Learning another language at church?

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You know you live in a truly multilingual and multicultural place when your local church does not only advertise their times of worship but also the languages in which the services are conducted. Abu Dhabi Week was running a feature about “Churches in Abu Dhabi” a few weeks ago and it turns out that all three Christian churches are very multilingual. Christians and other non-Muslims are welcome to practice their religion freely in this Muslim nation and two of the three churches are even built on land generously donated by the late President of the United Arab Emirates, HH Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan.

According to the feature article, English is the main language of all the three denominations in the city and the Anglican parish also offers services in Hindi, Urdu, Tagalog, Korean and Arabic. The Evangelical Community worships in three additional languages, namely Filipino, Afrikaans, and Mandarin and the Catholic parish is the most multilingual of them all, with services in Tagalog, Malayalam, Urdu, Arabic, Konkani, Tamil, French, Singhalese and Malankara.

All this is of course a wonderful testimony to the incredible diversity of the city of Abu Dhabi and one of the reasons I love living here (I’ll write about how frustrating and infuriating multilingualism and lingua franca use can be when you try to get something done, some other time)

It also reminded me of my childhood fascination with Heinrich Schliemann, the excavator of Troy. Schliemann had to leave school at age 14 because his parents could not afford to continue his education and so he was pretty much a self-educated man. What I admire most about him is the way in which he successfully taught himself a number of languages. No private language schools, best-teaching-method-ever, most-innovative-curriculum-ever or learn-a-language-in-your-sleep for him (if you stay tuned to Language on the Move you are bound to hear more about what we think of the contemporary English language teaching industry ...).

So, how did Schliemann learn to speak English, French, Dutch, Spanish, Portuguese, Swedish, Italian, Greek, Latin, Russian, Arabic, and Turkish (I take this list from the Wikipedia entry about him) in addition to his native German? He attended church services in all these languages while stranded in Amsterdam! It seems that the foundations for his life-long love of languages and his knack for learning them was laid when the Venezuela-bound ship on which he worked stranded in the Netherlands and he worked as an office boy in Amsterdam for two years before moving to St Petersburg. Amsterdam being the international port city it was back then – and still is today, I suppose – church services were being offered in many languages for seafarers from many nations, and Schliemann made good use of them by sitting in on as many as he could.
As a language learning method it makes a lot of sense:

- You start with a “text” you already know so you won’t get frustrated by “not understanding a word the teacher is saying”
- You get to listen to real language from the very beginning and don’t have to scratch your head wondering whether you’ll ever have occasion to use “The cat is on the mat”
- And you can sit there quietly, and don’t need to be in a constant sweat for fear of having to speak in the new language before you are ready to.

All this is based on the assumption that “you are preaching to the converted” and all that is new for the language learner is the language. It’s a very different story if you are trying to learn a new language through a new faith simultaneously as our colleague Huamei Han has so insightfully described in her PhD work about the interplay between English language learning, conversion to Evangelical Christianity and immigrant settlement in Canada. You can list to a recording of Huamei presenting a paper on “Accumulating Linguistic and Socio-Economic Capital on the Margin at and through Church” on the Language-on-the-Move portal.
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