

CHAPTER 5: CHILDREN'S LANGUAGE AND EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

Excerpt from:

Dormer, J.E. (2021). *Language learning in ministry: Preparing for cross-cultural language acquisition*. Pasadena, CA: William Carey Publishing.

Note: This excerpt is intended only for the use of participants in my seminar at ICLL. Please do not post online or share with others.

Lori: What I guess we didn't count on was how hard it would be for the kids. We kind of thought they would learn the language just by being here. We expected that at least our youngest would play with the local kids, but it seems like unless I am there with an organized activity, the interaction just doesn't happen. And the ones who are already in school hardly hear any of the language at all, because their school day is almost entirely in English. The two times a week that they actually do get 30 minutes of instruction in the language just turns them off more, because the teachers are either very boring or way too unrealistic in their expectations. And the very hardest part of our week is church on Sunday. We came here with visions of our family all participating together in ministry at the church... but now our kids really dread Sunday mornings, and I don't know how to change that.

Lori's realization that children don't just automatically acquire the language of the country they are in is one that takes many missionary families by surprise. Because the myth that children learn language easily and effortlessly is so predominant, insufficient attention is often given to the language acquisition of the children, by both mission agencies and missionaries. *The failure to understand the reality that the family's ministry will be hugely impacted if the children do not integrate well into the language and culture, and the resulting lack of attention given to children's language learning, poses a significant threat to missionary effectiveness and longevity.* It also poses a threat to MK identity and well-being later in life. Adult MKs may feel a sense of shame if they spent many years in a country and yet never became fluent in the language. They feel that this indicates some kind of failure on their part. In reality, though, it is the adults who are to blame for this failure. Both parents and mission organization leaders must ensure that MKs are provided adequate opportunities to acquire the language of the country they grow up in.

What do missionaries and mission agencies need to understand about the language acquisition of MKs, besides the fact that it is very important and should be prioritized? In this chapter, we will first recap what we learned about second language acquisition in chapters one and two, with specific application to childhood second language acquisition. Next, we will consider the three most common educational options for MKs, and look at each through the lens of language acquisition potential. We will then address the ministry aspect of missionary life, considering issues and perspectives about the involvement of children in ministry. Finally, we pull all of this together into a short-list of priorities to help chart the best course for MK education and language acquisition. For those who have the possibility of raising children bilingually, with two first languages, some additional information is provided at the end of this chapter.

Childhood Second Language Acquisition

An internet search on “childhood language acquisition” brings up a plethora of information that can be difficult to sort through, and which has often been misunderstood and misapplied. There are two significant issues which typically cloud understanding on this topic. First, we need to know whether we are talking about *first* or *second* language acquisition. And second, we need to look at particular age-ranges, rather than “childhood” as a whole. Let’s look at these two issues.

First and Second Language Acquisition

A child acquires his first, or native, language as a natural part of his development. Basic acquisition of one’s first language happens from before birth to 3-5 years of age. Babies receive a tremendous amount of oral language input, beginning in the womb, before they begin to babble and reproduce some of the sounds they hear. Research by Kuhl (2010) suggests that by the time babies are around ten months old they begin to filter out sounds not represented by the native language, or languages, that they are hearing. This helps to explain the reality that we reproduce the sounds in our native language perfectly, while we may struggle to produce foreign sounds in a new language later in life.

A child can have two native languages. Called *simultaneous bilingualism*, this occurs when caregivers speak to the child using two languages. A typical scenario for simultaneous bilingualism is when the parents have two different native languages, and they each use their own language with the child. A child can also develop two first languages by learning one from another caregiver, such as a grandparent or a nanny, and the other from the parents. However, it is suggested that a child will *not* develop native language ability in any language that comprises less than 30% of total language input (Genessee, 2007). For example, a child who visits grandparents once a week who speak to the child in a different language will not develop that language as a native language, because of insufficient input. Acquiring two native languages is obviously a very attractive way to become bilingual! For parents wanting to pursue this goal for their children, see additional information at the end of this chapter.

