

# Effective L2 Language Learning Strategies

Used by Missionaries for the  
Church of Jesus Christ of  
Latter-day Saints

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*Language learning strategies (LLS) are techniques that help a learner learn a second language (L2). Research on identification and use of LLSs within academic spheres is prevalent but not within the religious sphere. Seven recently returned missionaries from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints shared their experiences learning an L2. Upon evaluation, qualitative data revealed trends in preference for LLS type depending on stage of learning. Cognitive strategies were most frequently used during the Pre-MTC/Home MTC stage; cognitive and socio-affective strategies during the MTC stage; and cognitive, socio-affective, and metacognitive strategies during the mission field stage. Metacognitive strategies were less frequently identified and used during all stages.*

**L**earning strategies are “specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations” (Oxford, 2002). To understand how missionaries learn a second language, the concept of language learning strategy (LLS) must be understood first. An LLS is any technique, thought, behavior, or action that helps a learner store, retain, or use an L2. LLSs are typically categorized by their specific method or aim. For the purposes of this study, LLSs will be categorized into three groups: cognitive, metacognitive, and socio-affective. Cognitive strategies are any method a learner uses to relate new information to older information. Metacognitive strategies are thoughts and behaviors learners use to plan and monitor their own learning. Socio-affective strategies are techniques that are transactional in nature or that help reduce the affective learning filter.

Missionaries for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (abbreviated to “the Church”) may use a variety of these types of strategies to learn a language throughout their missions. They are typically assigned a location and a language in which they will serve for eighteen to twenty-four months. Missionaries assigned an L2 may not have acquired or even had exposure to this language previously and are required to learn their L2 while receiving their missionary training and while serving in their respective field. In this study, effective LLSs that good language learners use are compared to effective LLSs that missionaries for the Church learning an L2 use throughout their missions. Qualitative data was collected through one-on-one interviews with recently returned missionaries about their L2 learning experience and use of effective strategies.

Within the data analysis, we examined whether these missionaries are able to identify effective LLSs they used and what types of LLSs are most effective for missionaries learning an L2. Do young missionaries learn languages in the same ways learners in other contexts do? How do they describe LLSs, if at all? Are cognitive, metacognitive, or socio-affective strategies most effective? Answers to these questions will aid in determining possible changes to be made within the Church’s missionary training programs as well as what resources and strategies future missionaries should use.

# Literature Review

## Language Learning Strategies (LLSs)

Although language learning strategies are defined differently by different researchers, Abdalmaujod A. Hardan synthesizes these definitions in his 2013 overview of LLSs as “steps, behaviors, and techniques used by learners to enhance and facilitate the language acquisition” (p. 1713). Beginning in the 1970s, researchers delved into what characteristics good language learners possessed and which strategies they used frequently. Language learning strategies have been well-researched in the fields relating to academic and community classroom settings. Within more recent years, research in these settings has continued, resulting in the development of how LLSs are categorized and observed in learners, the recognition of a wide variety of strategies, and the debate on which strategies are most effective for learning an L2.

There is a “lack of widely accepted systems for describing strategies” (Oxford, 2002), as many researchers have different ways of categorizing LLSs depending on their research focus. In a book chapter written by Rebecca L. Oxford in 2002, she cites her previously developed LLS categorization. Her system includes affective, social, metacognitive, memory-related, general cognitive, and compensatory strategies, based on the perspective that a language learner is a person and not just a learning machine (Oxford, 2002). Other systems include performative, interpersonal, communicative, and experiential strategies as additional or replacement categories. Most systems of classification “reflect more or less the same categorizations of language learning strategies without any radical changes” (Hardan, 2013) and can be boiled down to three main types of LLSs: cognitive, metacognitive, and socio-affective.

Cognitive strategies are those that aid in the direct learning of language through using specific tasks and connecting previous information to new information. These strategies include any task involving memorization, deductive reasoning, guessing, or practice (Hardan, 2013). Tasks of this nature include but are not limited to keeping a written personal dictionary, reading a grammar book, reading a text aloud repeatedly, using flashcards, completing information gap activities, memorizing prepositions, practicing verb conjugations, writing narratives, or playing improvisation games.

