

The Growing Participator Approach (GPA): A Brief State of the Art and Some Practical Illustrations

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More and more in our international travels we're encountering people who begin to describe to us a "new language learning method" that they have either observed or heard about. They are surprised when we say, "That's us!" It seems it is high time for a clarification of what is meant by the "[Growing Participator Approach](#)" (GPA)

At the outset, we need to make some distinctions. Anthony (1963) distinguishes most helpfully between

1. *Approach*, ("a set of ... assumptions dealing with the nature of language and the nature of language teaching and learning")
2. *Method*, ("an overall plan for the orderly presentation of language material, ...based upon the selected approach") and
3. *Technique* (what actually "takes place in the classroom").

The people referred to above who describe this "new method" may refer to it as "the new method where you don't talk". They sometimes described **techniques** they had actually witnessed in their overseas context. They had little or no idea of the actual **method**, which, although it spells out techniques for an initial non-talking period of thirty hours, it also spells out techniques for an additional 1,470 hours in which talking plays an important role. They had even less of an idea of the **approach**, which doesn't specify how many non-talking hours there should be, but holds that there should be some initial non-talking period, and furthermore that this emphasis on listening and understanding will play a central role all the way along.

In our courses and workshops, there is indeed 1) an *approach*, 2) a *method*, and 3) *techniques*.

1. The **APPROACH**: the [Growing Participator Approach](#) (GPA), highlighted in this paper, which includes the

- a) *Sociocultural Dimension*
- b) *Cognitive Dimension*
- c) *Temporal Dimension*.

1. The *METHOD*: the *Six-Phase Programme*, a plan for activities that that may take 1500 hours to carry out, structured in such a way that the activities become increasingly advanced as the user becomes increasingly advanced, and they are keyed to the sociocultural/human-relationship changes and cognitive changes that the *growing participator* (GP) undergoes.
2. The *TECHNIQUES* used in the Six-Phase Programme are numerous, ranging from TPR activities in a format we call the Dirty Dozen, to life-story interviewing, to discussions in the [host language](#) of recorded real-life, native-to-native discourses.

If people employing the *techniques* have embraced the GPA(*pproach*), while those observing the techniques have not, then the activities (or as we like to say, the story) that the observers are experiencing as they look on is radically different from the activities (story) being experienced (being lived) at the same moment by those being observed. This is because “all perception is theory laden” (a quote that is widely repeated without attribution, but from Richard Gregory, a perceptual psychologist).

The outsider-observer of the activities is drawing on his-her own ‘folk theory’ of language learning (Miller & Ginsberg, 1995). In some cases observers may also draw on more explicitly-learned theories of second language acquisition or language pedagogy, as they construct their story of what those following the GPA and using the techniques they observe, are doing. Still, what it is that the story the observer experiences, and the *lived-story* being experienced by those being observed, differ profoundly. What the outsider to the activities experiences (laden, as it is, with his/her “theory”) is what we will refer to below as a “*they story*,” while the story experienced by those being observed is the *lived story*. (In applying these concepts already, we are leading you into the GPA!)

In short, what I primarily want to do today is give you a better idea of the *approach* of the GPA, so that if you encounter the *techniques*, you will at least realise that there is another framework for understanding them, beside the framework you are using to interpret them. In fact, we find that when people say they are “modifying the GPA,” more often than not, they mean they are trying to use techniques from the Six-Phase Programme within their own approach, which is not in fact the GPA at all. (Happily, there are also many people who make improvements to the techniques that show an understanding of the approach.)

LANGUAGE LEARNING IS SOCIOCULTURAL

The [sociocultural](#) dimension of languaculture learning/growth is the fundamental one, and the natural starting point. For this, we draw on [Vygotskyan](#) Sociocultural Theory, and especially on the concepts of [mediation and the growth zone \(ZPD\)](#) (Wertsch, 1991), along with the understanding of language learning as participation (Sfard, 1998; Norton, 2000), seeing language not as fundamentally “a collection of things (grammatical concepts, word patterns, etc.) for the learner to ‘collect, absorb and assimilate,’” (Benson & Lor 1999) but rather as “an environment to which the learner must be responsive in order to learn” (*ibid.*). These brief allusions to our intellectual roots in the GPA fail to arouse much of the GPA sense of languaculture learning as a living, social,

personal/interpersonal phenomenon. Although the GPA accepts a strong social constructionism, in practice we resist abstract intellectualization and depersonalization.

The [\(ZPD\)](#) is what the GP can do with a bit of help from a host person that s/he could not quite manage without such help. Being met and helped in one's ZPD spells powerful growth. We find it communicates better to rename the ZPD the "growth zone".

We will talk repeatedly of what it is that the GP is nurtured into. At this point, we can say that the GP is nurtured into the life of a people group by being nurtured into specific lives of special individuals. Because nurturing the GP in the early days is hard work, even when it is done through play (!), it may require a hired, paid nurturer. Over time, as interacting with the GP takes less and less effort on the part of host people, a growing variety of host people will find it worth the effort. Eventually, the relationship of host people to the GP will seem less like nurturing, and more like apprenticing them into maturity in the host languacultural world. Any host person willing to spend time interacting with the GP in his/her growth zone is an expert/master in relation to whom the GP is an apprentice, even if often only momentarily. (To be a normal host person is to be an *expert* in the host languaculture.) A large number of people may unwittingly enter the nurturing relationship or the master-to-apprentice (expert-to-apprentice) relationship with us. Some will be our major nurturers/masters/experts supporting us in our efforts to do what they do by letting us participate with them in what they do. The early nurturers especially, and later major masters, will be remembered as major players in the cast of the GPs overall life narrative.

MEDIATION AND "THEY STORIES"

This is perhaps the most important concept, for us at least, in sociocultural theory, as it leads us to our understanding of the uniqueness of each languacultural world, and what it means to be nurtured into it through participation.

