

10 reasons NOT to learn a language

I have spent the last three years trying to learn enough German to perform basic ministry tasks like preaching, teaching and ordering lunch at McDonald's. During these years several colleagues from other missions have tried to convince me that all this hard work was at best unnecessary, and at worst a waste of time. "Don't bother learning the language," they tell me, "we can do everything we need through translators."

During a trip to what was then the Soviet Union I finally came to agree with them. I discovered 10 reasons why a missionary should not learn the language of the people he or she is trying to reach. If you are thinking about a career in missions, you should carefully consider these things before putting yourself through the trauma of language acquisition:

1 *Not learning the language gives you many opportunities to practice sign language.* You become very adept at using hands and feet to communicate. Of course



you do have to be careful, since certain hand and head motions may mean something altogether different in your new country. When I first moved to India, I could never figure out why everyone kept shaking their heads "no" when I was talking—until I learned that the head motion for no meant yes.

2 *Ignorance of the language allows you to let other people take care of you.* Since you can't understand or speak to anyone, you don't need to worry about making your own arrangements. The travel agent can get everything in place.

Then your friends can pick you up at the airport, take you to and from your appointments, and generally pamper you.

3 *If you don't know the local tongue, you can believe that other people are saying whatever you want them to say.* For instance, in one hotel I had to stop an elevator door quickly by sticking my leg in. The porter became very enthusiastic about how quick my reactions were. Even as the doors were shutting on us he continued very loudly encouraging me. Had I had the disadvantage of knowing his language, I might have thought he was scolding me or something.

4 *It also lets you feel superior to these poor people who can't or won't speak English.* I mean, if they were really well educated they would be able to speak to me in the

world's most important language! The fact that they don't just shows that they're underprivileged, or maybe just lazy. (Of course they may speak three or four other languages, but that's beside the point.)



5 *Not knowing the language makes teaching much easier.* You don't have to struggle to find the right words. When I teach in German I feel restricted. My vocabulary isn't yet broad enough to give all the nuances I would like. When I teach in English I can be eloquent and persuasive. I can enrapture my audience or bring them to tears. (Of course the fact that they don't understand what I'm saying does tend to minimize their response.)

6 *It also lets you sleep easier.* A driver who picked us up in Minsk talked non-stop to another passenger the entire four hours we rode with him. But since we couldn't understand a word they were saying, we could ignore them and catch up on some much needed sleep. Their chatter was kind of like background music.

by Scott Klingsmith

7 Of course a missionary should never sleep in church. But if you don't know the language you can at least daydream with a clear conscience. We were in a Baptist church in the Belarussian city of Brest. We were nearing the end of our trip, and had had a short night of sleep, so we weren't really prepared to concentrate. But it worked out well. We didn't have to. We couldn't understand the prayers, the Scripture readings or the sermons, so we were free to think about things like getting home to our families and getting a good night's rest.

8 Not knowing the language can keep you from offending or antagonizing the wrong people. While in the Baltics I learned very quickly

that Latvians and Estonians are not particularly fond of the Russian language. Since I couldn't tell by looking who was Russian and who was Latvian or Estonian, my not speaking Russian saved me from insulting anyone (at least not that I know of—see point 1, above).

9 It also lets you eat well. Twice when we were in restaurants with friends who didn't speak English well, they kept ordering more food than we could eat. Another time our hostess kept bringing more and more food, and we couldn't say "no more." (Of course, the opposite can also happen. In one restaurant with no English speaking waiters we almost went without dinner!)

10 Finally and most importantly, ignorance of the language enables you to begin your real ministry sooner. Most missionary appointees face a long and difficult time of language learning once they get to the field. They have already spent between one and three years in support discovery, and are probably feeling that they will never be able to begin their work. The thought of another long delay can be discouraging.

So why wait! You can find a translator and jump right in, teaching and sharing the gospel. Of course, the fact that you won't be able to read the billboards



by the side of the street or the labels on cans and packages in the grocery store might be a small handicap. And the fact that the people you want to reach cannot communicate with you on a personal level could be considered a disadvantage. But that's a small price to pay for being able to begin your ministry right away!

So, for those potential missionaries who are dreading the two- to five-year delay in ministry while you learn a language, let me set your minds at ease. This modern emphasis on language learning is simply not necessary. Just show up on the field and jump right into your chosen ministry for the Lord. Surely He'll give you the ability to communicate with your target audience through English.

And if not, you'll still be able to take great pictures for your home assignment slide show—which will probably come a lot sooner than you had anticipated! ■



Scott and Carol Klingsmith work with CBFMS in Romania. Scott has spent the past year learning Romanian. He is also studying Hungarian, and has learned how to greet (but not yet how to say goodbye to!) the Hungarian border guards. Including languages no one speaks anymore, Scott has had experience in eight languages.

