

Language Learning: A Truly Educational Experience

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Internationally, BYU is known as “the language university.” The 2017 edition of the pamphlet *Y Facts* reported that approximately 65 percent of BYU students speak more than one language.

Let me do a quick survey to see if those assembled here today are representative of BYU students in general. If you know more than one language, please raise your hand. [The majority of the audience raised their hand.]

I hope you realize how extraordinary it is that you have been given the gift of being able to communicate in more than one language. Think about it: language is the most complex of all human behaviors, and most of you can communicate in more than one language.

The Complexity of Language

Since we can all read English, I would like to demonstrate the complexity of language by giving you a simple English test. How would you read “St. Paul St.” aloud?

You probably said, “Saint Paul Street.” And your response to this simple task was likely not only correct but automatic. But can you explain to another person the rule for determining what the abbreviation “St.” stands for? Perhaps you would say that “St.” before a noun is an abbreviation for “saint,” and “St.” after a noun is an abbreviation for “street.”

Now test your rule on the following street sign, which I saw near Disneyland in California: “St. College St.”

Oops, there is no saint named College! However, there is a state college, so we will have to refine our rule for pronouncing the abbreviation “St.”

Yes, even *simple* language is complex. Language is so complex that we are often hard pressed to explain how it operates. Yet we are generally unaware of how complex language is. In some ways language is like the air we breathe: we don’t pay attention to it—unless there is something wrong with it.

Because people don’t pay attention to language unless there is something wrong with it, you should not take compliments about your language skills too seriously. The fact that someone complimented you on your language is an indication that they noticed it—and that happens when there is something wrong with it.

Early in my mission in Austria, I was quite confident of my German language ability. In fact,

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several members had told me how well I spoke German. Then one Sunday after I said a prayer in sacrament meeting, I overheard some members commenting on my language skills.

One sister offered the critique, “*War das nicht lieb? Genau wie ein kleines Kind!*” Which means, “Wasn’t that sweet? Just like a little child!”

The sister who made the comment was too kind to ever provide that honest feedback to me personally, so I was grateful that I had overheard the comment she had made to others. Her candid assessment let me know that I needed to improve my language skills.

Another mission experience taught me how complicated it is to translate a concept from one language to another.

One of the best interpreters I have ever observed was Immo Luschin. At a regional conference in Vienna, Austria, Brother Luschin was asked to interpret the visiting speaker’s English remarks into German.

Outside, snow was falling, and inside the chapel the heating system was struggling to cope with the cold weather. Noticing that those in attendance were shivering, the speaker began his remarks with the comment “Brothers and sisters, I see that many are cold but few are frozen.”

Put yourself in the place of Brother Luschin. If you had been the interpreter, how would you have interpreted that pun?

Without a pause, Brother Luschin said in German, “Our speaker has just made a marvelous play on words that cannot be translated. Would everyone please laugh?”

Surprised by the request, the congregation laughed spontaneously, and the speaker proceeded—oblivious to both the challenge he had given the interpreter and the skillful way in which that challenge had been handled.

From that and other experiences with translation, I have concluded that when translating from one complex language into another complex language, the challenge one faces is a challenge that might be best described mathematically, not as complexity + complexity but as complexity x complexity, or complexity².

The Challenge of Language Learning

Because language is the most complex of human behaviors, it follows that language learning presents a formidable challenge. In fact, language study is a discipline that supports all four of the aims of a BYU education. As you know,

a BYU education should be (1) spiritually strengthening, (2) intellectually enlarging, and (3) character building, leading to (4) lifelong learning and service. [The Mission of Brigham Young University and The Aims of a BYU Education (Provo: BYU, 2014), 5]

Let me show how language learning supports each of those four aims.

Language Study Is Spiritually Strengthening

Reading the scriptures in more than one language gives you a more nuanced and fuller understanding of their intent than you can get from reading them in only one language.

