

# Learning Wolof Can be Fun

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Welcome to Senegal, and to Wolof the language of Senegal.

## Basic Principles of Language Learning

### 1. Introduction

Research has shown that one of the most effective ways of initially learning a language is by responding physically to spoken commands. Language experts have found that:

- The less times that one has to be exposed to a word before it is internalised, the greater and the longer will be the retention. So if you can hear something once and understand what it means you will remember that word much longer than if you have to try to learn a word 10 times before you understand it.
- Furthermore, practice before learning is detrimental to the retention of information.
- Those who focus on responding to the spoken instruction without trying to pronounce the word learn considerably faster than those who try to pronounce or memorise the new words. The results show more significant gains in reading, writing, and speaking as well as in listening comprehension when compared to students required to speak straight away.

### 2. How the brain learns

“How can this be?” I hear you asking yourself. There is actually a very logical reason for these facts. It is based on how the brain works. The brain has two halves - right and left. Each half has different functions, and a different way of functioning.

#### Left Brain Input ....

Input to the left brain in verbal tasks is a slow, incremental multiple exposure process.

Traditional left brain instruction is verbal, either in spoken language or in print, and it is processed in serial order, word by word, or sentence by sentence. The key characteristics are verbal and serial order.

The left brain responds to such things as

analysing	explaining
critiquing	judging
declaring	talking
discussing	telling

#### Left Brain Storage ....

It stores things in words and numbers through repetition.

The left brain resists the introduction of a new concept, but once the idea is incorporated, the left brain will resist any threat to remove or change the idea.

#### Left Brain Output ....

The left is verbal. The left hemisphere can express itself by talking.

#### Right Brain Input ...

Input to the right brain is a pattern which is understood usually in a flash: in one-trial or one exposure.

By contrast the right brain instruction is non-verbal and processed in patterns. The key characteristics are non-verbal and patterns. The right brain can process verbal information if it is presented in patterns such as a story, a drama, or an experience.

The right brain flashes on when you use

acting	singing
drawing	storytelling
games or sports	touching
gesturing	pointing
metaphor	
tasks such as sewing, cooking or small appliance repair	

#### Right Brain Storage ...

It stores things in symbols and pictures.

#### Right Brain Output ...

The right hemisphere is non-verbal and it cannot express itself in speech. but can express itself by listening to a command in the target language, and then performing the appropriate action, such as pointing, touching drawing, singing, gesturing and pantomime.

### **In summary ...**

Activities associated with the left brain are work, study, multiple exposures to information, memorisation, short-term retention, and stress.

Activities associated with the right brain are play, single exposure to information, internalisation, long-term retention, and zero stress.

(For an interesting account of what happens when the two halves of the brain are separated see the story of P.S. in Asher J 1996 *Learning Another Language Through Actions* pp2-21ff).

### **3. What is TPR?**

Total Physical Response is a method devised by Prof. James Asher based on research into language learning and brain function. If you strip away all but the bare essentials, you end up with a speech act which is related to a movement. It is based on responding in a physical way to commands which are instantly understood because of the context. When noises coming from someone's mouth are followed by a body movement, the learner is able immediately to decipher the meaning of the noise at many levels of awareness including phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics. Not only is there immediate understanding of the strange noises coming from someone's mouth, but the patterning of the target language is internalised in such a way that the learner is able effortlessly to reorganise constituents to understand novel sentences. It provides right side brain input which is internalised instantly.

There are two distinctly different phases in the learning process. The first is modelling (usually by an instructor with a few students) to communicate the meaning of utterances. The second is a demonstration by the individual student acting alone to show that the utterances were understood. The ideal is to have the fewest input trials (modelling) that are necessary to communicate meaning, and maximal output (demonstrating understanding of the instruction).

The instructional strategy of TPR works with an instructor giving instructions which the students do immediately without trying to pronounce the words. Whenever a new word is introduced, the instructor demonstrates (models) the meaning by doing the action with the students in response to his own command.

When language "causes" changes in the student's behaviour, it thus enters the right hemisphere and individuals can rapidly decipher the language code. A full time language student can expect to learn to recognise about 30 new words a day using this method or about 600 a month. As the student expands in understanding of how the target language works and what it means, there is a point when the person is ready to talk. This cannot be forced but will occur spontaneously. And when talk appears, it will not be perfect. There will be many flaws, but gradually it will shape itself in the direction of the native speaker.

According to Asher, most grammatical features can be nested into the imperative form. For example, the future tense can be imbedded in a command such as "When Sam runs to the door, Edna will write Sam's name on the board." The past tense is incorporated into the command structure when the instructor says "Abner, run to the table!" After Abner has completed the action, the instructor continues with "Janine, if Abner ran to the table, run after him and put your book on his head!" This means that grammar can be internalised as well as vocabulary via a right brain approach. The result is that you will speak like they do naturally with time without ever having to study grammar. You say it that way because that is how they say it. If you study the grammar later you will discover why you say things the way you do. This is better than trying to learn the rules, make a quick mental calculation in your head of how you should say it, before saying it. Learning grammar prematurely can be a hindrance to fluency later on.

It has been shown that the internalisation of understanding using this method transfers well to reading, writing and speaking.

The TPR method follows the natural sequence of children learning their mother tongue. There are three critical elements in the way a child learns a language. Firstly, listening skill is far in advance of speaking. Secondly, children acquire listening skill through thousands of commands issued by adults which are used to manipulate the orientation, location and locomotion of the child's entire body, such as "Come here!"; "Stand Still!". Thirdly listening skill may produce a readiness for the child to speak. It is believed that this applies to adults learning a second language as well.

