

From IALL '95

Language Resource Center: The American Federal Model

by Earl Rickerson, Center for Advancement
of Language Learning

[Editor's Note: The following remarks are excerpts from Dr. Rickerson's presentation at Notre Dame. He discusses the Center for the Advancement of Language Learning's Resource Center as well as trends in the teaching of less commonly taught languages.]

Introduction

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For more than 40 years the United States federal government has been teaching languages to analysts, diplomats, intelligence collectors, law enforcement officers, military personnel, and many other people in what we broadly call the "foreign affairs establishment." At the federal level, there are some 50 – 60 different organizations that have language needs. The federal government is by far the largest consumer of professional language skills in the country. And it is serious about teaching language because careers and assignments, paychecks, treaties, and even national security are affected. But while the federal government is largely successful—maybe the most successful language teacher in the country—the foreign affairs agencies have been criticized for not working together in language training. The effort has in the past been diffuse, disconnected, and duplicative.

People from those 50 – 60 organizations attend four federal language schools and a clutch of 6–7 commercial schools that handle overflow. These schools share a similar methodology, which has been described as "brute force eclectic"; and they teach toward a set of proficiency standards to which they all subscribe. But historically each developed its own

courseware. The use of testing procedures varied so much that scores weren't intelligible across agencies. There was little sharing of materials, few joint activities such as teacher training or research, and little communication among language teachers in the various schools.

Center for the Advancement of Language Learning

In 1992, a Congressional committee created CALL, the Center for the Advancement of Language Learning, to try to bring the federal schools together. As taxpayers, you'll be glad to know that the CALL experiment is working. For the past year and a half, an interagency group has been meeting at CALL to create a unified testing system for the federal community, and it is succeeding.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, instead of four schools creating four new courses for each of the languages of the 15 newly emerged countries, the governmental language training community, under CALL's umbrella, is creating one course for all in Armenian, Ukrainian, and five other languages of national interest. Instructor development is going on jointly in CALL-sponsored workshops; teachers and linguists from various schools are meeting routinely on joint projects. Duplication of effort is greatly reduced, and sharing and cooperation are in evidence every day. CALL's crown jewel to facilitate this sharing is its Resource Center.

Resource Center

If you were to walk into the Resource Center in suburban Washington today, you would see what looks like a well equipped language laboratory: six Pentium PCs and a cluster of four Macs, a service desk, a group of high powered UNIX-based Sunsparc servers behind a smoked glass wall, a few VCRs and monitors, and a long set of shelves. But this center is neither a language lab, nor a library, nor a place where students to study or practice languages. The Center serves as an electronic support system for the federal language community—a tool to facilitate sharing, a help for teachers, course developers, and federal professionals of all kinds who use language in their work.

The Center is a **central clearinghouse** to screen new technology-based courseware. We scan journals and advertisements, contact publishers, surf the Internet to keep up with what's new, locate new courseware and computer-based language tools such as multilingual fonts or authoring tools, and track new projects. Since no single teacher or single federal language school has the time or resources to do this, we're there to do it centrally for the whole community. Two people at our search-and-referral desk have the job of locating new

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software, obtaining a copy, installing the package on our computers, learning to use it, teaching others about it, and advertising its availability. And if we don't have a copy of the material in the center, our goal is to know about it and help others to find it. To help us in that work, we have a comprehensive database under development at UCLA, which includes work done by the Center for Applied Linguistics, on all the pedagogical material known to exist in over 1,000 less commonly taught languages (LCTLs), from Albanian to Zulu.

The database lists basic courses, intermediate courses, self-study materials, dictionaries, and reference grammars—in short, it indexes all teaching materials, including the most recently published courseware and emphatically including technology-based courseware. The database is not yet complete, but large parts of it are available in the Resource Center. Our plan is to make it electronically accessible to the federal community. Eventually, UCLA will make the database available to academia. Note that it does not include commonly taught languages such as French, Spanish, and German. We worry mostly about the neglected languages.

The Center is a **demonstration site** where teachers and others can try out new, language-related software before buying. Self-study students—federal professionals who may or may not be enrolled in a language course—can come to test drive a new course they may have heard about. We have been collecting only for three or four months and currently have around 50 titles. Our goal is to collect virtually everything that exists in video-based or computer-based courseware in LCTLs, as well as the newest and best of what is available in commonly taught languages.

At present, the Center collects

- complete basic courses
- maintenance materials
- course supplements
- authoring software
- multilingual fonts
- interactive courseware for intermediate students
- interactive reading courseware
- multi-lingual text archives with rapid retrieval
- computerized topical glossaries.

We hope that, in time, the task of locating these materials will be easier because we'll become a place that authors and publishers think of and send copies of their new products to. We do not actually promote or evaluate software; we merely collect samples. Eventually we want to open this service to teachers and linguists in academia.