We humans don't experience the world directly, but rather our experience of it is *mediated*—reaching us (or we reaching it) through intermediate *means*, which intervene between the world and us, in the process, altering what we take the world to be. Preeminent among those *mediational means* are tools (such as hammers, roads, houses) and symbols (such as spoken words). In other words, these mediational means, as they mediate our experience (and our thoughts), enrich and contribute tremendously to the constitution and course of the world as we know it. (Knowledge of the world is social and sociohistorical. The resources that enable and constrain the ongoing shared story-construction that is the life of a people group are a social heritage).

Take this example: I see what to me is a "small bowl", but a Kazakh sees as a *kece* and a Korean sees as a *babgueruet*. Now, unless you and I are participants in the Korean or Kazakh world, there is no way I can really tell you what the Korean or Kazakh sees. Oh, I can tell you that the Korean is surprised to see the Kazakh drinking tea from a *babgueruet*, and the Kazakh is surprised to see the Korean eating rice from a *kece*, but given that "rice," "eat," "drink," and "tea" are my Anglo-Canadian story-constructing pieces (symbolic mediational means), you and I haven't really told

each other what the Kazakh, or the Korean, is experiencing. Kazakh *shai* is a different experience indeed from English *tea*, while Korean *cha* is a different experience from both. On the other hand, I can tell you, as my fellow North American (or more widely, fellow native Anglophone), “Kazakhs drink tea from a small bowl.” You understand what I mean, since we mediate life by the same means, but what might be offered as a Kazakh translation, Қазақтар кеселерден шай ішейде, is something quite different from “Kazakhs drink tea from a small bowl”. Though the *small bowl/kece/babgueret*, the *tea/shai/cha*, etc., etc. may involve one and the same physical entities, those physical entities become “pieces of life” through the way they are mediated to us by our symbols. Every one of the little “pieces of life” from which the Kazakh story is constructed are different from all of the little “pieces of life” from which the Anglo-Canadian story is constructed. Thus, we say the actual Kazakh story, made with Kazakh story-constructing pieces is their *lived story*, whereas my observations of the Kazakhs drinking “tea” from a “small bowl” is my “*they story*”, constructed out of my Anglo-Canadian languacultural story-making pieces. The *lived-story* and the “*they story*” are different stories indeed. We live in different worlds, even when in the same physical world, with different events taking place (again, which aren’t different physically), and different stories being lived. I can only come to know the lived story of Kazakhs if Kazakhs adequately nurture me and apprentice me into that story which they are living.

In brief, the GP is being nurtured and then apprenticed into using the host mediational means—story constructing pieces—in the way that they are used in the lived story of host people.

Words are similar to tools

A word has two parts, the phonetic part and the conceptual part. The phonetic part is like the handle of a tool (say a shovel handle), and the conceptual part like the head of the tool (say, the shovel blade). It is the head of the tool that does the work of the tool, carrying out its specific function, but it is the handle that enables people to take hold of the tool and put it to work. So it is with the conceptual part of a word (which does the work, carries out the function of the word) and the phonetic part (which allow us to “take hold of” the word, and use it in listening or talking).

The new GP, in the early weeks of growing participation, quickly attaches her native languacultural “tool heads”(concepts) to the host people’s “tool handles” (the phonetic part—how the words sound and are uttered). Dealing with the new host words in this way, the GPs rapidly achieve a quick and dirty understanding of thousands of words in the [host language](#). Over time, as the GP participates extensively in host discourses (see below), those words increasingly are understood more nearly as host people understand them.

discourses (small “d”) and Discourses (capital “D”)

Think of everything that might typically be said by a customer, by fellow customers, and by a cashier at a check-stand in a grocery store. All of that which is said is what linguists call a “discourse”. But in and of themselves, the discourses don’t exist! There is much activity interwoven with the talking, and the talking itself is not something separate from the activity as a whole, but an inextricable constituent of an “alloy” that is the activity. The activity includes within it people

filling roles, such as cashier (and possibly other staff), and customer, and fellow customer. The roles are not separable from what is said, and often what is said is combined with objects and gestures (as when the cashier picks up a can of beans and says, “Did you notice the price of this?” The flow of activity also include other objects— the cash register, the conveyer belt, the scale, the bags and all the rest. There are expectations regarding what might be done physically and what might be said in synchrony with that.

This whole flow of action that includes the discourse is the *Discourse* (with a capital “D”).

In brief, a growing participator is thus being nurtured, and then apprenticed, into the Discourses (capital “D”) of the host languacultural world (with its inextricable talking), including its human roles, as it participates with the support of nurturers/masters.

Another important sense of “discourse”—ongoing community-wide discussions.

Unfortunately, the word “discourse” is used without qualification in various senses. In the social sciences, and more and more in academic writing in general, and even in the public sphere, you hear expressions such as “the American discourse about politics”. In this sense, “discourses” are on-going “conversations” or “discussions” within a whole people group or certain subgroups within it: the discourse about the war, the discourse about breast feeding, the discourse about the new bridge, the discourse about sickness and death, and so on and so forth, the discourse about the supernatural, the discourse about foreigners, etc.

For clarity when we need it, we can distinguish these community-wide “conversations” from individual discourses (what is said in concrete situations) and Discourses (what is said, plus everything else that goes into the situation) by calling them “on-going discourses,” or “on-going community-wide conversations/discussions”. Often, though, context makes clear which “discourses” we are referring to.

In brief, the GP is being nurtured through participation in host discourses and Discourses, and perhaps even more crucially, being nurtured into the “ongoing discourses” to which all host people are party.

Experience as narrative

A narrative is made from the story-construction pieces we discussed above—especially words (and frequent word combinations), with their conceptual part (tool head) and their phonetic part (tool handle). As we build a spoken narrative, events of the narrative are presented in narrative settings (described in the narrative), and listeners connect particular events in a narrative to other events in the narrative “logically”, for example, seeing one event as following from another, as causing another, as foreseeing another, as flashing back to another and so on. The “lived narrative” of your or my present experience is much the like a spoken narrative (Bruner, 1990). We make a story out of lived events right as we experience them, creating such “logical” connections between, for example, relating two events as cause-effect, reason-result, etc.

