

Field Language Learning

*“The mind of the rash will know and understand,
and the stammering tongue will be fluent and clear.” Isaiah 32:4*

Unit 1

Cast:

- Missionary Li Wei
- Mr. Mahmut
- Teacher Zhang Dong
- 4 or 5 students
- Baby Bao

Scene 1.1. Missionary Li Wei talking into camera in Chinese restaurant. Several camera angles and zooms.

Missionary Li Wei: Hello, my name is Li Wei. I am from the town of Xian, where my parents run a restaurant. When I grew up I often worked in our restaurant. I would serve, wash dishes and wipe tables. Sometimes I did some cooking too.

My parents were Christians; I too became a Christian when I was a child. During my teen years I tried to serve my church in any way I could. I liked being part of the young people group. I liked discussing with them about the way of salvation, the eternal blessings that are ours in Christ, and what it means to be a Christian. During my teen years I tried to serve my church as much as possible, particularly in evangelism and discipleship.

But let me tell you how I met Mr. Mahmut, for he sparked my interest in Muslims. And God used that interest to call me to serve Him as a missionary to Islamistan.

One day a Muslim trader came to our restaurant and ordered rice and fish. I could tell he was a Muslim from the hat he was wearing. When he had only half-finished his meal, his cell-phone rang. He talked into it in his own language for a few minutes. Then he stood up suddenly, put the money for the half-finished meal on the table, and walked quickly out the door.

When I went to wipe the table I noticed that he had left a package behind. I grabbed it and quickly ran onto the street. I looked this way and that, then saw his distinctive hat bobbing above the heads of the other people. I dashed until I'd caught up with him and tapped him on the shoulder. He looked around, saw me and gave me a frowning, questioning look. I held up his package, and said, “Sir, you left this behind.”

The man's frown changed to a very grateful look. He took the package, thanked me in very bad Chinese, and tried to give me some money. I smiled, turned down the money, wished him a good day, and returned to work.

The next evening the man showed up at our restaurant again. In fact, after that, whenever Mr. Mahmut was in town, he'd eat his meals at our place. Although he spent lots of time in Xian, Mr. Mahmut didn't speak Chinese very well.

I noticed that Mr. Mahmut always ordered rice and fish, never pork. One day I asked Mr. Mahmut, "Sir, would you like to try some _____(typical pork dish). It's very good."

"No," he said, "I Muslim. Prophet Muhammed say in Qur'an, No eat pork. Pork unclean."

"Oh, forgive me, I didn't know that," I said. "I'm a Christian," I added. "Jesus said in the New Testament, 'It's not what enters a man's mouth that makes him unclean, but what comes out of it.' So we can eat anything!"

"Good word." He smiled. "Jesus great prophet. Muhammed last and greatest prophet," he said. That day I learned that Mr. Mahmut loved talking about the prophets and the Holy Books.

I wanted to share all about the perfect life Jesus Christ lived on our behalf, and how, because He was the Son of God, His atoning death on the cross was sufficient to pay the price for all our sins! But these were difficult concepts for Mr. Mahmut. Also, his Chinese was very limited. Nothing I said seemed to make much sense to him. It became clear to me that if I wanted to communicate the gospel to Mr. Mahmut and to Muslim people like him, I would need to do so in their own language.

One evening I told Mr. Mahmut that I wanted to learn his language so we could talk better about our favorite subjects: God, his prophets, and the Holy Scriptures. Mr. Mahmut looked pleased. We start now, he said smiling, and put the plate, soup spoon, an empty bowl, chopsticks, tea cup and napkin in the center of the table. "You point, I tell you what it is", he said.

I pointed at the spoon. Mr. Mahmut said "spoon". I tried to repeat the word after him, but Mr. Mahmut shook his head. "No, not right", he said. "You listen first before you try speak. My language easy," he added smiling. "My children learn very good, but they listen first, then try speak. Children best language learners in world!"

