



## Utilizing Diverse Instructional Approaches; Designing Activities that Resonate with ELLs

ELLs need to engage with topics and situations in the classroom that equip them with the social, professional and civic cultural skills to address real-life interactions for their present realities, as well as their future realities (American, 2009, Garrett, 2005; Perez & Morrison, 2016). Teachers face the challenge of balancing conventional textbooks and curriculum, which are fixed and often limited to customary topics, not fully addressing the dynamic and changing realities of ELLs. This article describes how a post-methods teaching approach (Kumaravadivelu, 1994; Masouleh, 2012), which represents a self-designed flexible and pragmatic alternative to strict adherence to a singular method, can be tailored to ELLs' needs and commonly-encountered relevant contexts to connect learning to real-life experiences. The discussion highlights the value of a multi-method approach, falling under the umbrella of Situated Learning, to provide real-life scenarios within which students can complete tasks, engage in projects, and/or study and learn from relevant content-based material. In doing so, ELLs' language proficiency, as well as their world-readiness, are effectively developed.

The instructional focus for English language learners (ELLs) has been evolving to address the 21st century needs of students. In addition to language proficiency, educators and schools strive to prepare students with the English language skills needed for their specific contexts, practical needs and personal goals through socio-cultural competency, digital literacy, and civic awareness. ELLs' world readiness is being achieved through a variety of curricular approaches (ACTFL, 2014) and innovative classroom teaching techniques, which emphasize meaningful classroom communication connected not only to real world contexts, but also to those particularly relevant to the learners' local context. By doing so, learners are engaged in utilizing English in the classroom for real life situations, across a variety of contexts which they can relate to, in order to achieve both current and future personal, social, and/or professional objectives. In the process, learners obtain information and also diverse perspectives while acquiring the language to function in social, academic, and career-related situations, regardless of their proficiency level.

Within the existing ELL context in California, aspects such as the changing national socio-political climate lead ELLs to engage with topics and situations in the classroom that equip them with the social, professional, and civic cultural skills to address real-life interactions for their present realities, as well as their future realities. This article describes how a post-methods teaching approach (Kumaravadivelu, 1994; Masouleh, 2012), which represents a self-designed flexible and pragmatic alternative to strict adherence to a singular method, can be tailored to the needs and relevant contexts in which ELLs encounter to connect learning to real-life experiences. The post-methods framework is often advocated based on the diversity of instructional approaches that develop proficiency. The article highlights the value of this multi-method approach as it provides real-life scenarios within which students can complete tasks, engage in projects, and/or to study and learn from relevant content-based material.

Task-based Instruction (TBI), Project-based Instruction (PBI), Content-based Instruction (CBI), and Scenario-based Instruction (SBI) can be utilized strategically in the classroom to address curriculum content, better familiarize learners with commonly encountered communication, and/or inform them of local issues relevant to their communities. The instructional approaches mentioned possess some overlapping characteristics, along with inherent distinct features, thus sometimes creating confusion. Teachers may become frustrated trying to put a label on a particular teaching practice they are employing or even resist using certain approaches due to the vagueness of their interpretation. Additionally, teachers may view one as inherently separate from another and utilize them in isolation in the classroom. However, learning can be made more relevant by utilizing them in conjunction. In line with situated learning principles, SBI is not a synonym for situated learning (Di Pietro, 1987), rather, it is viewed as an umbrella

under which TBI, PBI and CBI activities can be situated, better connecting classroom activities to realistic contexts or relevant topics that ELLs encounter outside the classroom.

To eliminate possible confusion and to better support ELL teachers in understanding how a world-readiness approach through multi-method instruction can be utilized to implement even a lockstep curriculum, the article explains similarities and differences for the before-mentioned instructional approaches and demonstrates how each approach can be utilized in conjunction to support the needs of ELLs belonging to K-12, adult education, community college, university, and/or individualized education programs. The article approaches the discussion through the frame of *situated learning* (Lave & Wenger, 1991), implying that cognition is optimal when learning is situated within a context that is relevant and personally meaningful to the learner. The situated learning approach encourages learners to contextually utilize linguistic knowledge for the development of critical thinking and problem-solving skills within a provided scenario (i.e., SBI). TBI, PBI, and CBI activities can then be carried out by students under the umbrella term of situated learning to foster meaningful, context-based learning to build proficiency and assist learners to meet real-life challenges.

