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Language-Learning Strategies for Senior Missionaries

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The Missionary Training Center has experienced remarkable growth in the number of missionaries trained in recent years. In 1978, 7,800 missionaries were trained. 11,415 were trained in 1979, and we project there will be 14,500 in 1980. Historically, the Church's missionary training program has focused primarily on 19-21-year-old missionaries. In October 1978, 2.5 percent of the missionaries were retired couples and older sisters or senior missionaries, as we have begun referring to them. One year later, in October 1979, these senior missionaries comprised 17.5 percent of the total. Nearly all of this increase has been among English-speaking missionaries. Unfortunately, the need for senior missionaries to serve in foreign language areas equals or surpasses the need to work in English. An example will illustrate: Last year we trained approximately 40 couples in Spanish. The requests from the field for couples was close to 400 couples. Obviously, the need far outweighs the current available resources. This deficiency raises several interesting questions: What are we doing to encourage foreign language study in the Church, especially among older people? What are the factors that prevent or discourage older adults from learning foreign languages? Does the traditional approach to foreign language learning meet the special needs of these adult learners?

Alvin Toffler, in his book Future Shock, refers to the validity and relevance of foreign language study in its present form. "Tens of millions of children today are forced by law to spend precious hours of their lives grinding away at material whose future utility is highly questionable. (Nobody even claims it has much present utility.) Should they spend as much time as they do learning French, or Spanish or German? Anyone who thinks the present curriculum makes sense is invited to explain to an intelligent 14-year-old why algebra or French or any other subject is essential for him. Adult answers are almost always evasive. The reason is simple: the present curriculum is a mindless holdover from the past."

I personally feel that Toffler has overstated his case, but I believe he has some valid criticisms which we should examine, especially as they relate to adult learners. I fear that we have "too many books, too much stress on grammar, too little emphasis on culture," and I might add, with reference to adult learners, an unrealistic expectation for early production of the foreign language. I would agree with Wilga Rivers' assessment that "the contribution of foreign-language study that is truly educational in the sense that it expands the student's personal experience of his environment, and truly humanistic in that it adds a new dimension to his thinking, is the opportunity it provides.
for breaking through monolingual and monocultural bonds. Such an experience reveals to the student that there are other ways of saying things, other values and attitudes than those to which his native language and culture have habituated him.4 I believe then, that we need to reevaluate the approach we have traditionally taken in teaching foreign languages to adult learners.

Adults will almost always demand to know the rationale behind the method of instruction because habits that were acquired unconsciously in the first language tend to be formed consciously in the second. This being the case, whatever techniques are used in teaching, the adult learner will develop his own strategies to learn the language. A person's approach to the task can be completely independent to the way he is exposed to the theory. Regardless of the input, it is ultimately beyond the teacher's control how the learner selects and organizes the data. For example, even if it were proven that mental translation into the L-1 impeded second-language learning, that would not keep some students from translating every sentence.

I believe we should base our instruction to adult learners on real-life or simulated experiences they will likely encounter in their interactions with others in the new linguistic environment. The most effective learning will occur when there's a clear and simple correlation between the non-linguistic event and the talk that is generated. Children, for example, initially take the main lexical items from the sentences they hear, determine reference to those items, and then use their knowledge of the reference to decide what the semantic structure intended by the speaker must be. This task is much more complicated for adult learners, who tend to scrutinize all lexical items equally.

Once children have determined the semantic structure or meaning of an utterance, their final task is to know the syntactic devices such as word order, prepositions, etc. which correlate with the semantic structures. Such a strategy will yield most of the main syntactic devices of the language. The importance of this strategy can be seen in the results of an experiment with an intensive Russian course in which meaning was not introduced into the imitation and discrimination drills until relatively late in the 17-week program, and then meaning clues were introduced only incidentally. At the end of the course the students scored below chance levels on the Army's Russian achievement test. Later, after they had entered the Defense Language Institute program along with untrained students, it was found that they remained at a lower proficiency level than the other learners, and in fact, never caught up with them. Apparently, they had subconsciously decided that Russian was meaningless or likely their strategies had led them to develop meanings without appropriate situational cues and these conflicted with the actual themes.

The failure to apply this strategy correctly may account for the difficulties encountered by many older foreign language learners. The adult, because of his ingrained independence on reading skills, has a tendency to see the language strictly in terms of vocabulary. Thus he
attempts to understand individual words instead of formulating hypotheses about the complete utterance. The normal communication strategy of inference in the first language can be carried over to the second language learning situation as a guessing tactic. When a good language learner hears a sentence, he processes the parts he comprehends and infers the rest. He uses the topic, setting, or attitudes of the speaker as clues to meaning. In general, he attends to the context of the speech act in such a way as to isolate the features of maximum intelligibility. For instance, a good learner will proceed with English intonation and stress, which are often more crucial to meaning than the absolute correctness of individual sounds. This ability to draw inferences and to tolerate the risk it involves is a highly individual thing and changes significantly with age.