When Mr. Mahmut said that I thought of Jesus blessing the little children. I suddenly understood that if I wanted God to use me to introduce Muslims to Christ I would have to become like a little child all over again!

Fade and Cut

Scene 1.2. Teacher Zhang Dong lecturing 4-5 missionary candidates

Teacher Zhang Dong: Mr. Mahmut unwittingly introduced missionary Li Wei to some basic issues pertaining to language learning.

First of all, Mr. Mahmut said that children are the world's best language learners. He said that they learn it fluently, but that they listen first and only try to speak later. This is an important principle. What other principles about language learning can we learn from children?

Let's put three columns on the whiteboard. (*Teacher Zhang Dong draws three columns on the whiteboard*). We'll call the first column "Children". Now you tell me how children learn language, and we'll write those things in this first column.

Students volunteer basic info. Teacher Zhang Dong writes students' points on whiteboard and fills in details orally.

Student #1: Children get lots of exposure to language.

Teacher Zhang Dong: Yes! Talk goes on all around them. Some of it is directed at them, some is not. Language directed at them in the early years relates to things physically present (like toys, food, furniture, clothes, etc.) and activities (like playing, eating, washing, dressing). Later, after they know the basics, they started learning about things that are not physically present, like conversations about things going on elsewhere, at another time, or about abstract things like emotions and feelings.

Unless the missionary can move in with a national family, he or she rarely has the same exposure to the language they are trying to learn that a child has.

Sometimes missionaries think that they can learn the language in a couple of months, and when this doesn't happen they slack off. Although some missionaries put in many long hours of study and practice, others don't try nearly as hard. They don't have the discipline to spend long periods of time concentrating on language learning. Sometimes, when they experience difficulty in learning language, they only make a half-hearted effort or give up altogether!

Can you think of anything else?

Student #2: Children don't feel under pressure to learn language by a certain date.

Teacher Zhang Dong: True! They take as long as they want! Sometimes, if a child is slow, the parents get worried, but not the child! As Mr. Mahmut pointed out to missionary Li Wei, children don't try to talk right away. They spend the first couple of years listening before they begin speaking. There is an important principle of language

learning here: only after you have listened lots should you try speaking. It's called the principle of comprehension-driven language learning. You need to comprehend before you can speak properly. Anything else?

Student #3: Children have lots of people who talk to them and who will correct bad language.

Teacher Zhang Dong: Indeed! They have a multi-generational network of people (siblings, brothers, sisters, parents, grandparents, cousins, friends) who talk to them. That network expands as they grow and go to school, etc. Children tend to receive lots of encouragement from these people.

Student #4: Children are motivated to learn language.

Teacher Zhang Dong: That's right. Children's need to communicate grows more complex as they grow. Children first learn simple things, then, slowly, more complex things. Do you have any idea how this works?

Student #1: Well, children don't look things up in a dictionary.

Teacher Zhang Dong: True. They learn the meanings of words and idioms from repeated usage. Meaning develops gradually until it becomes clear. They learn the meanings of words from the context.

In other words, new concepts are communicated using a few new words embedded in lots of simpler ones. That is the principle of comprehensible input.

If you don't understand anything of a language, you won't learn a thing. It's just noise. If, on the other hand, you understand 75% of a sentence, your brain will create meaning for the 25% it doesn't understand.

For example, listen to this sentence: "I stopped a *unimatopet wungle* in the street and asked him the way to the *schlazimov*." The words "unimatopet", "wungle", and "schlazimov" are complete nonsense words. They don't mean anything in any language. And yet, based on the context, the words around them, your brain tells you that "wungle" is a human being, "unimatopet" describes that human being, and "schlazimov" a place of some kind. If you were to hear those words more often in different contexts, the meaning of those words, if they existed, would become sharper and sharper.

If children are such good language learners, why don't adults simply do it the way children do it? Well, that takes us to our second column. Let's call it "Problems". What are some of the problems that adults have that prevent them from learning language like a child?

