

Unit 24

Review: What Are Good Language Learners Like?

Cast

- Missionary Li Wei
- Church congregation
- Teacher Zhang Dong
- 4-5 Students

Scene 24.1. *Missionary Li Wei pottering around the house, keeping busy with little project: waters the plants, straightens out a pillow on the couch, blows some dust from the bookshelf, rearranges his books, sharpens his pencils, straightens a picture on the wall, strums a few cords on his guitar, etc.*

Scene 24.2. Teacher Zhang Dong with his students

Teacher Zhang Dong: What is missionary Li Wei doing?

Student #2: Note much of anything, it seems. He's just doing odd jobs around the house.

Teacher Zhang Dong: Exactly. Missionary Li Wei is just pottering around the house, not accomplishing much of anything! He's not learning any language, he's not engaging with the culture, he's not trying to develop meaningful relationships with anybody. He's just pottering around the house! Why do you think he is doing that?

Student #3: Maybe he is tired of language learning...

Teacher Zhang Dong: Yes, maybe. I sure looks like it! If it goes on for too long, however, missionary Li Wei has a problem. He is trying to avoid coming to grips with his host's culture and language, and is just keeping busy to fill his day. Pottering around the house can become a cop-out!

Sometimes missionaries find that they are not coping very well with language study. They find it hard. They struggle. They are in survival mode, and such things as language learning, exploring the culture, and engaging meaningfully with nationals is just more than they can cope with! They are not coping very well... Pottering around the house without actually accomplishing much is a symptom that they are not coping very well. They make up for their failure at language learning and communicating meaningfully and establishing meaningful relationships by pottering around the house. Sometimes some of these people are busy with their kids the whole day! Let me give you a couple more symptoms that may indicate that you are not coping very well.

Wandering could be another symptom. Sometimes missionaries get to the field and they spend hours every day just wandering. They wander all over the place. Sometimes they call such wanders “prayer walks”, but they are really just wanderers. By early afternoon you can find these people in a tea house, a café, or an internet café, after which they go home. By wandering or exploring, they managed to fill another day, though they didn’t actually do much. Their wandering is an excuse for lack of language learning and integrating into the culture.

There are also project people. They get really caught up in some kind of project: stuffing envelopes for a Bible correspondence course, marking multiple choice course exams, writing emails to people back at home, etc. Some of these people really get into photography, or Christian video. As a result, they don’t have to interact with national people, their language and their culture. That may look better, but it is still a cop-out.

Then there are the escape artists. These are the people who go to conferences, field-trips, and/or submerge themselves in the expatriate culture. Some end up having a meaningful ministry to other foreign people, maybe to the local Chinese community, and find meaning and fulfillment in ministry that way. But that is not what they went to that country for in the first place! They came to evangelize nationals and to be involved in the birth and growth of a national church. But because the language was difficult and the culture awkward, their focus shifted, and they ended up ministering to the often very needy expatriate community. But their ministry is, in effect, a cop-out.

Lastly, some really stressed out people can begin exhibiting what can best be described as bizarre behaviour. They fail to get out into society, or they view every national with suspicion. Some make people wash their shoes before they can enter into their houses, or greet people wearing gloves. When you start behaving that strangely it is definitely time to go home!

Students: Laugh

Fade and cut

Scene 24.3. Missionary Li Wei preaching/teaching fluently and stirringly in his target language in front on a large church/crowd of people from Islamistan!

Scene 24.4. Teacher Zhang Dong with Students

Teacher Zhang Dong: What is Missionary Li Wei doing?

Student #1: Preaching to a large crowd of people!

Teacher Zhang Dong: Yes! Hallelujah! What a long way Missionary Li Wei has come! All the way from being a waiter in his parents’ restaurant to being an effective

missionary in Islamistan! To God be the glory! Missionary Li Wei has proven to be a good language and culture learner. He has earned the right to be heard—so people are listening to him. They know he has something valuable to teach them, and they know he can do that in a way they can understand.

For this last lesson we want to review some of the things that missionary Li Wei did that led to his being a good language and culture learner, and so laying the foundations to becoming an effective communicator in Islamistan.

What lessons have you learned from Missionary Li Wei that you can implement in your own life, and so become a good communicator in a foreign language and culture just like missionary Li Wei? In other words, what are some characteristics of good language learners?

Student #1: Well, missionary Li Wei was active. He didn't just sit back and hope that things would happen, he did things to make it happen.

Teacher Zhang Dong: Yes indeed. Missionary Li Wei took charge of his own language learning. He was pro-active, he was continually exploring and finding new ways of engaging his language helper and other people. Good language learners find their own way of taking charge of their learning.

What else characterized good language learners like missionary Li Wei?

Student #2: Good language learners know who they are. They know how they learn; they know their learning style.

Teacher Zhang Dong: Yes, very good. Good language learners know themselves. They know their own personal characteristics, including attitudes and learning style. The better you understand yourself, your motivations, anxieties and preferences, the better prepared you will be to make wise choices about language learning materials, approaches and activities. Good language learners realize that people learn language in different ways, and modify their approach accordingly. They also know the weaknesses of their learning style and compensate for that.

