

# College Faculty Perceptions About Foreign Language

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**Abstract:** *Most postsecondary institutions are committed to internationalization of their curricula, global awareness, and appreciation for multiculturalism. However, proficiency in a foreign language plays a marginal role, at best, in reaching these goals. In an attempt to understand the perceptions about the role of foreign language in postsecondary education, liberal arts faculty and administrators were polled regarding their beliefs about foreign language. Responses indicate that regardless of their support for foreign language, faculty members generally believe that learning another language means instruction in grammar and lexicon, with little attention to culture. Although faculty generally agreed that proficiency in another language is important, degree programs in the service professions were viewed as too prescriptive to allow students enough time to learn another language.*

**Key words:** *attitudes, college foreign language, faculty survey, foreign language requirement, perceptions,*

**Languages:** *English*

## Background

The report of Strategic Task Force on Education Abroad characterized America's ignorance of the world as a national liability, and it urged the government to increase the number of college students who learn foreign languages (CNN, 2003). In its comments, the task force criticized America's stubborn monolingualism as feeding the confusion many Americans felt after September 11, 2001 (Lovgren, 2004). There is little wonder that postsecondary institutions have set goals to internationalize their curricula, to increase the number of American students who study abroad, and to facilitate students' appreciation of diversity within the United States. Proficiency in another language goes far to meet all these goals (ADFL, 2004; Calvin & Rider, 2004; National Standards, 1999). Nevertheless, Goldberg, Lusin, and Welles (2004) found that less than one-third of American colleges require foreign language study for admission, and Calvin and Rider (2004) have described the common practice of waiving college graduation requirements in foreign language for students with as little as two years of high school coursework, despite the fact that a study by the Council for Basic Education (2004) found that as a result of the No Child Left Behind Act, instruction time in foreign language in American schools has decreased. This investigation was undertaken to understand

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what college faculty think about the place of foreign language study in postsecondary, liberal arts education and to help the profession make informed decisions about programs based upon colleagues' perceptions and beliefs.

## Methodology

Carson-Newman College, located in rural, eastern Tennessee, has a long and continuous history as a liberal arts college. The vision statement for the college proclaims its desire to have a worldwide impact, and each year approximately 50% of the 2,000 students volunteer for service projects in the United States and abroad. No prior study of a language other than English is required for admission to the college. Depending upon the degree program, the foreign language requirement for graduation varies from no coursework in college-level foreign language, to elementary-level coursework in one language, to elementary coursework in two languages, to intermediate coursework in one language. Students who maintained a "B" average during four or more years of high school language study are exempted from any foreign language requirement. Carson-Newman's lack of an entrance requirement in foreign language, coupled with wide-ranging degree program requirements in language study, and the college's vision "to have a worldwide impact" combine to make the college an opportune site at which to poll faculty about foreign language study and foreign language requirements.

During the spring of 2004, a questionnaire was sent to all of the approximately 100 faculty and administrators with faculty status inquiring about their personal experiences studying foreign languages, their opinion about college-level foreign language study, their expectations of proficiency for college-level foreign language study, their beliefs about challenges to learning another language, and reasons for learning another language. A cover letter explained that the purpose of the study was to investigate attitudes toward foreign

language by those outside the language teaching profession. (See Appendix for copies of the questionnaire and cover letter.) The responses of faculty who taught foreign languages either full-time or part-time were not included in the study. The 27 respondents included administrators, graduate and undergraduate faculty, and faculty from all divisions on campus.

In order to obtain categories of responses based solely upon the data, the literature review was written after the data were analyzed and the findings were confirmed by participants. Follow-up interviews and discussions were conducted with approximately one-third of the respondents. Portions of this manuscript were sent to participants for feedback and confirmation of findings, and that information was incorporated in the final manuscript. At various stages of the research process, drafts were sent for review and triangulation by both language faculty familiar with practices in contemporary language classrooms and by non-language faculty.

## Findings

This study informs the profession about beliefs and perceptions among college faculty who teach subjects other than foreign languages. The findings suggest that opinions about languages are formed during an individual's initial language learning experience (usually during adolescence) and that these beliefs remain unchanged during the span of an individual's professional career. These perceptions, whether positive or negative, are passed along to students and advisees and, therefore, have the potential to influence foreign language study, attitudes, and enrollment. By understanding the perceptions of university colleagues toward language study, language professionals may make better decisions about delivery of instruction and department, program, and course objectives.