Hence:

Understanding the spoken language should be developed in advance of speaking.

Understanding should be developed through movements of the student's body in response to the imperative form.

Students will spontaneously begin to utter sentences when they are ready, and should be discouraged from speaking any earlier.

There are four skills that need to be acquired in learning any language: understanding what is spoken, speaking, reading and writing. The first skill that should be developed is listening comprehension, then reading followed by writing and finally speaking.

Reading when introduced should be limited to what learners have already shown that they comprehend aurally. That is they would read only what they have already heard. Wolof has a phonetic alphabet, and thus reading skills come very quickly once the sounds of the language have been mastered. However, reading too early will cause you to say the words according to how you see them (that is, how you would read it in your own language and accent), not according to how you hear the people speaking them. This will result in accent problems that may be hard to break later. In early stages concentrate on listening carefully and writing down what you hear. Much later on when you are hearing the language well, you can check these words in dictionaries.

The last skill to be introduced to the students is speaking. Language learners should not be required to speak immediately, although students may produce utterances spontaneously if they wish.

So our aim is to provide input which will be received by the right hemisphere. Other effective right hemisphere instructional strategies that have been developed are:

**The Learnables** by Harris Winitz which uses tapes with accompanying line drawing pictures;

**Rosetta Stone Language Library** which uses multi-media CD ROM with sound writing and pictures;

**Suggestology** by Georgi Lozanov (Asher 2-28). Students are given a new identity including a name, an occupation, a geographic area in which they live, a family and a background history. Each becomes a different person. This play acting with costumes, props and music tends to by-pass the left brain and permits the right brain to intake the target language.

#### 4. Language learning is CUTE

We have seen the importance of using right brain activities to learn a language. SIL language learning expert Greg Thomson would add to this four key principles or golden rules to learning a language, which he summarises with the mnemonic "CUTE".

**C (C for "communing"):** Join with people around experience using language.

**U (U for "understanding"):** Pay attention to large doses of things that people say which you can understand.

**T (T for "talking"):** To become good at speaking you need to speak a lot, putting your own ideas into your own words.

**E (E for "evolving"):** Adapt your language learning activities to your current level of language ability.

Stop here and read carefully Greg Thomson's excellent 1996 article, *A Few Simple Ideas for New Language Learners*.

Now you can see where the TPR method fits in. TPR is a right brain activity which joins with people around experience using language and provides total beginners with a large dose of language which they can understand immediately. As your language ability grows then there are other strategies that one can employ to gain exposure to language which you can understand. But notice it is not enough to just hear the language. You must actually process the language as language. It is not enough to just to hear a thousand times "This is a bathroom". Rather there should be a processing involved - "Where is the bathroom?" which forces you to actually do something in response to the sounds that you hear.

## **5. Language is like an ice-berg**

Greg Thomson likens how a second-language is in your mind to a pyramid shaped iceberg. The top, or tip of the iceberg is the words that I have used enough times in my own speech that they are usually easy to access and use when I am speaking. Most people seem to want to put all the effort into getting words straight into the tip of the iceberg. But that is probably a slow and inefficient way to deal with the thousands of words that must get into my language system.

Down at the bottom are words that I recognize when I hear them as "familiar", but have not yet connected sound with meaning. When I hear them, I wonder what those familiar words mean.

Mixed in with those words at the bottom, there are words that I can remember when I hear them once again in the very same context where I heard them before. It is to this level of the iceberg that it is easy to add one or two hundred words in a single evening. For example, here is one way, once you have a basic understanding of the language.

Find a text. This might be a written text, in which case you'll need a native speaker to read it onto tape. You discuss with your language assistant any new words that you do not understand until you understand them. Then he reads the whole passage onto tape.

You might do this with a magazine article, a newspaper article, short story, section of a book. Or you might start with a spoken text. This might be taped off the radio or TV, or recorded live. For example, you might be recording somebody's spoken autobiography in great detail. If you start with a spoken text, then it is handy to have two tape recorders. Play the text on one, stopping at words you don't know and learning the meanings (avoid doing this by translation if you can do by discussing meanings with a native speaker--if you are stuck doing it with a bilingual dictionary, then go ahead and use it).

By the time you have worked through a text, you have in memory a representation of the whole discourse. Fortunately, our memory for discourse is mainly in the form of a memory of the meaning rather than of the form. And that is great. Because it means that when you listen to this text again (not more than a few hours later, the first time), you have a memory of the meanings already available, and when you hear the new words again, you can easily attach them to the meanings when you hear them in the very same sentences. As you do that a few times the sound-meaning links are strengthened.

A key is to do this a lot, so that you are steadily adding many hundreds of ordinary words to the bottom of your iceberg. Then, you also need to be hearing comprehensible language at other times, many hours a week. If you have enough words in the bottom of the iceberg, then some of them will always be coming up in new contexts as you listen to speech. This moves them higher in the iceberg, until they reach the point at which you might be able to make a stab at using them in your own speech. But for this additional step to happen, you also need to be spending a reasonable amount of time speaking.

I believe that for the same effort, you'll end up with just as many words in the tip of your iceberg as if your strategy was simply to work directly on putting words into the tip, as is traditional. So, I bet, you'll get just as many words in the tip, but you'll also have this other, vast number of words lower in the iceberg, increasing your ability to understand the language while they are working their way up to the tip.