Metacognitive strategies are those that aid in the indirect learning of language through the use of planning, monitoring, or evaluating oneself. These strategies include any task involving preview, overview, reflection, prioritization, setting goals, self-talk, or self-reward (Hardan, 2013). Examples of these tasks include but are not limited to previewing a text by skimming the table of contents, self-rewarding for completing difficult tasks, planning to study during downtime, actively practicing self-encouragement, repeating positive affirmations, summarizing learning material, choosing to focus on words that have been difficult to pronounce in the past, setting a goal for new vocabulary to learn, and writing down areas of confusion to study next.

Socio-affective strategies are those that aid in the indirect learning of language through transactional communication, interaction, and optimization of the learning environment. These strategies include any task that is social or results in lowering the affective filter in any situation (Hardan, 2013). These tasks can include activities such as having conversations, asking questions, listening to music when stressed, making requests, giving directions, self-reassuring to lower anxiety, playing a group game, exchanging stories or experiences with another person, or taking breaks to avoid being overwhelmed.

Oxford discusses ways in which these kinds of LLSs can be observed or researched within learners as “informal or formal interviews, group discussions, language learning diaries, dialogue journals between student and teacher, open-ended surveys, structured three- or five-point surveys of strategy frequency, and think-aloud procedures that require students to describe their strategies aloud while using them” (Oxford, 2002). In response to issues relating to interviews, Anna Uhl Chamot (2005) wrote that effective interviews are conducted immediately after completing a task or learning experience, and ideally, a researcher would play a videotape of the learner completing that task to the interviewee before interviewing them about their thoughts or actions during the task. Despite the variety of other data collection methods or the potential issues involved in interviews, they remain a good way to gather information on effective LLSs.

## Effective Strategies Used by Good Language Learners

When discussing strategies used by good language learners, it must be noted that “good language learners” cannot be considered a uniform body. Good language learning has less to do with a set of specific, effective LLSs and more to do with which strategies individuals use based on their preferred learning style (Oxford, 2002). Depending on whether a learner is best influenced by visual, kinetic, or audio stimuli, their effective strategies may not match with other good language learners’ effective strategies. With this consideration, what are the most effective strategies? The short answer is that it depends.

Considering Osamu Takeuchi’s research in 2003, he learned that the strategies L2 learners found effective shifted over the course of their learning. Good language learners used a variety of metacognitive strategies to optimize their learning. They actively sought out opportunities and environments where they could speak the L2, and they planned to immerse themselves in the L2 as frequently as possible. They also used a variety of cognitive and socio-affective strategies like reading aloud, memorizing, keeping personal dictionaries, imitating native speakers, and requesting correction (Takeuchi, 2003). Similarly, Chamot (2005) found that “more skilled listeners used more metacognitive strategies . . . than did their less skilled peers” (p. 115). Being aware of strategies as options and choosing the right one for a specific language task was more important than the strategy itself.

## Missionary Language Learning and LLS Training

This study focuses on the effective LLSs used by recent missionaries for the Church. There is little research done on missionary uses of LLSs besides a thesis done by D. Brian Kohler in 1998. His research is valuable as it describes the effects of LLS training in the context of the Missionary Training Center. LLS training is the instruction of L2 students in a variety of effective LLSs. Those trained are likely to be able to name LLSs, determine which LLS to use for different language tasks, and develop their own repertoire of effective strategies.

Results of Kohler’s (1998) study among German- and Portuguese-learning missionaries showed that those who received LLS training “showed significantly higher scores for frequency, appropriate usage, and range [for intended strategy use], over those

with no training” (p. vi). However, results for these MTC missionaries’ use of actual strategy “showed that LLS had no significant impact on frequency, appropriate usage, or range” (p. vi). Oxford (2002) observed that strategy training has not been consistently proven effective. Its effectiveness is sporadic, proving useful in some areas of language learning and fruitless in others. Chamot (2005) found that LLS training is most effective when done in a learner’s L1 and when taught explicitly.

## Research Design

### Participants

Participants were solicited through my personal social media accounts and through mutual friends. Seven participants were identified and interviewed. Each participant was a recently (within one year) returned missionary for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and was assigned to speak a non-native language on their mission. Figures 1.1 and 1.2 depict the demographic information of each participant, or subject.

