Inside the MTC’s immersion approach to language learning



Shima Yoshida
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With only six to nine weeks to prepare for a mission in a country where they may not understand a word, Latter-day Saint missionaries enter the Missionary Training Center and are immediately immersed in the language they are expected to learn.

Key Takeaways

The MTC’s language immersion program gives missionaries a foundation in their assigned language, but the real learning continues in the mission field, where they spend 18–24 months putting that foundation into practice.

The first time Sister Schenk (a pseudonym) sat in her Japanese class at the Missionary Training Center (MTC) of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, her heart raced. Her teacher walked in and immediately began speaking Japanese.

Six to nine weeks to learn

She had studied French for years, so when the teacher asked her a question, her brain reached for the only foreign language it knew. “I was lost,” she said. “When my teacher would ask a question, I would want to be ‘Oui.’ If I didn’t understand, I’d be like ‘Comment?’” She said it was really hard, and she knew absolutely nothing about the language.

She had nine weeks to change that.

Missionaries in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints face a unique language-learning situation. Most missionaries apply to serve in their late teens or 20s. Then they receive a mission call telling them where they will serve, but they do not choose their assigned country or language. The clock is already running when they arrive. Their departure date is set, and within weeks, they will board a plane for their assigned country.

For missionaries assigned to foreign-language missions, the MTC uses an intensive approach designed to prepare them to communicate in languages they may never have studied before.

During their training, missionaries spend hours each day developing their gospel teaching skills and practicing their assigned language before leaving for their missions. The length of MTC language training varies by language. Missionaries learning languages considered more difficult, including Japanese and Russian, receive longer training than those learning languages such as Spanish and Portuguese.

Building a foundation through immersion

Unlike traditional classroom instruction, the MTC’s approach attempts to make the target language part of the learning environment itself. Missionaries are encouraged to practice speaking, even outside the classroom.

Language educator and polyglot Steve Kaufmann describes immersion as having two important components: abundant exposure to a language and deliberate effort to use it. Adult learners need to deliberately read, listen, and speak rather than simply expect the surrounding environment to teach them, he said.

In a YouTube video about her MTC experience, Sister Schenk recalled, “My experience with the MTC, the first day was long. It was the longest day of my life. On the first day of the week, it hits you like a ton of bricks, and you are exhausted by all this information. You're jam-packed into you, and it's like no other language you've really ever learned before.”

When Japanese becomes real

For one returned missionary who now teaches Japanese at the MTC, the environment presented a different challenge. He had spoken Japanese at home with his mother but had never formally studied the language. “I didn’t understand anything happening in my class for the first three weeks. Because I had never used gospel vocabulary in Japanese. So I struggled with confidence at the start.”

Missionaries spend six hours a day in language instruction during their training, according to an MTC language teacher.

He continued, “I found that immersion helped me understand the language. Studying and working with my companion over the next two weeks helped me learn over 200 kanji, and I was able to understand class the last week of the MTC.”

From his perspective as an MTC language teacher, he said, “One challenge that I’ve seen with the missionaries is that the responsibility completely rests in the hands of the missionaries to grow. We, as teachers, give them resources, but it depends on the missionaries studying to get better. If missionaries don’t have good studying skills, they won’t grow as much, so there is often a wide spread in Japanese levels in the class.”

His experience illustrates Kaufmann’s observation: immersion requires deliberate effort.

The shock of the mission field

Another returned missionary remembers the shock of hearing native speakers for the first time. “When we got to our mission field, I was like, ‘What the heck is this?’ It seriously felt like we had just spent the last nine weeks studying the wrong language. I don’t believe that missionaries learn a language in just a few weeks. Missionaries get some basic training on what swimming might look like. Then get tossed into the deep end of the pool.”

Kaufmann pointed out a practical challenge for adult language learners: the people they meet are not teachers. They simply want to communicate. When they sense that someone cannot communicate in their language, they switch to English.

Missionaries practice communicating about everyday needs, including food and daily activities. They practice saying things such as, “I like chicken,” and “I want to go to the hospital,” said a Japanese teacher.

Drawing on his experience both as a missionary and as an MTC teacher, he described the immersion program this way: “Although it is hard to teach them just going through slides [in Japanese], I strongly believe that in the long run, it is much better for the missionaries. I like the emphasis on using the mission language as much as possible.”

The MTC is only the beginning

His description was a reminder that the MTC is not simply a language training center. It is a missionary training center.

For him, the results of the program also have a spiritual dimension. “Looking at missionaries grow has increased my faith in the gift of tongues,” he said. “I’ve been amazed to see missionaries with no past Japanese experience become nearly fluent by the end of nine weeks, which is just sort of impossible. But through the gift of tongues was very possible.”

He compared the process to learning how to fish. The MTC gives missionaries a foundation; the mission gives them the next 18–24 months to put it into practice.

Nine weeks later, the classroom is over. They step off the plane. Their real immersion begins.