



Q&A INTERVIEW with Rosetta Stone CEO Steve Swad



In 2010, faced with increasing alerts that schools and universities were implementing software programs in place of qualified language professionals, ACTFL developed a position statement regarding this issue in which we took a stand on using stand-alone software products as a means to helping students develop communicative competence. Since then, there has been an explosion of web-based, online tools developed—most designed to assist language educators, but some clearly aimed at learners who are interested in acquiring language ability outside of the classroom. With the lines continuing to blur and with our own Communities goal area in the National Standards for Learning Languages of encouraging the use of language outside of the classroom, ACTFL decided to interview the elephant in the room, education technology company Rosetta Stone. The organization's new CEO, Steve Swad, agreed to sit down and answer some tough questions with ACTFL Executive Director Marty Abbott.

Marty Abbott: Steve, thanks for meeting with me. As you know, ACTFL has a history with Rosetta Stone. Over the years we have written to you regarding your claims about students advancing on the ACTFL Proficiency Scale by using your product and we have challenged the use of the Rosetta Stone software to replace classroom teachers and professors. With the increase in online language learning opportunities and the decrease in school and university budgets, we want to have a frank discussion with you about Rosetta Stone's plans for increasing their presence in the education space.

First of all, do you realize that many language educators cringe when Rosetta Stone is mentioned? What can your company do to reassure our members that you are not interested in replacing language professionals with software?

Steve Swad: I hate to think that anyone would cringe at the mention of Rosetta Stone, but I am aware that there are educators who are concerned that we've presented ourselves as a replacement for language professionals. That reaction probably stems from our very visible past marketing efforts, which were designed not only to raise awareness of Rosetta Stone, but to increase interest in language learning overall. Certainly that's an ambition we both share. Like ACTFL, we want to see an increase in the number of people in this country who are versed in other languages. At the end of the day, we believe multilingualism is important to the vitality of our society.

Let me also say, Rosetta Stone is not out to replace teachers. We see ourselves as a partner to educators, and are proud that many schools have called on us to help teachers augment and extend their reach. Rosetta Stone was originally founded as a technology solution for educators, though as we grew we focused more on our consumer business. We hold teachers in the highest regard, and that will not change—even as classrooms evolve and new approaches to teaching and learning are developed.

Since I became CEO of Rosetta Stone 18 months ago, we've launched several initiatives to promote the use of our technology in a blended learning environment. We have really focused on helping educators understand how our technology complements classroom instruction.

Our goal is to help educators at all levels understand technology is a tool, not a substitute for a good teacher. In addition, over the past 18 months we've worked to add key members to our product organization that have a focus in language acquisition and retention. One example would be our new vice president of language learning products, Nicole Wilson, who has a PhD in cognitive psychology with a focus on psycholinguistics. This is all part of our effort to rebuild the organization to better meet the needs of educators.

Marty: Some of your marketing claims, specifically that this is the “fastest, easiest way to learn a language, guaranteed!” fly in the face of what we know goes into developing language proficiency. It doesn’t happen effortlessly overnight and the focus needs to be on communicative competence, not vocabulary flash cards. Yet, the American public has come to believe that they are “not good at languages” because they are not able to learn quickly using just software programs. How can we work together to change that attitude?

Marty: In 2010, ACTFL developed a position statement stating that in order for students to develop communicative competence, there needs to be guidance from a language professional. How does that concept fit into the current Rosetta Stone product line?

Marty: Several years ago, a group of deans were invited to attend a seminar with Rosetta Stone to discuss using the software in beginning level university classes. There was an outpouring of concern from our members about this move. Are there any universities solely using the Rosetta Stone software in lower level classes and is there actual research to support that this method is effective? The research we have seen points to the fact that the software alone cannot produce communicatively competent students.

Steve: When we introduced the “fastest way to learn a language” campaign back in 2008, it really resonated with the consumer market. Consumers were looking for a holistic language learning program, and our message turned out to be a tremendously powerful motivator. It spoke to the concepts of accessibility and empowerment, and helped remove a lot of the barriers people felt about getting started learning a new language.

Our intention is to be a catalyst for language learning. We’re no replacement for going through a complete classroom learning experience with a great teacher, or even spending a few years in a foreign country. But we’re way more than “flash cards” for vocabulary and grammar.

Our solution provides educators the opportunity to reinforce core instruction through interactive lessons, reading, games and activities, and live tutoring sessions with native speakers. All of these resources are a part of our solution, and enable educators to reinforce language learned. We know that when Rosetta Stone is used in classrooms in a blended learning environment it enables educators to provide even more individualized attention and boost student success.