### Instructional Approaches

As shown in Table 1, the four instructional approaches share many characteristics. If teachers learn about each instructional approach independently, they may have difficulty labeling their instructional practices, depending on their experience, as they may not easily identify the unique features of each. The table shows that the main difference among the instructional approaches is the learner's role and the length of instruction for the activity. However, using these instructional approaches to design relevant and meaningful world-readiness activities across a variety of proficiency levels may appear challenging, depending on teachers' experience and place of work.

**Table 1**  
**Differences and Similarities of TBI, PBI, SBI & CBI Activity Design & Delivery**

<i>Characteristic</i>	<i>TBI</i>	<i>PBI</i>	<i>CBI</i>	<i>SBI</i>
<i>Role of Learner</i>	Real-life Role	Real-life Role	Student as Learner/ Real-life Role	Real-life Role
<i>Length of Instruction</i>	Usually One Lesson Period	Usually Extended Over Chapter/Unit	Varies Depending on Objectives	Minimum Several Hours/Immersion Activity
<i>Topic/Content</i>	Real-world Context Focus	Real-world Content Focus	Real-world Context Focus	Real-world Content Focus
<i>Cognition</i>	HOTs*	HOTs	HOTs	HOTs
<i>Outcome</i>	Multiple	Multiple	Single/Multiple	Multiple
<i>Goal</i>	Meaningful TL** Communication	Meaningful TL Communication Content Acquisition	Meaningful TL Content Acquisition	Meaningful TL Communication
<i>Context</i>	Group Interaction in One Class	Group Interaction in One Class or Across Classes	Group Interaction in One Class or Across Classes	Group Interaction in One Class or Across Classes

**Note:** \*HOTs - Higher Order Thinking, \*\* TL - Target Language

Teachers, even with an awareness of TBI, SBI, PBI, and CBI, often struggle to conceptualize how these instructional approaches intersect with one another, or not. Due to the possible lack of clarity among approaches, when teachers receive in-service training at conferences, regional events, and within their schools and institutions, they often understand they are being presented with *new* practices that can, will, or should replace the old ones. Yet, in-service teacher training is not only about equipping teachers with innovative practices to replace existing ones, but also serves to refresh teachers' awareness of their classroom practice and to support teachers in addressing institutional goals by revisiting known instructional approaches utilized in a different manner.

In doing so, it is beneficial to encourage teachers to situate language practice within a meaningful context so students can relate to the content in a meaningful way. Using a situated learning approach encourages learners to develop language proficiency, socio-cultural competency, digital literacy, and civic awareness at the same time. Achieving world-readiness proficiency requires contextually meaningful use of linguistic knowledge to develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills.

The larger framework of the post-methods approach that the authors have, in part, based the discussion on encourages teachers to revisit and use various communicative and traditional approaches to meet learning objectives. Therefore, it is important to situate new knowledge and training on a post-methods approach for teachers within their existing knowledge and practices. Just like for ELLs, leaning needs to be situated within a meaningful context that is linked to the teachers' instructional contexts and experiences (Stolovitch & Keeps, 2011). However, not all teachers come to in-service professional development at the same point in their professional journey, so it can be challenging for some teachers to synthesize the content from each individual training event. At times, content on a post-methods approach can possibly be understood as a new initiative, rather than being part of a larger whole towards current ELL teaching goals.

The following sections provide a description of each approach and feature corresponding sample activities that are framed under the topic of education in California across a variety of proficiency levels and educational contexts while using SBI and Situated Learning as a basis for the design on TBI, PBI and CBI activities. The examples serve to demonstrate how a post-methods approach can be incorporated into classroom practice across various levels to bring topics that are relevant to students to develop not only their linguistic skills, but also their digital literacy, civic knowledge and/or socio-cultural awareness. It should be noted that in the examples concerning TBI, PBI, and CBI, particular types of students were considered to prove how SBI and situated learning can be used to frame such instructional approaches. The type of learners described in each activity has situated scenarios based on who the learners are or based on their future selves (i.e., they are not assuming a role). The activities serve as examples of what teachers can do to develop activities under a relevant scenario for their students.

