A Study of Foreign Language Learning Outcomes Assessment in U.S. Undergraduate Education

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Abstract: *This article reports on findings obtained from an online survey answered by 97 foreign language department chairs. The Web survey was pilot tested for validity and reliability and obtained a Cronbach's reliability coefficient of .80. The results suggest that student learning outcomes assessment in American undergraduate foreign language education combines performance-based and traditional assessments. The use of translation as an assessment method supersedes the application of the ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) and exit exams to gauge language proficiency. The ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines and the National Standards are common in the assessment of oral proficiency, but infrequent in the development of assessment procedures of other skills. The article also reports on obstacles that institutions face in the implementation of standards-based assessments (e.g., OPI and portfolios).*

Key words: *assessment of learning outcomes in foreign languages, foreign language assessment in undergraduate education*

Language: *relevant to all languages*

Introduction

Over the past 20 years, outcomes assessment of student learning has been central to the accountability debate in American higher education (Astin, 1987). Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, pressure for accountability from the government, taxpayers, and policymakers initiated a systematic student outcomes assessment movement that has increasingly made higher education institutions responsible for documenting the quality of their students' learning. Consequently, colleges and universities are required to evaluate and report not only what students have learned, but also how they perform with their acquired knowledge (Banta, Black, Kahn, & Jackson, 2004; Banta, Lund, Black, & Oblander, 1996; Beno, 2004; Bray & Belcher, 1987; Cross, Wiggins, & Hutchings, 1990).

A growing interest in performance assessment started with the works of Grant Wiggins (1989, 1991, 1998). In his view, student learning is better documented when standards for performance inform the assessment procedures. In language education, attention to performance assessment, as opposed to the measurement of knowledge, occurred due to the publication of the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines

and the Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) (Liskin-Gasparro, 1995; Supinski, 1995). These two initiatives were developed to serve as a benchmark for the assessment of foreign language proficiency (LeLoup & Ponteiro, 1997).

Language assessment experienced another major overhaul with the dissemination of the *Standards for Foreign Language Learning: Preparing for the 21ˢᵗ Century* (Brown & Ellingson, 2001). The standards designated the content of language learning and the abilities that the students should develop as a result of K–12 foreign language instruction (National Standards, 1996). To access complete information on the Standards, visit www.actfl.org.

In the 1980s and 1990s, the literature on language assessment strongly suggested the implementation of performance-based assessments as a way to evaluate language proficiency more effectively. Hancock (1994) defines these assessments as the procedures that evaluate student use of the language as opposed to student content-knowledge. The literature also recommends the Proficiency Guidelines and the National Standards as frameworks to develop such assessments. In practice however, assessment methods of foreign languages have not always been of a performance-based nature. As an illustration, Nuessel (1991) argues that although the proficiency movement in foreign language instruction brought on a great variety of assessment approaches, many foreign language professionals are not using such approaches to gauge the learning quality of undergraduates. Similarly, Sieloff-Magnan (1991) adds that for the sake of convenience, many programs assess foreign languages solely through discrete-point grammar tests. Likewise, Liskin-Gasparro (1996) claims that the use of performance-based assessment methods (e.g., OPI, portfolios, and projects) is occasional and that foreign language departments may not have comprehensive assessment efforts in place. In the same vein, Schulz (1998) argues that "few university language departments assume

the responsibility of formally testing and certifying students in the competencies of their majors before awarding degrees . . . " (p. 12). Byrnes (2002) claims that the state of language assessment is still deficient.

In general, research on assessment of foreign languages at the college level is scarce (Bricault, 2001; Mathews & Hansen, 2004). To date, little is known to indicate whether or not changes have occurred and there is a lack of evidence about learning outcomes assessments of foreign languages.

This article reports on findings obtained from an online survey answered by 97 U.S. foreign language department chairs. The questionnaire was developed from a review of the literature pertaining to outcomes assessment practices in foreign languages. The survey was pilot tested to ascertain its validity and reliability. The reliability Cronbach's coefficient was .80.

The purpose of the study was to develop a description of the existing outcomes assessment practices of foreign language proficiency at comprehensive and baccalaureate institutions in the United States. The study also describes the extent to which the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines and the ACTFL National Foreign Language Standards are used to develop performance-based assessments to evaluate language skills. Obstacles to implementing performance-based assessments are also reported.

Literature Review

Historically, American foreign language education has experienced many curricular changes as a result of economic and political pressures (Kramsch, 1989). The lack of foreign language proficiency among Americans, first chronicled in the 1979 President's Commission on Foreign Language and International Studies Report, was, in part, a major force for these changes (Schulz, 1988; Spolsky, 2000).

During the 1970s, concern grew for more student-oriented methodologies that moved away from the audio-lingual habit formation principle of the 1960s toward a communicative application of language

learning (Savignon, 1998). Of special attention among the humanistic approaches was the Communicative Approach (Larsen-Freeman, 2001), also known as Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) (Omaggio-Hadley, 2001). The theoretical framework of this approach was grounded in the second language (L2) notion of *communicative competence* espoused by Savignon (1972) and Canale and Swain (1980). They asserted that competence in a foreign language was established by the learner's ability to communicate in the target language in real situations. Language teaching under this view is intended to promote communication by engaging the learner in activities that mirror real-life scenarios in which the language teacher adopts the role of facilitator (Knight, 2001). According to Omaggio-Hadley (2001), CLT did not prescribe a particular language method or curricular design. On the contrary, CLT was congruent with any method whose main objective was language proficiency.

