

Language Learning *is* Communication - is Ministry!

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There is a popular mentality that suggests that missionaries should learn a language in order to have a ministry - that is, in order to be able to communicate with the local people. We would like to suggest that the language learning process itself *is* communication - effective communication.

The missionary anthropologist Charles H. Kraft was recently asked, "How much time should one who goes to serve as a two month short-term missionary spend in language learning?" Kraft responded: "Two months." The questioner continued, "What about one who stays six months?" "Then spend six months in language learning." "And if he stays two years?" "There is nothing he could do that would communicate more effectively than spending those two years in language learning." Kraft continued, "Indeed, if we do no more than engage in the process of language learning we will have communicated more of the essentials of the Gospel than if we devote ourselves to any other task I can think of."

The idea that short-term missionaries should somehow be exempt from language learning needs to be challenged. I recently asked a Cantonese man from Hong Kong, "Do the missionaries in Hong Kong learn the language?" I knew the answer but I wanted to hear it from the lips of an insider - maybe 5%, at most 10%, of all protestant missionaries in Hong Kong are able to minister in Cantonese. I was therefore surprised, and then chagrined when he answered, "Yes they do - the Mormons do."(!) They are all short-termers, but they spend 12 hours a day, six days a week, on the streets talking with people.

The fact is that the learner posture might continue to be the most effective communication base not only for short-termers but also for those who invest their entire lives ministering as guests in another country. With a "learning *is* communication" perspective one can have the unique opportunity to learn important cultural knowledge in the context of community relationships - right where ministry opportunities are.

We should note here that we are talking about language learning, *not* language study. Millions of people have studied a language without learning it, yet billions have learned languages without studying them. Certainly over half of the world's people are multilingual, and relatively few have learned their additional languages in school. These spontaneous learners demonstrate that *normal language acquisition is a social activity, not an academic activity.*

The isolation of the foreigner in a language school does little to communicate positively in the community. Missionary language schools have undeniably played an important part in recent mission strategy. It is now timely, however, to address issues such as the typical student's isolation from the local people, and the frequent mediocre level of communicative proficiency achieved by graduates. It is also time to believe God for a viable strategy that will enable potential missionaries to confidently and competently respond to the challenge of reaching an unreached people group many of whom are among the more than 4,000 languages that will never have language schools.

The positive impact of the language learning process itself is revealed in many ways. On a recent visit to South Africa we received various invitations to speak to bilingual people whose first language was Afrikaans. As an opening statement during each speaking opportunity I said "Ekis bly om hier te wees" - "I'm happy to be here with you." Invariably the audience erupted into applause. It totally disarmed them - I cared for them and demonstrated it by being a learner of their language. This provided an atmosphere so that even a discussion on a sensitive issue such as ethnocentrism could be favorably received.

The learner perspective

If language learning were viewed *as* communication and *as* ministry what would be the perspectives and the activities of new missionaries?

Picture in your mind learners who spend their days available to, and involved with the local people, learning from them and highly esteeming what the people know. These Learners are willing to project themselves as needy, and dependent upon the people. They are in no hurry about doing their own thing. Rather, they are at ease in spending their days in relationships with the people. They have a plan for their learning each day, and they know how to go about it, but their personal agenda can always be set aside when needs or opportunities arise. They have a strategy of learning and serving and sharing that allows them to spend virtually all of their time in meaningful relationships.

The Christian Missionary Fellowship, as a total mission, has affirmed all of their people in this kind of approach. In a recent mission publication an observer described the activities of CMF personnel in Kenya:

What was there about the team to attract the attention of an outside observer? The *singular attention to language learning* is one thing that does not escape notice. For at least a year after arrival on the field, a new missionary has no other assignment but language and culture learning. Also, instead of learning Swahili, the national language, they have first begun study of the heart language of the people, for some Maasai, and for others Turkana.

The language is learned, not in a classroom, but in a better laboratory - among the people. This is possible through the use of language acquisition techniques known as LAMP. How proud we were to see the progress some have made in natural conversation in the vernacular, and the determination of newcomers to really get inside the Maasai and Turkana language and culture.

