

PART 2: EXPATRIATE WORKERS LEARNING AND WORKING WITH ARABIC

Optimal Language Learning: Learning from those who have done it

by SB

SB, along with his family, has been living in North Africa for 14 years where he and his wife have been very involved in CP and running his own business. Currently he is serving as a country leader for our company.

Introduction: The Language Survey

Language ability is one of our highest values as a company. Being able to communicate in the heart language of those we minister to is foundational as God works through us to establish his church in the Arab world. I am thankful that as an organization we place such a high value on learning language – through encouraging language learners to set aside adequate finances and time for study, by directing them to quality language schools and by providing support and counsel to assist them.

Recently I surveyed the workers in our region in North Africa in an effort to discover the current levels of language ability. More importantly though, I was interested in discovering the factors that past and current language learners felt had contributed to their successful language learning, as well as those they felt had been a hindrance. With more and more language students coming into

our region, I hope that the information gleaned from seasoned language learners through this survey will be helpful in guiding new language students as they lay the foundations for their own language learning.

In December 2007, I surveyed thirty-eight people in relation to two general areas. First, I was interested in knowing each person's current level of fluency as well as the level they felt was needed for life and ministry. My second interest was in discovering the factors that had contributed both positively and negatively to their learning of the language. The average length of time that those who responded to the survey had lived in North Africa was nine years, and their average time in the Arab world was twelve years. The newest members surveyed had been in country for only one year, while the longest serving member had been in country for over thirty years.

The languages covered in the survey were French, Colloquial Arabic (CA), Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) and Berber. For the sake of this article, I will focus only on the two main languages, CA and MSA, since these are the two primary ministry languages for our personnel throughout the Arab world. Although thirty-eight people were surveyed, I did not include the results of the seven people who were still in their first two years of CA studies. It is very unlikely that they could have reached a solid level of fluency in this short amount of time and they had not yet begun any MSA studies. I was more concerned with the levels of those who had already passed through their formal language training period.

The language level scale I used for the survey was the one that we have traditionally used in our company, which measures fluency on a scale of 0 to 4.

- At **Level 0** a person has roughly fifty vocabulary words and is able to understand and give basic greetings.
- At **Level 1** person has survival and basic courtesy vocabulary. Certain sounds are still a problem, accuracy in grammar is limited to set expressions, and speech is slow and requires enormous effort. Comprehension requires slow speech and much repetition.
- At **Level 2**, a person is rarely unintelligible but still needs practice with pronunciation. There is

fair control of the grammar and an ability to convey meaning accurately with simple sentences most of the time. Vocabulary is adequate for social conversation and routine tasks or job needs. Fluency is usually hesitant and occasionally the person is forced to silence by limited grammar and vocabulary. While direct speech is generally understood, utterances sometimes need to be repeated or reworded. Usually a Level 2 person is not able to follow conversation between native speakers.

- At **Level 3**, the person's pronunciation is sometimes foreign but always intelligible. There is good control of basic grammar and an ability to almost always convey meaning accurately and in reasonably complex sentences. Vocabulary is adequate for participation in general conversation and for professional discussion in his or her field. Speech fluency is rarely hesitant and the person is able to sustain a steady flow in conversation. A Level 3 person is able to understand most of what is said to him or her and can follow most conversation between native speakers, though not in great detail.
- At **Level 4**, mistakes in pronunciation are very rare and the person makes only occasional grammar mistakes. Professional and general vocabulary is broad and precise and appropriate to the occasion. Speech is practically effortless and easy to listen to. Although the Level 4 per-

son may be baffled occasionally by local colloquialisms, he or she can

understand all educated speech in any clear context.