Since then, the foreign language curriculum has been redesigned to enable learners to communicate proficiently in a foreign language (Hewitt, Ryan, & Kuhs, 1993; Thompson, 1991). For departments of foreign languages, this emerging curricular goal resulted in a conscious effort to take into consideration students' needs and instructional practices to foster systematic and accountable assessment procedures (Swaffar, 1998).

In the 1980s, a performance movement introduced standards and guidelines that would bring about dramatic changes in classroom instruction and assessment practices (Thompson, 1991; Wood, 1999). Such standards and guidelines spearheaded national campaigns intended to improve the low proficiency level of foreign languages among American students (Brown, 1995). Consequently, the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages started to promote the Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) and the Proficiency Guidelines (Sieloff-Magnan, 1991; Supinsky, 1995).

Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI)

The OPI was intended to measure language production as a whole by determining the level of proficiency attained by an individual without regard to the method used to learn the language (Liskin-Gasparro, 2003). Glisan and Foltz (1998) argue that students with higher language classroom achievement tend to score higher on the OPI. Nevertheless, Shrum and Glisan (2000) add that the OPI is not to be used as a classroom test since it does not measure students' progress in a particular language course. Koike and Hinojosa (1998) recommend an oral achievement test for this purpose.

Shrum and Glisan (2000) describe the OPI as a face-to-face (or telephonic), tape-recorded interview carried out by a trained proficiency examiner. They further explain that the interview consists of a warm-up (initial questions to set the stage). Then, it follows with level checks to determine whether the examinee consistently carries out the task at a specific level. The examiner uses probes to move the interview to another level. The session may also include a role-play between the student and the examiner. Finally, a wind-down period consisting of easy-to-answer questions ensues. The OPI may last up to half an hour. Swender (1999) adds that the examiner would score the student's performance against the Speaking Proficiency Guidelines. A second examiner also reviews the student's interview to assign a second score to ensure interrater reliability.

Other Types of Assessments

Assessment methods inspired by the performance movement would emphasize application of knowledge using an array of linguistic skills (Fidalgo & Von Schmidt, 1995; Hancock, 1994). Among other innovative approaches for performance-based foreign language assessment, the literature highlights self-assessments to evaluate students' perceptions of their learning, and portfolios to assess development of writing skills (Liskin-Gasparro, 1996). These performance-based assessments prescribe the

use of rubrics containing criteria to evaluate student proficiency (Shohamy, 1998; Supinsky, 1995).

Self-Assessment

Bailey (1998) interprets self-assessment as the process by which the students themselves appraise their language skills and knowledge. Henning (1993) and Underhill (1987) regard self-assessment as the most accessible, most inexpensive, and fastest form of assessment. Henning (1993) emphasizes that self-assessment can be a stimulating activity for the students since it includes them in the assessment process. As a result, students claim ownership of their learning (Randall, 1999). Likewise, Blue (1994), Dickinson (1987), and Moritz (1996) express that self-assessment is a relevant educational goal in its own right and that students should be trained in performing self-assessments. Dickinson (1987) further adds that self-assessment is most suitable for formative assessment, placement, and diagnostic testing. Liskin-Gasparro (1996) stresses that self-assessment should expand, rather than substitute, teacher assessment of student progress. For an example of the application of self-assessment, refer to Barnhardt, Kevorkian, and Delett (1998).

Student Portfolios

Portfolio assessment of student learning is a methodic, longitudinal compilation of student assignments developed out of particular, established instructional objectives and appraised in relation to these instructional purposes (Bailey, 1998; Barnhardt, Kevorkian, & Delett, 1998; Belanoff & Dickson, 1991; Liskin-Gasparro, 1996; Ponte, 2000; Shrum & Glisan, 2000). Liskin-Gasparro (1995) explains that there are *progress portfolios* and *best-work portfolios*. The former is similar to a scrapbook and contains samples of assignments created throughout the course. The latter showcases samples selected by the students themselves following pre-established guidelines regarding the types and quantity of samples. She further annotates that the students have to provide a rationale for the selection of their samples. Shrum and Glisan (2000) claim that portfolios can present new perspectives on student learning that traditional exams cannot offer. For complete guidelines on how to implement portfolios in foreign language assessment, see Barnhardt, Kevorkian, and Delett (1998).

The literature also underlines other assessments that can be considered performance-based, if implemented with a demonstration of linguistic skills in mind: exit exams (Teschner, 1991; Walker, 1998), computer-assisted assessment for language proficiency (Chung, 2005; Dunkel, 1999; Norris, 2001), capstone course projects (Black & Hundley, 2004; Blattner & Frazier, 2004; Hummer, 1997; Jensen & Wenzel, 2001), and service learning projects (Butin, 2003; Cairn & Cairn, 1999; Holland, 2001).

Exit Exams

Walker (1998) argues that exit exams can be an ideal way to measure the level of language mastery attained by majors and minors. According to him, colleges and universities pressured to demonstrate that their students have learned a foreign language could benefit from this on-going type of assessment. At his institution (Bradley University), German majors are given a multistep battery of assessments. First, students retake the German entry placement exam, and then they fill a two-part exit survey. Next, they take a German achievement test. They also have to submit a copy of their portfolio comprising samples of course assignments. This includes results in oral language performance. Finally, students' grades are also added to this assessment together with written reports from the students' employers (this only applies to students doing internships).

