

BOOK REVIEW

Becoming Bilingual, a Guide to Language Learning, by Donald N. Larson and William A. Smalley, Practical Anthropology (Box 1041, New Canaan, Conn. 06840, USA) 1972, pp. v-xv-426, paper bound, \$6.00.

Reviewed by the Editor.

Larson and Smalley, who have been teaching language learning techniques to missionaries for some years, have now set forth their ideas and procedures regarding language learning. The reviewer received a copy of *Becoming Bilingual* at the time he was settling down in Beirut for a very intensive course in spoken Levantine Arabic. He has not only read it but has applied many of the suggestions urged by the authors.

The authors do not present us with anything which will revolutionize language teaching, nor do they claim to do so, but the wealth of observations and the consistent orientation of the book make it possible for the language learner to select from a vast range of notions and to apply these to his language learning task. There is no attempt to force every situation into a single ideal pattern, but rather to point out numerous ways in which the frequent inadequacies that characterize language learning can be corrected.

Becoming Bilingual may sound overambitious as a title, but the authors have a perspective in mind: they see language learning as a process of dealienation. In brief, they are concerned to enable the foreigner in a new and strange environment to decrease the cultural, and hopefully the personal, gap between himself and the native speakers. Having done this (it is a continuing process) the new language learner, if he really has something worthwhile to contribute in his new setting, is in a position to do so.

It is perhaps the awareness of this new setting and how to relate language learning to it that is the major contribution of the authors to the rather extensive literature in this field. They do not claim, and wisely, to possess a theory of second language learning, but they manage to draw upon an almost overwhelming store of observations which relate their approaches to real situations.

The authors begin with the learner himself and show how each person is involved in a complex of forces: motivation, aptitude, insight, imagination, immediate physical and cultural environment and opportunity. One of the important recommendations for the learner is to become a part of a local family, an excellent way to give the learner practice in language and cultural perspective, but somewhat difficult for a foreign family with children.

Having examined the nonlinguistic factors which face the learner, the authors then tackle a very sizeable job: to show how language operates and to describe both ideal and typical language learning programs. On page 82 a chart is presented which attempts to indicate the order of learning and the amount of time required in a three-year language program. The basic order suggested is pronunciation, frozen phrases, pattern practice, using patterns to say new things, reading, and finally oral cultural investigation. The authors then outline the various sources often available in the society which can be utilized by the learner.

Part Three gets down to the hard work of "how to do it" with learning cycles and how to organize the drills which must be worked out in order to obtain adequate controlled practice in pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary. This is the technical core of the book and contains 231 pages, including a section called "learning to make sense" and another on "learning to read and write".

The final section entitled "Wider Communication" is an attempt to help the learner keep moving upward beyond the familiar plateau sometimes expressed as "I know enough to do my own little job." This section is an invitation to explore the cultural terrain as well as dialect variations, and ends with a brief section on translation.

Larson and Smalley have given us a new tool, one which cuts in many directions. If there is a fault in the tool, it is its cumbersomeness. At times one feels the specialist alone is being addressed, not only where it is stated explicitly. At other times the detail of illustration gets in the way of clear, concise presentation. No doubt the person without training in linguistics would find Larson and Smalley almost as large a task as tackling the new language. The authors write, quite naturally, from an American perspective, and one might be tempted to think that only Americans need to become bilingual. But these failures are minor compared with the overall value of the book.

I have put this book to good use here in Beirut while learning spoken Arabic. In fact, anyone who is motivated to dealienate himself in a new language-culture will be deeply indebted to the insights of *Becoming Bilingual*, for clearly no other book on language learning casts its net so wide and so helpfully.

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