

Language Acquisition and Effective Gospel Contextualization

Jonathan Sharp

For the cross-cultural Christian worker, language learning is a fundamental part of communicating and contextualizing the gospel message. After all, Paul writes that people cannot call on Christ if they have not believed in him, and they cannot believe in him unless they have heard about him (Rom. 10:14). Missionary-sending agencies normally value language acquisition. But in practice, language learning at times can be fraught with difficulties for missionaries.

First, language acquisition is simply not an easy task. Research shows that attaining basic fluency in a new language normally takes an investment of at least 480 to 720 hours.¹ Prioritizing such a time-intensive task can be challenging while dealing with pressures of life and family and facing so many other tasks that need to be done. There are no shortcuts to effective language learning. Because of this difficulty, a temptation for missionaries is to default to English or another trade language.

¹ Peter Rubenstein and Bryan Lufkin, "How to learn a language in an hour a day," *BBC*: <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20190219-how-to-learn-a-language-in-an-hour-a-day> , accessed 20 September 2023.

In fact, English is the common language in much of the world today like Greek was in New Testament times. In other regions of the world, Spanish, Hindi, Mandarin, Arabic or another language may be the common trade language. Missionaries sometimes assume that their use of the heart language is not as strong as the English of the people they are reaching. This easier route to ministry in English or a trade language can be tempting. Years ago, I observed the consternation of missionaries in the Andes Mountains of Peru when told that they were required to learn the language of the indigenous peoples. They did not understand why they needed to go to so much trouble when they thought that everyone spoke enough Spanish. Their ministry context was typical of many parts of the world. The trade language--Spanish in this case--was necessary to live and communicate in the country. However, a country may have many people groups who speak different mother tongues. Often there are fewer resources for learning these languages, making this task even more difficult. But I have observed that subsequent missionaries in the Peruvian Andes have worked more effectively evangelizing and planting churches among indigenous groups as they have emphasized learning the heart language of the people. They have seen that through the heart language of people, faith can take root and be expressed and understood more deeply.

Koine Greek was the common language of the Eastern Mediterranean world during New Testament times.² Yet with the coming of the Holy Spirit at the birth of the church, we see the heart language of the people used, not the common trade language. Observers that had come from many nations for the Festival of Weeks were bewildered by the miracle of hearing followers of Jesus declare the wonders of God in their own mother tongues (Acts 2:6-12). These travelers would have been proficient enough in Greek to get by. Perhaps they even knew Aramaic or even some Latin. But this day God chose to speak to people in their own heart languages. The Spirit clearly showed

² Edwin Arthur, "Koine Greek and the Missio Dei": https://www.sil.org/system/files/reapdata/13/71/10/137110192086627701320378479176302680043/Arthur_Koine_Greek_and_the_Missio_Dei.pdf, accessed 20 September 2023.

God's plan to extend the kingdom outside of just Israel and to the nations. Use of the heart language shows that the message is not just for one group of people; the message is for all. Using their heart languages cut through barriers quickly, allowing them to get to the heart of the gospel and preparing people to be open to hear it.

A motivation for learning the heart language is recognizing that language is an essential part of people's culture; culture and language are inseparable. We can never understand a culture well without learning the language well.³ Missionaries unprepared to learn heart language and culture effectively can easily end up establishing *transplanted churches* that reflect the missionaries' home culture more than the local context.⁴ Kraft notes that, while sometimes necessary to introduce some foreign concepts, the application of too many foreign concepts and customs to the practice of a new faith results in a religion that feels foreign to nationals: "It's as if they were learning to follow a foreign Christ and to speak their language with a foreign accent."⁵ Fluency in the heart language, not just a trade language, is necessary to think culturally and express the gospel in culturally relevant ways, allowing the gospel to genuinely take root in the culture.

This principle of communicating in the heart language is relevant, but challenging, in an increasingly multicultural, global environment. The use of trade language in ministry is often necessary, especially as we seek to see multicultural expressions of the Gospel. The Apostle Paul is an example of using trade languages out of necessity.⁶ Wisdom is needed to know when a general trade language needs to be used in a multicultural environment, and

³ Clyde Davidson, "Language Learning for Missions is Worth It," *Radical*: <https://radical.net/article/language-learning-for-missions/>, accessed 29 July 2023.

⁴ Gailyn Van Rheenen, "Transplanted and Contextualized Churches," <http://www.missiology.org/blog/GVR-MR-17-Transplanted-and-Contextualized-Churches>, accessed 28 July 2023.

⁵ Charles H. Kraft, *Issues in Contextualization* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2016), 19.

