

# LANGUAGE ACQUISITION



## *Enhancing Language Learning*

### SCRIPTURE FOCUS

*“Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”* Philippians 2:5-11

*“... 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, and crying out with a loud voice, ‘Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!’”* Revelation 7:9-10

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### QUOTES

*“Don’t be a fool,’ friends told me fifty years ago when I decided to translate the Word for the Cakchiquel Indians, a large tribe in Central America. ‘Those Indians aren’t worth what it would take to learn their outlandish language...They can’t read anyhow. Let the Indians learn Spanish.’ . . . But I couldn’t forget them.”* William Cameron Townsend

*“Your attitude should be the same as that of the most excellent missionaries who have taken on the mind of Christ. These excellent missionaries knew they were completely ethnic and fully competent as leaders in their own culture, but did not consider their own ethnic values, their expertise at home, or even their own language as something they would cling to. On the contrary, they counted their cultural ways as mostly inappropriate in the new context, choosing to add a new cultural side to their personalities. They worked hard at thinking, acting, and talking like the people they came to serve. And having successfully acculturated themselves among the people, they humbled themselves before God and the people and*

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became like servants no matter what the cost...even unto death, but mostly unto inconvenience. As a result, although they did not seek praise, they were praised by the people, to the glory of God the Father.” Greg Holden

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## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

As a result of the readings, discussion and activities in this session, the candidate should be able to:

- Identify factors which influence your language learning capacity.
  - Discuss language learning strategies.
  - Identify resources to enhance language learning.
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## LANGUAGE COMPETENCY

Language competency is a vital aspect of missionary service. The most effective way to share the Good News of Jesus Christ is in the heart language of the people whom you seek to serve. Language communicative competence is not a quick process, nor is it an easy one. There are no shortcuts to language mastery.

Miss Bertha Smith, a Southern Baptist missionary to China (now deceased), used to share the story of a Pentecostal missionary she met who was convinced that if he prayed enough, the Lord would give him the language of the Chinese people he was serving. Sure enough, one day he began speaking in the tongue of the Chinese. Rejoicing, he began preaching. Miss Bertha had the opportunity to hear one of his sermons. The message she heard consisted of cursing the Lord Jesus and spreading lies about a life in Christ. Imagine the shock of this well-intentioned missionary who thought he had found an easier way!

Genesis 11 tells the story of the Tower of Babel, at a time when everyone spoke the same language. Full of pride, the people built a tower “to make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth” (v. 4). God caused them to speak many languages and prevented them from communicating with one another. Their pride caused God to create the languages, and learning languages is still a humbling activity. Someday in the future, you may look back and reflect on some of the most embarrassing and funniest moments of your life as a result of language acquisition.

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## CASE STUDY: MY LANGUAGE LEARNING JOURNEY BEGINS

When I was twelve years old, my father was stationed in Germany. We were living in the town of Kaiserslautern while we waited for housing to become available on the military base. For the first time, I was living in a culture other than American. Our fifth-floor apartment had a tiny balcony off the kitchen from which we could see the bombed remains of a church. While living there, I learned to lean on the window sill like my German neighbors did, enjoying the briskness of the October days and watching the people across the street and on the sidewalk

below. Mattresses aired in the open windows. Sausages hung in the window of the butcher shop down on the corner. I had to learn how to flush the toilet a new way. I was living in a different world from the one I had left in the United States.

My school situation was a different world, too. I was taking German at school from a native speaker. Although she spoke English very well, I had to listen closely to understand her accent. A few days after I joined the class, we had a test. I had never been told how to learn a language and my test results revealed that. Gradually, I discovered some from the teacher and mostly on my own, that Germans spelled sounds differently, and they had some sounds which were hard for me to pronounce. Unconsciously, I began to employ some language learning strategies:

- Remember the English equivalent for sounds that certain letter combinations make (e.g. “sch” in German says “sh” in English).
- Practice making new sounds (e.g. sounds which were spelled with two dots on top called umlauts, and the guttural “ch” sound).
- I also used a strategy I had used for memorizing Scripture: write what you want to remember on a small piece of paper or index card and review the new vocabulary each night before going to sleep. Keep the segments for memorization small. Review them every day.

By the end of the semester, my teacher praised my efforts at learning German: “Sharon, you have made much improvement in my class. For that, I will give you a plain A-minus.” Other than at school, I spoke German very little, although I enjoyed reading the signs to find new words I was learning. When Mother went to the store, I would sometimes accompany her. Occasionally she would ask me to tell her the word she needed in order to buy something, but I was too shy to speak up myself. Occasionally I would frustrate Mother by remaining quiet while she stumbled through her efforts to communicate and then tell her afterward what she should have said.