### ***Task-Based Instruction***

Until recently, communicative competence was the gold standard in forward thinking classrooms; its benefits can be limited due to its focus on the individual speaker and not always on the interaction among speakers (Thomas, 2017). Ellis (2000) describes two distinct perspectives of TBI and language learning, a psycholinguistic perspective and a socio-cultural perspective. The former conceives the task as a means to provide learners with the kind of language structures to be used as learning opportunities (Lantoff, 1996). The later understands the task and language use opportunities as being co-constructed by the speakers based on their socio-cultural background and goals (Vygotsky, 1978). A task can be designed with particular structures in mind that will be practiced, but language learning is socially constructed through interaction as well. Therefore, learners need to consider not only the constraints on the task provided, but also learn to assess the discourse (i.e., the whole context) and intercultural communicative competence (i.e., strategic use of lexicon and structure) based on their experiences. Consequently, TBI offers students the opportunity to practice predetermined linguistics forms, and to build dialogic and socio-cultural competences in the framework of one lesson.

In a typical TBI lesson, students are prepared for the task via schemata activation, a preparation for the introduction of new material, and a practice activity, which allows students to practice the new material in pairs or groups. Then, students are presented with a task set in a real-life context (Nunan, 1996). They should be themselves or future selves during a task, rather than assuming a role.

Since the instructions are not likely to be given in the students' native language, task descriptions can be adapted to the students' level of language competence. Besides, tasks can be designed for all instructional levels. Some task

examples could be: (a) a letter to campus officials about the dietary needs and preferences of international students to inform campus menu options, or a request to serve on a school committee to develop parent-teacher night refreshments that reflect the ethnic and/or religious dietary preferences of parents ( e.g., beginner level); (b) a pamphlet for high school students on how to apply to university ( e.g., intermediate level); or (c) a blog post on cultural differences and possible cultural pitfalls for students and their host families for international students on campus ( e.g., advanced-intermediate level). TBI allows students to use their skills creatively and in meaningful situations, involving higher order thinking skills, and the final product is the result of both individual and team work.

Although the task is geared for the use of particular structures and lexical items, the dynamic nature of the interaction is co-constructed during communication and is also determined by how motivational tasks are. With this in mind, one of the challenges teachers face when implementing TBI is to ensure the designed tasks promote students’ autonomy, independence, and productive behavior. Accordingly, motivation should be a determining factor in the design and implementation of tasks (Stroud, 2013).

Table 2 provides an example of how TBI can make learning meaningful for learners as their work is situated within a relevant context. The objective here is to demonstrate how to offer meaningful ways of using topic-related vocabulary, as well as to recycle previously studied grammar. In the example here, intermediate learners are able to see how they can utilize their language skills in more complex situations, beyond their daily routines. In other words, ELLs functionally participate in the English-speaking society, but in predictable, known situations that they have the language to do so ( e.g., going shopping at a local grocery store), while TBI classroom activities enable them to use the same known vocabulary and structure in distinct contexts that develop socio-cultural and civic awareness.

**Table 2 University – Intermediate to Advanced Intermediate Level**

<p><b>Instructional Approach:</b> TBI</p> <p><b>Level:</b> Intermediate to Advanced Intermediate</p> <p><b>Theme:</b> Education</p> <p><b>Topic:</b> Applying to College</p> <p><b>Length of Instruction:</b> 1 hour/1 Instructional Period</p> <p><b>Scenario:</b> An Education Fair is to be held on a California community college campus. Each year, the event draws thousands of students and their families with a focus on preparing former ELLs for community college and beyond. At the fair, students, and often parents too, participate in educational workshops, meet community college representatives as well as state colleges and vocational school representatives, to become familiar with community resources that support funding for higher education.</p> <p>As a former ELL and recent Business graduate of a California State University (CSU), who completed two years at a community college before transferring to a CSU, you are now going on to California Polytechnic Institute to complete further studies in agriculture business. As part of the Education Fair, the committee has invited you to be part of a panel at one of the educational workshops offered at the fair to describe what it takes to apply to community college, transfer to a state college, successfully complete degree requirements, and access support services in the community and on campus.</p> <p><b>Instructions to Students:</b> In groups, using the information obtained in class, address two to three subtopics of your choice pertaining to the processes of applying to college ( e.g., application requirements, degrees available, housing options, financial aid options, academic support, etc.). Based on group findings, prepare a presentation in English for the Education Fair workshop panel, using the format and multi-media of your choice, on the issues related to the chosen topic.</p>
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### ***Project-Based Instruction***

