoming French, and low points when she just wanted to be accepted as American. In the end, she returned to America with her French languacultural experience having changed who she was as an American as well.

As an LLA you will encourage co-workers who are struggling with home identity issues, and/or host identity issues. Home identity issues may surface in statements such as "I'm a failure as a language learner," or "I'm quite fluent in this language." These people are living a story within the languacultural world of foreign workers with whom they identify in their host country. Those low in the "language learning pecking order" of that expatriate languacultural story may thus find themselves to be the failures in the story (and even present themselves to others as such). Or they may live a story in which they are doing great, even though you experience them as not very different from the "failures". Those who are high in the "language learning pecking order" may find their sense of home identity greatly elevated (i.e., they may feel like heroes in the eyes of their co-workers). In the past, I tended to feel they were just exaggerating their ability, presenting themselves to me as closer to "near-normal" in host languacultural terms than they could possibly be for the amount of time they had lived abroad. (I may also have noticed that after six months in the host country I could understand most of what many of the "language learning heroes" were saying in the host language, but I could understand very little of what host people were saying!) So I felt they were bragging or exaggerating their ability. I now see matters differently. When such a person talks about how "highly fluent" they are, I can see this is a part of a home languacultural story related to a home languacultural identity. They are telling the real story that they are experiencing/living as members of their home languacultural community abroad, and plenty of others will tell the story about them, if they don't tell it about themselves.

The home identity is an important issue in LLA work, as it can affect team dynamics, and personal emotions in ways that impact our growing participation into the host world. However LLAs would ideally be far more focused on issues of developing host identities. Growing participators struggle

“through language [to] negotiate a sense of self within and across different sites at different points in time” (Norton, 2000, p. 5) in the ongoing languacultural story of the host world. There is a long process of attempting to build a story of themselves in the understandings of others. As in Alice’s case, this is where the experience of growing participation should begin to bite, even for people who are “language learning heroes” within the expat languacultural story. It is hard to imagine what could impact us at a deeper level than the struggle to become a new person in a new world. We may need to guard against letting our “success” as language learner in the expat languacultural story emotionally insulate us from experiencing the bite. If we go far enough into host languacultural life, we should sooner or later experience the bite of struggling to negotiate the sense of who we are in our new world.

Experiencing my language learning as a new kind of story

The title of this section reflects what we hope will come out of LLA workshops. As the sociocultural dimension comes to dominate my own thinking more and more, I find myself living a very different story than the one I once lived. In 1999, I used to ride in taxis (actually, a Russian analogue of taxis—I could have told the story by saying I hitch-hiked, too). The reason was that in my language learning story I had a desperate need for more opportunities to “practice Russian”. In recent years, I get in a “taxi”, and look at the driver not as an “opportunity to practice” but as a relationship to enter into, hoping he will meet me in my ZPD so that our relationship can be a genuine one, and so that I can grow more deeply into his world. I don’t participate in order to grow, but I do participate with a constant eye on growth! There is a difference.

The whole growth process as sociocultural participation

We saw in the case of Eva that she was unable to grow until she was able to participate. This is the problem that newcomers to a languacultural world face. Bremmer et al. observed that newcomers in Europe weren’t given any sort of communities of practice to participate peripherally in. Rather they were given lots of once-off relationships with shop-keepers and officials. The host people they interacted with did not enter their ZPD, but rather placed the burden of understanding and being understood on the newcomers shoulders—sink or swim. Now it is not that the newcomers never got to participate and grow in those relationships; bits of their interactions with shop-keepers or officials must work in the right way. There probably *are* participation experiences—growth experiences. Life in the big world is sparsely sprinkled with such experiences. When they happen, they contain the stuff of which growth is constituted. What if we could change things so that these growth-participation experiences were much more numerous and concentrated? That should be the obvious role of a “classroom”, to give newcomers very concentrated experience of a host master meeting them —the apprentices—in their ZPD. It is still participation, the sort of thing that life provides here and there, but now provided intensively. The “language class” would be a *participation session*, and the participation would be the same, in principle as normal-life participation—people meeting us in our ZPD and letting

us participate in host life at the level of our ability in specific growing relationship with them. The classroom experience would be more participation in addition to that on the outside, but it would be *supercharged* participation. The classroom would not be for *teaching the language*, but rather for *supercharged participation*. Not language classes, but *supercharged participation sessions* (SPSs).

