Learn that Language—Without Using Paper?

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Language learning in the German SIL and in some other SIL schools has taken a new twist, somewhat radical compared to what was offered in previous years. It has some very promising features worth testing with new arrivals.

For years in Germany we've been teaching language learning, using phonetics, making a program, developing little interchanges of conversation to be learned, partially by drills, repetition, games, slowly diversifying into more complicated structures, natural texts, and much more. Many of us have learned "our" language that way, not the mother tongue, of course, but the one (or maybe several) that we've been assigned to and learned as adults.

But the last few years a different approach has been taught in Germany as well as in a number of SIL schools around the world. Phonetics is still there, but for language learning itself the main elements (at least in the beginning phase) are built on listening with understanding, on reacting and speaking when the learner is ready. Paper comes in very marginally. This is based on the writings of Greg Thomson (LinguaLinks Library Language Learning, Essays on Field Language Learning).[1] I watched in fascination as it was being taught and applied.

Recently, I had a chance at trying it out myself. Tim has learned the Kaingang language in South Brazil, though it took him 10 years to do so (1976–1986). His family and his coworkers also tried, but none of them speak it with any fluency. I lost count of how many Kaingang courses I taught them, always using the "traditional" approach of using texts, making them into drills, giving explanations. On my recent visit, the younger coworkers and students in the school in Tim's house approached me: would I once again hold a Kaingang course?

Everyone was shocked when I announced that in this course no one was to use paper. In fact, it was the paper that had kept the older fieldworkers from talking all these years—like using a crutch. Instead, the Kaingang teacher held up, one by one, 12 common objects and said their names, going through the list a couple of times. (The names are monosyllabic, easy to recognize. In other languages it might be better to start with less and build them up slowly.) He then asked:

Is this a knife?	Is this a stone?	Is this corn?	Is this water?

When the proper answer was affirmative, all the students were to nod or shake their heads. The third exercise introduced the question "Where is …?"

Where is a knife?	Where is a stone?	Where is the corn?	Where is the water?

This had to be answered by pointing. Each one of the group took a turn while the others watched. The last command to be learned that day was:

Give … to him.	Give … to her.	Give … to me.

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[1] For more information, go to < http://www.ethnologue.com/LL_docs/contents.asp>.

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This last structure introduced some complications since the verb "give" changes with the shape and location of the object to be given. The students didn't notice these variations at first but understood the command, particularly since the structure "give … to him/her/me," was accompanied by the right gestures. The whole procedure easily occupied the two 45-minute sessions allotted to the course on a daily basis!

The next day greetings and finishing phrases were introduced and learned in the appropriate places—most of the students were ready to repeat what they heard. The names of the objects, questions, and commands from the first day were reviewed, which took most of the first 45 minutes. Descriptions such as "one, two, big, little" were then added to the names of the objects. "Little" has a singular and a plural form, which appeared naturally—nothing was explained—the students had the joy of discovery. The verb "give" also has a separate plural form. The principle "each lesson has to contain known as well as new elements if learning is to take place" was respected.

The third day started with expanding on the greetings and useful phrases, drilling the previous lessons, and adding descriptions of the objects, such as the following list, thus querying the characteristics that determine the choice of verb forms for "give" or "put" or even "be there, exist." This time the students wanted to do more than nod or shake their head, so they learned the appropriate verbal response, given in unison.

Is it long?	Is it round?	Is it big?	Is it little?
Is it one?	Is it a few?	Is it many?	

In the following days more objects and more commands were added, such as:

Put the knife in the basket!	Put the knife under the basket!
Put the knife beside the basket!	Put the knife lying down in the basket!
Put the knife leaning against the basket!	Put the knife the on top of the basket!

One day we tried body parts, a good one for monolingual demonstrations—not so good in this context, because we couldn't think of good commands, only questions that needed answers that were beyond the students' abilities at this point.

Within the first week the students knew the names of about 20 objects and verbs for a range of actions of what to do with them. They were also spontaneously answering yes-no questions, repeating the names of the objects, and saying the questions to each other. It was all such fun. "No sooner have we started the lesson than it is already over," they commented.

We did give some attention to phonetics also. There was no need to have a full phonetics course since we knew what language we were dealing with—which is a different situation than encountered in a general course on language learning. The teacher pronounced lists of words with sounds in different surroundings, contrasting them with similar sounds and pronouncing their variant pronunciations. This was purely a listening exercise. I wrote the sounds to be contrasted on the board the way they are written in the orthography, but the students did not get a copy of the lists. Some of them quietly tried repeating the words. Several months later I would teach by dictation and reading which would improve both the listening and the pronouncing skills. But this would have to wait till my next visit.

After a while we ran out of ideas. Circumstances helped us: one of the students had his birthday. So we organized a little party around a round table. The situation became so dynamic that soon the beginners were out of their depth entirely. But it served as an example: if you run dry, change the physical set up. It will give you enough material to work on for days.

The older students, among them a couple whose fulltime job for 17 years had been just to learn to speak, joined the fun. At last their crutches were falling. I witnessed the wife in a heated discussion with her Kaingang teacher—all in the language. We quickly recognized, though, that a class should not have more than six students. So we divided into three classes, which also permitted to group together those with more or less the same level of Kaingang competence.

One of the students was a trained language teacher using the Yazigi method to teach English, a favorite language to learn these days in Brazil.[2] He recognized the principles he had been taught to use, and at the same time he found help in the creativity applied to develop the lessons. He is now leading the course, together with a Kaingang teacher staff consisting of a 17-year-old Kaingang high school student and two Kaingang ladies.

The Kaingang teachers finally knew how they could help their students. They are not the most communicative people on earth; sitting quietly has much value for them. These structured real-life drills made it fun for them and gave them ideas on how to continue. There was much repetition without boredom, everyone having to keep on his toes. And the exchanges served to spur conversations during visits.

Several weeks after leaving the Kaingang location I phoned Faith, Tim's wife, to know how things are going. "Everyone is turned on to learning. At first it took me three days to clear my head from knowing that I could never learn, then I made progress. You remember Lisa, who quit the course? She has also joined again. We are meeting regularly."

With this way of learning, is there no place for writing down the language, analyzing text, and developing and listening to drills? If you want to read and write the language as well as speak it, written texts should obviously be studied. Explanations about the language offer insights and may serve as shortcuts to understanding. They may or may not be helpful in speaking the language right. If you want to explain the Biblical message, it is most important to become familiar with the best equivalences for key Biblical and theological terms. In any case, it is important to study literature in the language and so develop a deep understanding of the thought and talk patterns of the people, to learn what they know.

If there is no (or only a little) literature, listening to the old people talk is the best equivalent. But before they are willing to talk you probably must convince them that you understand enough to make it worth their while. Recording their talks is an effective way to learn from them. If translation has not yet been done, the best equivalences for biblical concepts will need to be developed

The method shows that you don't best learn a language by studying it. You learn it by doing things you find interesting and using the language to do those things. For me the interesting thing to do used to be language analysis. But it can be anything. ■

[2] Yazigi is a method that was already in use for language teaching when I learned Portuguese in 1957, but of course it has changed over the years. It is a language school trying to use the best method around. Obviously the current orientation for their teachers is similar to what we are now propagating.