



Five College Center for World Languages

Published on LangMedia (<https://langmedia.fivecolleges.edu>)

[Home](#) > [How to Organize a Mentored Language Program](#) > Essential Elements of a Program

---

# Essential Elements of a Program

## Mentored Language Program Purpose and Format

### Facilitating Study of the Least Commonly Taught Languages

The Mentored Language Program came into being as a methodology that would facilitate study of the least commonly taught languages in an academic setting even when target language faculty were not available to teach a traditional language course. Few institutions are in a position to locate and hire trained language professors for all languages that students are eager to study. The Mentored Language Program harnesses academic energy from a variety of sources and brings it together in order to offer students the opportunity to study the languages of interest.

### Program Format

The Mentored Language Program is an effective method for language acquisition that emphasizes all four primary language skills: speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Students using this format combine individual tutorials with a mentor (tutor), small group conversation sessions with a native speaker, and significant amount of weekly independent study based on structured study guides. There is a final written evaluation and a 20-30 minute final oral evaluation conducted by a professor, frequently an external professor, of the target language. This methodology was created and designed through a grant from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

### Program Coordination

In a classroom setting, the professor serves as the coordinator; in the Mentored Language Program, the Director or Program Coordinator and Program Staff fill this role. The Program admits students, provides access to Study Guides, hires and trains the mentors and the conversation partners, holds student homework portfolios, reads and records student self-assessments, organizes the final exams and records the final grades.

This site is intended to provide all information necessary for any academic institution to adopt the paradigm for its own use. In addition to prose descriptions of how the program functions, users will find links to videos clips of best practices and links to pertinent sites.

### Essential Elements

---

In order for this semi-independent language acquisition paradigm to function, the following elements need to be present:

# The Student

## An Organized Student

The successful student is one who is a self-starter, someone who can accept a task and complete it within a given amount of time with minimal supervision. The student must be able to organize the academic work week so that s/he can dedicate a consistent amount of time to language study each day (we recommend at least one hour per day for a ½ course and two hours per day for a full course).

## Comprehensive Practice: The Example of Vocabulary Acquisition

The successful student takes full advantage of the independent study time to practice everything in the week's lesson over and over and in every iteration imaginable. For example, successful preparation of a vocabulary lesson does not mean that an individual can look at the word in the target language and give an English equivalent. Rather it means that the student knows the words so well that s/he can produce the word without visual or textual prompts.

S/he can use the word in a variety of sentences and employ the word in appropriate social situations and with all ages and genders. Furthermore, the student can create a scenario in which the word is used and can utilize appropriate body language when using the word so that the language and its cultural context are never separated. The student has imagined how the mentor or conversation partner will use the word and has already created imaginary responses. Finally, if the student, in the course of this preparation, has unanswered questions about the word or its usage, s/he writes down a coherent question for the next language meeting.

## Self-Drill and Oral Practice

Students must be prepared to self-drill and to take risks with language usage in order to expand their vocabulary and the range of their syntax. They must find a place to study that is conducive to oral drill; in other words, they must be able to use a speaking voice when practicing language, so working in a location such as a library is not recommended. Students should take advantage of the many online self-recording programs to record themselves speaking the language and then listen to their oral production and note any issues that they hear.

## Self-Correction

The student's ability to self-correct by listening to speech produced or checking exercises completed is an additional skill to be honed in independent language study. If the student listens to her/his recorded speech and determines that there is a pronunciation problem, s/he can continue to work on that issue all week. Similarly, if the students use answer keys to check textbook/workbook exercises and find that they have gotten some of the answers wrong, the process does not stop there. The students must then go back to the chapters and figure out why the answer is incorrect. In the process, the student is correcting a misunderstanding that occurred during the learning process. By the time the student reaches the language session, s/he will have resolved the problem and be prepared to use the word or construction correctly. If s/he has not been able to resolve the issue, s/he has been able to formulate a detailed question for the mentor.

# The Mentor

## What is a Mentor?

The mentor or tutor is someone who qualified to work with grammatical intricacies, syntactical issues, and advanced, formal vocabulary. The mentor holds individual 30-minute meetings with each student enrolled in a half-course and two such meetings with students enrolled in a full course.