Just as later events in a spoken narrative cause us to reinterpret earlier events, so events in the lived narrative of experience cause us to reinterpret earlier experiences. Events in both spoken and lived narratives are generally compatible with our broad expectations. When they are not, we tend to come up with stories about the unexpected events in an attempt to convert them into something that would have been more expectable, given the new information we add to account for them (Bruner, 1990). This is true in spoken narratives and in lived narratives.

In brief, growing participators are nurtured and apprenticed into the ongoing narratives of individual host lives, and as a result, into the bigger shared narrative that the host people are living together. Eventually, the GPs “they stories” have died away to a large extent, and the GP is sharing in the lived story of the host community, making their unique co-contributions to its future course.

Cultural models

This is another helpful concept from Gee (1999). A cultural model is basically the whole body of knowledge related to some coherent area of life and known in common (co-known) by members of the speech community. Gee argues that the meanings of words are “situated”. That is, a word does not have a precise meaning or list of precise alternative meanings as displayed in a dictionary. Rather, a word activates a holistic cultural model from which the listener infers a coherent picture. Gee’s examples are

1. The coffee spilled; get a broom.
2. The coffee spilled; get a mop.

In the former, the picture may contain coffee grounds, and in the latter the picture may contain a dark brown puddle. We could make a dictionary which listed meanings (1) and (2) under the entry *coffee*. However, we quickly find that we just keep multiplying the meanings of *coffee* as we encounter it in new contexts. For example, in the right context of an evening stroll in Ethiopia, *coffee* might evoke a picture containing the aroma of coffee blossoms.

In brief, the GP is nurtured into wide-ranging co-knowing of reality—the cultural models of everyday life that become the means of creating the situated meanings of words dynamically during the process of listening to host speech.

Linguaculture and languacultural worlds

Agar (1995) felt that linguists have tried to draw a circle around a part of culture, call it “language” and then strive to stay within the circle in order elucidate their chosen segment of reality. The goal of Agar’s book was to start erasing the circle. I might agree with theoretical linguists that the advancement of knowledge has benefitted enormously from the way they drew the boundary between language and the rest of human experience, but other linguists—sociolinguists, pragmaticsists, discourse analysts—long ago burst out of the circle from the inside. Agar is erasing the circle from without, from the perspective of the whole of culture.

The notion of languaculture reminds me of the notion of Discourse (capital “D”). There is one flow of human action, in which talking plays a crucial role, but actions that employ talking are not separate from the rest or the mix. Rather they are part of the same stream of action. On a micro-level, in my home languaculture you can wait back a certain distance from the doorway for me to go ahead of you as a sign of respect, or you might add some talking to the mix, for example, uttering the word, “Please!” while standing back (and perhaps also gesturing toward the doorway with your forearm) but whichever of these possibilities you include, the complex action is a unified act of putting me ahead of you. And who puts whom ahead of whom is controlled by complex and subtle social factors (which include emotions and values). (I recall competing with an East Asian for the responsibility of holding back while the other went through the doorway. My “they story” about his behaviour was that he was reacting to my senior age, while I was reacting to the fact that he was the guest and I was the host.)

Agar uses the example of second person pronouns (and second person agreement) in German. Person and number in pronouns and verb agreement are classical matters of “grammar” to traditional language learners. Yet Agar found that their actual role in the so-called familiar/polite distinction in life, beyond the simplest cases, turned out to be puzzling to him, even after many years, despite the fact that language teachers think they have explained the distinction to their students on day 1 (well, day 2, perhaps, since day 1 is “The Alphabet”).

This puzzling matter of polite/familiar second person pronoun usages is what Agar calls a rich point: something that surprises and puzzles the newcomer, and is, in fact, the tip of an iceberg of languacultural difference, and misunderstanding, or non-understanding.

In brief, a GP is being nurtured and apprenticed into a languaculture, or a languacultural world. (I most often prefer to say *languacultural world* rather than simply *languaculture*. For me the latter has more of a cognitivist feel to it, while the former feels more sociocultural.)

Identity and “language learning”

If learning is *participation* (in which host people spend time interacting with newcomers in their growth zone), then *when*, *how much* and *with whom* one gets to participate—and thus grow—depends on *who* the host people take the growing participator to be at a given point. Initially, the GP has only the identity of a foreigner belonging to a particular stereotype. If s/he is to keep growing, then eventually s/he will need to be recognised by enough host people as someone who belongs in social situations within the host languacultural world as a contributor (and not as a mere visitor, onlooker or object of curiosity). In most cases s/he may never be seen as “one of us” by the society as a whole. However, within particular social networks (say, a particular extended family) and communities of practice (say, a church congregation) s/he may indeed come to be experienced by host people as “one of us” with his/her foreignness perhaps taking on a quality that is even appreciated as a unique enrichment of life within the group.

The notion of *community of practice* (Lave & Wenger, 1991 and Wenger, 1998) is important in the GPA. It refers to a group of people with shared purposes, shared understanding of who they are and of who belongs and who doesn't, and constituted by its shared practices.

Keeping with the deeply personal nature of the GPA, we emphasise the reality that a specific new person, a "new me" comes into view right before the eyes of those very host people who nurture that new person into existence and who apprentice that new person along in ever-growing maturity.

This understanding of the GP as an emerging person in the host languacultural world can be related to recent work on language learning motivation, framed in terms of a "self-system" (Dörnyei, 2005). Each person has an *actual self*, a *possible self* and a *dreaded self*, among other "selves". It is with this in mind that we cast the issue of identity and the self in terms of "the 'new me' that the host people experience now, and the 'later new me' who I can next become in their experience". If a desirable "new me" comes to be seen as a genuine possibility, (and realistically so), it may result in strong (and sustainable) motivation. We will say a bit more about this when we deal with the fourth dimension, time.