### MY LANGUAGE LEARNING JOURNEY CONTINUES

Since those early bumbling efforts, I have studied several other languages. The following are the most important strategies that I have learned during these efforts:

#### **Listen**

Surround yourself with the language as much as possible. Listen to tapes, radio, television, and sermons. Loop tapes were very helpful when I was learning Bassa, a language of Liberia. It is a tonal language; I could almost sing it. The loop tape repeated the same sentences or phrases continuously without stopping. The repetition helped me recognize the tones as well as the sounds of the words.

#### **Speak**

The most important strategy I have learned is to practice speaking with native speakers. This can be a terrifying experience at first, especially if you are afraid of making mistakes and being embarrassed or mocked. I have learned, though, that when I have studied languages in Africa, the people are very encouraging and tolerant of mistakes, perhaps because they have learned so many languages themselves. For those who feel afraid to speak to strangers, the temptation is strong to find a good language book or some tapes and study them at home. Limiting oneself

to what can be learned at home becomes a great handicap. Even when working with a tutor, the learner can limit himself to hearing only a few people speak the language. The more people the learner can hear pronounce the words, the better he will understand the language.

### Laugh

Don't take yourself too seriously. The fact is that you will make mistakes, and some of them will be quite embarrassing. People will laugh, so you might as well laugh, too. It beats the alternative. Since Bassa is a tonal language, it brought more laughs than any. English speakers tend to allow our voices to drop at the end of a statement and rise at the end of a question. This can radically change the meaning of the sentence in Bassa. The word for "have" is a high tone, and the word for "sing" is the same word with a lower tone. In learning John 3:16 in Bassa, I had to be careful to say, "whosoever believes in Him will have everlasting life," and not, "sing everlasting life."

My trips to the market were always a source of amusement since very few Americans were trying to learn Bassa. The words for "buy" and "urinate" are very similar in Bassa, so it takes little imagination to see the embarrassing situations a learner can experience there.

### Learn from Context

Observing what people are doing, or how they gesture when speaking can be a help. Beginning learners do not catch every word in a sentence, but many times they have to guess what the meaning is by the few words they do know. Smiling or nodding when you think you understand the meaning can sometimes get a learner in trouble. In Ivory Coast, our pastor was an enormous help in learning French. Fortunately, he was very patient at our attempts to communicate. We were working with Liberian refugees at the time and supervising a project which provided rabbits for food. To my beginner's ears the words for "rabbit" and "bread" sounded the same. When he asked for a rabbit, I nodded and smiled and brought him a piece of bread.

And the language learning journey goes on.

#### REFLECT #1

1. Look again at the Philippians scripture focus. Read from Scripture and also read Greg Holden's paraphrase included in the Quotes section. How can Christ's example be useful to us as missionaries in a new culture?
2. What similarities do you see in the Language Learning Journey above and your own language learning journey? (if applicable) How will your future language learning be different from a class in high school or at university?
3. What weaknesses have you observed in previous language learning experiences?
4. Which of the mentioned language learning strategies can be useful to you?

## FACTORS INFLUENCING LANGUAGE LEARNING CAPACITY

In the past, language learning specialists have advocated that the best way to learn a language is like a child learns it – by listening and mimicking sounds, words, and sentences – total immersion. Proponents of this method of learning would advocate that learners never read or write the language, just listen and talk. Encouraging only one type of language learning can be a mistake though, as it limits the acquisition of the focus language. Language learning is a very individual thing, influenced by several factors:

### **Age and Aptitude of the Learner**

Some people are more naturally gifted for language learning. In general, the older the learner, the greater the learning challenge. A conscientious, 58-year-old colleague was enrolled in a total immersion French class for her first language learning experience. During the class, students were permitted to speak only French. However, they were given some reading and writing assignments for homework. My friend worked very hard to memorize the vocabulary and sentences she was learning. However, she was totally frustrated and discouraged when her efforts met with failure. She had no understanding of the French phonetic system and was seeking to apply English pronunciation principles to the French sentences and vocabulary she was seeking to master. Some basic understanding of French phonetics could have given her some foundational information which might have alleviated the tears of frustration which flowed during breaks from the class.

### **Gender of the Learner**

Women generally use a greater variety of learning strategies. For example, a woman who was a trained artist sketched pictures of various weather conditions on cards which she used to discuss with the people she met in the market while she practiced her language skills. Women and men typically have different learning styles. Women may remember vocabulary easy while men may pronounce words with better tonation. It's important for spouses to not let this be a point of contention. One spouse may learn easier than the other and that's ok.

### **Previous Language Learning Experience of the Learner**

Although the previous languages studied may be very different, the techniques and mnemonic devices used in previous language learning can be helpful in a new language learning situation.

