MISSION WORK AND LANGUAGE LEARNING

Posted on November 14, 2017 by Eddie

Language learning 1905 style!
Category: Observations

The following quotes come from a 1905 handbook for workers with the Church Missionary Society. Though they are over a hundred years old, they have a contemporary ring to them. The first one looks at an objection that many people raise today; language learning takes too long!

> *Living in days when the proclamation of theÂ Gospel in the vernacular is as needful as it was at Pentecost, it is comforting to remember that the delay caused by language study is far from an unmixed evil. Whilst inability to speak with- holds the new Missionary from addressing the people he is gradually losing many of the inevit- ably crude ideas brought from home ; he is growing accustomed, through intercourse with fellow Missionaries, to many mission-field problems, and becoming equipped for safe utterance. He has a valuable opportunity from the first of winning the confidence and regard of the Native Christians by identifying himself with all their interests, attend- ing their vernacular service and congregational gatherings, even though he cannot follow what is said, and kneeling with them at the Table of the Lord. He can also in some measure, by gentle considerateness, holiness in life, and manifest joy in the Lord, make an impression upon the non-Christians around him, who will hereafter more readily listen to his words. The language-learning time will also, if rightly used, forge many links between the new Missionary and his colleagues, which will hold good in the stress and strain ofÂ later work.*

The handbook is refreshingly frank about the difficulties of language learning, but ends on an encouraging note.

> *It is useless to deny that the study of any mission-field language, with its numerous complex characters (except where the Roman alphabet is used); its unwonted sounds, so perplexing either to discern or to reproduce; its vocabulary, so re- dundant in some directions, so meagre in others ; its structure, so unlike any European language mastered before-is a mental task from which any Missionary may well shrink back in fear. In certain cases, inefficient teachers and inadequate grammars and dictionaries complicate matters still more, but on the whole the number of those sent forth who have really proved unable to gain a working knowledge of the vernacular is surpris- ingly small.*

You can find the whole handbook at Rob Bradshaw's excellent website which is a repository of interesting and important documents. Trainee missionaries looking for advice on how best to comport themselves onboard ship on the long trip out to their first assignment will find some excellent advice here. There is also some good information on the importance of wearing a solar helmet in the tropics.

However, amongst the anachronisms, there is a lot of good, practical advice, such as the section on language learning that I quoted from above. For example, the section on relations with other

missionaries is excellent.

For anyone who is concerned about learning a language today; there are two particular resources that I'd point you to:

- The language and culture acquisition course at Redcliffe college is excellent. Six weeks might seem like a big investment in time, but it's worth every minute.
- The growing participator approach to language learning is probably the best single method out there (though a mixture of methods would be helpful). You can find out more at the GPA blog and Facebook pageÂ (in both cases, you will need to follow links to find out more).

If you still think that LAMP is the best language learning methodology, can I point you to this?