PROJECT TITLE: Foreign Language Learning across Secondary and Tertiary Education Programs in America: Models for Emulation (and Avoidance)

As a student of foreign language for over ten years, I have come across both language programs designed to challenge students to improve their language abilities and programs that lacked a clear focus and accomplished little. Some teachers carefully designed their curricula, while for others, a curriculum was merely proof for school officials that students were learning something. One high school language teacher even designated every Friday as Movie Day, which let him read a book while we watched movies that had little to do with the topic of the class, wasting twenty percent of weekly class time!

From my experience, I have learned that regardless if a school is public or private, teaching middle school students or college students, or even if the school's foreign language program is regarded as a strong one, all schools have both strong and weak elements in their language programs. The aim of this project is to draw from these personal experiences studying foreign languages to lead to some conclusions about language learning and successful teaching strategies in American schools from a student's perspective. The following points will be targeted in the presentation:

- encouraging students to produce, not just acknowledge input, improves acquisition
- creativity and selectivity in assigning work targets students' weaknesses while allowing them some creative freedom in improving their language skills
- teachers' active leadership in leading students' learning is crucial for consistent improvement

Likewise, other strategies frustrate students and stagnate learning:

- allowing students to become passive learners
- over-reliance on textbooks is both inflexible and boring

The bulk of my presentation to Chinese educators will consist of an examination of my foreign language learning experiences at three levels of education (middle school, high school, and university) and analysis of teaching methods employed by faculty and programs with which I have had interaction. A PowerPoint will assist in my presentation of my topic.

I. EFFECTIVE TEACHING STRATEGIES:
A. Student production/output, not just acknowledgement of receiving input, improves acquisition. In my learning experience, the more L2 I produced, the faster I learned and more I retained. Though exposure to the L2 from a teacher and/or native speaker is also important, there is no guarantee students have absorbed new vocabularies, sentence patterns idioms etc. unless they have successfully used them themselves. Additionally, teachers with consistently high standards focused on using a variety of methods to encourage output, which provided a broad base for students to express themselves.

- **Develop solid basics early on and maintain high expectations regardless of level taught.**
    - Initiate immediate and extensive acclamation to new writing systems if necessary (for example: Russian, Japanese). Overwhelming students is not ideal, but integrating writing systems and speech at an early stage limits students' dependency on L1 interpretations of word sounds and spellings.

- **PowerPoint Example:** I will include pictures from the Chinese 110/120 character booklets.
  - Rapidly introduce L2 verb forms (or noun/adjective declensions, depending on the language), especially for students whose L1 does not require them.
  - Focus on pronunciation before fossilization occurs. If native speakers can't understand what students are saying, it won't matter how "fluent" they are.
- **Gradually increase length, difficulty, and variety of assignments to encourage output, involving reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills.**

PowerPoint Example: Three columns based on middle school/high school/college or beginner/intermediate/advanced programs:
  - use of basic skills:
    paragraph/short letter assignments based on lesson units
    short conversational dialogues
  - more extensive projects and longer written assignments:
    frequent assignment of short essays to improve writing skills
    3-5 minute presentations using the target language to explain cultural topics
  - advanced levels:
    frequent, extensive production as the core of classes, including substantial essays and research papers
    15 to 20+ minute presentations to explore a certain topic

B. Be creative and selective in assigning work that targets students' weaknesses while allowing them creative freedom in improving their language skills.

- **Develop creative activities, such as debates, picture prompts, and mysteries.**
  PowerPoint Example: A mystery task from ACC or the Hamilton Chinese Department (with permission). Also, using exercises from a variety of sources and developing new exercises, not just using the standard textbook, can provide more variety.
- **Use exercises that target students' problems and/or can provide a framework for future problem solving.**

PowerPoint Example: An exercise in my middle school German class combined prefixes such as "favorite" with various vocabulary words to improve knowledge of grammar and vocabulary. The exercise used repetition to reinforce the structure, while simultaneously acting as a blueprint for future use with new vocabulary.