We say that a child is learning a new language as a *second* language if the first/native language is already well-established, usually somewhere between ages three and five. We call this *sequential* bilingualism. However, the experience and outcome of acquiring a second language in childhood will vary tremendously with context. The amount of exposure to the new language, the type of exposure, and the circumstances and need for using the new language will all have a significant impact on the proficiency achieved in the new language. For example, a Vietnamese child adopted into an American, English-speaking home at age three will likely fairly quickly lose his initial native language, Vietnamese, and replace it with the new “native” language of English. Similarly, if a child has spoken only Spanish until going to kindergarten, but the school is fully in English, English may become their much stronger language within a few years. We would ideally hope that both of these children would be able to retain their initial native languages while developing the new language of English. But, depending on resources and context, that may or may not be possible.

Second Language Acquisition at Different Ages

In this section we look at five issues which are central to discussions on age and second language acquisition: learning vs. acquisition, native-like production, methodology, motivation, and affective factors. In each, we will focus on differences for children of different ages.

Learning vs. Acquisition

As we discussed in chapter two, there is a difference between “acquiring” and “learning” a new language. Though we use the term “language learning” colloquially to include any type of language acquisition, in this section we will return to Krashen’s (1981) distinctions between *acquisition*, or “picking up” a new language through exposure, and formal *learning*, which refers to learning grammar rules, memorizing vocabulary words, etc. It is fairly obvious that the younger the child, the more the focus should be on *acquiring* language. Songs, chants, games, informal and non-stressful dialogue occurring naturally in task-based instruction – all are key ways in which young children acquire a new language through exposure and repetitive, engaging use. What may be less obvious is that older children, and even adults, benefit from these same strategies! While there may be a barrier to overcome in the perception that these activities are too “childish”, older learners who engage in these types of activities usually *do* find that they are effective for language acquisition.

Where *learning* is concerned, the younger the child, the less appropriate is a focus on learning, such as memorization of words, spellings and grammar rules. I am often asked, “At what age should we begin teaching grammar rules?” My response is usually, “only when it is helpful.” Grammar is abstract, and children are not developmentally ready for discussions about grammar in lower elementary school. Some very limited grammar study, especially if done through discovery and student-centered learning, can be helpful for older children. For example, a fourth-grade teacher of English learners created a lesson to help her students discover the three different pronunciations of “ed” in English. The children were excited to discover these pronunciation rules, working in small groups, creating and testing hypotheses. This kind of grammar instruction develops critical thinking, and engages learners in exploring the new language.

Ultimately, the rule of thumb should be that if *acquisition* is taking place without the direct instruction that comprises *learning*, we want to avoid diverting attention away from active language use to direct vocabulary and grammar instruction, especially if students are passive receivers of that instruction. For example, if a child is able to *acquire* correct verb tense forms through exposure, there is no need to memorize grammar rules governing those forms. In the teen years and beyond, a limited focus on learning *about* the new language can be helpful. Older students have the ability to apply this learning as they engage in *acquisition* tasks, and this conscious application of learned rules can benefit the acquisition process.

A final note is that in the teen years and beyond, the study of *linguistics* can be very beneficial. Learning not only about one’s native language and the language one is learning, but learning broad concepts about languages in general, is both fascinating and motivating. There have been many initiatives to introduce linguistics as a core high school subject, replacing some of the outdated English grammar instruction that currently occurs. I heartily support these efforts!

Native-like Production

As we have already seen, young children do have an ability that older language learners may not have to hear and reproduce new sounds. This means that the younger the language learner, the greater the likelihood of achieving “native-like” pronunciation. And native-like skill is not limited to sounds. Native speaker language proficiency is also evidenced in some grammatical constructions, idiomatic language use, and other language features.

It has long been thought that the window for achieving native-like language usage closes fairly early – some claimed by age 7, others by puberty. However, new, much more comprehensive research by Hartshorne, Tenenbaum & Pinker (2018) suggests that native-like second language acquisition can occur throughout the teen years. In addition, Vanhove (2013) and others have pointed out that most studies claiming early age advantages fail to account for factors other than age, such as the type and amount of exposure that older learners may have to the new language.

