

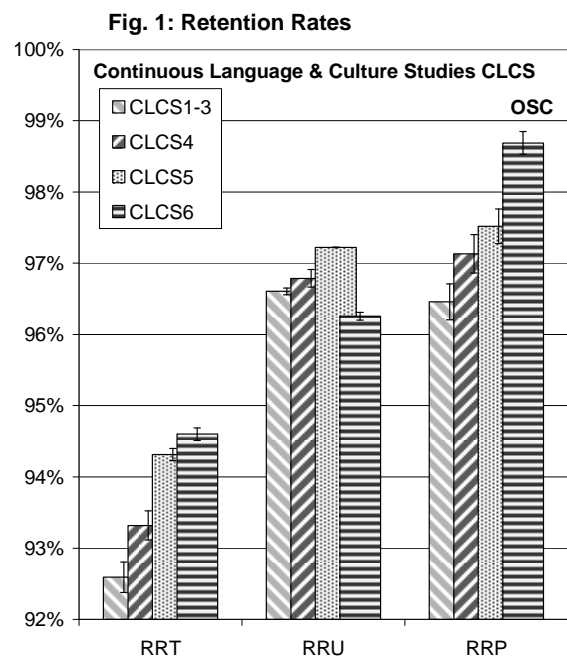
Continuous Language and Culture Studies are indispensable

Detlef Bloecher

Recently a well-known international mission agency called its missionaries to work through English and to abstain from learning the vernacular so that they enter faster into ministry as today's missionaries wouldn't stay long in their place of service anyway. These days many people understand English (or French or Spanish) so that missionaries are tempted to minister through an international trade language. Cross-cultural ministry is indeed expensive and donors expect maximum results for their donations. Is this trend good stewardship or a dead end?

There are various missiological and theological aspects to this issue but what about empirical evidence? For this purpose I reanalysed the extensive database ReMAP II. In the years 2004-5 600 mission agencies¹ assessed on their own policies, practices performance and experience² as well as providing statistical data on their missionaries longevity³ i.e. how many of them are (a) still in active service, (b) have moved on to another mission agency, (c) left for unpreventable⁴ or (d) potentially preventable reasons⁵. Methodology⁶ and various results have been published elsewhere⁷. The ReMAPII questionnaire also included the question whether or not 'Continuous language and culture studies' (CLCS) beyond the orientation phase is expected and how this works out in practice.

The response to this very item is then correlated to various characteristics of the agency and the longevity of their missionaries, in particular. In the following we focus on the results of the 312 "Western" mission agencies from the older sending countries (OSC), i.e. Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand. According to their self assessment of this item, the mission agencies were grouped into four blocks of equal size: 76 Agencies (with 3875 missionaries) put little emphasis on continuous language and culture studies (CLCS = 1-3); 60 agencies (3823 missionaries) gave a mediocre self-assessment (CLCS = 4); 108 agencies (10449 missionaries) rated it 5 (high/important/good) and 68 agencies (8632 missionaries) gave a 6 (very high/important/good). The characteristics of these four groups of agencies are compared in the following diagrams.



¹ From 20 countries of Africa, Asia, North America, South America, Europe and the Pacific

² According to the Swiss school mark system with 6 (excellent, very high/important) to 1 (poorly done/very little/unimportant).

³ 40'000 long-term missionaries who had first moved into a cross-cultural service with this agency in the years 1981-2000

⁴ Including normal retirement, completion of project, death in service, loss of visa, expulsion from the country, disability due to illness or appointment into a leadership position in your agency's home office.

⁵ These were personal, family agency, work or team-related reasons or dismissal by your agency.

⁶ Lim, Valerie. ReMAPII Methodology. In: Worth Keeping – Global Perspectives on Best Practice in Missionary Retention. Rob Hay et. al., William Carey Library, Pasadena 2007. p. 23-34

⁷ Rob Hay et. al.. Worth Keeping – Global Perspectives on Best Practice in Missionary Retention. William Carey Library, Pasadena 2007; Detlef Bloecher. Good Agency Practices. Lesons from ReMAPII. EMQ 41(2005) 228-237; Detlef Bloecher. How will the Global South Mission Movement further prosper? CONNECTIONS 4 (2005)3, 27-29; Detlef Blöcher. Member Care macht Missionare mutig. Evangelikale Missiologie 24 (2008), 47-50

Figure 1 depicts three retention rates: the total Retention Rate⁸ (RRT), retention rate for unpreventable reasons of return (RRU) and for potentially preventable reasons (RRP). The diagrams clearly show that RRT and RRP vary considerably: mission agencies that put strong emphasis on continuous language and culture studies lose (only) 1.3% of their workforce per year for personal, family, cultural, work, team or agency related reasons. Agencies that put little emphasis on language study however lose three times as many (3.6%). The return for unpreventable reasons varied much less – which is unexpected – although this definition included reasons such as completion of project or a limited assignment (to be expected from agencies that put little emphasis on language studies).