## **6. Your first TPR lesson - an example**

Your language informant says (in Wolof) "Stand up!" and immediately stands up. (An excellent alternative is to have a second native speaker. Your language informant gives the command to this second helper. You then understand the meaning from his response.) He indicates with his hand that you should stand up too. He then says "Sit down" and immediately sits down. He indicates with his hand that you should sit down. He says "Stand up!". This time you understand what he says and you stand up. He says "Sit down!" and you know to sit down so you do. He repeats this a few times until you are confident.

His next command is "Walk!" and he walks forward, and indicates that you should do it with him. He says "Stop!" and stops. He says "Walk!" and walks again. "Stop!" and stops. He says "Turn around!" and turns around. Then

he says "Walk" and waits for you to respond. You walk. He repeats these new words until you are confident then adds in "Jump!". He orders you around for few minutes until you have mastered all the words. Now he says "Point to the tree!" and points to the tree, waiting until you point also. "Point at the chair!", and points at the chair. "Point at the table!" and points at the table. He repeats these commands until you are confident. Now he says "Point to the window! Walk to the window!" He points then walks to the window. He now says "Touch the window!" and touches the window. He adds "Walk to the chair!" "Touch the chair!" "Walk to the table!" and "Touch the table! He drills you for a while until you are confident. Now he says "Jump to the window!" but he does not move. You have never heard this phrase, and he does not show you. You have heard "jump" and "walk to the window" though. Without any hesitation you jump to the window. You now realise that you have actually internalised enough Wolof in 10 minutes that you know what a new expression means without any translation. He says "Walk to the table!" then "Sit on the table!" This is another new phrase which he does not demonstrate. But straight away you sit on the table. He continues to drill you and slowly adds in other objects that are around you such as mat, cup, wall, door using the actions you have already mastered. By the end of your first lesson you have learnt approximately 30 new words. You have internalised them to the degree that if he mixes the words into new combinations you can still respond. You cannot say the words. (In fact, you shouldn't even try). You cannot even remember all the words to make a list. But the important part is, if you hear these words again tomorrow or next month even, you will recognise them and be able to respond immediately. You are on the way to mastering Wolof.

Very quickly the commands can get quite complicated, and include many aspects of grammar. Having learnt banana and orange it is only a small step to give the command "Put the potato between the banana and the orange!" You will have no difficulty after a few lessons understanding commands such as "Take the hot pepper which is on the top of the jar and put it in the bowl!"

## **7. Planning each session**

The key to successful language learning is the time you put into planning and preparing your sessions with your language helper. In preparing for every session, you can plan thirty new vocabulary items, and plan to review at least that many that you have previously learned. In your plan, you will want to include at least three different kinds of language learning activities. For example, you might do one activity using vegetables. In a second activity, the language helper may have you get up and go to different parts of the house and do things that are characteristically done there. Third, you may do something with pictures. The exact nature of your three (or more) activities will change from day to day. Keep the sessions fun and interesting for both you and your language helper.

In addition to learning new vocabulary, you will also design your sessions to highlight specific sentence patterns. Greg Thomson tells you how you can do this in his excellent 1993 paper *Kick-starting Your Language Learning: Becoming a Basic Speaker Through Fun and Games Inside a Secure Nest*. Stop and read pages 23-36 now to get a comprehensive overview of the kind of grammar structures you should be trying to bring out in your lessons. Can you see why you need to spend at least an hour per day getting ready for your time with your language helper?

In summary, each session should include

- 1) Activities that increase your vocabulary.
- 2) Activities that increase your ability to understand different types of sentences.
- 3) Review of material covered in earlier sessions, integrated into what you are now learning for the first time.

## **8. Your daily routine**

During this early phase of language learning your daily activities might include:

- 1) Spend one to two hours planning and preparing for your session with your language helper.
- 2) Spend one to two hours with your language helper. Your language helper will follow your instructions and use the new language to communicate with you in ways that require you to hear, process and respond. You will tape record the session.
- 3) Go over the tapes, and copy summary excerpts to another tape.
- 4) Listen to the abbreviated tape meaningfully (that is, in conjunction with the same pictures, objects, or actions that you used in your session), a number of times.
- 5) Do your daily journal writing and record keeping.

Initially, you will be majoring on learning to understand the language. Thus your plan for your session will aim to increase your ability to recognize vocabulary, and to understand different sentence patterns.

This daily pattern will change with time. Eventually you will be spending more than two hours per day with language helpers, and less time going over the tapes of the sessions. The reason for this is that initially, working with a live speaker is very demanding, and both you and the live speaker tire easily. You can relax with the tape recorder, and process the language input from your session over and over. Once you get rolling in the language, you will feel a need for much more extended live conversational interaction with your language helper.

## **9. Daily record keeping —more than just a frill.**

It is important that you devote some time at the end of each day to record keeping. As the Wolof alphabet is similar to the English alphabet, and the spelling is closely tied to the pronunciation, you can begin using the writing system at once. For the sake of your record keeping, just write things down roughly using English letters and whatever symbols (say, accent marks) you find helpful. Don't worry about writing down the fine details. That is because you will not use what you write as a basis for your pronunciation. Your pronunciation (when you get around to speaking) will be based on what you have heard, not on what you wrote. The writing is for the purpose of keeping track of what you have learned, and providing some visual reinforcement.

One important component of your daily records should be a simple log of the vocabulary you have covered, with a rough English translation for each vocabulary item. This will help you in keeping track of your progress in acquiring vocabulary, and will also assist you as you plan your subsequent sessions, since each session will include some review of previously learned items.

