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Missionaries and Language Learning:

What can missions organizations and missions leaders do to help their missionaries succeed?

Dr. Natalie Mullen Leisher

Director of the Institute for Cross-Cultural Training at Wheaton College

Institute for Cross-Cultural Training

at Wheaton College

- Fully online training, workshops, and certificates for missionaries and cross-cultural Christians
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Dr. Natalie Mullen Leisher is the director of the Institute for Cross-Cultural Training at Wheaton College where she works with Christian missions organizations and their missionaries who are learning and teaching languages all around the world. She was an ESL teacher to adults in university settings for over 10 years, specializing in listening, speaking, and pronunciation, and has lived and served in ministry in China and Spain. Her doctorate is in Education Policy and her research interests include language policy, second language acquisition, multilingual populations, and language justice and inclusion. This is her 16th year serving with ICCT.



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Outline for today:

1. The theological underpinnings for connecting with people in their own languages in the Great Commission effort
2. What we know about the connection between language learning and missionary attrition from recent research (and experience)
3. How missions organizations and on-field teams can help missionaries succeed in language learning
4. What resources are available to help organizations, teams, and missionaries in language learning

**1. The theological underpinnings for
connecting with people in their own
languages in the Great Commission
effort**

OR

**The importance of being a
“Revelationary Christian”**

Revelationary Christians

“⁹ After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, **from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages**, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, ¹⁰ and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!” ¹¹ And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God...” Revelation 7:9-11

Revelationary Christians...

...have beautiful feet

How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of **whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?** And how can anyone preach unless they are sent? As it is written: “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!” Romans 10:14-15

Revelationary Christians...

...believe that language learning IS ministry

- Communicate their value and God's love
- A message worthy of time and effort
- Example of humility
- You're the one making the effort
- Foundational for solid ministry and relationships
- Language learning is an opportunity to encourage believers
- Language learning is an opportunity to invest in people

Lauren Vitrano-Wilson (2022):

<https://www.facebook.com/languagehints>

Revelationary Christians...

...work towards Gospel Fluency

To get to the heart of discipleship in another language, a high level of language proficiency must be reached. For missionaries, Preston Fiddler in his book 1,000 Cups of Tea (2020) coins the term “Gospel Fluency” to help explain the way missionaries must incorporate elements of discipleship and evangelism into their language learning at every level, working on the skills that one needs for discipleship—understanding heart-level discourse, engaging in true conversations, and ability to engage with scripture in the language in all of its forms.

**2. What we know about the connection
between language learning and
missionary attrition from recent research
(and experience)**

The problem of missionary attrition

“With nearly 50% of missionaries leaving the field in their first five years over mostly preventable character issues, the church must find ways to increase the longevity of her workers.” Stephens, 2018

Language in missionary attrition studies

The role language acquisition plays in missionary attrition is often missing in attrition research.

- Missionaries often do not disclose failure in language acquisition

“I completed all the required modules and am grateful that I learned to read and write. These lessons did not help me communicate with my neighbors. Often I still can't hear how a native [speaker] may say a particular word (especially if it is their nickname) but if I ask them to write it down I can say it perfectly. My progress learning language was so slow that it became a source of shame.” –Missionary after 7 years on-field, taking our SLA for Continuing Learners course

- Recent quantitative studies (mainly surveys)
 - Missio Nexus attrition study report from 2019
 - Teitelbaum's research report “Mission Motives: Why North Americans Serve and Stay Cross-Culturally” (2016)

Survey Participants - *In their own words...*

Calling to a Role:

“I chose to be in Latin America because of Spanish language abilities. The position in Bolivia suited my college education.”

Calling to Obedience:

“I experienced a very clear call by God. It came entirely through prayer.”

Calling to a People Group:

“I believed this country would be an ideal location for our ministry and I could utilize my Russian language skills.”

Calling Through.... *an invitation/short-term trip/marriage*

“We were invited by a small church who needed some help.”

“When my husband was a youth pastor, we took our teens there on a missions trip.”

Language in missionary attrition studies

Qualitative studies bring out the role of language in attrition.

- We need more studies that are purely qualitative or have a qualitative aspect to round-out our understanding of attrition.
- When studies do this, language shows up in more prominent ways.

Language in missionary attrition studies

Quotes from Whiteman, G. & K. (2022) EMQ article: Mission organizations support today's global workers through love in action: Training, leading, and caring toward missional resilience.

Mixed methods study included survey and written interviews, so qualitative surveys and open-ended questions for people to give in-depth responses like “What else about yourself or your experience as a missionary would you like to share”.