Figure 2 shows the retention rate (considering potentially preventable reasons for return only) RRP of those missionaries that had been commissioned for their first assignment with this agency in the stated period.

Agencies that put strong emphasis on continuous language and culture studies have been able to uphold their high staff retention during this 20 years period. By improved personnel selection, prefield training, organisational development and personal care they have been able to withstand the global trend towards shorter assignments and rapid change of employment. Yet RRP of agencies with little emphasis on language studies is almost doubled (from 2.5% to 4.4%). In the youngest group of missionaries (with first assignment in 1996-2000) the rift in RRP widened to a factor of almost 4 (1.2% vs. 4.4%). This is a huge gulf. How many broken dreams are hidden behind these numbers: shattered vision, disappointed expectations of sending churches, wasted investment, spiritual crises and doubts about God’s goodness and calling!

These empirical numbers demonstrate the enormous importance of ongoing and careful language and culture studies for lasting ministry. They help missionaries grow, become enduring, resilient and flexible. They let them grow in their understanding of the local culture, its values and ways of communication. Missionaries become part of the community; they can communicate effectively and understand even the indirect, hidden signals of their local partners.

Fig. 2: Retention Rate (pot. preventable reasons of return only)

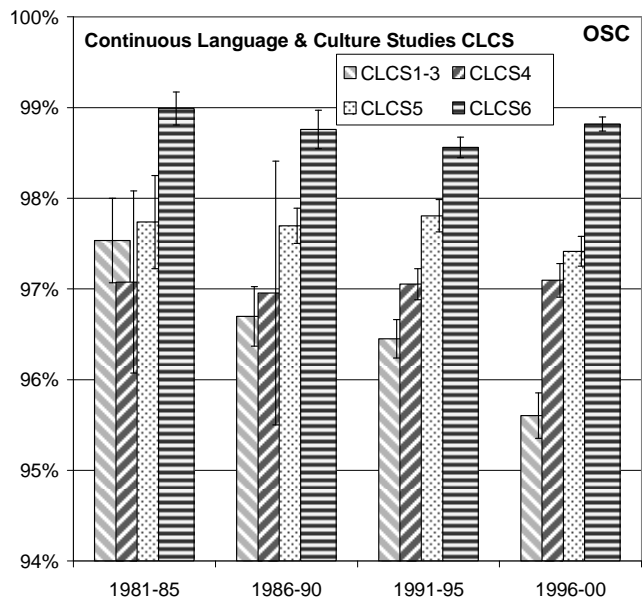
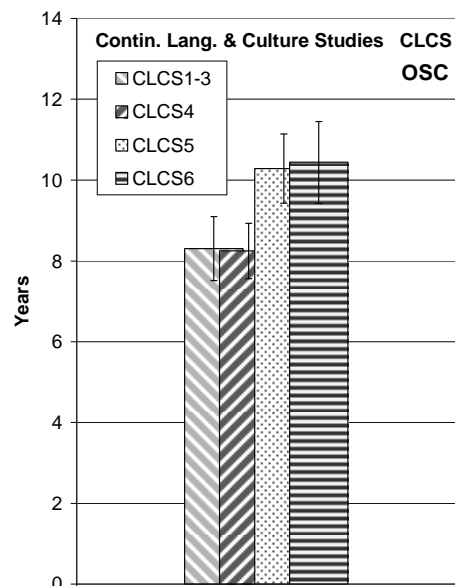