In brief, the growing participator is an ever emerging "new me" in the experience of the host people who interact with him/her, and who they take that "me" to be will impact participation and growth.

Next dimension please: Languaculture learning is cognitive.

Now we focus more strongly on the "langua-" in "languaculture". We want to say that every bit of languaculture participation/learning/development is both (or at least, ideally, should both) sociocultural and cognitive. That is the point of the geometrical metaphor, in which we say that the sociocultural and the cognitive are two dimensions (with an ordinate and abscissa, such that every point on this two-dimensional plane of growing participation is located simultaneously on both dimensions, at some single point x,y .) For the non-mathematician reader, the sociocultural and the cognitive are not separate components or separate aspects or features of "language and culture learning," but rather all of language learning is always both (at least ideally).

For our understanding of the cognitive dimension we draw from the field of psycholinguistics. (Psycholinguists study the cognitive processes of language comprehension and production, as well as child language acquisition and language pathology.)

Enormous progress has been made since the mid-20th Century in understanding the nature of language comprehension and production. The human brain handles these great challenges so exquisitely that, like all of creation, the phenomena appear to be miraculous! One's own brain uses well-established processes in comprehending and producing one's native language (L1), and initially these same L1 comprehension and production processes are all there is for processing the new language (L2). Over time, with massive experience hearing, understanding and producing speech in the L2 (especially in face-to-face interaction), new cognitive processes develop that work

adequately for the new language (perhaps aided by other cognitive strategies that aren't needed as much in the highly successful and efficient processes of L1 comprehension and production).

Language comprehension, or *understanding speech*

Language comprehension works from the sounds of speech, on through many "steps." to ultimately create mental models of what the speaker is assumed by the hearer to mean. Initially, the new GP is confronted with a "**wall of noise**". His/her listening system is in a massive state of mismatch with what s/he is hearing, even on the level of raw sound, and the mismatch continues at the levels of words, syntax and discourse.

Hearing sound/sounds in a new languaculture

The raw sound of speech contains no vowels or consonants or words. Listeners' brains use evidence, called acoustic cues, to arrive at a sense of vowels and consonants, and they also used a variety of cues to break the sound stream into words. These acoustic cues, are specific in nature to each language, and of course the set of words are too, along with the strategies that will work for breaking the speech stream into words. We are not aware of these challenges as we effortlessly understand speech within our native language, nor as our ears are assaulted by the wall of noise that is speech in an unfamiliar language.

The GPA recognises a slow process of tuning up to the sounds of host speech. Often, the initial experience of host speech can be described as "murkey" (see Sebastián-Gallés, 2004). Echoic memory is a brief and highly volatile type of memory for sound that is easily overwritten by hearing additional speech (which is one reason we insist everyone remain quiet during Phase 1 listening activities!) In order to let it play a role in our phonetic learning, we enforce a "silent phase" in our early techniques of the Six-Phase Programme, and we continue to include lots of techniques that involve listening without talking.

Cutting the speech stream into words

Imagine you have a 20,000 word dictionary, and you must look up words in it at an average speed of five words per two seconds. That gives some picture of the challenge the brain faces in dealing with words, even after it has successfully isolated them phonetically from the sound stream of speech which they exhaustively make up (Jusczyk & Luce, 2002). As soon as a word has been "looked up" in the massive "mental lexicon," a decision must be made nearly instantly whether to keep it. In the stream of speech are many "candidate" words that are irrelevant. For example, if you heard the previous sentence read aloud, the word *char* would be part of it: *speech+are* could be heard as *spee char*. It helps that there is no such word as "*spee*", so that it couldn't really be *spee char*. However, when you are just learning a language, you don't know what is and is not a word. Also, if you hear English as a native hears it, then the "*ch*" sound in *char* is slightly different from that in *speech are* (the "onset of voicing" is a few milliseconds later in the *cha* of *char* than in the *cha* in *speech are*). In fact, the host person hears a variety of such highly subtle phonetic clues that help him/her to break the speech stream into words. Nevertheless, his or her brain needs to

activate whatever candidate words it can spot in the speech stream, before deciding which “candidates” fit or don’t fit with the possible meanings of the overall utterance.

Thus hearing *bill* will activate the male name *Bill*, and also the beak-of-birds meaning, and the proposed-law-in-parliament meaning. If a foreigner is to process English words in rapid speech, s/he too needs to be able to activate every possible word, and then hang onto the ones that fit together with the likely meaning of the utterance. However matters may be worse for the foreigner, since the English *bill* may sound the same to him/her as *bell* and *bear* and *beer*. I kid you not! (Sebastián-Gallés, 2004). Thus, besides activating the three homonyms for *bill* that we mentioned, these other candidates—*bell*, *bear*, *beer*—may also be activated (along with their homonyms, and other words that sound similar to them and perhaps also some words that sound like *bill* in their L1).

Everything about the mental processing (comprehension and production) of words (and all other aspects of language) is highly sensitive to *frequency* (Ellis, 2002). Developing a powerful mental “word processor” for a new languaculture will be a matter of massive enough experience with the language so that word frequency can play its normal role, along with the roles it plays in dealing with word collocations (combinations)— we frequently combine *heavy* with *traffic* in English, but not with *crowd*. “There was heavy traffic down town” but not “There was a heavy crowd on the downtown mall.” And again, the frequency of what one hears—hence the experience of hearing and understanding massive amounts of speech—plays an important role at all levels of the processes of comprehension and production of speech. What you do a lot gets easier!

Knowing enough words

Adolphs and Schmitt (2002) showed us that good comprehension of English speech requires a listening vocabulary of many thousands of words—easily over 10,000. The GPA places major emphasis on developing a massive comprehension vocabulary, and suggests that GPs follow the [Iceberg Principle](#): don’t try to memorise ten or fifteen thousand words. Rather, have *strong encounters* with new words, paying simultaneous attention to sound, meaning and context, and then subsequently you will re-encounter those words in proportion to their frequency in speech. They will eventually rise to the tip of the iceberg, available for use in spoken production. In other words, applying the [Iceberg Principle](#) includes encountering a massive amount of understandable speech over a long period of time. (This process can be strengthened by making special vocabulary-related recordings.)