Participants began their missions between the years 2019 and 2020 and ended their missions between the years 2021 and 2022. Assigned second languages ranged from Spanish to Portuguese to Japanese to Finnish. Of the subjects in this study, four were male and three were female. All had some type of pre-mission L2 experience, most of which were foreign language classes taught in middle or high school. Only two subjects answered that they spoke an L2 in addition to their mission L2.

### Instruments

The main instrument used for data collection and analysis was a series of twenty-two interview questions (see the appendix). These questions were broken up into the sections Pre-MTC, Home MTC, “During Your Mission” Experience, and Conclusion to better understand the differences in L2 learning experience during different times or stages of the participants’ missions. Each interview was recorded over Zoom or with the iPhone Voice Memo application to ensure appropriate record and accuracy of participant responses.

**Figure 1.1**

*Subject Demographic Information*

Subject	Gender	Mission L2	Mission Location	Mission Duration
1	M	Spanish	US	10/2020–10/2022
2	M	Portuguese	Brazil, US	10/2019–11/2022
3	M	Japanese	Japan, US	9/2020–10/2022
4	M	Spanish	Argentina, US	10/2019–10/2021
5	F	Finnish	Finland	3/2021–9/2022
6	F	Spanish	US	10/2020–4/2022
7	F	Portuguese	Brazil, US	12/2020–5/2022

**Figure 1.2**

*Subject Demographic Information Continued*

Subject	Additional L2	Pre-mission L2 Experience	Post-mission L2 study?
1	n/a	Spanish	No
2	n/a	Spanish	Yes
3	n/a	Japanese, ASL	No
4	Arabic	Spanish	Yes
5	n/a	Spanish	No
6	German	Spanish, German	Yes
7	n/a	Spanish, French	Yes

## Procedure and Analysis

Each participant was interviewed using the script and questions in Appendix A. The interviews were conducted privately within twenty to thirty minutes, either in person or over a Zoom video call. Recordings of these interviews were collected and downloaded in order to reliably listen to them again to collect data. Data was collected and recorded using Microsoft Excel. The main data collected were the names and descriptions of each LLS used by each subject. This comprehensive list was then analyzed, and the identified LLSs were organized by type or category: cognitive, metacognitive, or socio-affective. The frequency of identified LLS types and the frequency of the total number of LLS types were then calculated using these number counts. Both the qualitative and quantitative results of the seven interviews will be discussed in the following section.

## Results

### Description of Data

There were both qualitative and quantitative findings that resulted from this study. Qualitative findings came from the information shared directly by participants in their respective interviews. This includes the specific strategies mentioned or described as useful or beneficial to them in each stage of their mission or throughout their mission experience. These results will be outlined and synthesized according to each stage of the participants' missions. Quantitative findings came from the categorization of the specific LLSs identified and utilized. This includes counts of identified LLSs, frequencies of identified LLS types, and frequencies of the total number of LLS types. These results will be outlined following the qualitative results.

### Pre-MTC and Home MTC

The time periods of pre-MTC and home MTC are combined here because of similar results between the two time periods. Only one participant took advantage of the pre-MTC language tutoring program offered. They said they participated in it "because why not? I felt like it gave me an edge when I officially started at the MTC." Others gave reasons for not participating, saying they didn't have time since they were working, felt like it wasn't necessary, preferred the idea of starting their language learning



with other missionaries, or simply didn't know that tutoring was available to them.

Participants had difficulty describing specific strategies they used during this period of their missions. Most merely referenced books or materials they used rather than techniques. A few mentioned they read (or attempted to read) the Book of Mormon in their L2, either individually or with their assigned companion. Many strategies involved learning vocabulary since many participants expressed that they quickly learned they couldn't do much in their L2 without the basis of vocabulary words.

Mostly cognitive strategies were employed during this time. These strategies included reading aloud in the L2, using flashcards and spoken repetition to learn vocabulary, listening to the scriptures or other Church books in their L2, reading grammar books, completing activities from their L2 textbook, writing out verb conjugations, and creating sentences using the words they knew. One participant said they created a study plan during this time, a metacognitive strategy, though the six others all used cognitive strategies almost exclusively.