Language Fluency Levels

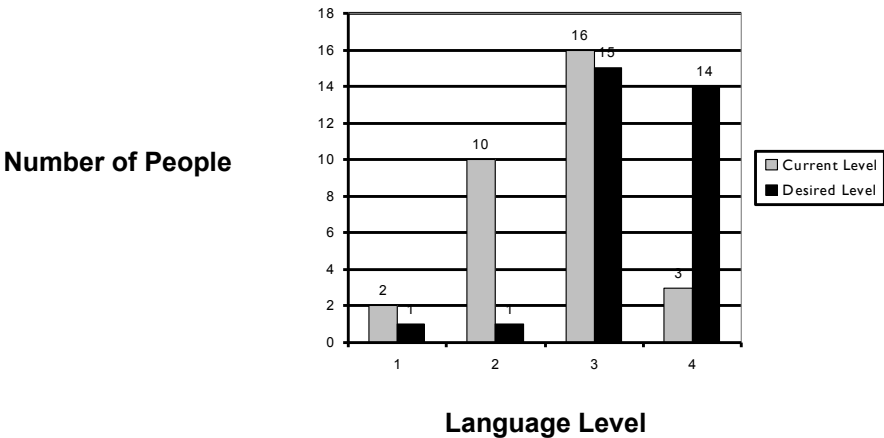
The first part of the survey asked two personal questions about the person’s language ability. The first question was ‘At what level of fluency do you currently function?’ The second was ‘What level of fluency do you feel is needed or desired for your ministry/work context?’ Thirty-one people, who had been in the country for more than two years and who had finished their formal language training, responded to these questions.

Colloquial Arabic (CA) is the primary ministry language for this region and we encourage the majority of our personnel to aim to achieve

Level 3 or 4 in CA.¹ Nineteen of those surveyed – more than 60% – said that they were currently at Level 3 or 4. Twenty-nine of the thirty-one were functioning at Level 2 or higher. When we asked what level each person felt was needed or desired for life and ministry, twenty-nine said they wanted or needed Level 3 or 4. Although we would always like to see a greater percentage of our people reaching higher levels of fluency, these numbers show that the majority of our people are arriving at high levels of Colloquial Arabic. In addition, and more importantly, they are recognizing and continuing to aim at

¹ We do now have a small number of personnel moving into Berber areas where Berber will most likely be the predominant ministry language.

Figure 1: Colloquial Arabic Levels



acquiring higher levels of proficiency for life and effective ministry here. Levels in MSA fluency were much lower than those of CA. The survey of MSA was divided into three areas: reading, writing and speaking. Of these three, those surveyed felt that reading in MSA was of highest importance while writing and speaking MSA were of least importance. Twenty (65%) felt that Level 2 to 4 in reading MSA was necessary although only thirteen (41%) were actually at these levels. In contrast, only around twelve (40%) felt that Level 2 to 4 in writing and speaking ability in MSA was necessary and less than 19% had acquired that level.

One of the factors that may contribute to these low levels of fluency in MSA is that new people are required to learn French before they arrive in North Africa, followed by Colloquial Arabic upon their arrival in the region. Since MSA is the third language most people learn, they may not be acquiring higher levels because of language-learning fatigue, lack of finances and time, etc. As a side note, over 80% of those surveyed had French at Level 2 to 4 and nearly 75% felt that Level 3

to 4 French was necessary. In spite of the importance of French in this region, if we want to see more people at higher levels of proficiency in MSA, we may need to rethink the requirement to learn French first – at least for those who really want to acquire a higher level of MSA.

Another factor that possibly contributes to low levels in MSA is that literacy in this region is not very high and as a result, most people are oral learners. Many of our workers find that they can minister effectively orally in CA and do not feel pressed to have a strong level of MSA.

These two factors may concern the North African region more than they do the Middle East or Arabian Peninsula regions, where learning French first is not necessary and where literacy rates may be higher. It would be interesting to see the contrast between North Africa and the Middle East and Arabian Peninsula in regards to levels of MSA acquisition among our membership.

