

# The Long-Term Impact of a Summer Institute Course on Styles and Strategies-Based Instruction<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

Over the course of a lifetime, language educators are bound to take numerous summer courses intended to improve the quality of their professional work. How often is research conducted on the impact that these courses have on the course participants' professional efforts over the ensuing years? This article reports on a study undertaken in order to explore the possible effects of such a course on the participants' careers going forward. The results of the study are deemed of particular relevance to those who offer such summer courses, as well as to those who are shopping around for courses which may have the greatest payoff to them in their professional development. While the study focuses just on one type of summer course, namely one that deals with learning style preferences and strategies of language learners, the aim is to have readers consider its relevance to their own areas of interest and expertise.

Having students report their learning strategies was a topic of research in the 1960s and 1970s outside the field of language learning (see McCombs, 2017). Its application to the learning of a target language (TL)<sup>2</sup> originated with Rubin (1975) and constituted revolutionary thinking at the time since the focus had often been on teachers and teaching. The first cohesive method for teaching learner strategies began in 1986 with the Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA) (see Chamot & O'Malley, 1994). The provision of strategy instruction (SI) as part of the language teaching curriculum became increasingly popular with language educators over time (see Nyikos, 1991; Oxford, 1990). Oxford (2011a) provided a helpful timeline of early developments in the field.

As of 1996, an SI course was initiated at the University of Minnesota's Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition (CARLA) (see Cohen & Weaver, 1998; Cohen, Weaver, & Li, 1996).<sup>3</sup> Its focus was exclusively on language learner strategies initially, but with the participation of Rebecca Oxford as an instructor in the early 2000s, the course added the learning style preference dimension, given her expertise in this field, and hence was referred to as a course in Styles- and Strategies-Based Instruction (SSBI).

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<sup>1</sup> We gratefully acknowledge the timely and insightful feedback received from Martha Nyikos and Rebecca Oxford. I would also like to acknowledge Karin Larson for alerting me to the availability of research grants for retirees, since it was her suggestion which led to the funding of this study.

<sup>2</sup> This paper is using the term *target language* to incorporate both second language and foreign language learning and use, consequently finessing the issue of the extent to which the learning and use of the language is entirely within a context where it is spoken in contrast to the situation where learners have little or no exposure to the language through the context.

<sup>3</sup> The SI teachers' guide developed at CARLA (see Instrumentation, below) drew on the work of Chamot with CALLA, that of Oxford (see, especially, Oxford, 2011b), as well as on empirical work reported in Cohen (1990).

It is inspiring to see that the interest in SI to enhance TL development has continued over many years. As if to underscore the reality that SI continues to be of concern to language educators, papers inspired by three meetings focusing on SI have appeared within the last several years (Chamot & Harris, 2019; Gavriilidou & Mitis, 2021; Oxford & Amerstorfer, 2018). These volumes have outlined challenges language teachers have encountered and specifically the obstacles that they have faced when engaged in efforts to enhance learners' strategy repertoire. In these various volumes, one can find descriptions of SI sessions in pre-service courses, in-service workshops, and short courses.

## **Research Design**

### **The Genesis of This Research Project**

When Cohen attended the Third Conference on Situating Strategy Use held in Osaka in October 2019, he heard two keynote addresses on SI – one by Luke Plonsky (N. Arizona U.) reporting on a meta-analysis of strategy instruction that yielded encouraging results (Plonsky, 2019) and one by Peter Gu (Victoria U., NZ) making a plea for further research in this area (Gu, 2019). These keynote sessions prompted Cohen to consider investigating the impact of the CARLA SI course that had been ongoing for many years at the University of Minnesota. While still at the conference, he emailed Martha Nyikos (who was the instructor of that summer institute course for many years) and found out from her by return email that the course had been discontinued in 2017. This news prompted Cohen to apply for and obtain a UMN research grant for retirees to investigate the long-term impact of the CARLA SSBI course on the subsequent careers of the participants. The grant stipulated recruitment of undergraduates as research assistants, resulting in the hiring of Anderson, Binu, and Tallapragada. The volunteer consultants for the project were the two colleagues who, aside from being major contributors to the growing literature on SI, had also served for many years as instructors for the SSBI course, Rebecca Oxford (Professor Emerita, University of Maryland) and Martha Nyikos (Professor of Education, Indiana University).

While the main goal of the study was to investigate the impact of the course from 1996 to 2017, an ulterior motive for taking on this effort was to determine whether there was sufficient evidence to justify reinstating the course at CARLA.