## Format of a Tutorial Session

Beginning with a review of the homework that the student has prepared to hand in at the meeting, the mentor works with the student on the areas of the weekly assignment that the student found confusing. Unlike a traditional classroom-based lesson, the mentor does not decide what s/he wants to teach but rather responds to what the student identifies as problem areas in the week's lesson or to what appears as a problem in the student's homework and work during the session. The mentor has thoroughly prepared the lesson, so s/he can perform spot drills to test the student's knowledge and retention from week to week. The language of interaction during this meeting should be a mix of the target language and English.

## Homework Correction and Reports

The mentor retains the student's homework, corrects it and hands it back at the next individual meeting after having scanned it into the student's homework portfolio, which is housed by the coordinating body. The mentor also meets with the program staff on a weekly basis to discuss the progress of the students and to alert the staff to any individual issues that many have developed among the students. Because the mentor is often a young teacher, this interaction is imperative

[Best Practices and Tips for Mentors Conducting Individual Tutorials](#)

# The Conversation Partner

## What is a Conversation Partner?

While the mentor must be able to address complex grammatical issues, the conversation partner need be only an educated native speaker. The conversation partner's main charge is to speak his/her target language using the authentic speech of everyday life and to help the students with their conversational abilities in the language. The hour long conversation sessions give small groups of students at the same level of language study the opportunity to practice speaking among themselves guided by a native speaker.

## Use of the Target Language

The conversation partner should speak entirely (or as close to entirely as possible) in the target language. Grammatical questions should be saved for the mentor, and conversation partners need to maintain target language use in a conversational atmosphere. The best conversation sessions are those in which all participants speak for equal amounts of time.

---

## **Preparation for Sessions**

The conversation partner's preparation for the session is crucial to its success. The conversation partner must be careful to use the structures and vocabulary that the students have learned and not to add words outside of the students' knowledge base. Many of the study guides found on this site have Conversation Partner Guides that accompany the weekly Study Guides and are designed to reinforce the lesson. Conversation partners working with languages that do not have pre-designed, accompanying guides can nonetheless benefit from close scrutiny of the Conversation Partner Guides on this site because they give a precise idea of what sorts of activities can be used successfully in a conversation session.

## **Weekly Reports**

Conversation partners file weekly reports with the program staff.

[Best Practices and Tips for Conversation Partners Leading Conversation Sessions](#)

# **The Study Guides and Self-Assessment**

## **Purpose of the Study Guides**

The semi-independent nature of the Mentored Language Program makes explicit study guides imperative. The weekly Study Guide should describe in detail what students need to accomplish in order to progress as well as provide a means through which students can measure their accomplishments.

## **Study Guide Content**

Each Study Guide contains the assignment for the week. In addition to the standard chapter assignments from the text or texts, there are audio and video assignments, activities to prepare before the conversation session and homework to be turned in at the mentored tutorial. Answer keys make it easy for students to check their own work throughout the week, which then needs to be reworked if errors have occurred or pushed to the next level if the student has been able to internalize the information covered in the week's lesson.

## **Self-Assessment**

Once the students have completed the week's assignments, attended the mentored tutorial and the conversation session, they fill out an online self-assessment and send it to the program staff. The self-assessment phase of language study provides an organized point of reflection for the students regarding the successes and failures of the week. Which exercises were most useful? What can the student glean from that information that informs their language study? Which methods of language acquisition are particularly effective for them? How can they harness that knowledge and apply it to the next week's lesson?

## **Diagnostic Role of Self-Assessments**

---

The self-assessments also play a role in the administration of the program. Due to the semi-

independent nature of the program, the self-assessments provide the only weekly contact between the student and the program office. Reading the self-assessments gives the program director(s) insight into the student's progress and serves to alert the program staff if the student is encountering difficulties that need to be addressed immediately.

## **The Final Evaluations**

### **The Evaluation Process**

Measuring the student's accomplishment at the end of the semester is the culmination of the student's period of study. There are checks and balances throughout the program, and homework is marked and returned, but the ultimate test of a student's language growth comes with the final evaluations or exams. We strongly recommend that external professors of the target language be contracted to give one-on-one, 20-30 minute oral exams to each student. With web technology, this can be accomplished with a simple SKYPE set-up.

### **Qualified Examining Professors**

The validity of the program depends on the quality of the examining professors. In the evaluation process, it is imperative that the term "professor of the target language" not be confused with "native speaker who is a professor." The two are not interchangeable. A native speaker, even a highly educated native speaker, is not an expert in language acquisition and does not know how to formulate or execute an oral language exam. A native speaker does not necessarily have the requisite skills to be an effective examiner. It is not an intuitive process. A trained language acquisition expert, on the other hand, will immediately hone in on the student's approximate level of fluency and use that as a base for the exam. The student will be challenged but not overwhelmed and will be able to demonstrate all that has been learned.

