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For Christ & His Kingdom

Language Learning: Should I? and How?

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Objectives

- Understand the biblical and humanitarian reasoning for making language learning a priority in your life and ministry on-field
- List some common pitfalls that medical and healthcare professionals make with language and culture learning
- Identify the keys to successful on-field language learning as a missionary
- Gain a practical vision for the different approaches and methods to language learning, and which might best fit your own situation

Institute for Cross-Cultural Training

At Wheaton College in the department of Applied Linguistics and International Education

- Fully online training, workshops, and certificates for missionaries and cross-cultural Christians
- Pre-field and on-field second language acquisition courses and coaching
- Language coach courses and missions leadership training
- Missions agency consulting
- Workshops, courses, and certificates in TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages)
- Free webinars, resources, and education



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Dr. Natalie Mullen is the director of the Institute for Cross-Cultural Training where she works with Christian non-profits and their workers who are learning and teaching languages all around the world. She was an ESL teacher to adults in university settings for over 10 years, specializing in listening, speaking, and pronunciation, and has lived and served in China and Spain. Her doctorate is in Education Policy and her research interests include language policy, multilingual populations, language justice and inclusion, internationalization of higher education, and second language acquisition.



Good language is absolutely necessary for meaningful long-term ministry. Language ability also directly correlates with how long people remain on the field. He is the God of all languages and nothing is too hard for him...we are believing that!

–Ryan and Chelsea, missionary doctors in Niger

The barriers to learning a new language

and long-term effectiveness and stability

Motivation

- The biggest predictor of success in adult second language acquisition is motivation!
- Take a moment to consider and jot down:
 - What is your motivation for serving?
 - What are your biggest motivators in life, in general?
 - What happens when you are not motivated to do something, and how can you combat that?
 - What helps you manage your emotions (especially negative emotions when experiencing failure and stress)?



Lack of knowledge and skills

Preparation is key

- Take a pre-field second language acquisition course
- Take a cross-cultural communication course
- Ask for or get a language coach while on-field
- Start learning before you go



Policies and precedents

- What does your organization want from you and expect from you?
- What have others done?
- What do YOU expect?
- Does your organization have “exceptions” to language and culture learning policies for medical professionals?



Life happens

Plan for set-backs

- Family "stuff" (babies, education, family back home)
- Physical health issues of self and family and team
- Disasters
- Pandemics!
- Mental health and well-being
- Culture stress
- Spiritual battle
- Relationship dynamics with team, family, and locals



Aside from highly recommending your language acquisition course for anyone moving abroad, I would note that the perfectionism of medical professionals can be a barrier to language learning. Thinking about [second language acquisition] in conjunction with application of phonetics (which was basically absent from my previous, formal language learning experiences) was transformative. Seeing language learning as ministry (not a prerequisite to ministry) was also life-changing.

- Elizabeth, SE Asia

The Heart of Motivation

Revelation 7:9-11

Revelationary Christians

Rev. 7:9-11

- “⁹ After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, ¹⁰ and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!” ¹¹ And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God...” Revelation 7:9-11

Your attitude...

Philippians 2:14-16

- Learner attitudes greatly affect the outcomes of language learning
- Adult learners need to know how to manage negative emotions like feeling like a failure, competitiveness with others, comparing with others, perfectionism, negative thoughts about the host culture, depression, etc.
- A realistic attitude about your host culture is imperative. “Not good, not bad, just different.” Don’t let complaining become your norm.
- Find time to use the language you are learning to have successes and build relationships with locals



History, power, and language

- What is the history of someone like you being a place and space like that?
- How might the people you want to serve see you?
- What are the power dynamics of your identity, your role, and your patients' identities?
- What role has language played in the history and politics of the place, space, and people you serve?
- What history does your primary language have in your patients' lives and the lives of their ancestors?



If you don't have one National friend (who isn't an English speaker) the likelihood of long-term service is really reduced. If it never feels like 'home', you are always fighting to stay somewhere 'foreign'.

–Jeff, mental health counselor to missionaries

The research

Evidence is clear: Patients need medical professionals who speak their language

When you don't speak their language...

- “Language discrepancies may result in increased psychological stress and medically significant communication errors for already anxious patients, something to which patients in language-congruent encounters (i.e. shared primary language) are less vulnerable. Moreover, it is not just language that can cause barriers to equitable healthcare: inequities inherent in the social dynamic of the patient-practitioner encounter are well documented, and these inequities occur independent of whether primary language is shared. Understanding language in the context of a medical encounter is thus critical for understanding the problems that might result when patients and healthcare practitioners speak a different primary language.”

-Meuter, R.F., Gallois, C., Segalowitz, N.S., Ryder, A.G., and Hocking, J. 2015. “Overcoming language barriers in healthcare: A protocol for investigating safe and effective communication when patients or clinicians use a second language”. BMC Health Services Research. 15:371.

The practicalities

So what do we actually need to do?

The policies

- Ask for time to focus on language learning FROM THE BEGINNING
- Sustain language learning throughout your life on-field
- Never take “a break” from language learning to practice medicine; try to incorporate it into your lives and practice with patients, etc.
- Ask for accountability and frequent language assessments and evaluations
- Ask for help
- Ask for prayer
- Ask for a goal to reach for: What proficiency level would be appropriate to try to reach in a given time in your situation?
- Ask for resources (language learning takes time and money)

Prepare

- Pre-field SLA is not optional
- Have a plan: Full-time study, part-time study, for how long?
 - Research learning options
 - Language school (university or private institution)
 - Tutor (at your home or other place)
 - Other methods (Growing Participant Approach, LAMP)
 - Personal study with at-home resources
 - Plan units and lessons yourself to work with a language helper
 - Plan for set-backs
- Have a language coach

Implementing your plan

- Start at the beginning and continue until you leave
- Make it proficiency oriented
- Make it balanced
- Integrated resources approach
- Don't assume one won't work for you because it didn't work for someone else
- NO magic bullet or formula



Evaluate

- Every month or so, check your goals
- Re-work what is not working
- Try different things at different times of your learning to match what your needs are and what works for you.
- Don't be afraid to try new things
- Set new goals



Revelationary medical professionals show Jesus