Introduction: ‘Definition determines direction’. ‘Theory informs practice’. How we view (‘define’) language learning will strongly affect how we approach and engage it, or how we will have our learners approach and engage it. To put it in the extreme, the mentality of many students taking a required foreign language course in high school and college was: ‘There is only one way to do this: Hit the books; study like mad; cram at the last minute; get through the exam with hopefully an acceptable grade.’ That mentality is not easily replaced when language learning is now for real and not just for a grade. Re-orientation will help.

Maxim: **Contrast is the Mother of Clarity**

An important contrast: **Language-Acquisition vs. Language-Learning**. Acquisition focuses more on the meaningful messages being conveyed by language than on **language** itself. That’s how we got our first language. As kids, we paid more attention to what was being said than to the words being used. Learning focuses more on **language** itself. This is where language-schooled adults tend to place emphasis; i.e., ‘working on the **language**’.

Along this line, here is, hopefully, a helpful analogy: Language is like a ‘conveyor belt’ transporting products (i.e., meaningful messages). **Language** (words that transport messages) is absolutely essential; but, as essential as it is, it is merely the conveyor. We acquired our first language (mother tongue) by focusing more on the **message** (what was being conveyed by the conveyor) than the **medium** (what was conveying the message). As we did, we also **acquired** the medium (language) and soon began to use it as a conveyor to transmit our own messages. To kids, **What’s on the conveyor belt is more important than the conveyor belt**.

Utilizing insights from analogies like this should influence how we help adults approach and engage language learning effectively. In training and coaching adult language learners, it’s helpful to view language and language learning from many perspectives, and then develop learning projects in line with them. Establishing premises (simple, straightforward statements) provides bases for doing this.

What is a premise? A declarative statement, a fundamental fact, a starting point, a launching pad into activities that relate or conform to that premise. A premise is to be accepted (or rejected) at face value. It is not set up, like a hypothesis, to be proved or disproved.

Example: Turn the **action statement** of Genesis 1:1, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth”, into a **premise statement** and it becomes: “The heavens and the earth are God’s creation.” What a grand premise! What a place to start! What a fundamental fact to begin to unpack! What a base for scientists to launch from into research!
Language learners can and should launch from multiple launch pads (premises) at the same time or close to the same time. It also might be advantageous to delay launching from certain launch pads (premises).

**Important Point:** “Research has failed to crown any one method as superior.” **Implication:** Don’t overly raise one method to a superior rank or to the exclusion of others.

Premises are places for methods to start. A premise should be given special attention but not to the neglect of the other premises. Here’s what I consider to be a fundamental premise:

**PREMISE:** Language is a Supra-Physical God-Infused Human-Capability

This premise has to do with where language exists, where language came from (its origin/source), and who language is for (exclusively for creatures (humans) who have the physical capacity all set up for it: brain and audio-vocal mechanisms).

1. **‘Supra-Physical’** (‘Supra’—existing above, beyond, outside of) Language itself resides outside rather than inside the brain. As absolutely essential as language is to being human, it is not in our DNA, not inherent, not inbred. Even though our vocal apparatus is all set up to speak a language (actually any language in the world), no language resides in the human brain waiting to emerge at the proper time. Language is not ‘intrinsic’ (situated and originating from within the body) but ‘extrinsic’ (situated and originating from outside the body). Language has got to come into the brain before the mouth can speak.

   As babies grow, they do not spontaneously begin to talk like they spontaneously begin to do physical activities: roll over, sit up, stand, walk, run. These physical abilities are in the genes, but language is not. Language originates from outside the brain, not from inside the brain. Humans do not self-generate language because they can’t. Language is not part of our physicality. It resides outside the physical realm. It is ‘ethereal’.

2. **‘God-Infused’** This is where language itself is sourced (in God). And this explains how it originally entered into the human race (the human brain) in the special way that it did, so that, to be perpetuated, it would have to be inputted into and absorbed by subsequent brains. God’s design was that language would not be resident in the brain from birth but would have to be inputted into the brain after the child is born. Language being ‘Supra-Physical’ denotes a ‘Supra-Source’. There is no verifiable evidence (no proof) that language has (or rose from) a physical/biological source. Because it is *supra-physical*, its origin cannot be explained by known physical forces or by natural physical laws or by outrageous speculations (e.g., a virus, a cosmic ray, an extra-terrestrial impact, gradual evolution stemming from emotion or necessity). God infused language, but did it in such a way that it would have to be passed on, not via the genes but via communicative use. Human language is God-originated and God-infused. Amazing indeed! That also must mean that language (communicative-ness in some form) existed before creation. Ponder that!
3. ‘Human-Capability’ (the capacity that humans (and only humans) have to acquire language). Language acquisition is first a capability that is dependent on input. It quickly becomes an ability as language gets inputted into the brain. But it starts as a capability, not an ability. This is an important point that must not be by-passed. As discussed above, everything necessary to make speech possible is physically built in. But speech does not emerge on its own. Speech is not an inherent ability that develops automatically like inbred physical abilities do. Babies do begin to use their voices: to coo, laugh, cry, etc. But they don’t automatically begin to talk until language is inputted.

So, for humans to be able to talk, language must first come in from the outside. It must first be inputted. Then the ability to talk gradually develops. The human brain is designed with the capacity (capability) to readily (but not quickly) acquire language and, remarkably, it acquires language virtually without conscious effort, even to the point that we may not realize that it actually did not originate in our brain. But unless and until language is inputted, humans will not acquire it. Language is not ‘intra-‘ (inside) but rather ‘supra-‘ (outside/above/beyond).