Joseph Smith possessed a multilingual Bible, and in one speech he reported:

I have an old edition of the New Testament in the Latin, Hebrew, German and Greek languages. I have been reading the German, and find it to be the most [nearly] correct translation, and to correspond nearest to the revelations which God has given to me. [Teachings, 349]

This comment from Joseph Smith also shows the value of having a translator who understands the content of what is being translated. When translators do not know the intended meaning of the original text, aberrations will occur. Joseph’s awareness of the sometimes-conflicting translations of the Bible likely contributed to the caveat in the eighth article of faith that “we believe the Bible to be the word of God as far as it is translated correctly.”

Elder Quentin L. Cook pointed out in his April 2017 general conference address that the Greek word translated as “virtue” in Luke 8:46 in the King James Version of the Bible is translated as “power” in the Spanish and Portuguese versions

of that scripture (see “Foundations of Faith,” *Ensign*, May 2017). We do not know why the translators of the King James Version of the Bible chose to use the word *virtue* instead of *power* in Luke 8:46. But we do know that they translated the very same Greek word as “power” when they translated it in Mathew 6:13, which contains the familiar wording “For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever.”

As Joseph Smith found, misalignments between different translations of Bible texts are the result of choices made by translators—and those differences invite further study to determine which translation best aligns with the revealed truths of the restored gospel.

Language Study Is Intellectually Enlarging

The Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote, “The limits of my language mean the limits of my world” (*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* [London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1922], postulate 5.6, p. 74, gutenberg.org/files/5740/5740-pdf.pdf).

Even here there is a translation issue. In the original German form, Wittgenstein used *bedeuten*, which is usually translated as the English word *mean* (*Tractatus*, postulate 5.6, p. 144). However, when talking about boundaries or borders, I think the word *define* is more consistent with the intent of the original statement, and one might even argue for the use of the word *determine*.

While Wittgenstein’s rationale for this postulate is philosophically more complicated than most realize, the implication is easily understood that someone with ability in more than one language can operate in more areas of the world.

John Taylor put the relationship between the breadth of our language and the breadth of our perceived intellect much more bluntly. Speaking in the Salt Lake Tabernacle in 1852, he said:

It is good for the Elders to become acquainted with the languages, for they may have to go abroad, and should be able to talk to the people, and not look like fools. I care not how much intelligence you have got, if you cannot exhibit it you look like an ignoramus. [JD 1:27]

Some of you may be asking yourselves, “Wait, what about the gift of tongues?”

Elder Taylor anticipated your question. He went on to say, “You may say, I thought the Lord would give us the gift of tongues. He won’t if we are too indolent to study them” (*JD* 1:27).

We can understand that serving a foreign-language-speaking mission can expand our intellectual and cultural horizons, but it has been difficult to quantify the extent of that intellectual growth. When I arrived at BYU in 2004, I repeatedly heard the question “How well do returning missionaries speak the language they learned during their missionary service?”

We have been trying to answer that question. To support that research, we have been testing returned missionaries using internationally recognized proficiency tests that are based on a hierarchy of functional communication ability. I have summarized the major levels of the proficiency scale applied in those tests into the following categories:

Novice: I can communicate main ideas using words and phrases.

Intermediate: I can communicate in sentence-length exchanges, such as in informal question-and-answer situations.

Advanced: I can communicate factual information and supporting details in paragraphs woven into cohesive, lengthy narrations and descriptions.

Superior: I can spontaneously deliver elaborate explanations and abstract reasoning in extended presentations and discussions.

[See “ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines 2012,” American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, actfl.org/publications/guidelines-and-manuals/actfl-proficiency-guidelines-2012]

Please note that this scale describes one’s spontaneous, sustained level of language abilities, not one’s rehearsed or memorized abilities.

Looking at this summary, how would you rate your second-language proficiency? Which statement best fits your ability level?

If you are a returned missionary and you rated yourself as an “advanced” speaker, you are probably right.

Some results from our initial research compare the proficiency results of 391 recently returned missionaries studying at BYU with the proficiency levels of 501 non-BYU students who were junior- and senior-year language majors studying at five large liberal arts colleges with study abroad programs. On average, returned missionaries are more proficient speakers of their second language than are language majors graduating from other large U.S. universities. That is good news! (See Dan Dewey and Ray T. Clifford, “The Development of Speaking Proficiency of LDS Missionaries,” in *Second Language Acquisition Abroad: The LDS Missionary Experience*, ed. Lynne Hansen [Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2012], 29–49.)

