Lessons Learned from Language

I have been learning languages since the late 60s, when I took Russian in high school. But I got more serious about it in 1986, when I first took Spanish at the YWAM school in El Paso, Texas, then in Guadalajara, Mexico. Since then I’ve continued learning Spanish all these years, and have learned more about my own English language too, from having to teach it. I also studied Russian, through making trips to Russian-speaking countries, living in Kiev, Ukraine for 3 ½ months, and through a summer course at Columbia International University. I’ve also studied it sporadically by watching YouTube teachers, using an app called Hello Talk, and just dabbling here and there. I also took some semesters of Koine Greek at Southeastern University, then some of Hebrew at Regent University, and later, on YouTube.

I first taught Spanish to short-term-missions-teams that came to El Paso. I prepared a couple of short documents to use for that. I probably first taught English at some language schools in Orlando and Tampa, over a period of months, back around 2004, when, for financial and personal reasons, I had to step out of ministry for a while. Then I’ve been teaching people online and in person here and there since around 2018.

I taught English online to a 17-year-old Guatemalan Indian girl for nearly a year (2022-2023), assigned the task by the tutoring company I worked for. Then I taught English classes in north Lakeland at Faith Wesleyan Church for 5-6 months, using one textbook. Around the same time, I taught both English and Spanish at a company in Winter Haven, Florida a few times and taught Spanish to a man who lives in my neighborhood for a while.

I have been watching YouTube teachers of English, Russian, and Spanish for the last year and have gained a lot of insight from them.

I’ve been teaching both English and Spanish at UFP, a company in Auburndale, Florida since February of this year (2024), so every week for more than 9 months, teaching two levels of each language, that is, both basic and intermediate English and basic and intermediate Spanish. I also teach a combined class of third through sixth graders at a Christian school once a week.

I’ve only recently been learning that standard methods of teaching aren’t the best. I heard this from a famous linguist, Stephen Krashen, who spoke of “comprehensible input.” I’ve since tried teaching with some of this in mind, and have found it useful in my own experience of learning Russian. I continue to wrestle and experiment in an attempt to develop the best methods. I’ve also learned of the value of reading, especially stories, and of “shadowing” or repeating after a fluent speaker and have begun using these techniques as well. In my class with the elementary children, I use something called TPR, “Total Physical Response” as well, telling them to stand, to sit, to touch their hair, their faces, hands, and point to their eyes or knees, etc. It gets them involved physically, using kinesthetic forms of learning.

On 07/19/24, I watched a great video by Erica Ray Limones about methodology and was so impressed, I sent it to my intermediate Spanish student. There is really a lot of new information abounding now about language learning and teaching, and there are apps, translation apps, and even AI teachers or methods which are beginning to be developed. I recently watched a video on how to use Chat GPT for this. I used an app called DeepL to translate both Spanish and Russian to help me with pronunciation. I also use the AI in my Microsoft suite to create exercises and teaching materials for my students and myself. With all that’s available nowadays, there’s no excuse for not learning a language! All a person needs is the motivation and perseverance to pursue it!

Language teaching is an amazing field, and it sure seems I ought to be able to make a living at it, but I need to learn and experience more, and it would also be good if I could get some kind of accreditation to validate my capacities and understanding.

Over the years, I’ve come to the realization that there are ways in which language learning and teaching parallel Christian discipleship. I will type out some of these as they occur to me, in no special order of priority or importance:

A very basic thing I’ve had to learn is that no one can *teach* another a language. The bulk of responsibility is actually on the person who wants to *learn*. They must *want* to learn and apply themselves diligently. The teacher only facilitates that process. I could give classes, lectures, show videos, etc., for *years* to someone, but if that person wasn’t keen to learn and wasn’t applying themselves to it daily, putting in the effort necessary, they would never really learn. A person must really want to learn if they’re ever going to “get” a language.

In the same way, a person must really want to learn how to live as a Christian in order to live a successful Christian life. As Peter puts it, as newborn babies crave milk, we must also “*desire* the sincere milk of the word, that you (we) may grow thereby.” (1 Pet. 2:2) They/we are also exhorted by the same apostle in 2 Pet. 1:5-10 to apply all diligence to grow and to make our calling and election sure. This same exhortation occurs in many other places, such as Proverbs 2:1-6, where we’re told we need to cry out for wisdom and understand and seek for them as we would for hidden treasure, and Heb. 6:1-12, where we’re told to apply diligence and go on to maturity, growing and learning more about our spiritual life and how to live it.

Speaking a language fluently requires years of effort, exposure, and experience. It requires both input, reading, studying, listening, memorizing, as well as output, where we put into practice what we’ve learned, trying it out, speaking, even clumsily and with many mistakes. Becoming a mature Christian does too.

