Kató Lomb’s Strategies for Language Learning and SLA Theory

Scott Alkire, San Jose State University

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/scott-alkire/6/
Abstract

A noteworthy yet relatively unknown text on language learning is Dr. Kató Lomb’s Így tanulok nyelveket [This is how I learn languages] (Budapest: AQUA Kiadó, 1995, 4th ed.). The text is noteworthy for its language-learning strategies, which closely correlate to language-learning strategies of successful learners documented in major SLA studies of the past 25 years. Also significant is the fact that the text is one of the few accounts of successful language learning by a self-directed and lifelong language learner; as data, it is rare.

Introduction

The knowledge of foreign languages has always been important in Continental Europe, and from at least the time of Comenius (1592–1670), scholars have written serious discourses on foreign language teaching and learning. In the last 40 years, important European contributions have been made by Belyayev (The Psychology of Teaching Foreign Languages, 1964), Lozanov (Suggestology and Outlines of Suggestopedy, 1978), and Medgyes (The Non-native Teacher, 1994), among others.

A lesser-known but exceptional text on language learning from Europe is Dr. Kató Lomb’s Így tanulok nyelveket [This is how I learn languages] (Budapest: AQUA Kiadó, 1995, 4th ed.). Lomb’s text is remarkable for several reasons. First, it has strategies for, and conclusions about, language learning that closely correlate with those of successful learners documented in major SLA studies of the past 25 years. Lomb’s text is one of the few discourses on language learning written by a learner who achieved fluency in several languages after childhood and largely through self-study. Krashen and Kiss (1996) note that Lomb “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…” (p. 210). Finally, Lomb’s text is important because it constitutes a rare body of SLA data. Although McLaughlin (1987) believes that “recourse to conscious or unconscious experience is notoriously unreliable” (p. 152), Stevick (1989), in his study of successful language learners, points out that learners’ accounts are valuable: “Whenever there is an apparent inconsistency between [successful learners’] statements and a given theory, then the theory must either show that the statement should not be taken seriously, or it must show how the statement is in fact consistent with it after all, or the theory must modify itself accordingly” (pp. xii–xiii).

This article presents Lomb’s learning strategies and correlates them to learner strategies documented in major SLA studies of the past 25 years. Most of Lomb’s strategies, it will be shown, agree with documented strategies, a few challenge them, and a small number have been matters of dispute among researchers or have simply not been studied. It is argued that when many outstanding acquirers such as Lomb use the same strategies, these strategies are worthy of our attention; indeed, they drive research and shape SLA theory.

Kató Lomb

Dr. Kató Lomb (1909–2003) was Hungary’s most accomplished multilingualist. A professional transla-
tor/interpreter, she worked in 16 languages for government and business concerns. As a state translator she traveled widely, and her reputation was such that, according to an interview in Hetek newspaper (14 November 1998), she and her multilingual colleagues were known as “the Lomb team” (p. 16). A lifelong language learner, Lomb began learning her 17th language, Hebrew, in her eighties.

Largely self-taught in languages (her doctorate was in chemistry); she first described her learning strategies in This Is How I Learn Languages. Upon publication of the first edition in 1970, the book attracted scholarly and popular interest across Hungary, and subsequent editions were published in 1972, 1990, and 1995. In addition, translations were published in Russia, Latvia, and Japan.

In her book, Lomb describes her strategies for learning a foreign language through the construct of a made-up language, Azilian. She assumes that she has had no exposure to Azilian and that it shares no cognates with her native language or any language she knows. Because of her conscious application of strategies to learn languages, Krashen (1997) calls Lomb’s experience “very relevant to foreign language education” (p. 41).

**Learning “Azilian”**

(from Chapter 20 of This Is How I Learn Languages, 4th ed. [1995] by Dr. Kató Lomb. Translation by Kornelia DeKorne. Note: Heads have been inserted into the text for clarity.)