Fig. 3: Length of Service of Returnees

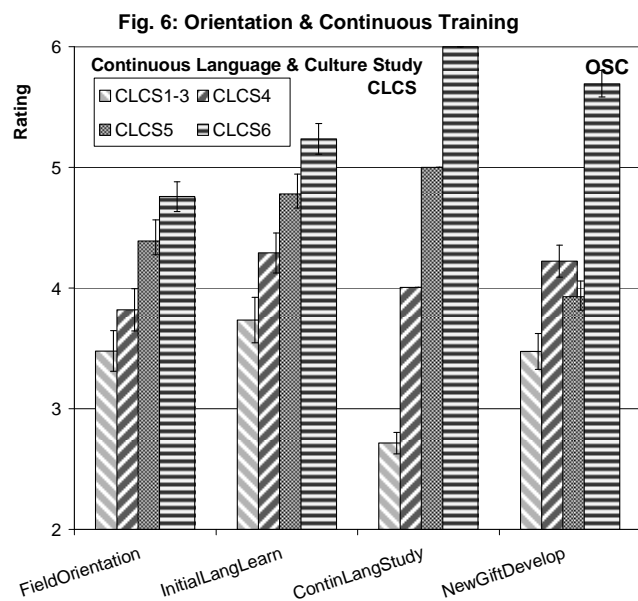
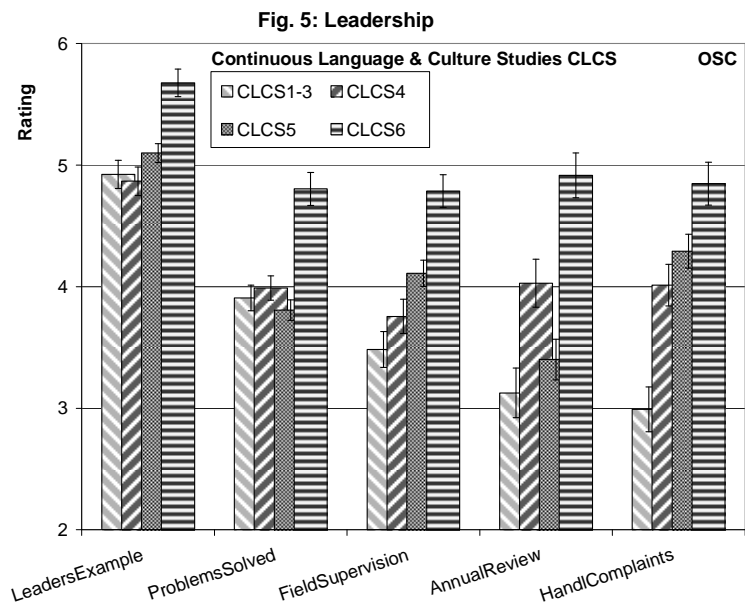
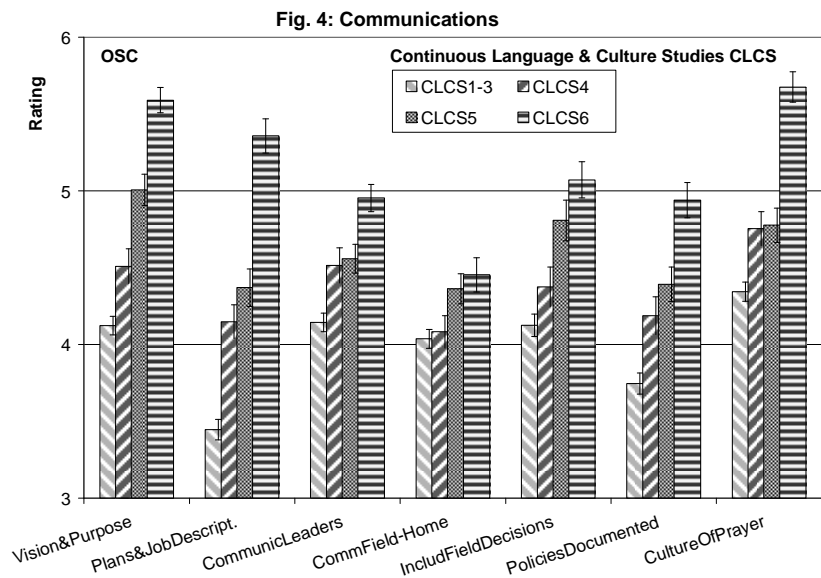


⁸ Retention means how many missionaries of 1 Jan. of a year are still in active service on 31 Dec.. Ideally it is 100%, yet in practice slightly less. The wanting missionaries left the agency for various reasons. The vertical line gives the standard deviation (uncertainty) due to the limited number of missionaries in the study.

In addition there is the extended length of service, even of the returnees (figure 3) as returnees from agencies with little emphasis on language studies (CLCS 1-3) come home on average after 8 years of service vs. 10.5 years (CLCS6). Considering the fact that the first two years are usually covered with orientation, finding your way and building relationships, the latter are much longer in effective ministry.