But we must remember that despite having developed a significant level of conversational fluency, the speech of returned missionaries showed consistent patterns of grammatical and vocabulary deficiencies—and those deficiencies limited their ability to communicate clearly about nuanced, complicated subjects.

Only 6 percent of the returned missionaries had attained a “superior” level of proficiency (see Dewey and Clifford, “Development of Speaking Proficiency,” 36). That is an important threshold, because the “superior” level of proficiency is the level required for professional jobs in diplomacy, business, and higher education.

All language majors at BYU now take proficiency tests as part of their senior capstone course, and the data show that further language study at BYU adds value, is intellectually enlarging, and improves students’ language proficiency.

Language Study Is Character Building

What builds character? In my experience, for an activity to build character it must be inherently good, it must require concerted effort, and it must demand perseverance over an extended period of time.

Language study meets all three of these character-building prerequisites.

First, we know that language learning is good. In Doctrine and Covenants 90:15 we are counseled to “become acquainted with all good books.” And as a reminder that not all good books are written in English, the verse adds, “and with languages, tongues, and people.”

Second, studies show that learning takes effort. In the stairway between the third and fourth levels of the Harold B. Lee Library is a framed copy of Doctrine and Covenants 88:118. As a student at BYU, I would read that reference every time I exited the library after a long night of study. In particular, the last line would catch my attention. It states, “Seek learning, *even by study* and also by faith” (emphasis added).

I remember asking myself why this revelation included the word *even*. Wouldn’t it be sufficient to say, “Seek learning by study and by faith?” Was the word *even* added to emphasize that also in education, faith without works is dead? In any case, the phrase “even by study” became a slogan and a guiding principle during my educational pursuits.

Of course, faith is also necessary. It provides ongoing motivation for us to persevere in our studies, but expecting to learn by faith alone is not realistic. Remember the advice of John Taylor: we won’t be given the gift of tongues unless we study languages.

Third, language learning requires perseverance. Perhaps you have heard of the popular notion called the “10,000-hour rule.” That rule suggests that to become an expert at anything requires about 10,000 hours of effort.

Since many missionaries study and practice their mission language for forty to sixty hours per week for up to two years, they might devote between 4,000 and 6,000 hours to the study of their mission language. By the time they return, they could amass half of the 10,000 hours needed to become an expert in that language. They are halfway to becoming language experts, and if they persevere, they can become experts. The expectation that learners will devote thousands of hours to the acquisition of language skills clearly meets the third criterion for building character: perseverance over an extended period of time.

Anders Ericsson and Robert Pool, the authors of the research that has been generalized as the 10,000-hour rule, continue to reject the oversimplification of their findings by reminding us that just spending time doing something is not enough to become an expert.

Attending 10,000 hours of piano concerts will not automatically turn you into a concert pianist. Just attending 10,000 hours of church meetings—the equivalent of attending a three-hour block of church meetings every week for sixty-four years—will not automatically turn you into a celestial person.

According to Ericsson and Pool, the key to becoming an expert is not just spending time but engaging in “deliberate practice.” Deliberate practice is different from other types of practice in two essential ways: there must be established “criteria for superior performance” and there must be teachers “who can provide practice activities designed to help a student improve his or her performance” (Anders Ericsson and Robert Pool, *Peak: Secrets from the New Science of Expertise* [Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016], 98). It is only possible to become an expert through deliberate practice, but deliberate practice is only possible under these two conditions.

Language study at BYU meets these criteria. The field of language study is a professional discipline with well-developed standards of superior performance, and BYU has more faculty with expertise in bringing learners to the superior level of language proficiency than you can find at any other university. As suggested by the need for deliberate practice, advanced language learning is not a do-it-yourself project—but resources are available to help you improve your skills. So take the pledge: “I won’t let my language languish.” (Say that ten times quickly!)