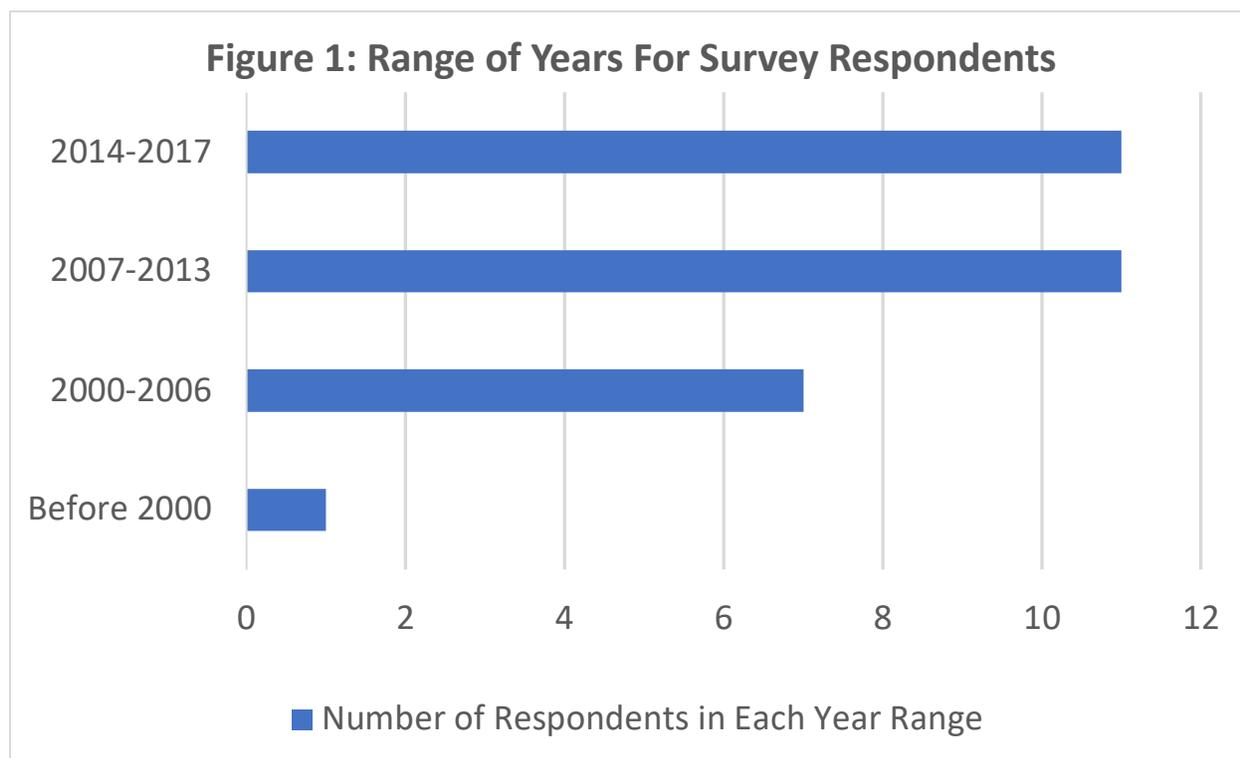
### **Research Questions**

1. How can respondents to a long-term course-impact survey be characterized with regard to
  - a. the recency of their participation in the course,
  - b. the type of language program in which they were involved,
  - c. the language proficiency level of students that they taught,
  - d. the language being taught,
  - e. the effect of recency on their survey response behavior?
  
2. In what ways did participation in the Styles- and Strategies-Based instruction (SSBI) CARLA Summer Institute course impact the participants' subsequent careers?

