

# Life-Long Language Learning: It's Always Too Soon to Quit

THERE ARE A COUPLE of common dangers students studying language on location overseas for professional reasons face after their initial study period:

- 1) they experience such relief at having passed the necessary exams that they would like to celebrate by immediately getting rid of all language-learning materials;
- 2) because they can now officially be involved in work or ministry they believe their language will develop further without any effort, OR
- 3) they are discouraged their level of language is not as high as they'd like and conclude they'll not improve it further. they aim to work within the limits of their language ability.

Language learning is a lifelong marathon from which the vast majority of cross-cultural servants of the church drop out way too soon—in fact, it's always too soon to quit! As the church develops the need to master the host language becomes more even important, for it takes higher levels of language to train others than to do the teaching yourself.

Language learning can become one of the most satisfying things you will ever accomplish—if you persevere long enough. So what can you do to stay engaged in the language and culture learning process?

## **I. Decide that language and culture learning will be on your mind all the time**

You must have the mindset that you are never done with language acquisition/culture learning. It must be a high priority on-going process turning you into an ever more effective communicator. Build time into your weekly program for continued "formal learning". How?

- Take further language courses if you have not mastered advanced grammatical structures. It is better to take the time to finish learning foundational grammar at this stage than to leave it until later on, when it will be much harder to get back into formal language study.
- Continue sessions with language helpers, or recruit 1 or 2 native speakers (close friends) who will take some responsibility to think of categories of things that you need to delve deeper into.
- Carry a notebook all the time.
- Schedule specific times for reading and tape work.

## **II. Start talking! Develop your conversation practice.**

Language school is a great place to learn about the language, a lousy place to speak it. You will need to develop regular conversation practice once you are finished school. You will, hopefully, have made some national friends and know others well enough for an occasional chat.

- Look for clubs, interest groups, associations, choirs, etc. that you could join.
- Look for adult education courses in some subject you are interested in or for a person who would be willing to teach you some skill.

- Look for someone interested in learning some skill you have.
- Look for media resources or public libraries where you can borrow or rent videos and books.

Our reason for being here is all about getting to know people and spending time with them. It is therefore obvious that regular conversation with both believing and unbelieving nationals be an important part of both ministry and ongoing language development. Due to differences in personality types, however, some people find it difficult to do so. If you are a "2 or 3 friends" type of person rather than an extensively social one, spend regular time with those few friends. It is important for more sociable types to engage in conversations that are linguistically, academically and/or spiritually more challenging.

Being a good conversationalist is a skill. When meeting new people, the usual topics about country of origin, jobs, family, and impressions of the host country are likely to come up. However, as relationships develop, expect conversations to broaden. This means that your language level should get stretched and opportunities for sharing aspects of the gospel in the context of the subject under discussion will increase.

Learn what the major topics of conversation, the ‘news of the day’ is. Try talking about your earliest memories, the country/city/town/village you grew up in, places you have visited, (photo album), interesting people you have met, the changing world, things that you like/don't like, a film you watched recently. When appropriate your Christian faith can be brought into conversations, as in,

“Peter, what do you think?”

“Well, as a Christian, I'd approach the subject from a slightly different perspective....”

An appropriate verse may be in order. As such memorizing key verses is a good idea, as is regular reading of the national language Bible. Learn Christian responses to key local religious concepts, such as “sevab” (good works) in Islam”. Learn to tell stories and parables illustrating key Christian truths.

### **III. Unite language and culture learning more and more**

At the beginning, language (articulation, expression, communication, comprehension, correctness) and culture (customs, values, social conduct) are separate foci. Stop seeing them as two separate things. What you investigate in language has cultural overtones—and you can't investigate cultural issues without language. To do this you must be aware of what is going on in the host country and the rest of the world. Watch a local soap opera, as well as the news on a regular basis. Read a newspaper. Some subjects are risky but more likely to lead to deeper discussions, e.g. current political events, involvement in wars, etc. One of the incentives for improving language is to develop the skill of contributing to such conversations in an appropriate way as well as being able to gently steer people to another topic when necessary!