The old story: the first hour of language learning

In the LLA workshop you are involved in a nine hour experience of “Phase 1 SPSs”. As you live your way through them, you are living/building the story about them, a story that is made out of the story-building tools available to you. Thus the first day, if you are like most literate, educated people you were telling yourself (and maybe others) stories about the unexpected things that were happening like “not writing down the words” and “not repeating them” and “learning new vocabulary more quickly than you expected” but being doubtful that you would “be able to use it” yourself. The person whose language you were learning was a great source of new words and phrases that you were trying to get into your head. Very helpful! That person may have been “a language helper” (or “teacher” or “tutor”). Depending on when you read this, that way of describing the experience may still make perfect sense to you. By the end of the LLA Workshop, you can look back on it and build a different story about what you experienced, should you so choose. The sociocultural dimension gives you some new story-building materials, and the other dimensions will further transform your language learning story building capabilities.

The new story: the first hour of growing participation

Let’s re-experience the first hour of Phase 1 activities drawing on concepts from the sociocultural dimension. Were you experiencing this new language as social interaction? Did the nurturer begin gently nurturing you into her languacultural world, letting you begin to experience something of the tools she (it may be a he, but we’ll say she) uses to live that world? Did she enter into your ZPD? That is, did she talk to you in a way that enabled you to understand her, rather than just talking and letting you catch what you could? If she is bilingual in English (or some other language that you know well), then you and she may already be negotiating your growing identities with one another as part of some Anglophone languacultural story. But did you begin to take on an identity in her native languacultural experience? Consider the fact that you moved from being someone totally on the outside of that world (as far as two-way interaction within it is concerned—certainly she could watch you and tell “they stories” about you within her world), to being someone whose body moved as a result of things she said! She has begun, in a germinal way, to have the experience of being understood by you. What’s more, you now have lived a bit of life together with her, and thus have a shared story, and a shared background. That will keep growing. The stories (identities) by which you know one another will also keep growing. You’ve started down the path of relational growth that is the path of growing participation, that is the path of “language learning”.

You can choose to live the story that way, or to live it in what may be the more comfortable world where it is an experience of learning words and getting lots of “practice” at hearing them over and over, and “reviewing” them a lot, and starting to figure out “rules” and so on. The new story I told above may not be easy to understand or to believe yet, and perhaps it may strike you as silly or affected. The [Growing Participator Approach](#) invites you to do within your Anglophone languacultural world what you do on a grander scale in growing into the host world: to experience new story-building materials that make a very different world and begin appropriating them by participating in a community of practice in which people already experience the story (to one degree or another) in this way of the [growing participator approach](#).

It may seem that which story you choose to tell doesn’t change much. Not in the first hour. But the Growing Participator story is one that can continue uninterrupted for thousands of hours. The cognitivist story will run out soon. Finally, then, let’s go back to the big picture.

How Language Learning Happens In The Sociocultural Dimension: An Example

The general story of how growing participation happens will keep changing as we understand it more deeply, but here is a summary [\[O1\]](#) of the current understanding. It assumes some familiarity with the idealised six-phase programme of the [Growing Participator Approach](#), but it should be fairly intelligible without that as well.

The First Days

During my first moments of being physically present among host people, I am shut out from their languacultural world by a “wall of noise”! The host community members can tell “their stories” about me, and in that sense, I become part of their story. But I want to live their story together with them purposefully.

During these first days what can I do? How can they enter my ZPD and help me to participate in their shared life? Well, the only thing I can think of is that they can talk to me in ways that let me begin to understand what they are saying. This requires at first that I can *see* what they are talking about, and derive the “meanings” of what they are saying from what I can see. This is how our interaction will begin, having the sociocultural qualities described in the section: *The new story: the first hour of growing participation*.

I don’t want to exaggerate the extent to which am immediately able to use *their* conceptual tools to understand them in these first days. When I start participating in their world, I don’t stop thinking! My biggest ‘bag of tools’ I use while thinking is my mother tongue. It is unrealistic to think that I can return to the pre-language “thought-life” of an infant. I think, therefore I am... therefore I am not going to give up my most powerful thinking tools when confronted with one of the biggest challenges

I've ever faced: the challenge of starting to function in a different languacultural world. So as I hear the sounds of this new language, I will be doing large-scale, rapid *label switching*. The Nurturer picks up a *spoon* and tells me it is a *chamchaa*, and suddenly *chamchaa* is the label for what I previously labelled as *spoon*. This previous languacultural *spoon* concept is rooted in all the discourses of my past life in which it plays a role — including verbal discourse about silverware and eating, and nonverbal “discourses” of just plain eating. Now I can view my past life with this new label, *chamchaa*, instead of *spoon*.