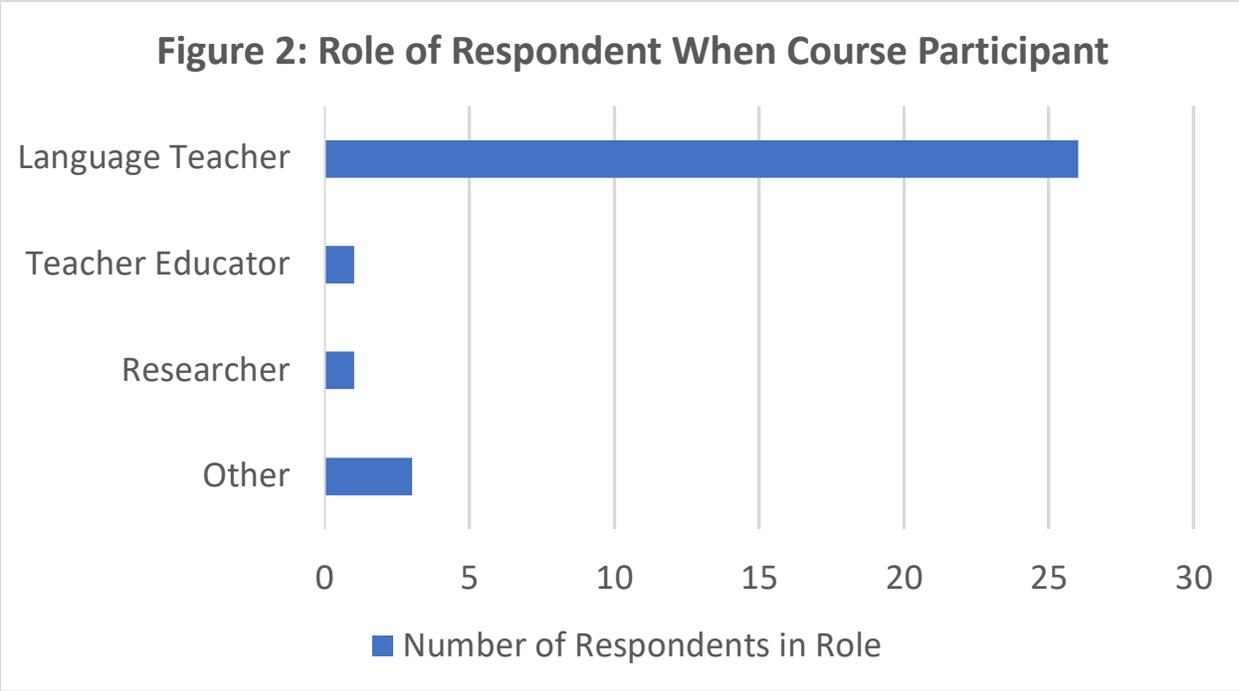
## Sample

The summer institute course on enhancing language learner strategies was initiated as CARLA's first summer course. During the 22 years that it was offered (1996 to 2017), 553 teachers, researchers, and administrators from all over the world participated in it. The course participants represented language educators from universities, public and private schools, as well as language educators working with the FBI, the CIA, and the Defense Foreign Language Institute. Those who were teachers were involved in the teaching of both more-commonly and less-commonly-taught languages. What united them was a concern for enhancing the strategies used by TL learners.

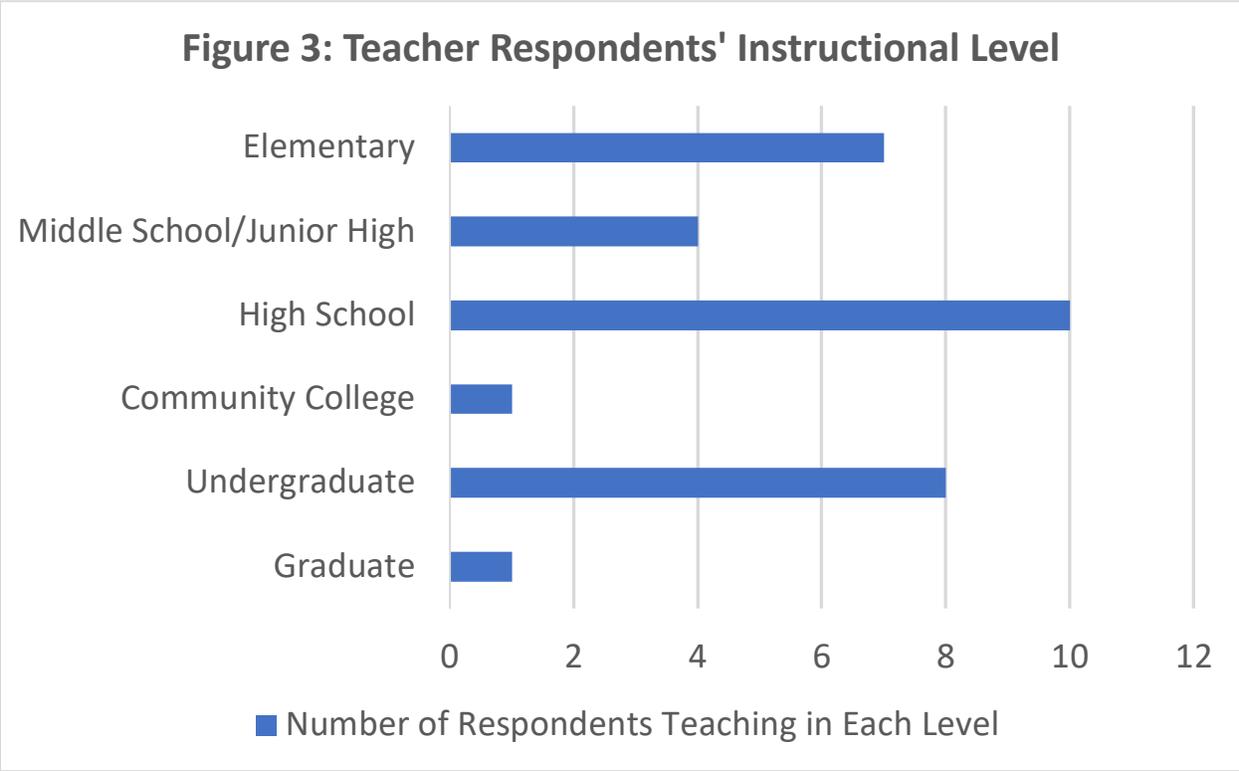
Out of the 553 people who took the course, the 242 that CARLA still had contact with were invited to participate in the study, and 29 (12%) agreed to do so, all of whom were based in the United States. Of these, five ultimately participated in a follow-up interview (out of nine who initially agreed). The participants fell into three time periods – 1996-2007, 2007-2013, and 2014-2017 (Figure 1).



