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## FEATURED THEME: LEARNING STRATEGIES

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## Learning Strategies for World Language Students

by Scott Sterling

By the time most language teachers see them, students have spent many years in the classroom and have developed habits and strategies that work for them. What students don't always seem to realize is that the strategies that they use to learn, say, biology, are not necessarily the same as those they should use to learn a foreign language. Just think of the number of times you have watched students cram for an exam, as though the past participle can be grasped by reading flash cards five minutes before a test.

If students are in college or high school, then they have already been somewhat successful at learning, so why should we expect them to change their strategies? One reason is that in a foreign language course students are expected to be autonomous language learners. Chan (2003), drawing from the often cited Holec, defines autonomy as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning. To take charge of one's own learning is to have, and to hold, the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning" (p. 33). Being in a classroom for four or five hours a week is simply not enough to generate the amount of exposure one needs to learn a language. Thus, learners will need to be (semi-)autonomous. For many, the language classroom is the first time that they will be expected to do the majority of learning on their own. This can be a daunting task, especially for those who are unprepared. Much has been written about learning autonomy; see Benson (2007) for a 30-year review on the topic.

Following is a brief overview of a few select methods that language students can utilize on their own while they are learning. It should be pointed out that not every one of these strategies will work for every student. Language learning strategies are not a magic bullet that fixes all language learning problems. As learners ourselves, we know that learning a language is a long process full of successes and failures. The following strategies are presented because in my experience they work for many people and because they are simple and easy to use. Finally, while my experience with these strategies relates to learners of Spanish and English, all can be adapted to fit the particular language you are teaching.

## EDITOR'S MESSAGE

Dear Readers,

Greetings from Michigan State University, where the leaves are on the ground and we've even had a few snowflakes already. The transition to a new season reminds me of the many transitions that have occurred at CLEAR in recent months. As we begin our third year of this grant cycle, the major funding cuts sustained by the LRC program as a whole remain in place. We are still operating at 50% of our initial funding levels, and this has impacted CLEAR and its sister centers in numerous ways. See page 7 for an article in which we say goodbye to two long-time CLEAR team members.

On the positive side, we moved into a beautiful new building in August. Bringing together all of the language departments (previously in quite distant buildings) and designed with the environment in mind—*Go Green!*—the new space allows for easier collaboration and synergy among language faculty and students in numerous programs.

Speaking of students, in this issue of *CLEAR News* we feature an article by Scott Sterling, a Ph.D. candidate in MSU's Second Language Studies program. He provides a number of useful ideas on strategies to help learners become more autonomous in their exploration of their

target language. Many of us can benefit from these ideas as well—they're not just for students!

We had a great turnout at our summer workshops this year, and our 2013 summer workshops are already posted on our website. We will be offering some new topics as well as some popular encore offerings. Please visit our website to learn more about the workshops on teaching writing, teaching vocabulary, using technology, and creating appropriate assessments.

We continue to visit regional and national conferences to give sessions and run exhibits about CLEAR's free and low-cost products for world language teachers. We hope to meet some of you at ACTFL in Philadelphia this month. Come visit us at Booth #739 in the LRC Pavilion to say hello and learn more about CLEAR and our products in person. You can also always visit our website for the latest information about CLEAR and our projects:  
<http://clear.msu.edu>.



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### SUGGESTIONS WANTED!

We strive to publish *CLEAR News* articles that represent current topics in foreign language teaching, and we want to hear from you! If you have an idea for an article or would like to see a particular subject addressed, please let us know at [clear@msu.edu](mailto:clear@msu.edu). We will consider your idea for future issues of the newsletter.

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The US Department of Education awards grants through Title VI funding to a small number of institutions for the purpose of establishing, strengthening, and operating language resource and training centers to improve the teaching and learning of foreign languages. There are currently fifteen Language Resource Centers nationwide: the Center for Advanced Language Proficiency Education and Research (CALPER) at the Pennsylvania State University; the Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition (CARLA) at the University of Minnesota; the Center for Applied Second Language Studies (CASLS) at the University of Oregon; the Center for Languages of the Central Asian Region (CeLCAR) at Indiana University; the Center for Educational Resources in Culture, Language and Literacy (CERCLL) at the University of Arizona; the Center for Language Education and Research (CLEAR) at Michigan State University; the Center for Open Educational Resources and Language

Learning (COERLL) at the University of Texas at Austin; the Language Acquisition Resource Center (LARC) at San Diego State University; the National African Language Resource Center (NALRC) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison; the National Capital Language Resource Center (NCLRC), a consortium of Georgetown University, the Center for Applied Linguistics, and the George Washington University; the National East Asian Languages Resource Center (NEALRC) at the Ohio State University; the National Foreign Language Resource Center (NFLRC) at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa; the National Heritage Language Resource Center (NHLRC), at the University of California-Los Angeles; the National Middle East Language Resource Center (NMEALRC) at Brigham Young University; and the Slavic and Eurasian Language Resource Center (SEELRC) at Duke University.