Anything else?

Student #3: Well, good language helpers have an organized approach to language learning. They try to learn as much as possible about how to learn a language.

Teacher Zhang Dong: Excellent. Good language learners organize information about language learning. They try to learn as much as they can about language and language acquisition. The more you know about language, the better the conceptual framework you have for language learning. You won't be as surprised by features in a new language that are different from yours, you may have some ideas about what kinds of characteristics certain language families have. In short, you will be better prepared to

take on any particular language you may encounter. Also, the more you understand about the language acquisition process the more actively you will be able to participate in your own learning.

Student #4: Good language learners are creative.

Teacher Zhang Dong: Yes. Good language learners develop a feel for the language by experimenting with its grammar and words. They learn to make creative, intelligent guesses, and know how to keep conversations going. They create their own opportunities for practice in using the language inside and outside the classroom. They learn to create strategies, like LAPS, to help them fill in gaps in their knowledge. They also use mnemonics and other memory strategies to help them recall what they learned. Can you think of anything else?

Student #1: Well, they use the context to help them in comprehension.

Teacher Zhang Dong: Excelling. Remember what we've said before: you need comprehensible input. If you can understand 80% of what you are hearing, your brain will begin to formulate meaning for the other 20% based on the context. In other words, good language learners don't mind functioning beyond their actual competence level. This means that they are prepared to live with a certain amount of uncertainty without getting flustered. They are prepared to keep listening or try to keep talking even though they don't understand every word. As they go on, good language learners learn different styles of language. For instance, they will learn the different styles of speech for different occasions, both in writing and speaking, and will be able to vary their language according to the formality of the situation.

Let's think of some other threads good language learners weave into their program...

Student #4: Well, they initially focus on their needs. They try to learn all the language they get to get along in life.

Teacher Zhang Dong: Yes, good language learners get the language they need to get to what they want to be doing. What else?

Student #3: Well, we learned that they develop their describing, narrating and storytelling skills.

Teacher Zhang Dong: Good. What else?

Student #1: They review their recordings of their language sessions.

Teacher Zhang Dong: Good. What else?

Student #5: They use the language to explore the culture.

Teacher Zhang Dong: Yes! Good language learners observe, observe, observe... They interview people, they ask lots of questions, they try to get people's life stories, they plan outings and cultural events. They are good observers, and soon learn how to ask good questions. Anything else?

Student #2: They strive for grammatical accuracy.

Teacher Zhang Dong: Of course they do! They practice their grammatical accuracy by developing pattern sentences of the grammar they are trying to learn. They let their language helper correct their grammar, and they listen to recordings of their helper drilling pattern sentences with them. Good language learners have a good grammar book of the language handy so they can refer to it whenever they run into something they don't know or can't remember.

Student #4: Good language learners read a lot.

Teacher Zhang Dong: They sure do! They learn to read longer and longer texts. They start off with very simple children's books, and comic books, and work their way up until they can understand their host culture's literature. They try to get bilingual readers. They make sure they are exposing themselves to a variety of written texts. Good language learners read, read, and read...

Student #5: They also write!

Teacher Zhang Dong: Of course they do. Some of them try to keep journals in their target language—even if they only have a couple of entries a week initially, they are writing. They experiment with various writing forms, like letters, lessons, sermon outlines, application forms, and dictation with their language helper or off recordings.

Student #2: Good language students plan their lessons in advance.

Teacher Zhang Dong: Yes! They plan a whole week's lesson in advance. They review their checklists to make sure they are putting together a balanced program. They gather their supplies for the next set of lessons, and every week they evaluate what works for them and what doesn't. When they run into a problem they find creative ways of solving it.

Well, you have learned a lot in this course. You go and serve the Lord. Learn your target language well. Adapt to the culture. Engage meaningfully with nationals so that, in time, some will be your best friends. And all the while, “do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God”, and do not be ashamed of the gospel. The Lord bless you as you serve him in Islamistan!

Fade and Cut

24.5. Things learned in this unit

- Sometimes people make up for their inability to come to grips with the host language and culture, as well as their inability to establish meaningful relationships with nationals by trying to keep busy with other things.
- Good language learners find their own way of taking charge of their learning. They don't blame others if they are not learning as they might have.
- Good language learners know how they learn. They know their learning style.
- Good language learners have an organized approach to language learning.
- Good language learners develop a feel for the language by experimenting with its grammar and words. They learn to make creative, intelligent guesses based on the context.
- Good language learners don't mind functioning beyond their actual level of ability. They don't get flustered.
- Good language learners develop their describing, narration and storytelling skills.
- Good language learners record their lessons and review them afterwards.
- Good language learners use the language to explore the culture
- Good language learners observe all the time
- Good language learners practice grammatical accuracy by developing sentence patterns of the grammar they are trying to learn.
- Good language learners do lots of reading.
- Good language learners experiment with different types of writing styles.
- Good language learners keep their little notebook handy.
- Good language learners are life-long language learners!