



## NOTES ON A POLYGLOT: KATO LOMB

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Dr Kato Lomb has acquired 17 languages and now, at age 86, is acquiring Hebrew. Nearly all of her language acquisition has been in the foreign language context, in Hungary. Her conclusions about language acquisition agree very well with current language acquisition theory: comprehensible input (mostly in the form of reading in her case) is central. Even though she is very interested in grammar, she feels grammar plays a peripheral role in language development.  
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Dr Kato Lomb is a polyglot who is very well known in Hungary. Now 86, she has acquired 17 languages and is currently working on Hebrew. She has described her experiences and thoughts about second language acquisition in her book, *Igy Tanulok Nyelveket (This is How I Learn Languages)*, originally published in 1970 (Gondolat Publishers in Budapest) and soon to appear in its fourth edition. Unfortunately, it has not yet been translated into English.

As a child, she was not considered to be good at languages. In both primary school and secondary school, she studied German but did not distinguish herself. At the university (Pecs) she studied natural science rather than languages. Her doctorate, in fact, is in chemistry. Her interest in language was stimulated when she discovered some Latin proverbs in one of her sister's schoolbooks. Having studied some Latin at the university (it was required by her major), she was able to understand some of them. She reports that she liked the way the proverbs sounded.

This encouraged her to enroll in a French class. Unfortunately, her teacher knew very little French and only stayed one lesson ahead of her students. Dr Lomb became the top student in the class. Finishing her degree in the 1930s, she was unable to find work in her field because of the economic situation, and she decided to become a language teacher. There was little demand for Latin teachers, and because "there were more French teachers than students" (p. 9), she decided to teach English, despite the fact that she knew no English at the time.

Using her core novel method, described below, she began reading Galsworthy. "After a week, I could guess the meaning of the words; after two months I understood; and after four months, I enjoyed" (pp. 9-10). In addition, she worked through a standard course book in English (*50 Lessons*). Just like her French teacher, she taught English by staying one lesson ahead of her students.

In 1941, during the war, she decided to begin Russian, with the help of an old (1860!) Russian-English dictionary she found in a used book store. This had to be done in secret because of the Nazi occupation and was done entirely by self-study. She met her first Russian speaker in 1945 and eventually worked as an interpreter with the Russian military. She expanded her interpreter work to include English, French, Russian and Hungarian for communication among the Allied Forces located in Budapest and introduced the practice of simultaneous interpretation in Hungary. She was then attracted to Romanian and began by reading a novel in Romanian and also worked through a grammar book.

In 1950, she began Chinese, excited to work with a language that was very different from the others. She accidentally found a Chinese class at the university, which she managed to attend even though the class was restricted to registered students, studied a Chinese-Russian dictionary, and developed her Chinese to the level where she published translations of Chinese novels and worked as an interpreter as well.

She then started Polish. She enrolled in a Polish class, but began at the advanced level! In 1956, again working alone, she started Japanese. She had no teacher, no textbooks and no literature. She took advantage of what was available, technical documents that she could analyze by comparing to a Hungarian translation. She eventually worked translating scientific material for a Hungarian company.

In 1954, she went abroad for the first time, to Czechoslovakia, and of course decided to acquire Czech. She focused on one Czech novel, her usual practice. After this, she acquired Slovak, Ukrainian and Bulgarian. After acquiring Italian, she did translation for a shoemaker, and then went on to Spanish, reading a translation of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*. Invited to a conference in Germany, she worked on German, the language she had studied in school as a child.

Perhaps the most impressive aspect of Kato Lomb's staggering accomplishment is the fact that nearly all her language acquisition was done with little or no contact with native speakers and with little reading material available. We review here only a few aspects of her method.

Whenever possible, she obtained aural input, from conversations or from radio. A great deal of her input came "on the job", while working as an interpreter. It was extremely difficult, however, for her to get aural input. When she began Russian, for example, it was during the Nazi occupation of Hungary, and use of Russian was strictly forbidden. Because of these constraints, she evolved alternatives.

### THE CORE NOVEL METHOD

She selected one novel in the target language and read it very thoroughly, preferring novels to language texts because of the artificial language used in the latter. Often, it was a difficult novel (recall that the first English author she read was Galsworthy), but when easier reading was available, she took advantage of it. When she started working on Russian, she tried some "serious" novels but found them difficult. Then she and her husband moved into an apartment that had been previously occupied by a Russian family who had to leave

hastily, and she discovered that a number of Russian romance novels had been left behind, which she read eagerly. "Without hesitation, I started reading them ... I worked so hard to understand them that even today I remember some passages" (p. 12). Because of the romance novels, her Russian improved, and by 1943, she read Gogol while in bomb shelters.