## During MTC

Participants still exhibited difficulty in identifying specific strategies they used during their time at the physical MTC, although collectively, they were more capable of identifying LLSs than they were for their pre-MTC experience. Many identified LLSs remained the same from their prior study, with more techniques added on, especially as their time at the MTC involved an increase in face-to-face interaction with others.

Their focus on learning grammar continued, and many of the participants said they read from vocabulary books, continued to memorize vocabulary words, and even started to apply words by using them in simple sentences. One said, "Our MTC teachers would give us a giant list of vocab and expect us to have it memorized by the next class period, which was crazy, but we did it." Their use of grammar books increased, as all interviewees described reading from them often as very beneficial. Overall, their focus on cognitive techniques did not diminish during this time.

Since they were now in a very social environment, learning their L2 among peers, their use of socio-affective strategies began to blossom. A number of participants mentioned they found talking with others and asking questions to be effective, even with their

limited knowledge. They spoke with their companions, teachers, and people they taught during TRC (Teaching Resource Center) meetings. They continued to read the Book of Mormon, but during this time, they read aloud with their companions or with a group of other missionaries learning the same language. Subjects also continued to learn vocabulary and grammar but focused on learning it together as they tested and quizzed their companions and other missionaries. One participant said, “It was kind of fun at the MTC because we were all learning together. I remember quizzing fellow missionaries on things while standing in line for food.” Another mentioned, “We tried to make things fun, so we played little games with each other.”

The majority of LLSs used during the MTC were cognitive and socio-affective, but one former missionary explained they would try to have active patience with themselves, a metacognitive behavior. Since the participant recognized they were learning a difficult L2, they made a point to be patient as they learned.

## **During Mission**

During their time in the mission field, whether abroad or within the United States, participants described using a wide variety of effective LLSs, with a preference for or a familiarity with cognitive and socio-affective strategies. One strategy that was noticeably used throughout their time in pre- and home MTC, the MTC, and the mission field was reading from the Book of Mormon, although the specifics of how they read were variable. Perhaps this was in part because of the encouragement to use this strategy from Church teachers and leaders. One participant said, “The promise of reading the Book of Mormon in your mission language is true! It really does help. I’d recommend reading from the Book of Mormon to anyone trying to learn another language.” All participants said reading from the Book of Mormon alone and with their companion, silently or aloud, benefited them. Most said they enjoyed reading it aloud and getting corrections from their companions on pronunciation or intonation, especially if their companion was a native speaker of the L2.

Other cognitive strategies used during this time period were learning verbs from vocabulary and grammar books, practicing verb conjugations in their head or on paper, writing down new words in a personal dictionary, keeping a phrase book, translating written material aloud, listening to church talks, playing memory

games, using cognates, practicing with flashcards, underlining unknown words while reading, reading street signs and ads aloud, and practicing difficult sounds in the L2.

Missionaries' use of socio-affective techniques increased during their time in the field since all but two participants were immersed in the language living abroad. The most commonly effective techniques were more socio-focused than affective-focused. Effective social strategies included listening and responding to native speakers, asking locals and companions about the culture, asking questions about the L2, speaking the L2 often and receiving correction, telling people stories, teaching religious lessons, teaching language lessons to other missionaries, testing their companion on the L2, and practicing difficult words and sounds with their companion. During their time in the field, much of their social strategies involved or relied on their companions. Those who didn't like or didn't get along with their companion expressed that this hindered their language learning. Only two participants mentioned helpful affective strategies they used during this time in the field. One said something beneficial was being able to "laugh at myself when I made mistakes. That helped me feel less pressure when I spoke the language." Another subject said the turning point in his mission came when he lowered his affective filter by simply "accepting it was hard and embarrassing and frustrating sometimes."

Although the use of metacognitive strategies remained relatively infrequent throughout their missions, there was more mention of these strategies in the interviews when asked about their time in the mission field than previous time periods. Most of the participants said that actively deciding to speak their L2 as often as possible instead of defaulting to their L1 was very beneficial to them. Other metacognitive strategies used included actively finding things to read, focusing on the basics during study, learning study techniques, setting a goal to improve personal pronunciation, being aware of sentence structure when speaking, and planning to notice differences in dialects.

