Linda Lane: *Statement about teaching*
February 24, 2009
American Language Program

The first English class I ever taught was a group of low-intermediate students in the ALP’s intensive program. Fresh from graduate school in linguistics, I had no language teaching experience nor any background in pedagogy or second language acquisition. My level leader (who taught half of the class’ 16 hours per week) met with me the Friday before my first class and suggested that I teach the modal verbs of ability, *can* and *can’t*. There was no textbook, but I was not concerned, since I knew what modal verbs were. I first decided that if teaching one modal was good, teaching all the modals would be even better. I then set about preparing an elegant, three dimensional model of the semantic fields of English modals, with each modal arrayed along one of the intersecting axes. In class, I explained my analysis, gradually reproducing the three-dimensional model on the blackboard. At the end of class, I asked if there were any questions. No one said anything, and I felt gratified that everyone had understood.

My level leader observed that class, and we met afterwards. Looking back on our meeting, I still marvel at her kindness and tact. She did not say, as she could have, that not one student had understood my analysis and that not one student had spoken a word. Rather, she suggested that teaching only *can* and *can’t* would have allowed the students to actually use English and then showed me the ALP’s picture files, which included pictures of people engaged in a variety of activities. I saw immediately how students could use those pictures to practice *can* and *can’t*; it also made sense to me that in a language class, the students should use the language.

That class and that meeting began a long and continuing learning journey for me. My teachers have been my students, my colleagues, and faceless researchers who study how second languages are learned. Sometimes they teach me different facets of the same lesson.

One teaching issue that I became immediately aware of is the need for language students to be actively engaged in classroom activities. At the ALP, most teachers plan several classes around a central topic which is developed through materials from a variety of media (readings, listenings, videos). The vocabulary and language structures come from those materials, and all language skills are practiced in the context of the topic. Because the topic continues over several classes, there is a recycling and reinforcement of the targeted vocabulary and language features, which promotes learning and retention. Student interactions also lead to involvement with English. The students in an ALP class typically come from several countries, and the exchange of different cultural perspectives on an issue is often as interesting to students as the issue itself. This interest leads to more participation, which leads to more practice, which leads to greater learning. The series of classes culminates in a writing assignment on the topic; after spending several classes exploring the topic through a variety of materials and discussions and after working with vocabulary and language features relevant to the topic, students have something to say and the tools to say it.

A second issue that was not apparent to me after that first class was the role of error correction in developing accuracy (no errors, of course, could have occurred in my first class because no students spoke). High levels of accuracy, as well as high levels of fluency, are
crucial goals for most ALP students, who plan either to attend a U.S. university or to use English in a professional capacity. Research suggests that fluency will not develop without substantial use of the language for real communication; on the other hand, spontaneous speech, the most natural form of real communication, is likely to be the least accurate. In the classroom, the two goals may seem to be at odds: when the teacher directs students’ attention to their errors, there will be some interruption of activities that promote fluency. I have been lucky to observe a range of techniques that my colleagues at the ALP use for error correction and have learned much from them. Research on second language acquisition also provides insights. Some features of language are learned in stages that apparently cannot be skipped. My students, for example, will first learn to pronounce the English TH sounds when they occur at the beginning of a word (think or then), next in the middle of a word (author, other), and finally at the end of a word (bath, breathe). With beginning students, I draw attention to mispronunciations of TH at the beginnings of words (think) and am less concerned with mispronunciations in other positions.

With more advanced students, the focus shifts. Not all features of language, however, proceed in stages, “fixing themselves” as learning progresses. The omission of the 3rd singular present -s ending (he plays), for example, is an extremely common error among ESL students at all levels and may only improve through (relentless) on-the-spot error correction. More generally, research also suggests that students should be familiar with the teacher’s approach to error correction and that error correction should be limited to structures that can be corrected quickly and whose rules are well-understood by the student.

These are two facets of teaching that I have learned since that first class. But there is much more. I’ve learned about the world from students who come from all of its corners and share their views over the course of a semester. They frequently reveal to me stereotypes I was not aware I had and possibilities I had never considered. I also learn as I research materials for new lessons: about global population trends; about parallels and contrasts between Gilded Age capitalists and those of today; about why the mental rocket ship of humans took off while that of the other great apes remains on the launching pad. And finally, each day reveals more to me about the magnificence and mysteries of human language, the subject that brought me into graduate school. There is no complete grammar of any living language. My students remind me of this when they ferret out some usage in English I had never thought about and ask, “Why does English do X in this context but Y in another?” I sometimes have to say, “I don’t know, I’ll look it up.” I search every available reference, including an old 7-volume English grammar of remarkable detail; I ask my colleagues. And it is no longer a surprise when I cannot find a clear answer, only the shared intuitions of native speakers that “this is the way it is in English.” These quests and discoveries, the product of the current that flows between teaching and learning, motivate and invigorate me. They make teaching an adventure, with the risks and rewards of any good adventure.