One of your goals can be to learn to recognize thirty new vocabulary items every day. That will be 150 per week. Thus after seven weeks you will be able to recognize over a thousand common vocabulary items. If you're more energetic, you can realistically go for fifty new vocabulary items per day, and thus learn a thousand items in a month. The key is to be well prepared, and to keep listening to your tapes and reviewing previously learned items in subsequent sessions.

You should also write out any observations you may have as to how the language is put together, or why you think certain forms of words may be used in some cases, and different forms in other cases. You can relate this to your goals for covering a broad range of sentence patterns. You should also mention anything that puzzles you about how the language works.

You will also keep various checklists of ideas for your language sessions. Greg Thomson gives some ideas of what to include in your checklist in his article *Kick-starting Your Language Learning: Becoming a Basic Speaker Through Fun and Games Inside a Secure Nest* pp 20-22. You will use them as part of the basis for planning your language sessions. These include a checklist of situations in which you need to use the language, and topics which you need to discuss in the language. You can also have a checklist for special areas of vocabulary that may come to mind. You can go out and look around the community for ideas for vocabulary and examples of daily life situations, and add these to the checklists.

Another important component of your record keeping is a diary in which you describe your whole experience as a language learner each day. This will have various uses. For one thing, reading back over your diary as the weeks and months go by will help you to appreciate the progress you have made. For another thing, the diary will help you to share your experience with a language learning consultant who may help you, or with other language learners, who may also share their diaries with you. The discipline of diary writing will help you to maintain a high level of self-awareness, which is important in the ongoing process of planning and self-evaluation.

## **10. Important tools and techniques**

### **a. Tape recorders**

This is how Greg Thomson uses tape recorders. He writes: "You can extend the value of your session considerably by wise use of the tape-recording you made during the session. I find I get very clear tape recordings if I use lapel microphones. I like to use a stereo recorder with two lapel microphones in case I want to record two native speakers interacting, or to record myself and a native speaker interacting. I also like to use a double cassette recorder so that

I can copy sample bits of the session onto a second tape. This second tape will grow from day to day, as I add key excerpts of each day's session. I don't need to save all fifty instances when the language helper said "stand up" during the session. But during the final part of the initial TPR activity I had learned to respond to fifteen commands, and the language helper was rapidly using all of them (in random order), and I was rapidly responding to all fifteen (or however many) commands. Therefore, by dubbing the final few minutes of TPR instructions onto a new tape, I can save a complete record of the expressions I learned in the initial TPR activity of that session. I will similarly dub excerpts of the second (pointing) activity onto the same tape.

With the picture descriptions I may just dub the whole works over onto the abbreviated tape. I can listen to that several times: This is a man, this is a woman, etc. Keeping up with the descriptions and not losing my place is enough of a challenge at this point to force me to keep processing what I am hearing.

As I listen to the recording of the TPR activities, I can actually respond, or I may just recall how I responded during the session. I may even listen to the tape of each entire session a few times during the days following the session. I would hope to be adding a new session every day, but it is important to keep cycling through the taped excerpts of previous sessions.

In the coming weeks, you will be systematically focusing on a large variety of sentence patterns. You will always learn to understand the sentences during your session. However, you could easily forget much of what you learn, were it not for the fact that you keep cycling through the taped excerpts of your earlier sessions. As you listen to excerpts of an earlier session, you can recall what you were doing in the session as you processed and responded to what you heard. If you have difficulty maintaining concentration while listening to the tape, then you can actually perform the responses (for example, point to the appropriate picture upon hearing a sentence about it), as you listen to the tape."

#### **b. Use of photos and pictures**

Another twist can further extend the potential of TPR. Use pictures, either photos, or line drawings (or even video recordings) as the basis for communication. In the long run, pictures have far more potential than simple actions. Pictures make it possible to learn to talk about the whole range of daily activities and experiences. You can repeatedly use the same pictures to learn to understand sentences of a variety of patterns. Suppose that during your eighth language session you are focusing on learning to understand sentences which describe an ongoing process in past time. Each sentence begins, "When this picture was taken..." and goes on to say what was happening when the picture was taken. "When this picture was taken, this man was ploughing. When this picture was taken this woman was making bread. When this picture was taken, this man was fixing a chair." etc. The language helper makes up these sentences on the fly. You have to process what you hear, and respond by indicating which picture she is describing. There are a hundred pictures (though only a few are in view at any given moment). The verbs themselves (*ploughing, making, fixing, etc.*) are not new to you, since you have been through these same pictures with the language helper many times. What is new is the form of the verbs used to describe an ongoing process in past time. By the time you get through the hundred pictures, you will have processed and responded to a hundred sentences which describe a past ongoing process. You'll be surprised how familiar you will have become with that sentence pattern.

While listening to a hundred sentences in a given form (and responding by pointing to the picture being described), you may get lazy, and not attend to the form of the sentence, but only catch one or two key words which are enough to allow you to respond. It may therefore be good to go through the pictures again, allowing the language helper to use two contrasting patterns. For example, she might use a pattern that begins "After this picture was taken—" along with the pattern beginning "When this picture was taken—". Using two or three contrasting patterns will increase the chances that you thoroughly attend to and process what you hear.

There are many sources for pictures. You can clip them from local magazines, travel brochures or old *National Geographic* articles related to your host country or to neighboring countries. It is far better if you can take your own photos of local scenes. It may be that your language helper can help with this. You could walk through the village and run off 3 rolls of film (approximately 100 photos), capturing a wide variety of common daily activities, in the space of about two hours.