## **Overall Quantitative Results**

Because one of the purposes of this research was to determine whether former missionaries could identify LLSs within their L2 learning experience, analysis of the number of identified

strategies was done to determine how many LLSs each subject identified, shown in figure 2.

**Figure 2**

*Number of Identified Strategies*

Subject	Cognitive	Metacognitive	Socio-affective	Total Strategies
1	5	2	2	9
2	6	4	6	16
3	4	5	3	12
4	3	0	2	5
5	10	3	2	15
6	5	0	5	10
7	12	1	2	15

Interestingly, Subject 2 was able to identify more total LLSs than the others as well as identify the most evenly distributed types of techniques across the three categories. Four out of the seven participants were able to identify more than ten total LLSs. It's important to note that these counts do not include any ineffective strategies participants identified during the interviews.

Since each subject identified a different number of LLS types during their interviews, it is also beneficial to consider the frequencies of strategy types they identified, so as to better determine which LLS types were most effective for Church missionaries. These frequencies, organized by individual subject and represented in percentages, are shown in figure 3.

As shown, seven out of the seven of participants named cognitive LLSs as more effective, with two out of the seven tying equally with socio-affective LLSs. Five out of the seven of participants named metacognitive LLSs as comparatively less effective, with two not identifying any metacognitive LLSs at all.

To better visualize the total frequencies of identified LLS types, the frequency of the total number of identified LLS types among all the participants is shown in figure 4.

The most frequently identified LLS type among all participants was cognitive, with the next most frequent being socio-affective. Metacognitive was identified at a much lower frequency than the other LLS types.

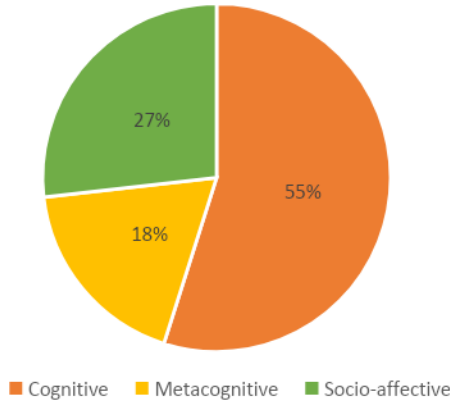
**Figure 3**

*Frequency of Identified Strategy Types*

Subject	Cognitive	Metacognitive	Socio-affective
1	56%	22%	22%
2	38%	25%	38%
3	33%	42%	25%
4	60%	0%	40%
5	67%	20%	13%
6	50%	0%	50%
7	80%	7%	13%

**Figure 4**

*Frequency of Total Number of Identified LLSs*



## Discussion

Looking back at previous research on effective LLSs, it is found that effective strategies depend on the individual learner, the learning environment, and the immediate task at hand. Good language learners tend to use a variety of LLSs but use more metacognitive types than others. When comparing this to the missionary L2 language learning context, the results are significantly different. Although missionaries did use different types of LLSs depending on the specific stage during their mission, they identified and used significantly more cognitive strategies than

socio-affective and metacognitive. Recently returned missionaries exhibited difficulty in identifying metacognitive strategies, with low numbers and low frequencies of these strategies mentioned in the interviews. Do these results mean missionaries are not good language learners? Not necessarily.

Learning an L2 to carry out missionary work is vastly different from learning an L2 to go to school, improve one's resume, or simply live abroad. It is not surprising that the most effective techniques for missionaries did not follow trends of previous studies done in different contexts with different types of learners. There are a number of possible issues or anomalies, though. This study utilized a low number of participants (seven), so a more expansive and diverse study may yield differing results. Perhaps it was the participants' lack of ability to identify or describe metacognitive techniques that produced these results, not the true effectiveness of metacognitive strategies in learning an L2 as a missionary. It is also likely that since cognitive strategies are most often the most recognizable or explicitly taught strategies, these types were at the forefront of participants' minds as they answered the interview questions about strategies. Almost all the interviewees also had trouble remembering the specifics of their mission, despite having only returned home within a year. This may have also had a significant impact on the results of the study.