Getting beyond the words: letting the grammar bits do their magic

Once words are recognised, as we have already said (following Gee, 1999), they function as cues to cultural models, which are activated and used in comprehension. We understand grammar to consist in a powerful set of processing cues (McWhinney, 1987) that enable the brain to organise the words into a “thought”.

There are sub-parts of words, and the variable forms of words (inflectional forms), and special grammatical words (function words) which work together with the grammatical cues of word order, rhythm, intonation, etc., to yield the meaning of utterances.

Sentence 1) below illustrates how grammatical elements are needed to create coherent “thoughts” from “content words” (nouns, verbs, adjectives adverbs). It was created by replacing grammar bits of a normal sentence with bits of nonsense (The grammatical cue of word order is still presevered, though, without which matters would be far worse.):

1) Blonk humid foov litch live-lar crabf flus crawl foov wiggle shoke litch pool.

This hardly sounds like a sentence. However, if we replace each nonsense word with a grammatical cue of some sort, and then replace the “content words” with nonsense words, we get Lewis Carol’s sentence:

2) ’Twas brillig, and the slithy toves did gyre and gimble in the wabe:

Do you get the difference between these two sentences? They could both be derived from

3) ’Twas humid and the lively crabs did crawl and wiggle in the pool.

by replacing functional bits or meaningful bits with bits of meaningless sound. Replacing grammar cues with bits of nonsense leaves us without a sentence. We’d do much better if the grammar bits were just omitted altogether:

4) Humid live crab crawl wiggle pool.

By contrast, the grammar bits without the content words—*’twas, and, -y, -s, did, and, in the,* (prepositions like in can be considered intermediate between grammatical words and content words), as in Lewis Carroll’s example, do something very powerful for the native reader/listener. Children hearing that Carroll sentence have been known to draw a picture to depict its meaning! For a native listener, the grammar bits are terribly alive and active and powerful, triggering rapid organisation of words into “thought”.

Unfortunately for the new GP, most of those grammar bits are just plain dead as a door nail for a long, long time, just as surely as *blonk, foov, litch,* etc. were dead for native English readers just a moment ago. It matters not that the GP supposedly knows the grammar bits from hearing lectures about them. They are dead. They don’t trigger the kind of lively processes that they trigger in native listeners (Thomson 2000). We hope that the GP will have massive enough experiences hearing and understanding English, until a sentence like 2) will indeed spring to life for the GP as it does for the native listerner. It won’t happen over night, or even in a year or two.

Getting beyond the words: grouping them into phrases, clauses, sentences

The native listener’s brain not only reacts powerfully to grammatical bits, using them to organise words into “thoughts”, but it also carries out a process of grouping words into phrases, grouping phrases into clauses, and grouping clauses into sentences. This is the process psycholinguists call *parsing*. Linguist John Kimball gave us the famous example (Kimball, 1973):

The horse raced past the barn fell.

Your problem in reading that sentence, if English is your native language, is that the moment you hear, “The horse raced” your mental parser decides that *horse* is the subject, and *raced* is an intransitive predicate. However, there is another way to group the words, according to which the meaning is equivalent to the meaning of

The horse that was raced past the bar fell.

If the native listener has reason to do so, s/he can group the words of Kimball’s original sentence so that they mean just that.

Well, the brain appears to make extremely rapid decisions regarding how to group words into phrases, and those “instant” decisions can give us the wrong result, so that when the listener reaches the word “barn,” his/her brain thinks the sentence is finished, with the result that the word “fell” can’t be fit into the “thought”, but instead just hangs there doing nothing.

In the GPA we acknowledge that just as each language has its own way of recognising sounds and words, so each language has its own way of grouping words into phrases “instantly”. The new growing participator has only the word-grouping (parsing) system of his/her native language to employ in grouping words in the new language. Some aspects of the L1 system of word grouping may work for the L2, but others may not. Perhaps most will not.

Getting beyond the words: filling in massive missing detail

Finally, comprehension processes beyond the word include inferencing. We saw an example with the two sentences about the spilt coffee. The nature of the “coffee” in question (liquid beverage vs. grounds) was determined inferentially, drawing on the cultural model of coffee (basically, all that we know about coffee in our languaculture, from the bushes and beans to the grounds and beverages). The native ability to understand speech, depends constantly on the ability to make the right inferences, drawing on the cultural models of the host languaculture. Until the GP has a lot of familiarity with host cultural models of everyday life, the ability to draw the inferences crucial for understanding will be limited. In this respect too, the solution is *massive experience with host discourse*, which will grow from the relatively simple ones that are understood in the early weeks, to the highly complex ones in later months and years.

There are also inferences that help us to understand, for example, that someone who asks, “Do you feel cold?” is actually requesting that you close the window. The level and style of such “indirectness” in speech will vary from languaculture to languaculture (this is the area called pragmatics).

In spite of the limitations in the ability of GPs to draw the “instant” inferences required for good comprehension, we can imagine that GPs make lots of inferences as they listen, since even meanings expressed simply for host listeners may be understood at best with the help of “guessing” by the GP listener!

Taking comprehension seriously

In short, the GPA recognises that comprehension processes are enormously complex and vary greatly in nature from language to language. We expect great challenges in learning to understand rapid, native-to-native speech., starting with the challenge of hearing the sounds, where we miss hearing some sounds altogether, and mishear others (Sebastián-Gallés, 2004), and continuing on through the challenges of finding words in the speech stream, making use of grammatical cues, grouping words into phrases, and making essential inferences. The fact that the GPA sees such a challenge in learning to understand speech leads to major elements of the design of the Six-Phase Program. The emphasis on comprehension ahead of speaking also relates to our GPA values in the sociocultural dimension: host people need to be listened to. We don't participate in a people group with an overwhelming focus on what we want to say, but rather with a passion to hear the thoughts and hearts of host people in order to converse with them rather than talk at them.