However, it is very important to have a realistic understanding of the value of “native-like” language competence. For most communication, native-like language production is simply not necessary. Millions of individuals successfully communicate in non-native languages that they have acquired to a high level of proficiency. And most languages have multiple dialects, meaning that there is a lot of diversity in accents, even among “native speakers”. For example, I am a native speaker of American English. But a highly proficient “non-native English speaker” might have an accent that is more similar to mine than is a native speaker of Irish English. Given this diversity, even among “native speakers”, there seems to be little advantage to advocating for “native-like” as a goal in language learning.

To summarize the question of age and second language acquisition, yes, children can probably more readily achieve native speaker-like production than can adults. However, new research suggests that this ability may last throughout the teen years, and not be limited to early childhood, as was previously thought.

Methodology

As we learned in chapter two, when focusing on the second language acquisition of adults, 75% of language instruction should be devoted to *using* the language for meaningful communication, and only 25% devoted to learning *about* the language, discovering its grammar rules, word usage, etc. How do these percentages change for the instruction of children?

Children at the early elementary level and younger do not need any grammar instruction. Grammar is an abstract concept, and young children are not developmentally ready to understand it. So, the best approach to help young children acquire a new language is to use and use and use that language, at a level that is comprehensible to them.

By upper elementary and throughout the teen years (and beyond), two specific language teaching approaches are ideal for language acquisition:

- Content-based language teaching (CBLT): This approach utilizes the teaching of another content-area, be it academic content such as math or science, or other content such as woodworking, sports, cooking, or a Bible study. This content is taught in the new language, and thus the new language is acquired. For CBLT to be successful, teachers

must gear the language of their instruction to the language level of the students. In other words, the teacher must ensure that the content and language are *comprehensible*.

- Task-based language teaching (TBLT): This approach focuses learners' attention on a task to be completed. For example, learners may need to produce a poster, or write a letter, or interview someone. As students engage in the task, often in small groups, they use language necessary to complete the task, and thus acquire that language. (See my "English for Life" checklists in Appendix ... as an example of a task-based curriculum.)

CBLT and TBLT work very well together. Teachers can create tasks which explore specific content, planning for specific language use as students learn the content and engage in the task. These two approaches also work very well for adult learners, given a content and tasks that are meaningful to them.

Can it be helpful for children in upper elementary and above to have some targeted grammar and vocabulary instruction? Do they benefit from that 25% of language *learning* time? Some may, but many may not. For many children of all ages greater language gains will be made by focusing on real language use at their correct language level, rather than lessons *about* the language being learned. However, older children can benefit from attentive teachers who will know when jumping in with a brief grammatical explanation can be helpful.

Motivation

Most experts agree that motivation plays a significant role in second language acquisition. The adult language learner without sufficient motivation is unlikely to stay in the game over the long haul and reach high proficiency. For children, motivation is important, but looks different at different stages.

Children in early elementary and younger are motivated by the here and now. Engaging classroom activities which provide enjoyable and interesting opportunities to use the language are what keep them motivated. Language teachers – and parents – sometimes err in talking to children about the eventual benefits of learning a new language. A much better strategy is just to make the day-to-day language acquisition experiences very interesting. This is why songs, chants and games work so well with this age group.

In upper elementary children may be motivated by discovery and accomplishment, making TBLT and CBLT great approaches for this age group. For example, in one of the English-learning textbooks that I wrote (Passport to Adventure, Explore A), children work in small groups to create a water filtration system. As they read about water filtration, discuss in small groups, create poster illustrations, and present their projects, they are using their new language for real, meaningful, communicative purposes.

Middle school is an ideal time to focus on the *social* aspects of acquiring a new language (Taylor, 2013). Developmentally, middle schoolers are motivated by social interaction, and this can be leveraged for language acquisition. Teachers and parents need to ensure that children at this age are engaged with empathetic peers who are helpful and supportive in the language acquisition process, and that children are able to hear and use language at their level of proficiency.

By high school, teens may be motivated by future work and study advantages, or ministry and service opportunities. They may be willing to put in the hard work of learning a language, through both *acquisition* and *learning* processes, for future reward or current opportunity. It is also true, though, that they may resist learning the language if they do not envision a future using the new language. For example, a high schooler moving with her family to Mozambique may see little advantage to learning Portuguese. If she is “biding her time” to return to the U.S. for college and cannot see how Portuguese would be advantageous to her in the future, then there is no future-oriented motivation. If we add a lack of involvement in current ministry or service, then there may also be no current motivation, and second language acquisition is not likely to occur.