It is striking that leaders of agencies that put little emphasis on continued language studies also rated many other issues of their own agencies much lower, i.e. vision and purpose, plans & job assignments, communication with missionaries, inclusion of missionaries in the decision making on site, written policies, emphasis on prayer and maintenance of own spiritual life (Fig. 4) – and this is the self-assessment of these very leaders. We found similar results also in respect to some aspects of leadership, i.e. leaders lead by example and they solve problems timely and effectively. Supervision of missionaries, annual appraisal for all missionaries, effective procedures for handling complaints from missionaries (fig. 5), as well as for orientation of new missionaries in country, language learning of new missionaries and development of new gifts (fig. 6)⁹.

Are these leaders just more self-critical applying higher standards to their agency? Yet their rating of a number of “neutral” items (i.e. loyalty of their missionaries to their agency, assignment



⁹ The third set of bars Continuous Language Study (ContinLangStud) served as the selection criteria for the four subgroups and thus does not contain new information.

of missionaries according to their gifting and experience; effectiveness of Missionary teams in providing mutual support, national church values the ministry) was similar to that of leaders of CLCS 6 agencies, so that the above hypothesis can be excluded.

It appears that agencies that put little emphasis on ongoing language study of their missionaries in general are more task-oriented and invest less in the care of their workers and the further development of their organisational structure – and readily accept a higher staff turn-over.

Now one might also argue that the increased staff attrition results from the agency’s mediocre organisational structure or personal care than from restricted language study. To test this hypothesis we selected the group of agencies with average rating of its organisational culture (Org 3.5 – 4.6) and split the group according to its attitude to ongoing language and Culture studies (CLCS 1-4 vs. CLCS 5-6. Thus both groups had a similar self-rating of its Organisational Structure (Fig. 8) and Personal Care¹⁰ (Fig. 9) CLCS 1-4 lost twice as many missionaries for potentially preventable reasons compared with CLCS 5-6: 4.1% vs. 2.4% (Fig. 7). Similar results were found when mission agencies with average assessment of its personal care (PC = 4.0 – 4.9) were selected and analysed regarding continued language study (CLCS 1-4 vs. CLCS 5-6, data not shown). In spite of similar assessment of its personal care the annual attrition for potentially preventable reasons of younger missionaries (commissioned 1996-2000) differed by a factor of two (2.0% vs. 3.9%), so that the above hypothesis is rejected. A large degree of unnecessary loss must result from the limited language and culture studies.

Apparently they are a different type of agencies that primarily focus more on projects and achievements and less on lasting trusting relationships with local people. They are more focused on doing than on being – and they might have good reasons for this (i.e. disaster relief, teachers for MK, specific development or technical projects).

Fig. 7: Retention Rates

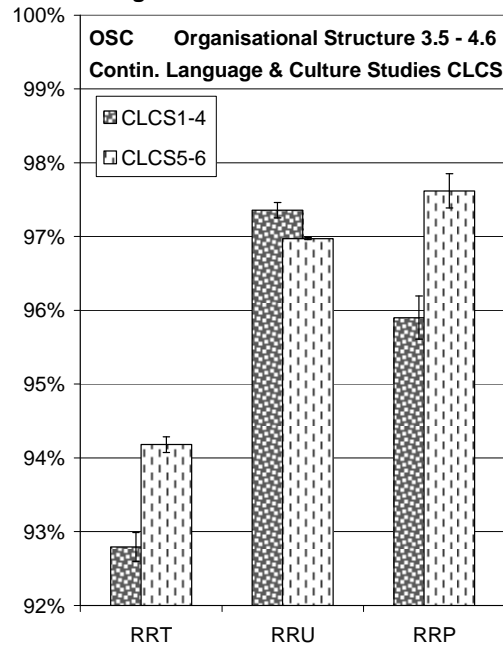
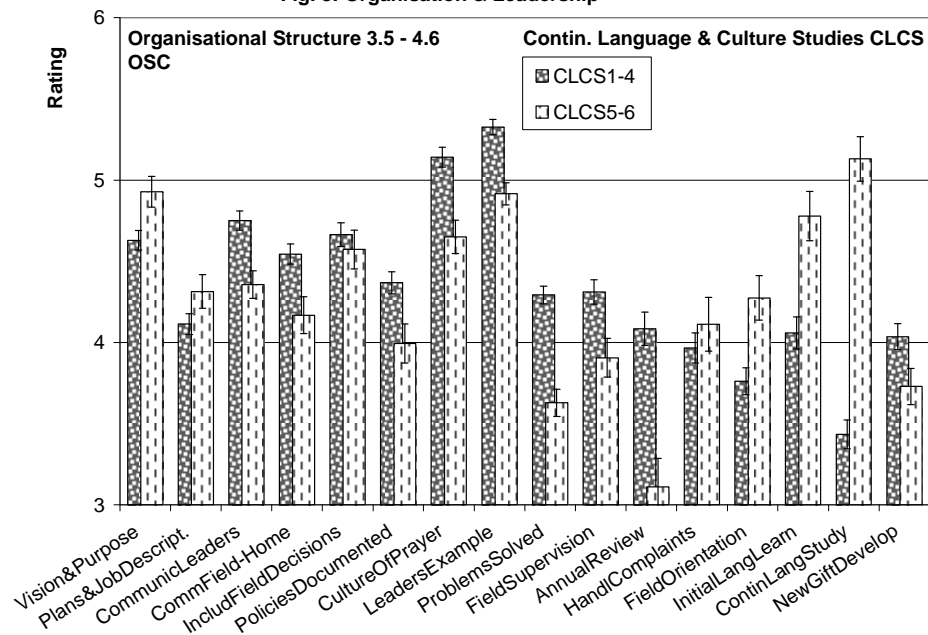


