In the evening, the learners find their instructor waiting in the classroom to welcome them. They take their seats, chatting with one another, preparing for the lesson ahead. To help them settle in, the teacher poses friendly questions in the target language about their work day and tosses candy to those who respond. Surprisingly—with extremely quick reflexes—they catch every piece thrown high and low.

Perhaps their physicality in the classroom is not such a surprise considering that these students—young men mostly between 18 and 25—are co-workers, or more accurately they are teammates, and their “job” is to work hard enough to make it on the roster of the San Francisco Giants Major League Baseball team.

“The San Francisco Giants are committed to the development of all of our players on and off the field,” notes Bobby Evans, Vice President and Assistant General Manager of the team. This includes the language education opportunities offered in Scottsdale, Arizona, home of the Giants’ spring training facilities.

Before the official baseball season begins in April, teams head to warm climates for spring training and the Giants traditionally go to Scottsdale. This includes not just big-time stars who play and train at Scottsdale Stadium and the adjacent athletic complex there, but also dozens of minor league players in the Giants farm system who gather each day at a nearby facility and dream of making it to the Big Leagues.

Of these players, many arrive from Spanish-speaking countries with very limited literacy skills, and still others are young men from the U.S. heartland who have never studied a language in school or don’t know anyone who speaks a foreign language. These are learners who, after a long day training in the hot Arizona sun, attend language classes in the evening throughout spring training and often beyond.

Decorated with the names of Baseball Hall of Fame players on the walls, the classroom where they study at night is adjacent to the fields where they practice every day.

“It is not what you could call a typical teaching or learning situation,” says Carol Gaab, head of the Giants language program. “I don’t have any of the students for a set amount of time and they come to me with different backgrounds, educational levels, and motivation. Some may be back here for numerous seasons; others I have for just part of a single season. If they move up [in the league] quickly, I might not be able to give them everything I want to help them.”

Therefore, she says “the classes are designed specifically around their needs as learners in order to maximize every moment we have and to offer them as much time with comprehensible input as possible.”

Gaab—a long-time educator, writer, and textbook consultant—teaches English as a second language (ESL) classes four nights a week to three levels of Spanish-speaking learners, as well as a weekly Spanish language and culture course for English-speaking players. The program is a requirement for most of the young men in the minor league system to enrich their language skills before they potentially move up to the major league team in San Francisco.

Gaab has also occasionally offered tutoring for students with native languages other than Spanish, as she did this past spring with a player from Japan trying out for the Giants, Kensuke Tanaka. Although he was not required to study English, Tanaka requested personal private tutoring in Scottsdale and has continued his language studies with Gaab online during the regular season while playing with the AAA-Fresno Grizzlies and in San Francisco with the Major League Giants.

“With Carol’s guidance and expertise,” says Evans, “the organization has been able to build a comprehensive orientation program that has enhanced the players’ experience of playing professionally in the United States.” Gaab, who has run the Giants language program for 16 years, is also president of TPRS Publishing (www.tprstorytelling.com) and has presented at ACTFL conventions and many other conferences and workshops.

In the Baseball Classroom

While Gaab follows the same principles she would in any language teaching situation—providing comprehensible input, staying in the target language 90%+, using physical gestures, questioning strategies, and stories to provide repetition—there are factors that make working with this group of learners unique.
Non-American players come from many different places, including Mexico, Venezuela, and Puerto Rico, but the largest group of Spanish speakers is from the Dominican Republic (DR)—a world center for baseball but also an extremely poor country. Gaab’s instruction is informed by her own firsthand experience in the DR, where she has studied the players’ linguistic needs both on and off the field and also trained a local ESL instructor to serve as an extension of her program within the Giants’ Dominican training facility.

“Certainly I need to respect the fact that these guys do not always come in with the same education background or with similar literacy skills. I have to adjust the instruction just from the standpoint of how fast I can go, how much I can give them at one time, and how much repetition they need,” Gaab says.

She feels a sense of urgency in every class because the season goes by so quickly. “These guys need a lot of time to process and they need tons of repetition so I will spend a great deal of time teaching the content, doing a variety of activities, so they have a better chance of internalizing the language.”

Because her learners are clearly “kinesthetic kinds of people,” Gaab says, “I need to adapt everything so that it is much more hands-on, much more real life... When I see they are maxing out on the language, I have to step back, provide more repetition, even more visuals and props. I always know that when they start checking out, they aren’t checking out because they don’t want to learn. They are checking out because they are tired, not used to sitting in school, and/or because I’m not being interesting or comprehensible enough.”