Talking is important, too!

Speech production, like speech comprehension is a many-“step” process (Kormos, 2006), with many of the steps happening “ballistically”, that is, so automatically and powerfully that once they are underway, the speaker has no control over them, until s/he has heard what s/he just said, at which point s/he may wish to make corrections. The ballistic nature of speech production results in lots of misfires as when someone accidentally says, “She hook my shand” in place of the intended “She shook my hand”. Such speech errors have provided researchers with abundant evidence regarding the process of speech production, since different kinds of errors reflect different “steps” or levels in the process. There is now also a large body of experimental literature and neuro-imaging research related to how people produce speech. In the major models, the production of an utterance begins at a “message level” without words (though perhaps influenced already by what is readily sayable given the grammatical and lexical inclinations of the language—See Slobin, 1994), and goes on through steps that include the selection of appropriate words, the placing of them into their positions and finally the physical speaking of them.

In the case of comprehension, if the GP fails to make use of some grammar bits in the listening process, host people will not be aware of it. When the GP speaks, as well, there will be many ways in which his/her speech is not host-like in its use of those grammar bits. Unlike the case of listening, this will be overwhelmingly obvious to the host people who hear the GP talking.

For the GP involved in his/her early speaking efforts, however, the luxury of sounding host-like doesn't come to mind when s/he is struggling mightily to get some of his/her point across, period! As with the comprehension system, at the outset of growing participation, the only production system the GP has is that of his/her native language (and possibly adaptations of it for other languages s/he has been learning). In a whole host of ways, that system doesn't work smoothly, or doesn't work at all for the new language. The struggle that the GP goes through in producing speech is often discussed under the heading of “communication strategies” (Kormos, 2006).

The GPA includes the *talk-a-lot principle*, which highly motivated growing participators seem to know instinctively, although if they are cognitively oriented, they may see it in terms of needing to

“practice speaking/” rather than a need to participate in the right kind of relationships enough of the time. Be that as it may, as we talk a lot, talking becomes easier— easier for the GP to produce and easier for host people to understand. *Having struggled and succeeded to express “an idea” in the past, expressing the same or similar “ideas” in the future should be easier.*

Therefore, in the GPA, combining the sociocultural and cognitive dimensions we are led to suspect that the most powerful cause of growth in speaking ability is fostered by conversational interaction with host people who meet us in our growth zone. For one thing, as the GP struggles, a sympathetic host person in his/her growth zone steps in and helps out, and success results. The next time a similar communication need arises, the struggle will be less than it was the first time.

There is another factor, though, which may make interpersonal interaction especially powerful in fostering growth. That has to do with characteristics of conversational interaction that have been called *coordination in dialogue, alignment, convergence, syntactic priming, and structural repetition*. Some of expressions sound more cognitive, and others more sociocultural. The idea is that in a conversation between two native users of the language, the grammatical forms and choices of words and phraseology that are used by either of the two conversational partners (interlocutors) strongly influence those used by the other conversational partner. We know that this is the case when you and I are carrying on a conversation as two natives conversing in our shared native language. There is also evidence that the same force is at work when we interact conversationally in our new language (Atkinson, et al., 2007; Costa, Pickering & Sorace, 2008; McDonough & Mackey, 2008). In conversational interaction, something in us conforms increasingly to the speech of the host person with whom we are conversing. This cognitive fact harmonises nicely with the general sociocultural understanding of learning in general: learning is not first and foremost a private, individual inner affair, but rather a public, observable, interpersonal affair, with the social/observable activity secondarily being privatised and internalised over time.

Getting the grammatical form of our speech to sound more host-like

There is a widespread view that to learn to speak, one needs to be “*taught the grammar*” and then “*practice using it*”. In the GPA we encourage activities which raise the GP’s awareness of grammatical form, and his/her understanding of the meanings of grammatical forms, but this is not necessarily accompanied by abstract discussion of grammar in technical language. We observe that many people have “grammar anxiety.” Yet we find that we can often “disguise the grammar” as meaning, letting people get the point of many grammatical forms without discussing them in academic terms. When told, “The plural suffix in Kazakh has six forms, governed by vowel harmony and consonant assimilation,” people with “grammar anxiety” may become paralysed. However, we find that in practice, there is just no need to inform them of such “facts”! As aids to increasing awareness of grammatical form without forcing people to learn technical grammatical terminology and abstract analyses, we recommend “structured input” techniques (VanPatten, 2007) and “input floods” (Trahey & White, 1993), many of which are built into the Phase 1 techniques of the Six-Phase Programme, and also “output floods”. We approach such techniques as examples of language play. In the case of Kazakh plural suffixes people learn these “games,” have fun doing so

and end up producing the right forms, which they may or may not have consciously analysed to one degree or another.

In any case, we feel that awareness of grammatical form can't hurt anything, and it may be of some help, for example, contributing to communication strategies such as advance planning of utterances. However, when it comes to L2 speech production, no amount of grammar study and drills are a substitute for extensive face-to-face social interaction and other experiences in understanding speech, leading to a high level of familiarity with how host people talk. We also recognise that matters such as word choice, idioms and appropriateness are more important than host-sounding grammatical form in terms of helping GPs to sound more like "one of us" to host people.

In the end (and well before that!) the most noble effort to lead L2 learners into host-sounding grammatical speech will often fail. Teachers can teach grammar points until they are blue in the face and students can understand them and pass tests about them, but when they get down to talking for real, it seems that no matter what the student's mind wants, the student's brain has a mind of its own, and keeps getting things wrong! Too often people talk of the importance of "good grammar" in moralistic terms. Too often, the learning of a particular language is made to appear to be a feat of great intellectual prowess rather than growing participation in a live, personal, languacultural world. One important feature of the GPA is that we expect people to end up sounding non-host-like in various ways. However much we may impress ourselves or one another as workers, the host people are less impressed with us than we imagine!

