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Colloquium – Language Learning Abroad: Insights from the Missionary Experience

Presented at the Second Language Research Forum, Michigan State University, USA; 30 October 2009

1. Rationale for the colloquium

Recent years have brought increasing attention to studies of language acquisition in a country where the language is spoken, as opposed to formal language study in classrooms. Research on language learners in immersion contexts is important, as the question of whether study abroad is valuable is still somewhat controversial among researchers (DeKeyser 2007; Sunderman & Kroll 2009). In the introduction to a pioneering volume on language study abroad, Freed (1995, pp. 17–18) noted that a vital question concerns the relative linguistic benefits of a summer, a semester or a year in the foreign environment. Our purpose in this colloquium, which was organized by Lynne Hansen, was to introduce a new line of research which allows comparisons of L2 attainment over these exposure times as well as longer periods. Tens of thousands of young missionaries for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (also known as the LDS or Mormon Church), advanced speakers of some fifty languages, return home annually after two years of language learning abroad. This natural sample of learners, in its relative uniformity of learner characteristics and learning contexts, allows for the control of variables in SLA research which can be problematic in studies of more heterogeneous groups.

2. Themes

The LDS Church has developed a number of 'language planning' protocols to address the missionary language acquisition challenge, where 'language planning' refers to planned approaches to language related problems or challenges (Eggington, forthcoming). William Eggington (Brigham Young University) discussed these plans in the colloquium, including the initial exposure to the target language at the Missionary Training Center (MTC), on-going formal language learning, individual missionary study and assessment while serving in-country, and a 'buddy' language acquisition experience where a novice missionary is partnered with a more proficient companion until at least a minimum survival level is achieved.

C. Ray Graham's (Brigham Young University) historical overview of church language policies then described the development of language training centers in the mid-twentieth century, where missionaries were given intensive language training prior to their travel abroad (Graham, forthcoming). The number of these centers has now grown to 16, located from

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Argentina to Ghana to New Zealand. Currently over 10,000 learners are instructed each year in 47 different languages. Methods for teaching languages mirror those employed in contemporary society, those currently used including task-based instruction with computer technology. Typical oral proficiencies achieved at the end of the eight- to twelve-week training period fall within the intermediate level on the ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) scale.

Dan Dewey and Ray Clifford (Brigham Young University) then reported findings from their study of 391 returned missionaries, showing that these learners typically achieve proficiencies at the advanced level, using the OPI scale, with a few reaching the superior level (Dewey & Clifford, forthcoming). The researchers discussed specific linguistic strengths and weaknesses of missionaries based on the OPI data and tester interview responses, and described in broader terms what kinds of real-world communication tasks these returnees are prepared to accomplish. Comparisons were then made of the abilities of the returned missionaries with the abilities of non-returned-missionary undergraduate language majors. In conclusion, the implications were discussed for understanding of the differences between formal classroom learning and informal independent study during immersion in the target culture.

Substantiating previous findings of differences in the rate of mission vocabulary learning according to the particular target language (Hansen, Umeda & McKinney 2002; Hansen et al. 2003), Lynne Hansen and Ronald M. Miller (Brigham Young University, Hawaii) reported on analyses of vocabulary data elicited from 80 learners of each of six languages (Hansen et al., forthcoming). The acquisition of productive lexical knowledge was found to differ significantly between learners of three East Asian languages (Japanese, Korean and Mandarin), typologically distant from the learners' L1 English, as opposed to three Indo-European languages which are more similar to the L1 (German, Portuguese and Spanish). In addition to language distance, a regression analysis showed significant effects in lexical acquisition for the length of time on the mission (with stronger effects during the first year), motivation to learn the language, and learner belief in the availability of spiritual aid in mission language learning and use.

Finally, Jenifer Larson-Hall (Northern Texas University) and Dan Dewey (Brigham Young University) focused further on individual learner characteristics in a report of their study of 44 English L1 missionaries learning Japanese in Japan (Larson-Hall & Dewey, forthcoming). Two proficiency measures were used, a Japanese Simulated Oral Proficiency Interview (SOPI) and an elicited imitation task. Information about language aptitude and working memory were gathered using the MLAT (Carroll & Sapon 1959), Meara's (2005) Llama tests, and French's (2006) Arabic non-word test. The amount of time the participants spent in the target culture was the strongest predictor of their proficiency level during the first year, but was greatly reduced in influence subsequently, as in the Hansen et al. (forthcoming) vocabulary study reported above. Out of the four aptitude tasks, the one with the most predictive ability was the non-word test. For motivation, questions were grouped into clusters and their ability to predict proficiency was examined. The best regression equation to predict overall proficiency included number of months on mission, the working memory task, and a motivational cluster representing Dörnyei's (2005) category of 'Ideal L2 self'.

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It is the hope of the colloquium participants that our modest efforts will provide a foundation for future mission language studies that will contribute to the accumulation of additional pieces of the language acquisition puzzle.

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Lynne Hansen
Professor Emerita
Brigham Young University, Hawaii, USA
hansenl@byuh.edu

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