For the early stages of language learning it is best to use pictures with certain characteristics. Each picture has one or

more people in it who are the central characters. In addition there are one or more inanimate objects which the person is using or doing something to. For example, the person may be using a hammer to build a table. Thus, in addition to the person, there is both a hammer and a table. Another person might be riding a bicycle. Another might be standing at a cash till. Two people might be simply sitting on a bench. The objects the people are involved with need not always be inanimate. Someone might be feeding an animal or nursing a baby. And it is not necessary that every single picture meet these criteria, but it is good if many of them do. I would consider having two or three identical sets of the pictures developed. Then you could glue one set in a notebook and have one or two sets loose. For different activities you might find it preferable to either use the pictures in a notebook or loose. Or you might want your co-learner and yourself to have the same pictures. For example, your co-learner might show a picture to the language helper from her set. The language helper then tells you something about the picture, and you respond by pointing to the same picture in your own set. Loose pictures can be manipulated and sorted. There are also advantages to the consistency of order and arrangement which a picture book provides.

A variety of commercial picture resources are also available. In Mbane we have

*Lexicarry: An Illustrated Vocabulary Builder for Second Languages* by Patrick Moran

*The Learnables* by Harris Winitz

*The Graphics Book* by Ramiro Garcia

*The Ultimate Visual Dictionary*

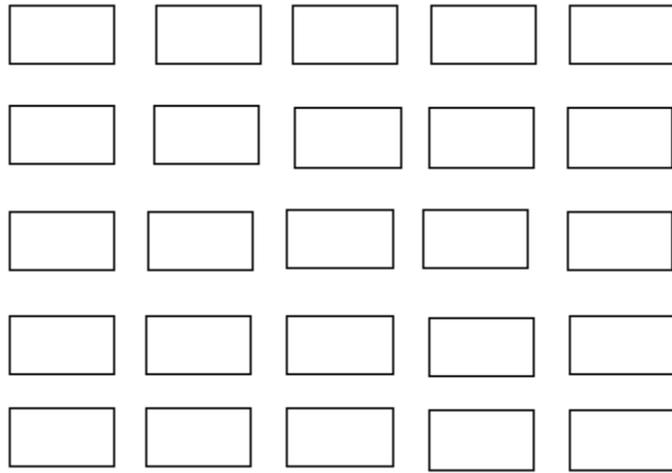
*Dictionnaire Visuel Africain*

Finally, at any point you can resort to drawing sketches, stick figures, or diagrams to use in a given language learning activity. I suspect that having the actual objects in hand is better than using sketches of them, but sketches are a whole lot better than merely using your mind's eye, since sketches still allow you to respond to what you process by pointing or by manipulating them. Without such aids it is hard to be sure you process what you hear. More importantly, these external aids are often what enables you to understand the language in the first place, so that you have a chance to process what you hear. If you can't process what you hear, it is of little use to you.

Pictures are useful to highlight specific sentence patterns. A wide variety of sentence patterns can be highlighted by having the language helper take a pattern and use that pattern to make a comment about each picture in succession. In that way you will quickly hear and comprehend a hundred examples (if you have a hundred pictures) of a single sentence pattern. You might have the pictures you use pasted in a book, and then you make repeated passes through the book with the language helper telling you things about the pictures on each pass. On the first pass through the book the language helper teaches the words for human beings (*man, woman, boy, girl, etc.*). On the second pass the language helper teaches the words for the inanimate objects which the people are using or acting upon. On the third pass, in the first approach, the language helper uses a single verb repeatedly in describing every picture. The verb might be *holding*. The descriptions would then go, "This man is holding a hammer. This woman is holding a spatula. This child is holding a toy; etc." for perhaps a hundred pictures. (It may be necessary to use two or three verbs in some cases.) The point is to have the experience of comprehending a lot of sentences which contain subjects and objects (such as *child* and *toy*, respectively). Alternatively after talking about the humans on the first pass through the book and talking about the most salient objects on the second pass, the language helper simply makes what she feels is the most natural descriptive statement of what each person is doing on the third pass. Often, the learner will not understand what the language helper says on this pass, but the learner and language helper tape-record it all, and go over the tape together, discussing whatever the learner did not understand.

### c. **Role playing**

Another twist is to base a TPR activity on some real life communication situation. For example, you can lay out a number of sheets of paper or envelopes in a format such as the following:



Pretend the papers are city blocks, and the spaces between them are streets. You hold a small toy car in your hand, and pretend that it is a taxi, and you are the driver. Your language helper gives you instructions such as “Drive three blocks and turn right”, and you comply by moving the toy car appropriately. This is a simple variety of role-play. By combining TPR with role-play, you can learn to understand expressions that you will need to use in real life communication situations. When you get into those situations you will be surprised how many of the expressions will come to you naturally, and you will use them in speech, even though you did not memorize them by rote. You learned them by hearing them repeatedly and each time processing what you heard and responding to it.

In a role play you can take either role. Take for instance the above you play where you were the taxi driver and your language helper was a customer giving you instructions. This is **reverse role-play**. You want to learn expressions a customer would use to talk to the taxi driver. But you do not pretend that you are the customer, even though that is the role you need to be able to function in. The reason you don’t pretend you’re the customer, is that you wouldn’t know what to say. So you take the role of the driver, and thus you get to hear what the customer says, and in the process you learn what customers say. In the pretend driver role you can hear, process, and respond physically by moving the car about the model town. With suitable props you can use reverse role-play to learn expressions which will be useful in just about any communication situation which you face during your early period of language learning. For example, what props might you use with your language helper in performing a role-play aimed at helping you learn how to talk to waiters in restaurants? Later you can reverse roles and you play the role of the customer, having already seen how a native speaker would handle the role.