I still have days when my lessons fall flat, when I wonder whether my efforts have an impact on student accuracy. My teaching beliefs and practices continue to change as I continue to learn from students, colleagues and other language professionals. Although I know that I am a better teacher than I was on the day when I taught the entire modal system to an uncomprehending first class, observed by an astonished but kind level leader, I know that the day will never come when I say I have nothing left to learn, no improvements left to make.
Statement of Teaching Philosophy

As a teacher of German language and culture, my goal is to help students understand that "learning German" means accomplishing tasks and goals using language: negotiating, questioning, playing, collecting and interpreting information. Writing is a tool for expressing meaningful ideas and reading a means of getting information, increasing knowledge, questioning, interpreting, and growing. I want my students to learn strategies and reasons for communicating in interpretational, interactive, and presentational modes.

In order to achieve these goals, my primary tasks are

- To apply methods that enable each student to use German from his/her entry point toward acceptable and attainable goals,
- To recognize student strengths in order to build confidence, and
- To assess each student's German language capability in a clear, fair, ongoing process.

Since there are as many ways of learning as there are students, I try to continue to review and update traditional methods, for example, most recently by:

- Supplementing multiple-stage essay assignments with peer-writing conferences and holistic grading,
- Encouraging mini-presentations in small groups that allow students to rehearse, give each other feedback and increase overall production and comprehension,
- Introducing more reading and reading strategies from elementary German onwards,
- Developing pedagogically sound uses of new technology supporting primary skills and encouraging inquiry and lifelong learning (Wimba, Websearch, Courseworks),
- Using portfolio evaluations beginning at the intermediate level, and
- Individualizing language support to advanced students so that "bridge courses" really lead to successful communicators.

Whether beginners are trying to master the basics of the German gender system and build logical responses to simple personal questions, or intermediate students are discovering links between fairytales, Romanticism, and the Greens, or potential majors in "Berlin: Past and Present" are honing structures while interpreting the city's subway system or multicultural politics or poetry, my role is informed by the same basic principles:

- I teach German language and culture to my students in German.
- My classroom aims to be student-oriented.
- My approach to teaching and language acquisition is a functional one in which students use German to learn German.
- Becoming functional in a foreign language requires years of practice, and I set expectations accordingly.
- Assessment using rubrics, models, and feedback needs to be applied at all levels to help students to progress and to keep track of my teaching effectiveness.
- It's essential to remain flexible and open to new developments and to build on time-proven principles of teaching.

Richard Alan Korb, January 2008
Statement of My Teaching Philosophy

My teaching philosophy has evolved from my experience as both a second language student and teacher. When creating curricula, reminding myself of what it is like to learn a second language is uppermost in my mind. I remember how intimidating it can be to communicate in class, how challenging it can be to use newly learned vocabulary and grammar accurately, and how important I feel it is to be corrected. As a result, creating a comfortable and non-threatening learning environment, teaching appropriate usage of vocabulary and grammar, and providing consistent error correction are the foundation of my teaching beliefs.

The more comfortable and involved students feel, the more likely they are to take risks and become active participants in class activities. Treating students with respect by truly listening to them and by tapping into their prior knowledge can give them the self-confidence they need to speak up. Our students come to us with lots of information and life experience, and bringing this to the foreground can give them confidence to communicate about this knowledge in English. This empowers students and hopefully establishes trust in the classroom. By providing a variety of classroom activities and presenting material through different kinds of media the amount of student participation will increase as various learner styles are being targeted.

When creating a thematic unit, it is necessary to consider not only activity variety but also the linguistic tools that are required to communicate about this topic. A successful lesson has a natural flow of activities that introduce and recycle new lexical items and structures in all skill areas, so that students feel confident about the words and forms they need to discuss a topic. Furthermore, students need opportunities to go beyond the form of the language and delve into appropriate usage. Variety is not just for variety’s sake, but has been proven to help students learn more than just lists of words but true control of the language. For example, when teaching new verbs, it is helpful to provide students with the appropriate prepositions that follow certain verbs or point out if a verb is transitive so that students know this verb always needs to be followed by a noun phrase. When teaching new nouns, it is useful to generate a list of common adjectives that precede these nouns. While native speakers understand the phrase “a high person or a high building” this is not native speaker usage, so students need to be taught that we say...
"tall person or a tall building" when referring to height. Therefore, I believe in teaching vocabulary in "chunks" rather than isolated words; providing students with these appropriate collocations will increase their ability to share their opinions with confidence.

In my opinion, fluency goes hand in hand with accuracy. Rambling on at length does not make a person proficient in a foreign language. Accuracy is just as important as fluency. Therefore, students need to be consistently given feedback in some form in order to learn to self-correct and become more accurate. Different types of activities, however, call for varied forms of error correction. In a guided classroom discussion, error correction can be immediate, but if a student is giving a presentation, it might be best to give feedback at the end so as not to interrupt the fluency of the activity.

Learning to be proficient in a second language takes effort on the part of the teacher and students. Teaching is an ongoing learning process and the longer I teach, the more I realize I can learn from my students as well as my colleagues. At this point in my career, I believe that creating a comfortable and non-threatening classroom environment, teaching appropriate usage of grammar and vocabulary, and providing consistent feedback is essential to teaching effectively.