

Teaching English to Newcomers

Teacher's Guide

Growing Participation – more than just language

Teaching English to Newcomers: Teacher's Guide. Based on *Flüchtlinge lernen Deutsch*, by Kathrin Pope and Team, Wycliffe Switzerland and Wycliff Germany, 2019. Inspired by Greg and Angela Thomson's Introduction to [The First Hundred Hours](#).

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Greg Thomson's original materials can be downloaded from growingparticipation.com.

Anyone learning a new language picks up more than just words and sentences. They have the opportunity to discover a whole new world. This guide and accompanying lesson plans were produced specifically with refugees (forcibly displaced people) in mind and are a guide to those who are involved in assisting refugees, immigrants and other guests as they learn to speak English in their new environment. We will refer to all learners as “newcomers”.



Photo Credit: Rodney Ballard



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Foreword

Learning a language using the Growing Participator Approach is more than just a new method of language learning. Rather, as the name suggests, it aims to help the newcomer grow through participation—both in the language and in the culture. In order to integrate well, newcomers need not only knowledge of the language, but also relationships with the people around them. Thus, this approach teaches language in the context of relationships. The primary focus is not on learning grammar and vocabulary, but on getting to know the new world around them and gradually ‘growing into’ this world.

The language learning philosophy on which these materials are based can be summarized in the following statement:

*Don't 'learn the language'!
Rather, discover a new world,
as it is known and shared by the people
among whom you are living.*

The Growing Participator Approach was developed by the Canadian couple Greg and Angela Thomson based on their language learning situations. This guide presents the approach they have developed, adapted in a way that mainly focuses on the needs of refugees and other immigrants to English-speaking countries and of their volunteer helpers.

Alongside this guide, there is a series of 60 lessons that will enable interested volunteers to use this approach. The plan is to make 60 lessons for Phase 1 available at www.sil.org/english-language-lessons, posting sets of lessons in increments that will take the newcomers through their first phase of learning English. (For Phase 2 and Phase 3, there will be separate documents.)

The suggestions and lessons are intended to supplement any other English learning opportunities the newcomers have available to them. The lesson vocabulary and pictures can also be adapted to fit your situation, as these lessons may be taught in many different contexts. We do not expect volunteer helpers to take new learners of English all the way to complete fluency. However, broadening the approaches to English language learning is recommended to accommodate newcomers with a range of educational backgrounds. This approach strives to give the practical, everyday support and assistance newcomers need while they take their first steps toward learning the language and culture of their host country.

Fundamental concepts of the Growing Participator Approach

In the Growing Participator Approach, the relationship between “teacher” and “student” is especially important. It is not primarily about teaching the material itself, but rather helping the newcomer get established in their new surroundings, enabling them, step by step, to develop

from a newcomer into an independent resident. For this reason, we do not refer to “teachers” and “students” throughout these materials—instead, we call them “nurturers” and “learners”.

Our brains learn best when we are enjoying ourselves, interacting with others in safe ways. These lessons are designed as structured play. Instead of referring to “activities” or “exercises”, we refer to “games” to reinforce the fact that our brains learn best when we are enjoying ourselves.

Early lessons involve games where the nurturer speaks and the learners respond through actions without words. This allows the learners to get used to the sounds of the language without having to pronounce correctly, and to connect words of the new language with concepts without the pressure to produce the new words and to get every detail right yet.

From Lesson 8 onwards, games are included in which the nurturer helps the learners to express themselves orally as they continue with structured play. The focus is not on “saying it correctly”, but rather communicating meaning and then hearing the nurturer affirm the meaning by correctly saying the sentence.

Reading and writing can be built on the oral skills later. The first reading activities are introduced in Lesson 41, writing starts in Lesson 51.

To summarize, the Growing Participator Approach is a comprehension-led approach focusing on listening, comprehending and speaking.

Teaching and learning in different cultures

In the West, we are used to learning from books, taking notes and being tested now and then. We find it hard to imagine a language lesson without using a book as a basis.

However, many we will teach and support have had different educational experiences and come from different backgrounds. Some may be used to copying facts from a blackboard or whiteboard, memorizing them, and reciting them back. Thinking things through, reflecting and acquiring new content independently are not skills that are taught everywhere.

There may be a clash between the different ideas of how a “proper language class” should be taught. But if everyone involved is willing to give the Growing Participator Approach a try, they will usually be quickly convinced that the approach works, and is even fun.

