

Unit 11

Strategies for informal language practice: learning on the street

Cast:

- Missionary Li Wei
- Muslims in Park
- Teacher Zhang Dong
- 4 or 5 students

Scene 11.1. Missionary Li Wei on park bench beside statue. A stranger sits down beside him and missionary Li Wei engaged him in conversation.

Missionary Li Wei: Excuse me. Could you tell about the man whose statue this is?

Stranger: Tells Li Wei about man in statue (some national hero) in his own words.

Missionary Li Wei repeats the question to various strangers as he moves from bench to bench in the park.

Fade and Cut.

Scene 11.2. Teacher Zhang Dong lecturing small class of missionary candidates

Teacher Zhang Dong: What is missionary Li Wei doing?

Student #1: He is apparently asking people in the park about the statue.

Teacher Zhang Dong: That's right. Do you think he knew who the person was before he started asking people?

Students show uncertainty.

Teacher Zhang Dong: No, not necessarily. What missionary Li Wei is doing is a very useful language technique. You see, in past lessons you have learned how to do lots and lots of activities with a language helper. When you are in a foreign country, however, there are hundreds of thousands of people all around you whom you can use to help you learn the language without them really being aware of it. That's what missionary Li Wei is doing.

Missionary Li Wei is using a technique called the Dumb-Smart Question technique. It helps him practice his language when he is out and about in society. It is a very good technique for relational people.

The Dumb-Smart Question technique is really very simple. Learn a standard description of something common from your Language Helper. Missionary Li Wei, for instance had learned in advance from his language helper who the person in the statue was. He knew all about this person! Then he went to the park and asked people about this person. These people then gave him information he already knew, but using their own language forms. It gave missionary Li Wei comprehensible input at different speeds and in slightly different forms.

In other words, for the Dumb-Smart technique you memorize a standard description about something and then go around the community asking people the answers to questions you already know. Ask questions that have a fairly standard answer, so you won't face a "torrent" of language.

You can get your Language Helper to tape-record the answers to various questions and work through the answers with him/her. Learn how to ask the question properly from you language helper (this is important!). Then go out and ask people the question. You will be pleasantly surprised at how much you can comprehend!

Here are some more examples of things you can ask:

- Directions on how to get to a certain place
- When a certain store, bank, office, etc. opens/closes
- How often the bus comes by; what the fare is.
- Where a certain bus goes or which bus to take to _____.
- What time it is.
- About national heroes.
- Find out how the major holidays are celebrated
- Learn to fix 4 or 5 national dishes
- Ask how people celebrate birthdays, weddings, anniversaries, funerals, etc.
- Learn how people observe particular religious events
- Find out how a particular sports event is played
- Go to a statue or monument and ask people there who the person was and what made him/her famous

There are lots of other Dumb-Smart questions you can use with, for instance, neighbors you are getting to know. For instance, you can ask

- "What do you people here generally eat for breakfast/lunch/dinner" (Perhaps you should begin by asking "How many meals do you eat in a day? When are they?")
- "What is your favorite meal/snack/dessert/drink/junk food?" "What is your favorite Western food?"
- "What is an ordinary day like from the time you get up to the time you go to bed?"
- "What kinds of things do people here generally do on the weekend?"
- "Tell me about each member of your family"
- "This is a map of (the country you are in). Please tell me where there are some interesting places" (or, "some interesting things to do.")

Cut

Scene 11.3. Missionary Li Wei on park bench.

A stranger sits down beside missionary Li Wei, who shows him a paper. The individual smiles, and starts asking missionary Li Wei some questions. Missionary Li Wei responds by trying to answer them.

Fade and cut

Scene 11.4. Teacher Zhang Dong lecturing students

Teacher Zhang Dong: Now what is missionary Li Wei up to?

Student #2: He looks like he has a list of questions written out which he is showing people.

Teacher Zhang Dong: That's exactly what he is doing! It's called the Ask-Me-A-Question Technique.

The way it works is very simple. First of all, create a list of, say, 15 specific questions.

- 5 autobiographical questions about yourself
- 3-4 time of day related questions ("What time is it now?" "What time do you go to work?" "What time does the post office open?", etc.
- 3-4 questions about what's going on with you. ("What have you been doing lately?" "What did you study today?" "Where did you go yesterday?" etc.)
- 3-4 location related questions. ("How far is the post office from here?" "Where is the best place to buy _____?" etc.

Work with you language helper until you have developed a sufficient answer for each question. Then learn to say, "I'm trying to learn your language and need to practice. Please ask me any 5 questions from this list" and "Ask me another one".

Practice answering the questions with you Language Helper, then go into the community, hand people the sheet and tell them to ask you any 5 questions listed there. This is a good project to use with people in the community who enjoy having a role in your learning. This is a good project for relational and energetic learners.

Cut

Scene 11.5. Missionary Li Wei in a tea house with Mr. Mahmut and a third national.

The language helper is talking to the third person about something he and Li Wei had done together earlier (they went to a movie and the language helper is describing the movie plot). As he is talking Li Wei is recording what is being said.

Cut

Scene 11.6: Teacher Zhang Dong lecturing small class of missionary candidates

Teacher Zhang Dong: Now what is happening?

Student #3: Missionary Li Wei is listening to his language helper talk to someone else.

Teacher Zhang Dong: Right. What are they talking about?

Student #3 (smiling): We don't know, because we don't understand that language!

Teacher Zhang Dong: True. Do you think missionary Li Wei knows what they are talking about?

Student #3: Possibly...

Teacher Zhang Dong: Well, he should, because if he doesn't it would be a useless exercise for him. If you can't understand anything that's being said around you, you are not learning anything at all—everything is just noise. Remember, the importance of comprehensible input! So, for this event to be useful missionary Li Wei must have some idea of what the conversation is about. Actually what he is doing is a technique called the Event Description technique.

It is very simple. You just have your language helper describe something you have done together to a third person. In this case the language helper is describing to a friend a movie which he and missionary Li Wei watched together. Li Wei knows the movie's story, so he knows what his language helper is trying to describe to his friend.

The event description technique enables you to hear how people tell stories, something they do whenever they get together to relate events which just happened. They use a specific narrative style when doing this.

When the "story" is about something you have experienced, you can follow it much more readily, and may even be able to anticipate what's coming. Get the story on tape or video and listen to it over and over again. Pay attention to how a native speaker's story-telling style may be different from the way you tell stories in your language.

Scene 11.7. Things learned in this lesson:

Scroll by on screen. Voiceover: Teacher Zhang Dong

- There are simple ways in which you can involve ordinary people in society in your language learning program.
- For the Dumb-Smart technique you memorize a standard description about something and then go around the community asking people the answers to questions you already know.
- For the “Ask-Me-A-Question” technique you develop the answers to a different types of questions. You then learn to say, “I’m trying to learn your language and need to practice. Would you be so kind as to ask me any 5 questions from this list” and “Ask me another one”. You then ask people to ask you some of the questions on your list, giving you the opportunity to answer them.
- Learn how to ask the questions properly from you language helper (this is important!).
- For the Event Description technique. Your language helper describe something you have been involved in together to a third person. This technique enables you to hear how people tell stories or relate events which just happened.
- With all these techniques, try to record what is being said so you can go over it later.