There is no set curriculum for the program—rather, “the curriculum is the learner,” Gaab says. Generally the topic for a lesson comes from personalized questions that are based on Target Vocabulary Structures. “The students tell me what the topic is. I focus on questions to questions that I have asked, and they share about the things they care about. This makes it truly compelling for them.” Players might want to discuss a situation that happened with a coach or another player, they ask questions about words they heard and sometimes want to practice how to respond. Comprehension games in class are based on a baseball diamond projected overhead and if they answer questions correctly, they advance on to another base; they can also decide how easy or difficult they want the questions to be (i.e., if they are going for a single, double, triple, or home run.)

Some classes provide initial media training to help the players practice responding to questions they could be asked by reporters one day. Other lessons focus on life skills that these young men need to get by in the United States beyond the baseball field. For example, they may discuss what a guy needs to do on a date, from calling a girl he likes, to showering and getting ready, to how to act and what to say. The players are highly engaged in the topic, they are practicing vocabulary about daily activities, and they are examining cultural nuances regarding how to interact in a personal situation. Such topics can inspire a high level of motivation, even after a long day of practice when the students may be tired and easily distractible.

“It has to be absolutely interesting and compelling to hold their attention because they usually can’t focus just sitting there and listening,” says Gaab. “I have to just make sure that I offer dynamic lessons so that they are interested enough to stay with me.” Her methods include using props and movement, asking questions and acting out stories, encouraging pair work, and giving choices for the learners on which activities they want to do.

Eliezer Zambrano, who began studying with Gaab in 2007 and currently plays for the A-San Jose Giants, says that in his position as a catcher, communication is extremely important. “I have to talk a lot with the pitchers,” he says, “and we need to be on the same page.”

He continues, “I like Carol’s class very much. Sometimes you can go to a class where every day the teacher is just talk-talk-talk and you write-write-write, like a normal class. But this class is different... we can talk back and forth with the teacher, we move around, we play baseball games, we can ask our own questions, and we can choose what kinds of questions we want to answer, easy or hard.”

Jose Valdez, a pitcher currently with AA-Richmond Flying Squirrels, started with the ESL lessons in 2006. He says that communicating with teammates is a big motivation in learning English. “We have to talk with American guys and we need to have really good English, and we have to talk to the coaches in English. We are here in America, so this is necessary for us to have success.” Valdez comes from the DR and is very grateful for the opportunity both to play baseball in the United States and to improve his language skills.

“I’m so proud to be part of the San Francisco Giants team. It’s a great organization, and they give us a lot of opportunities. We just have to keep working hard to get up to the Major League. The English classes help me a lot, like all the Latin guys. We come here—on the field, off the field, and the team takes care of us.”

Valdez found that he responded to the use of music in the class and felt that Gaab looked for ways to reach the students where their interests were. “I still remember the first song we listened to,” he says. “The things she does stay with us more than other classes.”
“Sometimes I think I don’t want to go,” says Zambrano, “but I have to go and then it’s always fun. We learn new things every night. We don’t do a lot of writing because we play baseball and we talk. That’s what we need,” he says.

**Bridging Language and Culture**

While the ESL classes are the primary focus for the language program, the Giants also place a large emphasis on helping the English-speaking coaches and players understand and appreciate the experiences of their teammates. Gaab’s weekly Spanish class with the American players provides them with the opportunity to learn Spanish words and phrases they can use with the Latino players, as well as gives insight into other cultures and empathy for the experience of their teammates and the barriers they may face.

One way she does this is by using a biography she wrote about Felipe Alou, one of the first Spanish-speaking baseball players to come to the United States back in the 1950s and a treasured member of the Giants staff. This book, *Felipe Alou: From the Valleys to the Mountains* (published by TPRS Publishing), was written in both English and Spanish versions with limited vocabulary and meant to be used in the classroom. It details many of the struggles that Alou experienced both as a dark-skinned man in the U.S. before the civil rights movement and as a player in the major leagues who could not understand English. The English language version is useful for the Spanish-speaking players to relate to and understand that they are not the only ones who have experienced cultural and language barriers. The Spanish version is read by the American players in order to appreciate the struggles that the others are going through.

Alou, who both played with and managed the Giants for many years and today remains a Special Assistant to the General Manager of the team, sometimes visits Gaab’s classes in Scottsdale to bring many of the stories in the book to life for the young players.

“When I first got here to the United States, I didn’t know one single word of English. I didn’t even know that the word ‘yeah’ meant yes,” Alou told the English-speaking students during a visit in March. “At first I really had a lot of problems—racial discrimination and language barriers,” he said, recalling several anecdotes for the class, some of which were detailed in the biography.

