

Language Learning Is Communication—Is Ministry?

E. Thomas Brewster and Elizabeth S. Brewster

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. We recently asked a Cantonese man from Hong Kong, "Do the missionaries in Hong Kong learn the language?" We knew the answer but we wanted to hear it from the lips of an insider—maybe 5 percent, at most 10 percent, of all Protestant missionaries in Hong Kong are able to minister in Cantonese. We were therefore surprised, and then chagrined when he answered, "Yes they do—the Mormons do." They are all short-termers, but they spend twelve 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 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 respond confidently and com-

petently 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 on 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 strategy¹ of learning and serving and sharing that allows them to spend virtually all of their time in meaningful relationships.

The Christiam Missionary Fellowship (CMF), 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.²

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 believer³ 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

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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 snowstorm. 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 on the people. A principle here (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-heeled 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 (Lk. 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.⁴

Unfortunately, we have a cultural perception that causes us to believe that dependence and vulnerability are weaknesses. On the contrary, those who authenticate their life-message are those whose strength lies in their willingness to be vulnerable. (Vulnera-

bility 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 excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us" (2 Cor. 4:7, KJV). 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 will growl angrily, baring 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. . . . 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.⁵

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 that 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 person who has just arrived in a foreign country. 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 nonverbal ways often communicate with much more impact than the verbal message. The Gospel of John (chap. 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" (v. 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 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*,⁶ 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 him.

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 advantages. 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.”⁷

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.

The Learner–Servant–Storyteller Posture

A few years ago an important essay was published by Donald N. Larson called “Viable Roles: Learner, Trader, Storyteller.”⁸ Larson suggests that these are the three missionary roles that can best make sense and be understood from the perspective of the local people. He directs our attention to the factor that ought to concern missionaries most—not “Am I making sense to myself, or my sending agency, or my fellow expatriate missionaries,” but, “Are my presence and my activities perceived as good news when viewed by those to whom God has called me?” This, it seems, is the issue that should be of primary concern to any missionary.

Larson further recommended that a new missionary devote his first three months to the responsibilities of the Learner role, then, in the fourth month, add the Trader role, and after the sixth month add the Storyteller role. In a pilot project we directed in Colombia in early 1978 we experimented with these recommendations. We became firmly committed to the principle of having viability from the insider’s perspective—of the missionary being good news when viewed by the local people.

But we have found it best to modify a few of Larson’s specifics. The role of Trader as he defined it does not seem to be functionally or methodologically different from his Storyteller role—both are telling stories but the recommended content of the stories is different (Larson’s Traders are trading information about the peoples of the world and his Storytellers are engaged in storytelling evangelism). We prefer to combine the content of both under the “Storytelling” banner. Second, we found that the Learner needs stories right from the beginning, so it seems best to have all of the roles in operation from early learning. Third, we feel that another important role should also be included in the list of “viable” roles—that of Servant.

The three roles—Learner, Servant, Storyteller—are viable not only for the newcomer, but throughout one’s ministry. Furthermore, each has a firm basis in the instruction and in the incarnational model of ministry that Jesus has provided for us:

Learner. The early followers of Jesus were called “disciples.” The word itself means “learner.” In the Great Commission Jesus told these original Christian Learners, “I have been given all authority in heaven and earth. Therefore go and make disciples [learners] in all the nations, . . . then teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you; and be sure of this—that I am with you always, even to the end of the world” (Mt. 28:19–20, Living Bible).

Servant. The One by whom all things were made (Jn. 1:3) left the glory of heaven to dwell among us (Jn. 1:14). But he did not demand respect or assume a privileged status for himself. To his disciples he said, “Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mt. 20: 26–28). Jesus earned respect, and he did so from the perspective of the very ones among whom he served.⁹

Storyteller. Through parables Jesus was a storyteller. Matthew once records for us, “He did not say anything to them without using a parable” (13: 34).

The Learner–Servant–Storyteller posture provides a model of ministry that can easily be multiplied by others. To have a discipleship ministry in postures other than Learner, Servant, and Storyteller is to minister from the platform of a privileged, ascribed status. The model of ministry that is then provided may be perceived as out of the reach of those who are ministered to. They may not view themselves as having the necessary credentials or resources to carry on the ministry, and may therefore feel that the responsibility of making disciples or leading the ministry is something that only the expatriate missionary can do.

