

Language Learning on the Job: *Another Look at Corporate Language Training Programs*

BY SUSAN BAUSCH

Editor's Note: In the January 2009 issue of The Language Educator, we included a profile of Jamalco, a mining company that has started a program to teach its Jamaican employees Portuguese to improve communication with the company's headquarters in Brazil. We asked our readers to write in with stories of other work-related language programs and we are pleased to feature more of those here.

In the global marketplace, language skills are becoming increasingly important to successful business operations and language lessons are moving into the workplace to fill this growing need. The following stories reveal that language learning is happening in a number of unexpected places, from a Catholic diocese in Detroit to a Silicon Valley torque tool manufacturing company. Whether in a traditional classroom, at a workplace-based program, online, or in one-on-one tutoring, what stands out in all of these programs is the extent to which the language course content is customized to meet the individual needs of workforce learners. When students have an immediate need for specific language skills, corporate language training can give them the tools they need to start communicating with co-workers and clients right away.





Sister Mary Kelly studies Spanish with her UDM Instructor Carlos Quiñones.

What Students Need to Know

Three years ago, when the Sisters of Mercy in Detroit, Michigan, called upon Sister Mary Kelly to take on a special assignment in which she would handle the legal and financial aspects of reorganizing their non-profits in Central and South America, she knew she needed to improve her Spanish skills quickly. She called the University of Detroit Mercy (UDM) to find out if someone could help her master in Spanish both the financial jargon she needed to conduct business, as well as Biblical verse. Through the university's language and cultural training program, Sister Mary was paired with instructor Carlos Quiñones, who meets with her once or twice a week on the UDM campus to work on both conversational and written Spanish.

Sister Mary could not be more pleased with the results: "What's so successful about [this way of learning] is that it follows my agenda. It's very customized. I'm not learning to repeat conversations that are irrelevant to what I need to do. The tutoring is customized to . . . what I need to know." Because of her facility with Spanish, Sister Mary has been appointed the North American representative for her Central and South American colleagues. They have become her constituents and she reports back to them during her frequent visits to the region.

The experience has also been rewarding for Quiñones. He is glad that UDM has developed a program for workplace language learners that can accommodate their needs: "[The university] has filled a void that was there. Because [workplace students] need to learn quickly, they need us to be flexible. So we try to tailor the class to the individual and their needs." Because Sister Mary travels to a variety of Central and South American countries, Quiñones teaches her regional colloquial expressions in addition to standard Spanish vocabulary. None of this effort is lost on Sister Mary's southern colleagues.

"For them it is a great affirmation," she says. "Rather than put the burden [of communication] on them, we just abandon English . . . and [Quiñones] makes that work for me."

UDM provides language instructors for a wide variety of workplace learning needs. Japanese instructor Emiko Kelley teaches students who work for Japanese companies in the United States. Her philosophy is that teaching corporate students something about Japanese culture is more important than drilling grammar. Kelley starts by teaching greetings and expressions the students can use around the workplace, "so they can get better relationships and understand their supervisors in Japanese." Behind every language lesson is a lesson in culture, according to Kelley, who encourages her students to use their new Japanese language skills to demonstrate both friendliness and respect towards their Japanese colleagues.

Similarly, UDM German instructor Hildegard Spencer prepares her corporate students for work-related travel to Germany by giving them lessons in both the language and culture. Although at international companies in Germany most high-level meetings are conducted in English, outside the office American visitors need German to rent an apartment, go shopping, or order in a restaurant. Spencer says the goal is for them to be comfortable in the country and to know how to navigate daily life. The bottom line for Spencer is to "concentrate on what [the student's] needs are" and to equip them accordingly.

A Sign of Respect

Part of customizing language courses for corporate learners is accommodating their hectic travel and work schedules. Michael Burke teaches French to Americans traveling to a Francophone country for work, but they are not all based in Michigan where he lives. Global LT's e-Langua online language courses allow Burke to teach students living in places as far away as Virginia and even France. Using the same Web conferencing technology that allows business executives to communicate with one another around the world, Burke offers live, instructor-led learning in his virtual classroom.

Despite the novelty of this delivery method, the teaching goals remain the same: to prepare students for daily life in a foreign country and help them thrive in an international work environment. Some students need to learn workplace vocabulary; others are focused on being able to socialize with their French-speaking colleagues. Burke maintains that learning even basic French is important because it is "a sign of respect for the host culture." Whatever the individual student's goals are, Burke finds workplace learners to be highly motivated because the language is integral to their jobs and to their future success.