The long and the short of it:

Picture humanity as being partitioned into groups which are separated from one another by walls—walls of noise. We say that what is a wall of noise—the sound of the speech that is heard but not understood—is only a wall to the outsider. For the host people, the same sound of speech is an invisible window into one another's minds and hearts. They notice the ideas being expressed, not the sound that is being used. Some of the reasons for the difficulty "penetrating" that wall of noise, turning the wall into a window, should be evident from our discussion of the difficulty of hearing and understanding speech.

People groups in general are isolated from one another by the walls of noise. They can still see one another's actions, but what they see is an illusion, given that they can only see those actions in terms of their own "they stories" about them, while the host people are carrying on a very different lived-story.

Enter the would-be GP. At the outset s/he is a nobody within the host languacultural world apart from being identified with the stereotype of his/her particular brand of foreigner (and host people unknowingly tell their own "they stories" about him/her). If s/he understands and follows the GPA, then s/he looks at the people behind the wall of noise and realises that there is a story going on in there that s/he knows nothing about. S/he wants to cross the wall of noise, and participate in the story that those people are living, rather than just continuing to tell him/her own home-

languacultural “they story” about “them”. S/he wants to be part of the shared life of those people, and even make his/her contribution with them to their process of extending their story to the next level of their history.

As times goes on, this one-time “nobody” emerges as a “new me” before the eyes of his/her host nurturers and other host people. S/he steadily becomes easier to deal with, less and less weird, so that dealing with him/her becomes more and more rewarding for a growing variety of host people, meaning that more and more host people interact with her in her growth zone, and she grows and grows.

In the first moments of growing participation, the GP cannot understand anything or say anything, but the nurturer begins helping the GP to take his/her first baby steps into that new world by playing with him/her in ways that allow him/her to learn and grow. We mentioned earlier how that the GP initially attaches the host-word “handles” (phonetic form) to his/her native-word “tool heads” (the conceptual part of each word). Gradually, with massive participation in host discourses, those “tool heads” (word concepts) become more like those of the host people.

The Time Dimension

It is often taken for granted that “learning a language and culture” takes time. However, time is too important a dimension to take for granted. In the GPA, we think about it a lot.

Our different lives/worlds/lived-stories compete for our finite time

A GP moves physically to where host people live. However, he is still living his home life at the moment of arrival, in spite of being physically among host people. This is also the case for tourists and world-travel addicts.

Imagine an Anglo-Canadian experiencing Uganda, Thailand, France, Turkey, Russia, etc. The story he is living is certainly not a Ugandan, Thai, French, Turkish, Russian, etc. story. Rather the experience in each land are part of his personal Canadian story, constructed using the Anglo-Canadian mediational means (story-constructing pieces) and drawing on the cultural models of his Anglo-Canadian home languacultural world. The Canadian’s lived-story moves in and out of Canada, and in Uganda, it is an Anglo-Canadian story/experience of Uganda, not a Ugandan experience of Uganda.

The point of growing participation is to stop making “them” part of my home languacultural story and begin living in their story with them. But my changeover from my story to theirs is gradual. Not that I stop living my Canadian story in my Canadian languacultural world, but increasingly I live the host story in the host languacultural world.

Even after I’ve grown a great distance into my participation in the host languacultural world, my Canadian languacultural life may still dominate. We aren’t saying that should or should not be the case. In my flat with my Canadian wife and children, I will likely be primarily dwelling in a little, insulated Canadian bubble (less so if host people are visiting me constantly there). But my

Canadian or wider Anglophone life (including Brits, Australians, etc.) doesn't end at my own walls. I may also have a network of people from Anglophone countries with whom I carry on an active social life that occupies many hours per week, including travel time to be with them. I may also have North American satellite television, a library of American DVDs, and I may spend a lot of time reading in English, both professionally and for leisure, as well as browsing American websites. My kids may be going to a school for the children of expats that may also be an Anglophone world. All of these examples are elements of my home world in the host country, and together they give me a rich and pervasive "home life" ("home" is intended as the antonym of "host") in my host country. This vigorous "home" languacultural life in the host country is what I will call my "**home-away-from-home life**." That is a tremendously important concept, and that life probably gets a bigger slice of time than my other lives.

Now I may be not an Anglo-Canadian, but a Korean or German abroad. I am likely to be carrying on a Korean or German home-away-from-home life in the host country. But unlike the Anglo-Canadian, who has only two lives to contend with, two lives to compete with one another, as a Korean or German, I have *three* languacultural worlds going on in the host country: 1) My Korean or German home-away-from-home life, 2) my life of growing participation in the international-expat-Anglo-worker community, and 3) my life in the local host languacultural world. Three worlds, each competing for my time! Any time that I spend in one of these three lives is time I don't spend in the other two. All too often, it is the third life, the local host languacultural life, that gets the smallest share of time, perhaps not even enough time to have real viability. I may describe the problem by saying, "My language learning is not going well", but I need to be told, "***It is not a language to be learned, but a life to be lived***".

Time alone is not enough

However, it is not purely a matter of the quantity of time, but also of the quality. I may spend many hours per day around host people, but I am not understanding much of what they say, nor conversing much myself. Or I may be relating heavily to local people, but in English (or some other language I share with them besides their heart language). I mustn't take comfort in the mere fact that I am with host people a lot. What really counts is

the amount of time during which people interact with me in my growth zone in their languacultural world.

If that is happening for at least fifteen hours a week, I can grow reasonably steadily.

How will it happen? Most likely, for many months people will only interact with me in my growth zone for that many hours per week if I pay them for it! As I become easier and more enjoyable to communicate with, it will happen more and more without payment, in the course of life. (We'll talk about making our workplace a host [community of practice](#). However, in the early months, making my workplace a host [community of practice](#) may still not mean that people in my workplace are spending a lot of time with me in my growth zone, and so I am likely to need to recruit a special nurturer and pay him/her.)