Phase 2 – Story Building

If you follow the six-phase approach of the [Growing Participator Approach](#), you'll go on to enjoy even more interesting interactions and shared experiences with your Nurturers. In Phase 2 you will be building stories from picture books and similar resources. You will still be doing lots of *label switching* and drawing heavily on AFCAs (as you recall, *approximate functionally compatible analogues*—ideas from my languacultural world that can substitute in this story for ideas in their languacultural world, without totally destroying the story I am trying to build). But during this phase the host languacultural *discourse* will start to kick in. The story you create with your Nurturer will contain bits based on *their* expectations rather than yours.

Phase 3 – Shared Stories

As you go on to Phase 3 (using already “shared” stories as a basis of much interaction), you will still be relying a lot on your native languacultural conceptual tools as you process interactions with your Nurturers. The conceptual tools you draw on from your previous languacultural knowledge now include entire stories that you already know. Nevertheless, you will be interacting with your nurturer, building your jointly shared experiences and shared knowledge, which will include more and more jointly shared knowledge about one another. Growth in these specific relationships will be, in sociocultural terms, also your languacultural growth.

At this point it will also start becoming realistic for a few “host friends” to start building *their* stories into your (new languacultural) life. More and more you will be discovering the host languacultural world through knowing the lives of people who have strong identities with you, and with whom you have a strong identity. In listening to volumes of “shared stories”, even though many may have their origin in your previous languacultural world, or in a much broader world of interlanguacultural discourses (in the case of globalised “world legends” or stories from Scripture), these will have become host stories coming from the standpoint of the host person telling them. Your Nurturers understand these stories and explain them from a host perspective.

Now discourse is really kicking in for you. Your “feel” for host words is starting to come from your experience of them in stories where host people chose to place them in contexts. If you are a growing participator in a Russian languacultural world, eventually it will be your experience of the word *khalat*

in the Russian discourses where it plays a role—both the discourse of nonverbal actions involving *khalats*, and the verbal discourses in which the word *khalat* plays a role—that will give you a *khalat* concept that feels right in all of the host discourses, and feels very different from the concept of bathrobe!

Phases 4 and 5

In Phase 4, your participation in the major ongoing host languacultural discourses will take off with a vengeance. You will be spending hundreds of hours exploring life with host guides. In Phase 5, you will be centring much interaction around specific discourses that actually happened between host people. At this point you will keep turning up whole themes (those ongoing discourses of the host languacultural world) that you are not yet a party to. Your “host friendships” will have settled into a healthy pattern. You will be able to pass as a legitimate peripheral participant in a growing number of host communities of practice, continuing to be led little by little in the direction of becoming “near-normal”. An encouraging thought for us introverts/bookworms is that extensive private reading can eventually make us party to many more host languacultural discourses. Once live people have taken us deeply enough into their lives, then for us, as for them, reading becomes just one more sociocultural activity, and often a highly fruitful way of participating further in host life. Similar remarks might apply to television, the cinema, and so on. Massive fruitful participation becomes easier over time, especially if such mass media are also instruments of the host languaculture. It may be that there is a literary register (a literary variety) of the language that is necessary for “near-normal” adults to become well-rounded participants in their languaculture.

Back to earth!

We noted near the beginning of this article that in fact, most people who set out to learn another language do not get very far down the road to becoming “near-normal”. Yet we have just painted an idealistic picture in which we talk as though everyone can at least get onto a path of steady growth in that direction. Hopefully, this article has given you some new conceptual tools for understanding what is going on when things are not turning out so wonderfully for your co-worker (or for you yourself). With these tools, you should have an insightful story to tell about why things aren’t going so well, and within the constraints of the person’s life, help them to alter their (or your own) future story. For example: If I’m not growing, I can come back to the question, “What kind of relationships do I need now in order to have host people in my life who meet me in my ZPD and interact with me there for many hours per week? What steps can I take that might lead to my participation in such relationships?” (In our introductions to the topics of Understanding and Talking, we’ll provide further conceptual tools for understanding why things may not be going well, and for doing something about it.)