Affective Factors

The affect plays a tremendous role in second language acquisition, at all ages. In other words, how a person feels about and amidst their language learning is very important. As human beings, we are attracted to things that are enjoyable, interesting, and rewarding, and tend to avoid things that are frustrating and stressful. The younger the person, the less willingness they will have to endure frustration and stress for a greater long-term gain. How does this play out at various ages?

It has been said that children love to learn... until they go to school! Unfortunately, mis-guided schooling has been to blame for a lot of stress and frustration in school, and a general loss of the pure joy of learning. Successful second language acquisition programs for elementary-aged children will focus on using language through enjoyable experiences and activities. Ideally, young children do not receive grades on their language learning, but are simply assessed regularly to document what has been learned and what still needs to be learned, with instruction modified accordingly.

In middle school, stress factors to watch out for include unhealthy social situations. If a child does not feel supported and understood as she attempts to use a new language, or worse, is ridiculed and made fun of, this can have a significant adverse effect on motivation. Though we know as parents we can't shield our children from all difficult circumstances, we do want to vet situations very carefully for children moving into a new language and culture in adolescence. We need to be on the lookout for trauma that may occur in school, whether due to social situations, unrealistic academic expectations, or teachers who do not understand second language acquisition.

In the latter years of schooling, late teens are beginning to focus on their futures, and stress levels may hinge on their perception of whether they are on track for the future they envision. If a child in grades 11 and 12 is doing well academically, and social stresses are minimal, he may have the bandwidth to pursue opportunities to engage in language acquisition through friendships, family ministry, or service opportunities. However, he may also be more focused on his future back in his home country, and may see little reason to invest in learning a new language that he believes will not help him in the future.

Educational Options and Second Language Acquisition

With the above overview of various factors on second language acquisition at different ages, we will now look at schooling options. Learning a language is not more important than getting an education, and parents must ensure that their children will receive an effective education which will prepare them for their likely future. However, this should not be construed as a promotion of so-called top tier schools. Parents and others sometimes underestimate the potential for supposedly “poor” educational options to provide an adequate education. To illustrate, I have shared my own story in the insert on pages... I had a very checkered K-12 education, including a stint in a Brazilian school that was poor in every way – from resources to teacher knowledge and skill. And yet, I value those experiences today. They not only did *not* prevent me from reaching my potential, I believe they have contributed to my success in my chosen field of language education.

Parents of MKs have many factors to consider in addition to overall educational quality, when making choices about their children’s education. Identity, passport country, eventual repatriation, and college goals must be carefully considered as schooling options are chosen, and these factors will be briefly referenced in the discussions of various schooling options.

However, the purpose of this chapter is primarily to discuss language acquisition. And so we will look at three main types of schooling used by missionary families today -- English-medium schools, national (local language) schools, and homeschooling -- considering the strengths and challenges of each as pertaining to children’s second language acquisition.

English-medium school

In the early days of the modern missions movement, many schools for MKs were started. Most of these are English-medium schools, and many remain in operation today. These schools often have a diverse student demographic, including expatriates in business and other sectors, along with local students. Many of these have held onto their Christian origins, and are now called “International Christian Schools”. I have experienced such schools from many different perspectives: as a student, parent, teacher, dorm parent, board chair and consultant. These schools have facilitated missions by providing schooling for MKs, and many have themselves contributed to the expansion of God’s kingdom through excellence in teaching and curricula that has produced men and women who are diligently carrying out the great commission in all corners of the globe.

But... the international Christian school movement has also often failed in one key area: ensuring that its students learn the local language. From Indonesia, to Brazil, to Germany, to Tanzania... there are graduates of these schools who, despite having attended the school five years or more, did not learn the local language. Perhaps it has been assumed that the local language would be learned outside of school. This can happen, but often does not. School sometimes becomes all-consuming, leaving little time for outside interactions.

Fortunately, some international Christian schools are beginning to address this issue. A few schools, such as Black Forest Academy in Germany, now have bilingual programs, so that both the local language and English can be learned. Some are increasing the hours of instruction per

week of their local language classes, and also providing professional development for language teachers in order to improve the outcome for language acquisition within the school. Some are taking seriously the fact that their students are failing to engage in the local community, and either building more community connections into the school curriculum, or lessening school involvement so that children have more time for engagement with others outside of school.