On the other hand, Fleak (1991) suggests an exit exam divided into four parts that would cover each linguistic component (speaking, listening, reading, and writing). At his institution (University of

South Carolina), the Spanish faculty devised an exit exam consisting of an oral part (descriptions, narrations in the past, situational tasks, general topics), listening comprehension (advertisements for travel plans, restaurants, rental apartments, short interviews, and conversations about others), reading comprehension (authentic materials such as ads, news articles, literature, application forms, timetables, menus), and a test of writing (two short tasks in the past and the present). The' writing test is scored according to performance in morphosyntaxis (40%), lexical usage (40%), content/organization (5%), and mechanics (10%).

Fleak further notes that exit exams are recommended as language assessments because they can determine the student's level of proficiency at the end of a course. Thus, progression to the next course can be easier. Walker (1998) adds that if exit exams are to have worth and effectiveness, faculty advisors should be enthusiastic to follow through with the assessment procedures until their advisees finish their studies.

Computer-Assisted Assessment

Kremer (2004) explains that computer-assisted testing can be very advantageous because it provides a variety of question formats. In addition, the workload of instructors can be significantly reduced and a better service to students can be offered if other technologies are used in conjunction with computer-assisted testing. During 2000–2005, computer-assisted testing made a breakthrough with new devices that facilitate the grading of non-multiple choice tests. Companies such as ETS Technologies, Knowledge Analysis Technologies, and Vantage Learning have designed software that allows the scoring of essays automatically and with a high degree of reliability (Chung, 2005).

Computer-assisted testing can also be implemented as a tool to assess the individual's learning level within a specific group. Dunkel (1999) referred to this type of assessment as *computer-adaptive testing* (CAT). In this method of assessment, the computer chooses the questions according to the linguistic level of the examinee. According to Dunkel, CAT is very suitable for students pursuing certification or a teaching license in foreign languages.

Yet despite all the potential advantages of computer-assisted testing, some caution should be exercised when implementing it as part of a student learning assessment plan. In a study on computer-assisted testing and oral proficiency, Norris (2001) found that speaking competence may not be objectively scorable since there is no alignment between the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines and the standards used by computer test designers. Another study on computer L2 reading tests and printed paper tests found that computer-presented reading tests may not "provide the comfort of paper-based reading" (Sawaki, 2001, p. 49). Finally, Kremer (2004) warns that an effective computerized testing program demands a huge commitment from language departments to keep up with the latest technological breakthroughs.

Capstone Course Project

A capstone course is a course that helps students to achieve curricular goals by consolidating and broadening their college experience through comprehensive academic projects (Brooks, Benton-Kupper, & Slayton, 2004). In a capstone course project, students can look into their own learning and supply vital information about the quality of the curriculum (Black & Hundley, 2004). Critical thinking can also be measured through capstone course projects (Blattner & Frazier, 2004; Hummer, 1997) since an array of performance-based activities such as discussions and project designs can be implemented (Jensen & Wenzel, 2001).

A thorough review of the literature revealed a paucity of research on the use of capstone course projects in foreign language assessment. In an article on the evaluation of foreign language student teachers, Christensen (1989) suggests that capstone courses in foreign language education can

serve as a source of multiple assessment data. The researcher adds that the course should be ideally introduced during the students' senior year and it could be team taught. He continues to explain that a project as an assessment method in the capstone course could be a project used in regular courses, but in abbreviated form. Most importantly, according to Christensen, the importance of the project should be placed on "verification of competency rather than diagnosis of deficiencies . . . " (p. 22).

Service Learning Project

According to Butin (2003), service learning has grown in the K–16 educational arena as it develops students' outcomes, foments civility, and harbors a sense of commitment between the institution and the faculty. Implementing service learning projects demands active participation and collaboration from the community, students, teachers, and administration in the pursuit of shared objectives. More specifically, students are encouraged to work closely with the community as a requirement of a course (Holland, 2001). Due to the nature of service learning, performance-based assessments can easily be incorporated. Thus, students may be required to apply what they learned in the classroom to real life scenarios. For instance, they can serve as tutors in English as a Second Language programs (Cairn & Cairn, 1999). To ensure quality, teachers must observe and record not only what and how the students do, but also the effect of the experience on the other participating agents of the project (i.e., community and special populations) (Holland, 2001).

The ACTFL National Standards and Their Influence on Performance Assessment Methods

A major contribution to the performance-based assessment movement was provided by the issuance of the ACTFL National Standards in 1996. The *Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century* promoted the assessment of K–12 languages

in a contextualized way (James, 2000). The ACTFL Standards encapsulate language learning and its subsequent assessment in five broad areas: communication, cultures, connections, comparison, and communities (National Standards, 1999; Thompson, 2001). These areas serve as frameworks for the design of instructional models centered on meaningful communicative tasks to allow learners to use language in real-life situations (Schulz, 1998; Thompson, 2001; Wood, 1999).

In spite of the boom of the performance-based assessment movement, there is still a tendency at many higher education institutions to regard foreign language assessment as an evaluation of linguistic knowledge. Therefore, there is an over reliance on traditional assessment methods such as discrete-point grammar and vocabulary tests usually designed by faculty (Sieloff-Magnan, 1991). Although convenient and easy to administer, these types of assessments do not provide data on students' actual linguistic skills and they tend to oversimplify language learning as the mere acquisition of isolated linguistic points (Liskin-Gasparro, 1996).

