Second Language Acquisition:

Experiential introduction to the six-phase program utilizing the growing participator approach

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Abstract—**This paper describes the Six-Phase Program for second language learning. This methodology is based on Thomson's Growing Participator Approach (GPA). The GPA is a set of principles for learning a language. The primary assumption of the GPA is that language and culture cannot be separated. Therefore, when learning a language you are also learning the culture and growing into a full participator of life in the host culture. The approach puts a strong emphasis on valuing the host culture. The Six-Phase Program is one set of techniques based on the principles of the GPA. The program has six phases of activities. These activities are spent in the learner's Zone of Proximal Development with a nurturer from the host culture. These activities are designed to encourage comprehension before production. Based on our personal experience and a survey of nine nurturers at a language school that uses the Six-Phase Program, we found that the program is strong in teaching vocabulary and culture. It is one of the best methods for learning a smaller language with limited resources, because the method does not require textbooks or formally trained teachers. Another strength is that the program gives the tools to continue learning the language and culture long term.**

Keywords—language acquisition; growing participator approach; six-phase program; language learning

I. INTRODUCTION

Greg Thomson for learning a second language [1]. It is based on the Growing Participator Approach (GPA), an approach to learning a second language also developed by Thomson [2]. In this paper, we will briefly discuss the basic principles behind the approach to language learning. Next, we will give a brief overview of the Six-Phase Program, along with some common misconceptions of the program. Then we will discuss pros and cons of the methodology based on our own personal experience of using the Six-Phase Program to learn Indonesian.

II. THE GROWING PARTICIPATOR APPROACH

The GPA is an approach as opposed to a technique or a methodology. Anthony defines an approach as "a set of … assumptions dealing with the nature of language and the nature of language teaching and learning [3]." This differs from a method, which Anthony defines as "an overall plan for the orderly presentation of language material …based upon the selected approach." The GPA is a set of assumptions and principles, which could be used to develop multiple different methodologies.

One of the primary assumptions of the GPA is that language learning is primarily sociocultural in nature. Learning a new language is less collecting knowledge of rules and vocabulary as it is being nurtured into the life and story of your host culture. Language learning is both acquisition and participation [4,5]. The GPA puts its primary emphasis on participation. Through that participation, a newcomer will grow in his/her ability to navigate the host culture, including, but not limited to the language. The GPA assumes that language and culture cannot be separated, following Agar's concept of languaculture [6]. For example, a newcomer to Indonesia can study all of the rules surrounding polite and formal pronouns, but without knowing the social status of the people he/she interacts with, the newcomer will be at a loss to use the pronouns as a native speaker would. Thompson might say it like this: "Don't learn the language! Rather, discover a world, as it is known and shared by the people among whom you are living [7]." The GPA embodies this principle.

The GPA puts its focus on the host culture. The approach involves a focus on comprehension and input before speaking and output. The learner's output should be driven by what the learner knows about the host culture. This implies that the learner has knowledge about the host culture. Accurate comprehension of vocabulary and grammar is emphasized above accurate production of vocabulary and grammar. The GPA emphasizes an awareness of grammatical form through meaningful interactions, instead of through discussions of grammar using technical language [8]. A learner may sound non-host-like in various ways, but the GPA says that if he/she is able to comprehend what is heard well, then he/she will be able to reply, communicate, and thus participate (even if this participation seems somewhat non-host-like).
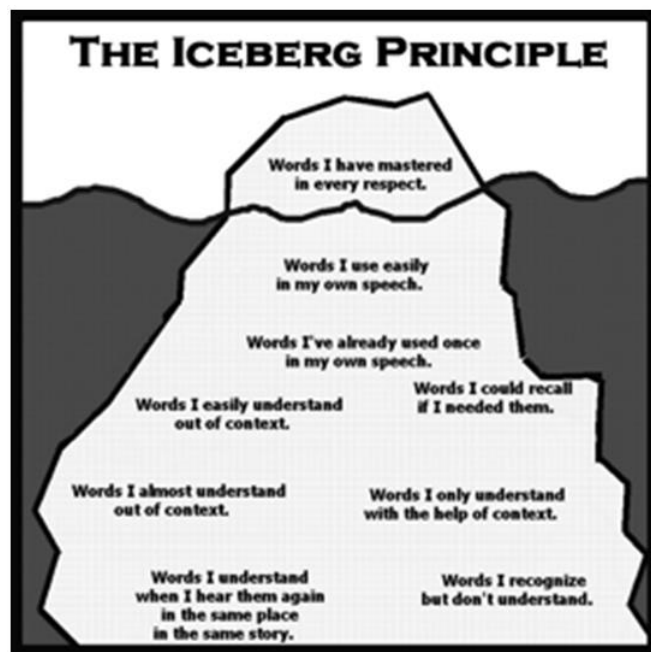
Fig. 1. Iceberg Principle [9].