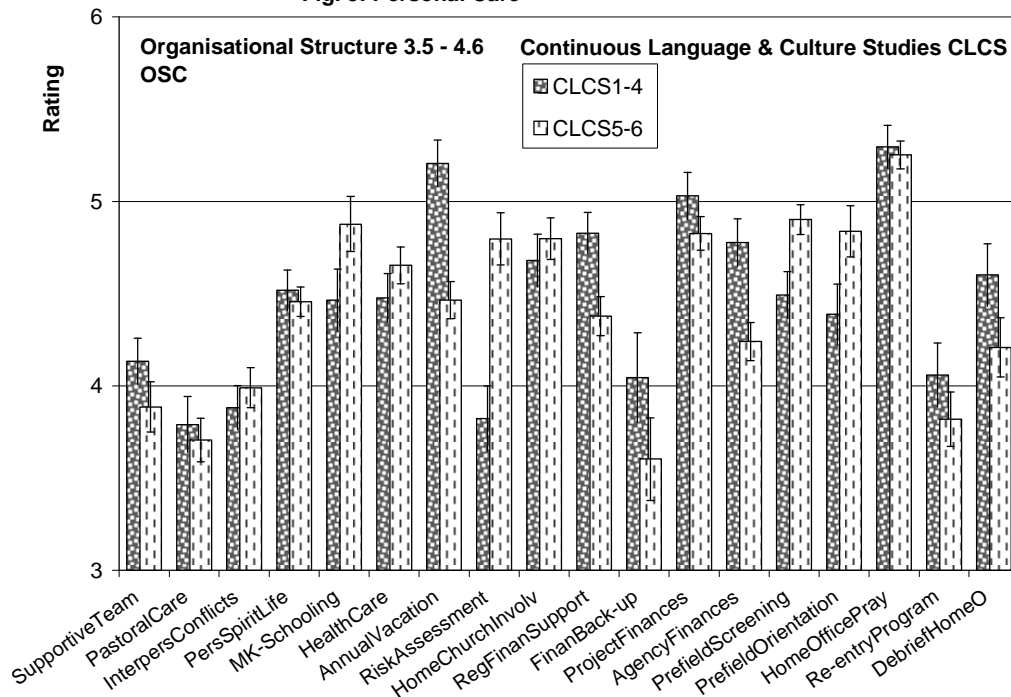
Fig. 8: Organisation & Leadership



¹⁰ CLCS1-4 invested a similar amount of time and finances in Member Care and even significantly more into preventative Member Care, a very positive factor, than group CLCS5-6.

Sustainable development happens very slowly. A new attitude is growing, values and habits are required and this takes lots of time, patience, trustworthy relationships. The missionary needs to be well versed in

Fig. 9: Personal Care



the vernacular and local culture which is very time-consuming. It requires the support by the mission agency, its ethos and practice as well as the encouragement by its leaders. 2000 years ago, Jesus did not come for a short term mission to earth but for 36 years. He did not communicate with people in the then world language Greek but learnt Aramaic and studied the Torah. He perfectly adjusted to the Jewish culture of his time and was challenged as we (Hebr 4:15). In this way he became our friend (John 15:5) and brother (Hebr 2:11). And only in this way we will become friends and brothers to the people in our place of service. Faster and cheaper is not an option.