- *“The most prevalent concern global workers shared in these write-in comments was insufficient training/the need for more training.*
- *Content needs broke down into four main categories: **Relational Skills** (n=270, 38.9%), **Cultural Skills** (n=158, 22.8%), **Practical Living and Ministry Skills** (n=138, 19.9%), and **Soul Care Skills** (n=128, 18.4%).*
- *Those who desire training in Relational Skills mention needs related to personal relationships, such as “communication” (#1 most commonly expressed training need), conflict resolution, and establishing and maintaining healthy relationships (#4). They also expressed needs more related to professional relationships, such as leadership, coaching, or mentoring skills (#3), and team dynamics. **Cultural Skills included both foundational skills of learning about culture/ethnography (#2) and language, and application skills of dealing with difficult cultural differences (#5) and contextual theology/evangelism/discipleship.**” (p. 2, bullet points mine)*

Language in missionary attrition studies

Quotes from Elliot Stephens dissertation, “Factors contributing to longevity in missionary service: A self-report study from an Evangelical mission agency” (2018)

“In order for a career missionary worker to become embedded in a community and to become engaged in the culture, there must be a solid commitment to learning the language. Participants consistently pointed to gaining fluency in the language as a key for longevity on the field (14 findings). Matthew in SE Asia stressed the importance of this factor by repeating the word “huge” and “biggest” several times, wanting to emphasize the significance of learning the language:

But then, seeing language study as such a huge, huge, huge, huge part of my ministry that the present ministry at that time in terms of learning the language...and then seeing that as the investment for long term. That was just so essential for me. So, to be able to engage in conversation, to be able to talk to someone at the heart level, to be able to make the applications and adjustments in culture, to match more appropriately to where the local culture is. Those things are just so huge in terms of longevity. For me to overcome my frustrations in the things I want to share with people, as well as for me to live here and to not feel as much like an outsider but to really be included in the culture. Language is such a huge, huge, huge part of that. That's probably the biggest, biggest, biggest thing.” (p. 100-101, 229)

Language in missionary attrition studies

Quotes from Elliot Stephens dissertation, “Factors contributing to longevity in missionary service: A self-report study from an Evangelical mission agency” (2018)

“Eight of the nine interviews [of missionary field leaders] emphasized the importance of learning the local language for retention. Leadership was emphatic on the significance of gaining fluency in the language: “Language, language, language, language. You cannot shortcut language learning!” (Simon, p. 231). Jim argued for an “absolute commitment” to do whatever is necessary for learning the language, so workers can understand the people they are trying to reach (p. 231).

Howard explained, If people acquire the language of the country they live in, they have longevity. People that tend to go home quickly are people that are unable to master the language. They never feel at home. They always feel a stranger in that community. (p. 50, 232)

The data demonstrates that leaders leave no doubt on the significance of this factor for longevity, probably because they have witnessed firsthand over and over the reality of these observations.” (p. 130)

Quotes from missionaries on discouragement related to language acquisition

Comments in SLA for Continuing Learners course participant and comments from an on-field missionary leader

“Language school was a disaster for me. I was not prepared at all for the language learning challenges I faced. I love learning and I love school. I had no idea how terrible this experience would be or how difficult, and I still don't understand why it is so difficult for me.

My wrong assumption was that I would just "pick it up", it would be fun and natural. I never learned a spoken language in high school. Because everything was taught in Italian, I feel like I had to guess and make my own assumptions about grammar etc. and obviously most of them were wrong. So even if I did learn something I was never sure it was right. And I am still very unsure and lack confidence.

I am sure I am having more trouble today because of the emotions of fear and failure, getting those horrible facial expressions after I speak and the sheer agony of being with people when I am the only one that can't converse. Now I have less energy and willingness to take risks than I did in the beginning. I hated it because I wasn't successful.

I need to use the language I do have and talk, but I am so tired of looking stupid it is hard to "engage" the language again, when what I really want to do is ... avoid everyone and stay in my home!

My heart is to disciple and mentor, I would love to work toward that in my language skills.”

–Missionary on-field for 5 years who took our SLA for Continuing Learners course

“[One of our roles is] connecting people seeking online with folks on the ground. We have hundreds of workers in our city. While there are certainly people we are unaware of, the list of people that we can connect seekers with is probably no more than 30. On more than one occasion, the seeker has asked, “Why did you put me with this person? They can’t study the Word with me.” So there are hundreds of people that can have friendships, share stories, but the number of people that can do in-depth discipleship is very very small. ... We’re so depressed about it sometimes.”

—Missionary on-field leader in creative access location for 15 years who attended one of our Language Coach Workshops

I spend about 5-10 hours each week working in meetings in [the language]. I can usually be understood, but sometimes it takes a few tries, but am feeling increasingly like my language level is burden to my coworkers and is slowing the work. I am committed to making those meetings easier for us.