Student #3: Because it is difficult for an adult to be childlike!

Teacher Zhang Dong: Absolutely correct. It is very difficult for adults to be childlike. Why is that?

Student #1: Because we don't like to be silly.

Teacher Zhang Dong: Right. As our personality develops we are less willing to make fools of ourselves. We have a big problem. It's called our EGO!

For instance, children don't mind babbling or repeating a word or phrase endlessly, until their parents or older siblings are sick and tired of hearing it. Sometimes a younger child will repeat exactly what an older child is doing or saying, until it drives the older child nuts. That is the way the younger child perfects his or her pronunciation. We adults don't want to repeat a strange sound or word or phrase endlessly, because it makes us feel silly. So, because we don't allow ourselves enough practice, we speak our target language with a horrible accent for the rest of our lives! It's all because of our ego.

Also, everyone who learns a foreign language makes lots of mistakes. Sometimes we make mistakes that sound funny to the native speaker. When we think they are laughing at us we feel shamed and begin clamming up. Everyone makes lots of mistakes before they speak properly. Having a sense of humor really helps when you try to learn a foreign language!

As adults we are predisposed to make certain sounds. For years your mouth muscles have made the very fast, very precise movements necessary to make the sounds of Chinese. The muscles needed to make Chinese sounds are very developed! However, other languages have all kinds of sounds we don't have in Chinese. Since we've never made those sounds before, the muscles needed to make those sounds are very underdeveloped. In fact, not only our mouth's muscles, even our ears are undeveloped when it comes to hearing the subtle differences in sounds other languages make. Instead of using the right sound, you use the closest equivalent in Chinese, because that is what you are hearing, and that is what your mouth muscles are used to making. That is what gives you a funny accent when you speak a foreign language.

The trick to effective language learning is to adapt the way children learn language in a way that we adults can control and, thus, are comfortable with. That's what this language course will try to teach you. It will introduce you to lots of simple methods and activities that you can do with a language helper—or even just using people on the street—to help you learn any language in the world! In other words, this course is all about filling in the third column on the board called “Solutions”!

Let me start by introducing you to the very simply Look and Listen Technique. It is very simple, but learn it well, because it is fundamental to a number of other techniques.

Fade and Cut

Scene 1.3. Missionary Li Wei and Mr. Mahmut model Look and Listen Technique in restaurant. Teacher Zhang Dong explains what is happening.

Teacher Zhang Dong voiceover: The Look and Listen Technique is basic to a number of other techniques. It enables you to begin acquiring some basic vocabulary and grammatical structures. It works like this: First you get a selection of related objects or photographs. Mr. Mahmut, for instance, has a number of objects pertaining to eating in front of him. Using these object you do the following steps.

Points appear on Screen. Teacher Zhang Dong does voiceover, Missionary Li Wei and Mr. Mahmut model the point.

1. You point to the object, your Language Helper says what it is. You listen.
2. Your Language Helper names the objects, you point to the right one.
3. You learn the words for “Yes” and “No”, or “True” and “False”
4. Your Language Helper names one of the objects and points. You say “Yes” or “No”, depending on whether the object s/he pointed to is the right one.
5. You give the name of the object, your Language Helper points to the right one.
6. Your Language Helper points to an object, you give its name.
7. You give the name of the object, your Language Helper points to one of the objects, you respond with “Yes” or “No”, depending of whether it is the right one.

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Scene 1.4. Missionary Li Wei looking at a picture book with his nephew Baby Bao in his lap.

Missionary Wei, looking into camera: When I learned that children are the world’s best language learners, I began to look at how my nephew Baby Bao goes about learning language. Well, I suppose different children have different approaches, depending on their character. Baby Bao is a quiet, pensive little boy. He loves to sit in my lap and look at picture books with me. Baby Bao doesn’t mind going over the same picture book again and again. I’ve looked at this book a dozen times with him, but he still enjoys looking at it. He will pick out different things, and then he wants me to tell him what it is, or have me tell a story about it. After we’ve gone through the book a couple of times, he will tell me in his own, funny way what different things are.

