

Unit 12

What Makes a Good Language Learner?

Cast:

- Missionary Li Wei
- Teacher Zhang Dong
- 4-5 students

Scene 12.1. Missionary Li Wei talking into camera with mosque in background

Missionary Li Wei: People have asked me if I ever felt like giving up. Believe me, there have been times when I was so tired of the language and the foreign culture, that I could have wept. I was home sick. I longed for my own family, my friends, my home church, even the satisfaction of working for my daily bread in my parents' restaurant. Sometimes the language learning process seemed so slow and life so lonely and unrewarding that I really felt like giving up.

There were many times when I thought I'd never get it! More than once I came to the conclusion that I just was not smart enough to learn a foreign language. Or that I didn't have the aptitude. Or that my mouth just wasn't capable of making those strange sounds. There were times when I blamed the language program for my lack of progress. At other times I blamed the lack of a school: if only I had a good school to go to, I thought. If only I had a good teacher... If only I'd had a better education in the first place... If only... If only...

One day, however, it dawned on me that if God called me to be a missionary then He must have given us the necessary brains to enable us to learn a foreign language! And even if there are no good schools, and even if there is no good teacher God would help me—if I persevered in obedience. I felt very convicted of my sin and unbelief, and asked God to forgive me. I also realized that the most important things about really learning a language is motivation. If we want to learn a foreign language badly enough, we will do what it takes to get it. And surely we missionaries should have more motivation and reason for doing so than any business man, scholar or diplomat! We are ambassadors of Jesus Christ, the Son of God and the Savior of the world! We have the greatest message of all time to share: that Christ lived a perfect life on behalf of sinners, and that he died an atoning death for them too!

God in his grace did allow me to meet people who had been successful language learners, and the techniques I learned from them allowed me to keep going. I trust that you will profit from them and persevere with them too! Remember, it is not your lack of intellect, nor is it the nature of the program that prevents you from mastering a foreign language. It is lack of motivation! Motivation can be hard to sustain, but you must do so if your hopes of being a real cross-cultural ambassador for Christ are to be realized.

Fade and Cut

Scene 12.2. Teaching Zhang Dong and his class of missionary candidates

Teacher Zhang Dong: Missionary Li Wei touched on a very important aspect of language learning: the importance of motivation. You see, if you want to learn your host culture's language badly enough, you will find a way. Where there is a will there is a way!

Successful language learners are aggressive learners. They recognize that without knowing the language well, they will always remain an outsider, and that being an "outsider" has a negative connotation. If you want to become an "insider", at least to some extent, if you hope to avoid negative reactions to your presence and become a valuable person in the community, you've got to learn the language and understand the culture. In other words, successful language learners are motivated to be accepted on equal terms.

Your emotions are very important when learning a new language. Negative emotions can erode your motivation, while positive emotions can keep you going. That is what is going to affect the amount of time and energy you will spend learning the language. You are more open to new input when you are relaxed and happy, so learning to encourage yourself is an important factor when learning a new language.

Can you think of different things you can do to stay motivated during the long process of learning your host culture's language? What can you do to encourage yourself to stick with language study?

Student #1: Well, I suppose that before anything else you've got you believe that it is actually possible that you can learn a second language!

Teacher Zhang Dong: Right! If people are wired to learn languages, as we are, and as children prove, then you must still have the capacity to learn another language, given the right circumstances. Although children have some advantages over adults, many adults have learned multiple languages successfully. If you are motivated and have the right conditions, you can learn. If you expect to succeed, you will be more likely to be successful.

Student #2: If we could find ways to get involved in aspects of the culture we enjoyed we'd stay more motivated.

Teacher Zhang Dong: That is very, very true. In other words, you've got to find ways to express your personality and interests. One of the basic functions of language is self-expression. If you can find ways to use your new language to express your own ideas, emotions, interests, and experiences, you will make the language yours and be more likely to want to continue with it. Practice a hobby, sports, professional interests, crafts, music, or arts.

Student #3: I think that we will need to accept the fact that we will sound like a children, even though we are adults.

Teacher Zhang Dong: Indeed. One thing that most adult language learners find frustrating is that they have the communicative repertoire of a child, but the communication needs of an adult. In other words, they often want to be able to talk about the kinds of abstract or complex subjects they can discuss in their own language, but they can only handle the most concrete, predictable topics in their new language.

If you can come to terms with the fact that you have to go through developmental stages in language acquisition, you will find the process less frustrating. If you have unreasonable expectations you may get discouraged.

Student #2: We should remind yourself of the reasons why we are learning the language in the first place

Teacher Zhang Dong: Yes. When your enthusiasm for language learning starts to wane, it can be helpful to remind yourself of why you decided to learn this new language in the first place: you are missionaries seeking to communicate the greatest message, the greatest treasure on earth! If your motivation is strong enough and important enough to you, your determination to continue will be strengthened.

Student #4: It might help to find non-threatening people to talk with.