## STRATEGIES

### Study abroad and local alternatives

One major difference between most content courses and a language class is that biology or math students aren't expected to spend their lives "in the field" (unless you have a budding Jane Goodall on your hands). World language students, however, are advised to study abroad if possible. Study abroad can be a life altering experience (see Amuzie & Winke, 2009 for an overview of learners' beliefs on study abroad), but the fact is that not everyone will be able to go. Financial and time constraints—or a simple fear of the unknown—are just a few of the reasons students cannot dedicate months (or years) to living in another country. For those that can do so, I highly recommend going abroad. For the rest, which is likely the majority, there are strategies that can be utilized to get some of the same results at home.

One of the simpler methods is to find a conversation partner. A conversation partner is a person, ideally a native speaker, with whom the learner can interact in the target language. This boosts the amount of contact time a learner has with the language, adds the benefit of one-on-one attention, and can lead to rich conversations on a variety of topics. This pair should meet several times a week, at a coffee shop or some other enjoyable place (avoid classrooms since that could seem like more "official" learning). You can find materials online for different topics and activities if you are having trouble finding things to discuss.

A big challenge with conversation partners is that it can be difficult to find someone who is willing to give up hours of his or her life for free, and paying someone to do it turns them into a tutor, changing the relationship. One way to solve this issue is to use an alternative method called a language exchange. A language exchange works the same way as a conversation partner relationship, but instead of being one-sided, where all communication is happening in the second language, a language exchange capitalizes on the fact that both people are trying to learn a language. Thus the partners would switch the language of communication, so one day the conversation might be in English and the next meeting would be in French. This way, both people get the chance to practice their second language.

A final, simple solution for learners unable to study abroad is to simply spend time where the target language is spoken in their own communities. Someone learning Spanish could try

to get a job at a Mexican restaurant, or even just try to talk with the server in Spanish when ordering. If there is a bar in town where German speakers hang out and watch soccer matches, of-age learners could go and watch a game with them. If a group of Chinese students play pick-up basketball at the park, students could try to join them. This technique requires courage, but most people are pleased when they realize someone is making an effort to learn their language and will accommodate the "intrusion."

### Language plans

Just being in an environment where the language is spoken is not all it takes to learn a language; think of the countless people who live in states with large Spanish-speaking populations but don't speak Spanish. So, for most of us, some traditional studying is required. One of the most powerful tools that we can give our students is to teach them to *think* about learning. World language students are not trying to be professionals—they are not reading about the best methods for language learning and they are probably trying to incorporate the knowledge they already have of learning in general and apply it to the new task of language learning. Thus thinking about *how* to learn can be as important as learning itself.

To accomplish this task I suggest that students develop individual language plans. A language plan can include items such as different learning strategies, different places to go in order to use the language, how/when they will look for a language partner, different technological tools they can use (see below for examples) or any number of other considerations. Developing a language plan can do many things for students. First, it can allow the learner to consider the wide range of different learning styles and methods available to them. It can also help take some of the mystery out of the language learning process.



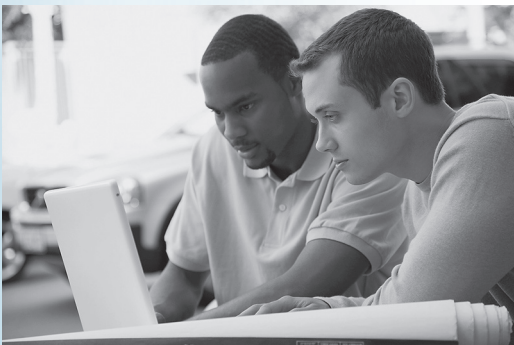
(Continued on page 4)



A language plan can also include a schedule or a set of goals. Learning a language is a lifetime commitment, but most people don't see it that way initially. Many want to increase their language skills to some preset level that they feel will be helpful in their lives. Studying Italian for six years to go on a two-week trip to Italy is clearly not a productive use of time. But what is that elusive level and what should a realistic expectation be for when it will be reached? These are the types of questions that could go into a language plan and this is something with which most learners will need help. The goals can be vague, but must nonetheless be attainable. For instance, maybe by the end of the first semester of study a learner should be able to order food at a restaurant or talk to an information desk over the phone. Maybe near the end of the second year they should expect to be able read a newspaper or a website written entirely in the second language (even though they will not understand all of it). Knowing that there are goals and that they are achieving them can help students keep up the required motivation they need to work toward higher proficiencies.