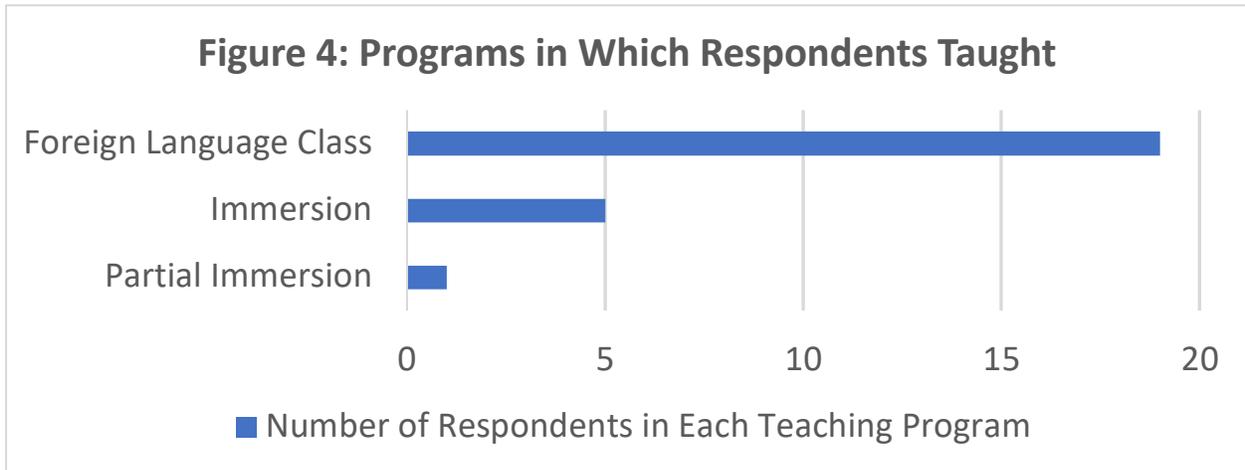
While the role most frequently indicated was that of language teacher, participants also reported being in the role of teacher educator and researcher, as well as in other roles (Figure 2). Note that several participants assumed different roles during their careers as language educators.



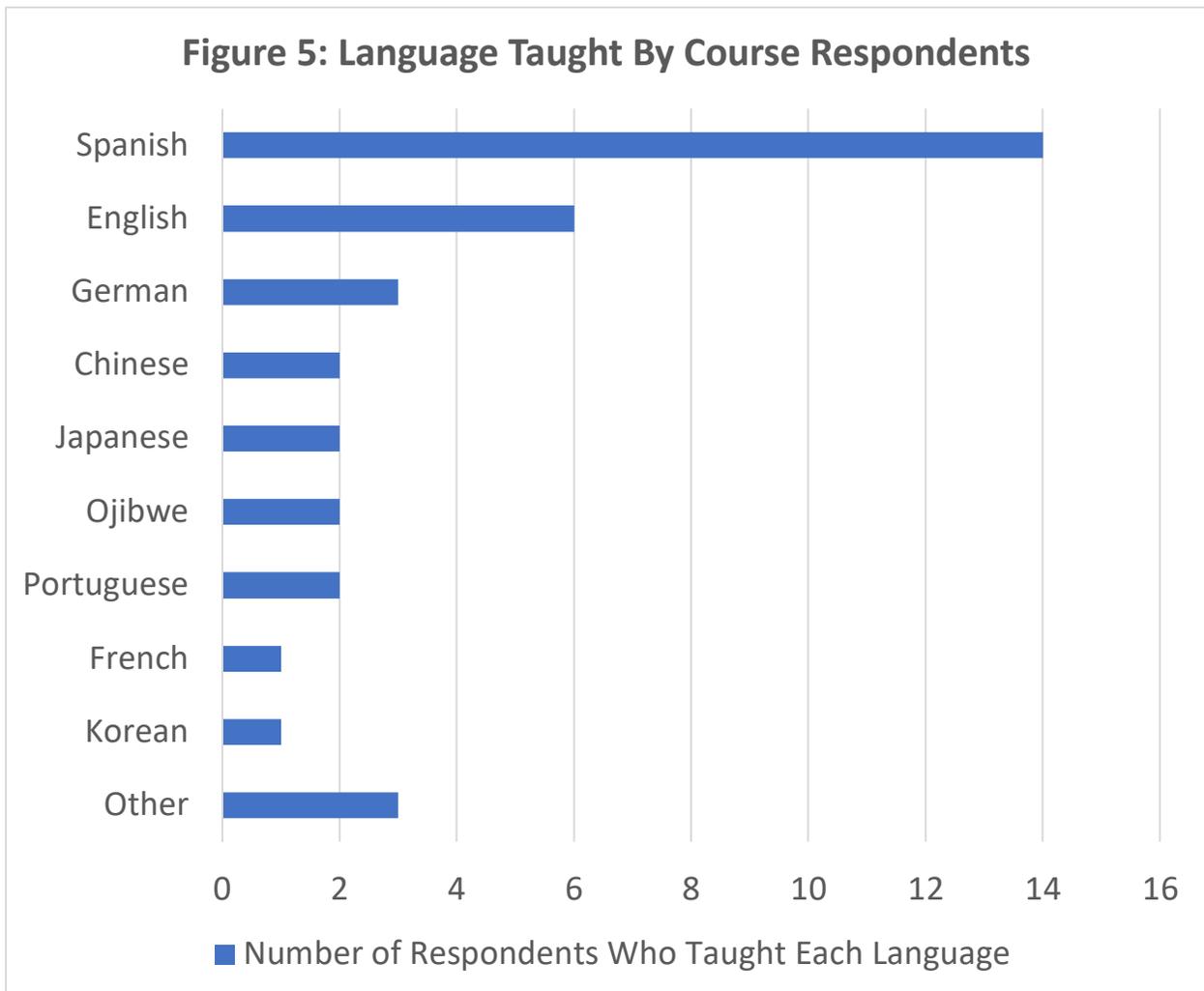
The language teachers represented the following different levels: elementary, middle school, high school, and college (Figure 3).