### **Difficulty of the Focus Language**

Tonal languages can be a particularly difficult challenge when a shift in tone can completely change the meaning of a word. Some languages have particularly difficult grammatical structures, e.g. Pulaar has 40 different ways to say "a, an, or the."

### **Tonality of the Language**

Tonal languages present special challenges. People who have a musical ear tend to discern the fine nuances of tone in the language.

### **Availability of Dictionaries, Grammars, and other Learning Resources**

For language learners who are familiar with the International Phonetic Alphabet, a dictionary with the pronunciation in IPA can be a tremendous asset, but these are often not available for less common languages such as those spoken among many unreached people groups.

### **Training of the Language Informant**

For the language learner who would like to have a strong role in determining what aspects of the language he wants to learn, a language helper who is willing to provide the information required would be more of an asset than a language helper who wants to "teach" the cross-cultural worker.

### **Socio-cultural Factors**

#### *Individualist versus Collectivist Cultures*

Americans tend to be individualistic, focusing on the person, whereas collectivist cultures

focus on the group. Depending on the culture, it may be more helpful to practice with several people rather than an individual.

#### *Power Distance*

In speaking with native speakers, be conscious of class differences. Many languages have different pronouns for speaking to someone of higher class. In some cases, such a person may not be willing to speak to the learner, or may not be willing to correct any errors of one they consider a superior.

#### *Uncertainty Avoidance*

Be aware of cultures which are more demonstrative, emotional, and aggressive. An unemotional, relaxed, tolerant approach may not communicate well with them. The reverse is also true.

#### *Masculine and Feminine Culture*

Masculine cultures have expectations for “man’s work” and “woman’s work.” They expect men to be strong and assertive and women to be subservient. Feminine cultures have overlapping cultural roles. The language learner must be cognizant of the differences when speaking to people of the opposite sex.

#### **Learner’s Personality**

Various aspects of one’s personality affect language learning, including self-esteem, inhibition, risk-taking, anxiety, empathy, extroversion. If the learner has been unsuccessful at tackling grammar, for example, his level of self-esteem might be lower than a learner who has mastered grammar in the past. If a learner is afraid to make a mistake, their language learning can be inhibited. A learner who is willing to risk making a mistake will progress more rapidly. A certain amount of anxiety can heighten our performance, but too much will cause us to panic and freeze up. A people person who genuinely cares about the people he is seeking to communicate with will communicate much without even saying a word. Introverts can fall into a trap of studying their vocabulary and perfecting grammar and bypassing the most important aspect of learning the language.

## PERSONALITY AND LANGUAGE LEARNING

Myers-Briggs Type Inventory (MBTI) is a widely used personality inventory. The instrument helps determine one’s preference for four different personality aspects:

### **1. Favorite World**

Do you prefer to focus on the outer world (Extroversion) or on your own inner world (Introversion)?

*Extraversion (E) or Introversion (I)*

### **2. Information**

Do you prefer to focus on the basic information you take in (Sensing) or do you prefer to interpret and add meaning (Intuition)?

*Sensing (S) or Intuition (N)*

## PANORAMA

### 3. Decisions

When making decisions, do you prefer to first look at logic and consistency (Thinking) or first look at the people and special circumstances (Feeling)?

*Thinking (T) or Feeling (F)*

### 4. Structure

In dealing with the outside world, do you prefer to get things decided (Judging) or do you prefer to stay open to new information and options (Perceiving)?

*Judging (J) or Perceiving (P)*

Madeline Ehrman has done extensive research and written several books and articles on the relationship between Myers-Briggs preferences and language learning.

Assets and Liabilities of Myers-Briggs Types (Ehrman 1990)		
PERSONALITY PREFERENCE	ASSET	LIABILITY
E Extroversion	Willing to take conversational risks	Dependent on outside stimulation and interaction
I Introversion	Concentration, self-sufficiency	Need to process ideas before speaking sometimes leads to avoidance of linguistic risks in conversation
S Sensing	Hard, systematic work; attention to detail, close observation	Hindered by lack of clear sequence, goals, syllabus, structure in language or course
N Intuition	Inferencing and guessing from context, structuring own training, conceptualizing and modelbuilding	Inaccuracy and missing important details
T Thinking	Analysis, self-discipline; instrumental motivation	Performance anxiety because self-esteem was attached to achievement, excessive need for control
F Feeling	Integrative motivation, bonding with teachers, good relations lead to good self-esteem	Discouraged if not appreciated, disrupted by lack of interpersonal harmony
J Judging	Systematic work, get the job done	Rigidity, intolerance of ambiguous stimuli
P Perceiving	Open, flexible, adaptable to changes and new experiences	Laziness, inconsistent pacing over the long haul.

