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The Enemy Within: Part III

You might recall from the last Language Notes that I said diets often do not help when people are trying to lose weight. I explained the importance of having personal control and ownership of what we are doing. This was an analogy for our language program: we need to take control and direct what needs to happen in it, not just leave it up to a program. In this Language Notes, I want to explain why everyone needs a good diet program! This is not a contradiction. The point is we all need structure when accomplishing difficult tasks. A good program can be a part of that. The people who succeed in losing weight do not see their diet as one that will last just 6 months; they see their diet as their new lifestyle. Something they will do for the rest of their lives. Making the jump to the language learning context is easy. If you see language learning as something that lasts only for two years, or something that just happens during the day at language school, then language learning will be difficult. Language learning needs to be your new life-long habit. The following section will shed some light on this.

Life Long Learning

Earlier this month we traveled to a neighboring country to conduct a marriage seminar. While driving through the mountains to the conference center with a local believer, I asked him if he knew why some people succeed in language learning and some did not. This particular man has been helping foreign workers get settled in, find language teachers and translate for about 15 years. His answer was very insightful. Let me share it with you.

He noticed that some foreigners create a home for themselves that isolates them from nationals. They try to recreate their own home-culture. He said this type of person will not learn the language, or at least not well. He also noticed that the other extreme, of immediately moving into a national's home, does not work well either. He said living with a national puts a great strain on the host who has to live with a foreigner who cannot speak the language and they end up feeling like they are baby-sitting. These arrangements end up stressful for everyone involved.

Language students who just study at home with a private teacher do not do as well as those who have to leave their apartment everyday and go to a language school. He felt that both private teachers and language schools are good, but if a person is not getting out of their home everyday and seeing new things, just studying a lot at home will not make up for it.

The key difference he noticed between those who succeed and those who do not, is attitude. He mentioned two important attitudes. The first is the willingness to try and fail. He said that people who are stuck on "*doing it just right*" make very poor progress. In contrast, those who start speaking and sound terrible end up doing quite well. The second important attitude he said is the desire to be with nationals. If language learners really love the nationals, want to learn more about them, and want to develop good friendships with them, then they will learn the language. Their love for the people makes them compelled to do whatever they can to enter their world. He felt that this was the key factor that makes the difference between those who succeed and those who do not. These people want to learn everything and want to learn all the time. It is their new lifestyle for the rest of their life!

I finally asked him about how people get past the intermediate levels of language learning to become fluent. He noticed that each person has his or her own way, but he felt reading a lot and speaking were keys. He explained that when someone can begin to read the key books of the country in the national language, they begin to understand the soul of the people and the heart language. In regard to speaking, once a person has completed a good two year course, they need

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to move into doing their work in the national language, as much as they can. Those that speak the most win in the end. Good advice for us all!