While the majority of participants represented instructors in FL classes, five reported teaching English in immersion programs, and several reported teaching in both types of programs (Figure 4).



While the respondents reported teaching various languages, the most commonly reported was Spanish (Figure 5).



## **Instrumentation**

While the course initially focused just on language learner strategies, with the advent of Rebecca Oxford as an instructor in the early 2000's, the course came to accentuate the relationship between learning styles on the one hand and language learning and language use strategies on the other. These two areas of assessment were given considerable prominence in the course book (see Cohen & Weaver, 2006). All participants completed the two measures described below, both in their role as teachers and also so that they would have a better sense of just what their students would be responding to.

### **The Learning Style Survey**

This self-scoring measurement of learning style preferences included not only sensory style preferences, but cognitive and personality-related preference areas as well:

Sensory style preferences: e.g., some students learn visually, some learn through sound, others learn better through hands-on activities.

Cognitive style preferences: e.g., some students are more concrete-sequential, others more random-intuitive; some more global and others more detail-oriented.

Personality-related style preferences: e.g., some are more extroverted and others more introverted.

### **The Language Strategy Use Survey**

The institute course opted for a skill-oriented approach to language strategies – in the areas of listening, vocabulary, speaking, reading, writing, and translation. The focus was both on strategies for learning a language and on strategies for demonstrating their language skills when called upon to perform classroom and real-world tasks. The skill-oriented approach was selected so as to make the survey student user-friendly, as well as easy for teachers to relate to.

### **The SSBI Impact Survey Questionnaire**

Using Qualtrics, a survey questionnaire was constructed consisting of 30 items. The survey was piloted on five former course participants, who were asked both to respond to the survey questions and to make comments about them, especially if they identified any ambiguities. Nyikos and Oxford also provided feedback on the questionnaire. The following are two sample items:

Looking back, what do you remember using from the course? Please highlight several activities that influenced your role as a language instructor, a teacher educator, and/or an administrator.

If you have been a language instructor, to what extent do you think sharing your knowledge of SSBI influenced your students' awareness of learning styles and their language strategy use?

The SSBI Impact Survey Questionnaire contained links to key materials in the SSBI course in order to help jog the memory of the respondents. The manual for the course was a revised version (2006) of Cohen and Weaver's *Styles and Strategies-Based Instruction: A Teachers' Guide*, containing within it the two principal surveys that the participants were asked to complete as part of the course (the *Learning Style Survey* and the *Language Strategy Use Survey* described above).

### **The Follow-Up Interview**

The Follow-Up Interview was constructed for the nine respondents who initially agreed to participate, with both general questions for all respondents, as well as items intended to have individuals expand on their questionnaire responses. The following is a sample question aimed at all interview respondents:

Are you able to identify certain strategy areas that you supported your students with as a consequence of the SSBI course: for example, in the areas of listening, speaking, reading, writing, grammar, vocabulary, or pragmatics strategies?

### **Data Collection Procedures**

The CARLA office sent out the request to former course participants inviting them to respond to the survey questionnaire. Gift cards for \$25 were offered to participants, which increased the initially limited response level. Responses were recorded on Qualtrics. Perhaps due in part to the pandemic, from the initial nine there were five who ultimately agreed to participate in follow-up interviews – four of them being video-recorded and one conducted by telephone, with audio-recording. The participants were given an extra \$25 gift card for completing this task.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

Qualtrics provided basic statistical analysis, including demographics for the sample in the form of histograms. Content analysis of the open-ended questions for the main survey entailed identifying comments related to a series of themes. In addition, a content analysis was performed on the interview transcripts, and quotes from the interviewees were selected for inclusion in the Results section below to further illustrate the themes that emerged from the data.