BYU has many options for continued language study, and more options are being developed. I foresee a time when every BYU student will have the opportunity for advanced study of a second language—whether that be a language learned on a mission, a language spoken at home, a language

learned through formal study, or a language acquired through other life experiences.

These learning opportunities will be structured as language programs that complement students’ chosen academic disciplines. To accomplish this, our language programs will have multiple competency-based entrance and exit options and will offer both undergraduate and graduate instructional options.

Language Study Leads to Lifelong Learning and Service

Just as having the ability to communicate in another language will expand your intellectual horizons, knowing another language will have a multiplier effect on your post-BYU opportunities for service and lifelong learning.

When we hear the word *service*, our first thoughts are likely to turn to service opportunities in the Church—and they are plentiful. However, service and learning opportunities abound in our vocations as well.

For my entire life there has been a shortage of individuals with expertise in languages. A 1979 report to the president of the United States concluded, “Americans’ incompetence in foreign languages is nothing short of scandalous, and it is becoming worse” (President’s Commission on Foreign Language and International Studies, “Strength Through Wisdom: A Critique of U.S. Capability,” November 1979, in *Modern Language Journal* 64, no. 1 [spring 1980]: 12).

Parallel conclusions were reached this year in a report by the national Commission on Language Learning (see *America’s Languages: Investing in Language Education for the 21st Century* [Cambridge, Massachusetts: American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2017], amacad.org/multimedia/pdfs/publications/researchpapersmonographs/language/Commission-on-Language-Learning_Americas-Languages.pdf).

Regardless of where you serve, your language skills will make that service personally rewarding. You will get to know and come to love other peoples—and you will do so with a depth of

feeling and understanding that would not otherwise be possible.

The Language of the Spirit

In conclusion, I would like to comment on another language that is available to us all but that is a foreign language to most of the world's inhabitants. It is the language that Joseph B. Wirthlin called "the language of the Spirit."

Elder Wirthlin described this language as follows: "There is a mighty power that transcends the power of messages conveyed by words alone, and this is the power of messages communicated by the Spirit to our hearts" ("The Language of the Spirit," *Ensign*, November 1975).

Of all the world's languages, it is the language of the Spirit that best satisfies the aims of a BYU education. I have personally experienced the language of the Spirit in my life, and I know it exists. I would like to share some personal examples with you.

A Prompting for Preparation

After five years of marriage, my wife and I had not been able to have children, so we applied to adopt a child through LDS Social Services. We were told that the process would take about two years.

After only six months, my wife, Karen, informed me one morning that "our" baby had been born. She knew by a communication of the Spirit that this had happened. She had just had a dream in which a beautiful, blonde baby girl had come from heaven to be in our home. She asked if I would come home early that day so that we could go shopping for baby clothes, diapers, a baby carrier, and a bathinette.

Later that afternoon, as we returned from shopping, I was just unlocking the door to our apartment when the phone began to ring. It was the adoption agency calling to inform us that a baby

had been born the night before and that when they had prayed about placing the child, they had felt inspired that this child was meant to be part of our family.

A Prompting for Change

Decades later, when I was working as the chancellor of the Defense Language Institute in Monterey, California, I was informed that BYU would be hiring a director for a newly created Center for Language Studies. I did a pros and cons analysis of my options and quickly concluded that leaving my position in Monterey did not make sense. The logic of that conclusion was incontrovertible, but the Spirit kept nagging me to reconsider.

In response to those promptings of the Spirit, I went to the temple and prayed for guidance. "Should I apply for the BYU position?" was my simple question.

The Spirit's answer was immediate and direct: "Yes, and when you apply, you will get the position."

I have never gone into a job interview with such confidence as I did for that BYU position.

A Prompting for Healing

Almost two years ago I placed my hands on my wife's head. With the assurance of the Holy Spirit, I confidently blessed her that she would fully recover from the cancer with which she had just been diagnosed. That blessing has been fulfilled, and earlier this month my wife and I gratefully celebrated our fifty-first wedding anniversary.

Yes, learning other languages is important, but becoming proficient in the language of the Spirit should be our top priority.

Brothers and sisters, I know the gospel is true, and I leave that witness with you. In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.