**Using dictionaries**

“First of all, I try to get my hands on a thick Azilian dictionary. Owing to my optimistic outlook I never buy small dictionaries; I go on the assumption that I would fathom them too quickly and then the money I invested in them would end up being wasted. If an Azilian-Hungarian dictionary does not happen to be available, then I try to get hold of an Azilian-English, Azilian-Russian, etc., dictionary.

a) In the beginning, I use this dictionary as my textbook. I learn the rules of reading from it. Every language—and consequently every dictionary—contains a lot of international expressions. The bigger the dictionary, the more such expressions there are in it.

b) The words for nations, countries and cities (especially names for smaller places that are not in danger of distortion through frequent use) and the scientific vocabulary that ‘transcends language’ reveal to me the relationships between letter-characters and phonemes in the Azilian language. I remember that the first thing I looked up in the Russian-English dictionary I bought in 1941 was my own name: E________1.

c) I do not memorize the words; I just scan and study them as though they were some crossword puzzle to be solved. By the time I glean the rules of reading from the above-cited vocabularies, my dictionary will have revealed a lot of other things, too, about the Azilian language. I can see how it morphs the parts of speech into one another: how it nominalizes verbs, how it forms adjectives from nouns and adverbs from adjectives.

This is just a first taste of the language. I am sampling it, making friends with it.”

**Notes**

Lomb’s strategy of using a L2–L1 dictionary as a beginning text for learning a language is unique; there is no extant research on it. In terms of general dictionary use, her use of bilingual dictionaries when beginning to learn a language is strongly supported by SLA research. Rossner (1985), Underhill (1985), Gethin and Gunnemark (1996), and Harmer (2001) all endorse the use of bilingual dictionaries over learner’s monolin-
gual dictionaries by learners at the beginning stages of foreign language learning.

Although it is not known if Lomb was familiar with bilingualized compromise dictionaries, Laufer and Hadar (1997) suggest that these dictionaries (which follow a bilingual dictionary format but include the “good features” of learner’s monolingual dictionaries) may represent an advance over bilingual and learner’s monolingual dictionaries. In a study that compared the use of learner’s monolingual, bilingual, and bilingualized compromise dictionaries among 123 EFL learners in Israel, Laufer and Hadar found that irrespective of the learners’ proficiency level, the bilingualized compromise dictionary was either as good as, or significantly better than, the other two dictionaries for comprehension and production tasks.

Using textbooks and works of literature

“Following this first assay, I buy a textbook and some works of Azilian literature, all together. Of the first, I always buy one with answers provided for the questions in the exercises, as I am an ALS, or average language student: i.e., because of time constraints, I mostly have to teach myself.

“I go through the lessons and do all the written exercises in sequence, as they come in the book. I write ‘breezily,’ leaving ample room for corrections. Then I look up the correct answers in the key and write them beside/above my own incorrect variations. In this way, I get a very visual representation of ‘the history of my folly.’

“I scold myself for the errors made and then promptly forgive myself. I always leave enough space in my notebook to be able to write five–six correct words or sentences, similar to the ones I got wrong."

This is very helpful in imprinting the corrected formulas.

“As all this is a bit tedious, right from the outset I start reading Azilian plays or short stories. If I’m lucky, there will be ‘adapted’ texts available. If not, I just start on any literature published before 1950. (I can have trouble understanding the style of modern novels, even in my native Hungarian.) I always buy books in pairs: this increases the chance that at least one will be comprehensible.

“I start on the comprehensible novel immediately. To go from incomprehension to half-understanding to complete understanding is an exciting and inspiring journey of discovery worthy of the spirit of a mature person. By the time I finish the journey, I part with the book feeling that this has been a profitable and fun enterprise.

“At first reading, I only write out words that I manage to understand, that is, words whose meaning I have been able to figure out from context. Naturally, I do not write them out in isolation, but in the context they appeared. It is only after a second or third reading that I look up words unknown to me. Even then, I do not look up each and every one. With those that I record in my notebook, I include the vortex of meaning supplied by the book or by any contemporary dictionary worthy of the name.”

Notes

No studies could be found on the value of answer guides in language textbooks. Lomb’s systematic use of them suggests that they are important for language learning, at least independent language learning.