TBI, as described, emerged from research in two main areas, cognitive and interactionist perspectives (Doughty & Long, 2003), and research has continued over the last thirty years (Thomas, 2017). Like communicative competence leading in part to TBI, TBI in part moved the field to looking at TBI distinctly as a form of extended tasks (Thomas, 2017), which lead to research in the field of language learning for PBI (Weinstein, 2006). In sum, PBI revolved around a central topic from which all activities are derived and informs the final tangible outcome. Technology, which promotes digital literacy, has increasingly played a role in PBI as a means for research and investigation (Thomas, 2017; Casa-Todd, 2017). Additionally, analytical skills are used as different text sources need to be evaluated and synthesized in producing the final product.

'Extended tasks' (i.e., PBI) engage learners with a variety of skills while addressing topics that are too elaborate to be dealt with in one class, either due to the complexity of the topic itself or due to the number of its aspects that result in multiple sub-topics to be covered (Desiatova, 2008). In such cases, PBI enables exploration of the topic by expanding the timeframe (several teaching hours or several weeks), the number of students involved (e.g., more than one class section), the audience of the final product (e.g., other class sections, the department, the school venue), and the addition of the elements of formative reflection and feedback by the students and their teacher throughout the project phases.

This in-depth work requires students to explore the topic collaboratively during a pre-determined timeframe under the guidance of the teacher. However, the students remain owners of their project and the final product. This highlights the socio-constructivist view of [extended] task interaction as dialogic and informed by the individual's background while also impacted by the psycholinguistic perspective of [extended] task interaction that enables the practice of predetermined structures and lexicon (Ellis, Skehan, Shintani, & Lambert, 2019). Many traditional practices are preserved in PBI but are restructured for a project. Teachers still design and plan the project activity and align it to standards. They still manage the activities and scaffold learning while promoting student growth and independence and coach students through the process, before assessing the final outcome (Larmer, Mergendoller & Boss, 2015).

Like TBI, PBI can also be adapted to different levels. For example, beginner elementary students can be tasked to research water conservation practices in California and develop a brochure to provide to parents. Intermediate elementary students can investigate social service programs in their communities and make a pamphlet that can be then distributed to relevant community groups. High school or university advanced intermediate students can be asked to research the economic and social ramifications of the current changes and potential future changes in US immigration policy, with the opportunity to present and dialogue with peers in a public forum. The benefit of PBI is the focus on the ability to address larger topics through research that are not suitable to one instructional session. PBI also develops student autonomy, which increases motivation and involves the integration of all language skills, as well as higher level thinking skills (Larmer, Mergendoller & Boss, 2015). However, it is important to train students on collaborative work skills beforehand to make sure every student takes an active role, not only in the project completion but most importantly during the execution of the project, which is challenging when most of the learning process depends on it.

Table 3 provides an example of how PBI can make learning meaningful for learners as their work will be distributed to the local community. It can be further empowering as the choice of the local community with which the project is serving can permit younger, more novice learners, to help more mature and senior members of the community as this sample PBI activities does. The sample PBI activity presented is understood to be integrated into instruction as a topic that supports the set curriculum. The objective here is to demonstrate how the use of determined elements from a unit (i.e., question structure, education vocabulary, etc.) can be formatted into a students' project, which takes little classroom instructional time as the majority of the work with the language and production of the tangible outcome can be done outside of class instruction time. In doing so, language use and language production are contextualized and meaningful.

**Table 3**  
**High School - Beginner Level**

**Instructional Approach:** PBI

**Level:** Beginner to Intermediate

**Theme:** Education

**Topic:** Applying to College

**Length of Instruction:** 2-4 hours

**Scenario:** A high school in an agricultural valley of California is having a Beyond High School, Pathway to Success Month with a range of events in school, and after school, to introduce students to the numerous options available to them after high school. The goal is to assist students to think about what options may be best for them and to begin to prepare them for that pathway by choosing the appropriate classes and academic interests now as new high school students. As part of this, students are asked to compile a brochure, video ad, or another product outcome of their choice that would be provided to individuals attending English language classes at the Adult Education Center in the area as a resource for them to pursue vocational or academic training in the future. The final product will be compiled in English (or a bilingual final product could be assigned).

