How to teach a self introduction through immersion.

Learning to introduce yourself is a very common and useful way to start language learning. It’s a useful lesson because students can use it on all kinds of occasions, more and less formal. It can be rather easy to learn. Also, the topic of the lesson focusses on people and things that the learner already knows. It’s important to keep in mind that learning the language is difficult, and we can only really learn one thing at a time, so language lessons should be built around subjects the learner already knows well and understands.

Often times, self introductions are taught by learning a script that is previously written out and then memorized. The lesson presented here is a different approach; it’s based on a more conversational approach to learning. Basically, the mentor and apprentice or teacher and learner will talk about the family relations and learn through conversation. So how is this done?

When teaching and learning through immersion, the first problem to consider is making sure the student knows what’s being said. If the teacher points to the window and says something in a language you don’t understand you don’t know if they said “that is a window” or “it’s raining outside” or “the curtains are brown” or any number of things. But if the teacher points to themselves and says something, there’s a good chance they said “my name is…” or “I am…”. If they hold up an object and point to it, you know they’re saying something about that. But if they point to a photo of a person, you don’t know if they’re saying “this is a woman” or “this is my mother” or “this is a photograph” or “her hat is blue” and so on. Abstract terms are much more difficult to teach and learn, so we always look for ways to keep lessons grounded in things we can point to, for now.

Preparations

This lesson is about relationships, so we need to begin with a visual depiction of the relationships. Both the teacher and the learner should bring together photos of the people and places they want to talk about. Include a photo of yourself. Try to find individual, portrait style photos as they will be more clear than group photos. If you don’t have a photo of a person, write their name on a small piece of paper; this goes for places as well.

Next, take the photos and names of people and places and arrange them into a family tree. Arrange them on a large sheet of paper and draw lines connecting the people, or use pieces of string. These connections are really the subject of the lesson.

The Lesson

The lesson is being taught through conversation so nothing needs to be written down. After the lesson, it might be helpful for the student to write down some of the terms (mother, father, grandfather, aunt, and so on) so they can study and practice. But only AFTER the lesson. Listening and speaking use a different part of the brain than reading and writing. We learn first through our senses: seeing, hearing, acting out what’s being said, touching, smelling, etc.; and then by trying and practicing, in speaking. Sometimes we need to listen for a long time before speaking.

Once both of the family trees are ready (one for the mentor and one for the apprentice), the lesson can begin.

You will be talking about the relationships between the people; that is, about the lines connecting the photos and names. The teacher will begin to talk about their family. Let the learner hear the whole story a few times before they’re expected to participate. They may not understand most of what is being said, but they will be hearing the language and they will be learning the sounds and rhythms. They will hear where the voice rises and falls. Each language has its own melody. We can’t learn the melody of Gwich’in if we don’t have an opportunity to listen to it.

Once the teacher has gone through their family two or three times, they can begin at the beginning again, one sentence at a time and have the student follow along, but using her own family. Here is an example of a possible exchange if it were translated into English.

Mentor My name is Alestine

Apprentice My name is Bobbi

Mentor John is my father

Apprentice Rob is my father.

Mentor John comes from Tsiigehtchic

Apprentice Rob comes from Teetł’it zheh.

At the beginning, it’s better to keep sentences very short. Only say one thing per sentence. Once the learner is comfortable with the basic connections: my father is, he comes from, my mother is, and so on; then you can begin to put them together, but this may very well only be possible after a few lessons.

*John is my father and he comes from Tsiigehtchic,*

or

*my mother and father both come from Tsiigehtchic.*

Also, once the learner is comfortable with the different relationship or kinship terms, then you can begin to mix them (slowly). However, this might be very difficult, so only do this if the student is ready for such complex sentences.

*John’s mother was Mary, that’s my grandmother. Mary is my grandmother.*

Repetition is extremely important. Every time you repeat something you help to make the information more clear for the learner, and the learner is better able to understand it and better able to remember it. Notice how repetition is used in the example above.

Building to the complexity

We can only learn what we understand. There is a very important concept in language teaching called *comprehensible input*. This means that we can only learn what we understand.

With this in mind, it’s very important for mentors to keep the vocabulary and verb forms at a level where the learner will know what is being said. In the beginning we need to keep lessons at a very concrete level, where you can point to the thing you mean, or hold it in your hand. This is why the lines connecting the pictures in the family tree are helpful, because they make the abstract relationship terms a bit more visual. Consider how easy it is for a person who doesn’t speak the language to understand if you point to yourself and say “I am Alestine”. And how difficult it would be to understand if you point to a picture and say “that’s my maternal grand-aunt.”

If you want to teach more complicated things, you do this by building up to them using simple things. If you want to teach *maternal grand-aunt* then you begin with

My mother

Her sister

My mother’s sister

She is my (maternal) aunt

My mother’s sister is my (maternal) aunt

My mother’s mother

She is my grandmother

My mother’s mother is my grandmother

My grandmother’s sister

She is my (maternal) grand aunt

My grandmother’s sister is my (maternal) grand aunt.

