THOUGHTS ON LANGUAGE LEARNING

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Category: Observations

I'm currently reading No Shortcut to Success by Matt Rhodes. It has a lot to say about some current missiological themes and I'll give an overview soon. However, for the moment, I just want to highlight some quotes about language learning - a subject in which I have a bit of an interest.

> *Most missionaries today are plunged into linguistic contexts quite different from their own. Increasingly, they must master two languages in order to communicate. Not surprisingly, their language learning often plateaus long before they acquire even low levels of proficiency. Few missionaries that Iâ€™ve encountered pursue language learning as if their ministries depended on it. The vast majority spend one to two years of part-time study before theyâ€™re expected to move on to other, more â€œimportantâ€ responsibilities.*

> *...most missionaries see language learning as â€œimportant,â€ but not vital. Useful, sure, but nonessential. Few missionaries understandâ€"asÂ we saw in chapterÂ 4â€"that as ambassadors, communication is their primary task. Previous generations of missionaries believed it would be unrealistic and unprofessional to expect God to fill in the gaps of communication when theyâ€™d gained only a cursory familiarity with the languages they work in.*

> *Iâ€™ve known more than one couple whose leaders refused to let them stay on the field unless they sharply reduced their language study. Choosing to enter ministry prematurely may result in short-term gains, but only at the cost of long-term effectiveness.*

> *Because of the intense drudgery involved in learning language, nothing short of whole-hearted, sacrificial support for language learningâ€"making concrete plans and expecting intense commitment until high-level mastery of the language is achievedâ€"will enable new missionaries to master their languages of ministry.*

> *Language learning requires costly self-discipline, and missionaries who donâ€™t understand its importance will have little motivation to persevere.*

> *Clear communication matters. Ultimately, itâ€™s Godâ€™s Spirit who convicts people of sin. And yet, in order to do so, he works through our very human abilities to communicate. Past generations of missionaries understood this and pursued mastery of the languages they worked in so that they could communicate the gospel clearly. Todayâ€™s missionary force has largely forgotten this.*

These are challenging quotes, but none more so than this one:

> *... in North Africa where I serve, the vast majority of missionaries fail to achieve the proficiency of a seven-year-old.*

I have anecdotal experience to back this up. 35 years ago, I used to help to organise a course called the "Language Learning Course". This six week module was run to help people who were not training to be Bible translators to understand how best to go about learning a language. We didn't actually teach any languages, but we helped people to understand how different sounds are made in the mouth and how to organise your learning. When I first started working on that course we would have fifty or more students from a wide range of mission organisations. Today, that course has been abbreviated to four weeks, but almost everyone who takes the course is training to be a Bible translator, for whom it is now a pre-requisite. Investing six - or even four - weeks in improving your language learning proficiency is no longer seen as a worthwhile investment. There are lots of interlinked reasons for this, not all of them bad, but I would argue that it is symptomatic of something very problematical in the Western mission movement.