

Helping Mission Agencies Increase the Effectiveness of Their Workers: A Look at Language Learning

Working in three different countries over the last 25 years, I have observed that fewer than 30% of the American missionaries I have met have learned the language of the people with whom they work. Why?

Certainly, some missionaries are lazy. This, however, is a simple answer. Language learning for an adult, is very difficult. We get tired and discouraged. Cross-cultural living is stressful. It is especially easy to give up when some work can be done among local people who know English. These explanations plant the responsibility for failing to achieve fluency in a local language on the shoulders of the missionaries themselves. Might there be however, other contributing factors?

Research shows that levels of language proficiency can be predicted

In the 1980's, Dr. Judith Liskin-Gasparro observed US Government employees as they studied languages at the Foreign Service Institute's center in Washington, DC. (A chart summarizing her research is found in the unedited version of this paper.) At the conclusion of her study she was able to predict how long it would take FSI students to learn a language. English was their first language.

FSI students spent 6 hours per day, 5 days per week in intensive and structured language learning and were highly motivated. Mastering another language would lead to a promotion and boost in salary. Yet, Dr. Gasparro concluded, surprisingly, as a student moves from one proficiency level to the next, his progress will slow and it will be increasingly more difficult for him to progress further.

Applications of the Research to Missionary Language Learners

Interestingly, these same principles of language learning apply to missionaries in the field as well. As they progress from one level of difficulty to another, their rate of progress will slow. Also, in order to move from one level of proficiency to the next, it will require up to twice the number of hours of intensive and structured study required to reach the previous level of proficiency.

However, while a missionary may want to learn their language, it is extremely rare (if ever found) that they would have the same conditions in which to learn as did the FSI students. For many missionaries, especially those living in remote areas, there is no language school to attend. Skilled language helpers who speak some English may also be difficult to find. During their first years overseas, missionaries are adjusting to a new climate, new colleagues, new working environment and a new culture.

In spite of these factors, missionaries consistently end their study programs (upon reaching a "limited working proficiency") prematurely. I found this to be true among missionaries I have met, regardless of their location (city or rural). It was also true regardless of the kind of instruction they were receiving (formal or nonformal).

This means that they stopped purposely building vocabulary and improving listening comprehension. Identifying and addressing key areas of grammatical difficulty were no longer priorities. In place of language learning, the missionary "began ministry." At this point, missionaries began to write sermons and different types of lessons and assume positions of responsibility. It was often assumed that through

these new activities, the missionary would “pick up” what he had yet to master in the language. This rarely happened. required to prepare lessons with this limited level of knowledge. Certainly, the amount of time invested in these activities took away enormous amounts of time from intensive and structured study of the language.

Why do missionaries stop intensive and structured language prematurely?

Mission agencies are in a hurry to get people to produce results. They are also anxious to reduce the workload of already overworked field staff. As a result, agencies of those missionaries I have met had pre-determined an amount of time for language learning before the missionary arrived on the field. Generally, agencies only allowed the missionary about half the total time they felt they needed in order to reach a minimal professional proficiency in their language. This was very discouraging to them.

Missionaries are also responsible for this trend to prematurely end language study programs. There continues to be a mentality among workers that language learning is something to be endured. This attitude is rooted in the thinking by some missionaries that they are already trained and ready to begin field ministry. Certainly many missionaries have completed many years of schooling and training before leaving for the field. This can lead some to view language study as a barrier standing between themselves, who are ready to serve, and their new ministry.

Recommendations

To reverse the trend towards ending language programs prematurely, a change in thinking as well as in actions will be required by both mission agencies and their workers.

1. Mission agencies and missionaries need to view language learning as the beginning of ministry and as a vehicle to more ministry, rather than something to get past. Agencies must be committed to their field workers attaining minimal professional levels of fluency in their field languages. Missionaries who understand how critical language acquisition is to the success of their work must also be willing to sacrificially commit themselves to intentional and structured language study
2. Missionary supervisors need to refrain from arbitrarily assigning missionaries a set length of time for language study before they leave for their field assignment. A language program should be designed only after a missionary arrives on the field. Supervisors need to respect the missionary’s time by not assigning them extended duties that will take them away from this priority.
3. Missionaries need their agencies to support their language learning efforts by putting in place structures that encourage and properly monitor their progress. These structures include regular and objective language testing and incentives that motivate field workers to work hard and persevere.
4. Mission agencies can further support the learning programs of their workers by educating supporting churches about its importance.

Missionaries might find encouragement to persevere in their language programs by studying the example of Hudson Taylor, missionary to China. He would sometimes skip morning prayers in order to work on Chinese. Biographers write that Taylor would beg God’s forgiveness for choosing Chinese over his devotions, so committed was he to learning the language of the people to whom he had been sent. To learn languages, missionaries today will need to be no less single-minded and hard-working.