The research on whether adapted texts are superior to authentic texts in aiding L2 acquisition is inconclu-
sive. One practical solution, supported by many recent studies ("free voluntary reading"). This would be consistent with Lomb’s strategy. Krashen (2003) writes that free voluntary reading ‘is now perhaps the most thoroughly investigated and best-supported [language learning] technique we have in the field of second-language pedagogy’ (p. 26).

Lomb’s strategy of learning vocabulary in context is strongly supported by SLA research (see Seal, 1991; Ur, 1996; Harmer, 2001).

Learning to comprehend and pronounce Azilian via radio broadcasts

“All this, however, does not teach one of the most important of the four aspects of language learning: verbal comprehension. In addition, I have not gotten an accurate picture of Azilian pronunciation (the phonetic transcriptions of the textbook are almost always of somewhat dubious value). For this reason, at the very beginning of my language study I set aside some time for scanning the Azilian airwaves. I figure out when and at what frequency I can hear Azilian speech live on the radio. Somewhere, sometime, I am sure to catch the idiom I am interested in from the ether.

“News bulletins generally reflect the most important international events of the day in their main outlines. For this reason—even if the news items are selected according to the probable interests of Azilia’s inhabitants—they are usually the same in the broadcasts of different languages. So I always listen to the news in some other, familiar, language as well. Thus I am given a key—almost a dictionary—to what I can expect, in advance. If an unknown word crops up along the way, I write it down. After the broadcast, I look it up immediately in my big dictionary. The reason for this is that at that time, immediately after the broadcast, the word still resounds in my ear with its entire context and if I misheard it (which happens many times), the context, still fresh in my memory, helps redress the error.

“If I find the word in the dictionary, a little self-congratulation is in order again, and this makes learning a pleasant pastime instead of a burdensome task.

“Then, not immediately, but after a day or two, I record in my glossary the knowledge thus acquired ‘from the air.’ This temporally staggered approach is advisable because this way I am forced to revisit fading memories—unfortunately, quite often not for the last time.

“Once a week, I tape the broadcast. I keep the recording for a while and play it back several times. On these occasions, I always concentrate on pronunciation. Alas, I must admit that based on the announcer’s native pronunciation, sometimes I have to reacquaint myself with words that I thought I already knew from books.”

Notes

Studies by Crookall (1983), Norbrook (1984), and Imhoof and Christensen (1986) show that radio, whether used naturalistically or formally, has positive effects on the acquisition of an L2.

Although television- or Internet-based technologies may eventually prove to be superior to radio in facilitating L2 acquisition, in much of the world radio is still the only language-learning technology available for little or no cost to learners. It must be noted that Lomb herself preferred radio to television: “I simply believe it [television] to be a time-wasting activity. My favorite is the radio…. When considering pronunciation it is indispensable.” (Varga, 1996, p. 4).

The role of the Azilian teacher and/or informant

“No course, I try to seek out a teacher who speaks Azilian. If I find a professional educator, I’ve got it made. If there isn’t a bona fide teacher available, I try to at least get a native speaker student who is staying in my country on a scholarship.
“I confess that I prefer to be taught by a woman. Perhaps this is because it is easier to chat with women. I have long been intrigued by the question of why women talk more than men do (generally speaking)…. “

“To return to my method of language study, what I expect from my Azilian teacher is what I cannot get from either books or from the radio. Firstly, I ask the teacher to speak at a slower than average speed so that I can catch as many words as possible from the context, and secondly, I expect him or her to correct my Azilian, mainly on the basis of written assignments that I diligently prepare for each class.

“At first, I write free compositions because it’s easier. Often these are disjointed texts, made up of elements not connected with each other, just loose sentences that I use to hang new, just seen/just heard words and grammatical phrases on. On the basis of the teacher’s corrections, I verify whether I grasped their meanings and functions properly. When I reach a higher level of knowledge, I begin to translate. At this stage, an already given text compels me to give up using well-practiced formulas and, under the pressure of the translating discipline, employ others that I am not so certain of.

“Uncorrected mistakes are very perilous! If one keeps repeating wrong formulas, they take root in the mind and one will be inclined to accept them as authentic. Written translations pinpoint one’s errors ruthlessly, while a listening ear might be prone to just glossing over them….

