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A Comparison of Second Language Learning and Conversion to the LDS Church

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Recently a non-LDS friend of my neighbor was visiting Provo, and for entertainment he decided to tell everyone he was introduced to that he was investigating the Mormon Church. This young man is interested in psychology, and enjoyed watching people's reactions when they heard that he was a potential candidate for baptism. During the course of this charade, however, his harmless form of entertainment became a tell-tale study of Mormon culture. One particular comment he made has especially stuck in my mind. As he was introduced to some passing ward member, he greeted them with the usual, "Hi there! I'm an investigator!" He then paused, and continued, "Well, at least until I get baptized. Then you can leave me out on the porch." As biting as this comment is, it is in many cases true. A number of people who are baptized into the LDS Church are never fully integrated into their wards. Consequently, new members are left alone to learn a culture that is so foreign it is like learning a foreign language. In fact, I have found that the emotional climate of foreign language learning is in many ways the same emotional climate experienced by new members of the LDS Church when they try to integrate into Mormon religion and culture. Accordingly, if we can understand the emotions learners feel when they are learning a foreign language, we should be able to apply that knowledge to helping new converts find their place in the Church.

First, according to William T. Littlewood, learners are most motivated when they are "favourably disposed towards the speakers of the language they are learning" (55). For example, if someone thinks the French are rude snobs who do far too much nuclear testing in the South Pacific, that person is probably not well motivated to learn French. However, a person who loves fashion, wine, and other various French stereotypes is more attracted to the French language, and is therefore

more motivated to learn the language.

Similarly, new LDS members are more motivated to absorb a Mormon lifestyle if they feel favourably disposed towards Church members. Unfortunately, the Mormon culture has become notorious for being exclusive. Like my friend said, converts are often left "out on the porch," distant from the group. Many Mormons need to learn that the number of people in a ward is not limited to the number of names in the ward phone directory.

The second point Littlewood makes is that language students often have to perform in ignorance, which may produce feelings of helplessness and inadequacy (58). They may encounter unfamiliar sounds, such as a trilled "r" or nasal vowels. Often, with cases such as nasalization, an unaccustomed ear cannot distinguish differences in sound. Consequently, students receive comments and corrections that don't always make sense to them. Hence there is confusion rather than confidence, and the students easily become withdrawn.

In much the same way, new LDS converts are easily overwhelmed by the jump from basic missionary discussions to in-depth Gospel Doctrine classes. They are immediately faced with an abundance of unfamiliar terms which leave the new member in helpless ignorance. For example, I recorded the following terms from the discussion of one afternoon's church meetings: the Word of Wisdom, the urim and thummim, calling and election made sure, Liahona, sword of Laban, great and spacious building, cubits, King Noah, being changed in the twinkling of an eye, Adam-omdi-Ahman, telestial, and taking out endowments. Without a working knowledge of how these terms fit into LDS theology, simply following the direction of a lesson is a laborious task; understanding everything is impossible. Without someone to explain unfamiliar terms to the learner, frustration is inevitable.

Further difficulty lies in the fact that students both of languages and of religion have to re-learn many of the conventions of daily living. For example, when studying a foreign language, students have to learn new mannerisms of greeting an acquaintance, eating in public, or making business transactions. There are new definitions of what is polite, what is acceptable, and what is offensive. These new codes of behavior and speech can produce various degrees of "culture shock" or anxiety. While a little anxiety can stimulate a learner to invest more time in the language, too much anxiety can hinder or even halt language learning.

Similarly, new LDS members need to learn Mormon culture and all of its conventions. To me, the most easily seen of these conventions is the Mormon manner of speaking, with its many particular idioms. The most conscious idiomatic changes I have noticed have been in the manner of praying. For example, regard the following two prayers:

Dear God,
 Thank you for today, and for life.
 We are grateful for the lesson that was taught.
 Please help us to remember it.
 Please watch over us and keep us safe.
 Stay with us.
 We need thy guiding hand.
 Help us to stay strong and righteous.
 In Jesus' name, Amen.

That was a prayer offered by a non-member friend of mine. Compare that with the following prayer, which was given in my religion class:

Our most kind and gracious Heavenly Father,
 We come before Thee this day in thanks for this beautiful
 day and for this beautiful building we have to meet in.
 We thank Thee for the words which have been given us,
 and ask Thee to help us remember them, that we might be
 able to use them in our every-day lives.
 We ask Thee to watch over us, that when the time comes
 we might all travel home in safety.
 We say these things in the name of Jesus Christ,
 Amen.

This is just a sample of Mormon idiomatic speech. I consider the quaint clichés important because until I learned to master them, several Church members informed me that I was "doing it wrong." Such statements only made me feel inhibited when the aim was to feel more involved. Littlewood suggests that the best way students can remedy these feelings of inhibition is to "establish friendly contacts in the second language environment, which cushion their relationship with it and make them more willing to expose themselves in the new language." Surely it is understandable that a foreign language student will be more comfortable with a language if they have a patient mentor explaining cultural idiosyncracies. The same idea applies to a religious setting. Even Pres. Benson has stated, "When you make a friend of a person, then you can teach them the gospel" (36). If more ward members (particularly home teachers or visiting teachers) could fill the mentor role first performed by missionaries, then certainly more converts would remain active in the ward.

Lastly, Littlewood points out that the best students of foreign language are those who can tolerate ambiguity without feeling insecure. Learning a second language involves being introduced to enormous amounts of information which cannot all be learned at once for instant reward. Rather, it appears that success in foreign language studies is closely tied to the ability of a student to work for delayed gratifications (Arendt 8) and maintain a strong image of the "anticipated self" (Singer 21). Likewise, new converts will benefit if they can anticipate that one day they will be more culturally literate.

The religious parallel is obvious. I say it is the responsibility of Church members to see that converts are taught hope and endurance; it is our responsibility to welcome them in the ward and help them develop their own Mormon identity. Foreign language learning provides a convenient parallel that allows for clear insights. It is imperative that we learn to implement these insights because, quite frankly, the porch is getting crowded. If we are going to continue to invite people to feast on the words of Christ, we had better be ready to let them in the dining room.

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