Online resources for language maintenance and enhancement
A critical inventory of the resources available through the Joint Language University website

Executive Summary

PURPOSE
The Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) employs many individuals with foreign language proficiency. Maintaining foreign language proficiency can be difficult, particularly when the target language is not used daily and conventional methods of language instruction are time consuming and costly.

Online language training resources are often seen as a practical option for maintaining or even enhancing language skills. A large selection of language courses, language learning objects, language assessment tools, and other resources are made available to members of the Intelligence Community (IC) through the Joint Language University (JLU) website.

The University of Maryland Center for Advanced Study of Language (CASL) performed a critical inventory of the foreign language training and assessment resources available through the JLU, focusing on the languages offered, the ILR levels targeted, the skills engaged, the organization and structure of each resource, the level of instructional support offered by each resource, and the extent to which each resource offers opportunities for use of the target language in context. The questions used to classify the resources as well as the resulting resource categories are presented in Figure 1.

The goal of this critical inventory is to provide guidance for managers and foreign language learners in selecting resources that are most appropriate for their needs.

CONCLUSIONS
CASL’s review and classification of the JLU resources revealed the following six conclusions:

1. The JLU offers a wide variety of language training resources in many languages and a few language assessment resources.

The JLU sponsors 35 online language training resources. Although this
number may look small, many of these resources (e.g., the LangNet Language Learning Objects and the DLI Weekly Training Events, among others) offer multiple modules of activities with many different texts and resources in many languages. This variety of resources and activities allows the JLU to offer hundreds of hours of online training—at a range of proficiency levels—to its users. Overall, these resources focus on reading and listening skills, although at least some training in all four skills (speaking, reading, listening, and writing) is available. The website also includes three language assessment resources, though the number of languages covered by two of these resources is limited. While the assessment resources offer the opportunity for learners to evaluate their language skills between formal assessments, an investigation of their validity and reliability was beyond the scope of the current report.

Most resources offered through the JLU website are intended for independent language learners and offer instructional content as well as opportunities for language use.

Only two resources available through the JLU website appear to be intended for instructors or instructed students: the Special Operations Language Training (SOLT) Introductory Courses and the DLI Basic Courses. Each of these resources consists of language-specific links from the JLU website to databases containing large PDF documents (of workbooks and exercise sheets) and sets of MP3 files (containing target language audio clips and lessons). To determine whether the PDF documents and MP3 files would be helpful, independent learners suboptimally would need to read through a large amount of text or listen to a large amount of audio, because there is little organization to aid learners in navigating these materials.

All of the other resources available through the JLU appear to be designed for learners completing language training on their own. Eight of these resources provide materials for learning isolated vocabulary (e.g., CL-150 Rapid Rote, WordChamp, and Word of the Day) but do not provide a means for learners to practice using the target lexical items in context. Fifteen resources provide access to some sort of instructional content as well as opportunities to use the target language, including four standalone language courses (e.g., The Operational Language and Culture Training Series) and eleven thematically organized learning objects (e.g., LangNet Language Learning Objects). Ten resources provide learners with opportunities to listen to or read the target language in context without any sort of instruction (e.g., DLI Phone Conversations, SCOLA Foreign Text, and dotSUB).

Many resources offer authentic materials. Exposure to authentic materials may enhance language proficiency for a number of reasons, including exposing learners to realistic speaking rates, informal use of lexical items, and a variety of accents. Many resources on the JLU website offer access to authentic materials, including authentic target language videos and printed media in a wide variety of languages from a number of different countries (e.g., Library Press Display and SCOLA Digital Archive).

Most of the JLU resources are modular and allow learners to select the activities and materials most relevant to their needs. All of the resources intended for independent learners permit learners to
choose their own materials, using information such as ILR level, topic, and skills to identify appropriate selections. However, not all resources provide all of this information for users.

In general, the resources providing both instructional content as well as opportunities for learners to apply their target language skills offer more information about target language proficiency and intended skill level (e.g., CL-150 Language Pro, DLI GLOSS, and USSOCOM Language Familiarization Courses).

While it is possible to pick and choose among the lessons for all of the materials intended for independent learners, some of the language courses (e.g., Rosetta Stone) are intended to be used in a predetermined sequence, making it more difficult to choose a self-contained lesson on a particular topic.

Largely missing from the JLU resource materials are opportunities for interaction with other speakers or learners of the target language.

With the exception of Word Champ, which offers a service to match learners with a fluent speaker of the target language for conversation practice, and SCOLA’s Spoken Word, a forum for direct interaction between learners and native speakers, the resources available through the JLU website do not provide a means for learners to interact in the target language with other learners or speakers.

Rosetta Stone, Language Pro, DLI Headstart, and The Operational Language and Culture Training Series provide limited opportunities for simulated interaction through voice recognition software or selection of textually displayed responses, but the extent to which these interactions mimic real-life conditions is minimal, given their scripted nature. Opportunities for person-to-person interaction in the target language are necessary for learners interested in acquiring speaking skills; this is one area in which the JLU resources fall short.

The JLU resources would benefit from being integrated with one another to form a more cohesive training program.

This conclusion follows, in part, from JLU’s design as a repository rather than a structured presentation of resources. If the authentic materials, vocabulary training resources, and comprehensive language courses were based on an assessment of learner needs and built upon one another, the JLU would provide learners with much richer, integrated input.

RELEVANCE

Many DIA employees wish to maintain or improve their foreign language skills. For these individuals, independent study with online language resources may be an attractive option. This critical inventory of the language training and assessment resources offered through the Joint Language University website provides information about which resources are most likely to meet the needs of these employees according to characteristics such as current language proficiency, targeted skill (e.g., reading), or need for target language materials focused on particular topics. The inventory could also provide guidance for the addition of resources to the JLU website or future changes to its organization and the basis for an online guide to optimal use of the resources.

ENDNOTE


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