Teacher Zhang Dong: Yes, some people are more fun to talk to, in any language, than others. Some people are more welcoming, encouraging, and helpful. These are the kinds of people who will lower your anxiety and increase your motivation to be able to make relationships and communicate in your new language. Look out for them, and spend as much time as you can with them.

The more positive you feel about the speakers of a language, the more motivation you will have to learn it. People learn better if their learning is encouraged by speakers of the language. So, the more positive you feel about the speakers of a language, the more motivation you will have to learn it.

Student #1: I've noticed that the method of language learning Missionary Li Wei is teaching us focuses on understanding before speaking. So, we should look for situations we can participate in without pressure to speak a lot.

Teacher Zhang Dong: That is a very sharp observation. It's the principle of comprehensible input we've mentioned before. You've got to be able to understand a good bit of what is said around you for you to learn anything.

It can be exhausting and intimidating for a language learner to try to speak a second language all the time, and yet it is important to get lots of comprehensible input. If you can participate in some situations where you do not have to talk a lot, but where you can listen to the language being used in authentic communication, you will probably feel less anxiety, although it is still

tiring to try to process what you hear. Of course it is important to spend some time actually negotiating meaning with speakers of the language, too.

So, look for situations in which you can use the language in context. If there is a church, go to it. Maybe you can participate in the mid-week service, or the youth group. You can watch children's programs on TV, watch cartoons, do lots of the Dumb-Smart question technique...

Student #3: I think it might be possible to be so concerned to be correct that it prevents you from talking.

Teacher Zhang Dong: That is indeed a problem for some people. They are so afraid of making mistakes that they do not talk at all. This is like being so afraid you will fall off your bicycle that you never get on it. It is sure that you will not fall off your bike that way, but you also will never learn to ride it. Expect to make mistakes, and learn from them.

Many people fear making mistakes in a second language, but if you look at making mistakes as simply testing a theory your attitude may change. A scientist looks at a failed experiment as one more piece of data that will eventually lead him to a correct conclusion. Think of your mistakes that way. If you accept the fact that you will make them and decide to learn from them, they become less scary.

Student #4: Learning a language seems to me to be an overwhelming challenge. I think that if I focus on small bits at a time, like focusing on learning a LAP or two, I will become less discouraged.

Teacher Zhang Dong: Yes, that is a good principle. If you set achievable goals for yourself, you will set yourself up for success, and each success will encourage you to go further. The trick is to set yourself a series of small, achievable objectives, and to prepare yourself so that you succeed in them. As you mentioned, the LAPs are particularly good for this.

Note that the more the language you are learning is like the one you already know, the more quickly you will learn it. Note too that too much correction or criticism can inhibit your learning.

Student #1: I think we are just going to have to learn to be patient with ourselves, and to learn to laugh at ourselves!

Teacher Zhang Dong: Yes, we are often more patient and forgiving of other people than of ourselves, but harsh self-criticism does little to help our language learning. A kindly attitude toward ourselves and realistic expectations will be much more productive.

Don't have unreasonable expectations of yourself. Part of being able to enjoy language learning is being able to laugh at our mistakes. Often we are embarrassed at the time, but think of all the stories you will be able to amuse your friends with for the rest of your life!

Student #3: It might be good to watch people's reactions to what we are trying to say.

Teacher Zhang Dong: Indeed, when you interact with other people it is important to be alert to the feedback they give you from their facial expressions, gestures, and posture. This is how you can pick up on whether or not they have understood you, or more importantly, whether or not you might have offended them.

Note that there may be only one correct way of saying or doing certain things! What you are doing or saying may be culturally incorrect. Every culture has its taboo subjects. So watch people's reactions!

Student #2: I wonder if it might be helpful to consciously remind ourselves of what we have grown to like about the culture, the people, the language.

Teacher Zhang Dong: Yes. Sometimes, in the midst of culture stress, we can become negative about the people we are learning to communicate with and the language we are learning. Yet in most cultures there are things we can really admire and enjoy. Dwelling consciously on those things is a good way to bolster our motivation. Maybe they have some really good food. Maybe you have learned to enjoy national films. Maybe they are a very friendly people. Maybe you've started to enjoy their literature...

The more positive you feel about the speakers of a language and the richness of the culture the more motivation you will have to learn it.

Can you think of any other things that might help you stay the course?

Student #2: Much has been made of the need to be like little children when you are learning a language. That cannot always be easy for adults. It might be good to remind ourselves every so often of what we are good at!

Teacher Zhang Dong: That is very perceptive. Yes, we do need to remind ourselves of all the things we are good at, even if we are not yet very good at speaking this language. Keeping our overall morale high will encourage us to persevere with language learning.

Professionals, like engineers and doctors can be poor language students because it is much harder for them to "become like little children" once again. Reminding yourselves that this is a phase that will not last forever, and that you really are good at certain things which you will, one day, be able to do for God's glory in a new culture will help you keep going.