As your language ability grows, in addition to learning to discuss a variety of important topics, you can now engage in elaborate role-plays. Your role-play with the model town and toy car was extremely simple and artificial. Now you and your language helper can have serious role-plays. Keep a list of all the situations in which you could use the language. One situation might be *hiring an employee*. You might have your two language helper’s do a role-play of that situation, one of them pretending she is hiring the other. You could tape-record this and listen to the tape numerous times. You can go over it with either or both of your language helpers, discussing at length any parts you do not understand, discussing all that is said, and how it is said. Now, in your next session, you can take the opposite role from the one you have in real life and do the role-play with your language helper. Then you can take the actual role you have in real life and do the same role-play again with your language helper.

**Role play cards** can help as well. For this you need a partner, or other helpful person, in addition to the native-speaker friend with whom you are going to be practicing the language. If you are a solo language learner, you can adapt it. In the form we do this one of the learners writes on two cards. One card is then given to the native-speaker, and one to the other language learners. A simple example might go like this:

**Card for native speaker:** “You own an ice-cream store. Your chocolate ice-cream is very popular, and you have just run out.”

**Card for language learners:** “You are craving chocolate ice-cream. Go and get a cone at the ice-cream store.”

It is crucial that neither the native speaker nor the language learner know what is on the other one's cards. Now here is another example

**Native speaker's card:** "Ndey. You live in Dakar. You do not know even one word of English. In the apartment next to yours a Canadian widow and her two friendly sons recently moved in. They speak broken Wolof. You want to get them to help you learn English. Call on them now. Arrange to visit with them for one hour every day for the purpose of learning English."

**Language Learners' card:** "Daniel and Cornelia: You have recently moved to Dakar. You need someone with whom to practice Wolof for one hour every day. Your neighbour Ndey is very sweet, and she does not know one word of English, which makes her an ideal person for you to arrange to talk with. Arrange to meet with her for one hour every day to improve your Wolof."

The basic concept here is taken from *Strategic Interaction*, by Robert J. DiPietro (1987, Cambridge University Press). The role cards have some shared information and some unshared or conflicting information that will add a problem that must be solved in your new language. Our ice-cream example could be used quite early. At advanced stages, the role cards can be as complicated as you like.

At all stages, once you have finished the activity you can trade role cards to see what the other person was trying to achieve. Then discuss what both of you did (early on, this discussion can be partly in English, French or some other language that you and your native-speaker friend know well.) It is helpful if you taped or videoed the activity. Then you can go over the tape or video with your native speaker friend and tell her "This is what I was trying to say at this spot. How might I have better expressed myself?" And she can explain things to you that she had said during the activity and you were unable to figure out, even with her best efforts to clarify for you. But the activity itself should be strictly carried out in the new language as a way of forcing you to **talk**.

#### d. **Pre-recorded messages such as Yoonu Njub**

Taped messages of native Wolof speakers provide an excellent resource for language learners. They not only provide a ready source of understandable input. They can also be played over and over again allowing the music of the language, that is to say, the intonation, to sink in. Yoonu Njub scripts are available in Wolof as well as the English translation. The Yoonu Njub messages are particularly useful in that the content of the messages are subjects familiar to missionaries. This helps you to understand what is being said even when much of the vocabulary is new. The content of the messages Tapes can be used in many ways.

- Sections can be copied onto another tape with pauses for mimicking. A language lab tape player which allows you to listen to one side while speaking on the other is excellent. The same thing can be done with two tape recorders. One tape which plays your listening tape and another small one into which you speak in order to mimic. You might concentrate on mimicking different aspects of language production including intonation, where the stress is placed on individual words (especially long words), pronunciation of individual words, or fluency of speaking phrases at normal speed.
- Go through the tape identifying all the words you do not understand. Look them up in a dictionary or discuss them with your language helper, but do not try and memorise them. Listen to the tape again. Many of the words you did not understand the first time you will now understand in context. Those words which you do not understand, look up again. Listen to the tape again. You should understand even more this time. Repeat the process until you understand all of the tape in context. Revise the tape again a few times over the next few days.

#### e. **Texts such as books, the New Testament etc**

Texts can also be used to increase your vocabulary considerably. Read through your text and mark all the words you do not know. Look them up or discuss them with your language helper, but do not try to memorise them. Read the text again. Many of the words you did not understand the first time you will now understand in context. Those words which you do not understand, look up again. Read the text again. You should understand even more this time. Repeat the process until you understand all of the text in context. Revise the text again a few times over the next few days. The text can also be read onto tape by your language helper and become a useful tape resource. You can read the text out aloud onto tape yourself, and have your language helper correct your pronunciation or intonation. The New

Testament is particularly useful for learning spiritual vocabulary. Because the passage is already familiar in your own language you will understand the meanings of many of the new words you encounter because of the context.

f. **Series method**

Recounting all of the steps in a process is called the Series Method. Here again, the speech is made easier to understand by the fact that each step in the process is relatively predictable, which drastically limits the range of possibilities you have to consider as you process what you hear. Consider all the steps in preparing a potato to be fried. You pick up a potato. You turn on a tap. You pick up a brush. You hold the potato under the running water. You rub the brush back and forth against the potato. The dirt that was on the potato is washed away. The water becomes dirty. The dirty water runs down the drain. You turn off the tap. You open a drawer. You take out a potato peeler. etc. (You can finish the series as an exercise.) Ordinary life provides hundreds of ideas for series. If the series are based on every-day mundane processes, you can bet that the vocabulary you hear and learn will be vocabulary that a basic speaker should know.

g. **Natural Action Dialogues**

Natural Action Dialogues are described in detail in SEELY, Contee; ROMIJIN, Elizabeth 1996 *TPR is More Than Commands - at all levels* (Command Performance Language Institute, Berkeley) pp28-32. How they can be used to master points of grammar is discussed in pp 89-110, and pages 119-132.