One term that is unique to the GPA is the *Iceberg Principle* [9]. The Iceberg Principle says that language learning is like an iceberg. The majority of the words a learner acquires start beneath the surface. Even if the learner is only able to produce a few simple sentences, he/she is slowly building vocabulary comprehension. As shown in Figure 1, as the learner repeatedly encounters words through active participation, those words will rise above the surface and the learner is eventually able to produce them.

The GPA puts an emphasis on focused intentional input from a host person who nurtures the newcomer into life in the host culture. In fact, to use the terminology of the GPA, the host person (teacher) is actually a *nurturer*. Additionally, the newcomer is a *growing participator (GP)*, as the newcomer grows into the host culture through participation.

The GPA focuses on the individual *growth zone* of the GP. The growth zone is effectively the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) as described by Vygotsky [10]. When understanding growth zones, one should understand that at any stage of language learning there will be things that the GP:

- can do without any help,

- can do with some help or a little support, and

- simply cannot do, with or without help.

The growth zone includes those things that the GP is capable of doing with some help from his/her nurturer that the GP would not be capable of doing alone. The nurturer tries to keep the GP operating at a level just above what the GP can do without any help. In addition to keeping within the GP's growth zone, the GPA utilizes several other presuppositions about second language learning. H. Caasi says that Thomson promotes "strategies that encourage high learner motivation, low stress interaction, and high self-confidence levels. To this end, Thomson encourages use of tools that develop a sense of self-awareness, a learner-controlled learning environment, and accommodation of individual strengths and weaknesses [11]." Any methodology based on the GPA will incorporate these strategies.

The Growing Participator Approach is a holistic approach to entering a new culture. Its primary goal is to grow the GP into an active, functioning participant in the host culture. The focus is less on language than it is on the entire languacultural world of the host culture. The GPA utilizes intentional, focused, and comprehensible input in the ZPD of the GP. This input is slowly added to the GP's iceberg beneath the surface. After sufficient time and exposure, these inputs move up the iceberg from familiar, to comprehensible, to producible.

III. THE SIX-PHASE PROGRAM

Greg Thomson's Six-Phase Program is one concrete example of a methodology developed according to the principles of the Growing Participator Approach. The Six-Phase Program is the most developed method that follows the GPA, and is often misunderstood to be synonymous with the GPA. It consists of 6 phases, which include incrementally more advanced techniques. The program is designed to put comprehension before production so that the GP will begin to produce language that he/she was only able to comprehend in the previous phase. Transitions between phases are based on both the number of hours spent in language study and the growth zone of the GP. If the GP has completed the recommended number of hours of focused language study, and the new activities in the new phase are in the GP's growth zone, then the GP is ready for that phase. The goal is for each individual GP to see continued growth through the program at his/her own pace. It is understood that each GP will grow at a different rate and will be ready for the next phase at a different time. The guidelines are primarily guidelines, and not hard rules for when the GP is ready to enter the next phase.