An English-medium school may be the best educational choice for the child, as parents consider the child's eventual college goals and repatriation. However, parents should also investigate the school's level of commitment to language acquisition, and parents can advocate for a strong local language program in the school. Such a program should include:

1. At least four hours of instruction weekly in the local language, preferably spread over four or five days.
2. Teachers who are trained in teaching a *second/foreign* language. This is not the same as having a degree in the language itself, or in teaching it to native speakers of that language. The school may be able to provide this training, if trained teachers cannot be found.
3. Curricula and methodology that are developmentally appropriate and highly engaging. Students should be using the language for meaningful communication, and should be engaging with the local community.

It also bears keeping in mind that school should be only one part of a child's life, not all of it. If the school dominates your family life, it may be worth investigating the possibility of changing this dynamic. This will be explored more fully in the section on "Involvement in Ministry", below.

Though this book is primarily geared towards those whose native language is English, this section warrants some discussion for those whose family language is *not* English. If the child does not speak English as their native language and is in an English-medium school, then there is more to consider regarding acquisition of the local language. The first priority should always be to help the child learn the language of instruction in the school. Without the language of instruction, children are hindered in their ability to learn the academic content. So, initially, a child may need ESL classes instead of classes in the local language. Ideally, ESL support should continue until a child has reached an intermediate level in English. How long this will take depends on both the child's age/grade and the level of English proficiency upon entering the school. In most cases, until a child is able to navigate mainstream classes nearly as well as fully-English-proficient peers, additional language learning time should be focused on learning English, not the local language. Also, where older children at low English proficiency are concerned, delayed participation in mainstream academic classes may be advised, to provide the child time to learn foundational English, especially if an intensive, academic-language-focused English immersion program is available.

National School

Sending children to a local national school is not a new option, as evidenced by my own experience in Brazilian schools many years ago. But there has been increased focus on this educational option over the past twenty years or so (see Dormer, 2009, Wrobbel, 2008, and Wrobbel, 2016). I want to clarify from the outset that this discussion about national schooling is

geared to missionaries who are expatriates in the country in which they are serving, and MKs who are not yet fluent in the local language. For missionary families serving where one or both parents are not foreigners, or for children who have grown up bilingually and already speak the language used in local schools, the issues presented here may not apply.

As you have read in my own story, my first Brazilian school experience was traumatic because I spoke no Portuguese, and there were no measures taken at the school to either provide me with a means to communicate or help me learn the language and the academic content.

Many years later, when my husband and I moved to Brazil with our own daughters aged 8 and 9, my childhood experience came vividly to mind, and I was fearful of putting my daughters into Brazilian school. Still, there was no English-medium school where we lived, and I did want them to learn Portuguese. So Brazilian school seemed like the best option. We found a school that would work with us, allowing us to tailor the girls' schedule and environment to their needs. Though they were a year apart in school, we initially put them in the same grade, and brought in a tutor who would sit beside them in class and translate as needed. This tutor, a dynamic and fun-loving college student named Flavia, sat beside them and helped them understand what was going on in the class. She took them out of the class when they needed a break, and taught them Portuguese through fun activities. Over time, the girls needed Flavia's help less and less. They learned Portuguese, succeeded in school, and love Flavia to this day!

Sometimes national school experiences go well. Children learn the language, make friends, and keep up with academics. Sometimes, however, schools are not flexible or supportive, children struggle academically because they cannot understand, they can't make friends because they can't speak the language, and teachers do not know how to help them. Here are some issues to consider in deciding whether or not national schooling is a good option.

The Child's Age

Generally speaking, the younger the child the more likely national schooling can be a good fit. Young children use less language, academics are more hands-on and visual, and learning may be more engaging and experiential. If we add to this mix teachers who speak some English and can communicate with the child, and a willingness to differentiate instruction and assessment for a child who is not yet fluent in the local language, we may have a winner – a school environment in which a child can flourish both linguistically and academically.

