

A Year's Journey: Acquiring Vietnamese Through Comprehensible Input

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Abstract

In this paper, we describe the processes and results of a year-long attempt by one of the authors, Bushnell, to acquire the Vietnamese language through massive amounts of listening and reading in the target language. Based on conversational data collected during the last half of the year, the authors informally rate Bushnell's speaking ability based on level descriptors developed by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). They then present an analysis of conversational data and discuss Bushnell's results from the viewpoints of explicit and implicit learning, arguing that language acquisition through massive exposure to comprehensible input results in abilities not adequately characterised by current frameworks.

Keywords: Second language acquisition, comprehensible input, implicit learning, interactional competence, CEFR guidelines

Background

Bushnell chose to learn Vietnamese based on personal interests. Prior to the present study, Bushnell had no experience with the Vietnamese language and was unable to differentiate spoken Vietnamese from other Southeast Asian tonal languages, like Thai or Cantonese. Additionally, he had no knowledge of any Vietnamese words or phrases. However, Bushnell already had extensive experience learning other languages to varying degrees of proficiency. He is a native speaker of English, and has acquired Japanese to a near native level, having lived and worked in Japan for almost two decades. Additionally, he has basic ability to

interact in Japanese sign language because he has deaf friends in Japan, and he acquired Spanish and Mandarin Chinese during his time in Japan to interact with students and friends. He acquired Toki Pona¹ for research and teaching purposes and has put in significant time studying Hungarian and Tagalog as well, although his abilities in these languages are still very basic.

This prior knowledge of languages and experience as a language learner may have facilitated some aspects of acquiring Vietnamese. For example, after several months of exposure to Vietnamese, Bushnell began to notice many Vietnamese words that are of Chinese origin.² Additionally, Bushnell soon began to see similarities, either real or perceived, in sentence formation and word order between Vietnamese and English, Spanish, and Toki Pona. For example, he found that Vietnamese places adjectives following the noun they modify, as does Spanish, and it has a very productive word construction pattern of combining free morphemes into larger, more complex words,³ which is very similar to the logic of Toki Pona. All these things provided Bushnell with points of familiarity in an otherwise completely foreign language, and it is likely that his acquisition of Vietnamese was influenced to some degree by his prior experience with and knowledge of other languages.

Methodology

For this study, we used a longitudinal microethnographic methodology (LeBaron, 2008). We attempted to triangulate our findings by using multiple data points consisting of video recorded interactions, journal and observational records, and interviews. Rather than employing traditional testing methods, we chose to observe and report on holistic improvements in real usage situations. These real usage situations consisted of actual, unscripted conversations between the authors. Lee (2019) articulates the benefits of such an observational approach as follows:

Observing the improvement resulting from reading and listening to stories in real situations is a better assessment of language acquisition than paper and pencil tests that do not reflect the changes in behavioural, cognitive and affective aspects. (p. 7)

The current paper provides an overall view of Bushnell's attempt⁴ to acquire Vietnamese and to discuss the results thereof from the viewpoint of implicit learning.

Procedure

With the help of Nguyen, Bushnell began exposure to comprehensible Vietnamese input on 21 November, 2023. By input, we refer to content in the Vietnamese language consumed through either listening or reading. By comprehensible input, we refer to input which is slightly beyond the learner's current ability to understand, but which can be made understandable through various methods (see Krashen, 2004). For the purposes of the present study, these methods included extra-linguistic support such as pictures and drawings, gestures, facial expressions, and intonation, which can make the input understandable on a global level. Occasionally, linguistic support via translations into Japanese or English were also provided. This can make individual elements of the input understandable, or transparent.

Bushnell consumed two main types of comprehensible input. First, input provided by Nguyen during their twice-weekly meetings. Second, daily exposure to other content which Bushnell listened to or viewed intermittently throughout the day. Most of this other content was podcasts or videos accessed online.

In their twice-weekly meetings, for the first 32 sessions (November 2023 to April 2024) Bushnell and Nguyen did an activity they call "story share." Story share provided comprehensible input in the two languages of the authors through stories. First, during the initial 30 minutes of the meeting, Bushnell would tell a story, such as a folk tale or other pre-existing story, in English. Nguyen listened to and comprehended the story, sometimes asking clarification questions. Next, Nguyen would retell the same story to Bushnell in Vietnamese. Story share allows participants to provide each other with highly comprehensible input in each other's native (or proficient) languages. The input, given through stories, is also rich and abundant, as well as compelling (Krashen & Mason, 2020).