I for sure wish I had taken this or a similar class beforehand. I had some help getting started, but it was pretty minimal and often not particularly helpful. I got a lot of mixed messages from different people about what would 'work'.

I'm mostly able to get anything done I need to in the language. The distance between where I am now and being able to speak in more compelling and clear ways feels overwhelming.

—Missionary on-field leader in creative access location for 5 years taking our
SLA for Continuing Learners course

3. How missions organizations and on-field teams can help missionaries succeed in language learning

Language Policy

The key to successful language acquisition and longer missionary service (Mullen Leisher & Dickerson, 2021)

Every organization, field, and team has a language Policy.

Part of the work is to figure out what your Policy is and what your explicit policies should be.

Language Policy is best thought of as a VERB. It is enacted. (*McCarty, 2011*)

Three parts to language Policy (Spolsky, 2004):

- The written (and unwritten) “rules” (from above and below)
- Beliefs about language and language learning (ideology)
- What *actually* happens on the ground

Language Policy

Why is language Policy important?

- Makes sure everyone involved understands expectations, requirements, etc.
- Reduces stress
- Keeps learners on track
- Provides accountability
- Raises the level of language proficiency of missionaries

Language Policy

What happens if you have weak language policies?

- Works against effective coaching and training
- Contributes to low motivation and high frustration
- Leads to less effective learning (lower level of language proficiency)
- Leads to less effective ministry
- Leads to higher missionary attrition

Language Policy

Strong language policies should include:

- Expectations
- Opportunities
- Follow-up
- Evaluation

Dickerson, 2021

Language Policy

What are some examples of good policies?

1. REQUIRED pre-field training in second language acquisition from EXPERTS

- Should be a non-negotiable for all missions organizations and sending agencies, for all missionaries, without exception. Do not make it optional. *“I wish I would have had this training years ago.”* – Every participant in our SLA for Continuing Learners course!
- *“Better learning requires better learners”*– Lonna Dickerson. Good SLA training combats false beliefs, common pitfalls, and myths about language learning that lead to burn-out, discouragement, waste of resources/time, attrition.
- The Whiteman study (2022) found that missionaries want more and better training on language learning. They want training that is relevant, personal, and timely.
- The study included a note on the “Interdependent Missionary Organization”– what the authors suggest as a healthy missions org. “That interdependence extends externally. In our globalized era, **no one organization can be all things to all workers—nor should they be.** If we can see ourselves as members of the cooperative body of Christ (1 Cor. 12), we can rejoice in the different “gifts” given to each in order that the whole may rejoice. This opens the door to very **practical stewardship of the resources God has given to each organization, as we do not seek to replicate services or supplies that we could be sharing.**”

Language Policy

What are some examples of good policies?

1. REQUIRED pre-field training in second language acquisition from EXPERTS

Missionaries who receive pre-field SLA training find it essential

- A study done in 2021 by Arthur Lin interviewed experienced missionaries about their training experiences. Many quotes in this study refer to pre-field SLA training as essential to their success.
 - *One participant found the language acquisition training as part of the organization's pre-field training "really, really great," "definitely helpful," and "very, very impactful." He had no idea of how to learn a language, and through the training, he learned valuable concepts on how to learn a language well. (p. 50)*
 - *"...[pre-field language acquisition training was an] essential training for one participant as he learned tips and principles for learning a language." (p. 52)*

“As a large organization with staff serving all around the globe, one of the biggest needs Cru has had over the past 30 years is second language acquisition training that is specifically tailored for cross-cultural Gospel workers. Our ministry provides a one-time pre-field training shortly before our staff depart for overseas, but our training- though good- has been limited and there has often been little to no follow-up. Over the years, we have had some staff succeed in language learning and even reach a high proficiency level, but most staff have struggled in language learning and many never reached a level that allowed them to do all of their ministry duties in the language. However, requiring our staff to take the Wheaton SLA course has been a game changer for our ministry! The Wheaton SLA course has given our staff not just the necessary vision that they can and should learn a second language to a high proficiency level, but it has also given them the practical tools, guidance and to make that dream a reality! As more and more of our new staff are being trained through the ICCT SLA program we are seeing measurable and noticeable results on the field. With the help of the Wheaton ICCT, we are confident that our new international staff are now being equipped with the most comprehensive SLA training for cross-cultural ministry, that is available anywhere.”

– Cathy Gallaher, Language Acquisition Specialist with CRU

Language Policy

What are some examples of good policies?

2. Adequate time at the beginning of missionary service for language learning

- Stephens, 2018's study and data showed that two years of full-time learning seemed like the best and most adequate amount of time for someone to get a good handle on the new language. (Not the only time that is needed, but enough time for the start).
- Example of the “no-speak” ESL student at the Intensive English Institute at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign: 2-3 years to reach Advanced Low or Advanced Mid

Language Policy

What are some examples of good policies?