The number of people who are able to speak a second or third language in this country is regrettably low. We want to support efforts to spark interest in learning a language, which is why we think ACTFL’s efforts are so important. We look forward to working with ACTFL to further public awareness on the importance and benefits of language learning.

Steve: Just as there are many kinds of learners, there are many modes of learning—from one-on-one tutoring to classroom interaction with a teacher, to group learning with a community of peers, to self-paced individual study. We are certainly factoring that into our products. Rosetta Stone is available in desktop and mobile versions so we are adaptable to all of these environments. We have game-based activities and rich reading content that teachers and professors can use to further engage students. We have also created a reporting tool that helps educators assess student progress so that they can customize their instruction for different learning needs.

Rosetta Stone is continuously evolving as a learning organization. We recently acquired two companies—Livemocha and Lexia Learning—that broaden our scope beyond language and further our efforts to provide educators with the best learning solutions for students. Both Livemocha and Lexia offer products that combine the best aspects of face-to-face time with teachers with instructional technology. As time goes on, we’re going to tap into the technical capabilities and educational experience of these organizations so that we can provide the best solutions for education customers.

As we evolve our product offerings, it is critical that we expand our dialogue with you and your members so we have an intimate understanding of the changing needs of educators. **I truly hope that we can develop new ways for the ACTFL community to provide us with candid and productive feedback so we can work together to achieve the goal of communicatively competent students.**

Steve: University customers typically use Rosetta Stone to extend their classroom reach. Some incorporate our software into their language labs, while others make it a component of their syllabi. I’m only aware of one program that uses Rosetta Stone by itself for beginning level classes and that’s James Madison University’s continuing education program. That program, however, is not available to full-time enrolled students. Instead it is only offered to non-traditional students, students that are often trying to rekindle their language education.

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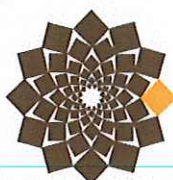
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Marty: We have also had reports about principals setting elementary-age children in front of computers with the software loaded up and no language professional in the classroom. While they may be able to develop recognition of some vocabulary items, there is little room for developing the ability to communicate. Is this a practice that Rosetta Stone condones?

Marty: Steve, I appreciate your candid responses. ACTFL will continue to monitor the situations that we have described but we also know that integrating technology into language instruction continues to be the number one professional development need of our members, according to our most recent member survey. We do hope that companies like Rosetta Stone will work together with us to enhance and improve language instruction and not to replace language instructors.

Steve: What we condone is cultivating language interest at an early age. But the reality is that, in some situations, schools are unable to provide teachers at the elementary school level. In these situations, some administrators have turned to language learning software, like Rosetta Stone, in lieu of not offering any language programs at all. While schools and districts choose to use different models to integrate Rosetta Stone into their language programs, we believe the ideal results are seen in a blended learning environment.

Steve: Thank you, Marty. I sincerely believe that Rosetta Stone and ACTFL share many of the same goals in terms of helping people learn to speak new languages, and I know if we work together cooperatively, we can make progress. I'm delighted that we're opening a new chapter in the relationship between our respective organizations. I encourage ACTFL members to come and see us in the exhibit hall at your upcoming conference in Orlando. My team will be happy to share some of the exciting things we're working on to promote technology in the classroom. **More importantly, we hope to hear from your members about the instructional resources they need to be even more successful.**



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ANNUAL CONVENTION
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SAN ANTONIO 2014
HENRY B. GONZALEZ CONVENTION CENTER
NOVEMBER 21-23

2014 CALL FOR PROPOSALS

SUBMISSION DEADLINE: Wednesday, January 15, 2014

THEME: *Reaching Global Competence*

The annual convention of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) will be Friday, November 21 through Sunday, November 23, 2014 (Pre-Convention Workshops scheduled on Thursday, November 20) at the Henry B. Gonzalez Convention Center in San Antonio, Texas. The ACTFL Convention features over 600 educational sessions covering a wide spectrum of the language profession. The ACTFL Convention is a national event bringing together over 6,000 attendees from all languages, levels and assignments within the profession.

The goal of the ACTFL Annual Convention is to provide a comprehensive professional development experience for language educators of all languages and levels. Compelling proposals address the needs of today's learners and educators by focusing on innovative programs, emerging trends and research-informed practices. Special consideration will be given to proposals that highlight one of these four focus areas: planning for the learner, learning and teaching, assessment, and collaboration. Please read all instructions very carefully before you submit your proposal.

We encourage all language educators to submit a proposal for consideration. To submit a proposal you must go to www.actfl.org and click on the 2014 Call for Proposals. You can only submit using the online form. **The deadline to submit a proposal is Wednesday, January 15, 2014. Late submissions will not be considered.**