Presumably you will have already learned some proverbs. Continue to learn more from national friends as well as from books. Get to know how and when they are used. Start a collection of idioms and sayings. Jokes and riddles lighten conversations when things get too heavy or stagnate.

Asking questions about cultural practices and beliefs is a good way to get to know people as well as developing conversation. Ask about body language. Use the Dumb-Smart Question technique (i.e., ask questions about things you already know the basic answer to).

#### **IV. Don't let yourself get into an unbroken routine**

Determine to get into new arenas, new activities that will broaden your language and culture learning. Do one new or out-of-the-ordinary thing every month that has a language and culture focus.

Carry a notebook. Write down what you wish you could say, or things you should do. Note any new idioms and words to hear, or things you want to learn more about. Log the questions people ask so you can work out an extended answer later with you Language Helper, so that you're not caught out a second time.

Try doing crossword puzzles. The simple ones are not as hard as you might think!

#### **V. Broaden your reading**

Reading in the target language is one of the best ways to reinforce grammar already learnt and increase vocabulary. As well as reading a favourite section of the newspaper, become familiar with well-known national literature heroes. Read, read, read. Underline or star things you don't comprehend. Use a local language dictionary as well as non-English speaking nationals to explain things to you.

Start with simple comic books, graduate to Agatha Christies (or other short, light, translated novels) then to slightly heavier translated western novels, and finally to national authors. Study subjects of interest in the local language.

#### **VI. Develop creative writing skills**

Creative writing is usually one of the least liked aspects of language learning, and often the first thing put aside after the formal learning period is over. It is, however, important to be able to write letters, emails, Bible studies and sermons. Creative writing forces you to think (not a bad thing!) and put our thoughts into appropriate cultural forms. Try writing an article on a subject of your interest.

#### **VII. Other tips**

1. Try to have minimal involvement with other expatriates, particularly during your first year overseas. Your first associations will peg you; make sure they include nationals.
2. Be extremely cautious about taking on an English Bible study or other ministry in English. If you want to sense the heartbeat of the people, you have to mingle with those at the core of the society, not those on the fringe. So don't make commitments away from language learning, the long-range effects of which will keep you functioning at the periphery of the culture.
3. Be careful about making yourself self-sufficient. Becoming a part of the culture includes learning how to give and receive. Learn to ask for favors and how to receive from others. Learn how reciprocity functions. If you are perceived as self-sufficient you deprive people of an opportunity to fulfill one of the basic ingredients to friendship-making: the meeting of needs.
4. Find out from those considered good language learners what they have found helpful.
5. Investigate the possibility of living with a national family.

6. Continue exploring. When did you last ride a random city bus to the end of the line?
7. Plan a cultural event monthly—museum, festival, sports event, art exhibit, concert. Investigate joining a community club. Get involved in a sport or craft and learn the specialized terms.
8. Beware of regular trips back home. Don't welcome too many visitors from home either—both are distractions.
9. Buy and look at a newspaper daily, concentrating on 1 or 2 topics—e.g., sports, accidents, comics. Make reading the paper a project with your language helper.
10. Record a news broadcast and go over it with your helper.
11. Record people telling their favorite stories or childhood experiences.
12. Learn phone calling and answering courtesy language. Practice by calling stores and asking what their hours are.
13. Get the sermon topic and Bible passage from the pastor before Sunday, read it and look up key words ahead of time.
14. Buy children's books and have your language helper record them.
15. Learn some Christian songs and choruses.
16. Memorize a Bible verse a week. Start with shorter verses and work up to John 3:16. Learn simple statements to explain these verses.
17. Memorize a proper prayer before meals, a simple prayer for a church service and a prayer for God's blessing on a friend.
18. Work out a monologue on how trusting God resulted in specific things taking place (e.g., specific answers to prayer).
19. Work out your testimony with your helper (short version to be expanded later). Have him/her record it, then memorize it.
20. Learn the kinship system and the degree of obligation connected with each.

***Conclusion: You need maximum exposure to comprehensible input on an ongoing basis.***