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The Resource Center is also a **central repository** for authentic materials collected overseas. Because culturally authentic radio, television, and print are the raw material of choice for writing language courseware, CALL is pursuing a plan to collect audio and video material directly from media providers overseas. The focus is again on the LCTLs, and especially on materials such as entertainment shows, documentaries, travelogues, soap operas, quiz shows, and interview programs.

Our plan is to collect, summarize, and catalogue roughly ten hours of authentic material in each of the languages taught in government language schools. That's about 101 languages. This project is unusual not only its scope, but also in its method: we are not going about it by hooking up cassette recorders to radios and television sets in hotel rooms and living rooms in the target country. The material we collect will come directly from studio masters to assure high quality, and we will obtain copyright permission to use these recordings for the educational purpose of teaching the language. Both audio and videotapes will be digitized and distributed to our users through the National Audiovisual Center at the Department of Commerce. Again, our hope is that, at a future date, these materials will also be available to users in academia and elsewhere. We have already started the collection process and are currently working on the problems of compression and digitization. Later this year, we should have our first materials of this sort available for distribution.

Fourth, the Center is a **one-stop-shopping source** for information about languages—a place where one can get a wide range of language-related information by phone, fax, or computer. We are still building this capability, and not all of it is in place, but our plan is eventually to provide information on

- teaching materials in government schools
- organizations in the language profession
- publications and conferences
- national language expertise
- LCTL programs in the U.S.
- total immersion programs here and abroad
- courses in commercial schools
- government and academic language projects
- newsletters and catalogs from the profession
- language-related resources on the Internet.

And finally, the Resource Center is an **advocate** for applied technology and a vehicle for electronic sharing because not every teacher of foreign languages is interested in technol-

ogy. At CALL, we have a two-fold task: to make technology-based tools available to language teachers, and to show them how to use the tools. In other words, we have a teaching function as well.

As of last month, we began running workshops, both at CALL and in the workspaces of the four language schools—so that the good things we are acquiring for our consumers can be put to use. Since part of our job is to encourage sharing, we have set up a PC-based electronic bulletin board and invited teachers to share material and ideas. Workshops teach our instructors how to use our bulletin board. And we are also running “how to” workshops on topics such as browsing the Internet and using multilingual font systems for word processing.

Resource Center and Language Labs

I would like to suggest that, in the thinking behind the Resource Center, there are models for you who are pondering the future of your labs.

Even though the Center is not a language laboratory, it has things in common with modern labs which put us both on the leading edge. Places such as ours sit at the confluence of four clearly visible trends in turn-of-the-twentieth century American culture. Those trends played a role as we planned the Center, and I think they're equally relevant for you.

The first trend is the “internationalization” of the U.S. economy, which brings with it a pressure for Americans to learn languages. I work for the U.S. foreign affairs community where the need is obvious. But is there a campus where the college administration has not declared a program to “globalize the curriculum?”

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The second trend is the explosion of electronic communications and the passion of students for computers, videotape, and the keyboards that will soon eclipse the American love affair with the automobile. I can hear the slogan coming: “What’s good for Microsoft is good for America.”

Then there are the related trends of mobility and portability: moving around. Peregrination! It has become a cliché to say that we are a nation on the move. We have always been a nation on the move. But the pace has quickened. Between 1985 and 1990, more than 21 million Americans migrated between states, and in 1990 the Census Bureau tells us only 61.8% of Americans lived in the state in which they were born.

With our penchant for being on the move has come technology that permits us to be entertained and to learn while we are moving: the cassette tape recorder, the Walkman®, the

Discman®, the Watchman®, the tape decks in our cars, the tiny TV screens mounted (would you believe) in the windshield that allow drivers of 18-wheelers to watch *The Young and the Restless*, long-distance video teletraining, portable telephones, and laptop computers that become language labs on the beach and can reach from anywhere to virtually any source of information in the world on the Internet. We want to be on the move, and we also want to take our technology with us.

“Bowling Alone”

“I would like to suggest that, in the thinking behind the Resource Center, there are models for you who are pondering the future of your labs.”

You may have read the article in the *Journal of Democracy* by Robert Putnam with that title. Putnam’s modest insight caused a great deal of stir in the chattering classes of Washington when it came out last year. Putnam harks back to De Tocqueville’s comment about Americans in the 1830’s—that our propensity for civic association was the key to our ability to make democracy work. “Americans are forever forming associations,” said De Tocqueville, “not only commercial and industrial associations, but religious, moral, serious, futile, some immense, some minute. Nothing, in my view, deserves more attention than the intellectual and moral associations in America.” Putnam comments that the quality of public life is powerfully influenced by the norms and networks of civic engagement, of social “connectedness.” Without civic engagement, we have more crime, more poverty, the breakdown of respect for government and other public institutions, even poorer health. And as a good researcher, Putnam presents a good deal of data to back it up.

