

Higher Education Foreign Language Needs: Student Supply & Demand

*Scott McGinnis
National Foreign Language Center*

In the 200-some years since Jefferson built his “academical village” in Charlottesville, it may be argued that while the status of foreign language instruction in American higher education has remained at best marginal, the demand for the products of that instructional system has only increased, particularly in the months since September of 2001. In considering the supply of such language and area studies expertise, the most recent data (Brod and Welles 2000) clearly reveals the preponderance of enrollments in the most commonly taught languages (French, German, and Spanish). However, such data is fundamentally meaningless without an understanding of the proficiency levels of those students being produced by American colleges and university language programs.

Based upon their 50 years of instructional experience, the Foreign Service Institute has developed benchmarks for instructional contact hours in order to achieve various degrees of foreign language proficiency, classified according to the Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) rating scale. As noted by Brecht and Rivers (2000), “the minimum working proficiency for most jobs requiring language competence in the government is ILR level 2 (ACTFL Advanced), while other positions in private industry and in federal agencies require ACTFL Superior or ILR 3 and above” (2000, p. 99). To achieve such a degree of proficiency generally takes at least twice, and sometimes nearly three times, as long for the Less Commonly Taught Languages (LCTLs) than it does for the more commonly taught ones.

Given the above data, it is clear that no standard four-year curriculum at the college or university level will be sufficient to produce proficiency of the sort needed for either government or private sector careers even in the more commonly taught languages. Consequently, a significant study abroad component has been increasingly understood to be essential for students to develop truly professional competencies. But as Brecht and Rivers comment, “most students of language in our nation’s schools and universities do not study abroad at all” (2000, p. 100). And those that do commence their study abroad experience at still relatively low levels of proficiency.

The Brecht and Rivers study analyzed a number of participant databases from the American Council of Teachers of Russian (ACTR), the Center for Arabic Studies Abroad (CASA), and the National Security Education Program (NSEP), all of which, with the exception of NSEP, focus exclusively on the Less Commonly Taught Language. Consistently across LCTLs, students who had enrolled in a prototypical four-year language course curriculum at the college/university level without study abroad experience achieved at best a median proficiency

of Intermediate Low on the ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI). Similar trends can be seen in the self-reported OPI scores for students that had been awarded Foreign Language and Area Studies (FLAS) fellowships during the academic years and summers for 2000-2001 and 2001-2002. For those students with five years of foreign language study, generally including a significant study abroad experience, the median OPI ratings ranged from proficiency levels of Advanced Mid to High in French, German and Spanish, but only Advanced Low to Mid for Chinese, Japanese and Russian, and only Intermediate Mid to High for LCTLs such as Arabic and Korean.

Given these current conditions, the following recommendations are proposed for those engaged in teaching foreign languages in colleges and universities in the United States.

- There is a need to build the American foreign language educational “pipeline” both down and out – that is to say, to think not just in terms of vertical articulation, from kindergarten to college, but also in terms of horizontal articulation, among instructional settings both domestically and overseas, at all levels of instruction.
- There is a need for greater articulation with the heritage sector (and where they exist, heritage schools, such as for Chinese and Korean), wherein a significant population of genuinely bilingually and biculturally proficient young men and women are being developed even prior to commencing college study.
- There is need to enhance the articulation among the various programs supporting language learning at the advanced levels – including, but not limited to, those supported by Departments of Education, Defense and State -- so that the participants view themselves not so much as being competitors for funds as they are collaborators for meeting national needs, with each of them serving unique roles with respect to those needs.
- Finally, and perhaps foremost, there is a need for the higher educational community to come to the realization that for some of the most critical languages in particular, including Chinese, colleges and universities are in fact a minority rather than a majority provider of foreign language education in the United States. In their position at the exit point from the foreign language education pipeline, their need to provide high levels of instruction appropriate to their student populations has never been greater.