Light from the Low Performance Language Learner

Robert W. Blair
LIGHT FROM THE LOW PERFORMANCE LANGUAGE LEARNER

Robert W. Blair

I have a son who plays the piano by ear. Both hands. Melody, rhythm, chording and all. By some incredible magic he can pick out almost any piece, from familiar hymns to Beethoven sonatas. And he hasn't taken piano. He can't even read music. All he can do is play it. He doesn't have to think about it, he just lets the music come out the end of his fingers. But that's not enough. This same boy swims. Not like your ordinary swimmer. He is a fish—smooth, powerful and fast. He was a high school swim champion. Yes, my son is an athlete and a musician (not to mention his other fine qualities), and what's important here, he seems to have been born that way, born with what we call musical athletic talents or propensities.

Then there's his old man. Through some fluke of genetics, the father of this boy, though he studied trombone for many years, can't for the life of him figure out how to go about playing a piece of the piano by ear. Not even "My Country Tis of Thee." And although he learned to swim early in life, that same father can't put together in a respectable way the components of any but the sidestroke. In fact he moves through water with the grace of a trudging freighter in high seas. It's not that he hasn't tried to learn these things. It's evidently something or some combination of things that he just doesn't have working right. He's not wired for those things. It doesn't help for the son to say, "Dad, this piece is easy." Or, "Dad, the butterfly stroke is simple, just do what I'm doing. You can do it. You just have to FEEL it in your muscles. It's that easy!"

What does the appreciation of my son's special abilities teach me? Well, I enjoy languages. I enjoy learning languages, I enjoy designing language instruction, and I enjoy teaching languages. These things come relatively easy to me and I've had quite a lot of experience with them. What is not easy to understand is why anyone should find difficult what I find easy. Isn't it interesting that most language teachers you know and most language textbook writers are themselves skilled language learners. They not only know the language inside and out but they also know the technical language of grammar and phonetics. What they often don't know is what it is like to be a beginner, an unsure and perhaps untalented beginner.

If I were to take up piano or swimming at this point in life, I think I might rather have as my teacher someone with the same kind of psychological and physical barriers I face.
in these things, perhaps someone who overcame the barriers at a mature age in learning to swim or play the piano. At least he would be more likely to understand me in my predicament than would someone like my son for whom there are no such barriers.

My concern in this paper is with people who seriously need and want to learn a language in a short time, people such as missionaries, Peace Corps volunteers and the like. Also my concern is with language training programs such as the LTM which are designed to give the necessary initial concentrated language training to such people. You understand of course that these kinds of training institutes have to deal with the entire range of talent and motivation. The challenge of LTM is not like that of a football coach with a select roster of already accomplished and very promising athletes to organize and train for mock war on the gridiron. Not at all. The LTM's mission is to train all who are sent on foreign language missions. They may be fresh out of high school or they may be senior citizens, they may be farmers, grandparents, engineers, retired teachers, doctors, or others. Whoever they are they face the awesome task of learning a language well enough to function effectively in their new roles within a short period.

Let's step back and take a look at that for a moment. To learn a language well enough to function effectively in a new social role is no mean task for even a gifted learner to accomplish over several years' time. Even to assume a new social role, a new identity, a new projection of self, is no easy matter. To do that in a new language is simply awesome. We language professionals don't often admit to ourselves how truly awesome it is. In fact it almost seems as if there is a conspiracy to hide from ourselves, and certainly from the public, the fact that language learning, if pursued to the point of mastery, is a very long and enormously complicated process. Not one that can be programmed through a series of academic courses. Yet language mastery is the aim of every missionary sent to LTM, and he is not given much time to attain it.

Actually, of course, there is an extremely wide range among otherwise normal adults in their language learning abilities. At the top of the scale are the "natural athletes," individuals who learn all aspects of languages with relative ease, while at the other end is a significant percentage of people who, no matter how much they may need to learn or want to learn, and no matter how hard they try, experience great frustration in their attempts to acquire fluency in a new language. Yes, there have been some frustrated learners at LTM, some who have not been able to "put it together," And of course, what is more serious, there are some missionaries who even after several months in the
mission field still feel frustrated in their attempts to speak and understand the language.

Let me turn now to the more specific concern of my paper. It is these low-performance learners. More particularly it is the older people--referred to in the mission field sometimes as the "older couples." As a group the older people constitute a unique challenge to an intensive language training program. They come scared. Unsure. Even though they may have been able learners in their youth, they now feel at a disadvantage. It takes a great deal of faith and courage for them to undertake such a learning program.

I am interested particularly in this group of learners for two reasons. (1) I believe that they are capable of making important contributions to the solution of the world's problems if only they can equip themselves with communicative competence. And (2) I believe that from them we can possibly learn more about language learning and language teaching than from any other group.