“I would like to emphasize another great advantage of written translations over holding conversations. To speak a foreign language is a matter of practice, and a wise person learns not to get out of his depth…. [unfortunately,] this does not lead to an increased vocabulary or an enhanced ability to create sentences….an ALS….must learn how to expand the framework and then fill it…."

Notes

Lomb recognizes the value of the trained teacher regardless of native tongue over the native speaker who is not a trained teacher. This is consistent with ELT theory (see Medgyes, 1994). In addition, Lomb acknowledges the value of the untrained native speaker as an informant. This is consistent with ELT theory as well (see Krashen, 1993).

Lomb’s strong belief in written corrections runs contrary to much ESL theory for teaching writing. Gray (2004) cites several studies that show that written corrections do not serve to improve students’ writing, and that they can actually be harmful to students’ “performance and development.” However, Gray notes that most students “strongly expect” teachers to notice their writing errors and comment on them.

Harmer (2001) suggests self-assessment: “Where students are involved in their own assessment there is a good chance that their understanding of the feedback which their teacher gives them will be greatly enhanced as their own awareness of the learning process increases” (p. 104).

Lomb’s assertion that translations advance one’s knowledge of a foreign language and “pinpoint one’s errors ruthlessly” is noteworthy; translations are an important part of foreign language instruction in most countries. However, to be most effective they generally require that the students and the instructor share the same L1. This is rare in most ESL programs in English-speaking countries.

Learning about, and traveling to, Azilia

“Those who had the patience to read through my musings about mastering the Azilian language might find two things lacking in them. Any self-respecting language-learning manual’s writer would now say something like: ‘…I make an effort to familiarize myself with the history, geography, social, political, and economic conditions of Azilia as thoroughly as possible.’

“Such study cannot hurt, of course, as it brings us closer to our goal: as comprehensive and precise a knowledge of the language as is possible. If I write this with some degree of reluctance, it is mainly be-
cause this ‘trans-linguistic’ field (as I call it) is often abused.

“It is much simpler to attend (or give) lectures on these aspects of Azilia in one’s own language than to torment oneself (or one’s students) with the vocabulary and grammar involved….

“If I am able to travel to Azilia, the trip’s effect on my Azilian may depend on two factors. One is the extent to which I am able to observe the natives’ speech with conscious attention and to make a record of what I hear for subsequent reinforcement. The other factor is the extent of my knowledge of Azilian at the time of departure.

“It is a grave delusion that a stay in the country of the language one is studying functions as a funnel through which knowledge just pours into one’s head. I think people have been misled by the Latin proverb: ‘Saxa loquuntur,’ or ‘Stones talk.’

“Houses, walls and buildings do not undertake the task of teaching. It may be that they talk, but their speech, alas, is in stone language. It may be that they talk, but their speech, alas, is in stone language. It is quite possible to pick up a few colloquial, idiomatic expressions or clever turns of phrase under the influence of the local environment, but these generally do not amount to any more than what one would have acquired anyway by applying oneself to diligent study at home for the same time period.

“Neither reminiscing with your émigré compatriots who live in Azilia (‘Do you remember Alex from sixth grade?’) nor comparative window shopping (or Schaufenster lecken in German, meaning ‘shop window licking’) will do anything for your Azilian. Frequent hearing of spoken Azilian, however, will. Local papers usually publish information on what museums or galleries offer guided tours. Then there must be an Azilian version of the Society for Popular Science Education that is sure to organize free lectures to educate the public. Whenever I am abroad, I frequent all these types of events and take copious notes every time. Studying a language also provides an excellent excuse to go to the movies. I spent three weeks in Moscow in 1967 and during that time, I went to the movies 17 times….

“The ideal solution, of course, is to maintain active relationships with native speakers of one’s ilk and interests, with lots of shared activities—especially if these natives are willing to correct your mistakes, and if one is resolved not to get mad when they do.