From “Weird” to “One of Them”

Throughout this journey of our growing participation, our identity will continually change. At first, we are so weird. If we mainly concern ourselves with our *home identity* issues—like what cool language learners we are (or what dunces we are compared to others from our home background) — we may not realize our weirdness among host people, and thus even decrease the chances of becoming normal! But let’s assume that we are grappling with who we are, attempting to negotiate a new host languacultural “I” in host relationships and within host communities of practice.

Our weirdness is partly due to the fact that we express ourselves (e.g., formulate our sentences and discourses) in such weird ways. We would like to do some “impression management”, but we are barely managing to function at all. We may have what we think is a universal sense of how to behave politely and appropriately (as discussed by Kasper and Rose, 2002), but in fact, our best efforts leave us still *extremely* weird in the eyes of the host community.

(Although it hasn’t been a theme in this article, it should be easy to recognise how urgent it is that we develop strong listening comprehension ability—the ability to readily understand the normal speech interaction that is going on around us. Without that, we may be physically present, but still in large part, shut out from the languaculture that is throbbing all around us. In our introduction to the cognitive dimension, we will emphasise that our ability to understand speech is in many ways foundational in the process of growing participation.)

Eventually it really is key that we be allowed to be “one of them” in a very full sense—a legitimate peripheral participant in their communities of practice, an apprentice in a world of masters, incorporated into the life that is being jointly lived, participating in all the common discourses of that life, appropriating the life-building tools for that life, and not relying on label switching and AFCA[4] building blocks from our home languacultural conceptual worlds. We may always have a “conceptual foreign accent” along with our phonetic foreign accents and our grammatical foreign accents, because our life-long tools for living just can’t be pushed out altogether. But for the most part, we will come to behave appropriately, because for us in our new languacultural life, as for host people, the inappropriate is also the unexpected, always warranting a story. Now we’re on the long path to becoming “near-normal”. May God go with us!

References and Further Reading

Agar, Michael. (1994). *Language Shock: Understanding the Culture of Conversation*. New York: Perennial.

Aveni, Valerie Pellegrino. (2005). *Study Abroad and Second Language Use: Constructing the Self*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Bell, Sandra & Coleman, Simon. (1999). The anthropology of friendship: Enduring Themes and Future Possibilities, in Bell, Sandra and Coleman, Simon (eds.) *The Anthropology of Friendship*, pp. 1-19. Oxford: Berg.
- Blieszner, Rosemary & Adams, Rebecca G. (1992). *Adult Friendship*. Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage.
- Block, D. (2003). *The Social Turn in Second Language Acquisition*. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press.
- Bremer, K., Roberts, C., Vasseur, M.-T., Simonot, M., & Broeder, P. (1996). *Achieving understanding: Discourse in intercultural encounters*. London: Longman.
- Bruner, Jerome S. (1990) *Acts of Meaning*. Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Carrier, James G. (1999). People who can be friends: Selves and social relationships, in Bell, Sandra and Coleman, Simon (eds.) *The Anthropology of Friendship*, pp. 1-19. Oxford: Berg.
- Cary, Stephen. (2000). *Working with Second Language Learners: Answers to Teachers Top Ten Questions*. Portsmouth N.H.: Heinemann.
- Eckert, P., & McConnel-Ginet, S. (1992). Think practically and look locally: Language and gender as community-based practice. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 21, 461-490.
- Edwards, D., & Potter, J. (1992). *Discursive Psychology*. London: Sage Publications.
- Ehrman, Madeline E. (1996). *Understanding Second Language Learning Difficulties*. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage.
- Gibbons, Pauline (2002). *Scaffolding Language Saffolding Learning: Teaching Second Language Learners in the Mainstream Classroom*. Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann.
- Grindal, Bruce & Salamone, Frank (eds.) (1995). *Bridges to Humanity: Narratives on Anthropology and Friendship*. Prospect Heights, Ill.: Waveland Press.
- Harre, Rom & Gillett, Grant. (1994). *The Discursive Mind*. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage.
- Harre, Rom. (2001). The discursive turn in social psychology. In Deborah Shiffrin, Deborah Tannen, and Heidi E. Hamilton (eds.), *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis*, pp. 689-706. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Horwitz, Elaine, K., Horwitz, Michael B. & Cope, Jo Ann. (1991). Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety. In *Language Anxiety: From Theory and Research to Classroom Implications*, pp. 27-36. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall.
- Kanno, Y. (2003). *Negotiating Bilingual and Bicultural Identities: Japanese Returnees Betwixt Two Worlds*. London: Erlbaum.
- Kasper, Gabriele & Rose, Kenneth R. (2002). *Pragmatic Development in a Second Language*. Oxford: Blackwell.