> In the exercise, combining "lieblings" (favorite) with "die Farbe" (color) creates "die Lieblingsfarbe" (favorite color). I found this exercise helpful because I could always recall the memory of this particular class when I needed to use the structure again. As German features many compound words, this exercise can also be used with different combinations, and hence is flexible for use with whichever compound structures are under discussion. I remember this exercise as one of many in our textbook, but my teacher specifically selected it and continued to use it beyond the unit/chapter.

- **Encourage student flexibility in expression (within reason).** When I start learning a language, I always want to learn how to discuss my activities, such as

horseback riding. Students are more likely to be interested in their assignments if they seem relevant and/or interesting.

C. Actively leading students' learning is crucial for consistent improvement.

- **Take initiative to make the material accessible.** Some of the best teachers I have had can creatively use students' responses—serious, funny, bizarre—as jumping-off points to continue a discussion. These teachers can also use unexpected situations as teachable moments, a different way to engage students than the standard lesson text discussion.

PowerPoint Example: One of my Chinese language professors who now teaches at a different university asked me to talk to her beginning students about my study abroad experience. While sitting in on the class, I found myself used multiple times in examples, including:

- 今天在教室里一共有几个学生？Since I was an extra person, students got to review counting and use of 一共.
- 葛岚坐在哪里？ Students practiced using directional phrases like 旁边 and 对面.

II. INEFFECTIVE TEACHING STRATEGIES:

A. Letting students become passive actors in their language learning. Directing students' energies in a productive way is undoubtedly challenging and sometimes frustrating. But some teachers I have encountered, especially at the lower levels, opt to use language television programs or other methods in a large percentage of class time. In addition to boring students—my French middle school teacher often used T.V. programs in class; the only time I ever fell asleep in middle school was during a French T.V. class day—passive methods not supplemented with other activities are not the most effective use of class time. At the very least, students could be practicing with a high-level speaker in real time, their teacher. Similar passive strategies include:

- **Limiting peer to peer interaction/projects.**
- **Assigning projects that emphasize elements other than language study.**

PowerPoint Example: In my sixth-grade Spanish class, we were given at least two weeks to create a barnyard scene and label the animals in Spanish. I remember laboring over my barn drawing, but the actual labeling only took about ten minutes. A similar assignment in German class for labeling clothing already included background elements, and was probably due the date of the next class. In Spanish class, the drawing was at least as important as the vocabulary; in German class, we also got to color, but the focus was on acquiring new vocabulary.

- **Over-emphasizing phrase learning rather than mastery of phrase components.** This tends to be a problem in lower level classes.

PowerPoint Example: When I was first learning German, a teacher introduced us to some basic vocabulary and also some phrases, including how to say happy birthday ("Alles Gute zum Geburtstag"). At the time, we didn't know what any of these words meant, including that Geburtstag means birthday or that Alles Gute is used to congratulate or express well-wishing (similar to 祝你。。。 in Chinese). Consequently, I had a tough time remembering the phrase. Although it's important for students to learn basic phrases, retention will not be very high if they don't have a foundation for understanding the parts of the phrase. Building blocks are key.

B. Relying on the book. Even if the lesson book is sound, it is still not targeted to equally address each class's unique problems. Course books are important, but they're not the only tool. Also, over-reliance on strict translation to and from the target language, often based on book exercises, results in neglecting to assign creative and task-based compositions, which in addition to boring students can also stifle gains in fluency, especially in speaking.

III. CONCLUSION:

The intent of this project is not to praise strong language programs or castigate weak ones, but rather to emphasize that a combination of innovative teaching methods and dedicated teachers really does help the vast majority of students master a foreign language. The examples and strategies above all affected my learning, and the effective strategies made it possible for me to make and retain solid gains in fluency. Although my presentation is merely based on my own experiences, I would hope that it would inspire educators to take new ideas back to their own schools with the aim of improving the educational experiences of their students.