Overall, Takeuchi's (2003) research that effective LLSs shift over time in a learner can also be applied to missionaries for the Church. During the pre-MTC and home MTC stage, missionaries almost exclusively use cognitive strategies. During their time at the MTC, they begin to find socio-affective strategies beneficial as well. By the time missionaries are in the mission field, they find cognitive and socio-affective strategies effective, while using minimal numbers of metacognitive strategies.

## Conclusion

Recent missionaries for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints show knowledge of LLSs, with five out of the seven interviewees being able to identify ten or more in their discussion of their L2 language learning experience. Cognitive strategies took preference and were identified as effective more frequently than socio-affective or metacognitive strategies, compared to the trends in past research that point to metacognitive strategies to be most effective. These findings are significant to the language

learning world and especially to the world of missionary training and language learning for the Church. Future studies involving LLSs will need to consider more fully the vast differences in learning contexts and environments. Since it is not certain whether the results regarding metacognitive LLSs' effectiveness are accurate, further study on effectiveness within missionary contexts will need to be done.

These results also point to obvious language learner familiarity with one major category of LLS: cognitive. Because past research shows good language learners have the knowledge of and ability to use a wide range of LLSs, L2 learners will need to engage in learning about strategies along with their language of study. As LLS training has no consistent effect on learners' overall actual use of LLSs over time, significant further study must be done to determine whether widespread LLS training should be implemented.

Based on the results of this study, future missionaries for the Church may find advantages to utilizing metacognitive LLSs as well as cognitive and socio-affective strategies throughout their missions. Future studies on the impacts of the language family of the assigned L2 or the impacts of language/cultural immersion as part of the mission experience may lead to valuable insight. Conducting a study with missionaries keeping language learning journals instead of being interviewed may also lead to valuable insight more proximate to the language learning experience itself. Overall, learning about and experimenting with a variety of strategies may prove beneficial for missionaries in finding the most effective personal strategies and lead to a whole new world of global missionary work.

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# Appendix

## *Interview Questions*

“This interview is with subject # \_\_\_\_\_. I’m going to ask you some specific questions about your mission language learning experience and techniques or activities you used while learning your mission language that you found especially helpful.”

- How long have you been home from your mission?  
\_\_\_\_ months.
- What was your mission language? \_\_\_\_\_
- At any point in your mission, did you relocate to the United States? (Yes / No).  
If yes, for how long? \_\_\_\_\_ (months)

### *Pre-MTC:*

- Did you participate in the online language tutoring provided by the MTC? (Yes / No)
- If no. Why not? If yes, how was it beneficial to you?
- Did you study a language in school before your mission? (Yes / No).
- If yes, which language? \_\_\_\_\_.  
For how long? \_\_\_\_\_(months/years)

### *Home MTC:*

- How much time per week did you devote to language study during the Home-MTC experience?
- Did you continue with the online language tutoring during your Home-MTC experience? (Yes / No)

### *“During MTC” Experience:*

- While studying the language in the MTC, what techniques or practices did you find most helpful?
- What do you feel were the benefits of using EMBARK (online language learning program)?
- What were the drawbacks?

- Did you participate in companionship language study at the MTC? What were the benefits for you? What were the drawbacks if any?
- Describe the benefits and drawbacks you experienced with the weekly TRC / “Helping Others” meetings.
- What materials did you use at the MTC that you found most helpful?
- What did your instructors do that you found helpful in learning your mission language?

*“During Mission” Language Learning Experience:*

- While on your mission, how much time weekly did you spend in individual language study?
- Did you consistently have companionship language study? If not, why did you not do this?
- If yes, what was most helpful about this experience?
- How long did it take before you felt comfortable communicating in your mission language?
- How would you evaluate your pronunciation skills (scale 1 to 5—1 being poor, 5 being excellent)
- Did you work on pronunciation deliberately? (Yes / No). If yes, how did you do this?

*Conclusion:*

- What language learning techniques or activities did you use throughout your mission?
- What are your overall feelings about your mission language and that experience?