Phase 1, the *Here-and-Now Phase*, is designed to last approximately 100 hours. The first 30 hours are *supercharged* participation sessions. This is Thomson's term for hiring a host person to provide "heavily concentrated opportunities to participate in their world [12]." In Phase 1, the GP focuses on listening and providing nonverbal feedback. Phase 1 is the most structured phase. Some of the techniques in Phase 1 include *dirty dozen* activities, *Total Physical Response (TPR)*, and lexicarries [13]. Dirty dozen activities involve starting with two items. The nurturer identifies the two items and asks the GP to point to the two items. The nurturer then adds one additional item to the group at a time and this process is repeated until there are approximately 12 items in the group. TPR was developed by James Asher [14]. In these activities, the nurturer gives commands to the GP who then acts out the commands without speaking. Lexicarries are similar to comic strips with empty talk bubbles. The nurturer says the phrases a person may use in the situation described by the lexicarry. An example lexicarry can be seen in Figure 2. This lexicarry is used to teach how to introduce two people to each other. Phase 1 is broken into two sections. Phase 1A consists of 35 to 45 hours in which the GP listens and responds nonverbally. In Phase 1B, the GP begins simple two-way communication [13].

By the end of Phase 1, the GP has approximately 800 vocabulary items and some simple grammar constructions [11].

Phase 2, the *Story-Building Phase*, is another 150 hours in the growth zone of the GP with a nurturer. In Phase 2, the GP begins practicing production. The emphasis in Phase 2 is building stories. The primary tool in this phase is wordless picture stories. The first 50 hours are spent looking at wordless picture stories. The GP describes the pictures on each page. The GP repeatedly practices using *power tools* to gain more language from the host people. Power tools are questions such as "What is this?", "Who is that?", and "What am I doing?" [15]. These descriptions are largely driven by the GP with the purpose of getting the GP to produce as many words and phrases as possible. For the next 80 hours, the nurturer begins guiding the wordless picture stories. This allows the GP to begin observing how these stories are interpreted by the host culture. For the final 20 hours, the GP and the nurturer create their own autobiographical picture stories. The relationship between the nurturer and the GP begins developing at this point, whereas prior to Phase 2, the relationship with the nurturer was one-sided. At the end of Phase 2, the GP has approximately 1,500 more words [12].

Phase 3, the *Shared-Story Phase*, is an additional 250 hours. The focus in Phase 3 is on *shared stories.* The GP is beginning to be comfortable with producing simple narratives such as the ones in Phase 2. Phase 3 shared stories include three types of activities: stories of familiar daily events, stories that are shared between cultures, and stories about shared experiences. The GP begins to grow the ability to process larger and more complex narratives. The key in Phase 3 is that the stories being described are not new to the GP [16]. This frees the GP to process the vocabulary and discourse markers in narrative speech. While the nurturer may begin with stories that are common between his own culture and that of the GP, the nurturer will transition to telling local stories by first giving a basic summary of the plot. By the end of Phase 3, the GP and his/her nurturer are able to have more relational conversations. At the end of Phase 3, the GP has approximately 1,750 more words [12].

Phase 4, the phase of *Deep Life Sharing*, is another 500 hours. This is where the GP begins having deeper conversations about life in the host culture [1].

Fig. 2. Lexicarry sample [17].

The GP begins collecting ethnographic interviews about people's lives and culture. The GP and his/her nurturer continue to grow through sharing their life stories and experiences. Discussion topics continue to grow deeper. "The relationship between the nurturer and the growing participant can become deep at this phase, and many relationships will become quite meaningful [11]". In Phase 4, reading can continue, and writing journals of daily activities can be introduced [16]. At the end of Phase 4, the GP has approximately 2,500 more words [11].

Phase 5, the phase of *Native-to-Native Discourse*, is an additional 500 hours of focused study in the GP's growth zone. The GP begins to focus on speech that is directed toward other native speakers. They may collect recordings of conversations between two native speakers, watch television, movies, or news, and read literature. Phase 5 also allows the GP to begin intentionally turning their focus to language that will be required for their work in their host country. At the end of Phase 5, approximately 3,500 more words are added to the GP's iceberg [1]. By the end of Phase 5, the GP should have approximately 10,000 vocabulary items they can understand, though their production will still be lagging behind this number [12].