Consider your personality strengths and liabilities in making language learning plans. For example, a shy introvert might find it terrifying to speak to numerous strangers on the street. However, inviting a few guests to a safer situation, such as one's home, school, or church, would be less daunting.

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### REFLECT #2

1. If you don't know already, determine your personality type according to Myers-Briggs Type Inventory. Each person is classified by four letters, depending on preference pairs:

Introvert / Extravert

Sensing / iNtuitive

Thinking / Feeling

Judging / Perceiving

Refer to (<http://www.myersbriggs.org/my-mbti-personality-type/mbti-basics/home.htm?bhcp=1>) to explore the assessment and to learn more about the 16 different personality types.

I think my Personality Type is \_ \_ \_ \_

2. Referring to your own personality type, review the *Assets and Liabilities* chart above. What advantages will you probably have with language learning, based on your personality type? What disadvantages do you foresee?

3. What other personal and contextual factors will likely influence your language learning capacity?

## LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES

In teaching, educators are encouraged to appeal to as many senses as possible in presenting new materials. Instead of receiving information only by hearing, students retain more if they receive the information by seeing, touching, and even smelling and tasting, when possible. Each of the senses will provide a different “hook” to help retain the memory. Why should language learning be any different?

Below are some Language Learning Strategies I have used over the years:

### Organize

Take charge of your learning. Determine what topics you need the most. Plan to tackle a different topic each day for variety. Plan times of rest. Determine how much time you should use for your language learning time. Organize your information about the language. Index cards are a great means of organizing vocabulary.

### Analyze

Observe sentence patterns, word endings, and grammatical structure. Use rules to generate possibilities. Paraphrase and use the structure in new sentences.

### Theorize

Make educated guesses as to how to substitute other patterns within patterns that you have already learned. Then try it out with someone who will confirm or correct.

### Memorize

Create mental linkages. Review well. Employ action. Learn chunks of language as wholes and formalize routines to help you perform “beyond your competence.”

### Verbalize

Make your own opportunities for practice in using the language inside and outside the classroom. Learn to make intelligent guesses. Experiment with new sounds, repeat sentences until pronounced easily. Work on generating sentences from the beginning. The main event is face-to-face contact; the classroom or tutor is merely preparation for the main event. For more rapid progress, spend more time among people using the language. Remember, talking with people is also relationship building, which is ministry.



### Utilize Verbal Tools

Learn phrases such as “Please speak more slowly,” “Say that again,” “I don’t understand,” and “What does this mean?” These phrases keep the conversation moving even when you aren’t catching all the words. Learn to live with uncertainty by not getting flustered and by continuing to talk or listen without understanding every word.

### Listen

Use contextual cues to help with comprehension. First, listen to pronunciation and grammatical forms and imitate these with drills and exercises. For example: What is he reading? He’s reading a book. What is she reading? She’s reading a book. Listening is the most important activity – active and passive.

### Laugh at Yourself

Make errors work for you. Don’t take yourself too seriously. Think of the entertainment you are providing. Turn embarrassing moments into learning moments.

### Discern Cultural Practices as You Learn

Utilize seemingly mundane events of life as learning events. During the first years, broader knowledge of many cultural subjects is better than deeper knowledge of a few.

### Use a Variety of Learning Styles

Left and right brain functions are both valuable in learning. Try singing your sentences, especially in tonal languages. Be creative in your learning.

### Verify

Ask for examples of how to use a word or expression. Make sure you are pronouncing the sounds accurately. Don’t settle for the accent of a non-native foreigner.

In early language learning efforts in Bassa, a Liberian language, our organization had dictated certain skills which had to be mastered in order to reach the required level of language competency. These guidelines were widely used throughout the West Africa region.

We were encouraged to follow the **GLUE** method:

Get what you need,  
Learn what you get,  
Use what you learn, and  
Evaluate.

One of the requirements was that we learn how to catch a taxi using our focus language. The snag we encountered was that most of the taxi drivers in our town were not Bassa, but Mandingo, and they were unable to or refused to speak Bassa with us.

This encouraged one of my colleagues to coin the acronym **GUM**, rather than **GLUE**:

Get what they tell you,  
Use what you can, and  
Memorize the rest for the test

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Imposing the same language learning structure for every language can frustrate, dampen enthusiasm, and impede the acquisition of a new language.

### REFLECT #3

1. Some language learning specialists encourage students to learn a language as a baby would, by listening and mimicking sounds, but making no effort to write down the new vocabulary they are learning. What do you think the advantages and disadvantages of this “total immersion” method could be?
2. Of the Language Learning Strategies outlined in this section, which of these strategies did you observe in the case study about my learning German as a child?
3. How are these strategies different from your previous efforts to learn a foreign language? How are your goals different than passing a vocabulary quiz or end-of-term final exam? How do the different goals require different learning methods?