Introduction

In the following pages, we mainly refer to “language learning” as “growing participation”. People who are already part of a community (locals) help those who want to grow into this community (newcomers) so that they can become a part of the community. This process of growing and adapting takes many years. The lesson plans presented here are the first steps in a long journey.

Giving the learner opportunities to grow

We have defined language learning as “growing participation in a community”. Even though we simply refer to them as “learners”, we should always keep this process of growth at the back of our minds and not forget that learning a language is more than just an intellectual exercise.

The process of “growing participation” is often made difficult by the fact that newcomers have a deep need for human interaction but, because of the language barrier, they are not yet able to independently form such relationships. So, beginners need to be able to depend on one or more locals who will interact and speak with them in a way that helps them to grow into the language and culture of their host country. These local nurturers come alongside the newcomers on their path towards real participation in the host culture. Over time, the locals view the learners more and more as part of their community. As the learners have more opportunities to participate in the community, they grow in their communication skills. It is important that the nurturer provides the learner with these opportunities for growth.

The nurturers should never lose sight of the fact that they are in a real human relationship with one or more individuals and are helping them to learn to communicate in a variety of real life situations. As we assist someone over a longer period of time, we should also help that person to build relationships with our wider circle of family and acquaintances, as well as with other people. Over time, the relationship between the learner and the nurturer will deepen. As the nurturer is willing to invest in a relationship with the learner, they will be able to help them to participate in increasingly wider areas of life in society and build further relationships. Through these further relationships, the learner can grow even more.

Learning by listening

In the beginning, the focus is on comprehension and it is important the learner should be able to see what the nurturer is talking about. If the nurturer points to an apple and says “apple”, the learner “understands” the new word without any prior knowledge. If we talk about the things that are around us, real communication in the new language is possible from day one. In the beginning we work orally. Reading and writing are introduced later.

Language is best learned when we can understand what we hear in context, and if we use what we know when interacting with other people. At the very beginning, when the learners have zero knowledge of the language, they can already understand what their nurturer is saying as long as they can see what the nurturer is talking about. As a result, the learner begins to recognize words and sentence patterns. Exactly how this is done is explained in detail in the lesson plans.

Once the learners have become accustomed to the sound of the language, they have a natural starting point for their first attempts at speaking. We should always follow this sequence: The

learners first become familiar with what we “the locals” are saying, and **only then** should they attempt to speak themselves. Listening and understanding comes first.

When learners begin to speak, they should not simply recite words and sentences that they have memorized. Rather, they should express themselves to the best of their ability and according to their level. After all, that's how we learned our mother tongue.

To make these principles clearer, imagine what happens when a beginner memorizes: *Could you please tell me how to get to the train station?* If he then uses the sentence, he will sound as if he already has a good grasp of the language. In return, he will almost certainly get a flow of words of which he understands practically nothing. However, when he says the word *train station* with a big question mark on his face, the person he asked will probably realize that they need to use very simple language, and maybe gestures as well.

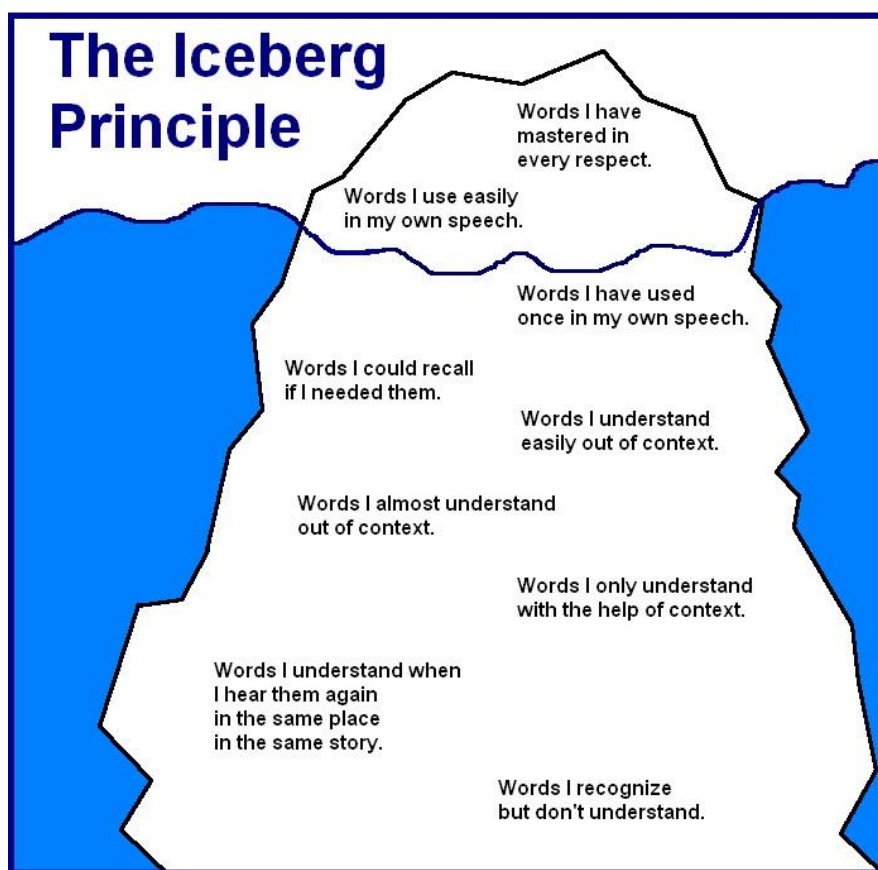
Some people are tempted to shortcut the language learning process by memorizing entire sentences by heart. We are, however, convinced that learners who learn within the context of real conversations are soon able to express spontaneously whatever it is they would otherwise have memorized, and much more besides. In addition, by listening first before attempting to speak, the learner has a better chance to develop good pronunciation.