### **A "Pro-chievement Examination"**

This type of exam - built around the material that the student has been assigned and nothing else - is called a "pro-chievement" exam by the National Association of Self-Instructional Language Programs. For a semi-independent language acquisition program to succeed, the exams must be pro-chievement exams.

### **Written Evaluations**

Depending on the size of the program and the agreements made between the program and the external examiners, the external examiner may also create the final written evaluation. This is a task, however, that can be accomplished also at the mentor level.

## **The Coordinating Entity - The Program Staff and/or Director(s)**

---

## **Necessity of Coordination**

In order for the Mentored Language Program to function successfully, it must be organized by a coordinating body that serves in the place of a professor. This is not a task that can be tacked onto someone's fulltime job as an "extra." Depending on the size of the program and the number of languages, it can be a fulltime job or a few fulltime jobs. The amount of individual instructional time given to each student makes the Mentored Language Program a superb experience for a determined, independent student.

## **Areas Coordinated by the Program Staff:**

### **Hiring**

Nothing impacts the quality of the program as much as the personnel serving as mentors and conversation partners. While conversation partners can be drawn from the undergraduate, international study body since their assignment is to speak their native language and they are not in a position to give grades, mentors need to have finished a BA at a minimum. Mentors need to be able to discuss grammatical concepts, correct homework and assign grades. One good source for mentors is the Fulbright/Institute for International Education program for Foreign Language Teaching Assistants (FLTAs). This cooperative venture enlists American academic institutions as hosts for young international teachers, who come to the U.S. for a year to teach.

### **Training**

Even young people trained in second language acquisition will not be familiar with a program such as the Mentored Language Program; therefore, a training period is needed. This period should include time before the beginning of the academic year and should continue at least throughout the first semester.

Many international language teachers are used to focusing on reading and writing, so it is a good idea to provide an early introduction to the methodology that informs teaching for oral proficiency and giving an oral proficiency interview. Since the mentors may be new teachers, we recommend a system in which mentors meet weekly with the program staff to discuss how they are planning to prepare the material in the weekly study guide. Furthermore, program staff observations of select tutorials and conversation sessions increase the type and utility of feedback that the program staff can give the mentors during the weekly meetings.

### **Admission**

Because of the semi-independent format of the Mentored Language Program, selective admission is one way of insuring that the program fits the learning profile of potential students. To gain admission into the Five College program, students must first fill out an application before they are admitted.

### **Orientation**

Students interested in enrolling in the Mentored Language Program need to understand exactly what will be expected and how much independent work will be required. Since there is no professor to whom they can direct questions, students need either a one-on-one or an online explanation of program details. The Five College Mentored Language Program's online orientation provides an initial explanation and also serves as a refresher for students to consult during the term.

## Homework Portfolio

With all the elements that make up the Mentored Language Program, it is a good idea for the program staff to maintain a homework portfolio for each student. The Five College Mentored Language Program now compiles an online portfolio into which is scanned each student's graded homework before it is returned to the student.

## Self-Assessment

In order for the self-assessments to be effective, students must complete them regularly and submit them each week by a designated deadline (the Five College Mentored Language Program's deadline is every Monday by 9:00 AM). Program staff read the self-assessments, record them, and follow up on any problems or issues raised by the students with regard to the course.

## Grade book

The program staff should maintain the master grade book for all students. Grades are entered into the book each week as homework is scanned into the portfolio.

## Final Exams

Organizing the final exams is an exacting task that is performed by the program staff who must schedule the students individually, the examiners individually and the Skype facilities – all far in advance of the actual exam. The program staff provides exam grade sheets to each professor for each individual student that are returned with comments and grades following the exams.

## Final Grades

At the end of the semester, program staff assembles all the elements that make up the student's final grade, performs the mathematical calculations and enters the grade into the grade system.

## Training Resources

- [Best Practices for Individual Tutorials](#)
- [Best Practices for Conversation Sessions](#)



[Some Study Strategies for Independent Language Learning DOC](#)

### **Five College Center for World Languages**

79 South Pleasant St, Suite 100

Amherst College, AC Box 2264

Amherst, MA 01002

USA

[FCCWL website](#)

p: 413-542-5264

e: [fclang@fivecolleges.edu](mailto:fclang@fivecolleges.edu)