He also advised the players how they could improve their skills year-round by playing baseball during the winter in the DR and suggested various ways that having Spanish language skills would help them in their careers with the Giants. “It is good to learn not only Spanish but any language,” said Alou, who himself speaks English, Spanish, and French. “It is an ever-evolving world and things happen so quickly.”

Players from different backgrounds see how language learning can improve their baseball skills and help them move towards their goals. Myles Schroder, a catcher from Castro Valley, CA, says learning Spanish has been very valuable for him since his position requires a lot of communication on the field. “It helps to learn little ways to communicate with a pitcher who speaks Spanish, being able to talk about certain pitches and how you call them,” he says. “Body language is important, but sometimes time is tight and we need to have the right words at the right time in whatever language.” He says he understands more now about the difference between Spanish spoken in Venezuela versus the Dominican Republic, and other such nuances.

“That helps us a lot more than just memorizing a list of verbs,” Schroder says. “This class is more like a conversation between...
Sometimes really weird.”

“Reading about Felipe and talking about what he went through helped me a lot to appreciate what my teammates are going through.”

“It’s helpful to get to know the American guys who speak English,” says Zambrano. “Sometimes they try to speak Spanish with us, greetings, jokes or sometimes even bad words—little things. It creates the team, forms a team better.”

Gaab periodically gives a talk for the Giants coaches on various topics, such as how it feels for the players to be a learning a second language and what coaches can do to help the guys understand (i.e., what vernacular to use and how to avoid idiomatic phrases). This year since she has been spending more time in the Dominican Republic helping the Giants enhance their language program and creating a new education program (at their new training facility), they asked her to explain more about how cultural perspectives affect the general perception of these players. Gaab deferred the question to her students who said that in the Dominican Republic, there are fewer rules—such as consistent traffic laws or standard rules of etiquette when lining up. “And when the Dominican players don’t conform to our accepted and expected norms of standing in line for meals or getting on the bus, it can cause friction with the American players who have been raised to follow different cultural rules. Just understanding these kinds of differences—without labeling one culture ‘right’ or ‘wrong’—helps the coaches handle conflicts that could arise out of misunderstandings,” she says.

“There is so much in terms of cultural expectations for these guys in the United States,” remarks Gaab. “Plus they have to take in the language and culture of baseball, learning how it operates here and how it is different from their country.” Players have told her of times when a coach will ask, “Do you understand?” and they say “Yes,” but really do not get what is being said. She recalls a story of one former player who was told that he would be moving up to AAA, but he didn’t get the meaning of the message. “Every day for a week the coach would ask him, ‘Are you ready?’ and the player just thought he was asking if he was prepared for that day’s practice before he ran out onto the field. Friday rolled around, the coach said something and [the player’s] eyes popped out of his head because he suddenly realized he was moving up. He also realized he almost missed the bus!”

Similar situations are recounted in the Alou book, as in one story where he had been told but didn’t understand that the team was going on a nine-day road trip and so he had to board the bus immediately with just the clothes on his back. “It’s really good to learn those words you need,” a smiling Alou tells the players today. “I sure wish I had known road trip.”

While circumstances have improved with the influx of Spanish speakers into the U.S. baseball scene, the players still face struggles. “My first and second years [in camp] were very difficult because I couldn’t understand much,” recalls Jesús Navarro, a catcher from Mexico playing with AA-Richmond. “The coaches would speak English and somebody translated for me. I felt disappointed . . . sometimes really weird.”

Navarro says that reading the book about Alou was enlightening for him and his teammates. “For us guys, our first year in the USA, the book really shows how difficult it is to come from another country and culture. Even if it is about a long time ago it shows how hard it is. Not that long ago no one was speaking Spanish.”

While it was once only offered during spring training for the majority of the players, the Giants language program has now evolved to reach guys even as they scatter across the United States during the baseball season and many continue their lessons through online webinars led by Gaab. This development is yet another way that these courses are designed and adapted to meet the needs of this specific group of dedicated, busy—and mobile—learners.

While working with baseball players affiliated with the 2012 World Series-winning Giants can be viewed as prestigious from the outside, Gaab always keeps the focus on her learners—who they are, where they come from, and what they need. “People sometimes say, ‘Oh you teach these high-profile baseball players,’ but I don’t have that view at all. I teach these young learners, and hopefully some of them will have the opportunity to become great baseball players—but that is actually not going to happen for 97% of them,” Gaab says.

“My job is to help all become successful. Some of them have more natural athletic talent, some come into my class at a higher level of language or education, but regardless my job is to help everybody improve their overall psyche, boost their confidence, and improve how they view themselves. If they can communicate, they will have a much higher level of confidence and a much smoother road to the Major League.”

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