During the next 20 sessions (i.e., 33 to 53; April to August 2024), Bushnell and Nguyen began to speak. This was not planned in advance but began naturally once the participants felt ready to try. This speech was initially limited to questions and incremental retellings of the stories. First, Nguyen would tell a small increment of the story in Vietnamese, and then Bushnell would retell in Vietnamese what he had just heard from Nguyen. There was, however, no attempt made to achieve an exact

retelling — indeed, the retold portions were usually greatly simplified because Bushnell used only language that had already been acquired and came readily to mind. While Bushnell's Vietnamese was characterised by imperfections and disfluencies, both he and Nguyen were excited to see how much he had actually acquired during the first five months of pure input; Bushnell was clearly able to understand and was beginning to be able to speak Vietnamese.

From August to the end of October, Bushnell and Nguyen switched from telling stories to having free conversations. During August and September, this took the form of a traditional language exchange, with the first 30 minutes in English and the last 30 minutes in Vietnamese. Then according to a suggestion from Nguyen, they did the first hour-long weekly session entirely in Vietnamese and the second entirely in English during October. The primary purpose of producing speech in their meetings from April to November was to provide data by which they could examine the results of their input activities while continuing to provide each other with large amounts of comprehensible input along the way. Bushnell ended his 50-week period of Vietnamese acquisition on 5 November, 2024 with an hour-long conversation in Vietnamese.

The second type of comprehensible input was obtained through Bushnell's daily listening and reading in Vietnamese. Bushnell and Nguyen video recorded all their story share sessions, and from the first session in November 2023, Bushnell began to rewatch portions of these videos each day. He would often relisten to segments he could not catch or stop them to find out what certain words or phrases meant. Once Bushnell began to understand most of the stories, he began to listen to the audio only. Bushnell also began to make extensive use of podcasts in Vietnamese, which either featured one person telling a story, or two people discussing a topic or sharing stories.

Over the course of 50 weeks, from 21 November, 2023 to 5 November, 2024, Bushnell experienced 9 to 10 hours of comprehensible Vietnamese input each week. This resulted in a total of around 460 hours. Approximately 70 per cent of this input came in the form of listening. The main reason for this was that Bushnell was able to listen throughout the day as he performed other tasks, such as exercising, cleaning, travelling, and so forth. The remaining input came in the form of reading, which Bushnell typically did first thing in the morning, or at night before

bed. With regard to learning the Vietnamese alphabet, although he did consult some online resources at the very start, Bushnell found them to be confusing and unhelpful; he was able to learn it mainly from listening to audio content while reading along. Most of Bushnell's reading materials consisted of the transcripts of the podcasts or stories he was listening to. Bushnell also read sentences excerpted from the stories told by Nguyen. Bushnell read these sentences throughout the day when he had a few spare minutes. No attempt was made to memorise any of the words and phrases in the sentences; Bushnell simply read with a focus on understanding them while recalling the context of the stories the sentences came from. In this way, he continued to "resonate the input" throughout the day.

Results

Nguyen performed an informal rating of Bushnell's oral ability in Vietnamese observed during their video recorded conversations from August to November 2024. Bushnell's participation in conversations around October clearly demonstrated that he had become able to produce and connect simple utterances about topics that were familiar or of personal interest to him. Furthermore, Bushnell was able to produce simple narrations of past experiences, describe future hopes and plans, and give brief reasons for opinions. Based on these findings, the authors estimate that Bushnell's oral proficiency level by the beginning of October 2024 had reached B1, according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) Global Scale (see CEFR, 2025). They also estimate that by this time, Bushnell had consumed around 430 hours of input.

However, there are important facets of Bushnell's acquired ability in Vietnamese that are not sufficiently captured by standard language assessment rubrics; he exhibited an ability to participate in interaction far beyond simple routine informational exchange. His qualitative movement from being an almost completely passive listener to becoming an active conversational participant was characterised by substantial contribution to and expansion of current topics, and proffering new ones. Active participation in topical development is considered to be an important indicator of more advanced conversational proficiency (Lee, 2012), but it is not explicitly mentioned in the CEFR (2025) level descriptions. Another striking change occurred in Bushnell's ability

