What Missionaries Wish their Agencies Understood about Second Language Acquisition (SLA)

Please email me (jdormer@messiah.edu) if you would like a Word Doc version!

My Research
- Purpose: background for my book
- 140 total questionnaires:
  - Over half went out through one agency; no request for agency name.
  - No restrictions on time of language study, age of learner, language or location.
- Elicited learner perceptions on preparation, support, effectiveness and affect.
- Additional interviews with 10 participants, done by a graduate student.

Terms
- L1 / L2: First language / Second Language
- TL: Target language: the language being learned
- Input: Taking in the new language through listening or reading
- Output: Using the new language in speaking or writing

Topics for Today
1. Fallacies believed
2. Pre-field Preparation
3. On field professional guidance and supervision
4. Agency policies and standards
5. Consideration of family needs

Fallacies believed by learners

Various statements made by the participants illustrated perspectives and assumptions at odds with modern SLA theory and research. What faulty understanding do you think the following quotes highlight?

1. ____________________________________________________________
   - “Learning a language over 40 for someone like me was not a good thing.”
   - “I do believe children are much better learners, because even their mouths haven’t formed completely and they are just so less resistant to the challenges language learning presents.”

What we know:
2. “Not enjoying language or grammar in High School didn’t help. Not understanding grammar was a true weak point.”

What we know:

3. “My husband had a much harder time learning because he has low aptitude—but he worked hard and long and got to a decent level.”
   “Some people are much more gifted at languages than others.”

What we know:

4. “Immersion in is critical. We found the single missionary, who lived in a national home, picked it up much quicker.”
   “Anything you do works well as long as you are immersed in the language and do not have good access to your native language.”

**Fallacies believed by teachers**

Various statements made by the participants illustrated teacher perspectives and assumptions at odds with modern SLA theory and research. What faulty understanding do you think the following quotes highlight?

5. “School had the policy you should stay in the target language the whole class time. I’ve taught ESL I understand this approach, but at some point you see the anxiety level rising, so you give the word in the L1. One "rule" of the school was that only the target language should be spoken in the classroom. We had one teacher who respected this rule excessively; she wouldn’t give us the English word, even if she knew it, until she had spent 15 minutes trying to get us to understand the L2 word by using circumlocutions we also didn’t understand.”

What we know:
6. “In the beginning the pattern was to not let us see words........we just had to listen to 'jabber' (to me)...... this was supposed to acquaint me to the language, but only served to frustrate me. I was sure I would never learn the language. I’m not an auditory learner; I need to see the words, and study them. I would put post-its all over the house to help myself learn. In the end, I could pass all of my tests, I got out with people and was afraid to talk and mess up.”

“I know there are different learning styles, and I am a very visual learner, so when a Spanish teacher in another country insisted that I begin only by listening without given formal written instruction with examples of right and wrong, I was very frustrated. I couldn’t fix the rules in my head until I finally convinced her to give me a written sheet with the rules she was trying to explain.”

What we know:

Turn and Talk: What is your reaction to these fallacies? Do you see any of these fallacies causing decreased SLA effectiveness?

Pre-field Preparation

1. Many participants wished they had learned more about ______________.
   o “I wish I would have understood more about language-learning from the beginning and had been presented with options earlier on.”
   o “I did not do a pre-field course. I could have used my time so much better if I would have had that course – if I could have looked at skills and competencies used...how am I covering all the areas and how did I do that.”
   o “The long-term missionaries of my organization attended a workshop focused on how to learn a second language, but short-term staff (defined as two year staff in my case) was not given the opportunity. I think everyone should have attended this workshop.”

2. Many participants wished they had learned more about the ____________ factors involved in SLA.
   • 30% of respondents checked: “I wish I had earned about the emotional factors in language learning”.
   • A telling quote: “Our entire group HATED it and one student even tried to commit suicide.”
Do simulations foster unrealistic expectations?

- “I went to Toronto Institute of Linguistics with missionaries going to learn 30 languages. Communication is not just linguistic ability. It was a great asset to realize this. I picked up Greek in an afternoon out, the basics, conversation with the method taught.”

**On-field professional guidance and supervision**

Statement by my student researcher: “Participants mostly agreed that they did not receive much support from their missionary agency in terms of learning a language. Outside of suggesting or, in some cases, mandating language schools, the agencies were not very “hands on” in their interaction with missionaries in the field.”

