

# CALA Summer Language Institute: A Brain-Based Approach to Teaching Languages

by Brian Roberts and Shelley Thomas

The Center for Accelerated Language Acquisition (CALA), in partnership with the University Honors College, hosted its 12th annual Summer Language Institute (SLI) at the Martin Honors Building from late May through early August.

CALA's approach to language learning puts the focus where brain research says the most long-term memory takes place: the five senses. The brain is a natural pattern seeker, and it internalizes the patterns of a new language by using them—not talking about them.



Jie (Helen) Zhou, right, CALA Chinese instructor, poses with her class after a fun session of storytelling in Chinese

The biggest session ever, this year's SLI provided teacher training, English as Second Language (ESL) workshops, and 14 courses in six different languages: Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Latin, and Spanish.

Shelley Thomas, an Honors faculty member, founded CALA in 2003 to offer more effective language instruction. Thomas had completed a three-year certification in brain-based learning and used her knowledge to create a learning experience that results in fast, unconscious, long-term acquisition of languages.

One CALA Spanish participant, a professor of education, said, "[The methods were] interesting and motivated us to use language rather than just 'study' it, using a 'hands on' not just 'minds on' approach—more in tune with the way language acquisition occurs."

Early CALA instruction includes experiences that are physical, fun, relevant, repetitive, and social. Activities like games, songs, sports, and storytelling are especially effective in language learning.

A CALA participant who studied French said, "I thought the methods were extremely effective and

Shelley Thomas and Brian Roberts, director and assistant director of the Center for Accelerated Language Acquisition (CALA), respectively, thank J. Paul Vaughan, director of the Jennings and Rebecca Jones Foundation, for a generous grant that made it possible for more than 50 high-achieving students and teachers from Rutherford County to attend CALA language and workshop classes.



Faculty and Staff

engaging. There was no pressure to perform, but the ability to do so came very naturally and easily."

The CALA curriculum is designed toward acquisition by working four basic skills—listening, speaking, writing, and reading—of the most frequently occurring words used in daily interaction.

A high school English teacher and CALA Arabic language student said, "The methods were very effective. They were fun, which kept anxiety low. Just enough of each language modality—speaking, listening, reading, writing."

In Phase I of the program, Total Physical Response (TPR), learners have physical experiences with a core set of high-frequency vocabulary words and about a dozen grammatical structures. The experience of walking, drawing, playing games, and touching the vocabulary contributes to moving learning into long-term memory.

In Phase II, Teaching Proficiency through Reading and Storytelling (TPRS), basic vocabulary words and grammatical structures are woven into stories that are performed and processed through a variety of activities designed to promote listening, speaking, reading, and writing fluency.

In Phase III, students begin to read a simple novel in the new language. This phase introduces a few more

words and grammatical structures in context, which leads to talking and writing in the new language.

CALA provides professional development to local, regional, national, and international teachers. To support local educators, CALA offers a free methodology workshop. Teachers in the workshop can learn about brain research and comprehensible input tools like TPR and TPRS and explore and practice ways

to better promote brain-based learning in the classroom. CALA has joined MTSU's Confucius Institute to provide similar methodology training to more than 30 ESL teachers from China.

Almost 40 Rutherford County high school teachers and students took advantage of CALA this year. As a part of its mission to support high-achieving students and promote positive outcomes for local schools, the Jennings and Rebecca Jones

Foundation sponsored their attendance.

Through the generosity of various University departments and private donors, CALA will continue to encourage and improve language learning in Tennessee schools.

To learn more about CALA and see class offerings, please visit the website: [www.mtsu.edu/cala](http://www.mtsu.edu/cala).

This workshop has helped me **shape my idea of teaching** and how to engage students.