## TECHNOLOGY STRATEGIES

The final strategies discussed in this article are those involving technology. With autonomous learning, the amount of exposure to the target language can be quite limited depending on how much access the learner has to the language. One way to work around this is to utilize the increasing number of Internet and technology-based approaches. Most of the suggestions given here are from sources that are free for the user.



## VoIP (Skype)

The first tool that can and really should be utilized is a voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) service, such as Skype. VoIPs are interesting because they allow international communication to occur very easily. Students could use a VoIP and find a language partner in Mexico without ever leaving their bedroom. This is particularly good for those learning foreign languages that are not well represented in the local community. A good site to use is The Mixxer (<http://www.language-exchanges.org/>). Here learners can sign up and seek out language learners at a variety of levels and for language exchange partners. They then use Skype to communicate on their own time, like real-time oral pen pals.

## Newspapers and blogs

Many people learning a foreign language tend to forget that an entire group of people use the Internet in their native language. It is easy to find actual content in the second language via a simple web search. Major English-language news sites (e.g., BBC, CNN) tend to offer video/audio and even transcripts in multiple languages. News providers from non-English speaking countries (e.g., *Le Monde*, *Al Jazeera*) are also great sources for authentic material for practice. Finding this sort of content is easy and can lead to a better understanding of a particular language community.

## Entertainment and Internet radio

More entertainment content is being placed online every day. It is now possible to find movies in almost any language, often with English subtitles. The same can be said about TV programs. Another source that is often overlooked is the use of local radio stations that stream their content online. Thus, you can listen to the best of Russian rock or the latest in K-pop (Korean music) from your laptop. Streaming radio also often includes commercials and those sometimes-annoying DJs, but remember that content is content and DJs can provide excellent examples of vernacular speech.

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### Small changes

There are also a host of small changes that can be made that can result in more contact with the language. For example, websites like Facebook, Gmail, and Firefox allow changes to the language setting on the site. This won't convert the content, but it does force users into reading menus and the like in the target language. Wikipedia and also be switched to the second language for practice reading articles that way. I find it interesting to read about a topic in the second language and then switch the site back to English. This way I know very quickly how much of the language I understood.

Another easy thing to do is to open a new account on a social media site. Learners could then only add or interact with people who speak the second language. This can be a good way to meet new people (possible language partners) and add even more input for the learner.

Finally, I think it is a really good idea for language students to find things that they already like and try to do them in the second language. Play *World of Warcraft*? Try it in German. Like to read books? There are tons of classics in French that are free on Google Books. Love surfing the Web? Google Chrome has an extension (language immersion for Google Chrome) that randomly translates words into the target language. The Poles probably like cute kitten photos as much as you do, so search for them in Polish. Need to get money? Switch the ATM to Spanish. Learning—especially autonomous learning—should be as pleasurable as possible. Encourage students to try to do what they already are doing but in the target language. I think students will be surprised at the world of opportunities they have if they are just nudged in the right direction.

### CONCLUSION

There are many language learning strategies available to learners, but our students may not be aware of them. If your students (or even you) are not at the proficiency level that you want to see, perhaps it is time to look for some different ways to approach the situation. Students should write down everything that they are currently doing to learn their target language, then take stock of what is working and what is not. Have them develop a language plan with goals and steps to achieve those goals. In several months/semesters, remind them to come back and reassess the situation. What did they enjoy? What seemed to work? What could they do better? Learners' situation in life will change so encourage them to keep refining their plans and try out new techniques. You never know when they may hit on the perfect activity to make autonomous language learning enjoyable and turn it into a life-long pursuit.

### Resource for Language Plans

<http://www.sil.org/lingualinks/languagelearning/mangngyrlngglrnnngprgrm/MakingAStrategicPlanForLanguag.htm>

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## Michigan State University Offers New Online MA in Foreign Language Teaching

Language teachers hoping to advance their education and/or enhance their career options will be pleased to learn of a unique opportunity to achieve their goals via an online program. The College of Arts and Letters at MSU launched a new online Master of Arts degree in Foreign Language Teaching this fall. Current students have very positive comments on the program so far, for example, “This program perfectly fits my needs as a full-time teacher who wants to enhance my effectiveness in the classroom.” Another current student reports, “This program is excellent! My classes have been fascinating and have entailed practical application, which helps the material come alive.”