1. _____ participants indicated a lack of SLA experts in their organizations.
   - 0% said that there was a language expert at their headquarters, supervising all language acquisition on all fields
   - 70% said they did not know of any professional having involvement in their language learning process.

2. Many participants wanted more ______________ in selection of SLA options.
   - 39.58% of respondents chose the option, “I wish there had been more discussion between me and my superior in terms of selecting the language learning options appropriate for me.”
   - 50% of respondents chose the option, “I wish that procedures/systems/resources had been in place for me to learn the language.”
     - “There was very little structure in how my organization supervised our progress in language learning, we felt like we were literally on our own and it was tough.”
     - “I wish there had been more discussion about the differences, and relative strengths and weaknesses of language school vs. tutors. I wish I had learned how to use informal language tutors better.”

3. Many participants identified things they wish had been ______________ during their initial months/years on the field, with regard to learning a language.
   - 50%: More procedures/systems/resources in place to learn language.
   - 40%: More discussion between learner and superior about selection of appropriate language learning options.
   - 30%: Teachers trained in second/foreign language teaching.
   - 25%: Environment to learn in-class instead of memorizing everything at home.
   - 19%: Experience success in class to not get so discouraged.
   - 15%: Language class (group) instead of a tutor.
   - 6%: Tutor instead of class.
4. Many participants indicated frustration in having teachers who were _______________ in SLA.
   • “Offer me someone who can actually teach!”
   • A participant spoke about tutors who were helpful, but the language learners had to direct and guide the tutors in their own learning, unexpectedly.
   • Other respondents commented on their frustration in not receiving more direction from teachers about what they could do to continue their learning autonomously.
   • Respondents who had more than one language teacher did recognize the difference between their skilled teachers and less skilled teachers.
   • Participants reported many examples of language teaching that did not follow SLA best practices.

**Turn and Talk:** Have you seen any of these same issues in pre-field and on-field support? Why do you think agencies have not provided more support?

**Agency policies and standards**

1. Participants questioned high-stakes _______________ and the place of language in missionary evaluation.
   • “I reached an intermediate level and was able to pass the language test and proceed to my ministry. I was able to carry on basic conversations, greetings, shopping in the markets, etc. I was required to take another language test at the end of my first term and took several weeks of intense remedial tutoring. I did pass the test but found it very stressful. If we didn’t pass the test we would have to go back into full-time language learning when returning from our home assignment.”
   • “Adapting to a new culture and way of living can have its own challenges, and instant language proficiency is not going to happen for everyone. A person can have a very successful ministry and not be a great communicator. I would like to see the missionary’s work judged as a whole, and not just by language acquisition.”

2. Participants questioned ______________________________ policy.
   • “We were told, absolutely no ministry until the language was mastered.”
   • “Language is important. But it is interesting—I have known missionaries whose language of their host country could be rather embarrassing because it is not good. Yet they have had very effective ministries. That does not mean that we should not all strive to be the best in the language we can be, but it does show that God can work despite our weaknesses!”
   • “I kinda wish that there was a better balance of language study and ministry at the same time. When we were studying language the policy was that we could not do ministry and had to focus on language study. I see the benefit of that, but also see the benefit of studying and ministry at the same time.”
• “Did not have to do language study in the place of ministry. This is much better than being in language study while other missionaries are waiting for you to finish language study.”

There were a few comments on the other side:
• “I wish that I had felt that I really had the freedom to learn and study the language for a long period of time without the pressure from those above me to engage in ministry activities. I believe that I could be much further along in ministry now if I had felt that I was allowed to really focus all my efforts on language learning and stay in language school longer.”

This shows the need for ________________ approaches to decisions about ministry and language study.

Data on perceived level of proficiency and ministry:
• Around 30% reached high proficiency and able to engage in ministry
• Around 50% didn’t reach high proficiency but still could engage in ministry.
• Less than 10% identified poor language proficiency as hindering ministry.

**Consideration of family needs**

1. Many participants desired more ________________ SLA options. Among those suggested or implied:
   • An understanding that parents with children at home may not have time for homework.
   • Provision of child care.
   • Whole-family language learning options. “At one point, I had a tutor together with two of my children and was responsible for reviewing with them during the week. That helped me considerably.”
   • Studying in the country of service, so the family doesn’t move twice.

2. MANY participants ________________ the fact that their children did not learn the local language well, and that MK learning of the local language did not seem to be valued by their agencies.

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**Turn and Talk:** Have you seen any of these policy or family issues in your work? What is your main take-away from today’s session?