Another critical concern I have concerning adult language acquisition is the often unrealistic expectation that students should produce spoken utterances early in the course of study. All who work with adults are aware of the negative affective variables and high degree of threat associated with intense production-oriented learning situations. At the Missionary Training Center we have encountered this concern among senior missionaries. We have found most of these missionaries to be highly motivated, but very fearful. Nearly all of them lack confidence in their ability to learn a foreign language and are inhibited in their attempts to produce the language. We have resorted to tutoring to diminish this threatening environment, but even tutoring fails to avoid negative affect when husband and wife move at different rates. I believe a radical shift in emphasis and approach is needed if we are to effectively prepare adults to function in foreign languages.

Recent research confirms the validity of listening comprehension as a viable method of language acquisition. I believe a pre-MTC listening comprehension-based approach would help us achieve the goal of training more people in foreign languages in a non-threatening environment. David Butler, in a report on listening comprehension for the Missionary Department, points out the value of listening comprehension in language acquisition. He quotes Dr. Tracy Terrell: "Learning is the conscious process of studying and intellectually understanding the grammar of L₂. Acquisition, on the other hand, refers to the unconscious absorption of general principles of grammar through real experiences of communication using L₂."

Terrell also points out that immigrants and adults in many different cultures are able to acquire proficiency in a second language without formal training, provided "there is a real need and motivation for it." Mere exposure to the language is a necessary but not sufficient condition for acquisition. Krashen (1976) indicates that adults are able to acquire language without formal instruction, but "informal environments must be intensive and involve the learner directly in order to be effective." There is strong reason to believe that the real need and motivation Terrell mentions exists among prospective senior missionaries. Numerous church materials and doctrines already
familiar to these people could form the basis of a listening comprehension program. Dave Butler suggests that communication tasks might include: learning gospel or proselyting principles, classifying common parables or sayings as being consistent or inconsistent with the gospel, recognizing correct and incorrect application of teaching principles by listening to missionaries respond to nonmembers in the target language.  

Due to the affective drawbacks of early production, there seems to be real justification and need for research into delaying speaking and emphasizing listening. Speech practice is not necessary to acquire a second language. Language is a single system for which there is a single set of rules, not a separate set for listening, speaking, reading and writing. Dave Butler quotes E.H. Lenneberg's report of the case of an 8-year-old boy with a congenital inability to speak. Yet this boy was completely capable of understanding language. He could easily respond to tape recorded instructions without any nonverbal cues available.

While there is a high correlation between the four language skills, there are strong arguments for putting the receptive skill of listening first in the training sequence. Butler suggests five reasons:

"First, an early stress on speaking gets in the way of understanding and getting a feel for the language as a system. Gary (1976), Nord (1978) and Davies (1978) all point out that an early focus on speaking produces language interference because the learner is required to produce before he has had sufficient opportunity to assimilate the rule system of the target language. He is likely to revert to the language habits he knows best, those of his own native language.

Second, a simultaneous demand for both speaking and listening performance tends to produce task overload during initial stages of language acquisition. Tell and Ferguson (1974) compared the recall of two groups, one of which pronounced words in a list aloud while the others read the items silently or heard them spoken by the experimenter. It was found that requiring the respondent to actively vocalize the words interfered with effective recall. Asher (1969) also found that requiring students to speak at the same time they were listening to target language commands significantly retarded listening comprehension performance.

Third, there is a significant affective advantage for a listening approach to the target language, particularly for those who tend to be problem learners such as the couple missionaries. Gary (1976) points out that it is stressful and embarrassing to produce a language that you do not understand.

Fourth, it should be noted that, in an important sense, receptive skills are more necessary to a missionary than productive skills. As Gary (1976) points out, "one can speak using a very restricted subset of familiar language structures, but he cannot force the other
speaker to use only language which he [the missionary] knows.'

Fifth, delaying speaking during the beginning stages of second language acquisition does not seem to adversely affect speaking proficiency at a later point. In a controlled experiment with servicemen learning Russian at the Defense Language Institute, Postovsky (1974) tested their speaking ability after six weeks of intensive training in the language. With the experimental group, oral practice was delayed for four weeks and written production was substituted (dictation practice, written practice of pattern drills, writing dialogues from memory). During the first four weeks the control group was given practice in oral imitation, oral pattern drills, and dialogue recitation. Both groups had the same language content, common vocabulary, and were given an equal emphasis on comprehension of materials. At the six-week point in the intensive training program, the experimental group (with the four-week delay in speaking) actually did significantly better on a speaking test than the control group. As might be expected, the experimental group also did significantly better on a listening test.10

The affective advantages to a listening comprehension approach or other non-threatening solutions are obvious. Recently we trained several couples who were called to South Africa. Two of the couples lived in the Provo-Orem area; the others did not. On their own, these local couples engaged in language study prior to entering the Missionary Training Center. The others had no exposure to Afrikaans prior to the MTC experience. They were asked to evaluate their informal, non-threatening pre-MTC experience, which included a strong listening comprehension component in the environment of their home. These evaluations are insightful.