Factors and Analysis

The second part of the survey focused on the more practical aspects of language learning. My goal was to determine the factors that either contribute to or hinder people from acquiring the needed language level, and it is this information that I hope will prove to be the most

valuable as a guide for our new language students in their language learning efforts.

People were asked, first of all, to note in order of importance the factors in their language learning experience that they felt most contributed

to them acquiring the language well. They were then asked to note any negative factors that hindered them from reaching the level they were aiming to acquire. The response to these questions came from their experience of learning French and Colloquial Arabic rather than Modern Standard Arabic.

Of greatest interest to me was the contrast between the positive factors that were listed by those who had achieved a Level 3 or 4 in CA and the

negative factors listed by those who were aiming for a higher level of language proficiency but had not yet acquired it. This information, I feel, gives us a helpful idea of what language learners need to incorporate into their language learning efforts and what things they need to avoid if they wish to learn the language well.

The following chart shows the positive factors that were listed by people who have acquired Level 3 or 4:

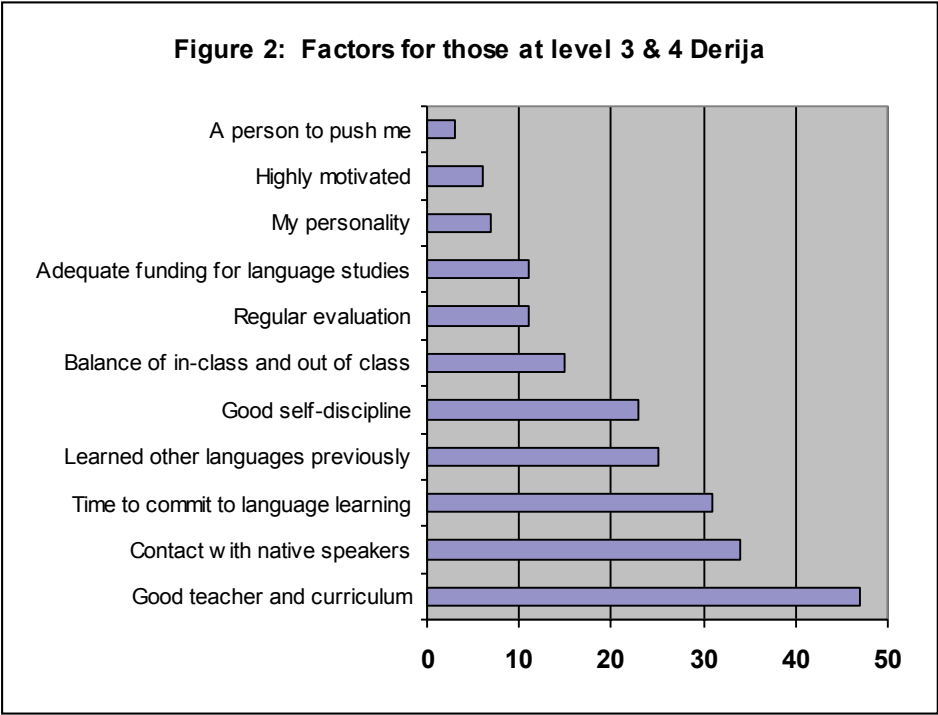


Figure 3 (on the next page) shows the negative factors that were mentioned by those who were aiming for Level 3 or 4 but had not yet reached it.

This survey overwhelmingly stressed the importance of having a good teacher and curriculum for learning a language well. Everyone has different learning styles but even for those

(like me) who learn best by getting out and using the language, and not necessarily studying from a book or in a classroom, the classroom is still important. The contrast I have witnessed over my thirteen years living in the Arab world, between those people who set aside adequate time and money and put the effort into formal language study, and those who do not, is striking. Trying to learn language almost exclusively outside of the classroom or on the street through untrained tutors has not yielded a lot of success in our region.

The failure of many who have not gotten the language is in almost every case linked to the lack of time spent in a good formal learning situation. We need to encourage language students to not cut their formal language study time short but to set aside adequate time and finances to complete their studies.