These are dialogues in which action is performed with or without commands. A dialogue is developed through the natural give and take between the language helper and student. An action and a real context are present at all times. The core of this approach is a series of acquisition activities. Each activity must be meaningful or interesting so that the student's attention is focused on the content of the utterances instead of the form. In a typical language course grammar is learned as rules and forms. The form is practiced but not the circumstances in which it is used, leaving the student with a structure which they may know how to formulate perfectly, but which they have only a very vague idea of when to use. The result is that they do not use it at all. If the circumstances are merely explained and examples given, they may understand how it is used, but do not have a feel for it. It is not enough to understand the circumstances. They must experience them.

What natural action dialogues plan to do is to vary the content while repeating the circumstances which require the use of a particular structure. An explanation of the grammar provides the opportunity to learn about when to use a structure. The experience of the circumstances in which it is used provide the opportunity both to acquire the structure and acquire a feel for when to use it.

Natural action dialogues should be based on vocabulary already internalised by TPR.

To create your own natural action dialogues:

1. Determine at least one context or set of circumstances in which the structure or idiom is commonly used. This normally means thinking of some examples of the use of the structure and then carefully examining the contexts in which they are used.
2. Formulate the questions that will elicit the desired structure.
3. Gather any props that might help make the situation seem more realistic.
4. In your lesson place, set the scene with props if any.
5. Enact the scene.

For example, the subject emphasis structure in Wolof is used when one wishes to emphasize the subject, i.e. who is doing it. It is commonly used in forming or responding to questions relating to the subject.

Who is it that is buying the chicken? Kan mooy jënd ginaar bi?

It is Bill who is buying the chicken. Bill mooy jënd ginaar bi.

Thus you might go for a walk with your language helper, who as he sees different activities going on he asks you questions as to who is doing some action. The verbs should all be words that you know, thus you are working on the structure in its natural context. After half an hour or so it should become automatic, not only in how to use the structure but when. He might ask: "Who is sweeping the yard?" And you respond with: "The woman is sweeping the yard."

Who is going for a walk?	We are going for a walk.
Who is learning Wolof?	I am learning Wolof.
Who is sieving the rice?	Anta is sieving the rice. etc.
Who is carrying water?	They are carrying water.

Once two contrasting structures have been learnt in this way. The next action dialogue would seek to mix up the circumstances of each so that you must decide what circumstances are present and use the correct structure. For instance, having done a Natural Action Dialogue for the subject emphasis pronouns, the object predicator pronouns, and the explicative, you could then go on your walk again with your language helper mixing up questions about the subject (subject emphasis), questions about the action (explicative or presentative structure) and questions about objects being used (object predicator).

Kan mooy bale?	Anta mooy bale.
Lu muy bale?	Kër gi lay bale.
Lu mu def?	Dafay bale. or else Mu ngi bale. etc

#### h. **TPR storytelling**

One very important technique for obtaining comprehensible input, internalising grammar and acquiring fluency is to work extensively with story telling. Fluency is an important skill to master. It is the ability to express oneself without too much hesitation or difficulty. A good way of developing this is through storytelling. The key is telling the story without interruption or too much hesitation. The goal is fluency not accuracy. Correctness will come naturally in time. In this exercise the important principles are:

Use vocabulary that you have already internalised, even if it is not exactly the right word for the situation.

Keep talking even if you make mistakes.

Don't let anyone correct you while you are telling your story.

At the start your language helper can get you going by telling you a very short story of 20 or 30 words, using words you have already internalised with TPR. You could even act it out as he tells it. For instance after learning: has; cat; in; chair; run away; look for; everywhere; come back; sit down; and asleep; - one could tell this story.

Tammy has a cat in the chair. The cat runs away. Tammy look everywhere for the cat. She comes back and sits down. Oh! The cat is asleep in the chair.

After you have heard the story you retell it in your own words from memory. The purpose is to tell it in your own way using the words that you know, rather than recite it exactly how the language helper did. If you have internalised the vocabulary adequately you will be able to tell the story without too much problem.

You can also retell simple stories that you know. Children's books with pictures are particularly useful as a guide for telling a story in Wolof. Recounting Biblical stories is also a good exercise. They might be very simple and summarised at first. That doesn't matter. The important thing is to learn to tell stories without hesitation.

Once the story has been told, then words which could not be found or mistakes of expression can be discussed. Recording the story as the student tells it, is particularly helpful here as you can replay the tape of the story to your language helper and dissect it word by word if you wish, to find out better ways of expressing yourself etc.

With time the stories can become longer and more sophisticated. Good stories will contain surprises or even zany elements. They use exaggeration, and are appropriate to the level of the student. Seely and Romijn recommend the following process for group or class situations in *TPR is More Than Commands - at all levels*.

Step 1 - Internalise the vocabulary

Step 2 - First telling of the story by the language helper acted out by the language student(s).

Step 3 - Language helper retells the story event by event by questioning and prompting to elicit short oral responses about the story. These can be yes-no or short answer questions; questions with one or two alternatives to choose from; sentences with mistakes in them which the student picks up and corrects; language helper pauses to leave a space at the end of the sentence which the student fills in; why type questions.

