CLEAR 20 years

CENTER FOR LANGUAGE EDUCATION AND RESEARCH

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Are some languages really more difficult to learn? Maybe, maybe not.

by Charlene Polio

We've all heard students say that they have chosen specific languages to study based on how easy they are to learn. In fact, the *Washington Post* has a quiz called "Which foreign language should you learn?" (found here: http://bit.ly/whichlang). If you choose responses that indicate you don't want to put too much time and effort into language learning, you get told you should study Spanish. Changing your responses to say that you want to work harder gets you Arabic. A quiz such as the one in the *Washington Post* may seem like harmless fun, but pervasive ideas about language learning and teaching may have negative consequences for language teaching and learning. Consider the following statements:

- *I can't speak Language X in my beginning class because Language X is too hard to understand.*
- *We can't use authentic materials because Language X is too hard to read.*
- *We can't have the same expectations for our students as other programs do because Language X is too hard.*

Each of these statements can have a negative effect on language teaching. Students studying the so-called difficult languages may get less aural input and less authentic language, and teachers may have lower expectations. What's more, even if Language X truly has more challenging aspects than other languages, it does not necessarily mean that the language should be taught differently.

To explore the concept of what we are calling *language difficulty*, I, along with Margaret Malone, the co-director of CLEAR's sister center, the Assessment and Evaluation Language Resource Center, have begun a project to address the notion in a principled way. The first part of the project, which we presented at the 2015 conference of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), deconstructed the idea of language difficulty. The second part involves a pilot study that examines language learning across typologically different languages. While it is true that certain aspects of certain languages may make learning and teaching challenging, most claims about language difficulty are not rooted in empirical research and are too broad to test empirically. Thus, we are hoping to break down the claims and dispel some of the myths about language difficulty.

CLEAR NEWS

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. We will consider your idea for future issues of the newsletter.

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EDITOR'S MESSAGE

Dear Readers,

Greetings from CLEAR! We continue the celebration of CLEAR's twentieth year of service to the language education community with this issue, in which we present a current research project that may contest some enduring ideas in the field.

In this issue of *CLEAR News*, center co-director Charlene Polio discusses the issue of language difficulty and whether or not we can make assumptions about how difficult a particular language will be for a particular learner. This article is based on a research project sponsored by CLEAR and our sister center in Washington, DC, the Assessment and Evaluation Language Resource Center. You may find some of your long-standing ideas challenged by this project.

A highlight of this twentieth anniversary year was hosting the annual symposium of the Computer-Assisted Language Instruction Consortium (CALICO) for the second time. We enjoyed welcoming participants from all over the country (and abroad) to MSU for this conference on the intersection of language and technology.

Later in the summer, we were pleased to host our best-attended professional development workshops in over a decade. We have several workshops planned for summer 2017, with a new date format. Check out the descriptions on our website (go to "Professional Development") and start making summer plans!

We hope you'll look for us in November at the ACTFL conference in Boston—we always enjoy going to regional and national conferences to share about CLEAR's products for world language teachers. And as always, you can visit our website for the latest information about CLEAR and our projects: http://clear.msu.edu.

Joy Campbell
Executive Associate Director

Where do claims about language difficulty come from?

If we look at websites and literature in the popular press, the idea that some languages are more difficult is related to differences both across languages and within languages. Across languages, there is the belief that because a language is very different from English, or anyone's native language, it must be difficult. While this is sometimes true, there are two problems with such a broad claim. First, just because a certain feature is different does mean that it is difficult. Take, for example, negation in Spanish. Spanish has preverbal negation, which English does not, yet English-speaking beginning learners of Spanish have no trouble learning Spanish negation. Similarly, Japanese generally is a verb-final language, yet Japanese learners of English don't transfer Japanese word order to English. The second problem with this claim is that the concept of *different* is not clearly defined, or as one would say in an empirical study, it is not operationalized. For example, French has articles just as English does, but they are not used in exactly the same way. So do we predict that French articles will be hard for English learners or not? Within a language, there is a belief is that some languages are inherently more complex. For example, one website (http://bit.ly/hardlanguages) states that Basque is hard for English speakers not only because it is different from English but also because it is has a complex case system. There is some truth to the claim that certain features, such as a complex case system, are difficult to learn, but it does not necessarily mean that all features of a specific language will be hard to learn.

