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True Blue Family Duos

CALA: Leading Language Learning

For ten years, teens and adults have jumpstarted their understanding of new languages during the University's Center for Accelerated Language Acquisition (CALA) five-day Summer Language Institute. In 2013, people with no experience in Spanish or French who took the placement test at MTSU tested out of one to four semesters of instruction after CALA sessions. Tammie Dye (Human Resource Services) is a grandmother who went to South America after CALA. "I am at a loss for words to express how much I enjoyed the class and how pleased I am with the results," said Dye. "I am still amazed that I can understand so much Spanish! I am truly energized and can't wait to try to converse with people in Paraguay."

Dr. Shelley Thomas, associate professor in the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures and founder/director of CALA, said, "We all understand that we don't acquire a taste for coffee by looking up its qualities on the Internet, nor do we acquire the skill of riding a bike by memorizing its parts. Research on language acquisition shows we acquire our second language the way we acquired our first: through direct experience and engaging contexts like stories."

In traditional language classes, students might be asked to memorize vocabulary lists and

repeat verb charts. CALA classes use the intensive, brain-friendly language acquisition tools Total Physical Response (TPR) and Teaching Proficiency through Reading and Storytelling (TPRS).

In CALA classes there is direct experience with new vocabulary first, then personal interaction and games to process new knowledge to help it go deeper. Finally, there's a question/answer session about the stories and language. Some beginning learners are able to grasp and use new vocabulary in just five days.

"We take about 200 to 300 words that students can touch, see, and act out. We don't use any words that they don't actually experience in class, so that it goes into long-term memory. We've had people take Level 1 and come back a year later for Level 2, and they say they are able to pick right back up where they left off. We start reading a simple novel on the fifth day, and when students realize they are understanding comfortably without any aid from a dictionary, they are amazed," said Thomas.

The CALA immersion classes are the result of a Special Projects Grant Thomas was awarded in 2003. Test results for that summer were published in *Fluency through TPRS Storytelling* by Blaine Ray, inventor of TPRS. Ray's book, now in its sixth edition, is used by teachers all over the world.

Since 2003, CALA has gained international recognition, and Thomas earned an MTSU Teacher of the Year Award. She's been invited to coordinate five-day summer language classes or teacher workshops at the Tennessee Foreign Language Institute in Nashville, the



Photos from left to right:

CALA students practice stories in French.

Dr. Thomas takes CALA to China.

Dr. Thomas with CALA schoolchildren in India



CALA Summer Language Institute 2013

University School of Nashville, O'More College of Design, the Tennessee Center for Child Welfare, and the Isha Vidya School in Coimabtoe, India. She has given keynotes and presented workshops at international, national, and regional conferences. At MTSU, she has been providing 12 hours of training for Chinese teachers from the Central South University of Forestry and Technology, hosted by MTSU's Confucius Institute.

In addition to the important role CALA plays at MTSU, it has volunteer teachers, materials, and workshops for the Murfreesboro Hispanic Family Center.

Laura Clippard, Honors College undergraduate fellowship coordinator, recommends CALA for Fulbright Scholars who are required to teach English abroad. An example is Adam Emerson, who said, "I acquired not only an extensive French vocabulary but also an understanding of the ways in which we acquire language, best practices for ensuring my students' comprehension of important concepts, and effective classroom management techniques."

Brian Roberts and **Ahmad Jeddeeni** teach the Spanish and Arabic CALA classes, respectively. Roberts graduated with majors in psychology, philosophy, and Spanish. After living and traveling in Spain and France, he earned a Master of Arts in Teaching. Because he learned TPR and TPRS during his internship, he became a language specialist for the Tennessee Center for Child Welfare, teaching Spanish to employees. He continues

to teach for CALA each summer because he finds it so rewarding. Jeddeeni, a native of Syria, earned a degree in English literature in 2006 from the University of Damascus. He came to MTSU as a graduate student on a Fulbright assistantship in 2009 and taught Arabic for two semesters. He discovered TPR and TPRS in Dr. Thomas's graduate methodology class. He has taught Arabic for CALA and as a graduate assistant in the Foreign Languages and Literatures Department. CALA offers training in TPR/TPRS in the afternoons following language classes. Rutherford County Schools, Murfreesboro City Schools, and the Tennessee Foreign Language Institute have sent teachers to the institute.

Because of CALA's success, Thomas was invited to bring the program to the Honors College, and Dr. Mark Byrnes, dean of the College of Liberal Arts, invited her to give a presentation and demonstration to the college's advisory board this spring.

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Doug Young, board chair, was so impressed that he asked, "How can we make MTSU number one in this?" Thomas replied that her Special Projects grant made CALA possible. The program has grown from one TPR/TPRS-trained teacher delivering one week of Spanish class to five weeks offering up to five languages, which Thomas coordinates voluntarily. "The demand for year-round classes requires serious investors who can provide a year-round salary for a full-time assistant coordinator and a full-time teacher. This will make us number one in the nation," she said.

Find details at acceleratedacquisition.com or email Dr. Thomas at shthomas@mtsu.edu. ■

Dr. Thomas with CALA schoolchildren in India