Excerpt 2

1. N: .hhh sợ quá heh [heh
(So scary.)
2. B: [heh heh
3. N: ahh trời ơi.
(Oh heavens.)
4. B: heh heh
(0.8)
5. N: ơ thầy của Minh, có một người thầy của Minh,
(Uh, Minh's teacher, Minh had a teacher,)
6. N: là thầy nuôi một con rắn?
(who kept a snake?)
7. B: ((nodds))
8. N: con rắn ở trong nhà. con rắn là con mà em sợ nhất.
(The snake was in his house. Snakes are what I'm most afraid of.)
9. N: em sợ nhất con [rắn.
(I'm most afraid of snakes.)
10. B: [ừ ừ ừ::n. ((nodding))
(Yeah yeah yeah.)
11. N: thì thầy của Minh nuôi con rắn ở nhà như mà con thú cưng.
(He kept the snake at home like a pet.)
12. N: và thầy làm một cái à một cái bể.
(And he made a small tank.)
13. N: giống như một bể cá.
(Like a fish tank.)
14. N: và thầy bỏ con rắn vào. xong rồi thầy trang trí thêm cây,
(And he put the snake in, decorated it with plants,)
15. N: cành cây, rồi con rắn nó ((circular motion with hand)) [cứ quấn quanh.
(branches, and then the snake just curled around.)
16. B: [heh [heh
17. N: [sợ quá. heh heh
(So scary.)
18. B: con rắn đó loại gì?
(What kind of snake was that?)
19. N: em không biết.
(I don't know.)
20. B: to hoặc là nhỏ.
(Big or small?)

21. N: chiều ngang của nó cũng phải là ngang này. ((makes circle with both hands))
(Its width must be about this wide.)
22. B: ồ:[::: khá là to.
(Oh, quite big.)
23. N: [to:: nó rất to. còn chiều dài thì em không biết bởi vì nó cuộn tròn lại rồi.
(Big. It's very big. I don't know how long because it was coiled up already.)
24. B: có lẽ đây là "python."
(Maybe it was a "python.")
25. N: con rắn?
(A python?)
26. B: ừ, "python."
(Yes, "python.")
27. N: nnn. em sẽ không sợ Google từ này bởi vì nó sẽ hiện ra picture.
(I won't Google it because it'll show pictures.)
28. B: heh heh không muốn nhìn thấy.
(You don't want to see.)
29. N: heh heh đúng rồi. heh heh
(That's right.)

As Nguyen begins her telling, she monitors Bushnell's responses. In line 6, she produces *con rắn* ("snake") with questioning intonation while gazing at Bushnell. After Bushnell nods in line 7, she continues in line 8, mentioning her fear of snakes. In line 9 she begins to rephrase, however, after Bushnell nods and repeats ừ ("yes") in overlap in line 10, Nguyen finishes her story with an extended turn in lines 11 to 15. Bushnell responds with laughter in line 16, and Nguyen overlaps Bushnell's laughter with *sợ quá* ("so scary") and laughter of her own.

Up to this point, Bushnell's responses in lines 7, 10, and 16 have only claimed an understanding, but by asking what kind of snake it was in line 18, he displays an understanding of the story so far. This display of understanding continues through line 28, as Bushnell asks how large the snake was, and then proposes, based on Nguyen's answer in lines 21 and 23, that it was a python (line 24). Here, Bushnell uses the English word *python*. Nguyen responds to this in line 25 with a candidate Vietnamese word, *con rắn* ("python"). She seems to display uncertainty through producing it with questioning intonation. Interestingly, this juxtaposition of English/Vietnamese creates a moment in which the words *python* and *con rắn* are potentially made mutually comprehensible in the interaction

for the participants. Then, after Nguyen says she will not search the internet for *python* because it will produce pictures of snakes (line 27), Bushnell submits that the reason is that she does not want to see such pictures (line 28). Nguyen confirms this understanding in line 29.

The analysis of Excerpt 2 shows that Bushnell was able to understand Nguyen's extended story about the teacher's snake and her own fear of snakes. Furthermore, this understanding underpinned Bushnell's active participation in the interaction, which in turn functioned to produce more comprehensible input for both participants.

Discussion

In order to acquire conversational ability in Vietnamese, Bushnell focused almost exclusively on listening and reading for about one year. He engaged in no traditional "practice" aimed at developing fluency and automatization. Although, as mentioned in the previous section, Bushnell did produce some speech during his interactions with Nguyen during the last half of the year, it was negligible (less than 20 hours total over the course of the year). Thus, it is not conceivable that this could have contributed in any substantial way to Bushnell's abilities, as demonstrated in the analyses of the prior section, to comprehend and participate actively in natural Vietnamese conversations.