## Results

### Research Question 1: The Characteristics of the Respondents and the Effect of Recency

Respondents were found to represent the full range of time intervals during which the course was offered. As can be seen from Figure 1, there was a relatively even spread among participants across the time intervals: one respondent took it before 2000, seven respondents took it between 2000-2006, ten between 2007 and 2013, and eleven between 2014 and 2017. In addition, the respondents overwhelmingly represented language teachers (Figure 2), teaching a range of different levels from kindergarten through graduate school (Figure 3). While most respondents were teachers in foreign language classes, six of them were teachers in immersion programs (Figure 4). It was, in fact, especially the immersion teachers who noted that the course greatly impacted how they taught because styles and strategies could support their students who had to learn content subjects through a TL. The language taught by the largest group of respondents was Spanish, followed by English (Figure 5).

A key finding was that those who responded fully to the questionnaire demonstrated in their responses that impactful elements of the course endured regardless of the recency of their participation. Nonetheless, it was observed that participants with the shorter gap between their taking the course and their responding to the questionnaire seemed to produce more detailed responses.

### Research Question 2: Impact of SSBI Course on Participants' Careers

#### Learning Style Preferences & Language Learner Strategies

The course accentuated the relationship between learning styles on the one hand, and language learning and use strategies on the other. With regard to the ways in which participation in the SSBI course impacted the participants' subsequent careers, a content analysis of all survey responses found that one major topic was the role of learning style preferences and language learner strategies both for language learners and for the teachers as well. In fact, numerous participants emphasized a key takeaway to be focusing on their own learners' style preferences and strategy choices and how this affected their interactions with their students. One interviewee even reported that having students complete the *Language Strategy Use Survey* had become a regular facet of language courses at his university:

I started [using the instruments] a long time ago, probably about the time that I took the course, but the Department itself now has evolved to use an online version of [the *Language Strategy Use Survey*] for all of our courses for students. I know in Spanish, I think they have it in a few other languages too, where one of the things we do during the second week of the course is go into the language lab and have them do a survey where they figure out exactly where they are.

## Learning Style Preferences

The respondents reported that as a result of participating in the institute course, they gave much attention to the importance of assessing learners' style preferences when designing the curriculum for the classroom. For one thing, the survey had the power of suggesting style preferences that were not currently being used by their students but that could be beneficial to them. As one respondent put it:

I like to expose students to different styles -- styles which are different from what they are used to or what they might think is easy in general.

Participants also saw the benefits of assessing learning style preferences at all grade levels, as indicated in this quote from the follow-up interview:

I would say [checking for learning style preference is] absolutely relevant no matter the grade. In every situation, I had to use multiple styles and expose students to multiple styles.

Moreover, they saw that students in their language classes benefited from being treated as individuals and consequently avoided treating them according to a herd mentality or with a one-size-fits-all approach. Here is a relevant quote from an interview:

Recreating the survey from the SSBI course for my [German] students helped the students identify how they would best study the language.

Insights about the style survey also included that of thinking twice when teaching older learners before engaging in extensive lecturing, given inevitable differences in the students' learning styles. Furthermore, it included that of varying the teaching methods according to the proficiency levels of the students in the target language.

In addition, by completing the *Learning Style Survey*, teachers reported becoming aware of similarities and differences between their own style preferences and those of their students (see Oxford, 1999, regarding potential conflicts in styles between teachers and learners). Respondents also reported how the course helped them to see the ways in which learners benefited from an enhanced sense of their learning style preferences when engaging in instructional tasks. Here is a quote from one of the interviewees:

...[since] most language is spoken...people have to learn to somehow use that pathway to learn. That's how I use the *Learning Style Survey*. I ask everyone about it: "Was there anything new that you learned about yourself or something that you recognized that's going to have a big impact on your [learning]?" ...I have them reflect on that.

Some course participants reported designing surveys (several with the assistance of Prof. Cohen) which were administered to their classes over the years in order to get an idea as to the distribution of learning style preferences.

## **Language Learner Strategies**

It was also found that the assessment of language learner strategies had an enduring impact on participants. During the follow-up interviews, it was possible to obtain details from the respondents as to the skill areas for which the gaining of insights from their students was most beneficial for them as teachers. Especially in the case of skills such as reading, teachers may know little about the actual reading strategies that their students are using in order to operationalize the skill since many of these strategies are not observable. The teachers learned from the course the value of asking students to describe the strategies that they in fact were using.

Another advantage of the *Language Strategy Use Survey* was that its items could be applied to the learning of almost any language, as pointed out by one of the interviewees:

...styles-and-strategies-based instruction is more what we kind of have to do because in our class we've got people who are studying an African language, [those] who are studying Korean, people who are studying [other languages], and we're trying to give them strategies and ways to approach it that would help for any language.

## **Impact on Other Areas of Language Education**

### **Modifications in Other Teaching Strategies**

Participants reported that participation in the course led them to modify their teaching strategies relating to numerous areas beyond learning style preferences and learner strategies. An interviewee noted, for example, that she felt validated every time she observed that her approaches to teaching were in line with the empirically-based activities of the course. Consequently, she felt encouraged to try other approaches as well. As she put it:

I was reinforced that the things that we were already doing in my class with my students were good and they were based on good research. It was good to have specific things that I could point to.