However, even at preschool level, the right school conditions are necessary in order for the experience to be a positive one. When we first moved to Indonesia our youngest was 4-years-old, and we placed her in an Indonesian preschool. I am glad I stayed with her every day at the school, so I could see what was happening. The teachers spoke no English, and so were not able to communicate with Jenna. Also, the other children were a little fearful of her, likely because they had never interacted with a white child who didn't understand them. They didn't interact with her on the playground. My most vivid memory of that experience is seeing Jenna up front with four Indonesian children during a presentation. There were two children on each side, standing as far away as possible from this tall, white, blond child in the middle. That solidified my decision to take Jenna out of that school! Mind you, the school, teacher, and other children were not at fault. What happened was just what happens when kids can't communicate, and the

adults have no experience in facilitating communication across language barriers. Jenna was not learning much Indonesian, and leaving her in that situation would likely have resulted in negative feelings about the new language and culture.

As children progress in age, both language and content become more challenging. A child will likely struggle if placed in a situation where differentiation and direct language instruction are not provided. By mid-elementary and beyond, it would not be advisable to put a child into a school where there is no provision for helping the child to understand what is going on. Even if the child has some basic understanding of the language, support in both academics and language learning are required.

The School's Provisions and Flexibility Regarding Language Learners

In any school context in which a child is not fully proficient in the language of instruction, the school should provide differentiated instruction for that child, in order to ensure that the child can both learn the language and understand the content. However, in many parts of the world schools receive very few children who do not speak the local language and are not prepared to help them. So, the very first question to ask is, *"What kind of support and assistance do you provide for a child who is not fluent in the language of instruction?"* If the school indicates that they have a program to assist with language learning, and teachers are trained to help students understand the academic content even while they are still learning the language, that is ideal, and the school may be a very good fit for your child. If you receive platitudes such as "Don't worry... children pick up languages easily!" or worse, blank stares, those are indications that the school may not be a good fit.

Some schools may not have systems in place to accommodate foreign children, but may nevertheless welcome them, and be very open to parent-initiated modifications and supports. Such was the case with the Brazilian school my children were in. If this is possible, following are some ideas for modifications that you may want to suggest. Which modifications are needed depends on the age and grade of the child (the older the child, the more modifications will be needed), the child's personality and his/her own preferences, your own availability for support (for example, your ability to provide some schooling in your native language until the child is fully integrated into the school), and other cultural and logistical factors.

Possible modifications for children learning the language of instruction:

- No academic grades given for the first year, or grades based on effort or progress in the language, not on academic achievement.
- A daily pull-out time for instruction in the local language. Note: You may need to provide the instructor for this. Ensure that the language instruction is developmentally appropriate, and focuses on real, meaningful, oral language use. Unfortunately, some teachers focus too much on grammar, spelling, literacy, etc., when oral language development is the first, most important, need. If the school has mandatory English or other foreign language classes, this can be a good pull-out period for local language instruction.
- A tutor to sit by the child, at least until intermediate proficiency is reached. The tutor will translate or simplify oral and written language as needed, and provide encouragement and support for the child.

- Modified testing. Some modifications might include using a bilingual dictionary, having additional time, utilizing the tutor, and oral testing.
- Gradual integration into academic subjects, especially if a tutor in class is not used. Following is a typical order in which a child learning the language of instruction can effectively learn language and content in the various subjects. This list begins with those subjects that students could be placed in from the beginning because they are visual and not very language-dependent, ending with subjects that a student can probably only succeed in after they have reached an intermediate level of language proficiency because they are very language-dense. Additional notes are also provided regarding the various subjects.
 1. Physical Education
 2. Art
 3. Music
 4. Math: This also depends on math aptitude and interest. If math is a struggle for the child, delay introduction to math in a foreign language, and try to provide some grade-level math instruction in the native language.
 5. Science: This also depends on the way science is taught. If it is very visual and experiential, and if the child finds it interesting, science could be introduced sooner.
 6. Bible: If the child is in a Christian school that teaches Bible, and if the child is already familiar with many of the stories and concepts that are taught in the Bible class, this may be a good first “language-dense” subject for the child to be integrated into.
 7. Social Studies: This is very language-dense and often requires considerable cultural background. Thus, it is often not advisable for children below intermediate-level proficiency.
 8. Language Arts: The study of language by its own native speakers usually includes very advanced language, and an emphasis on grammar, reading and writing that is not very helpful for those learning the language as a second or foreign language.