## LANGUAGE LEARNING RESOURCES

### Community of Native Speakers

A language learner’s primary resource for learning the language is the **community in which he/she seeks to serve**. This is the main focus for the language learning task. It is in the local community where there are opportunities to hear the distinctions between various accents.

During the years when my husband and I were doing “barefoot” language learning among the Bassa people of Liberia, we walked through the neighborhood speaking to people and practicing our daily lessons. Our daily text usually began (after appropriate greetings, of course) with “Today I am learning about \_\_\_\_.” Aminata and So Maa would look up with smiles when they saw us coming. “And what are you learning today?” they would ask. They listened politely as we said our few sentences, corrected mispronunciations, and tried to teach us new things, too. They and many others like them are the best language resource a learner can have.

### Tutors and Trained Teachers

Recruit a coach – a native speaker who is willing to be directed by the learner. The profile of an ideal coach is one who speaks the target language as a first language, preferably uses some English, is willing to allow the learner to bring the agenda for the learning sessions, is able to keep a commitment to a regular schedule, is willing to be honest with the learner about strengths and weaknesses, is a creative thinker and can preferably take a look at their own culture from the perspective of an outsider. You might prefer to recruit several coaches within your community.

### International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA)

In English, the letter “a” has numerous pronunciations. Consider the “a” sounds in the following words: cake, cat, father, about. The various dialects of English in the United States, Britain, Australia, and other English-speaking countries add further variance to the “a” sound. The IPA has a separate symbol for each of these “a” sounds. Having a consistent sound for each character clarifies the pronunciation of words.

### Phonology

A basic understanding of how sounds are formed can help the language learner in attacking unfamiliar sounds. If you are fortunate enough to have a patient and willing language coach, you can feel his vocal cords when he produces a sound to see if it should be voiced or not. He can show you the position of the tongue and teeth in the production of sounds as well.

In a children’s French-language book teaching French speakers to speak English, the sentence “Is this the way to the train?” was inadequately transcribed “Eez zees ze we tu ze tren?” A little phonology work on the voiced “th” sound could have greatly assisted these potential English speakers in sounding less foreign.

### Dictionaries and Grammars

A good dictionary or grammar can be helpful, but it should be a reference, never a crutch. Although you see the pronunciation marked in the dictionary, you may observe different pronunciations when you listen to native speakers. What you learn through interacting with your focus people will be the most valuable.

### Barefoot Language Learning Resources

What if you are studying an unwritten language or a language with no dictionary or written language learning resources? What resources will help you? “Barefoot” language learning textbooks such as LAMP (*Language Acquisition Made Practical* by Brewster and Brewster) give suggested topics for you to discuss each day. Decide what topics are important to learn immediately. Focus on a different topic each day. Have a language helper assist you in developing a text of a few sentences to learn. Record the language informant saying the text. Listen to the text, repeat it, and practice it in the neighborhood.

Develop exercises to help you substitute other texts to expand your vocabulary. For example, an early text could be: “Good morning! I’m learning \_\_\_\_ language. Today I am learning about shopping. What is this thing? (How is it called?) How much does this cost? That is all I can say. I will learn more tomorrow. Good-bye.”

In order to expand your language skills, you can substitute other words, e.g. “Today I am learning about \_\_\_\_\_. Yesterday I learned about \_\_\_\_\_.” This simple approach can help you work on verb tenses.

### Expatriates

It may be easier for you to understand an expatriate speaking your focus language, but never fall into the trap of learning the language from a non-native speaker. Expatriates can be of help in explaining some of the grammatical intricacies or meanings of words, but seek to verify what they tell you as you practice talking with native speakers.

#### REFLECT #4

1. What strategies have you found most helpful in language learning? Are there other strategies you would also like to try?
2. What factors will you personally have to consider as you begin to learn a new language?
3. How can a consistent system of phonetic symbols be advantageous in language acquisition?
4. If you encounter a sound that is not used in your heart language, what questions can you ask a native speaker in order to learn how the sound is produced?
5. Do some research. What resources are available in the language you want to learn?

### BIBLICAL EXAMPLE: PAUL AND BARNABAS (ACTS 14:1, 8-18)

The following section focuses on some examples of missional strategies of Paul and Barnabas as they traveled to new cities and cultures to share the good news and experienced cultural and language disconnects.

### Entering a New Culture

As Paul and Barnabas entered a new city, their usual strategy was to go first to the synagogue.

*“Now at Iconium they entered together into the Jewish synagogue.” (Acts 14:1)*

### Why was this initial entry an effective strategy?

Being Jews themselves, Paul and Barnabas could relate to the people of the synagogue through their common understanding of Scripture. The Jewish businessmen who attended the synagogue were familiar with the customs, religious practices, and language of the city. The Jews at the synagogue would also be acquainted with influential people of the city.