- Kim, Min-Sun. (2002). *Non-Western Perspectives on Human Communication*. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage.
- Kinginger, Celeste. (2004). Alice doesn't live here anymore: Foreign language learning and identity reconstruction. In Pavlenko, Anita & Blackledge, Adrian, (Eds.), *Negotiation of Identities in Multilingual Contexts*. Toronto: Multilingual Matters.
- Lantolf, J. P. (2000a). Introducing socio-cultural theory. In J. P. Lantolf (Eds.), *Socio-cultural Theory and Second Language Acquisition* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lantolf, J. P. (Ed.). (2000b). *Socio-cultural Theory and Second Language Acquisition* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lantolf, J. P., & Appel, G. (Ed.). (1994). *Vygotskian Approaches to Second Language Acquisition* Norwood, N.J.: Ablex Press.
- Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Leaver, B. L. & Atwell, S. (2002). Preliminary qualitative findings from a study of the processes leading to the Advanced Professional Proficiency (ILR 4). In B. L. Leaver & B. Shekhtman (Eds.), *Developing Professional-Level Language Proficiency* (pp. 260-279). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- McAdams, Dan P. (1993). *The Stories We Live by: Personal Myths and the Making of the Self*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Nelson, Katherine. (1996). *Language in Cognitive Development: The Emergence of the Mediated Mind*.
- Norton, B. (2000). *Identity and language learning: Gender, ethnicity and educational change*. Harlow, England: Pearson Education.
- Oxford, Rebecca L. (1999). Anxiety and the language learner: New insights. In Arnold, Jane (ed.). (1999). *Affect in Language Learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press., pp. 58-67.
- Rogoff, Barbara. (2003). *The Cultural Nature of Human Development*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sfard, A. (1998). On two metaphors for learning and the dangers of choosing just one. *Educational Researcher*, 27, 4-13.
- Thomson, Greg (1993) Leave me alone! Can't you see I'm learning your language? (In *Lingua Links Library*, CD-ROM, 1996. Dallas: Summer Institute of Linguistics. In downloadable form, from the Language Impact web site, <http://www.languageimpact.com>)
- Thomson, Greg. (1995). Comprehensibility and processing demands as factors in the order of acquisition of -ing and -ed: a search for evidence. *Papers in Theoretical and Experimental Linguistics*, 3: 68-86, University of Alberta.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1987). *Thought and Language*. (Alex Kozulin, Trans.). Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

Wang, Qi. (2004). The cultural context of parent-child reminiscing: A functional analysis. In Pratt, Michael W. & Fiese, Barbara H. (Eds.), *Family Stories and the Life Course: Across Time and Generations*, pp. 279-301. Mahwah, N.J.: Erlbaum.

Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wertsch, James V. (1991). *Voices of the Mind: A Sociocultural Approach to Mediated Action*. Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press.

[1] I say “a sociocultural understanding,” and not Sociocultural Theory, because the latter label is associated with a more narrowly “Vygotskian” line of research (e.g. Lantolf and Appel, 1994; Lantolf, 2000). I am using the term in a broader sense, encompassing Vygotskian concepts and other topics such as those discussed by Block 2003, and more.

[2] What they call “Advanced Professional Proficiency” I will call “near-normal”

[3] This Western value may also lend itself to a cognitivist understanding of language learning, which takes language learning to be fundamentally about changes inside of the individual language learner, and views language proficiency as what one can do independently of the specific human relationships in which one has a history of participation. I believe the Western individual self concept also surfaces when we complain about host people “finishing our sentences for us”. They are really just assisting us in our ZPD, but we feel the important thing is “showing what I can do by myself.”

[4] Approximate functionally compatible analogues!

[O1]

Original Document: [Introduction to the Sociocultural dimension Oct 2007 \(1\)](#)