⁶ Paul's pioneering calling and gifts did not allow the time for learning local languages. His calling was to get the gospel to anywhere people had not heard. He had to use common

when and how the heart languages of people should to be used. For example, we have seen many internationals attend our church plant in Lisbon. Any given night we have groups meeting in Portuguese as well as English and can have people from up to 10 different countries represented. In these cases we are relying on the two main languages spoken among the group, yet we have seen a disconnect from some of the internationals until we find someone who can speak to them in their heart language and get them a copy of the Bible in their heart language. While we can partner together and do ministry through the trade languages, we have seen the most response and the most fruit when we find someone who can bridge the gap between their heart language and our trade language.

The practice of world religions around the world, unfortunately even Christianity at times, often includes elements of syncretism, such as the incorporation of elements of folk religion.⁷ To avoid syncretism, deep discipleship and healthy leadership development are necessary. Proficient use of the heart language is necessary for healthy discipleship. Missionaries who are not able to communicate well in a people's heart language will likely find it difficult to have deep spiritual conversations and explain many essential concepts.

My wife has a good friend she was discipling who loved using English and was very proficient in it. Yet when she talked about personal matters—about her relationship with family or her boyfriend, about stresses, about hurts or even about her biggest dreams—she always switched mid-sentence, probably without realizing it, from English to her native language. All the Bible study and application and prayer time was always in her language, not in English. She defaulted to her heart language.

trade language for this task. However, this does not mean that the leadership that he helped disciple and raise up did not function in local heart languages.

⁷ Brooks Buser, "Three Reasons the Church Needs Fluent Missionaries," *Radical*: <https://radical.net/article/church-fluent-missionaries/>, accessed 27 July 2023.

Language study is also important for Christian workers to personally adapt to life in another culture and to have deep friendships. One study found that missionaries who do not experience continuous culture and language learning reported having a shorter, less fulfilling term of service.⁸ Language proficiency opens the doors for meaningful interactions and friendships within the host culture, helping produce a fulfilling life and more fruitful ministry. I have observed workers in my context from organizations that do not emphasize language learning. The worker's lives seem to mainly function in a foreign bubble of English-speaking expatriates. Language and culture learning help to break this bubble, allowing workers to engage meaningfully within the host culture.

Learning a people's heart language is also a powerful way of showing God's love. Many minority people groups have had their language and culture rejected by their society and government. We show people that we love and value them as we learn their language and culture.⁹ Jesus is the ultimate example of this in his act of incarnation. He took on human language and culture as his own. He even endorsed the disrespected Galilean culture and language, considering them fit vehicles for God's message.¹⁰ Jesus's incarnation is our example of perfect love in which he identifies with people, serves them, and gives himself sacrificially for them.

Pitfalls to avoid

While intentional language acquisition is a foundational part of the missionary task, I believe there are ways that workers can lose a healthy balance

⁸ Detlef Bloecher, "Continuous Language and Culture Studies are Indispensable," <https://www.theimtn.org/main/documents/articles/Continuous%20Language%20Studies%2011714.pdf>, accessed 27 July 2023.

⁹ Catherine Gaul, "Why Learning a New Language Is Hard But Still Worth It," <https://www.wycliffe.org/blog/posts/why-learning-a-new-language-is-hard-but-still-worth-it>, accessed 28 July 2023.

¹⁰ Kraft, *Issues in Contextualization*, 31.

between language learning and practical ministry. Garrison warns of a mentality of sequentialism that can lead a worker to put off essential elements of the missionary task until after becoming proficient in language. He writes that a characteristic of Christian movements is that missionaries model gospel proclamation from the beginning, even before language proficiency.¹¹ Some Christian workers tend to avoid the work of the ministry, evangelism, and disciple-making until becoming proficient in language. However, much language can be learned through practical ministry. God uses our gospel witness, even despite weakness in our language proficiency.

We do not need to wait until we are perfectly proficient to start ministering. I first started language and culture study when I was a teenager and Latin-Americans moved into my town and accepted invitations to our church. Since I was the one willing to learn Spanish to communicate, I soon was the one teaching the adult Spanish-language Sunday School class and translating sermons into Spanish. I learned Spanish and culture much more quickly because I was “in over my head,” immersed in meaningful ministry. We must seek to follow God’s wisdom and direction to avoid the extremes: (1) overly disengaging from ministry until mastering language and (2) failing to prioritize learning language and culture. In many cases, it may be necessary to refrain from overinvolvement in ministry for a time in order to receive classes or tutoring in the local language. Wisdom is necessary for the appropriate balance.