Related to both of these ideas is the suggestion that certain languages take longer for English speakers to learn because those languages are either different from English or more complex. In other words, given similar students, teaching methods, and exposure, it will take a student longer to achieve a certain proficiency level in Language X than Language Y. Such claims that some languages take longer to learn abound in both the popular press and the academic literature and can be traced to the US Foreign Service Institute's (FSI) language difficulty ranking, such as we see on this website: http://bit.ly/FSIranking. In the academic literature, the citations can be traced back to Liskin-Gasparro (1982), who provided the FSI chart but never stated that it was based on an empirical study. Furthermore, no one has revisited this issue since 1982,

nor do we have any description of whether or not instruction was similar across languages at the FSI, where such observations about the time it took to reach certain levels of proficiency were made. It's quite easy to imagine, for example, a teacher of one the so-called difficult languages using more English when teaching, thus resulting in less student exposure to the language. As Stevens (2006) stated in an article about Arabic, "I would like to suggest that one reason for Arabic's ranking high on the 'difficult' list might well relate more to pedagogical factors than to the linguistic structure or anything else about the language itself" (Stevens, 2006, p. 61). He was not claiming that Arabic is poorly taught, but rather that no studies have addressed teaching methods vis-à-vis difficulty claims.

What do we know?

- Basic word order, regardless of one's native language, is easy to learn. For example, a speaker of Korean, an SOV language, will have no difficulty learning basic word order in English, an SVO language.

- Deviations from basic word order are difficult. For example, speakers of any language learning German will have difficulty moving the verb to the final position in dependent clauses. Also, forming English questions in which the verb is moved is not easily learned.

- Certain grammatical functions, such as aspect, are difficult. Learners of Spanish struggle with imperfect and preterit, and learners of Chinese

take a long time to learn how to use the complex system of aspect particles.

- Bound morphemes are not easily learned. Advanced learners of English will often omit the third-person singular –s even though it is taught at the early stages of language learning.

- Cognates can facilitate processing or comprehension, and they can be easier for learners to retain.

Each of these topics has been extensively discussed in the research on second language acquisition, but DeKeyser (2005) presents a fairly comprehensive summary.

What do we not know or only partially understand?

- Some languages may or may not be universally difficult. The claim that Basque is difficult may be true because of the number of bound morphemes in its case system. Navajo, also a language with a complex morphological system, has been claimed to be difficult to learn as well. We know that these features are difficult, but we don't know if the languages themselves overall are harder to learn for everyone.

- The effects of some features not found in students' native languages are not fully understood. For example, tones in Chinese, Vietnamese, and Thai might perplex English speakers at first, but we do not know if they slow down learners' progress in speaking or listening.

- Although some writing systems are new, we do not understand the long-term effects of this fact on learning. Research on target-language captions in listening has shown that they may be less helpful when the target language uses characters (see the study by Winke, Gass, & Sydorenko, 2013) and it is logical to assume that learners of Chinese or Japanese will not be able to learn vocabulary from reading as students of other languages might be able to do.

What should teachers do?

First, do not tell students that a language is hard or easy. Instead, be aware that certain structures might be acquired quickly while others may not be. With the latter, be tolerant of errors. Second, when introducing students to a new language, such as in an exploratory course, show

Author Charlene Polio (in front of monitor) presents on the topic of language difficulty at the Center for Language Teaching Advancement at Michigan State University.

them what is easy about a language. For Chinese, do an activity that will reveal that Chinese has no cases, no subject-verb agreement, and no plural markers. In Spanish, take advantage of the large number of cognates.

More importantly, do not assume that you should have different expectations or use different methods for teaching certain languages. ACTFL states the following on their website:

> American students learning Arabic, Chinese, Hindi, Japanese, Korean, Russian, Swahili, or Urdu face different language learning challenges: unfamiliar sounds, different writing systems, and new grammars. These linguistic features, which oftentimes cannot be linked to anything the language learners know in their native language, generally extend the language acquisition process. *However, these challenges vary according to the mode of communication and should not change the focus on teaching for performance.* With every language, some elements will be easier than others to learn. For example, when learning languages whose writing systems are unfamiliar to them, learners face the greatest challenge in interpretive reading and presentational writing, and less of a challenge with interpersonal listening and speaking. [emphasis added, source http://bit.ly/ACTFLdescriptors]

In other words, although some features may be challenging, the focus of the teaching should not change. Furthermore, while different writing systems may result in slower progress in reading and writing, speaking and listening should not be more difficult. As noted, part of our research project involves documenting progress across different languages. Any such study is challenging in terms of controlling for extraneous variables and

obtaining enough participants, but our pilot study of students studying Chinese and Spanish found that beginners in an intensive immersion program in Chinese can achieve similar levels to beginners of Spanish on an oral proficiency interview, despite having reading skills far below the Spanish learners. We will be collecting more data to try to confirm these findings, but based on what we know about language learning, these results are not surprising. Nevertheless, we still don't understand the long-term effects of not being able to easily access written language and how this may impact proficiency.