Phase 6, the *Self-sustaining Growth Phase*, does not have an end-point. If the first 5 phases have gone well, the GP will know how to learn and grow through conversation and will be equipped to continue to grow as long as they are receiving language input. Phase 6 involves self-sustaining growth outside of formal language sessions. Of course, the GP can still request language sessions as needed. The idea is that the GP will be in his/her growth zone in daily life and still be able to grow steadily as life becomes dominated by a full work schedule [9].

While nobody ever truly finishes learning another language, the GP who has finished the first five phases of the Six-Phase Program is ready for nearly full participation in the host-world. The first five phases have included 1,500 hours of focused participation in the growth zone of the GP. The GP has emphasized an awareness of growing himself into the world of the host culture. The GP has had exposure to approximately 10,000 vocabulary words in a large variety of contexts and domains, which have largely been driven by the GP's interests. The GP who has reached Phase 6 is not finished learning, but is rather prepared for a life of self-sustained learning in the host world that does not require formal language sessions.

IV. COMMON MISUNDERSTANDINGS

Several misunderstandings exist concerning the GPA and the Six-Phase Program. First, the GPA is often identified with the techniques used in the Six-Phase Program. While the Six-Phase Program is the most developed methodology that uses the GPA, the two are not synonymous and should not be confused. The Six-Phase Program is a set of techniques: a method. The GPA is a set of assumptions: an approach. The GPA could be applied to a different method that is not the Six-Phase Program.

Some misperceptions about the GPA and the Six-Phase Program are based largely on how they are described. They are often described as being designed to mimic the way children learn language. However, Thomson recognizes that learning a second language is a very different process from learning a first language. A child develops "mental comprehension and production processes that will be deeply entrenched in the same person as a 'second language learner' [18]". When children learn the L1, they are also building for the first time the very concepts of vocabulary, grammar, communicative

intent, and the like. When the L2 is learned, these meta-structures have already been conceptualized, and so learning the L2 is a different process than learning the L1. Thompson acknowledges that at first we only have the cognitive processes from learning the L1, but "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 [8]". This is not equivalent to saying we learn the L2 in the same way we learn the L1.

The Six-Phase Program is sometimes referred to as "a method with no talking". While it is both true that there is little talking in the first 100 hours of the Six-Phase Program and that there is an emphasis on comprehension, once talking begins, the GP is actually encouraged to produce with feedback from his/her nurturer. The Six-Phase Program does not discourage production, but it does intentionally lag production behind comprehension. After the first 35 to 45 hours in Phase 1A, the GP begins speaking in the language sessions. Considering that the first 5 phases total 1,500 hours, the first 40 hours is a mere 2.7% of that. To call the Six-Phase Program "a method with no talking" is simply not accurate.

The Six-Phase Program is sometimes perceived as being slow in the beginning. This is something that GPs reportedly complain about, as there is little language production in Phase 1. The idea behind this is that language use should be within the growth zone of the GP. Usually by Phase 2, the GP is beginning to be able to practice the language outside of language sessions. Other methods of language learning often include interviews outside of class from the beginning of the program. This may cause the GP to perceive that compared to other methods, growth is slowed at the beginning by using the Six-Phase Program. However, this aspect of the program is developed for exactly the opposite purpose. The program operates this way in order to keep the GP's learning within his/her ZPD. The idea is that time spent in the growth zone of the GP is contributing to overall growth. Comprehension is growth, and then the production that follows the comprehension is further growth. The idea that the Six-Phase Program is slow at the beginning prioritizes growth in production by assuming that the goal is production only. The issue is not with effectiveness of the Six-Phase Program, instead the issue is with the priorities of the learner.