Can you think of anything else?

Students: *silence*

Teacher Zhang Dong: Well, let me give you a few last tips. Find ways to relax and get away from the language for short breaks. It is important to get lots of comprehensible input and be engaged in language learning as much as possible. However, it is also important to get some breaks from time to time so that you do not become exhausted by the hard work of language

learning. If you find yourself avoiding the language for long periods of time, you will be in trouble, but short breaks can make you more productive in the end.

In short, the key to success is to persevere, to pace yourself, and to utilize a variety of techniques to expose yourself to lots of comprehensible input.

Language learning is not difficult as such, but it takes much perseverance. That falters. Sustain it through a variety of study activities. Don't be book bound: Get a T.V., comic books, music, friends, go to teahouse, etc. That way you absorb culture. But the bottom line is that you've got to be convinced of the importance of learning your target language. As missionaries that is supremely important, more than for any other businessman, scholar or diplomat. And it can be done and, by God's grace, you can do it!

Student # 2: Teacher, can I ask a question?

Teacher Zhang Dong: Of course.

Student # 2: How important is aptitude in language learning? Do some people have a greater knack for languages than others? How big a difference does this make?

Teacher Zhang Dong: Yes, there is such a thing as aptitude. Some people have certain innate intellectual or other aspects which can speed up the process of language learning for them.

For instance, some people do have the advantage of a good memory. Others have the intelligence to grasp certain linguistic structure more easily. Yet others can learn "strange" sounds easier.

However, "B" students usually catch up to the "A" students over a 4 year period if they persevere. This has to do with both perseverance and plateaus of language learning, something we will cover later.

Also, previous language learning experience helps. Each language learned makes the next one easier. Children from a bilingual background tend to have an easier time.

Sometimes previous overseas living experience may help inculcate a positive attitude.

On the other hand, sometimes childhood trauma affects language learning negatively. For instance, some countries discourages children from learning their parents' language if their parents are from a minority group or immigrants. .

Some people have the ability to make a little bit of language go a long way!

Interestingly, women can have an easier time learning a language than men. Reasons for this might be that society is less suspicious about their motives, or they may mix easier with neighbors because they have certain things in common with them, like running a household or raising children.

Of course having a good ear helps. Some sounds sound very close to each other (English example: Merry, Marry, Mary, or Bill and Pill, for instance, for languages which don't distinguish between a "b" and a "p").

A perfectionist upbringing can also be frustrating. Everyone has to butcher a language before they can speak it, and that is more difficult for perfectionist people to do. People who are not perfectionists, who don't mind making lots of mistakes and can laugh at them will learn much faster and have an easier time of it than those who are mortified and humiliated each time they make a fool of themselves. You've got to be able to laugh at yourself. Even those mistakes can breakdown barriers.

Outgoing people have an easier time mixing, which may help in the language learning process. And that, of course, takes us to the subject of language learning and personality, which we have already covered!

Fade and Cut

Scene 12.3. Things learned in this lesson

Scroll by on screen. Voiceover: Teacher Zhang Dong

- If God calls you to be a missionary then He must have given you the necessary brains to enable you to learn a foreign language!
- The most important thing about learning a language is motivation. If you want to learn a foreign language badly enough, you will do what it takes to learn it. It is not your lack of intellect, nor is it the nature of the program that prevents you from mastering a foreign language. It is lack of motivation!
- Successful language learners recognize that without knowing the language well, they will always remain an outsider, and that being an "outsider" has a negative connotation.
- You are more open to new input when you are relaxed and happy; learning to encourage yourself is an important factor when learning a new language.
- Find ways to express your own ideas, emotions, interests, and experiences. Practice a hobby, sports, professional interests, crafts, music, or arts.
- Come to terms with the fact that you have to go through developmental stages in language acquisition. If you have unreasonable expectations you will get discouraged.
- Find non-threatening people to talk with. The more positive you feel about the speakers of a language, the more motivation you will have to learn it.

- Look for situations you can participate in without pressure to speak a lot.
- Expect to make mistakes, and learn from them. Look at making mistakes as simply testing a theory. Learn from them, they become less scary. Part of being able to enjoy language learning is being able to laugh at our mistakes.
- Set achievable goals for yourself. Each success will encourage you to go further. Don't have unreasonable expectations of yourself.
- Too much correction or criticism can inhibit your learning.
- Watch people's reactions to what we are trying to say to see if what you are doing or saying is culturally incorrect.
- Remind yourselves of what you like about the culture, the people, the language.
- Remind yourself every so often of what we are good at! I can be hard for professionals to "become like little children" once again. Reminding yourselves that this is a phase that will not last forever, and that you really are good at certain things which you will, one day, be able to do for God's glory in a new culture will help you keep going.
- Short breaks can make you more productive in the end
- Persevere, pace yourself, and utilize a variety of methods to expose yourself to lots of comprehensible input.