Step 4 - the language helper writes a list of guide words or simple drawings representing the main points on a board. (Use of written words is only used very sparingly at first). This can be used to focus the students attention on some

difficult point of grammar or vocabulary, making sure they use it.

Step 5 - The student tells the story using guide words or pictures as necessary.

Step 6 - The student tells the story without guide words.

Step 7 - The language helper focuses on any particularly important items.

Step 8 - The students tells as much of the story as she can in 1 minute.

The story once mastered can be followed up with: reading it aloud; written exercises; oral comprehension questions; writing the story; oral questions to develop other versions; saying or writing a new story using basically the same vocabulary as the original; vocabulary review.

TPR storytelling is also a useful way of internalising grammar in a similar way to Natural Action Dialogues. Once a particular story has been mastered it can be retold in different ways. You can tell it from the point of view where you are the main character using the first person singular, or where you are an observer. You can tell it as though it happened in the distance past or will occur in the future. You can tell as though the action was something you want to happen, or might happen to introduce double verbs, conditional and subjunctive forms. Grammar is internalised when the correct structures are heard repeatedly in context. Eventually you will speak correctly not because the rule books say this is how it is done, but rather just because it “sounds right”. Stories can create any context thus permitting any grammar structure to be used naturally.

TPR storytelling is described in detail in SEELY, Contee; ROMIJIN, Elizabeth 1996 *TPR is More Than Commands - at all levels* (Command Performance Language Institute, Berkeley) pp 39-86 and in RAY, Blaine; SEELY, Contee 1997 *Fluency through TPR StoryTelling* (Command Performance Language Institute, Berkeley)

**i. Twenty second responses**

This is another exercise in fluency. Have your language helper give you a topic. You are to say as much as you can on the subject in the allotted time (which can be 20 seconds, one minute or even two minutes in advanced stages). You can do this several times in a session. Key words for the topics are describe, convince and explain. For instance describe what happens at an event; convince your sister to go to the village ball; explain how peanuts are harvested. The goal is fluency, so your language helper should not correct or interrupt. It is helpful to record your speech and then to correct it later with your language helper from the tape.

**j. Freewriting**

Once you are past the beginners stage it is helpful to develop writing and spelling skills. As Wolof is has a phonetic alphabet spelling provides a check on your pronunciation. Once a week include a freewrite. Have your language helper give you a topic. You are to write at least one hundred words on that topic in 5 minutes. At the end of the 5 minutes count your words, then you can correct spelling.

**k. Go for a walk**

A simple and very useful activity is to regularly go for a walk with your language helper. As you walk, he might ask you to respond in some way as he asks questions about activities, objects or people that you see on the way. Alternatively, you might try to give a running commentary on everything that you see or hear. It is also a very useful way of incorporating grammar structures into their context. Doing this regularly will expose you to everyday vocabulary which you would otherwise not think to include in your language learning program. It will also expose weaknesses in your ability to describe scenes or activities.

**l. You will find other ideas for language activities in:**

Greg Thomson 1996 *A Few Simple Ideas for New Language Learners*.

Greg Thomson 1993 *Kick-starting Your Language Learning: Becoming a Basic Speaker Through Fun and Games Inside a Secure Nest*

Greg Thomson 1993 *Language Learning in the Real World for Non-Beginners*

SEELY, Contee; ROMIJIN, Elizabeth 1996 *TPR is More Than Commands - at all levels* (Command Performance Language Institute, Berkeley)

## 11. A word on using language helpers

I want to remind you of what you have already read in Greg Thomson's article *A Few Simple Ideas for New Language Learners*.

"But we continue to see repeatedly that a key to organizing your early language learning is the way your native-speaker friends understand their role as your helper and co-communer. Explain to them that you need a friend, not a teacher. People base new roles on ones they already know. "Teacher" may seem to them to be the obvious one. Don Larson reminds us that "mother, father, uncle, aunt, older sibling" are closer to what you actually need. You need someone who will talk to you in such a way that you can understand her, and who will help you along as you struggle to put your own thoughts into words. That's all you need."

He writes more about using language helpers in his 1993 article *Leave Me Alone! Can't You See I'm Learning Your Language?* It is worth taking the time to read pages 1-6 right now. He has some good advice on the kind of language helper to look for and how to reward them for helping you. The rest of the article is a good summary of the principles of learning a second language. Incidentally, later on he talks about working through social networks for language learning but the advice is also equally valid for transmitting the gospel.

So how do we help our language helpers get the idea of how we want them to help us. Well your language helper may speak English or French and then you could explain it to them, or a bilingual friend (your language supervisor perhaps) could explain it for you to them. But an even better way is to show them by giving them a lesson in English using TPR following the ideas in "6. Your first TPR lesson - an example" above as a guideline. Working with them for one hour in English is usually enough for them to get the idea. They will still need plenty of reminding before they will repeat new items enough. You may want to give them two lessons. In the first lesson you do lots of repetition. In the second you introduce new words with very little repetition. A week later you test what they remember. They will see for themselves the value of repetition (although you might be surprised at how much they remember of what you didn't repeat much)!

Another way that you can show your language helper what you want is to work with a partner. The partner stands behind you (out of your view) and mimes what you are to do. The language helper then instructs you to do what he has seen your partner doing. Thus your partner controls when new words are introduced and when how often they are repeated. The language helper should gain a good idea of what you want eventually. Even the best language helpers will need reminders of how the system works from time to time.

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