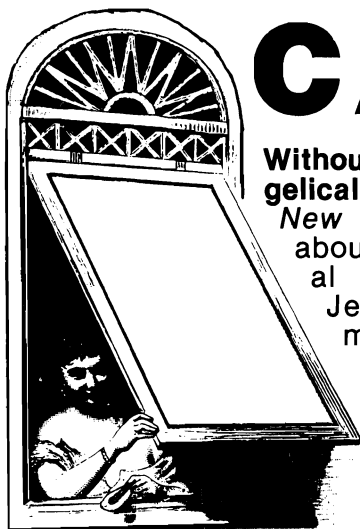
The high-profile, high-status administrative, educational, technological, or theological positions that many missionaries assume for themselves may seldom be perceived as good news when viewed through the eyes of the local population. Often the missionary may be introducing a competitive health system or agricultural system or educational system or religious system. These, when introduced by one who does not deeply understand the culture, cannot help but draw attention to themselves in a negative way. A better posture could be based on Philippians 2:3: “Let each esteem others as better than himself.” The people themselves should have their self-esteem raised as they are affirmed through their relationship with the missionary.

Rather than assuming for themselves an ascribed or privileged role (sometimes signaled by using titles like Reverend, Doctor, etc.), Learner–Servant–Storytellers can develop an opportunity to earn the respect that accompanies an achieved role. Rejecting a status position for themselves, they might adopt the perspective: “The people must increase (in self-image and stature); I must decrease. I am not here to assume privilege for myself, but rather, to lift up Jesus.”

The *attitude* of Learners, as well as their strategy, is of critical importance. It is, of course, possible to pursue a language-learning strategy from the posture of nonprivileged roles and yet never come to understand or appreciate the cultural values of the people. On our personal pilgrimage we have found that our conservative theology (which we affirm) has sometimes caused us to want to jump to hasty conclusions about whether or not certain cultural forms will be compatible with the Scriptures or appropriate for the new believing community. Sometimes we don’t trust the Holy Spirit in his ministry of guiding the people into truth. Often when we bring our own theology to the mission task it may be very im-

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portant to us that we carefully teach the people what they should think about doctrinal issues. But this has the potential of placing us in a role where there is great probability that we shall fail to affirm the very cultural values that could lend strength to the work of God within the midst of the people. Rather than telling them what to think, it is probably better to try to help people learn *how* to think and how to allow the Holy Spirit to lead them into truth as they apply the Word of God for themselves. A patient attitude of openness toward the values of the culture and a trust in God's care for the people is essential. With such an attitude, the Scriptures may open up with new perspectives that may be especially relevant to the new cultural context.

Two Case Study Reports

Guatemala. Two years ago the authors consulted with a "Language Exploration & Acquisition Project" (LEAP) for a large mission in Guatemala City. Each of the twenty participants spent their days on the streets in relationships with people. During the eleventh week the mission's coordinator of the project conducted a comprehensive study of participants' progress and also compared participants with a control group that consisted of the mission's language-school-trained missionaries who were located in the city. The twenty-plus-page report was filed with the mission, and a copy was sent to us. A sample of the findings strongly supports the thesis that language learning *is* communication, *is* ministry:

... each of them [the LEAP participants] ... [is] less affected by the "ghetto mentality" than any of our other missionaries [p. 7].

The LEAPers feel relatively "at home" in Latin culture. The Language Schoolers, even those who have been here for many years, do not [p. 18].

The LEAPers have not only learned some Spanish, they have learned how to continue learning by relating to people. Most Language Schoolers, when asked about further Spanish learning, have ideas of "taking an advanced course," or "working through a grammar book on my own" [p. 18].

[Those] in the control group have, on the average, one Guatemalan friend. The LEAPers each have fifteen or more [p. 18].

