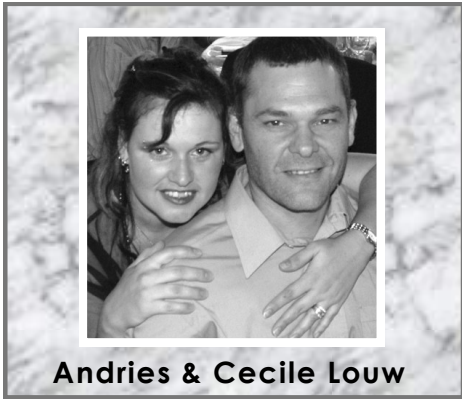


A Bottle of Water a Day Keeps the Culture Shock Away



Andries & Cecile Louw

“Walking down the street in India is work”, Ansie said referring to a recent exposure trip to learn about the culture and religion of the Hindi people. Ansie and Rita first attended one of my language-and-culture learning encounters in South Africa, practising basic language-learning techniques by learning an African language. They then applied the same techniques learning Hindi in India.

Listening to them reflecting on the experience, I was reminded about the reality of culture shock but also about the potential of language learning to engage cross-culturally with people in powerful ways.

“It was overwhelming: the noise, the bells, the hooters, the masses of people, the vendors constantly pushing their wares in your face, the beggars, the smell of incense, the cars, the bikes, the motorbikes, the heat... My reaction was to switch off emotionally, to disengage, to observe from a distance” said Ansie. “I was in survival mode.”

But it wasn't all culture shock. Ansie remarked: “One man said how much they appreciated the fact that we were wearing their traditional clothing during Divali. The mere fact that we greeted people in Hindi helped to be accepted.”

On arrival in Delhi Rita learnt a simple greeting. She chose four language helpers. “I chose people that I knew I would see every day. I would define what I wanted to learn from them and use it on all of them... So I would get... different answers and eventually I was getting corrections on my way of asking.” Having practised the greetings for a few days,

she learnt to ask for a bottle of water. “I would walk in and say 'Kripya pani ki bottel chayje'. They knew what I was coming for eventually because I was going to say the same thing every day but then I would change it and I'd say I want a big bottle or I want a small bottle or I don't want a cold bottle... We were starting to play with one another. It's about relationship, It is ABSOLUTELY about relationship.”

“The more time I spent with an individual,... the more they became convinced that I wanted to learn the language, and they then became honoured with the fact that I chose them. Therefore they would give me their best... We went away to Varanasi. When we came back from Varanasi into Delhi and we walked down our street, it was like coming home. It was like my family was waiting for me. They stood up, they came out of their shops and they shook my hand.



Rita on left with friends in India

“Language learning is such a relational thing. Religion and religious talking... is also a relational thing... One man said to us: 'When you were married, were you married in a church?' So I said yes. He said 'Did the priest put lots of blessings on you?' That was an open door. But I also knew that I was leaving in the next couple of days. I had no way of discipling this guy... I told him it wasn't the priest's blessing in my life that he saw. It's the spirit of Isha Bakta, the spirit of Jesus Christ that you see in me and that's where I left it.... But he was asking and he would not have asked anybody else because they hadn't built relationship with him



Ansie in Indian Bazaar

in the same degree. He was one of the four I had chosen to help me.”

Dealing with the beggars was emotionally challenging. “You can't give to any of them because then you would not be able to move”, Rita explained. So she learnt to say ‘Go away’ in Hindi. “I felt good because I could say it in Hindi, but bad because I was actually chasing them away.”

“But after a while you start calling them Auntie. You tell them 'Auntie... please go, thank you' with a smile. And their attitude is they're not bugging you and tapping you on the arm. And there are lots of them, they don't stop. They come at you from all angles man... It was hard, it was very hard... It was terrible but it was good at the same time.”

“I shut the door each day, so empowered. I was exhausted but I would close the door and say 'yes!' and do the whole air-punching thing. It was exhausting but invigorating as well.”

Language learning is about so much more than simply making yourself understandable. It is a bridge-building exercise, a culture-shock absorber, an act of ministry.

Andries Louw founded Vulavula Languages and teaches language & culture learning. Andries is married to Cecile and has three daughters.

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