The effort in the Christian life doesn’t mean we’re saved by works. Rather, it just means that we learn over time and acquire wisdom, and we need exposure to teaching and modeling, that is, we need to be around Christians, see how they live, absorb by watching, by reading the Bible, going to church, witnessing, learning the disciplines of prayer, fasting, and all the other spiritual disciplines. And we need to put what we learn into practice, applying ourselves to the spiritual disciplines, witnessing to people, learning to pray, learning to give and to serve. This enables us to live more as Christ would have us. We’re already saved, but we need to learn to *live* like saved people. And of course, in the Christian life, the Holy Spirit is within us, motivating, stirring, prodding us along, correcting, guiding us to places, people, and encounters where we will learn and grow. That’s not necessarily the case in language learning, though I do believe He helps us learn languages when it’s part of His purpose for our lives.

When it comes to teaching someone a language, it can seem overwhelmingly complicated, as we consider all there is to it, all there is to learn, etc., thousands of words, all sorts of grammatical principles, all sorts of rules and exceptions to those rules. It requires diligence, training, and patience/perseverance.

The same is true when considering how to disciple a person in the Christian life. Where do we begin? What are the most important elements, subjects, or skills, that we need to convey to people? These are things language teachers and Christian leaders have pondered and worked to develop over centuries of time.

Of course, in line with the above, I would say that’s why I prefer preaching to the lost over preaching to the saved. When dealing with complete beginners, it’s more obvious what needs to be covered and taught. When students are more advanced, it’s harder to figure out what they need and bring that to them. When I have to share the gospel with unbelievers, I know what to major on, whereas with more mature Christians, it’s not always that clear. We have found that assessments or evaluations (tests) can be useful to show someone things they don’t know or even that they don’t know as much as they think they know.

For example, being an interpreter for nine months made me more aware of my lack, that I didn’t know as much as I thought. Before that experience, I was complacent, thinking I’d basically arrived. I was fluent, wasn’t I? Everyone complemented me on my Spanish. That being said, I was very zealous to learn for the first years, and I applied myself to learning Spanish daily, spending many hours in study and practice, and I had reasons for learning Spanish. I was involved in mission work in Mexico!

No one will turn to Christ until they first come to the realization that they need something, they are empty, they have no hope, they feel sinful, trapped, powerless in some way. Likewise, no one learns a language well who doesn’t *want* to learn and who doesn’t have a strong motivation to learn. God uses His law to make us aware of our need for His salvation. Likewise, language learners need to be aware of their lack before they press on to learn a language more completely. Moving to a country where the target language is spoken, and experiencing all the difficulties of not being able to communicate effectively there, is often one of the motivating factors that drives people to learn a new language. There are others as well.

With my advanced students, it helped when their boss told me their emails weren’t acceptable, so I got them to share some with me, and then we could see all the mistakes and begin to deal with them. It was seeing they didn’t do as well as they thought that motivated them to want to learn more.

With both language and discipleship, there have been tremendous efforts over many, many years to develop teachings on the basics, categorizing what’s most important, where to start, how to teach these things. Often, the methods haven’t been the best. In fact, very often, the methods have actually led to failure and discouragement. I’m sure that different teachers have come up with maybe thousands of methodologies or lists of the basics and how to teach them, and I’m sure there is a lot of disagreement about which way is “best,” or what’s most important.

I developed my own series of 10-12 basic teachings for new believers and taught them to many different groups and individuals over the years. I’ve also seen a variety of other “packages” created to disciple new believers. Probably many different methods or schools of how it should be done are good and can produce good results. But we’re constantly looking for better ways, ways to improve, things that are helpful. I think different individuals learn differently too, of course, so some respond better to one method or technique, others to something different.

One thing that is pretty apparent, however, is that it’s never sufficient to just learn a lot of random facts, either about a language, or the Christian life. You can learn grammar for years and not be able to speak the language. You can learn all sorts of theology and apologetics and so forth, but not really live a very fruitful or successful, (or even happy), Christian life. In fact, you can even know all sorts of theological truth and not even *be* a Christian! What this indicates is that information is important, but *transformation* is the real goal. People need to be taught things, but they need to also be formed, disciplined in putting them into practice, because otherwise, they’ll *blow* *up* or get *puffed up*, but they won’t *grow up*. People must learn to speak the target language, not just know facts about it!

Along this same line, therefore, it’s apparent that a teacher must not do all the talking. He/she may lecture or teach at times, but this must be balanced with exercise, that is, allowing the disciple to put into practice what’s been taught. No one learns a language without speaking, conversing, practicing over and over how to say things, and being corrected in their pronunciation and grammar. Our native language is so ingrained in us, it requires real effort to pronounce and adapt to the new language. Students must spend time alone with the subject as well, absorbing it personally. Likewise, no one learns to live the Christian life without living it – putting into practice what is taught, making it their own, and being in relationship with others who are putting that same thing into practice, so that the disciple sees it modeled and is also corrected when doing some part of it wrong. Christians must do this with others, but they must also spend time on their own with God and His Word if they want it to be real in their lives.