“The other factor that decides the impact of a trip on one’s knowledge of the language is one’s level of mastery at the time of departure…. ‘A’ and ‘F’ students will benefit the least from trips. Those who know nothing at the outset will probably return with virgin minds. For those at a very advanced level, improvement will be difficult to detect. The best results will show—given the ideal conditions listed above—at the intermediate level.”

Notes

Lomb’s claim that “trans-linguistic” (i.e., content-based) instruction is “often abused” is provocative though unsupported by SLA research. Lomb’s observations about the factors that determine a trip’s influence on one’s acquisition of a language are supported by Rubin and Thompson (1994) and Gethin and Gunnemark (1996).

***

Ten “Requests” for language learning

“The thoughts distilled in the course of my linguistic excursions are organized into the little compendium below. Heaven forbid that we should call them Ten Commandments—let us perhaps call them Ten Requests.

I.

Spend time tinkering with the language every day—if there is no more time available, then at least to the extent of a ten-minute monologue. Morning hours are especially valuable in this respect: the early bird catches the word!
II.

If your enthusiasm for studying flags too quickly, don’t force the issue but don’t stop altogether either. Move to some other form of studying, e.g., instead of reading, listen to the radio; instead of assignment writing, poke about in the dictionary, etc.

III.

Never learn isolated units of speech, but rather learn words and grammatical elements in context.

IV.

Write phrases in the margins of your text and use them as ‘prefabricated elements’ in your conversations.

V.

Even a tired brain finds rest and relaxation in quick, impromptu translations of billboard advertisements flashing by, of numbers over doorways, of snippets of overheard conversations, etc., just for its own amusement.

VI.

Memorize only that which has been corrected by a teacher. Do not keep reading texts you have written that have not been proofread and corrected so as to keep mistakes from taking root in your mind. If you study on your own, each segment to be memorized should be kept to a size that precludes the possibility of errors.

VII.

Always memorize idiomatic expressions in the first person singular. For example, ‘I am only pulling your leg.’ Or else: ‘Il m’a posé un lapin’—‘He stood me up.’

VIII.

A foreign language is a castle. It is advisable to attack it on all fronts at once: via newspapers, the radio, undubbed movies, technical or scientific articles, textbooks, or via a visitor at your neighbor’s.

IX.

Do not let the fear of making mistakes keep you from speaking, but do ask your conversation partner to correct you. Most importantly, don’t get peeved if he or she actually obliges you—a remote possibility, anyway.

X.

Be firmly convinced that you are a linguistic genius. If the facts demonstrate otherwise, heap more blame on the pesky language you aim to master, on the dictionaries, or on this little book than on yourself.”

Notes

All of Lomb’s “requests,” with the exception of VII (a minor point), have been validated as strategies of “good” language learners in research and studies by Stevick (1989), O’Malley and Chamot (1990), Oxford (1990), Rubin and Thompson (1994), Naiman et al. (1995), Cook (1996), Gethin and Gunnemark (1996), Chamot et al. (1999), and Lightbown and Spada (1999). More broadly, Lomb’s requests fall under the two holistic strategies that Nation (1983) found employed by good language learners: abstraction (non-analytical learning; requests I, II, V, VIII, X) and rule induction (analytical learning; requests III, IV, VI, VII, IX).

***

Ten “No’s” of language learning

“As seven of the biblical Ten Commandments are in the negative, let me now approach the question from a forbidding angle and list what not to do if you aim to achieve an acceptable level of linguistic mastery within an acceptable time frame.

1. Do not postpone embarking on learning a new language—or restarting such a study—until the time of a prospective trip abroad. Rather, try to gain access to native speakers of your target language who are on a visit to your country and who do not speak your language. They could be relatives or friends. If you accompany them and show them around, they will help you solidify your knowledge of their language out of gratitude; they will enrich your vocabulary and overlook the mistakes you make.

2. Do not expect the same behavior from your compatriots. Do not practice on them because they will actually obliges you—a remote possibility, anyway.

3. Do not let the fear of making mistakes keep you from speaking. Most importantly, don’t get peeved if he or she actually obliges you—a remote possibility, anyway.