Let me expand on these two reasons. It is not always the gifted language learners who are qualified in other important respects for given missions. In fact the men and women who are longest on needed skills and experience are seemingly often shortest on language learning potential. But think what it would mean if doctors and dentists, engineers and business managers, educators, agronomists, and others who are so plentiful in North America and the Western World could be equipped with the communicative competence to reach out and give of their expertise to the less fortunate people in the world. Rather than retiring to the rocking chair to play golf and watch the stock market and talk endlessly about their grandchildren, people could, if motivated and equipped, change the world. And their lives might be longer and happier. And what if the experience and know-how of bishops and counselors and quorum presidents and youth leaders and welfare directors and relief society workers and others with long and faithful experience in the Church, people such as we have in this area by the thousands and tens of thousands, what if these people could prepare themselves to contribute to the spiritual and temporal uplift of areas of the world that lack trained leadership.

If you are aware of what President Kimball has been saying about lengthening our stride, you know there is great need and the invitation for older people who can arrange their affairs to take on the challenge of a foreign mission. I personally believe that the LDS people will respond to this invitation in large numbers. The LTM will be crowded with older couple missionaries. And what a great uplifting power they will be in the mission field when they can master the language and become fully functional and comfortable in their roles.
Now as to what can be learned from older language learners. You are aware of course of the recent tremendous growth in research on language acquisition and language learning. Whole disciplines have evolved that have bearing on this research: psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, various branches of theoretical linguistics, language teaching methodology and others. There are now shelves of studies on child language acquisition, on language teaching in the schools, on bilingual education and the like. But there is scarcely any research that has focused on the problem of acquiring a new language at the age of retirement. There is little research on adult language training designed specifically to facilitate and accelerate intensive learning for the frightened yet motivated language learner that most of our "older couple missionaries" are.

Why is this? It is a fact of history that most intensive language training programs are designed and operated mainly to accommodate a relatively homogeneous class for average learners. The program prescribed for all consists of uniform objectives, a uniform sequence of units and usually a set course duration. Such a program is optimally cost-efficient if a modest rate of attrition can be tolerated, i.e., if it is acceptable that some students in the program will fail or be severely frustrated. The training program is designed and targeted for a more or less uniform student profile, instructional and developmental costs are minimal, teacher training is standardized, and, if the student population more or less fits the profile, the attrition and low achievement rates can be kept at a tolerable level.

But given this policy, which as far as I know is the policy of all intensive language training institutions such as the Defense Language Institute (DLI), Foreign Service Institute (FSI), and Language Training Mission (LTM), there has been little effort invested in developing approaches or techniques or materials of a philosophy suited particularly to the needs of persons who do not fit the standard profile. Our instructional programs are not very adaptive. They don't easily accommodate the special needs of students who don't fit the pattern.

Now to such agencies as the Peace Corps (PC), the state department, or the military it may not be counted a very serious matter to lose some of their trainees; there are always more to take their place. But in the matter of a mission call it is different. Crippled communicators are a liability. A frustration to themselves and others. That is why I think that vigorous research is now in order to discover how best to help older people equip themselves with a new language and adapt themselves to a new role. Although we have by no means exhausted what we can learn about learning and teaching from research on child language acquisition.
or on strategies and techniques of successful, skilled language learners, from research on bilingualism or on language teaching in the schools, I believe that the most promising new frontier of research on language learning for right now will be in the intensive learning of foreign languages by older people in such programs as the LTM and the mission field. For one thing, this involves actual (or seriously attempted) language acquisition, not just academic exercise in language acquisition, and for another, it focuses on a population of learners rarely considered before.

If that research contributed only to increase our effectiveness in teaching older people, it would be well worth the investment. But I suspect that such research might also yield answers to more fundamental questions we have about language acquisition. Hence I submit that research on this frontier has important scientific as well as very practical implications.

Now I'll let you see some of my personal biases in what I would recommend as some first very practical assumptions that might underlie such research. Although we have recognized that different people learn in different ways and that in language training one man's meat may be another man's poison, we haven't followed this recognition to its logical conclusion: that solutions to many of their problems may be found in the manipulation of instructional alternatives, that low language learning performance of older couples may be more a product of inflexibility, non-adaptive, impersonal approach or other qualities of our instructional systems than it is of factors such as language aptitude (or method aptitude?) that are resident in the student. And that by introducing certain changes into the instructional system we may be able to accommodate the needs of these older learners, by shaping the learner to the method or the method to the learner, or perhaps the learning style of the learner to the teaching style of the instructor or courseware. I would suggest first, then, experimentation with different language training designs, perhaps designs that would allow greater flexibility, that would be more adaptive or personalizable to accommodate the special learning needs and problems of learners whose performance is substandard. I wonder if we cannot anticipate and prevent learning problems before they emerge if we have an instructional system that is rich in content, scheduling, and methodological alternatives, a system that provides effectively for individualization particularly in the exploitation of content and methodological alternatives at the discretion of either the learner or the course supervisor. Let me explain.