It is true that newcomers don't know any of the language before they begin. But they know how to learn the language in normal ways by becoming a believer within the new society. They view language acquisition as a social rather than an academic activity. They want to learn to use the language correctly as the people do, so they spend their time with the people. They may not concern themselves much with studying about the grammar. (Schools have adequately demonstrated that studying *about* the language does not produce speakers of the language.)

At first, becoming a believer in a new society is filled with an understandable anxiety, but that quickly passes for the one who implements a strategy of involvement. One Learner wrote us after her participation in an overseas project that we directed for a group of newly arrived missionaries: "The best thing that happened to me was on the first day when you challenged us to take the little bit we knew how to say and go tell it to 50 people. I didn't talk with 50, I only talked with 44 - but I did talk with 44!" She got over the anxiety on the first day by initiating many relationships. Further, she began to establish herself within a social network where she could show her care for the people and learn from them. *Her language learning and her ministry became one and the same thing.*

It is important to establish one's credibility as a learner at the very beginning of each relationship. The first thing that must be communicated is the impression that "I value what you know and I want to be learning from you." Last December we were stranded in the Denver airport during a snow storm. A family from Mexico was also waiting so I (Tom) initiated a conversation with the teenage son. In my hindsight reflection on that encounter I realized that, from the very outset, I missed an opportunity to be learning from him. My manner communicated "I can pass the time talking with you in the Spanish that I know," when I could have communicated, "I know some Spanish, but I need help to be sure I make sentences correctly." Throughout the conversation I could have asked something like "How would you say that sentence?" or "Is there a better way to say that?" It is easy to meet people and give a

first impression of independence and self-sufficiency, but if we make a point to establish credibility as a learner then we can help people feel free to give us the help we need.

In order to have continuing credibility as a learner it must be evident to people that one is making at least some steady progress. This point was recently illustrated to us when a Japanese friend described a man who had been a missionary in Japan for twenty-five years. The missionary had learned little Japanese, and our friend said he was "awkward" in his relationships. Having little ability to communicate, being uncomfortable in relationships, and having no credibility as one who was a progressing learner, was more than enough to keep the missionary's contacts with Japanese people to a minimum.

The self-sufficient independence of North Americans is of little help for the one who would communicate positively, have an incarnational ministry, or learn the language. Far more is communicated by being in a state of dependency upon the people. A principle here (as pointed out by Dwight Gradin) is that *people help people who are in need*. As a Learner, then, one must be willing to demonstrate dependency. Jesus Himself (who, of course, could have been more independent than even the most well healed among us) modeled dependency for us. In childhood He was dependent on a poor family, and in adulthood He conducted His ministry as One who could say He had no place to call His own where He could lay His head (Luke 9:58).

The disciples, too, experienced dependency. Bonnie Miedema says it well:

When Jesus sent out the Twelve to preach and heal the sick, He instructed them, "Take nothing for the journey - no staff, no bag, no bread, no money, no extra tunic" (Luke 9:3). I'm finally beginning to understand why Jesus said that. He wanted the disciples to experience the hospitality of the local people and to be dependent upon them. He knew that identifying with the people and staying in their homes would open doors for their ministry.

Unfortunately, we have a cultural perception that causes us to believe that dependence and vulnerability are weaknesses. On the contrary, the one who authenticates his life-message is the one whose strength lies in his willingness to be vulnerable. (Vulnerability is the willingness to put oneself in a position where one could be taken advantage of by others, or where one's shortcomings and weaknesses may be exposed.) The Lord told the Apostle Paul "My power shows up best in weak people" (2 Cor 12:9, Living Bible). "We have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God, and not of us" (2 Cor 4:7). Jesus' willingness to go all the way to the cross is the supreme example of vulnerability being a strength.