The Nature of Language

All of the above relates to the basic Nature of Language. (Nature: what something inherently is in and of itself, what its inherent tendencies are, what naturally happens to it if left to itself). Examples: a. The nature of a gravel road (if left to itself and is not cared for) is to become wash-boardy and pot-holed. b. The nature of fallen human beings left to themselves is to stray (Is. 53:6). No one causes this to happen. It just naturally does happen.

1. In and of itself, Language is an open system, not a closed system. Contrast human language with the communication system of other physical creatures; for instance, ants and bees. For ants and bees, their communication system was inbred from the beginning of their creation. The code for communicating was built in. If a communication system is built in (inherent like for ants and bees), it is a closed system. Human language is an open system.

2. Closed systems are constricted; open systems are not constricted. Again, contrasting human language with ants and bees: Since the communication system of ants and bees is a closed system, it has likely never changed from the time they were created. Language on the other hand, being an open system, is not constricted. Nothing restricts it. And for humans, it’s a good thing that it is an open system. We would be severely handicapped and restricted in our ability to communicate if it were not.

3. Language is subject to change and it does. Since language is an open system, it’s in its nature to change over time, either to fade or grow or even go extinct and be lost forever. It does not remain the same. So we humans come up with new terms related to experience or research. Over the generations, new words are coined; words change in meaning; words fall out of use. This all happens because of the nature of language. In and of itself it’s an open system. So again, what happens when language comes in? It expands or contracts over time, depending on the people that use it.
So, why are there roughly 7000 languages in the world? The answer is obvious: Because language is an open system and is not inherent, not in our DNA. What an evolution of languages has occurred over the millennia, eh! All because language is an open system.

4. Languages can and do go extinct. Why do languages go extinct? The common answers are: Because people stop using them or because of predatory languages, like English! True. But the basic reason is ‘Because they can’. Why can they? Because language is not in the genes. It’s in the nature of language to vanish. That’s what language will tend to do if left to itself, given the right circumstances. So if a particular language is to survive, there must be the commitment to preserve it, or else it’s gone! There are attempts to preserve dying languages. Some are successful. For others, too late!

On the other hand, ants and bees communication system does not go extinct. Why? Because it can’t. It’s built in. For it to go extinct, the whole species would have to be destroyed.

Interesting fact: When a communication system is built in (like for ants and bees), it is completely adequate for them. Ants and bees never chafe under their seemingly limited ability to communicate with each other. But when it’s an open system (like for us humans), we sometimes do chafe or struggle trying to come up with the right words to express how we really feel about something. The words that we have available just don’t cut it. And sometimes even a thesaurus lets us down!

So, languages can and do go extinct. But language itself cannot go extinct. Why? Because language is absolutely essential to the human being. But even though that is true, language is not and never was inbred. Fascinating, no?!

Guidelines for Adult Language Learning

So, based on this premise, what guidelines can we glean in ‘launching into’ helping adults learn language effectively? Remember, this is only one limited premise. It only ‘orients’ us in certain directions. You can’t make it do everything. But it can indicate some things. What?

A personal family experience: I grew up in a family of 7 kids. Childhood diseases back then were mumps, measles, chicken pox, and whooping cough. When one of us got one of these, what did Mom do? Quarantine the one that got it and keep the rest of us away? No! She put us all in the same room so that all of us would contract it and get it over with!

What does this have to do with adult language learning? Keep at the forefront of your mind what this premise declares: Language is non-physical. Language exists outside not inside the brain. Language must somehow get in. So, like measles: Language is ‘contagious’. All baby human brains are ‘susceptible’ and get a ‘full-blown case of it’.
But what’s required? **Exposure!** Multiple exposure in multiple contexts. Human brains are designed in such a way that, when exposed to language in a very rich learning environment, acquisition takes place. Input! Input! Input!

**Fact:** Your adult brain and language are still a perfect match!

So, how to replicate ‘exposure’ for adults is a crucial issue. Perhaps we could very carefully look at what the conditions are for kids in a family and a community to get exposed to language. What’s involved and how can we simulate that for adults? Also, are there models—programs that are designed to actually put adults in situations where exposure takes place? What can we learn from them? How difficult would it be to work it into our programs? Are we avoiding it? Are we locked in to our ‘trodden paths’?

**Guiding Principles to deeply ponder and then to implement** (Some of these overlap)

1. To engage the total brain you must involve the total person.
2. Language is initially better *acquired* (memorization not in focus) than *learned* (memorization in focus).
3. Lots of input before output.
4. Get the language in before requiring it to come out.
5. Lots of exposure before analysis.
6. Lots of ‘play’ in the language before ‘work’ on the language.
7. Lots of *activity-experience* in the language before *grammar-explanation* of the language.
8. Connect ‘listen with understand’ first, before ‘listen with mimic’.
9. Focus on the message being communicated before focusing on the medium (words) that communicates it.
10. Enable the learner initially to ‘pull the language in’ more than the teacher ‘push it in’.

**Advice:** A ‘school’ is one of the best venues for an adult to begin language learning, but ‘schooling’ (directed teaching) is one of the worst ways to begin. (This in no way negates the value (actually the helpfulness) of grammar explanation. The advice is: Delay it. But don’t delay pronunciation drills.)

**End-Note:** There are hard ways for adults to learn language and then there are harder ways. There is no easy way. Perhaps the hardest way is what most of us experienced in school where grammar, translation, memorization, test-taking, were in focus, without any opportunity to actually use it. The only thing really necessary was an acceptable grade.

Likely the least-hard way is to try to match the way a child does it. But, instead of forcing adults to become kids again, let’s discover what kid-learning is all about and then bring that to the adult level and **accelerate it**! Develop projects and activities that will enable adults to experience and acquire language without concentrating on language itself. Kids don’t think *language*; they think *meaning, message, communication*. Get the language in first.