The program was designed to meet the needs of both current and aspiring foreign language teachers. It provides a solid foundation in second language acquisition (SLA) and explores the intersection of SLA with the practice of foreign language teaching. Students will learn to design lesson plans, tests, courses, and curricula that support teaching for high levels of language proficiency. This program also focuses on the teaching of culture in the foreign language classroom. In addition, the effective integration of technology into the teaching of language and culture infuses the entire curriculum.

The program is not language specific. However, those applying must already be in possession of a Bachelor’s degree or equivalent, and must have achieved specified proficiency levels in the target language they wish to teach. Required for graduation are 30 credits, 21 of which are completed through online course work. Three of the remaining nine credits are attained by completion of the online portfolio; the final six credits are attained by completion of one or two “experiential modules.” Students in the program will work with faculty mentors to create experiential modules that will not only enhance the student’s plan of study, but also contribute substantially to preparation for career placement and/or enhancement. Modules are implemented at a location of the student’s choosing.

With such a diverse audience for the degree program, the faculty included the module requirement to allow for maximum flexibility, while at the same time allowing students to address individual career needs and goals. This attention to students’ needs has been appreciated by current

students, one of whom says, “The MAFLT program meets any educator or future educator where they are and equips them to teach effectively.” Students report that they are impressed by this new program that allows them to pursue graduate education in a highly interactive online environment through a major accredited university at reasonable tuition rates, supported by excellent faculty.

“I feel as though I am able to have a relationship with the teachers even though it’s an online format; this certainly enhances the learning experience.”

For more information on the MAFLT program, visit the website at <http://maflt.cal.msu.edu/> or contact the program director at [maflt@cal.msu.edu](mailto:maflt@cal.msu.edu).

## Summer Workshops a Success

For the sixteenth consecutive year, CLEAR hosted workshops this summer, drawing participants from all over the United States – and a few other countries! Teachers of many different languages gathered in East Lansing to gain hands-on experience in a variety of topics.

The largest workshop was the one on Rich Internet Applications (RIAs) led by Dennie Hoopingarner and Vineet Bansal, which gave participants three days of intensive work on the pedagogy and practicality of using technology in and out of the foreign language classroom. Attendees were able to see immediate applications for the tools, and looked forward to sharing their new skills. As one participant commented, “One of the first things I hope to do is to teach my colleagues how to use these tools. Then we can create and share activities for the whole department.” Others were pleased to have enough hands-on time: “It was awesome to sit at a computer and have time to practice everything.”

The second workshop was on teaching language in blended environments, and participants were very pleased with the content: “Dennie’s technological savvy and passion for language teaching combine to make his workshop outstanding. He provides more than enough information without overkill, including the appropriate theoretical contexts.”

The workshop on communicative speaking activities, led by Charlene Polio, was also a success. “There were so many great ideas that can be used in the classroom and I also liked the focus on what to think about when making up activities,” said one participant. Another echoed, “The best thing was the great variety of activities and ideas to incorporate – keep them coming!”

And we will indeed keep these great professional development opportunities coming! Workshops for summer 2013 are already posted on our website. Visit <http://clear.msu.edu> and click on “Professional Development.”

## GOODBYES

It was with great sadness that we said goodbye to two longtime CLEAR team members this year. In August, Dennie Hoopingarner left MSU to move to another position. In his sixteen years with CLEAR (nearly since its inception), Dennie was the driving force behind our technology projects, putting CLEAR “on the map” with its Rich Internet Applications and other initiatives. His unique skill set included not only programming skills but a background in language pedagogy and native-like fluency in Chinese, which allowed him to approach CLEAR’s projects from numerous angles. He was also a gifted workshop leader, as hundreds of past participants will agree. We will certainly miss his quick sense of humor around the office and in our exhibit booths at conferences nationwide, and we wish him continued success in his new ventures.

More recently, our nine-year veteran information technologist, Vineet Bansal, also left CLEAR to pursue other opportunities (and join his wife in New Jersey!). Vineet came to CLEAR as a graduate assistant and grew to be a valuable full-time member of the team, lending his considerable programming expertise to our website and web store, RIAs (*QuizBreak* and *Revisions* were specifically his projects), CD-ROMs, and a host of other behind-the-scenes initiatives in support of CLEAR’s mission. He has also worked tirelessly on some of our outreach projects, assisting national organizations such as the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages and the American Association for Applied Linguistics on programming for special projects. We will miss his calm competence and can-do attitude, and wish him the best of luck.

We sincerely thank Dennie and Vineet for their dedication and extraordinary contributions to CLEAR’s growth and success over their combined twenty-five years of service, and we wish them the very best as they begin a new phase in their careers.



Vineet Bansal (left) and  
Dennie Hoopingarner



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