Paul Shoemaker started his language lessons stateside with Burke, but he now logs on from his home in Paris, France. He appreciates being able to learn wherever he can access the Internet, since he travels a lot. With the goal of "being able to carry

on [French] conversations both socially and in the office,” Shoemaker and Burke spend the majority of their time working on speaking and listening skills. Shoemaker finds this kind of learning much more practical and natural than traditional classroom learning and especially well-suited to someone who needs to use the target language on a daily basis.

Every Gesture Appreciated

It is not only corporate executives, but also social service professionals, who may need second language skills to work effectively with their clients. Teachers, counselors, and social workers find themselves dealing with difficult issues that are further complicated by a language barrier. But, as in other professions, a little language learning can go a long way in improving working relationships and establishing rapport. Through the University of Missouri St. Louis (UMSL) Foreign Language Connection Continuing Studies Program, Eric Zegel recently taught beginning conversational Spanish for a local school district’s social services staff. They learned greetings and basic workplace vocabulary such as how to ask for someone’s name and address.

Zegel encouraged his students to use the language right away: “Each week I would start by asking, *What phrases were you able to say? What challenges did you face?*” By discussing actual conversations with Spanish-speaking parents, the students contributed to the course curriculum and made the learning much more relevant to their situations. By the end of the course, students participated in three-minute role-plays in which one person was the parent and the other was the school staff member. They were also able to fill out mock intake forms by doing interviews in Spanish. Zegel wanted to “lighten the pressure” on his workplace learners and make them realize that their Spanish did not have to be perfect to use it, that “any gesture toward speaking the language would be appreciated.”

Daniela Sales, who teaches Bosnian for UMSL, has also worked with social service providers. In a recent class, she taught basic Bosnian conversation to teachers and community members with the goal of “opening the channels of communication” between school employees and parents. After a three-week introductory class on Bosnian culture and traditions, the students spent six weeks becoming familiar with the sounds and basic structure of the Bosnian language. Like Zegel, Sales made sure to involve her students in the course content.

Learn More About These Programs

University of Detroit Mercy Language and Cultural Training Program
libarts.udmercy.edu/lct

GlobalLT e-Langua Online Program
www.global-lt.com/language_e-langua.html

University of Missouri St. Louis Foreign Language Connection
www.umsl.edu/divisions/conted/flc/welcome.htm

Habla Language Services
hablals.com

“Every class ended with every student contributing a sentence they wanted to use that week,” she says. “[That way] they used it right away.” As is common in workplace language learning, these students were eager to learn and practice words and phrases that were relevant to their jobs, so Sales made it a major component of the curriculum.

Making Connections

Even with a limited amount of class time, workplace learners can benefit from exposure to a second language. At her company Habla Language Services, ACTFL member Gina Covello offers employers a three-session workshop intended to provide students with a basic foundation in Spanish. Much of Covello’s

work is dedicated to making language learning fun, since she finds that “a lot of adults have had bad experiences” learning languages in the past.

By focusing on conversation and conducting the entire class in Spanish, Covello encourages her students to use the language and not to worry about making mistakes. This philosophy is generally well received among workplace students, who in Covello’s experience “are highly motivated . . . [and] really want to learn.”

Brad Mountz, CEO of Mountz, Inc., a torque tool supplier in San Jose, California, sought out Habla Language Services for his employees because he felt it was important to have a Spanish language teacher rather than just books, software, or other learning tools. With 14 subsidiary employees based in Mexico, Mountz believes it is important for his California employees to be able to speak some Spanish “to help create an affiliation between the groups.”

Although his employees’ initial exposure to onsite corporate language learning was relatively brief, Mountz still thinks the experience was valuable for them. As someone who travels all over the world and has learned a smattering of different languages, Mountz believes that languages affect learning and understanding and says that even basic knowledge of a second language is an asset.

As the world grows smaller and the need for second language skills increases, language learning is growing beyond just the traditional classroom. Corporate language programs can help provide the customization and flexibility that workplace learners need to make the most of their limited time to study. Language educators who take on the challenge of this learning community will likely find it to be rewarding and their students highly motivated.

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