This technique is called *scaffolding*. Like a scaffold on a building, *scaffolding* is a way of supporting the student to build towards complex things by breaking the complexity into bite sized pieces. An example of this is when we learned our times tables. Before we could learn to multiply we first needed to learn how to count, then we learned how to add, and only then could we learn to multiply.

123456

1+1=2

2+3=5

2+2+2=6

2 x 3=6

So a good way to make up lessons is to begin at the end. What do I want the student to know? Or from the student’s point of you: what do I want to be able to talk about? Then break that big final goal down into small parts. Once you know the parts, decide which parts you need to learn before you can learn the others. Once you know the order of the lessons, you know where to begin.

Correction

Ideally this lesson will sound more like a conversation than a script being memorized; a conversation where the two of you are exchanging the very simple story of your family relations.

A good way of correcting a learner is to model what you want them to do or say. This goes for corrections in pronunciation or grammar, or anything. Rather than saying “No, that’s wrong,” say the word or phrase for them correctly. Make sure to emphasise the part of the word or phrase you’re correcting.

Something to be aware of is the issue of possession. Each person will be talking about their own relative: my mother; my uncle. So when the mentor corrects they will be saying your mother, your uncle. This will cause confusion, but it will be a valuable teaching opportunity.

Here is an example of such a correction if the dialogue were translated into English.

1. Mentor James was my grandfather and Ellen was my grandmother.
2. Apprentice Thomas was my grandfather and Mary was my grandfather.
3. Mentor Mary was your *grandmother*.

Thomas was your *grandfather*, but Mary was your *grandmother*

1. Apprentice Mary was your *grandmother*.

(Depending on the kind of relationship between the mentor and apprentice, kind laughter is often a good way to relieve the stress of learning)

1. Mentor No, you say, *my* grandmother. Mary was *my* grandmother.
2. Apprentice Mary was *my* grandmother.
3. Mentor That’s right. Ellen was *my* grandmother.

Mary was *your* grandmother. Understand?

*My* grandmother (mentor pointing at herself)

*Your* grandmother (mentor pointing at apprentice)

1. Apprentice *My* grandmother (apprentice pointing at herself)

*Your* grandmother (apprentice pointing at mentor)

1. Mentor Very good. Who was my grandmother?
2. Apprentice Ellen was your grandmother.
3. Mentor Good, and who was your grandmother?
4. Apprentice Mary was my grandmother.
5. Mentor Yes, that’s very good.

A couple of things to notice here. Firstly, as the mentor, you will gauge your responses according to the learner’s ability. In the above example, the whole mix up about *my* grandmother and *your* grandmother could have been avoided if in line 3, the mentor had corrected by modeling *my grandmother*. Then the apprentice would have repeated what she heard and they could have continued. By correcting the apprentice the way she did, saying *Mary is your grandmother*, she was leaving it up to the apprentice to make the change from *your* to *my.*

How much support you give to your apprentice depends on how much they need. You want them to be challenged, but not drowning. Learning stops when there is confusion or stress. This is why laughter is a good tool for relieving stress (as long as people don’t feel they’re being laughed at, of course).

Another thing to notice is how, after the laughter on line 5, how the mentor begins the whole lesson over from the beginning, making sure the learner is able to follow each little step.

Once the learner understands something new, that is the time for repetition. Repetition ensures the lesson gets really clearly established in the learner’s mind. It’s said a learner needs to hear a word 20 times in 20 different contexts in order to really learn it. So even if the mentor feels this might be boring, watch the apprentice to see if they’re bored. The chances are they are still processing the information and working it out. If as the mentor, you feel you need to find new ways of looking at a word to make it more interesting or to make the meaning more clear, you could try something like the following:

Mentor: Ellen was my grandmother. Roberta was my grandmother. I had two grandmothers. Ellen and Roberta. They were my grandmothers.

I hope it comes across in this example how something as simple as having two grandmothers can come across as very complicated. So sometimes it helps to speak a little more slowly. Also, if the apprentice can handle it, you can build connections between other people in the family tree. However, be aware that you will be using new possessives *his/hers/their*.

Mentor: Ellen was John’s mother, and her mother was Bella. Bella was John’s grandmother, so Bella was my great-grandmother.

As you can see there is a lot to learn here, and there is a lot to remember. Just the way repetition is vital for learning during the session, it’s also essential for remembering. To make the fastest progress, the student will practice what they learned in the time between classes. So it would be good to leave the last few minutes of the session for the student to record what they learned today. They might record themselves describing their family tree, or record the mentor repeating some key information. Phones are probably the most convenient tools for this. Learners can listen to them between sessions. The best is to listen to it later the same day, then at least once a day for a few days, then every few days. By then it will be stored into the long term memory. You can also use the last few minutes of the class to write down some key words. This can help with pronunciation as well, especially if you are a visual learner.

Finally, keep in mind that every mistake, or error is an opportunity to learn something new. Learning can be difficult and making mistakes can be stressful, so move slowly making sure that it’s very clear what is being said (using simple sentences and clearly visible or understandable subjects), with lots of repetition and lots of laughter.

I hope this was a helpful description of a way of teaching a self introduction. Good luck.