**Instructions to Students:** Identify someone who has graduated from university, community college, or a vocational college to interview. It does not have to be a family member or relative. It can be someone in the community, religious group, etc. It cannot be someone who works at the school. First, in class as a group, create a minimum of 10 questions to ask (why they choose this, how it prepared them for the workforces, etc.). Next, individually conduct the interviews based on the aspects selected for the interview and take notes. Write a short summary and/or a bullet point outline to present to your group. Research different aspects of the identified job ( e.g., pay, benefits, schedule, etc.). Finally, synthesize each group member's content into the final product on pathways to vocational and academic training for adults, with the benefits and drawbacks of each profession based on a personal assessment. Prepare the material content for the Adult Education Center for ELLs in the community using the format of your choice (brochure, video ad or any another format) and multi-media of your choice.

### ***Content-based Instruction***

CBI emerged about 25-35 years ago (Stryker & Leaver, 1997), but earlier applications of the same concepts were visible in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and second language immersion programs, foreign language magnet schools, and English for Academic Purposes (EAP) at universities (Stoller & Grabe, 1997). Thus, the instructional approach has been part of ELT and is one that permits a focus on particular structures and lexicon, while allowing learners to benefit from the discursive negotiation of meaning through interaction. Due to the nature of the learners' use of digital media for independent and in-class guided research, CBI allows learners to connect with meaningful topics and people, as part of building digital literacy and leadership (Casa-Todd, 2017). For example, if students work on an assigned topic, they would likely utilize online resources to learn about the topic. Additionally, students will develop leadership and autonomy as they assign different roles to each other as part of the group work.

CBI focuses on teaching specific content important to the topic at hand and not solely on a linguistic feature. CBI lessons can be communicative, student-based lessons, and are not limited to mini-lectures matched with a comprehension check. The content knowledge learned can also be used to produce a tangible outcome. However, the question of how CBI is different from PBI can be raised if students are researching a topic to acquire new information

and producing a tangible outcome. In one sense, CBI's focus on the study of new topics as part of the curriculum, opposed to self-selected topics by students, can distinguish it from PBI. For example, CBI could be used to teach beginning students about US regional cuisines, to discuss the historic background of a movie on Martin Luther King that intermediate students will watch, and to investigate the social and political background of the longstanding debate in the US over gun control for advanced-intermediate learners. To elaborate, advanced-intermediate students can research the history of US born individuals involved in terrorist activities and the social, political, and economic significance for the US. In the context of a lesson or over several lessons, CBI prepares students to engage critically with the content by means of English, rather than by means of language features, as the primary focus. Such integration of language and content represent a challenge for teachers, as a lack of vocabulary may lead to insufficient comprehension of the content knowledge (March, Hau, & Kong, 2000). Consequently, teachers need to invest sufficient time to design and plan effective lessons that include adequate input exposure for students, along with vocabulary learning, to fill the gap between vocabulary and content knowledge comprehension.

Table 4 provides an example of how CBI can make learning meaningful, in particular if it is situated within a specific professional field of study. The objectives here is, on the one hand, to demonstrate how the use of domain specific and current socio-economic and political issues can provide learners with more in depth understanding of the context in which they live and/or work, as well as language specific practice. On the other hand, it aims to show how content information, beyond culture and historical events, can be incorporated into the curriculum through CBI with an application in a meaningful situation. Again, language use and language production are contextualized and meaningful for students.

**Table 4**  
**University/Adult Education – Intermediate to Advanced Intermediate**

<p><b>Instructional Approach:</b> CBI</p> <p><b>Level:</b> Intermediate to Advanced Intermediate</p> <p><b>Theme:</b> Education</p> <p><b>Topic:</b> Gaining Job Experience</p> <p><b>Length of Instruction:</b> Several hours/Instructional Periods and Student Independent Research</p> <p><b>Scenario:</b> The notion of a global society is no longer in debate. International commerce is a given in today's business world at many levels. US companies rely on exporters' and importers' work to organize air and ocean freight. Companies dealing with Asia, Europe and the Middle East are impacted by domestic and international trade regulations.</p> <p>As an international student in an Intensive English Program at a private university in Southern California, you have a non-paid internship/volunteer opportunity through a local organization to prepare for a planned master's degree in International Business, with a focus on trade and logistics management. To provide a foundation, interns/volunteers conduct research on current trade policy and any potential changes to policy, with an analysis of the economic impact on US sectors.</p> <p><b>Instructions to Students:</b> As a culmination of the unit topic on international trade, research a region that the US trades with ( e.g., Asia, Europe or the Middle East) and analyze how current or changing trade regulations will affect the US market and economy. Make predictions on how a change in policy or a lack of change will influence the domestic and international market short and long term. The interns/volunteers will give a presentation to the program advisors to demonstrate their foundational knowledge of the current and changing trade policy. This presentation will serve as the qualifying event for intern/volunteer position selection.</p>
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### ***Scenario-based Instruction***