I have found, over many years, that hearing sermons and teachings is very helpful, even essential, but seeing someone model them is more helpful, and having someone to walk them out with me is most helpful of all. I also need someone to correct me from time to time, to call me to account regarding my “performance” of what’s been learned. I have also seen that I had to put into practice what I’d learned for a good while before it really became part of me. There were things I couldn’t learn at the beginning. They never even occurred to me, and I didn’t have the maturity to know I should learn them or to seek them out. Later in life, when I was more curious, more mature, more aware of my need for such things, I would be able to learn them. But in that earlier level of maturity, I couldn’t.

I have been speaking Spanish for over 37 years. But it wasn’t until I was an interpreter and then, a teacher of the language that I really saw how much I still had to learn. Before that, I thought I was pretty good at it, pretty far along. But when I had to interpret, I discovered how far I was from being like a native speaker. Likewise, it’s only been by teaching both languages that I have discovered many, many areas in which I was/am weak. Teaching has been the best way of learning for me.

I believe this is true spiritually too. When I taught people my ten New Believers’ classes and asked them to teach them to others, I saw this really worked out before my eyes. Several of my students in that effort told me nothing had ever helped them learn as much as having to teach. I find it interesting that in Hebrew and Russian, (AI tells me the same is true in Hindi and Arabic) the verbs for teaching and learning are related. A teacher is therefore someone who learns. We learn so we can teach, and as we teach, we learn! When we find ourselves having to teach, it motivates us more than anything else to learn!

As a parallel to this, we need spiritual leaders who can model the Christian life and call us to higher levels. If we have no mature leaders, we remain in immaturity. I like the definition I learned years ago of what an elder in the body of Christ should be. My pastor at the time said an elder was to be a “bell sheep,” that is, like a more mature sheep who has a bell around its neck and leads the other sheep along the path. Elders are disciples too. They’re also part of God’s flock. They’re just a little further along in the discipleship process, so they can model how to live the Christian life and walk just a little ahead of the rest. This is why we also need language tutors or helpers. They can greatly facilitate our learning of another language. It’s possible to learn without them, but most people won’t apply themselves and won’t get very far without a teacher, tutor, or language helper.

On 9-15, I went to two different church services. At the second one, a Spanish service, it occurred to me that when I teach a language lesson, I have to study up before I present it. Of course I know the material, but to teach it, I have to be more detailed, so I have to examine myself to see if I really understand what I’m going to teach. I myself may not always speak or write perfectly according to whatever grammatical principle I may be teaching. But I’m way ahead of the students, so I can review a bit, then effectively teach them. In the same way, when I preach or teach some spiritual truth, it makes me examine myself more. It makes me feel a bit more insecure and unsure of myself. Do *I* practice this? Could others see hypocrisy in me if they examined my life in light of what I’m preaching? I’m sure that in almost every case, they could! Yet someone has to preach or teach it. And even though I’m not perfect at either English, Spanish, or spiritual life, I still need to teach these things! I was thinking about things the preacher said, calling on the church to be obedient to the Lord and such. And it made me think, what about you? Do *you* do this, live out what you’re telling us to do?

While looking for materials to use in teaching my intermediate English learners, I found one website that said something I’ve really found to be true: When you begin learning, you seem to progress rapidly, because everything is new and exciting, and you can feel or see clearly that you are progressing. But when you reach the intermediate level, it gets much more difficult, because you don’t see progress. You already know a lot, but you’re weak in certain areas. Unfortunately, it’s hard to see where your weaknesses are, or what exactly they are. Even teachers have a hard time diagnosing where you’re weak. So it’s easy to stagnate and not move forward, and even, to accept your mediocre status. This is the area where it’s most difficult to figure out what you need and how to move forward.

I think this is very much the case in Christian life as well. In our early excitement of being saved and beginning to follow Jesus, we feel like we’re just being transformed before our own eyes. We seem to be growing so fast, and it’s all so exciting. We’re learning a completely new way of life! Ah, but as the months and years go by, growth no longer seems so obvious. We find it’s actually much harder than we originally thought to grow and change. We don’t see much happening, often for months. So we can become bored with discipleship, or distracted by other things.

On the other hand, we can become complacent, thinking, well, I’ve learned all I need to know. I’m a Christian, I’m mature in fact. I’m way better than I used to be. I’ve arrived! Ah, but this is dangerous. The word complacent comes from a Latin word meaning to be pleasing, but it gradually evolved to mean “pleased with oneself,” or “self-satisfied.” People who are self-satisfied are what Jesus called “lukewarm” in Rev. 3:16. They’re so satisfied, they don’t see the need to press on. They don’t understand how much farther they need to go or can go, how much more fruitful they could actually be. That’s why the Lord says He will spew them out of His mouth. The moral? Never think you’ve arrived, not in spiritual life, and not in language learning!

Finally, James 1:22 talks about being doers of the Word, not hearers only, who are like people who look in the mirror at themselves, then walk away and forget what they look like. Here again, language learning parallels discipleship. If we don’t put the Word of God into practice, it never becomes our own. Instead, it evaporates and has no impact on our lives. The same is true of language learning. It’s not those who just hear lessons on grammar or vocabulary, but those who go out and practice them who learn a language, just as it is the doers of God’s Word whose lives are blessed and transformed.