V. PROS AND CONS

Like any methodology, Thomson's Six-Phase Program has both advantages and disadvantages. We have researched the method, experienced the method first-hand through learning Indonesian, and surveyed a group of nurturers at a language school that uses the Six-Phase Program of language learning. As of the writing of this paper, we have each logged 900 hours of language sessions using Thomson's Six-Phase Program to learn Indonesian. We are approaching the end of Phase 4. We have logged these hours at Interkultural Edukasi Partner (IEP), a language school in Indonesia that employs the Six-Phase

Program to teach various languages. We have primarily worked with one nurturer, although we have been able to spend time working with 8 or 9 other nurturers. When we began using the Six-Phase Program, we had no competency in the language. For our first year (Phases 1-3 and approximately 150 hours of Phase 4), our only source of learning Indonesian was the Six-Phase Program. We have identified some advantages and disadvantages of the Six-Phase Program. There is no debate that the Six-Phase Program is well suited for learning languages that do not have existing language learning resources. The lack of a formal textbook and the lack of a need for a formally trained teacher make this the most accessible method for many languages. "The Thomson method can be applied to acquiring almost any second language regardless of whether the language is written or unwritten or commonly learned or not [19]". Another strength of the program is that eventually, participators can guide the program to suit their own needs. For example, we were able to learn about words in the domain of pregnancy and childbirth while we were expecting our second son. Also, the Six-Phase Program requires little homework relative to other methods. Our homework in the first three phases typically consisted of 20-30 minutes of reviewing recordings of new vocabulary from that day. In Phase 4, we began recording interviews and writing summaries of them. This contrasts with other methods, which may try assigning interviews with local people before the GP has a sufficient proficiency in the language for conducting interviews. This helps lighten the overall burden that the GP might put on his/her community at the beginning. It also lowers the stress level of the GP, which is helpful for language learning.

Our survey of nine nurturers at IEP revealed that from their experience, one strength of the Six-Phase Program is teaching vocabulary [20]. The survey results, indicated in Figure 3, also showed high marks with regard to the GP's ability to learn to write using the program. Other strengths that the survey revealed were that the program is fun and not boring, it helps the GP differentiate between formal and informal language, and it develops a close relationship between the GP and nurturer. Several respondents drew positive attention to the program's focus on growth and utilizing the GP's growth zone. The response that came up the most consistently in the survey as a strength of the program was that it puts a strong emphasis on learning the culture.

Correct grammar production is perhaps the most difficult aspect of second language learning to obtain using the Six-Phase Program. According to Thomson, "Scholars tell us that our ability to use native-like grammar develops gradually, and often follows a particular developmental sequence [1]." In fact, Thomson also says, "Regardless of the approach, when foreigners are interacting in the host language in everyday situations, they have a high incidence of non-native-like utterances." In light of this, the Six-Phase Program emphasizes "comprehensibility and intelligibility rather than native-likeness, and aim to grow into Phase 6, where we
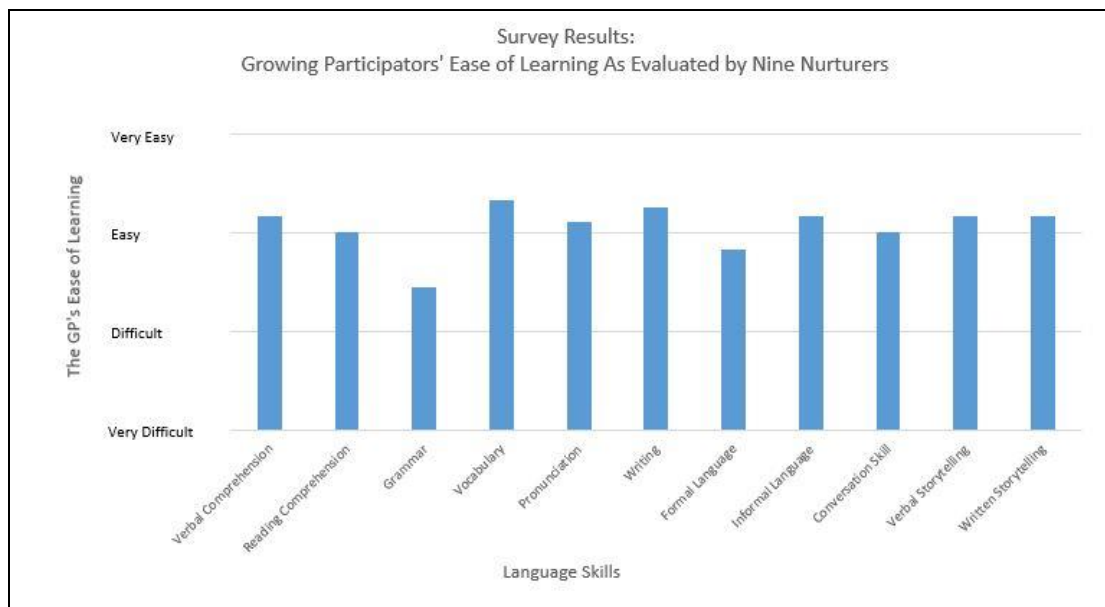
Fig. 3. A. Brumleve and L. Brumleve, 2018. Survey Results. Available: Unpublished.