### Altering Strategies in Different Circumstances

*“Now at Lystra there was a man sitting who could not use his feet. He was crippled from birth and had never walked. He listened to Paul speaking. And Paul, looking intently at him and seeing that he had faith to be made well, said in a loud voice, ‘Stand upright on your feet.’ And he sprang up and began walking.” (Acts 14:8-10)*

In Lystra there was apparently no synagogue, so Paul and Barnabas began their ministry there by healing a crippled man.

*“And when the crowds saw what Paul had done, they lifted up their voices, saying in Lycaonian, ‘The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!’” (Acts 14:11)*

How did the crowd respond to the healing of the crippled man? What language were they speaking? **In responding to Paul’s and Barnabas’s actions through their only cultural and religious viewpoint, how did they perceive Paul’s and Barnabas’s identity?**

*“Barnabas they called Zeus, and Paul, Hermes, because he was the chief speaker. And the priest of Zeus, whose temple was at the entrance to the city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates and wanted to offer sacrifice with the crowds.” (Acts 14:12-13)*

### Responding to Communication Breakdown

*“But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of it, they tore their garments and rushed out into the crowd, crying out...” (Acts 14:14)*

When Paul and Barnabas realized what the people were thinking, how did they respond, both verbally and non-verbally? In Jewish culture, tearing one’s clothes was a demonstration of distress and grief. How would this non-verbal action be perceived by a non-Jew? Are there non-verbal gestures you use such as “thumbs up” or “high five” which may not be understood by those of another culture?

*“Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men, of like nature with you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them. In past generations he allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways. Yet he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness.” Even with these words they scarcely restrained the people from offering sacrifice to them.” (Acts 14: 15-18)*

Paul and Barnabas then presented their “good news.” The Bible does not indicate which language they used, nor if they had an interpreter. However, Acts 14:18 indicates that they had a difficult time being understood.

**REFLECT #5**

1. What truths can you glean from Acts 14:8-18 that can help you in the beginning to minister in a new culture with a language barrier?
2. What are you learning from Paul and Barnabas about flexibility in using strategies to enter a new culture?
3. How can you avoid giving non-verbal clues which might be misunderstood?

EXAMPLES TO FOLLOW: THOUGHTS FROM MY OWN JOURNEY

During my 30+ years in Africa, I had an opportunity to meet many missionaries who were seeking to minister in other cultures using a language that was not their own. I well remember the lady from the United States who drawled in her southern Georgian accent, “My tongue just won’t make those sounds.” When she said that, I often thought of Moses making an excuse to God about being “slow of tongue.” “Who made your tongue?” was God’s response. The creator of your tongue and mine can use our tongues to minister in another language.

One of the best non-native French speakers I know shared an experience that occurred when he was a student at a language school in France. My friend was discouraged at the lack of progress he was experiencing in the classroom setting. The preferred teaching style at his school seemed to be intimidation and criticism. “They seemed to berate the students for not having answers to questions for future lessons. How could we know in advance what we had not been taught?”

Disheartened and discouraged, he had brought the matter before the Lord in prayer. That morning he prayed that the Lord would provide a good language learning opportunity for him that day. As he was driving to school that morning, thinking about the language lesson coming up in an hour or so, the sickening sound of the crunch of metal heightened his senses. His car had dented the car in the adjacent lane. Furious, the irate Frenchman jumped out of his damaged car and slammed the door. A barrage of French words peppered the air, most of which my friend could not understand. Gesturing angrily, the Frenchman seemed impossible to appease. “The Lord had answered my prayer,” said my friend. “I was forced to search my memory for every possible French word I knew which could apply to the situation.”

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*SOME OF THE BEST OPPORTUNITIES  
WE HAVE TO IMPROVE OUR  
LANGUAGE SKILLS ARE UNPLEASANT  
SITUATIONS.*

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Some of the best opportunities we have to improve our language skills are unpleasant situations. These are also some of the times when we rely most on the Lord to lead us in our efforts to communicate in a new language.

In contrast, one of the missionaries I knew with the worst French competency was a good example, not for his fluency in the language, but for his communication skills. With his cowboy hat and boots, and his strong Texas accent, this missionary stood out in every crowd. Listeners were horrified at the way he butchered the language. He had never managed to learn

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how to use French verbs. Rather than using the forms for past tense, present tense, and future tense, he chose to use the infinitive form and point behind him (for past), where he was (for present), or ahead of him (for future).