The husband said: "Having someone come to introduce the Blacks and us to Afrikaans was a great blessing. It cut the 'culture shock' factor down to a minimum, because we had some feelings for the language before we were subjected to an intensive study program.

Most of our fears come from suddenly being confronted with something that is entirely unfamiliar. Any preparation which precedes intensive study is helpful. In starting a difficult, technical book, the wise person flips through the table of contents to get an overview (or "feeling") for what he is going to study.

This teacher's labors with us served exactly the same purpose—plus the fact that his very positive attitude encouraged us in starting what could have been a traumatic experience. In all, it was a most helpful and encouraging experience." Edward L. Wheatfill

His wife commented: "I'm glad we have the opportunity to tell you what a difference it made to have our teacher work with us for a month prior to our coming to the MTC.

The language was a great concern to me. With his introduction to the language, I felt much more secure in my ability to learn the language.
There was much more pressure on the couples who hadn't had any introduction to their field of labor. We had a good understanding of the people and the things that were expected of us.

There are so many unknowns when you are called on a mission, especially a foreign one. His working with us really helped in our adjustment.

It's a great challenge for an older couple to grasp so many new concepts so quickly. He also gave me an enthusiasm for my mission and a love for the people because of his love of his work. It was a great help to me." Ila Wheatfill

Comments from the second couple were as follows: "I appreciated very much the time our teacher took to come to our house to give us a head start on Afrikaans before we arrived at the MTC. It was not all new and strange to me and therefore we could start our language training with much more confidence. And having that much background, I think, has made it much easier to move ahead. There is so little time here to learn a language, that I think any background one can receive before he comes here is very helpful. I think that if a basic language tape could be sent to every language missionary at the time he receives a call it would be a big help, unless you think it might discourage some and make them change their minds," Spencer Black

The wife said: "Our teacher, by visiting with us in our home prior to entering the MTC, helped us in many ways. First, it gave us a good positive feeling about learning a language at an older age. Second, we were somewhat familiar with the language and could even say we had a feel for the pronunciation and flow of the words. It gave us a tremendous boost to have that much pre-training (one month). Our vocabulary is probably larger than those not having the advantage of this pre-training.

I guess what I am saying lastly is that we came in with more confidence that we could actually learn a language. It was surely the difference between us feeling good about the whole thing and not. I can't say enough positive about the help the preview of Afrikaans has been to me." Venna Black

In conclusion, let me reiterate that the need is urgent to better train our senior missionaries in foreign languages. The research literature is pitifully scant in this area, and much needs to be done to identify the optimum strategies and methods for teaching adults. Those of the faculty who are trained in the area of language research and evaluation, and that would include psycholinguistics, should address these issues and provide the field with the necessary data to move ahead assertively. Some unresolved research areas include the following:

1. What is the optimum class size for adult learners?
2. How much does listening comprehension facilitate language acquisition and production and should it precede speaking, reading and writing?
3. How can we effectively relate language learning to the language learner's professional and technical skills?

4. How can we avoid negative affective behaviors and still test language proficiency among adults?

5. We need to develop some valid placement instruments.

6. Why do adults drop out?

7. What are the important characteristics and qualities of the effective teacher of adult students?

8. What are the motivational factors involved in adult language acquisition?

These and many other questions must be resolved as we approach the challenging task of better preparing our senior saints for missionary service.

Innovative, non-threatening methods do exist which we could incorporate. Among these, Silent Way, Natural Method, and Counsel-learning, and especially the latter, hold promise for adult learners. The Church is aware of the need to promote foreign language study. The work of a language task committee chaired by Dr. Bruce Brown has been submitted to the brethren for consideration. These recommendations include promoting home study courses. Jim Taylor, Bob Blair, Grant Harrison and others are working to prepare materials and courses for this purpose. In addition, BYU Continuing Education will sponsor a number of Education Week courses this fall in Spanish to encourage prospective missionary couples and others to study and prepare themselves linguistically.

In spite of these efforts to promote the study of languages, there is a crying need for fundamental research in the area of adult learning. The BYU language and linguistic community is well equipped to perform this necessary research. It is my sincere desire that all who are able will invest time and effort in identifying solutions to these challenges. The linguistic competence of these adult learners and of the entire church should be of vital interest to us all.