Some respondents noted that the course provided them a useful analytical framework within which to place the teaching activities. For example, the respondents emphasized the need to make transparent to the learners through a comprehensible metalanguage what their aims and strategies were in presenting the material or engaging in certain classroom activities in the way that they did. This approach could avoid efforts at second-guessing on the part of learners whose style preferences included wanting to know just what was happening at a given moment in the class session and why.

In addition, a significant takeaway for teachers was to ensure that students were given the freedom both to choose among various possible activities and also to determine how they would engage in the selected tasks, given differences in their style preferences and strategy choices.

Moreover, respondents indicated that as an outgrowth of activities in which they participated experientially during the SSBI course, they introduced new activities in their own language classrooms, such as pair work (e.g., collaborative writing and paired sharing), role-playing, improvisation, and skill-focused activities. The latter provided them greater appreciation of, say, the role of skimming and scanning in reading a text. In this case, since they themselves participated in an activity involving the use of these skills, participants had an opportunity to see that a variety of different strategies can be deployed both in scanning for specific information and in skimming the text in general. One of the early SSBI course participants mentioned in his interview that he still remembered an activity which underscored the importance of context in understanding word meanings:

So what I found is that by having the students contextualize [words], mainly by writing, sometimes writing dialogues, sometimes asking each other questions, you model the different uses. I think that was something that I believe came out of the course and I've used it for other situations too, in Spanish.

The course manual (Cohen & Weaver, 2006) was seen to be valuable in other ways as well. For example, the section on individual attitudes and personalities was cited as especially helpful. It was also deemed useful in the manual specific sample lesson plans and ideas for final projects, especially in cases where participants wish to conduct their own SSBI courses based on the one that they had participated in.

### **Interactive Nature of the Course**

The experiential nature of the SSBI course had a major impact on the participants who were engaged in numerous activities involving both observation and discussion. Their active involvement created valuable experiences for the participants and their peers in the course. Having the participants themselves engage in numerous interactive activities was seen to open their eyes to the benefits of having their students also engage in interactive language tasks such as when learning disfavored material such as grammar. Here is a quote from a participant regarding they use in his language classroom of interactive activities for this purpose:

[Engaging learners in] interactive activities that involved repetition but didn't feel repetitive was a big takeaway from this course in how to help students interact with [unfamiliar] content.

For instance, participants saw the value of incorporating learning games to promote interactive learning environments, and also to incorporate more of the cultural context of their language of instruction into their activities. Course activities such as ones involving listening led participants to become more aware of their sensory preferences and to recognize that especially for students with an auditory preference, noises in the environment could disrupt their learning experience. According to an interviewee, the interactive tasks in which participants shared their learning style preferences served as an important motivator to having them engage in style shifting beyond their comfort zone – such as by taking risks when they tended not to be risk takers:

...[during the course] seeing the different styles or the different ways that other people approach problems kind of encourages you to take risks.

### **Diffusion of Knowledge: A Trickle-Down Structure**

Those respondents who served in administrative roles reported that they were able to use their knowledge gained from the course to enhance their language departments, as seen in the above quote by an interviewee that thanks to his example, his Spanish department eventually incorporated the use of the language strategy survey with its students. In addition, respondents who were instructors at the university level passed on their knowledge gained from the SSBI course to fellow professors, graduate students, and language instructors. Not so surprisingly, teachers who taught multiple levels were able to disseminate their new insights about language instruction more broadly, thus having a greater impact on language instruction at their home institutions. One respondent, for example, said the following:

...we discuss styles and strategies that can help [students] to develop from the point that they're at. So it's something that we've integrated into the program. We found from [debriefings from students] at the end of the semester...it helped them learn strategies that they'll be able to use into the future, even sometimes with other classes aside from their language classes. So we found this to be really, really useful.

## **Discussion**

### **Summary of Findings**

The SSBI course appears to have had some enduring impact on those who responded to the survey questionnaire – namely, a self-selected subgroup of course participants who were still in contact with CARLA. Another finding was that course impact depended more on how much participants engaged with the course than on its recency. It appeared that thanks to the experiential nature of the activities in which survey respondents have participated, their responses highlighted the advantages gained from interactive learning environments. In addition, they appreciated the provision of terminology to describe instructional goals in a metalanguage that students could readily understand.

It was found that gaining familiarity with both the style preference and language strategy instruments and learners' style preferences was particularly impactful. Not only did respondents report learning more about themselves by completing the measures included in the course, but many also reported that it proved beneficial to administer the instruments to their learners over the years so that they would have a better idea as to who they were teaching and how these learners were relating to the instruction.