Each LEAPER has had contacts with dozens of people in Guatemala. There are at least 1,000 Guatemalans who have had positive experiences with the mission in the twelve weeks of this program. ... Who knows how all this low-level public relations will ultimately benefit the mission; it is highly improbable that it will be detrimental [p. 19].

The development of relationships, not vocabulary learning, was in focus for these LEAP Learners. Yet, when their core vocabulary usage was compared with language-school-trained missionaries, the study revealed a 74 percent recognition/production score

for the LEAP group, while school-trained people scored 56 percent. When both groups of individuals were matched with "the same (or equivalent) grammatical knowledge, phonetic skill, etc., the LEAP person knows 32% *more* vocabulary!" (emphasis theirs; p. 17).

Knowing how to be a Learner is critical to the success of this kind of approach. The LEAP group consisted of some participants whom we had pretrained and others whom we trained in Guatemala. "Those in the group that had previous exposure to LAMP¹⁰ concepts made 11.78 time units of progress, compared to the 5.82 time units of those who had no previous exposure—more than double!" (p. 3). Moral: Most Americans need to be trained as Learners before they strike out on an independent learning-through-relationships approach.

Bolivia. An article we published in *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*¹¹ describes the kinds of ministry opportunities that go hand in hand with being an actively involved language Learner. The article describes the activities of a group of a dozen members of Campus Crusade's *Agape* Movement.

During the second week the team members learned to say something like, "Every day I learn to say something new and I'll need to practice it by talking with people. May I come by and say to you the new things I learn each day?"

In this way each one developed a community of interested people for his communication time. ... Warm relationships were developed with these regular daily listeners. Each learner also made a daily habit of talking with as many new people as possible in the community.

During the sixth week the team members began learning to tell a story about their own personal relationships with God. This "story-telling evangelism" developed progressively. Each learner planned the total story he wanted to be able to tell. ... In communication time he would tell as much of his story as he knew, and then he would say, "That's all I know today; I'll tell you more tomorrow."

Over 30 people came to know Christ as a result of the involvement ministry that these new language learners were able to develop during those [first] three months. Many of these were either members of the families with whom we were living, or were on a route of regular listeners. In both cases, as a result of the personal relationships that they had developed, they were able to follow up and disciple the new believers.

Conclusion

"Language learning *is* communication—*is* ministry!" is a perspective that could have significant implications for new missionary candidates. It might be important that they seek to correspond and communicate about these issues in advance with appropriate mission personnel. We feel it would be appropriate to view as unacceptable any mission position that would not give the freedom to pursue aggressively language learning, serving, and storytelling.

Notes:

1. We train scores of people each year, at the Fuller School of World Mission and elsewhere, in a strategy of learning and serving through involvement in a network of social relationships.
2. Ray Giles, "Home Again to Africa," *Impact*, Christian Missionary Fellowship, Indianapolis, June-July 1981. Italics in the original.
3. See "Bonding and the Missionary Task," a booklet that describes how to become a believer in a new culture, published 1981 by Lingua House, 915 West Jackson, Colorado Springs, Colorado, 80907; \$1.25.
4. Bonnie Miedema, "Reflections on a Learning Experience" (unpublished, 1981).
5. Konrad Lorenz, *King Solomon's Ring*, as condensed in *Reader's Digest Condensed Books*, no. 1 (1960), p. 466.
6. Don Richardson, *Peace Child*, (Ventura, Calif.: Regal, 1974). Also by Richardson, *Eternity in Their Hearts* (Ventura, Calif.: Regal, 1981).
7. Eugene A. Nida, "'Why Are Foreigners So Queer?' A Socioanthropological Approach to Cultural Pluralism," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, July 1981, p. 103.
8. Donald N. Larson, "The Viable Missionary: Learner, Trader, Story Teller," *Missiology*, April 1978.
9. Charles H. Kraft elaborates on the concept of Jesus earning respect, in "Communicating the Gospel God's Way," *Ashland Theological Bulletin*, Spring 1979, p. 12.
10. Brewster and Brewster, *Language Acquisition Made Practical (LAMP)* (Colorado Springs: Lingua House, 1976).
11. Brewster and Brewster, "How to Learn a Language and Culture," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 14, no. 2 (April 1978).