

# **Learning and Keeping a Second Language: The LDS Missionary Experience**

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## **Learning and Losing a Second Language: The LDS Missionary Experience**

This paper reports the recent research on the language learning and retention of missionaries of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (see bibliography for exemplars of this work done by internationally-known scholars). Following a brief overview of language teaching philosophy and practice in the LDS tradition, the review of empirical research is divided into two sections. The first examines the acquisition of foreign languages abroad by the missionaries, while the second focuses on the gradual loss of those languages after return home.

The acquisition section summarizes findings from studies conducted in missions abroad (in Brazil, Germany, Japan, Korea, Mexico, Spain, and Taiwan ) which examine effects on language learning of variables including motivation, aptitude, input, gender, language attitudes, and language distance (European languages are learned faster by the English-speaking learners than are the more distant Asian languages). The oral skill attainment of recently returned missionaries in seven target languages is also compared with that of undergraduate language majors at a university in the US.

In mission language research to date, more attention has been given to loss of the language following the mission than to its learning while abroad, with the returned missionary (RM) population cited in a recent review of the second language (L2) attrition literature as one of the three most frequently studied groups of L2 attriters (Bardovi-Harlig & Stringer, 2010). The second section of this paper reviews this research as it examines effects on language loss of motivation, aptitude, input, gender, language attitudes, literacy, and language distance (European languages are retained better than Asian). Positive influences are found on retention from formal instruction received by some RMs soon after their return. A sizeable benefit in the relearning of forgotten mission vocabulary is found for returnees home from 1 to 45 years,

In addition to specialists in study abroad and missionary language training, the pioneering work reported in this paper is expected to appeal to a broader audience of applied linguists, educators, and students interested in language acquisition and attrition. The reviewed research offers useful insights to adults who want to maintain a second language.

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