Placing the students physically in situations that contain not only the use of English, but also highlighting the cultural components to employ all their linguistic, social and cultural knowledge is what Di Pietro (1987) addressed as strategic interaction, a space where learners engage through scenarios with language. This teaching approach, which aligns with Situated Learning theory, is SBI (Di Pietro, 1987; Lave & Wenger, 1991). SBI overlaps with TBI in that students perform in real-life situations, solving problems while using higher order thinking skills and attending to the larger discourse features that are negotiated during interaction. However, SBI expands on TBI's content by providing a more mentally, potentially, and emotionally elaborate context, placing a student in the physically authentic surroundings, fully involving the students in the situation. Unlike TBI, SBI is more flexible in terms of what a learner needs to accomplish as a final outcome; a learner needs to make a choice and select an option that is perceived as optimal, ultimately answering the question of what the best course of action under the described circumstances might be. In addition, the interactions required expand on what students would typically encounter in conventional classroom settings.

Learning can be more contextualized and meaningful for learners if we expand the use of SBI and incorporate a real-life scenario when utilizing TBI, PBI and CBI.

### **Conclusion**

Teachers often employ a variety of instructional approaches in their classroom teaching. Novice and veteran teachers do what makes sense to them based on their students' needs and the institutional requirements and constraints. Novice and veteran teachers may have distinct experiences and rationale for what they do, but all teachers have a rationale for what they do in class and therefore, it is a legitimate approach to instruction. With this understanding this, the authors have revisited established instructional approaches (e.g., TBI, PBI, CBI) under situated learning (i.e., SBI) to assist California teachers and CATESOL members to better promote the development of ELLs' socio-cultural competency, digital literacy, and civic awareness, in addition to their language proficiency.

A variety of instructional approaches possess similar characteristics and can often be misunderstood by teachers. This perception is based on the authors' experience as teacher trainers and is supported by the available literature (Richards, 1997). Therefore, the purpose of this article has been to identify the similarities and differences among various approaches and to demonstrate how each one can be utilized individually and in conjunction with one another under a post-methods approach to make activities more relevant to learners. The rationale for the discussion is that the ELL classroom needs to reflect the current realities and socio-cultural interactions that students engage in within their communities. ELLs need to be prepared for the current realities they face and will face. Teachers need not only the pedagogical skills, but also an understanding of the socio-cultural realities of individual students to effectively design lessons and interact with students. A post-methods approach using a situated learning approach along with communicative approaches (i.e., TBI, PBI, CBI) provides the optimal conditions to foster meaningful communication, which develops not only learners' language proficiency, but also promotes their socio-cultural and civic awareness.

In addition, ELL educators in California teach across a broad range of demographics and contexts. Teachers have students in dense urban areas, extended suburban developments, and expansive rural agricultural regions. In these diverse contexts, educators can better meet the needs of their diverse ELLs by situating instructional activities within scenarios that are relevant to their specific realities to make learning more motivating, engaging, and meaningful. When learning is meaningful, the language learned can then be applied to the students' lives outside the classroom.

### **Authors**

*Kara Mac Donald is an Associate Professor at the Defense Language Institute. Her background consists of over twenty years in language teaching and teacher training across elementary, secondary, and higher education in the US and overseas. She earned a Master of Art in Applied Linguistics, TESOL and a Doctorate in Applied Linguistics.*

Tatiana McCaw holds an EdD in Instructional Leadership and currently oversees a faculty development program. Her research interests include neurolinguistics, learning strategies, critical thinking, and technology integration in foreign language teaching.

Annette Scheibner received her undergraduate education in Germany and her MA in Foreign Language Teaching from the Monterey Institute of International Studies. She has worked as a language teacher, testing specialist and faculty development specialist at Fachhochschule Flensburg, Chicago City Colleges, Cabrillo College, Monterey Peninsula College, and the Defense Language Institute.

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