In summary, foreign language programs can demonstrate academic progress through the implementation of assessment procedures that measure the level of proficiency attained by their students (Bricault, 2001). A growing demand for demonstrable foreign language proficiency became the essence of undergraduate curricula, and fostered departmental efforts for performance-based assessments and pedagogical effectiveness (Nuessel, 1991). For this reason, special attention has been given to defining proficiency in the context of comprehensive performance-based assessments (Bailey, 1998; Glisan & Foltz, 1998; Rifkin, Malone, Christian, & Johnson, 2003).

Methodology

Population

The population was comprised of 1,163 institutions: 570 baccalaureate and 593 comprehensive institutions as listed in the Carnegie

TABLE 1					
Population, Sample, and Respondents					
n = 1,163		n = 250		n = 97	
Population		Sample		Respondents	
Bacc.	Comp.	Bacc.	Comp.	Bacc.	Comp.
570	593	123	127	50	47

Classification report. There were 353 public and 810 private colleges and universities, most of which were located in the eastern half of the country. Baccalaureate colleges have a strong emphasis on liberal arts education. Comprehensive institutions embrace both liberal arts education and general education, and confer Master's degrees. At both types of institutions, foreign languages are a key component of their curriculum.

Sample
A series of procedures were followed to obtain a stratified random sample from a target population of 1,163 institutions. A stratified random sampling formula was used to draw the sample. The institutions were divided into two groups (see Table 1), baccalaureate and comprehensive, and then a sampling formula was applied to obtain the number of completed surveys needed for a 95% confidence level. The formula presented in Dillman (2000, p. 206) was used. The application of Dillman's formula suggested a number of 89 completed surveys for the study to reflect the target population with a 95% confidence level.

A stratified random sample consisting of 123 baccalaureate and 127 comprehensive institutions was drawn by using a computer-generated number table. It is important to note that from this sample ($n = 250$), 97 Web surveys were answered, representing a response rate of 39%.

Instrumentation
Information collected from the literature pertaining to learning assessment practices in foreign languages guided the construction of an initial version of the instrument.

The survey included six sections: introductory question, assessment methods, ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines, ACTFL National Standards, obstacles to implementing performance-based assessments, and general information. The sections contained closed-response items, such as a Likert-type scale, and Yes/No responses, and open-response items in the form of short-answer questions (see Appendix A).

After the paper survey was critiqued by a panel of survey experts and modified by the researcher, a Web version was created using the services provided by hostedsurvey.com. A Web survey format was used because it "offers so much potential for so little cost" (Dillman, 2000, p. 400) and because data can be easily gathered and analyzed. Cronbach's alpha was computed to determine the level of internal consistency of the survey. The resulting coefficient was an acceptable .80, which corroborates the reliability of the survey.
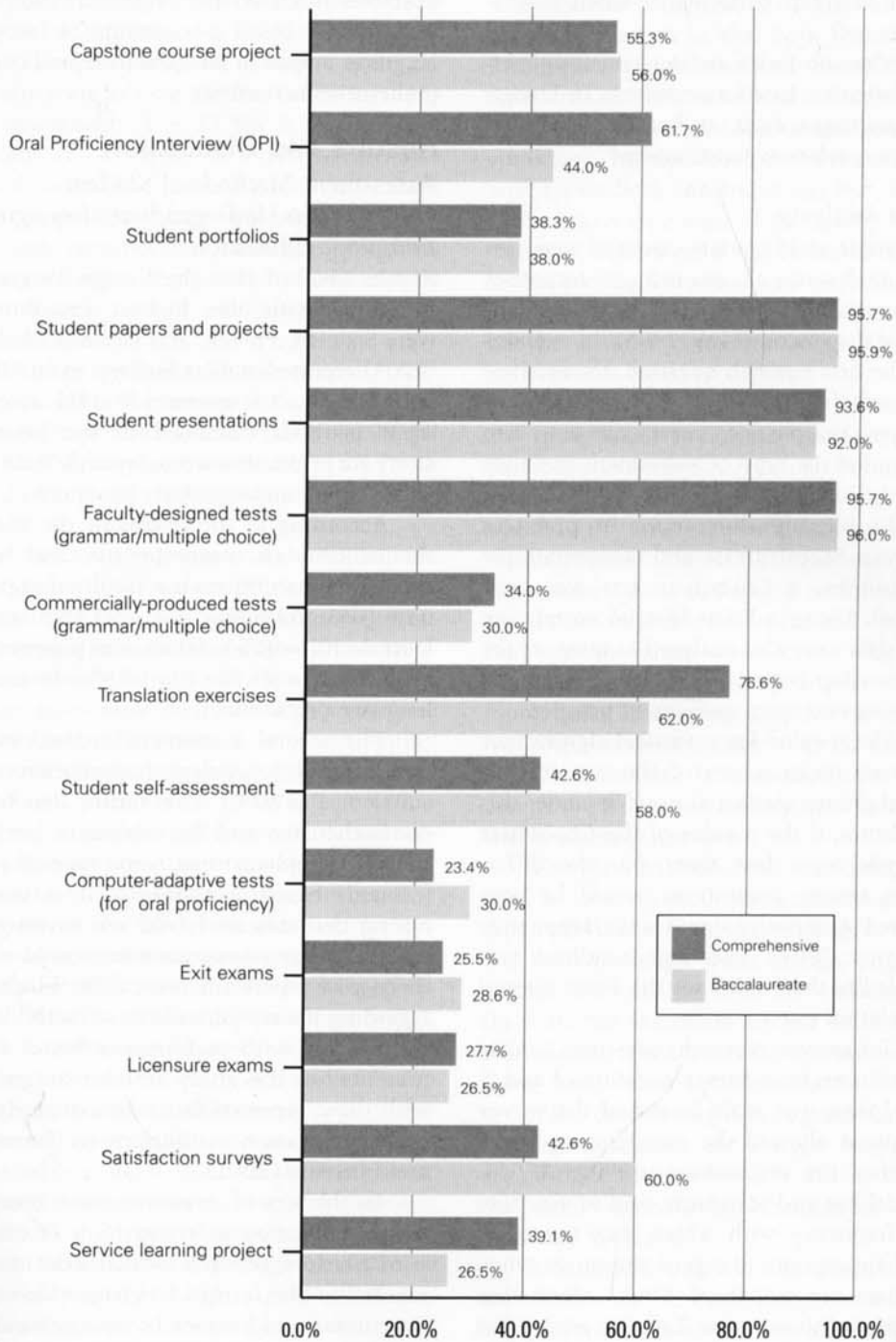
On October 3, 2005, 250 department chairs were sent an e-mail to solicit their participation and to let them know about the purpose and the importance of the research. The message also stated that they would receive an executive summary of the results if an e-mail address were provided. E-mails and physical addresses of the respondents were obtained from the Web sites of each institution.