I assume that as the art and science of language instruction develops further, the relation between the student, the instructor and the program of instruction will
more nearly parallel the relation between a patient, a physician and a program of treatment. A physician prescribes treatment based on diagnosis and on the accumulation of what he has learned from his own experience treating similar cases, supplemented by what he has learned or can find out from the medical experience of others in treating similar cases. For many cases, where the diagnosis is unambiguously clear and the remedy nearly 100 percent reliable, the doctor can confidently and safely prescribe the same specific treatment for all patients. This is the rifle method, impressive when the aim is sure and the weapon lethal. Many programs of language instruction rest safely on the assumption that a single-track, single menu (table d'hôte), rifle-method approach is adequate for the majority of learners regardless of individual differences. But of course in medicine (as in language learning) not all patients nor all conditions respond alike to the same treatment. In many cases a physician may attack a problem with the shotgun method; he may, for example, prescribe a compound treatment containing several possible remedy components, one or more of which is likely to work in a given case and none of which is likely to injure the patient. So in language training in recent years our more sophisticated programs have attempted to accommodate some student differences through optional supplementary resources and/or multiple-track programs that provide a higher degree of flexibility than the traditional lock-step training course. But just as the highly available, inexpensive patent medicines fail to satisfy the needs of all patients with similar complaints, so also auxiliary resources and multiple-track language courses do not solve all of the problems confronted in the more traditional configuration.

In cases where conventional or patent remedies are not the answer, or where the diagnosis is complicated, a different approach is necessary, an approach that required more experimentation and close cooperation between patient and doctor if a satisfactory treatment program is to be discovered. This approach might be called one of individual experimental accommodation. In this approach it must be recognized that the critical variables of a treatment may not be found in the disease-causing agent alone, but rather, or also, in features of the patient's system. For example, his system may not tolerate treatment with antibiotics. (The language learner may not tolerate treatments with grammar!) In these cases both the patient and the physician run certain risks. To a patient who wants to believe that medical science has absolute answers to every problem it may be a shock to hear his doctor confess that he is uncertain of the diagnosis or that proper treatment of the condition is uncertain. The patient may look for a doctor who is more reassuring—though perhaps less honest. But for the patient who understands something of the complexities of medical
diagnosis and therapy there is no need necessarily for alarm at such a confession. He may be brought to realize that he, the patient, is critically important in helping the doctor diagnose the condition and in implementing a carefully controlled program of cooperative experimentation.

This approach, that of individual experimental accommodation assumes that teaching must be subordinated to learning; that the learner—particularly the low-ability learner—must become a partner with the instructor or course supervisor, giving feedback as to the effect of various learning tasks, techniques and strategies on him; that teacher and learner must cooperate so as to discover how best to exploit all the resources available, including time, materials, background skills and knowledge, propensities, preferences, habits, etc., etc.

In attempting to account for the fact that adults learn languages with varying degrees of efficiency and success, we may be tempted to attribute the difference mainly or even entirely to differences in "language aptitude," "intelligence," or other relatively unchangeable native endowments or acquired propensities. But the difference between high and low performance language learners may in fact be due in large part to one or more factors that are subject to change through training. It is probably the case that the more efficient language learners know something or do something or have something that the less efficient do not know or do not have. Assuming this to be so, we are asking the question whether the less efficient (but otherwise normal) student can be led to acquire some of whatever it is their more successful peers have in the way of cognitive knowledge, efficient learning strategies, confidence and other positive attitudes, habits, etc., any of which could compensate for other deficiencies.

From experimentation with data-processing models of learning carried out by Gagne, Rohwer, Paivio, and many others, it seems probable that for some learners the initial steps of language learning can be significantly accelerated and smoothed by the use of various kinds of elaborative prompts, distinctors and mnemonic facilitators. From experimentation with Gattegno's "Silent Way" tactics it appears probable that for certain learners learning can be facilitated by withholding the types of prompts that characterize current language teaching practices, forcing the learner to develop his own hypothesis-testing strategies and his own "inner criteria of rightness." From experimentation by Asher and others it is suggested that some language learners may be severely disadvantaged, even "traumatized," by a training sequence that places early emphasis on the development of speech skills before an adequate foundation of receptive skills is built. In short, these and other lines
of experimentation lead us to believe that effective techniques and strategies for language learning can be taught, that low-ability learners can be trained to learn efficiently.

Just as the last few years have seen, I think, a productive marriage between BYU and the Translation Services Division in the investigation of translation theory and process, so it seems to me it is time for a marriage between BYU and the LTM in research on language acquisition and language training. Now is the time for a genuine interdisciplinary concerted research effort. We need to know now what we could have learned if research had been joined 10 years ago. We cannot wait for the rest of the world to give us the solutions we need. They may not yet be asking the questions that are staring us in the face. If we are to move ahead with better solutions over the next decade we must invest now in research and experimentation in order to construct a viable theory of second language acquisition and design language training accordingly. And one area where the need is demonstrably acute and the potential high for a significant pay-off is that of language acquisition by older persons.