Some schools may operate under very strict policies and norms which may preclude the implementation of some of the modifications suggested above. If that is the case, national schooling may not be the best option for your child until he or she has reached at least intermediate level proficiency in the local language.

Homeschool

With the surge in homeschooling in the 80s (Gaither, 2017) and the subsequent increase in resources and support for homeschooling families came a shift in thinking about MK education. Far from the early days in missions when children were routinely sent off to boarding school, homeschooling has enabled families to stay together. Other advantages to homeschooling include flexibility in location, as homeschooling families do not need to be located near good schools, and the considerable cost savings over private schooling. Increasingly, as well, online distance education options are available. Families might be able to utilize online educational options to supplement a home-schooling curriculum in subjects where the parents lack expertise or resources. Or a child might be enrolled in a full-service online school that provides real-time

video-based instruction in all subjects. Our daughters were enrolled in such a school, based in the U.S., for their middle school years. They started in this school in Brazil, as we had decided to switch from Brazilian schooling to an English curriculum when they reached middle school age. They remained in this school while we were on a six-month furlough in Canada, which provided consistency and made it possible for us to travel as a family for speaking engagements. In short, homeschooling, especially now with emerging internet schooling options, may have numerous advantages.

Still, homeschooling on the mission field can present challenges. First, it is likely a full-time job for one parent. Though the amount of time required is impacted by the number of children and the type of homeschooling, it frequently takes more time and energy than parents think it will. It is either one parent's fulltime ministry, or both parents' part-time ministry. Second, resources, support, and homeschool groups that would be accessible to home-schooling families in the home country may not be available overseas.

Finally, though the flexibility of homeschooling should provide opportunities for community engagement and thus language and culture learning, some mission agencies are reporting that homeschooling families are the least engaged in local communities. The teaching parent, often the mother, may not attend language school, and may struggle to learn the local language. Community connections that would be made by having children in a local school are not made, and homeschooling can become an easy excuse for not getting out of the house, talking to the neighbors, and learning the language. These dynamics can have a negative impact on the couples' ministry and longevity of service.

With forethought and planning, however, these challenges can be overcome, and homeschooling can be an excellent option for some missionary families, especially those who do not have other good schooling options. In fact, I believe the flexibility inherent in homeschooling can be leveraged for excellent language and culture learning by all family members.

The first step is to prioritize language and culture learning. It can be easy to fall into the trap of seeing grade level curriculum as urgent. But it's usually not. There is usually no downside, for example, to skipping the fourth-grade social studies and health curricula and instead using that time for language and culture learning. Even less mandatory is the sequencing of high school subjects. All subjects aren't needed every year, and in fact it often makes good educational sense to focus on one subject at a time. So it might be very possible to pare down academic subjects for the first semester in the new country, in favor of an intensive focus on learning the local language and culture. A local language tutor might be able to come into the home, providing language instruction for the whole family. At beginning language levels, adults and children can often benefit from the same instructional methods – songs, games, and lots of meaningful and engaging communication – and language acquisition can be an excellent family activity. If a tutor can come into the home for 2-3 hours daily for the first few months, a basic foundation in the new language can be achieved.

An equally important goal is to integrate into the local community. A language acquisition curriculum which poses tasks requiring interaction with individuals outside of the home can be very helpful. For example, after learning family words, a task might be to have a conversation

with someone from the community, telling them about the family. Ensure that there is adequate preparation with the language tutor first, as indicated in chapter three. But the point is that homeschooling can provide the kind of flexibility which makes such interactions not only possible, but in fact an integral part of the home-schooling curriculum.

None of this happens, however, without a strong commitment on the part of both the parents and the mission agency to prioritizing language acquisition the first 6-12 months in the country. Where the accountability of a formal school is not present, a great deal of discipline and perseverance are required to pursue language learning and community engagement. It may work well to design a plan and then have someone within the mission agency keep the couple accountable for sticking to the plan.