3. Proficiency-based learning goals

- Use a standardized language proficiency scale (ACTFL, CEFR, CLB, FSI) as the basis for the minimum language proficiency level required for missionaries
- Make proficiency goals unique to job situations (a church-planter should have a higher proficiency requirement than an office support personnel who works all day in English)
- Ex. Must reach Advanced Mid by the end of year two and Low Superior by the end of year five (ACTFL scale)

Language Policy

What are some examples of good policies?

4. Multiple ways of assessment and evaluation throughout their language learning

- Once you have a proficiency-based goal, make sure to assess learners' progress through multiple means at many times during their learning
- Use formal and informal evaluations, language portfolios, information from language school progress, and learner self-reports

Language Policy

What are some examples of good policies?

5. On-going language coaching from trained language coaches

- Language learning is a self-directed task that requires skills, knowledge, motivation, and perseverance
- All fields should have trained language coaches who check in with learners to give encouragement, provide feedback, give resources, help with motivation, and help problem-solve
- Missionaries should have access to language coaches throughout their time of service and not only during the first two years.

Language Policy

What are some examples of good policies?

6. Language ideology statement

- A written language policy should have a statement about the language ideology of the missions organization
- Good language ideology statements include things like:
 - Language learning is a lifelong pursuit
 - We place high priority in using the host language for ministry
 - Language learning IS ministry
 - There is no silver bullet for language learning
 - Language learning is the responsibility of the missionary
 - God offers help, strength, grace, and encouragement through the Holy Spirit for the ongoing work of language learning

4. What resources are available to help organizations?

Resources available to orgs and missionaries

ICCT offers a complete pre-field training program for missionaries and on-field options

Pre-field and on-field second language acquisition and culture learning courses with ICCT

- One-on-one courses with highly qualified instructors (former missionaries, at least an M.A. in language acquisition/teaching degree, experienced)
- Focused on target host language
- Video sessions one-on-one with instructor for each module plus asynchronous online work
- Schedules to accommodate different timelines
- Courses start every Monday (except August and December)
- For pre-field/early on-field beginners AND for continuing learners (intermediate+ proficiency level) on-field
- On-going language coaching available to SLA course participants, one-on-one or in groups

Resources available to orgs and missionaries

ICCT is the primary resource for training in being a language coach for missionaries

Fully online courses for missionary language coaches

- Offered several times per year
- Three courses (Foundations of Language Coaching, Learner Assessment, and Listen Up Speak Out)
- Highly experienced and qualified instructors (former or current missionary language coaches, at least an M.A. in language acquisition/teaching degree)
- Personal help from instructors regarding individual situations with language learners in your orgs, language policy, etc.

Resources available to orgs and missionaries

Other free and/or low-cost consulting and training through ICCT

Meet with an ICCT language acquisition expert for free or take low-cost training on the following issues:

- Language Policy development and restructuring
- Child second language acquisition
- Language school/program curriculum development and evaluation
- Language learner problems
- English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher training workshops for those doing English teaching ministry
- Cross-cultural living and ministry training course for missionaries and other Christians serving cross-culturally focused on the host culture
- Documents and publications on our website

Other resources available to orgs and missionaries

Websites and publications I recommend and refer to often

“Tip of the Tongue: Language Tips” by Lauren C. Vitrano-Wilson: <https://www.facebook.com/languagehints/>

1,000 Cups of Tea by Preston Fidler on Amazon and the <https://www.language180.com/> website

“Language on Purpose” podcast by MaryLynn Kindberg <https://languageonpurpose.org>

<https://www.tesolministry.org/> website for English teaching resources

<https://lifelearner.net/> website for lesson plans and tips on culture learning

<https://www.italki.com/> website to find language tutors, teachers, and conversation partners in languages all around the world

ACTFL proficiency guidelines and can-do statements: <https://www.actfl.org/educator-resources/ncssfl-actfl-can-do-statements>

CLB proficiency guidelines and can-do statements: <https://www.language.ca/publications/english-publications-downloadable/>

CEFR proficiency guidelines: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages/level-descriptions>

Sign up for the occasional ICCT newsletters: <https://wheaton.us17.list-manage.com/subscribe?u=51c418916ca4bd06dc5b328e2&id=f92c7579fe>

Recommended well-established, inter-agency, non-denominational training orgs for pre-field missionaries: Institute for Cross-Cultural Training at Wheaton College (www.wheaton.edu/icct), Mission Training International (www.mti.org), and Center for Intercultural Training (www.cit-online.org)

International Congress on Language Learning (online and in-person conferences and webinars): <https://www.icllonline.org/>

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