In the field of second language education, there exist two contrasting approaches. The first approach involves an attempt to learn and automatize knowledge through practice, what Krashen (2011) has referred to as a "skill-building" approach. The second approach, in turn, attempts to stimulate implicit learning, or acquisition, through massive exposure to comprehensible messages in the target language. The first approach is argued to develop an ability in learners to automatically produce fluent and accurate speech (DeKeyser, 2001). However, as pointed out by VanPatten and Smith (2022, p. 26), "the focus of skill theory is not what the learners know implicitly but what they can do automatically." While it is possible to practise discrete words and phrases until they become automatic, this does not equate to being able to extend that ability to unpractised material. It is also not the same as knowing a language in an intuitive and productive way, as native speakers do. Rather, following such an approach may result in what VanPatten has referred to as "language-like behaviour" (Talagrand, 2024), or an ability

to produce practiced language in a fluent manner, but lacking an ability to understand and intuitively use language (Figure 1).

Figure 1. *Acquired Language versus Language-Like Behaviour*

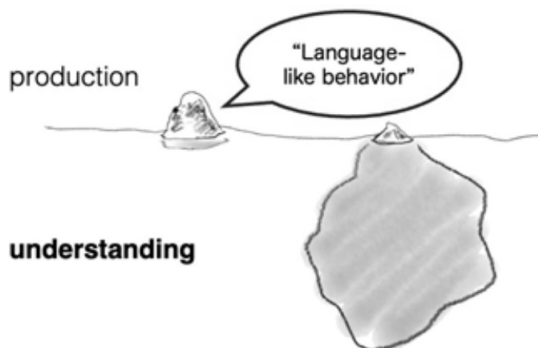


Figure 1 shows two partially buried rocks. The exposed portion of the rocks represents an apparently similar ability of two learners to produce speech. Underneath the surface, however, the difference in the ability of the two learners to comprehend is substantial. An approach that focuses on massive exposure to understandable messages conveyed in the target language should stimulate the development of neural networks (Shirai, 2019) that can result in an ability to understand and intuitively use the language (Brown, 2003). This is arguably what the analysis of Bushnell's interactional data has shown to be the case.

It must be noted that, as a single-case longitudinal study, the results of the present study are limited in their generalisability. Additionally, even after a year of input, Bushnell was still disfluent in many instances and his pronunciation continued to exhibit many flaws, some of which might occasionally impede understanding. However, still at only 460 hours, more time spent listening and reading is clearly necessary for Bushnell to reach full proficiency. On the other hand, an examination of the conversational data shows that Bushnell was able to intuitively produce unpractised Vietnamese in an intelligible manner to communicate his ideas in real time interaction. Importantly, he was able to do so repeatedly and reliably throughout and across multiple full-blown unscripted and unpredictable conversations covering a broad range of topics. More importantly perhaps, Bushnell was also able to understand and appropriately respond to Nguyen during the same conversations. This ability to understand his interlocutor made true communication

possible rather than mere canned transactions or the recitation of memorised and practised language-like routines.

Transcription Conventions

[indicates beginning of overlapping talk
:	stretching of prior sound
.	falling or final intonation
,	slightly rising intonation
?	rising intonation
heh heh	laughter
.hh	inhale
(1.0)	timed pause in seconds and tenths of seconds

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Notes

1. Toki Pona is a constructed language invented by the Canadian linguist, Sonja Lang. It has only around 130 words and can be acquired reasonably well in the space of a few months. Bushnell mainly uses this language with his first-year master's students, whom he requires to acquire the language as part of his class on second language acquisition.
2. That is, từ Hán-Việt (Sino-Vietnamese words). 50 per cent to 70 per cent of Vietnamese words are of Chinese origin. One example is the Vietnamese word *hiện tại* ("the present, now"), which is *xiàn zài* in Mandarin Chinese, and *gen zai* in Japanese.
3. For example, the Vietnamese word for "airplane" is *máy bay*. The individual components of this word are *máy* ("machine") and *bay* ("fly"), both of which are free morphemes. An example in Toki Pona would be *tomo tawa* ("automobile"), which is composed of *tomo* ("room, house") and *tawa* ("run, go").
4. We report on Nguyen's acquisition of English through comprehensible input in Nguyen and Bushnell (in preparation).

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