She strongly recommends reading for interest as a method for language acquisition. In *Igy Tanulok Nyelveket*, she notes that others have tried this method with great success, reading texts they were genuinely interested in. The texts selected, of course, will vary with the person, according to their interests. She lists the following examples: a retiree, who read stamp catalogs; a secondary school student, who read about football; a typewriter repairman, who read technical material related to his profession; a hairdresser, who read about Gregory Peck and other filmstars; a grandmother, who read romances, and pretended to be shocked by them; a politician, who was addicted to mysteries; a printer, interested in lyrics of popular songs; and a medical student, who read professional material on medicine.

She occasionally rereads the "core novel" years later, in order to bring back her knowledge of the language.

She says she does little reading in her native Hungarian and does nearly all her reading in other languages. Of course, Dr Lomb is aware that reading alone will not suffice to fully understand the oral, everyday language. She notes that "those who use my method may find difficulty in the oral language" (p. 87).

Dr Lomb is clearly a reading enthusiast: "A book can be put in our pocket, it can be thrown away, we can write in it, we can tear it, lose it and buy it again ... we can read during breakfast, after we wake up, and we don't have to phone it when we don't have time to read (unlike working with a private teacher) ... we may be bored with it, but it is never bored with us" (p. 83).

## VOCABULARY

Dr Lomb is very fond of dictionaries and often reads them for pleasure. She uses a dictionary when she reads, but only looks up a word if it appears three times in the text and she still does not understand it; often, however, she does not look up words even if they meet this criteria. In the beginning, she says, it is a good idea to simply ignore many words you don't know if you can understand the text without them. She does not deliberately try to remember new words, but uses the dictionary as a means of understanding the text ("tasting" the language). We often know words, she notes, but cannot remember how we acquired them, suggesting that much of vocabulary knowledge is absorbed.

## GRAMMAR

Kato Lomb is deeply interested in grammar. She frequently studies a grammar book when working on a new language and enjoys figuring out grammar rules inductively, as problem-solving.

Even though she is very knowledgeable about grammar, she does not encourage excessive grammar study. She recommends teaching and learning the straightforward rules, such as helpful regularities in morphology, and recommends that students focus on the first person singular of verbs.

Grammar study, Dr Lomb notes, is not the core of language acquisition. Quoting Langenscheidt, she says, "Die Grammatik kommt aus der Sprache, nicht die Sprache aus der Grammatik" ("Knowing grammar is a result of knowing the language, not the other way around"). She adds, moreover, that grammar study should be offered to the student, not required, and it is "absurd" to insist that children learn grammar (personal communication). When speaking other languages, Dr Lomb says she does not worry about grammatical accuracy, unless she feels she is being evaluated.

### CORRECTION

Error correction, according to Dr Lomb, can have very negative effects, and can actually make language acquisition more difficult. It can even make you "sick to your stomach"; she recalls one situation, when, as an interpreter, instead of saying "inorganic", she said "unorganic". Even though the translation was successful, she was haughtily corrected by another interpreter. After that, she said, "I was lost".

It is remarkable, and reassuring, that Dr Lomb's conclusions agree so well with current language acquisition theory: comprehensible input is central, grammar is peripheral, and negative affect can disturb performance. She also demonstrates, quite spectacularly, that high levels of second language proficiency can be attained by adults; much of her language acquisition was done in her 30s and 40s, and, as noted earlier, it continues today. It is also remarkable that as interested as she is in grammar, she recommends far less attention be paid to it than we typically see in schools, and although she reads dictionaries for pleasure, she does not recommend learning vocabulary out of context, a method still used in school today. We were also reassured to learn that one of the finest second language performers in the world is deeply affected by insensitive correction. Such instances occur daily in the lives of children in language classes.

Is her method appropriate for everyone? Dr Lomb insists that it is, claiming she has no special gift for languages. Current language acquisition theory agrees: she has, it can be claimed, used the same underlying mechanism for language acquisition we all have. Her extraordinary genius is in obtaining comprehensible input under such difficult circumstances, in finding input where practically none existed. Others will certainly have less difficulty applying her method than she had.

*Note:* We had the privilege of meeting Dr Lomb in Budapest in April 1995. The material for this paper comes from Dr Lomb's book and our conversations. All quotes from *Igy Tanulok Nyelveket* were translated from Hungarian by N. K.