

# Are You One of the Millions of Americans Afraid of Language Learning?

By George Parson

"I don't think I'm very good with languages." How many times have I heard that? "I took Spanish for two years in high school, and I can't remember anything!" It's true. I've met many people who took a language course in high school and feel that they didn't learn much. Does that mean they're just not good with languages? No! I'd like to point out some of the differences between real language learning and "taking a foreign language class" in school.

## Advantages of Real Language Learning

- **Being There.** Living in the country where a language is spoken makes a great deal of difference. You can hear it every day, not just three hours a week in a classroom, and you can practice what you know with friends and acquaintances all around you.
- **Motivation.** Motivation is another big factor. Most people have no real need or desire to learn a language when they are in high school. We take them because they are required. In America there's no need to learn another language? I mean, you can drive in a car for three days and all you'll hear is English! That situation is the exception in the world, not the rule. If you are in a country where God has called you, to minister to the people and share the Gospel with them, you have a strong motive for putting in the effort to learn the language to be able to communicate with the people.
- **Style of Learning.** In high school, the emphasis was on memorizing verb forms, right? It's much better if we focus on learning to speak the language for the purpose of communicating with people. One method that's helpful is called "learner-directed learning," as opposed to "teacher-directed learning." This way, the language learner directs the study sessions, learning useful phrases and practical things, rather than memorizing charts of verb and noun endings.

## Training

Most mission agencies have good training for language learning. Like many other skills which can be acquired, in language learning there are techniques that can be taught, and learned, which will make language learning more effective. A practical course in phonetics can be a big help. But I have talked to a number of people who have had an "introductory linguistics" class who had decided that studying linguistics is useless, at best. It *can* be that way. It really depends on who is teaching the course, with what methods, and for what purpose. In preparation with Wycliffe Bible Translators, I studied applied linguistics from people who had served for years on the mission field, for the purpose of learning and using a language for ministry. That was much more than theory. It was helpful, relevant, and interesting.

## The Importance of Language Learning

There are many countries in the world where you can teach English to people who are very eager to learn English. (A teacher's dream – students who are eager to learn!) That is a

great ministry, which it is possible to undertake without learning another language. But, aside from that, it is very important to learn the language of the people you are seeking to win to Christ. As you learn the language you develop many relationships. People are almost always amazed and blessed that an American would care enough and exert the effort necessary to learn *their* language. In some cases, it even confers honor and esteem on the language and the speakers of that language. And you can communicate effectively, in the heart language, with all the people in that language community once you've learned the language.

### **It's Not Easy**

As I seek to convey the truth that language learning is do-able, I don't want to convey the misconception that language learning is easy. My friends with Wycliffe in Papua New Guinea who have actually lived with the people and learned their languages tell me that it is HARD. These missionaries are average people not dummies certainly, and not geniuses, either. Just people who love Jesus and have accepted the call and challenge of taking the Gospel of Jesus Christ to people who previously had never heard, or understood, the Gospel.

### **But It Is Worthwhile**

Language learning is a challenge. It takes, on the average, two years of serious work (with some fun and leisure mixed in) to learn a language. Like many things that are worthwhile, it takes some effort to attain this goal. But it's worth it! And like many other things, the attitude with which you approach the subject makes a big difference. You can either see language learning as a big hurdle to overcome so you can minister, or you can see the process as part of your ministry, getting to know *people* as you learn their language. You can choose an attitude (which is recommended) of accepting the challenge, asking the Lord for help, and having joy in the Lord as you do it.

I hope these thoughts will encourage you to accept with joy and anticipation the excitement and challenge of language learning if the Lord should call you to serve in another culture and language. Many Americans have given their time and energy to language learning for a couple of years and have come out on the other end speaking the language fluently, and understanding and loving the people of another culture. These people are blessed, their lives are enriched and they are accomplishing their goal of effectively sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ with others. The same could happen to you!

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