



# Foreign Language Teachers Facing a Confidence Conundrum

Foreign language teachers play a pivotal role in creating global citizens, but some lack confidence in their ability to speak in their nonnative tongue, which could undermine the quality of language instruction, MSU College of Arts & Letters researchers argue.

**Peter De Costa**, Assistant Professor in the Department of Linguistics and Germanic, Slavic, Asian, and African Languages, and **Lorena Valmori**, a recent PhD graduate of the Second Languages Studies program, surveyed nine teachers in an Italian high school system, some of whom taught in college prep schools and some in vocational schools. The research, published in the journal *System*, is the first qualitative study examining how teachers maintain foreign language proficiency.

“Good language learning only takes place if there’s good language teaching. For that to happen, language teachers need to be proficient, confident, and motivated,” said De Costa, who recently was awarded the 2016 Emerging Scholar Award of the Language and Social Processes Special Interest Group of the American Education Research Association (AERA).

In the study, foreign language teachers state that over time their speaking skills had declined since teaching required them to concentrate more on accuracy, such as the mechanical and semantic aspects of language, and less on speaking and fluency.

In addition, students’ needs dictated teachers’ desires to improve. Those teaching in a college prep setting focus on skills students need in college, such as vocabulary and grammar rules, while those teaching at the vocational school are less focused on grammar, feeling the language bar was lower.

Combined, the two scenarios lead to feelings of inadequacy for teachers, the researchers said. The solution? Professional development.



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But unfortunately, the demographic and social constructs of a school often determine teachers’ access to resources, both in levels of support and materials, said De Costa and Valmori, both of whom are former high school teachers. Therefore, teachers in low-income districts or in vocational schools could be at a disadvantage.

In the study, teachers in college prep high schools formed active networks of foreign language teachers, while those in vocational education were frustrated by the lack of interest in doing so. In fact, vocational teachers reported feeling isolated, saying available resources didn’t cater to teachers with different needs.

Other key takeaways:

- Contrary to what many foreign language teachers believe, students don’t expect them to have perfect command of a language.
- In some cases, nonnative speakers of a foreign language are more empathetic to students’ needs, having been former language learners themselves.
- To seek out professional development, teachers must be motivated to improve.
- Professional development programs should be designed to meet differing needs, keep teachers motivated, and raise teachers’ awareness of their potential.

- Professional development doesn’t have to be expensive (i.e., attending a conference). It can be conducted among districts, and teachers can learn by collaborating.

Although conducted in Italy, De Costa and Valmori argue the issues addressed in their study are universal to all teachers.

“Our study is part of the larger narrative about how teachers need assistance and support from schools and the wider education system,” De Costa said. “We’d like to see more dialogue among teachers. Teachers don’t often talk to each other so they forget they’re probably their best helpers.”

De Costa earned a Doctor of Philosophy degree in Second Language Acquisition from the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 2011. He is part of MSU’s core faculty within the Second Language Studies PhD program and the Master of Arts in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) program. He was presented the Emerging Scholar Award at the AERA annual meeting on April 11 in Washington, D.C. The award recognizes outstanding scholarship among doctoral students and recent graduates.

*Research by Assistant Professor Peter De Costa, Department of Linguistics, Germanic, Slavic, Asian, and African Languages, and Lorena Valmori, recent graduate of the MSU Second Language Studies (SLS) PhD program, examined how teachers maintain foreign language proficiency.*