continue growing, rather than plateauing after an earlier phase [18]." The focus, early in the program, is primarily on comprehending correct grammar. Correct grammar production is expected to be continually improving, even if the growth is slow. According to the survey results, grammar was the most difficult skill for GP's to learn [20]. The Six-Phase Program recognizes that no methodology can fully teach a person to produce native-like grammar all of the time. The aim of the Six-Phase Program is to guide the GP to always be observing how his/her grammar is non-native-like and give the GP the tools to be able to overcome this non-native-likeness with the help of a local speaker.

Ideally, correct grammar production is achieved in the Six-Phase Program through what is called *input flooding* and *output flooding* [1]. Input flooding is an activity where a single grammatical structure, such as passive verbs, is singled out. Then the nurturer describes a busy picture using this grammatical structure repeatedly so that the GP can begin to hear how the particular structure is generally used. Output flooding is done next, where the GP then does the talking [11]. However, one observation that we have made is that the GP must first notice where his/her grammar is non-native-like, and then use this observation to design an input flooding and output flooding activity that can be done with his/her nurturer. This leaves the potential for the GP to practice using non-native-like grammar for a long time before it is given the attention and correction that it needs. This can serve to form bad habits that may be difficult for the GP to break.

Given enough time, the GP will learn to produce grammar. Our recommendation is that the GP should consider supplementing the program with a more explicit grammar study when the GP is ready. Greg Thomson acknowledges this potential as well when he says, "In any case…awareness of grammatical form can't hurt anything, and it may be of some help…" [8]. Explicit grammar supplementation should not be something that creates anxiety for the GP. Instead, it should be

something that feels relieving and helpful when the GP encounters it. This supplementation should not replace the input flooding and output flooding activities of the Six-Phase Program.

Overall, we recommend the Six-Phase Program for second language learning. Our survey respondents gave much more positive than negative feedback as well. Three of the nine respondents only listed positive features of the program even when asked what the negative features of the program are. The most significant difficulty of the program is grammar production. This could potentially be strengthened by supplementing the program with some explicit grammar study when the GP is ready for it.

VI. CONCLUSION

With the Six-Phase Program and the Growing Participator Approach, learning a new language is not just a means to an end goal. The way we approach learning a new language communicates the value we place on the host community. A growing participator attempts to enter into the host world in a way that values it. A growing participator does this by offering to change his/her own way of acting, and even thinking, to that of the host world, so that the GP can effectively participate in the host culture's life story. This is perhaps the most characteristic feature of the Six-Phase Program of the GPA. There are, as with any program, strengths and weaknesses to utilizing the Six-Phase Program. In the end, we highly recommend the Six-Phase Program and the GPA for anyone choosing to enter a new culture. We have found them both to be effective at nurturing a newcomer into a new languacultural world. While more research needs to be conducted to discover the true strengths and weaknesses of the Six-Phase Program, we would say from our experience that its strengths outweigh its weaknesses and that the Six-Phase Program through the GPA is a strong method of second language learning.

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