To address the purpose of the study, the following research questions were examined:
1. Which assessment methods are being used at baccalaureate and comprehensive institutions to evaluate learning outcomes of students majoring in foreign languages?

FIGURE 1

Assessment Methods at Both Baccalaureate and Comprehensive Institutions

Assessment Method	Comprehensive	Baccalaureate
Capstone course project	55.3%	56.0%
Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI)	61.7%	44.0%
Student portfolios	38.3%	38.0%
Student papers and projects	95.7%	95.9%
Student presentations	93.6%	92.0%
Faculty-designed tests (grammar/multiple choice)	95.7%	96.0%
Commercially-produced tests (grammar/multiple choice)	34.0%	30.0%
Translation exercises	76.6%	62.0%
Student self-assessment	42.6%	58.0%
Computer-adaptive tests (for oral proficiency)	23.4%	30.0%
Exit exams	25.5%	28.6%
Licensure exams	27.7%	26.5%
Satisfaction surveys	42.6%	60.0%
Service learning project	39.1%	26.5%

Comprehensive (*n* = 47); Baccalaureate (*n* = 50)

2. How frequently are baccalaureate and comprehensive institutions using the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines and National Standards for foreign language to develop performance-based assessments?

3. What obstacles to implementing performance-based assessments in foreign languages exist at baccalaureate and comprehensive institutions?

Data Analysis

Univariate and bivariate statistics were utilized to describe the institutions' responses and to establish measures of central tendency and dispersion (Fink, 1995). In examining the first research question, the analysis reported frequencies and percentages of all "yes" responses to survey question 3 to determine the type of assessment methods that the institutions use (see Figure 1).

To identify differences in practices between baccalaureate and comprehensive institutions, a Chi-square test was conducted. Using a Point Biserial correlation test, data were also analyzed to measure the relationship between institutional size and learning outcomes assessment practices.

The *p* value for statistical significance between mean scores of the two institutional groups was set at *p* < .05. Under this condition, if the *p* value of the Chi-square analysis were less than .05, the differences among institutions would be considered statistically significant (Heppner & Heppner, 2004). The same condition was applied to the *r* value for the Point Biserial correlation test.

To answer research question 2, data were drawn from survey questions 4 and 5. The Likert-type scale format of the survey questions allowed the researcher to know whether the institutions use the ACTFL Guidelines and Standards, and to ascertain the frequency with which they are used. It is appropriate to report the mode when data are not numerical. Thus, information pertaining to question 2 of this report was drawn from the mode to explain how frequently the ACTFL Guidelines are used.

To answer the third research question, data were drawn from survey question 6. This question also used a Likert-type scale to ascertain the extent to which obstacles hindered the implementation of performance-based assessments of foreign language majors at baccalaureate and comprehensive institutions.

Results and Discussion

Assessment Methods of Student Outcomes in Undergraduate Foreign Language Education

Results showed that the foreign language programs with the highest enrollment were Spanish, French, and German. Welles (2004) reported similar findings in an MLA report. Thus, it is assumed that the assessment methods discussed in the present study are primarily used in Spanish, French, and German undergraduate programs.

According to the results of the study, the majority of comprehensive and baccalaureate institutions use faculty-designed tests (comprehensive [C] = 95.7%; baccalaureate [B] = 96%) and student papers and projects (C = 95.7%; B = 95.9%) to assess language proficiency.

The second assessment method most widely used is student presentations (C = 93.6%; B = 92%). This means that both comprehensive and baccalaureate institutions are implementing some type of performance-based assessments. It is worth noting that this study did not investigate whether these assessments are scored with the use of a performance rubric. Findings regarding the use of traditional methods in conjunction with performance-based ones presented in this study are also congruent with those reported in a national study of higher education institutions by Peterson and Einarson (2001).

In this era of communicative competency, translation exercises (C = 76.6%; B = 62%) were selected as methods implemented in the foreign language classroom over more performance-based assessments like the OPI (C = 61.7%; B = 44%).