At some point, the learners will successfully complete the beginner phase, at which point they will be able to understand several hundred words, as well as simple sentences, and should also be able to use some of these words and sentences themselves. For teaching learners beyond this stage, there are ideas in the documents for Phase 2 and Phase 3.

The iceberg principle

Many of us will remember learning a foreign language at school and having to put a great deal of effort into learning new words in hopes of quickly being able to use them. We also remember how rapidly we could later forget many of those words.

To illustrate what goes on in our heads when learning a language, consider the image of an iceberg.



The words and expressions form a kind of iceberg in the learner's mind. At the top of the iceberg, above the surface of the water, are the words that the learner has mastered and uses regularly—their active vocabulary. Below the surface of the water are words that the learner understands but does not yet use—their passive vocabulary. At the very bottom are words that sound somewhat familiar but aren't yet understood. Words move upwards in the iceberg through hearing them repeatedly in a context that allows the learner to infer meaning.

We all know this from our own experience of learning a new language. How often have we been looking for a word or expression and we cannot recall it, no matter how hard we try? Then we hear someone say the word and think "Oh yeah, that's it!" This shows that a word can be stored somewhere in our mind, perhaps quite deeply below the surface. When we hear the word used in context, it climbs higher up in the iceberg, and next time we can recall it more easily and develop a better understanding of how it is used.

According to the iceberg principle, new words are put into the underwater part of the iceberg and then climb upwards with reinforcement and use in context. This way of learning is not only more fun, but it is also more effective than memorizing word lists. People can learn a thousand words passively, which means they understand the words but can't necessarily use them, with the same amount of effort it takes to learn a hundred words actively. When we hear words repeatedly, in understandable contexts, the words climb higher up the iceberg until they eventually pop out of our mouths without us ever having consciously learned them.

Practical Tips

The nurturer and the learning group

A nurturer could be a trained teacher of English as a foreign language, but people without formal teacher training often make outstanding nurturers. Both professional teachers and non-professional teachers require a nurturing spirit. Likewise, the nurturer should become familiar with the Growing Participant Approach, have an encouraging attitude, and be willing to build up a relationship with the learner.

An ideal learning group consists of a nurturer and a small group of two to six learners who are all roughly at the same level. The nurturer prepares and leads the lessons. If the group is much larger or if the English abilities of the learners within the group vary a lot, then small groups should be formed within the larger learning group. In this case, additional nurturers are necessary for some of the activities.

To ensure progress is made, the lessons should ideally be offered at least three times per week. Lessons can be scheduled for an hour or up to two hours, including a short break. This does not mean that every nurturer needs to be available five times per week. Within a group of nurturers, you can alternate between people, provided the nurturers inform each other of what happened in each lesson.

Resources

Audio recordings

The nurturer should make audio recordings in each lesson so that the learners can listen to them a few times in between lessons. The lesson plans indicate which parts of each lesson should be recorded.

The recording and playback quality of an average Smartphone is sufficient. (You can download a voice recording app or use whatever comes with your phone.) An easy way to get the recordings to each member of the learning group is to set up something like a WhatsApp group. After each lesson, the recordings are sent to the group members.

The learners should be encouraged to use these recordings to follow up on lessons, as this further reinforcement has a huge impact on the effectiveness of their learning.

Word lists

We recommend that the nurturer keeps a list of new words that are introduced during the lesson.