His point, as a political scientist, is that the decline in voter turnout over the past three decades is part of a much larger trend. The number of Americans who report that they have “attended a public meeting” has dropped by more than a third since 1973; labor union membership has fallen for four straight decades; membership in women’s clubs is down by more than half since 1964; participation in Boy Scouts is off by 26% from 1970; Red Cross volunteers off by 61% ; the Masons down 39% since 1959, and while more Americans are bowling today than every before, they are doing it more and more by themselves. Lest you think this a trivial example, you should be aware that nearly 80 million Americans went bowling at least once during 1993—nearly a third more than voted in the 1994 congressional elections. And, while the total number of bowlers increased by 10 percent in the last decade or so, league bowling decreased by 40 percent.

It’s a fascinating article. I recommend it to you. But, in case you’ve lost the thread of how any of this connects to

language labs or the Resource Center, what I draw from it relates to the mindset of a very large and growing segment of the population: the withdrawal of individuals from group to a marked preference for individual activity. "Bowling alone" in our context becomes *learning alone*.

Learning Alone

In 1995 we have all the tools to move from linear to multi-dimensional teaching, from stationary learning to learning on the move, and from lockstep group instruction to learning alone. But one thing hasn't changed in the past twenty years: the locus of language teaching is mostly still a 600 square-foot room with a teacher in front of a chalk board. And the potential of the laboratory is not always realized. Why? As the adage says: "If you keep on doing what you've always done, you'll keep on getting what you always got." That brings us to a fifth trend that has emerged in the last few years—the pressure to reduce the cost of public institutions through what is now called "downsizing."

Lately, we see the phrase "budget reductions" in a lot of headlines. It's a paradox that while we are at the peak of our potential we may need to do something different or be at risk. A fundamental question to ask ourselves is: where will we be on the night of the long knives? On the leading edge or the bleeding edge? Despite a Vice-Presidential Award for Quality, we at CALL asked ourselves that question and concluded that we had to have a strategy both to improve language learning and to avoid becoming a victim of the budget ax. We in the instructional technology area are in a position to change the learning environment in positive ways. But how do we make that known?

As in the academic world, we don't use the word "marketing" much in the federal government. But marketing, as a means of survival, was very much on our minds as we thought about what services to offer at the resource center. The crux of our strategy has been to see ourselves as a language services organization and to find a market niche other than that of being a place that purports to teach language. We recognized the need to offer three things:

- help for the self-study learner
- professional services for the teacher
- language-related tools for federal consumers outside the language area.

Conclusion

Let me conclude by leaving you with some questions to ponder about presenting the very strong case we can make—and must make—to establish the language lab in the minds of our consumers as a key player in a new environment.

- We tend to focus on what's in our face at the moment: the articulated needs of current clients. Have you considered the unarticulated needs of people who aren't yet using your services? How about the student who works 25 hours a week and commutes? The teacher who does not yet understand the value of doing research on technology in language teaching. The student learning an LCTL on his or her own? The dean looking for ways to implement a "globalized curriculum?" The Director of the International Studies program?
- Is your lab seen chiefly as a place for students to do assignments that other people give them or as a place where new learning strategies are suggested and supported?
- Are you trying to create in the lab an environment that capitalizes on your advantages or are you trying to persuade people to use it as another type of sit-down group activity? While I know there are good ideas out there for using LANs and teachers at a console with language groups in the lab, I would argue that you are swimming against the tide. That's not where the trends are.
- Are you talking to the business school at your institution about what role you might play in their language needs?
- As you invest in things for the lab, even if your investments are small, are they limited to things used in-house, or in things more suitable to people on the move?
- Have you suggested the use of an electronic bulletin board for language students and teachers that allow them to be members of the French Club or German Club without ever leaving their room? So they can be alone—together?
- Are you consciously thinking about the use of advanced technology for the self-study learner?
- Are you part of any movement toward foreign languages across the curriculum (FLAC) on your campus?
- Finally, are you offering expertise as well as services? Even if your lab consists of a roomful of audio cassette decks, are you the person on your campus who, with just one computer, knows more than anyone else about the language resources and user groups on the Internet? Do the language students and teachers in your institution know that you're the one who purveys this kind of information as a professional?

You've probably noted that national interest in language teaching—and the government's links to academic language professionals— comes in waves: the first was in the 1940s when we worked together to begin what became the modern era of language teaching in America; the second was 25 – 30 years later with the National Defense Education Act. And now, again 25 or 30 years later, there is a new surge of interest. This is a challenging time for all of us in the profession, but particularly for those of us in and around the world of instructional technology. ■

Work Cited

Putnam, R. D. (1995). "Bowling alone: America's declining social capital. *Journal of Democracy*, 6(1), 65-78.

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ReCALL

The European Association for Computer Assisted Language Learning (EUROCALL) is an association of language teaching professionals from Europe and worldwide, which aims to:

- promote the use of foreign languages within Europe;
- provide a European focus for all aspects of the use of technology for language learning;
- enhance the quality, dissemination and efficiency of CALL materials.

For details of how to subscribe to EUROCALL and receive ReCALL, contact:

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