Other performance-based assessment methods such as student portfolios (C = 38.3%; B = 38%), student self-assessment (C = 42.6%; B = 58%), and service learning projects (C = 39.1%; B = 26.5%) are used by fewer institutions.

Computer-adaptive tests for oral proficiency are among the least used methods of assessment (C = 23.4%; B = 30%). Exit exams (C = 25.5%; B = 28.6%) are also rarely used. The limited use of exit exams by comprehensive and baccalaureate institutions corroborates what Shultz (1998) observed regarding the lack of assessments of student overall competencies before graduation.

Other methods of assessments, self-reported by the institutions, were commercially-produced tests (C = 34.0%; B = 30.0%), licensure exams (C = 27.7%; B = 26.5%), and satisfaction surveys (C = 42.6%; B = 60.0%).

As all of the p values of the Chi-square tests were not less than .05, it is concluded that there are no significant differences between institutional groups. Thus, comprehensive institutions are likely to use the same assessment methods as baccalaureate institutions. However, it is worth noting that for service learning projects, the Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI), translation exercises, student self-assessment, and satisfaction surveys, there is a slight, but not statistically significant, difference between comprehensive and baccalaureate institutions. Comprehensive institutions are more likely to implement service learning projects, the Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI), and translation exercises, while baccalaureate institutions use more student self-assessment and satisfaction surveys. The r values of the Point Biserial correlation tests also support the notion that there is a weak relationship between the size of the institution and the types of assessment methods likely to be used. The average of the Point Biserial was 0.3. Thus, regardless of the institution size, a variety of assessments can be implemented.

The ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines and the National Standards in the Undergraduate Foreign Language Landscape

The general conclusion of the findings across the sample is that both the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines and the National Standards are likely to be used in the development of performance-based assessments for speaking. The modal value of the statistical analysis for both constructs was five, which in the Likert-type scale of the survey meant "always." Therefore, it can be assumed that at both comprehensive and baccalaureate institutions oral communication assessment has been most commonly done through performance-based procedures.

The ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines are rarely used to develop performance-based assessments for reading. The modal value of the statistical analysis was one, which in the Likert-type scale of the survey meant "never." The ACTFL guidelines are "sometimes" used to develop performance-based assessments for listening and writing. Both modal values were three, which in the Likert-type scale of the survey meant "sometimes." Reading and listening are neglected when it comes to performance-based assessments. It is assumed that these competencies are more likely to be assessed with discreet-point tests.

The National Standards are sometimes used to develop performance-based procedures to evaluate listening, reading, writing, and the knowledge of the foreign language culture (they are not used for speaking). If the National Standards are not being used consistently, it is hoped that institutions are using locally-developed standards. If that is not the case, it might be argued that the National Standards for foreign languages are destined to turn into a wish list, as has happened with national standards for other academic subjects.

It is notable that when it comes to the use of the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines, comprehensive institutions yielded a higher mean (M = 3.87) as opposed to baccalaureate institutions (M = 3.78). Nevertheless,

both means fall between measures for "sometimes" and "most of the time." The ideal mean would be the one that suggests that the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines were "always" used. An on-going use of the proficiency guidelines guarantees performance parameters against which language learning can be assessed (Liskin-Gasparro, 1999, 2003).

Baccalaureate institutions yielded the highest mean (*M* = 3.66) for the use of the ACTFL National Standards in the development of performance-based procedures, while the mean of comprehensive institutions was 3.56. Again, both means were not in the ideal value range. As the literature review suggests, effective performance-based procedures should be based on clearly specified guidelines and standards. The use of such guidelines and standards has to be continuous. Unfortunately, the results of the study indicate that the implementation of guidelines and standards is sporadic.

Obstacles to Implementing Performance-Based Assessments

On one hand, the obstacle with the highest modal value, *Mo* = 4, "most of the time," was designing performance-based procedures. If institutions regard, most of the time, the design of performance-based procedures as an obstacle, this may imply that not all foreign language teachers possess the skills to create assessments different from student papers/projects and student presentations. This explains the low use of other performance-based assessments such as student portfolios or exit interviews. Effective implementation of portfolios or exit interviews may require careful assessment design. On the other hand, the obstacle with the lowest modal value, *Mo* = 1, "never," was skepticism from administrators. This may indicate that administrators at comprehensive and baccalaureate institutions are supporting assessment efforts of student learning and, best of all, it is hoped that they believe in the positive effects of performance-based assessments on program quality.

The lack of faculty training in administering and scoring performance-based assessments was reported as an obstacle (*Mo* = 4, "most of the time"). This suggests that foreign language teachers at comprehensive and baccalaureate institutions may not know how to carry out and score an assessment with pre-established criteria or rubrics, for example on a service learning project. For this reason, the use of traditional assessment methods is more popular. Traditional assessment methods, such as multiple-choice tests for grammar, vocabulary, and reading comprehension, are easy to administer and score. To improve faculty lack of preparation in performance-based assessment, Khattri, Reeve, and Kane (1998) suggest professional development projects in which teachers can become more effective assessment providers through ongoing training.