We keep this word list primarily for two reasons:

1. We want to know how many new words have been taught to ensure we introduce enough new words but not too many in each lesson. We recommend no more than a dozen new words per hour.
2. We need an overview of the words that have been learned so they can be reviewed in subsequent lessons.

Depending on the situation, it may be useful to share the list of words with the learners at the end of the lesson. Under no circumstances should they be writing the list of words down during the lesson, as this distracts from listening. It is also time-consuming.

Objects and pictures

Objects and pictures help people to understand the meaning of new words. The nurturer can find many of these objects at home, for example, household products, toiletries, food, drinks, etc. Legos, Duplo, Playmobil or similar toy figures are essential for many of the lessons. Dolls and hand puppets can also be used.

Objects that cannot easily be brought to the lesson can be represented by pictures. We have included simple line drawings in the lesson plans.

The right-hand column of the lesson plans shows the materials needed for each activity.

Picture sheets

Picture sheets are provided for each lesson. They illustrate the new words taught in the lesson.

If anybody prefers colored pictures, they can be cut out of magazines or downloaded from the Internet (using royalty-free pictures). How important it is to use colored pictures is debatable. It is, however, important that the pictures are clear and easy to identify.

For some activities, it is helpful to cut the picture sheets up into individual pictures. For other activities, it is better to use the sheet without cutting it up. The lesson plans indicate the best format to use.

With newly introduced words, we recommend using real objects if possible. When these words are reviewed in a later lesson, and especially when they are combined with other sets of words, pictures may be easier to handle than objects.

In order to keep materials well organized, we recommend giving each learner a ring binder with sheet protectors for their uncut picture sheets. They need to bring the folder to every lesson.

Language Learning Activities

“Quick Dozen” vocabulary activity

A “Quick Dozen” activity includes ten to fifteen objects or pictures (around a dozen, hence the name). The aim is not to completely master the new words, but to get acquainted with them. We are aiming for a quick understanding.

In the Quick Dozen, you always start with two words. Assume you want to teach the words for a dozen different types of food. You have brought along samples of these foods, or pictures, or plastic replicas. For example, you begin with an apple and a pear. You say: *This is an apple. This is a pear*, while pointing to the relevant fruit.

You then ask the learners: *Where is the apple? Where is the pear? Where is the pear? Where is the apple?* and so on. The learners respond by pointing, not by speaking. At this point, they are not expected to repeat the words aloud—they listen, process what they have heard, and respond by pointing.

When the learners react correctly to both terms, a third item is introduced: *This is a potato*. A little later: *This is a carrot*. *Where is the carrot? Where is the apple? Where is the potato? Where is the carrot? Where is the pear?* The learners always respond by pointing, not by pronouncing the words.

You always ask where the new item is first, and then continue asking in random order. This ensures the learners listen to the words and connect them with the objects, rather than remembering the way they are arranged on the table. You can also re-arrange them on the table every so often.

When the learners feel ready to move on, another word is added, always introducing one new word at a time. To summarize the rules for the Quick Dozen activity:

- Start with two words.
- Add one word at a time.
- Use plenty of repetition.
- Present the vocabulary in random order.
- Have the learners point to the word/words they hear; they do not speak at this point.
- Deviating from these rules usually leads to frustration.

Listen and Respond

We use the label “Listen and Respond” for other comprehension activities that are not introducing new words. The nurturer models the activity by giving an instruction while carrying it out. For example, *Take the pencil and put it next to the book*. *Take the ball and give it to Aisha*. Then he gives more instructions and the learners listen and respond in the same way.

As with the “Quick Dozen”, this game allows the learners to develop comprehension skills without feeling under pressure to have to speak. They are given a chance to experience success immediately. They will think, “I understood that! I can respond to that!” The rules of the Quick Dozen also apply to any comprehension activity that introduces new sentence structures or other new material. We start with two new words or expressions, then add one new phrase at a time, repeat them many times in random order, and the learners react non-verbally.

If the learners hesitate over certain phrases or respond incorrectly, these should be used more frequently until they stick.

Listen and Respond games can be practiced by using the command form (*Sit down on the chair*) as well as by using simple statements (*I am sitting on the chair*). There are plenty of examples in the lesson plans.

Role play

From the beginning, learning mostly happens through listening, but even at this early stage learners also need to be able to express themselves in certain situations like greetings, shopping, traveling by bus, and so on. What to say in these situations can be practiced in simple role plays.