In sum, it is quite possible that given equal amounts of input and similar instruction, English speakers might take longer to reach certain levels of proficiency for the so-called more difficult languages. In addition, certain features might require more time to learn and more explicit instruction, but overall, we should not alter our teaching or our goals for our students.

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Summer Workshops a Success

For the twentieth consecutive year, CLEAR hosted workshops this summer, drawing participants from a dozen states and several other countries in our best-attended set of workshops in more than a decade. World language educators from many levels and backgrounds gathered at Michigan State University to gain hands-on experience in a variety of topics.

Guest presenter Julie Foss of Saginaw Valley State University returned to MSU to lead the first workshop, "Speaking activities for oral proficiency development." Participants enjoyed the concrete nature of the discussion and examples, and felt that they left the workshop with a wealth of ideas. Newer teachers like this participant gained assurance: "I feel more confident about what I need to expect from my students level-wise and how to build units, lessons and themes around them." Long-time teachers also felt the time was

well-spent: "The step-by-step process (and time allowed) for planning tasks was the most useful thing I've been exposed to in professional development in years!"

Our second workshop was a new format for CLEAR, just one day, and proved very popular. Also led by Julie, this workshop tackled differentiated instruction in the language classroom. Participants spoke highly of Julie's knowledge and organization, and many had big plans for this fall, like "One bit at a time… Frankly, I'm inspired to rethink a number of my classes for fall. We'll see what happens!" and "I will begin by planning my split-level course for next year! I have much to think about."

Another one-day workshop, this one on "Keeping student and teacher talk in the target language," was led by CLEAR co-director Charlene Polio.

CLEAR WORKSHOPS ARE BETTER THAN OTHER EDUCATIONAL WORKSHOPS BECAUSE THEY ARE SPECIFICALLY GEARED TO WORLD LANGUAGE TEACHERS.
(2016 workshop participant)

Participants were struck by language demonstrations that helped them "[be] able to remember what it feels like to be overwhelmed as a beginning language learner," and enjoyed "learning new techniques not just in theory but also in practice—hands on learning." Teachers left the workshop with the goal of increasing target language use in the classroom: "I am convinced it is worth the effort to speak in these target language and prep accordingly."

New CLEAR presenter Betsy Lavolette came to us from Gettysburg College to lead the workshop titled "Teaching language with technology: Basic tools and techniques." She presented not only on CLEAR's Rich Internet Applications, but on a host of other tools as well. Participants enjoyed the workshop's atmosphere: "The collaborative atmosphere was excellent. It was cool to be given time for us to show what we made and to teach

each other." They also gained self-reliance in how to incorporate technology in their classrooms, "I learned so much! I now feel more confident with technology."

Our final workshop, also led by Charlene, covered writing in the foreign language classroom. Teacher attendees appreciated the activity ideas as well as the "great mix of theory and practice." The importance of revision was stressed, as this participant mentions, "There are lots of ideas for writing activities and feedback that I plan to use. I appreciate talking about how to adapt activities for various levels. I realize that we don't do nearly enough revising." Another attendee also noted, "Revision, revision, revision will be my mantra."

THE WORKSHOP EXCEEDED MY EXPECTATIONS. I AM LEAVING WITH A LOT OF NEW TOOLS IN MY TOOLBOX.
(2016 workshop participant)

NEW FORMAT FOR 2017 SUMMER WORKSHOPS!

Based on feedback from past participants, we will offer workshops for one week in late June and then again the first week of August. The same two one-day workshops will be offered both months, with a different three-day workshop each time. This enables participants to choose the longer workshop that best fits their needs and still be able to add on the handy one-day workshops either week.

CLEAR NEWS

CLEAR News is a publication of the Center for Language Education and Research and is intended to inform foreign language educators of the Center's ongoing research projects and professional development workshops, to report on current foreign language research and publications and their applicability to the classroom, and to provide a forum for educators to discuss foreign language teaching and learning topics.

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 sixteen Language Resource Centers nationwide: the ASSESSMENT AND EVALUATION LANGUAGE RESOURCE CENTER (AELRC), a consortium of Georgetown University and the Center for Applied Linguistics; 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 INTEGRATED LANGUAGE COMMUNITIES (CILC) at City University of New York; 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 CENTER FOR URBAN LANGUAGE TEACHING AND RESEARCH (CULTR) at Georgia State University; the NATIONAL AFRICAN LANGUAGE RESOURCE CENTER (NALRC) at Indiana 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), a consortium of UCLA and the UC Consortium for Language Learning and Teaching; the NATIONAL RESOURCE CENTER FOR ASIAN LANGUAGES (NRCAL) at California State University, Fullerton; and the SLAVIC AND EURASIAN LANGUAGE RESEARCH CENTER (SEELRC) at Duke University.