Missionary Li Wei: *(looking at book with Baby Bao)* Look, a bear!

Baby Bao: Wear!

Missionary Li Wei: No, not wear, Bear! B. B. B. Bear. Bear...

Missionary Li Wei: (*looking into camera*) Sometimes Baby Bao will try to imitate what he sees in the picture book. Look, Baby Bao, What is the Bear doing? The Bear is dancing!

Baby Bao: (*crawls from lap and hops around*) Look uncle Li Wei, Baby Bao dance like Wear! Look, look!

Missionary Li Wei: That's great, Baby Bao!

Missionary Li Wei: (*looking into camera*) When I saw Baby Bao dancing like the bear in the book for the first time, I thought: boy, that is a good way to learn language. You look at pictures again and again, a language helper explains the pictures to you, and you act out some of the pictures. That would be a great way to learn and memorize simple words, even simple sentences, I thought.

I started collecting photographs that I thought I could use. I glued my photographs in a notebook. I collected as many photographs as I could of people interacting with other people. That way I could use the same photographs again and again. I'd get Mr. Mahmut to teach me the names of people, like man, woman, boy, girl first. Then I could learn the object in the pictures, and then what people were doing with those objects. That way I would already know the objects in the pictures for when I'd get around to learning the actions. I would be able to introduce new vocabulary gradually, with lots of repetition!

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Scene 1.5. Teacher Zhang Dong with students

Teacher Zhang Dong: As Missionary Li Wei discovered, a picture book is very useful tool when learning a language with a Language Helper.

Collect maybe 75-100 pictures of different people doing things. It is important not to simply get photographs of objects, but of people interacting with each other or with objects. That way you can do learn lots of different things from the same set of pictures, building on information you learned earlier—just like Baby Bao! You can first learn the names of the people, then the objects they are interacting with, then things about those objects.

Well, you'll learn many more uses for this picture book in the coming lessons. But before we do, let's review what we've learned so far.

Fade and Cut

Scene 1:6. Things learned from this lesson.

Scroll by on screen. Voiceover: Teacher Zhang Dong

- Everyone makes lots of mistakes before they speak properly. Having a sense of humor really helps when you try to learn a foreign language!
- Children are the world's best language learners, so if we want to learn a language well we have to become like little children. Children learn language through acquisition. Acquisition happens without conscious effort. Learning happens by hard study.
- Children do lots of passive listen before they try to speak. You should do the same. Comprehension preceded production! Your language learning program must incorporate lots of comprehensible input (i.e., you need to listen to lot language where you can make out most of what's going on) before you start producing (i.e., speaking and writing).
- Much meaning is learned from the context. That is another reason why your language learning program must have lots of comprehensible input. Your brain will create meaning for words it doesn't understand if it understands the words around it.
- Children have a multigenerational network of people they relate to. You too need a wide variety of people you can listen to.
- Another reason for doing lots of listening first is because you mouth's muscles and your ears are undeveloped when it comes to hearing and making the subtle differences in the sounds other languages make. Instead, you will tend to use the closest equivalent in Chinese, because that is what you are hearing, and that is what your mouth muscles are used to making. You first need to train you ear to hear those different sounds before you can train your mouth to make them.
- Learning a language well takes time. It can take several years to get the basic structures. In fact, language learning never ends. The real missionary is always deepening his or her understanding of their host country's language and culture.
- The Look and Listen technique is a simple way of learning vocabulary in which you listen first and produce later.
- You can use objects or photographs with the Look and Listen Technique. Using the same set of photographs enables you to learn more complex matters by

building on the simpler words (like man, women, child) you learned on your first “pass” over the photographs.

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