Suggestions for Effective Language Exchange

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Two keys to an effective and continuing language exchange include: 1) building rapport with your exchange partner, and 2) spending time together in ways that both partners recognize as effective.   In many cases two partners will meet and quickly learn to work together effectively for a semester or a year.   The exchange is yours, whatever methods work well for you are fine.

The following suggestions are meant to aid you in this process.   How you can best help your partner in expanding his or her second language skills?   In some cases your partner may already have high levels of proficiency in reading and writing the second language and may simply need to 'brush up" spoken skills.   In other cases he or she will have considerable 'passive' knowledge of the second language.   For example, many Japanese students have been introduced to a few thousand English words and have an overall, but passive, knowledge of English grammar.   Some students coming to Japan will have a similar knowledge of Japanese having studied it for several years.

In contrast, other students might still be at the initial stages of studying the second language. The suggestions that follow divide students into two groups: a beginning group (limited vocabulary, incomplete knowledge of basic grammar) and an intermediate/advanced group (hundreds or thousands of words and a good grasp of basic grammar).

A famous philosopher once suggested that to know a language well, you need to spend time, quite a bit in fact, in the neighborhoods comprising it. He also suggested that most languages today have at least two kinds of neighborhoods.   One is the 'old town,' the language that everyone must know to be a speaker of the language and a member of the culture.   The other is the 'suburb,' a new area where specialized language emerges.   For example, nearly everyone was born and raised in a family.   Nearly everyone today spends many years in school.   The ability to talk about such things comprises one of the common neighborhoods, one of the common areas in language, linking the members of a culture.   In contrast, a huge variety of new suburban neighborhoods have recently emerged in languages like English, Japanese, and Chinese.   These deal, for example, with the internet, cell phones, computers, and computer programming.   College students often understand these things – these new linguistic neighborhoods – much better than their parents or grandparents.   And yet, few college students understand the technical details of these areas.   Most of us only venture in the very beginnings of these new neighborhoods.   The philosopher suggested that in trying

to understand people we give priority to the 'old town,' to the neighborhoods they all share. The following suggestions build on this insight, encouraging you to focus on key areas of language and thought, ones that are both accessible and helpful to the second language learner.

Working with Beginning Students

Native speakers working with beginning second language students need to adjust their vocabulary and grammar to fit the background of your language partner.   Perhaps the easiest way to do this is to ask your partner to show you his or her language textbook.   Try using the sentence patterns and words you find in the textbook in communicating with your partner. Of course you can go beyond these and introduce new expressions, but recognize that your partner will learn more quickly by having an opportunity to use what has already been studied and 'partially learned' than by continually learning new things.   Try to spend most of your time communicating with your partner using what has already been studied rather than introducing new things.   In this sense the key 'neighborhood' your partner knows is comprised of the materials -- the terms, sentence patterns and contexts -- presented in the textbook.   One of your tasks is to encourage your partner to master that neighborhood while introducing him or her to new ones in your language.

Working with Intermediate and Advanced Students

More advanced students, in contrast, already 'know,' in some sense, much of what they need to know about the vocabulary and structure of the second language.   Much of this knowledge is relatively passive.   They have seen the neighborhoods of the second language from a distance.   What they need to do is to enter them and learn how you and others – people who have spent their lives in these neighborhoods -- use your language.   They need to learn how you use language to talk about your experience.   Language frames experience and understanding how this works is an important aspect of learning a second language and culture. Here are several suggestions to aid your partner in learning about your language and culture.

1) Rather than simply exchanging languages, try to learn about the other person's culture. Try to develop an 'anthropological imagination.   This means understanding people and their stories *in context.*

2) Become native informants to each other.

3) Decide a general area you would like to talk about in advance and with each of you thinking of a brief story (or two) to share.   Base stories on your own experiences. Stories can be very brief, two to three minutes. *Be sure to tell the story in your native language.*   Remember you are introducing your partner to language in context – in the context of your life and experience.

2

4) Try not to interrupt the other person's story.   Try listening to it all the way through. Then ask questions to be sure you understand the story, and, as necessary, ask for parts to be repeated.

5) Then ask broader questions about the social and cultural background of the story. Explore the contexts of each other's stories and lives.   In doing this you will develop your ability to understand and use a second language *and* your understanding of a second culture.

6) Try to repeat the other person's story yourself.   This is a valuable language learning exercise.

For example, a simple story about your birthday party can lead to a discussion of all of the following: Why were certain people invited to the birthday party?   What social networks stand in the background?   On what other occasions do these networks get together?   What else do they do? How are presents chosen? How much do they cost?   Is this uniform, or do some people bring more expensive presents?   What does this mean? How do birthday parties change as you age?   Why? How does the importance, the meaning of a birthday party differ for the guests vs. the person?   Are there other ways that growing older is celebrated or marked in your society? etc.......

In discussing such things, your language skills, your interest in the second culture and your knowledge about it are sure to expand.   With practice, it should also become very easy to spend an hour or more exchanging languages *and* cultures.   Enjoy!