Other matters of concern among the participating institutions are assuring validity and reliability of performance-based assessments, and lack of training in scale interpretation. As the literature on validity and reliability of assessment instruments has proposed, the lack of these two qualities renders the assessment tool inapplicable (Brindley, 1994; Nunan, 1991; Schulz, 1998). Therefore, it is paramount that foreign language teachers be familiar with techniques to enhance validity and reliability of assessment tools. With regard to the training in scale interpretation, ACTFL has developed a series of workshops that deal with performance-based assessment. Familiarization with rubrics and scales is one of the goals of these workshops (ACTFL, 2005).

The high cost of performance-based procedures was also rated as a potential obstacle (*Mo* = 4, "most of the time"). It is not strange that the participating institutions found the cost of implementation of performance-based assessments as an obstacle, if it is taken into consideration that implementation will probably start with training. The investment in training workshops can create an extra financial

burden on the already-tight budgets of foreign language departments. According to the ACTFL Web site, the cost of a performance assessment workshop can range from $1,650 to $2,200. A four-day OPI tester training can cost from $4,250 to $4,750 for a maximum of ten attendees. This means that large foreign language departments may be forced to plan more than one workshop. If an official OPI is given, either the student will have to cover the cost or departments will have to sample a group of students and pay for their OPIs.

Finally, the open-ended question reported that lack of time, lack of faculty knowledge about performance-based assessments, and faculty unwillingness to be trained can also be obstacles. In a study on performance assessment conducted by Khattri, Reeve, and Kane (1998), they recommend that faculty work as a team in order to understand the techniques of performance assessment. They also argue that assessment training is more effective when it allows faculty members to "examine their pedagogical assumptions and beliefs" (p. 158).

Research Implications and Limitations

The current study presented some limitations that may restrict the scope of generalizations that can be made from the findings. The fact that little variance was found between the comprehensive and the baccalaureate institutions could be the result of the small size of the sample groups (comprehensive, n = 47 and baccalaureate, n = 50). A larger sample might have yielded more variance between the two groups.

Another limitation of the study is that not all of the information provided by the participating institutions came from department chairs. In some cases, department chairs forwarded the survey to faculty members who were more knowledgeable about the assessment practices of the institution. This change of perspective may have affected the content reliability of the answers provided by institutions within the same group (comprehensive or baccalaureate).

To narrow the scope of the study, the survey only focused on programs with foreign language majors since learning outcomes assessments of these students are central to ensure program quality and effectiveness.

Yet despite these limitations, the findings suggest a series of implications for practice and future research. There is evidence that student learning outcomes assessment is taking place by means of a combination of traditional and performance-based assessments. Various performance-based assessments, such as the OPI, student portfolios, and exit interviews, are not widely used. The OPI is gaining some popularity among comprehensive and baccalaureate institutions. Nevertheless, the implementations of the OPI and the exit interviews are not as high as the implementation of translation exercises. We can assume from this study that the assessment of conversational competence of foreign language majors may need some attention. This study also found that that the use of technology for oral proficiency testing at the undergraduate level is rare.

Furthermore, the findings of this study indicate that the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines and the National Standards have not gained the expected popularity in the assessment practices of foreign language undergraduate programs. The application of the guidelines and the standards is infrequent in the development of performance-based procedures for listening, reading, and writing. It is worth mentioning that currently ACTFL does not have any performance-based assessments for listening and reading.

The National Standards are not used regularly to develop performance-based assessments to evaluate foreign language culture. This may be due to the fact that the Proficiency Guidelines and the National Standards were initially designed for K–12 students. Thus, implementation at the college level is slow.

Another implication from the study is that performance-based assessments such as portfolios, service learning projects, and

computer-adaptive tests for oral proficiency have not been fully implemented in foreign language undergraduate programs because of a series of obstacles. Faculty training on performance-based assessments is essential, if good results are to be achieved. The cost of developing or implementing these assessments must be included in the annual budget of the foreign language departments. Teachers resistant to professional development sessions must be held accountable and encouraged to participate in these types of activities. Professional development sessions must be geared toward the effective integration of performance-based assessments into classroom instruction.

Recommendations for Further Research

Further studies could include qualitative research that explores the perceptions of the faculty on performance-based assessment in the foreign language classroom. Another survey design could investigate the frequency and proportion in which assessment methods are used. As this study was exploratory, only some long-established assessment methods were included. Thus, special attention could be given to the emerging use of Integrated Performance Assessment (IPA) at the undergraduate level.

More empirical research is needed regarding the specific use of the student portfolio and the exit exams in undergraduate foreign language education. It is worth knowing if these assessments have a feasible applicability in the complex and multilayered foreign language curriculum.

Other potential research stemming from this study could conduct a follow-up survey that focuses on the performance-based assessments that yielded the highest implementation ratings. The survey could investigate whether such assessments are properly designed, implemented, and scored.

Conclusions

Student learning outcomes assessment in American undergraduate foreign language education combines performance-based and traditional assessments, but some of these assessments tend to overemphasize the evaluation of linguistic knowledge, one-way oral production, or writing skills. The use of translation as an assessment method supersedes the application of the OPI and exit exams to gauge language proficiency. The use of student portfolios to assess written progress over time is minimal. The implementation of student self-assessment is emerging.

The ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines and the ACTFL National Standards for Foreign Language Learning have not been embraced with the depth and breadth that they should. Their application has been limited to oral evaluation. Consequently, comprehensive and baccalaureate institutions are neglecting the implementation of the guidelines and the standards in the development of their own performance-based assessments that provide relevant data on the students' acquisition of listening, reading, writing skills, and knowledge of the foreign culture.