With all the motorcycles, bicycles, and pedestrians weaving in and out of traffic, the African country where he served had a reputation for terrible traffic. Accidents were unavoidable. Inevitably, this missionary was also in an accident. The offended African driver approached the situation with angry accusations. However, the missionary handled the situation smoothly and, despite his horrible French, he had the offended men laughing in just a few minutes. He taught me that communication is the key to language learning.

Most West Africans that I have met speak several languages, most of which are not written languages. They have few language learning resources. Yet these men and women are fluent in all the African languages they speak. Our Sappo tutor was one of these speakers of multiple languages. In addition to tutoring, he was a pastor and a good friend. I have vivid memories of this pastor standing beside my husband interpreting as he preached. Although I was not fluent in the language he was translating into from English, I was fascinated to observe that he communicated not only the words but the gestures and the passion of the message. He was an example of language acquisition at the higher levels.

He embodied 1 Corinthians 13:1 *“If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.”* Love is the key to communicating the message of the Good News of Jesus Christ.

## LANGUAGE LEARNING: CHALLENGING AND FULFILLING

Language learning is one of the most challenging things you will ever do, but it is also one of the most fulfilling.

Recognize the factors that will influence your language learning. Observe which factors may be more difficult to overcome and which factors will give you an advantage in language learning. Accentuate and take advantage of the positive factors, but do not ignore the negatives. Actively seek ways that you can overcome barriers which will impede your language acquisition.

Be strategic in your language learning. You have studied several strategies in this lesson and you will, no doubt, discover others. Be intentional as you study, but recognize that your language learning can grow by surprises as well.

Search out resources which will help you in your language learning. Resting in one or two comfortable strategies can rob you of opportunities for more growth.

Many cross-cultural workers who first arrive in a new country are eager to get on with the ministry work at hand. Language learning seems to be a hoop through which one must jump before the real work begins. Language learning is work, but it is also the work. Meeting people as you practice your language provides an opportunity for building important relationships for future work opportunities. Language learning is not merely biding your time until you really live. It is truly living.

As you begin your language learning adventure, allow me to add another acronym –LIVE:

- L-Listen
- I-Interact
- V-Verbalize
- E-Evaluate, Enjoy

**Language Learning is ministry.** Enjoy the life of a Language Learner.

The time when a candidate senses a call to cross-cultural ministry can be a time of excitement, anticipation, and perhaps a little fear. **Fear?** Yes, particularly where language acquisition is involved.

Learning to minister cross-culturally usually involves moving from the status of being educated, accepted and an insider who is able to function well in one's surroundings, to the role of an alien, a stranger, struggling to learn a new language, becoming a baby in the culture, unable even to ask for a drink of water. Perhaps, like Moses, the candidate might want to ask God to find somebody else, someone who can communicate more easily.

Most cross-cultural workers are tempted at least once to ask God to find someone else, but, like Moses, we must remember that He is the One who made our tongues – the very same One who called us to serve in another culture. **When the Lord calls a servant to minister cross-culturally, He also equips him to live and communicate in a new home.**

The process of learning a new language can be very frustrating and discouraging at times. Often prayer is the only way we can cope. What an opportunity for spiritual growth! When we are tempted to quit, we must listen to the One who asks: *"Who called you here?"* and assures us, *"Lo, I am with you always, even to the ends of the earth"* (Matthew 28:20).

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### SELF-AWARENESS, SURVIVAL, AND SOLUTION

In order to have a successful language learning experience, you must reason through each of the following bulleted activities. Discuss these with your cross-cultural candidate colleagues and apply the ideas to your own missions service journey. These activities will require familiarity with each of the topics presented in this learning session.

**Describe factors which influence language acquisition:**

- your age
- your aptitude
- previous language learning experience
- the difficulty of the focal language
- the tonality of the language
- the availability of dictionaries, grammars, and other printed resources
- the training of the language informant
- your personality
- socio-cultural factors

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Determine which factors will influence your personal language learning. Which of these factors are items over which you have no control? Which factors can be overcome with language learning techniques?

**Plan strategies for how you will deal with negative factors which might impede your language learning.** For example, if you are a young female in a culture where women, especially young women, are not held in high regard, how will you practice the language? What non-verbal communication factors will require consideration?

**Personalize some of the strategies mentioned in this session which may be employed in order to learn a language:** organize, analyze, theorize, memorize, verbalize, utilize verbal tools, listen, laugh, discern cultural practices, use a variety of learning styles, and verify. Based on your own personality, which strategies do you expect to be most helpful to you? What strategies do you feel should be added to this session?

**Acquire a basic knowledge of the International Phonetic Alphabet.** Look in the additional resources section for a basic overview of the IPA. Complete the brief exercises in the “Explore” section.

**Develop questions which will help you learn how to make unfamiliar sounds.** After reviewing the terminology and descriptions of the formation of consonants and vowels, think of questions you might ask a tutor about the phonology of your new language. Consider that you might have a tutor who is not well-educated.