As we see from this survey there are two other important factors that are addressed on both lists: time and contact with native speakers. Adequate time set aside for formal study

Figure 3: Factors for those at level 2 not arriving at 3 or 4



with a good teacher and curriculum coupled with adequate time and contact with native speakers create a strong scenario for successful language learning. This reinforces the fact that in the early years we need to look at language study as our full-time job. This means not just the two or three hours spent in class along with the one or two hours spent on homework each day, but also spending another two to three hours every day getting out and talking with people. Maximum time and contact with native speakers is vital, whether it is talking to your local store owner, your maid, your neighbours, men at the local café, friends you meet at a local club, drinking tea with shop owners in the old medina, engaging taxi drivers in conversation, taking public transport or walking rather than isolating yourself in a car, or paying bills in person rather than through automatic bank withdrawals. There are many ways to engage in conversation with native speakers in Arab culture.

It may be helpful for more seasoned language learners to make a list of ways and places where new people can meet native speakers in their city and to help open doors for them to meet and build relationships with local people. Those who are extroverted can more easily create opportunities to relate to native speakers, but it will require some self-sacrifice and discipline from those who are introverted to step out of their comfort zones and initiate relationships. Since contact

with native speakers seems to be such an important factor in good language learning, we need to look for ways that extroverted members can help those who are introverted.

Most of us have been thankful for the Internet and the many ways its advancements in recent years have enhanced our work and ministry. But I am concerned about the big role technology can play in hindering us from maintaining maximum time and contact with native speakers. Voice over Internet Protocols like Skype and Vonage and blog sites like Facebook have enabled overseas workers to easily maintain verbal and written contact with families and friends in their home countries for very little or even no cost. These technologies can not only affect the amount of time and contact students have with native speakers; they also play into the factors that were listed of having too many distractions and not enough self-discipline.

It can be very easy to spend large amounts of time talking on Skype with family and friends in our home countries and sitting in front of a computer chatting, blogging or writing emails. These temptations are great, especially when language learning gets difficult and one is going through culture shock and wants to withdraw from the local culture. If new language students are going to learn the language well, they will need good self-discipline in this area and maybe stronger levels of accountability that direct

them towards interaction with native speakers and away from so much time dialoguing in their mother tongue on the Internet.

One of the other negative factors for people not arriving at the level of language they would like seems to be connected to distractions and demands of life – specifically the demands of family, which take up time and energy. The busyness of family life and the energy and time it takes just to live in the Arab world make it easy to let language learning get squeezed out. We need to identify these distractions and demands in each of our contexts and look for practical ways to overcome them.

In North Africa we discovered that it is very helpful to hire a maid to clean the home, cook meals and, in some cases, provide child care for a few

days each week. This not only frees up time for the wife, in particular, but also provides someone for her to speak to in Arabic. At the same time, it gives her a valuable source of cultural information. This may not be the case in the Middle East or the Gulf where most maids are not Arabic speakers.

Having children integrate well into the local culture can also play a significant role in alleviating family pressures. We have seen that when we equip our children with a usable language, they fit more easily into the culture around them. Putting them into the local school gives Dad and Mom some time to work on learning the new language themselves and helps the children to do the same. Of course, this depends a lot on the specific child and the educational opportunities available.

Conclusion

The information gleaned from those who have already gone through the language-learning process is a real gift to those who are just starting. My desire is that it will stimulate new language students to reflect seriously on how to organize their language learning time so as to learn language well. I hope that they will discover ways to enhance the positive factors and be able to lessen the influence of some of the negative factors in their language study.

I would also like to challenge those who are helping new language learners. As they reflect on the results of this survey, they need to think about how they can better assist and encourage language students. It is my hope that they will be able to develop practical ways in their own context to lead language students to high levels of fluency and thus, to better equip them to glorify God in the Arab world.