Moreover, respondents reported acquiring new teaching strategies as a result of the course, such as ways to incorporate the cultural context more effectively into their teaching and to engage in specific language use activities such as improvisation. Participants who identified themselves as administrators reported bringing knowledge from the course back

to their home institutions and being able to instruct teachers on how to implement SSBI activities and insights.

## **Limitations**

With the investigation focusing on the impact of the SSBI course on the participants' subsequent careers, the great unknown was just how much information was going to be gleaned from the participants. We realized that obtaining impact information would depend on the former course participants' ability to identify the aspects of the course that they had taken away from it – in some cases, over two decades prior to participating in the study. In addition, the 29 participants in this study represented a subgroup of course participants who volunteered to provide information. The respondents' self-selection could have skewed the data in favor of those who had positive things to say about the course. Another limitation was selective attrition in that another ten individuals began to fill out the survey questionnaire but gave up when they felt that they could not provide answers to the more detailed questions. In addition, since the survey responses represented only 12% of that larger group (29 out of 242), the data did not include input from the majority of the course attendees.

Whereas recency of having taken the course did not prevent respondents from the early years from participating, it clearly had some impact on the robustness of the responses. In addition, while the survey questionnaire and the follow-up interviews referred to the course as a single entity, the reality was that the SSBI course was taught by four different instructors over the years. So, in principle, this could mean that there were shifts over the years in what was emphasized in the course and how it was done.

Since the rigorous course evaluations that all participants filled out immediately after completing the course were anonymous, it was not possible to compare those reactions with participants' recollections a number of years later. A final limitation was that the study only involved reported teacher benefits from the course rather than observation of the teachers actually involved in language instruction.

Finally, participants who had had a more positive or impactful experience were likely to respond to the survey. Consequently, there was a response bias built into the design of the study which most likely resulted in data reflecting either neutral or more positive responses to the various queries.

## **Interpretations**

Despite the limitations, the study yielded numerous insights as to what aspects of the course had an enduring impact on participants. For one thing, the recency of the course may not be an overriding factor when course elements are impactful enough to help shape behavior over an entire career. Since the course gave considerable attention to the learning style and language strategy measures, it is reassuring to know that their impact was reportedly long-lived. It was encouraging to find out that course participants reported

transferring insights from this course to instruction in other areas of study beyond second and foreign languages.<sup>4</sup>

## **Pedagogical Implications**

There appear to be genuine benefits from having learners take style preference and language strategy surveys at the start of a language course and later on in order to get in touch with their style preferences and language strategies. Ideally, the students will become more aware of the relationship between their preferred approaches to language tasks and the strategies that they select to complete the tasks, whether they be language *learning* tasks or tasks focused on *performance* of what they have learned.

The reported instructional use of activities influenced by the SSBI course with learners from kindergarten through college and in different types of programs underscores the point that these materials lend themselves to a variety of different language learning and use contexts. Another pedagogical implication is that the creation of an interactive learning environment motivates participants more than if they are just spectators. In addition, language teachers appreciate being afforded a model of how to use metalanguage to explain teaching activities to their learners.

Finally, the study demonstrated that if participants are engaged in interactive learning involving pair work and group work, then the takeaway may well be significant and long-lasting. This is due to the repeated opportunities in such a course to observe how their peers complete the various tasks and activities (given their learning style preferences and strategy repertoire).

## **Suggestions for Future Research**

Since the study yielded a fair number of insights based on the enduring elements of the SSBI course, in order to get a more complete picture perhaps the impact of summer-institute and other types of short courses could be assessed differentially: immediately after the course (as is usually the case), within a year of completing the course in order to determine short-term benefits, as well as on a more long-term basis as in this case. It would also be beneficial to replicate this study with more participants.

Moreover, it would be beneficial to collect data from language students in the courses taught by participants since this study was conducted exclusively from the viewpoint of the language instructors. Data collected from language students could provide insights as to how effectively their language teachers incorporated activities and knowledge from the SSBI course into their classroom instruction. It would appear that this study may serve to encourage other researchers to track the long-term impact of other summer Institute courses, whether focused on language or on other areas of the curriculum.

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<sup>4</sup> While this paper has generally referred to *target* languages, the reality is that the TL can be learned more as a *second* language, meaning that the learners have regular exposure to it beyond the language classroom, or as a *foreign* language, implying that for whatever reasons the learners do not have regular exposure to the language beyond the language classroom.

## Conclusions

Carrying out this study involved some challenges, especially as it was undertaken during a worldwide pandemic. The research team learned early on the value of conducting a study from the bottom up, rather than trying to impose some preconceived notion about how the investigation needed to be conducted. We learned that flexibility was an important factor. We also learned that piloting the research instruments was crucial in order to ensure that the questions being asked would resonate with the respondents.

We are pleased that the study yielded the results that it did. The positive findings from this impact study would suggest that CARLA might wish to reinstate this course in its future summer offerings. In addition, the findings of this study will ideally motivate other Language Resource Centers in the United States offering summer institute courses to conduct their own longitudinal studies on the impact of their summer offerings on the participants' subsequent careers.

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