The nurturer and another person act out the scenario a few times. For example, they go up to each other and say: “Hello” – “Hello” – “How are you?” – “Fine, and you?” – “Fine, thanks” – “See you” – “Bye”. (If no other person is available, a puppet or toy figure can be very useful.)

The conversation is repeated a few times. The nurturer then greets a learner in the same way. The learner responds. The nurturer greets a second, then a third, and a fourth learner. Then the learners greet one another.

Beginners will be overwhelmed by long sentences and numerous exchanges. Dialogues should be kept short and simple, and can even be broken down into individual exchanges, where you start simply with “Hello” – “Hello”. When the learners feel comfortable with this, you add “How are you?” – “Fine, and you?”, and so on.

Grammar

In traditional foreign language classes, grammar rules are taught right from the beginning. Some learners learn well that way, but many others find it boring, dry and abstract. Most people don't learn to understand and speak a language fluently by learning grammar rules.

However, grammar is part of language just like the rules are part of a football game. If everybody puts words together into sentences the way they choose, communication is difficult. In other words, grammar needs to be taught somehow. But how?

We are convinced that grammar is best taught within comprehension activities.

Here's an example: Some languages do not distinguish between “he” and “she”, so it may be useful to focus on this difference at some point. We can use an activity such as the following:

Put some toy figures out on the table, a mixture of men and women, boys and girls, some sitting, some standing, some lying down. Then make statements such as *He is standing* or *She is lying down*, and point to the relevant figure. You may also need to say, *This is a man, he is standing. This is a woman, she is sitting*. And emphasize “he” and “she”.

In a second round, make the same kinds of statements and have the learners point to the right figure. This forces them to not only pay attention to the verb (stand, sit etc.), but also to the pronouns (he and she).

When the learners keep hearing grammatical structures in their correct context, they will eventually use them correctly themselves.

Which grammatical structures are the most difficult for the learners depends greatly on their mother tongue. Nearly everyone who learns English as a foreign language finds the use of English articles (*the, a, an...*) or prepositions (*in, to, on, under, by...*) to be particularly challenging. However, in the early lessons, grammar activities are not a main focus. In the beginning, it doesn't matter yet whether the learners put every sentence together correctly and whether they always remember to put “s” at the end of a verb in the third person singular. The main thing is that they start communicating and build up a basic vocabulary. Hence, initially there will be grammatical errors.

At some point during the integration process it does become more important to use correct forms and sentence structures, but not in the first few weeks.

Reading and Writing

Lastly, some thoughts on reading and writing: As we have said before, these teaching materials suggest not doing any reading and writing activities in the first 40 lessons. This is in contrast to

most other approaches to teaching foreign languages, where reading and correct spelling is taught from the first lesson. There are several reasons to postpone reading and writing.

As suggested before, the most urgent need for a beginner is to understand what goes on around them. The learners should focus fully on listening, processing and reacting. Paper and pen distract from this.

If reading and writing plays an important role from the start, then people with little formal education are at a distinct disadvantage. However, they are able to learn to communicate in a foreign language just as much as those who are proficient in reading and writing.

If the teaching is based initially on the written word, the teaching of oral communication and comprehension is often not given enough attention.

If newcomers are going to live in their new country long-term, they will of course need to familiarize themselves with our alphabet and English spelling at some point. If voluntary helpers come to the point when they want to or need to help learners with this, there are a few things to consider.

It is important to realize that there are three groups of learners as far as reading and writing is concerned:

- People who have not learned to read or write in their mother tongue.
- People who can read and write, but are not familiar with our alphabet.
- People who already know our alphabet and “only” need to learn English spelling and pronunciation rules. Some may have learned a bit of English before coming to their new country. These people would probably be placed in more advanced English classes.

To teach reading and writing to a non-literate adult is not easy. Going about it the wrong way can do more damage than good. Therefore, untrained volunteers should not try to teach non-literate people to read and write.

Non-literates should definitely build up some comprehension and speaking skills before having to deal with reading and writing. If reading and writing is introduced in a language they don't understand, the letters make no sense and the learning process is seriously hindered.

It is also important to note that groups 1 and 2 above have very different needs concerning their literacy learning. They should not be taught together in one class. They can, however, be part of the same class for learning comprehension and speaking skills.

Undoubtedly, there will be some learners who insist on having something in writing that they can take home right from the start. If they cannot be convinced to wait a few weeks, the nurturer can give them a list of the new words at the end of each lesson. However, learners should be discouraged from writing words onto the pictures during comprehension activities. This distracts them from listening and interferes with the brain's ability to link sound to meaning.

We wish all nurturers and learners much success and fun together!