The timber wolf has a way of demonstrating that vulnerability is strength. Two fighting males growling angrily, bare their fangs to rip each other's throats. One finally does an incredible thing: he lifts his head and offers his enemy the bend of his neck - the most vulnerable part of his body. The furious fighting comes to a sudden standstill. The Nobel prize-winning naturalist Konrad Lorenz writes "A wolf or a dog that offers its neck to its adversary will never be bitten seriously." Lorenz continues, "Man . . . can learn a lesson from this. I, at least, have extracted from it a new and deeper understanding of a wonderful and often misunderstood saying from the Gospel . . . "And unto him that smiteth thee on the one cheek offer also the other" (Luke 6:29). A wolf has enlightened me: not so that your enemy may strike you again do you turn the other cheek toward him, but to make him unable to do so."

When we suggest that language learning *is* communication we are, of course, viewing "communication" in a broad sense: we are referring to the total life-message being received by members of the new community. It is only to a limited extent that the impressions and understandings which are communicated are received through verbal channels. Spending time with people, caring about them, being available to serve them, and, maybe most important, showing an appreciation for their ways and their language is a very effective communication strategy. Further, it is a strategy that is available to

even the newcomer who has just arrived. There is little that a guest in another country can do that will have more potential for powerful, positive communication!

One reason it is common to think in terms of "learning the language *in order* to communicate" is that verbal communication is in such high focus in our society. However, it is a fact that messages that are received in non-verbal ways often communicate with much more impact than the verbal message. The Gospel of John (Chapter 4) tells us about the encounter of Jesus with the Samaritan woman at the well - a passage that is often studied to gain insight into evangelistic technique. Whatever Jesus did was effective, for the passage tells us that many believed on Him. We would suggest that the impact of His message was due not only to what He said, but also to what he did. He was a Jew and "Jews have no dealings with Samaritans," (vs. 9) yet Jesus stayed for two days, sharing the hospitality of their homes! His disciples had the privilege of seeing Jesus model for them what an incarnational ministry is all about as the Word became flesh and dwelt among them - and, no doubt to their own chagrin, they experienced it with him.

Typically, missionaries complete many years of schooling and are conditioned to think of themselves as "prepared" to carry on a ministry. Learning the language is viewed as the major barrier that stands between these "prepared" people and a fruitful ministry in the new country. So, of course, they must learn the language in order to get on with the job. Language study is thus viewed as a hurdle to be quickly passed so that they can then get on with doing what they are "trained" to do.

With this mentality, these missionaries are probably "prepared" to make disciples in their own cultural image - following the patterns that have been modeled for them in a Western school and church context. All their education and experience are shaped in cultural forms that feel at home "back in America." Such people are prepared to take God to the people.

But the missionary does not take God to the people. That is backwards. God takes the missionary! And, God has been there before the missionary arrived. The Scriptures tell us that He has never left Himself without a witness (Acts 14:17). In recent years Don Richardson, through his books *Peace Child* and *Eternity in their Hearts*, has introduced the term redemptive analogy." An understanding of the redemptive analogy concept can enable the missionary to believe that within each culture God has provided insights, perspectives and cultural knowledge that His Spirit can use redemptively, as bridges, to bring people to Himself.

If the aspects of cultural knowledge that God can use redemptively are discovered and affirmed, the missionary might be privileged to see God use those insights to spark a people movement. Without those discoveries the ministry can only hope to reach the fringe members of the society - those who are willing to be enough like the Western missionary to understand the foreign packaging of the Gospel.

Those with the perspective that "language learning *is* communication - *is* ministry" may also have many years of schooling and experience, but they can recognize that they are only ready to begin learning in their new cultural context. They should reject the option of coming in with the privileged status and ascribed positions often assumed by those who have economic and educational advantage. Rather, through relationships, they can earn their way within the framework of the values and ideals of the culture and acquire an insider's perspective of the cultural knowledge in order to serve and minister in ways that demonstrate sensitivity and insight. Eugene Nida has called this "leading from the middle."

They should want their lives to be understood and to be viewed as Good News when seen through the perspective of the people of the new culture.