

Review of an EXPERIMENT in LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

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Abstract

To test some personal theories on language acquisition vs. language learning, I undertook to teach two of my friends Toki Pona¹ over the course of my probe-VA. The goal was to gain a better understanding of the process of teaching someone a language, what difficulties arise when teaching purely through immersion, and what the most prominent differences between two methods of language learning: immersion and the traditional approach of vocabulary and grammar books, as well as speculating on the optimal method of language learning. As one might expect, the answer is not as simple as just one or the other.

¹Toki Pona is a minimalist language constructed by Sonja Lang in 2001. It has a very minimal lexicon which lends itself well to such a short experimentation period. I also am already fluent in it, which made it easy to immerse the participant.

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1 Experiment Parameters

The experiment consisted of teaching both participants the language Toki Pona. Participant A would learn the language the “traditional” way: using vocabulary and grammar textbooks, while participant B would be forbidden from having any words or concepts explained directly through a third language; everything would have to be learnt through gesture, pictures, and explanations using previously explained words. Once the roughly three weeks were over, I would record the participants and I having a conversation in order to analyse the participants’ fluency. Additionally, a test would be performed where I would give one participant some specific thing to describe and the other would have to explain to me what they were talking about to evaluate their explanation and comprehension skills more directly.

2 Hypothesis

My understanding of the language learning and language teaching process at the beginning of the experiment is quite limited. Until now, I have only ever tried teaching a language to my parents, which did not go very well. My expectations for how the process will work is that I will spend fixed periods of time with each participant explaining various concepts and being available for questioning as often as possible.

As for the teaching itself, I guess that conveying the extremely vague Toki Pona words’ meanings through immersion alone without confusing the participant will be quite difficult and could lead to many issues in comprehension. Though, I assume the amount of practice afforded to the immersion participant would drastically improve their immediate comprehension and speaking ability. My idea for the traditional-learning method would be that the participant will very quickly pick up a larger amount of the lexicon with more concrete understanding than the immersion participant, but will struggle to recall and apply the grammar to them rapidly enough for speech.

As for how the end result would be, my personal hypothesis on the participants’ grasp on the language would be that, in general, the immersion participant would be able to recall the most common vocabulary and how to properly implement them into the grammar far quicker than the traditional-learning participant; however, I guessed that the traditional-learning participant would have a more correct usage of the language according to its official grammar than the immersion participant, while also being able to convey more complex topics due to their superior faculty over the vocabulary, but they would lack the speed required to utilise this knowledge in speech.

These are my hypotheses regarding how the experiment will go.

3 Pure Immersion Method

For both methods, the expectation that I would be able to spend regular sessions with the participants was quickly disregarded as unrealistic. Instead, due to the Coronavirus pandemic and our individual schedules, it made the most sense to sporadically practice the language through mostly digital interactions.

For the immersion participant, this entailed either discussing topics through a text-channel, which helpfully provided to opportunity to explain basic concepts through the use of pictographic imagery, and meeting — either in-person, or in a video game — the latter of which provided both ample example material and a basic system of gesturing which helped convey the meanings of my utterances.

In total, I would estimate that we spent about 6 hours speaking the language. The first few sessions were very difficult, as I had far fewer tools at my disposal to explain the concepts I was trying to convey, but once the most basic grammatical features were understood, I was able to bootstrap the participant's understanding by progressively building on top of the previously understood material.

// INSERT EXAMPLE GLOSSES FROM LOG IN RANDOM PLACES
HERE

Eventually, the most important grammar rules were understood and the bulk of the remaining words to be taught were simple verbs which could be explained through a picture accompanied by the phrase “This is X”.

4 Vocab & Grammar Method

The traditional-learning participant proved far easier to educate, simply because they were able to educate themselves with very little supervision; I gave them a copy of the official Toki Pona grammar book, which includes lessons about all the grammar as well as a dictionary and some sample texts.

I periodically checked in with the progress he was making, which was very sluggish at first, but with a deadline looming, they began by learning the entire lexicon in one go, given it's small size, which they stated improved their ability to understand the grammar through the examples, now that they knew what all the words meant.

// INSERT Q/A example

This participant estimates they spent /// INSERT HOURS HERE /// hours studying the language independently. It really showed off one of the major benefits of this method of learning: it's completely possible to do without a teacher and allows the student to proceed at their own pace. The immersion participant lacked this independence, and even though the lessons were tailored to fit their pace of learning, this was only possible, because I only had one student. If you tried to teach any significant quantity of people the language, people would likely be forgotten.

5 Results

/// INSERT TRANSCRIPT OF DIALOGUE / CONVEYANCE TEST THING
///

6 Review

My expectations for how teaching would be, were quite drastically adjusted after I had to try explaining even basic concepts such as thanking someone

through the bare minimum language available, and the simple convenience of independent study was something that surprised me. Though, I still believe the best option is a mix of independence, a structured lesson-plan, and a very large amount of input.

The thing that surprised me most about teaching through immersion for the first time was how intuitive it was. There were certainly many frustrating moments where I wished I could just say what the word was in English, but we always managed to find a way to come to an understanding, even if we sometimes had to rely on pre-existing knowledge about one-another and our culture to convey it. Ideally, the experiment would be conducted on a large number of carefully vetted participants, but one must work with the materials available.

/// INSERT RESULT-RELEVANT COMMENTS ABOUT EACH PARTICIPANT'S FACULTY ///