**Identify general resources available for learning all languages;** This may include a community of native speakers, tutors and trained teachers, International Phonetic Alphabet, phonology, dictionaries and grammars, barefoot language learning resources, expatriates. Which of these resources can be useful even before you reach your field of service?

**Identify specific resources which will help you learn your adopted language.** If you do not yet know which language you will be learning, think of some general plan you might use in order to find resources once you arrive in your new home.

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### EXPLORE: IPA

The International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) is something you should be familiar with whether or not you are currently involved in learning a new language. As a cross-cultural worker, you are probably already involved in ministry with people from around the world who speak languages you don't speak. Below are a brief introduction and a couple of exercises for you to practice using the IPA.

The advantage of the International Phonetic Alphabet is that each symbol has only one sound, so the confusion of multiple spellings of sounds is alleviated.

If you refer to the complete IPA chart, you can find symbols for sounds in all languages, even clicks and tonal markings (<http://www.internationalphoneticalphabet.org/ipa-sounds/ipa-chart-with-sounds/>).



Some basic IPA definitions to help you get started:

- **Vowel** – The air you breathe out is shaped in your mouth, but not constricted.
- **Consonant** – Sounds made by partially stopping or constricting the air using teeth, tongue, and various parts of your mouth.
- **Voiced Consonant** – Sounds made with the vocal cords engaged. Verify this by feeling for vibration in your larynx.
- **Unvoiced Consonant** – Sounds made without engaging vocal cords. There should be no vibration in the vocal cords.
- **Nasal Consonant** – Sounds channeled through the nose.
- **Stops** – Consonants that block the flow of air.
- **Fricatives** – Consonants which partially restrict air flow but allow air to pass.
- **Lateral** – Consonants made by allowing the tongue to touch the teeth on the sides of the mouth (primarily “L” sounds).
- **Retroflex** – Sounds made by curling the tongue (primarily the American English “R”).
- **Labial** – Sounds made with the lips.
- **Dental** – Sounds formed with the teeth.
- **Alveolar** – sounds formed at the forward part of the roof of the mouth behind the teeth.
- **Velar** – Sounds formed at the rear part of the roof of the mouth.
- **Glottal** – Sounds made at the back of the throat

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR *LANGUAGE ACQUISITION*

Brewster, E. Thomas, and Elisabeth S. Brewster. *Language Acquisition Made Practical (LAMP): Field Methods for Language Learners*. Lingua House: 1976.

Brown, H. Douglas. *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching*, Third Edition. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall Regents, 1994.

Helpful information on learning styles and the effect of personality on language learning.

Ehrmann, Madeline. *The Role of Personality Type in Adult Language Learning: An Ongoing Investigation*. Parry and Stansfield: 1990 Reference in Brown, 1994.

Larson, Donald N., and William A. Smalley. *Becoming Bilingual: A Guide to Language Learning*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America Inc., 1984.

Very helpful general knowledge on language learning.

Larson, Donald N. *Guidelines for Barefoot Language Learning*. 1984.

Helpful for studying languages which have not been written.

*International Phonetic Alphabet*. Department of Theoretical and Applied Linguistics, School of English, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Thessaloniki 54124, GREECE

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The International Phonetic Alphabet may be freely copied on the condition that acknowledgment is made to the International Phonetic Association.

Myers, Isabel Briggs and Katharine Briggs. *Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI)*.

Provides further information on the Myers-Briggs Personality Type Inventory.

Erneling, Christina E. *Understanding Language Acquisition: The Framework of Learning*. State University of New York Press: 1993. Reference in Brown 1994.

Kim, Young Yun. *Becoming Intercultural: An Integrative Theory of Communication and Cross-Cultural Adaptation*.

Larson, Donald N. "The Viable Missionary: Learner, Trader, Story Teller." In *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement*, edited by Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne, 438-443. Third Edition. Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1999.

Nida, Eugene A. "Communication and Social Structure," In *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement*, edited by Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne, 429-437. Third Edition. Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1999.

*Learning Vocabulary in Another Language*. I.S.P. Nation. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

Oxford, Rebecca L. *Language Learning Strategies Around the World: Cross-Cultural Perspectives*. Manoa: University of Hawaii, 1996.

Rubin, Joan, and Irene Thompson. *How to Be a More Successful Language Learner*. Boston: Heinle and Heinle Publishers.

Stevick, Earl W. *Success with Foreign Languages: Seven Who Achieved It and What Worked for Them*. New York: Prentice Hall, 1989.

Townsend, William Cameron. "Tribes, Tongues, and Translators," In *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement*, edited by Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne, 309-310. Third Edition. Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1999.

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