Another pitfall to avoid is overly focusing on our own language proficiency and cross-cultural communication to the neglect of the development of local ministry partners. While this task is important, we should not assume that effective language learning will necessarily guarantee fruitful ministry. The reality is that the most effective contextualization and communication of the gospel will likely come from cultural insiders. The apostle Paul, during his missionary journeys, left us an example of developing and

¹¹ David Garrison, *Church Planting Movements: How God Is Redeeming a Lost World* (Bangalore, India: WIGTake Resources, 2007), 308.

entrusting the work to local leaders and ministry partners.¹² We should have the humility to recognize that as local leaders are developed, they will be able to communicate the gospel, make disciples and establish churches more effectively than we outsiders can. Our task is to equip and release these leaders.

In our context, we have valued working toward higher language and culture proficiency among the people we serve. But at the same time, my wife and I seek to invest in and equip Hindi-speaking and Arabic-speaking national partners to make disciples and plant churches among these immigrant segments, despite not knowing their languages. In this case, the national partners have made much of the effort to bridge the language and cultural gap. Paul himself had to use the trade language in some circumstances, resulting in some misunderstandings by the locals in Lystra (Acts 14:11-15). But despite this confusion that occurred, a church was established and disciples were made. God can choose to work and use us in many ways. But the principle remains that in order for the gospel to get to new places and new peoples, cross-cultural workers must do the demanding work of learning language and culture in order to effectively communicate and contextualize the gospel.

Helpful tips to improve language learning

There is a misconception that children learn language better and faster than adults. They are able to learn some aspects such as pronunciation and intonation easier than adults, but overall, their capacity to learn a language

¹² Examples include elders appointed at the end of the first missionary journey (Acts 14:21-23), Lydia and her household being entrusted with the ministry in Philippi (Acts 16:40), and Priscilla and Aquila's ministry in Corinth and later in Ephesus (Acts 18:1-4, 18-19). Paul's personal greetings in Romans 16 also testify to the numerous leaders raised up and entrusted to ministry by Paul.

does not seem to be significantly higher.¹³ Children are simply put more often into situations where they have to learn the language quickly; for example, they go to school 8 hours a day in the host language and must make friends with kids who do not have a base in English. We, on the other hand, leave our language classes and revert to English. We have someone translate for us when we get stuck or switch the conversation to English. We talk to friends back home or escape with English media at the end of the day. In short, we do not force ourselves to learn the language the way we force our children, yet we are all capable of language learning. Here are a few suggestions that could help in the language learning process:

1. Begin with a humble attitude and be willing to make mistakes. Use the language. Try it out. Don't let a language mistake make you hesitant. Boldly go out and try the words you know.
2. Try to immerse yourself in the language. As easy as it is to revert to English, try to stay in your host language as much as possible. Develop and maintain friendships in the language. Listen to podcasts, read a news article, watch TV in the language, listen to the local radio, etc. When we do these things, we not only absorb more of the language, but we also learn more about the culture and its values.
3. Make small consistent improvements over time. This goes a long way in learning a language. Do a little each day. Break it into small, bite-sized pieces. Challenge yourself to learn and use a few new words each day. Even once you pass a fluency test, keep it up. Read a few pages of a book in the language each day. Memorize Scripture in your host language

¹³ Where do you go from here? Maybe you are convinced that learning the heart language is important, but maybe you are overwhelmed by the thought of learning another language. Maybe you even think you are too old to do it. Maybe you just don't know where to start. Lindsay Patterson, "Do Children Soak Up Language Like Sponges?," *The New York Times*: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/16/parenting/children-language-development.html>, accessed 29 July 2023.

this year. Find what works for you and keep at it. Five minutes a day long-term really do add up.

4. To begin, focus on practical, everyday language. Begin with what you need to know and use to survive and build relationships. Start with a few simple Bible stories that you can use to connect with your people group. As you improve, add more complexity and variety to your language learning.
5. Find language partners to practice with. Besides tutors, find people who can help teach you about the language and culture. Find nationals who are good at evangelism and have them help you learn tools and terms in the language. Find someone who is good at discipleship and have them do the same with discipleship tools. Coming in asking for help instead of having all the answers not only helps us learn the language, but it helps us learn more about the reality where we are as well as helping develop trust and building partnerships.
6. Learn to pray in the host language as soon as possible. We often revert to our own heart language in prayer, but there is something powerful in praying for someone in their heart language. Even when teaching a theological English class at our local seminary, I close by praying for the students and their specific requests in their language instead of English. It is meaningful for them. The effort to understand should be on our side, not on our people, so begin learning short prayers in the host language and use them.

These practices can help us lay a strong foundation for effective cross-cultural ministry.

Jonathan Sharp has served with the International Mission Board in Portugal since 2013. He teaches evangelism and missions at a local seminary and is involved with church planting. He hold a Pd.D. in Missions from New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary. He is married to Bethany and has two daughters.