4. Be firmly convinced that you are a linguistic genius. If the facts demonstrate otherwise, heap more blame on the pesky language you aim to master, on the dictionaries, or on this little book than on yourself.”
at the very least, they will be inclined to employ meaningful facial gestures—to demonstrate how much better they are at it.

3. Do not believe that instruction by a teacher in a course, however intense and in-depth that might be, gives you an excuse not to delve into the language on your own. For this reason you should, from the outset, get into browsing through illustrated magazines and into listening to radio programs and/or prerecorded cassettes.

4. In your browsing, do not get obsessed with words you don’t know or structures you don’t understand. Build comprehension on what you already know. Do not automatically reach for the dictionary if you encounter a word or two that you don’t understand. If the expression is important, it will reappear and explain itself; if it is not so important, it is no big loss to gloss over it.

5. Do not miss noting down your impressions in your own words, with familiar expressions. Write in simple sentences; words you can’t think of at the time can be replaced by words from your own language.

6. Do not be deterred from speaking by the fear of making mistakes. The flow of speech creates a chain reaction: the context will lead you to the right track.

7. Do not forget to store a large number of filler expressions and sentence-launching phrases in your memory. It is great when you can break the ice with a few formulas that are always on hand and can help you over the initial embarrassment of beginning a conversation, such as ‘My English is kind of shaky’ or ‘It’s been a while since I spoke Russian,’ etc.

8. Do not memorize any linguistic element (expression) outside of its context, partly because a word may have several different meanings: e.g., the English word ‘comforter’ may refer to someone who is consoling another or it can mean a knitted shawl, a quilt or eiderdown, or yet again a baby’s pacifier. In addition, it is good, right off the bat, to get used to the practice of leaving the vortex of meanings around the word in your own language alone and reaching out to its kin word in the new language or to the context you have most frequently encountered it in.

9. Do not leave newly learned structures or expressions hanging in the air. Fix them in your memory by fitting them into different, new settings:

10. Do not be shy of learning poems or songs by heart. Good diction plays a more significant role in speech performance than the mere articulation of individual sounds. Verses and melodies impose certain constraints. They set what sounds must be long and which ones must be short in duration. The rhythm inherent in them guides speakers and helps them avoid the into nation traps of their native language.”

Notes

All of Lomb’s “no’s,” with the exception of Point 2, have been validated as traits of “good” language learners in research and studies by Stevick (1989), O’Malley and Chamot (1990), Oxford (1990), Rubin and Thompson (1994), Naiman et al. (1995), Cook (1996), Gethin and Gunnefarm (1996), Chamot et al. (1999), and Lightbown and Spada (1999). As with Lomb’s requests, her no’s fall under the two holistic strategies that Nation (1983) found employed by good language learners: abstraction (non-analytical learning; no’s 1, 2, 3, 4, 6) and rule induction (analytical learning; no’s 5, 7, 8, 9, 10).

Conclusion

Lomb’s text is noteworthy; it has been shown, for its language-learning strategies, which closely correlate to the language-learning strategies of successful learners documented in major SLA studies of the past 25 years. When many outstanding acquirers such as Lomb use the same language-learning strategies, these strategies are worthy of our attention; indeed, they constitute a valuable body of data to SLA researchers and those engaged in the practice of second- and foreign-language teaching.
Translator’s notes

1. This transcribes as “Yekatjerina,” the Russian version of “Catherine.”

2. This is a reference to the title of a romantic Hungarian movie.

Biographical information

Dr. Kató Lomb (1909–2003) was an interpreter and translator based in Budapest. She is the author of Így tanulok nyelveket [This is how I learn languages] (1970, 1972, 1990, 1995), Egy tolmács a világ körül [A translator around the world] (1979), Nyelvekrol jut eszembe... [Languages remind me...] (1983), and Bábeli harmónia (Interjúk Európa híres soknyelvu embereivel) [Harmony of Babel (Interviews with famous multilingual people in Europe)] (1988).

Scott Alkire has taught English as a Foreign Language for the Open Society Fund in the Czech Republic and Bosnia-Herzegovina. He is currently teaching in the Linguistics and Language Development Department at San José State University.

Kornelia DeKorne is a certified member of the American Translators Association.

References


Copyright held by author