Preparing Children for Language Learning

No matter what schooling option is chosen, and no matter how the local language will be acquired, children need a voice in the conversation. Children as young as early elementary can understand various schooling options, and can engage in good discussions about learning a new language. In my experience, most MKs initially want to learn the language, and will benefit from having a voice in how that occurs. However, if language learning experiences are negative or ineffective, that initial willingness can quickly turn into a distaste for language learning, and even bitterness about being on the mission field. This is why it is so very important to ensure that children experience good, age-appropriate and language-level appropriate methodologies, in programs where they have a voice and are heard.

Involvement in Ministry

Children benefit from involvement in ministry and service to others, in any location. On the mission field, participation in their parents' ministry is often a natural fit for MKs. Growing up, I helped teach Sunday School, worked alongside my mom doing laundry for visiting work teams, and my brothers and I sang in churches. Our own daughters did much the same, helping in English camps and contributing in many ways to our ministry in Indonesia and Brazil. That said, like anything, this perspective can be taken to the extreme. An adult MK friend of mine still has an edge of bitterness in his voice as he recalls being forced to hand out tracts at train stations on Christmas day. This is not the kind of family ministry engagement I am talking about. Rather, it is involvement that is voluntary (or at least mostly so!) and sensitive to the feelings and needs of all family members that has the ability to not only bless others with service, but strengthen family bonds.

For example, during our second term in Indonesia our daughter, then in high school, developed an interest in health issues. She was able to assist a co-worker in her physical therapy ministry for a time, which was very rewarding for her. Had I insisted that she continue to help me in English teaching rather than giving her the opportunity to choose where she wanted to be involved, she would not have learned about another area of ministry, and our family life may have been negatively impacted.

Though children may be able to engage in some types of ministry without knowing the local language, those options are usually limited. Often, ministry within the new culture will be severely hindered if children do not learn the local language – at least for them, and possibly also

even for the parents. Therefore, no matter which educational option is chosen, it is worth engaging in discussion as a family and with mission leaders about how, exactly, the language will be acquired by *all* members of the family.

Sometimes, ministry and language-learning opportunities can go hand-in-hand. For example, an older child might provide babysitting services for a local child, and learn some basic language from the child. Or a neighbor might request help with English, and an agreement could be made to have two-way language learning sessions. Or perhaps an older child can play the guitar or piano for a local worship band, and thus be learning songs in the local language. There are many ways in which a service or ministry opportunity could also provide input in the local language. If families engage in regular dialogue, prioritizing ministry, language learning and the well-being of each family member, you might be surprised at the creative ways God can meet language learning needs.

Charting the best course

To re-cap, these are essential goals for families and mission agencies to keep in mind as they make critical decisions about education and language acquisition:

1. **Children’s emotional, physical and spiritual well-being is paramount.** This does not mean that we need to envision a stress-free path for our children or shield them from difficulties. In fact, one of the best things parents can do is to walk alongside their children as they encounter developmentally appropriate challenges, providing the resources and support to meet these challenges. However, this does mean considering carefully the long-term effects of our choices.
2. **Children need appropriate K-12 schooling which will prepare them for college and career, and probably also repatriation.** Again, this needn’t be perfect schooling, and sometimes short periods in a difficult school situation can bring long-term good. Such was the case with my few months in a poor Brazilian school, which solidified my Portuguese, and did not harm me in the long-run. However, most parents do envision that their children will eventually repatriate back to their passport country for college and adult life. This fact needs to be taken into consideration in the choice of schooling. For us, that meant switching our Canadian-American daughters from Portuguese to English-medium education in middle school.
3. **Children need good opportunities to learn the local language.** It is much more difficult for children to integrate into the local culture, and to appreciate their new home, if they don’t speak the language. It can also have a fracturing effect on the family, resulting in situations such as the father going to a local church for ministry, while the rest of the family attends an English-speaking church. Children do not just pick up languages effortlessly, and conscious planning is required to ensure that children have good opportunities to learn the language.
4. **Families benefit from engaging in ministry together.** Of course, parents will be engaged in a lot of ministry beyond that which might be appropriate for the family. However, finding some ministry opportunities that children can participate in is a very good thing. Make sure that these are developmentally appropriate, that children have a voice in their activities, and that all family needs and realities are considered.