How much time is enough? 100 hours; 300 hours; seventeen years

In order to help people to be realistic about the time needed to change, we adopt an observation of Betty Lou Leaver (2003b), based on her exceptionally vast experience learning languages and observing language learners in detail:

“The diagnostic assessment can be repeated periodically, but consider that for proficiency to make any noticeable gain at all, the typical person needs at least 100 hours of additional language exposure and practice to make noticeable gains at lower levels of proficiency and at least 300 hours at higher levels.” (p. 28)

Thus we tell people, “**100 hours to a new you**” (if they have limited ability so far) or “**300 hours to a new you**” (if they seem to have at least basic conversational ability). The idea of “a new you” is in line with the “self-system” approach to motivation referred to earlier. Do I want to become someone I currently am not in terms of the “me” that host people experience? I can schedule, say, three hundred hours of techniques optimal to my current ability level (and 300 hours will also mean at least 2250 new words in my iceberg, significantly increased familiarity with how people talk, and countless successfully produced utterances under my belt that will make many future efforts a lot easier). We believe having such a “possible” goal (say, 300 hours of concretely specified activities) involving a highly desirable “new me” could be powerfully motivating, while not reinforcing false hopes that a big change can occur in, say, ten hours.

Another tidbit we draw from Betty Lou Leaver is the figure already mentioned of *seventeen years*. In her research, she located over fifty people who had been officially rated as ILR Level 4, so-called “near native,” having begun learning the other language as adults. She found that the average time it took for adults to grow to Level 4 was seventeen years! She claims that with the right strategy, that average can be reduced to six years, but that is still just an average (and she doesn’t suggest a range).

The time dimension and metamorphosing techniques

The reason for hiring a nurturer is that at lower stages of our growth, life out in the big host world provides only snatches of time during which people interact with us in our growth zone, maybe a few minutes out of many hours around host people. With a hired nurturer, most of those many hours can involve co-participation in life with a host person meeting us in our growth zone. It’s like supercharging our time with host people for maximum participation. Thus we often refer to the techniques in the Six-Phase Programme as “supercharged participation activities”.

The time dimension was originally conceptualised first and foremost in recognition that the nature of one’s “language learning activities” (one’s choice of supercharged participation techniques) needs to evolve steadily (as in the Six-Phase Programme), so that one’s current techniques look radically different from those of six months ago (or in the early days, from those of three months ago, a month ago, even two weeks ago—they change most rapidly at first, and more slowly as time goes on). This understanding of the time dimension is behind the design of the Six-Phase Programme. However, we conceptualise the six phases not just in terms of metamorphosing

supercharged participation techniques, but also with a view to our personal changes in the social and cognitive dimensions.

Socioculturally, *who we are* (our identity)—in terms of the way host people experience us—keeps changing, and the *variety of people* who interact with us in our growth zone, and how much they interact with us, keeps changing.

Cognitively, our *ability to hear speech* in a host-like way, and our other *processes for understanding and producing speech* keep changing.

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Appendix: The Six Phase Programme

Phase 1: The Here-and-Now Phase

100 Hours (three to six weeks). Nurturer helps us grow by playing with us. We learn to understand about 800 words, and many grammar structures through input flooding. We tune up to the

language and begin speaking. We can understand complex speech about the here-and-now, along with survival expressions. Speaking is quite a struggle for us! When it comes to *meaningful relationships in the host world* (as opposed to host people meeting us in our own world) it is *mainly just our hired nurturer*. By the end of this phase our ability is **something like FSI Level 0+**

Phase 2: Story-Building Phase

150 Hours. Using wordless picture stories (possibly other visible props) we greatly increase our ability to talk and understand. Though our talking still works best in the here-and-now mode, we are understanding lengthy narratives when we have set ourselves up for them through personal interaction in the [host language](#) supported by picture stories. *Our relationship with our nurturer is getting surprisingly deep already, and we may carry on a few other relationships, but still with difficulty.* We add another 1200 words to our listening vocabulary, and participate in many public situations in local life. By the end of this phase we are **roughly comparable to FSI Level 1.**

Phase 3: Shared-Story Phase

250 hours. Hearing and discussing “world stories” (also called “bridge stories”) such as Cinderella or other widely available stories. Engaging in shared experiences with our nurturer(s), and reminiscing together later. Talking in detail about the common public experiences mentioned above under Phase 2. Starting to understand expository language. Basic conversational ability—can carry on conversations on a growing variety of topics. Can tell simple stories. Thus, *friendships with several people can be going relatively deep.* In [ILR terms](#), we like to **compare ourselves to Level 1+ or Level 2** by the end of this phase.

Phase 4: Deep-Life-Sharing Phase

500 hours. Life-story interviewing, walk-of-life interviewing, interviewing about detailed observations of local social situations, letting us discover more about the meanings host people bring to their world in order to understanding it, building “epic stories” day-by-day (by co-construction and task repetition rather than memorisation) with a number of friends. Bonding deeply with a number of people. Lots of conversational ability, and ability to narrate with increasing richness. Able to produce some expository discourse. *People share their hearts with us and we with them.* In [ILR terms](#), we like to **compare ourselves to Level 2+.**

Phase 5: Native-to-Native Discourses Phase

500 hours. Understanding much of what host people say to one another (in contrast with what they address to us personally) is still a great challenge. In this phase we “massage” a large volume of recorded, native-to-native speech, figuring out what is preventing us from understanding those parts that we can’t understand. We are able *not only to have deep relationships, but also to participate in host communities of practice*, for example, an aerobics club or a study group, and in those groups being taken as “*more or less one of us*”. In [ILR terms](#), we **may not yet be Level 3 by the end of Phase 5, but we have a powerful secret:** we are understanding most of what we hear people say. Thus we can’t stop growing as long as we are involved with people.

Phase 6: Self-sustaining growth

The last sentence under Phase 5 defines this phase. We continue walking the walk and talking the talk, and growing the growth, never forgetting that *“it’s not a language to be learned, but a life to be lived.”*