One recommendation that emerged from this study is for ACTFL to include language assessment as one of the monthly topics: "Discovering Language Assessments Month."

Foreign language teachers in the K–16 system need to be presented, in various ways, with the different possibilities of performance-based assessments. College teachers need to be empowered and reassured, and ACTFL should also design some specific training sessions for this population.

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APPENDIX A

Paper Copy of the Survey

LEARNING OUTCOMES ASSESSMENT OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE:
A NATIONAL SURVEY OF BACCALAUREATE AND
COMPREHENSIVE INSTITUTIONS

This survey is about learning outcomes assessment of students majoring in Foreign Lan-
guages. Please take a few minutes to complete it. Your cooperation is very much appreciated.

1. Please indicate which Foreign Language majors your institution offers. Check all that
   apply.

❑ Chinese

❑ French

❑ German

❑ Hebrew

❑ Italian

❑ Japanese

❑ Latin

❑ Portuguese

❑ Russian

❑ Spanish

❑ Other: _____

2. What are your 3 top foreign language majors in terms of enrollment during the fall 2005?
   Enter N/A in the remaining spaces, if your institution only has 1 or 2 top FL majors.

a. Major ranked #1_____

b. Major ranked #2_____

c. Major ranked #3_____

Assessment Methods:_____

3. Please indicate which of the following assessment methods your institution uses to evalu-
    ate learning outcomes of students majoring in (based on the first major you identified in
    question 2). Check all that apply.

a. Capstone course project   ❑ Yes (1)   ❑ No (2)

b. Oral proficiency interview (OPI) ❑ Yes (1)   ❑ No (2)

c. Student portfolio   ❑ Yes (1)   ❑ No (2)

d. Student papers and projects   ❑ Yes (1)   ❑ No (2)

.e. Student presentations   ❑ Yes (1)   ❑ No (2)

f. Faculty-designed tests
    (multiple choice)   ❑ Yes (1)   ❑ No (2)

i. Student self-assessment   ❑ Yes (1)   ❑ No (2)

j. Computer-adaptive tests
    (for oral proficiency)   ❑ Yes (1)   ❑ No (2)

k. Exit interviews   ❑ Yes (1)   ❑ No (2)

o. Service learning projects   ❑ Yes (1)   ❑ No (2)

p. Other (please be specific): _____

ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines

4. How frequently does your institution use the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines as a frame-
    work to develop performance-based assessments to evaluate the skills of students major-
    ing in foreign languages?

	Never used (1)	Rarely used (2)	Some-times used (3)	Most of the time used (4)	Always used (5)	N/A (6)
a. Listening Skills						
b. Oral Proficiency						
c. Reading Skills						
d. Writing Skills						

ACTFL National Standards

5. How frequently does your institution use the ACTFL National Standards as a framework to develop performance-based assessments to evaluate the skills of students majoring in foreign languages?

	Never used (1)	Rarely used (2)	Some-times used (3)	Most of the time used (4)	Always used (5)	N/A (6)
a. Listening Skills						
b. Oral Proficiency						
c. Reading Skills						
d. Writing Skills						
e. Knowledge of the Culture						

Obstacles to Implementing Alternative Assessment:

6. Indicate to what extent the following obstacles keep your institution from implementing performance-based assessments to evaluate the skills of students majoring in foreign languages?

	Never an obstacle (1)	Rarely an obstacle (2)	Some-times an obstacle (3)	Most of the time an obstacle (4)	Always an obstacle (5)	N/A (6)
a. High costs associated with the implementation of alternative assessment procedures.						
b. Skepticism from administrators.						
c. Resistance from the faculty.						
d. Resistance from the students.						
e. Difficulty in finding appropriate assessment tools.						
f. Difficulty in designing appropriate assessment tools.						
g. Faculty's lack of training in administering alternative outcomes assessment procedures.						

h. Faculty's lack of training in scoring alternative outcomes assessment procedures.						
i. Faculty's lack of training in interpreting the proficiency rating scales that usually accompany alternative assessment procedures.						
j. Trying to ensure validity and reliability of alternative assessment procedures.						
k. Amount of time require from faculty to score this type of assessments.						

Other (Please be specific): _____

Other information:

7. Please indicate if your institution is:

❑ Public (1)

❑ Private (2)

8. Please indicate is your institution is:

❑ Baccalaureate (1)

❑ Comprehensive (Master's) (2)

9. Approximately how many students attend your institution? (Check only one answer)

❑ Fewer than 1000

❑ 1000 to 1999

❑ 2000 to 2999

❑ 3000 to 3999

❑ 4000 to 4999

❑ 5000 to 5999

❑ 6000 to 6999

❑ 7000 to 7999

❑ 8000 or more

10. Approximately how many students in your institution are enrolled in Foreign Language classes? (Check only one answer)

❑ Fewer than 100

❑ 100 to 199

❑ 200 to 299

❑ 300 to 399

❑ 400 to 499

❑ 500 to 599

❑ 600 to 699

❑ 700 to 799

❑ 800 to 899

❑ 900 to 999

❑ 1000 or more

11. Does your institution offer a degree in Foreign Language education?

❑ Yes (1)   ❑ No (2)

12. Please indicate if you would like to receive an electronic copy of the executive summary of the survey results by providing your email address:

Thanks for your answers!

Remarks: The layout, the design and the page breaks shown in this copy of the survey are different from what the actual Web survey looked like. This paper copy is only intended to show the content of the survey.