### *Perceived Benefits of Foreign Language Study*

All respondents reported studying at least one language other than English, either in a classroom setting, in an independent study, or in a target country. When asked to list the language or languages that they studied, several people reported having studied multiple languages, for a total of 63 responses by 27 respondents. The languages studied, listed in alphabetical order, were Chinese ( $n = 1$ ; 1.5%), French ( $n = 14$ ; 22%), German ( $n = 14$ ; 22%), Greek ( $n = 4$ ; 6%), Hebrew ( $n = 2$ ; 3%), Italian ( $n = 1$ ; 1.5%), Japanese ( $n = 2$ ; 3%), Latin ( $n = 7$ ; 11%), Russian ( $n = 1$ ; 1.5%), Shona ( $n = 1$ ; 1.5%), and Spanish ( $n = 16$ ; 25%).

In response to the question "what language would you like to study and why," only two respondents (5%) answered that they had no desire to learn another language. Many respondents listed multiple answers for a total of 39 responses. Of these 39 responses, Spanish led the list ( $n = 10$ ; 26%), followed by French ( $n = 5$ ; 13%), German and Greek (each  $n = 3$ ; 8%), Italian, Japanese, Chinese/Mandarin, Latin, Russian (each  $n = 2$ ; 5%), with Arabic, any Scandinavian language, Samoan, Romanian, Hebrew, and any language each receiving one response ( $n = 1$ ; 3%). The primary reasons stated for studying another language were for mission work and service in the respective (language) community ( $n = 10$ ), followed by personal travel ( $n = 4$ ), to read the Bible ( $n = 4$ ), research ( $n = 3$ ), for reasons of family origin or adoption ( $n = 3$ ), the language sounds or looks beautiful ( $n = 3$ ), to understand etymology of words ( $n = 2$ ), for business ( $n = 1$ ), and to be able to communicate with a perceived enemy ( $n = 1$ ).

Most faculty members responded affirmatively when asked whether American college students should be required to know another language. When asked to give reasons, the responses indicate that liberal arts faculty members believe that knowing another language enhances one's knowledge of the world and its many

cultures (responses 1, 3, & 8), that knowing another language makes one a more informed person (responses 2, 4, 6, & 7), and that knowing another language gives one certain advantages (responses 2, 4, 5, & 6). The first and second beliefs are in keeping with traditional rationale for learning a language, and the third may be described as professional enhancement or valued added later in life (ADFL, 2004; Goldberg, Lusin, & Welles, 2004; Trappes-Lomax & Ferguson, 2002). The responses ( $N = 65$ ) given in order of frequency were:

1. appreciation or respect for other cultures in the United States and abroad ( $n = 17$ )
2. to enhance one's ability to communicate with others ( $n = 11$ )
3. global awareness ( $n = 8$ )
4. to be able to travel ( $n = 8$ )
5. for job or career opportunities ( $n = 6$ )
6. to better understand English ( $n = 5$ )
7. as part of a well-rounded, liberal arts education ( $n = 5$ )
8. to decrease ethnocentrism and xenophobia ( $n = 4$ )
9. to meet the core curriculum requirement ( $n = 1$ )

When asked how participants used the foreign language(s) that they had studied, answers clustered around work and travel or value-added purposes. Of the six respondents who stated that they had not used the language that they studied, five stated that they would like to learn another language in addition to the one(s) they had studied previously. Two of the five wanted to learn another language following the adoption of foreign-born children, two wanted to learn Spanish to be able to communicate with Hispanics in their community, and one wanted to learn another language for travel. The responses ( $n = 62$ ) given in order of frequency were:

1. for travel, including mission trips ( $n = 13$ )
2. for work in the local community ( $n = 8$ )
3. to better understand English ( $n = 7$ )

4. I haven't used my foreign language skills ( $n = 6$ )
5. for research related to my work ( $n = 6$ )
6. for work or study abroad ( $n = 5$ )
7. to understand culture or history ( $n = 4$ )
8. in my everyday work, such as composing or teaching ( $n = 4$ )
9. to get an advanced college degree ( $n = 2$ )
10. to learn another language ( $n = 1$ )
11. to read in the foreign language ( $n = 1$ )
12. to work crossword puzzles ( $n = 1$ )
13. to order in restaurants ( $n = 1$ )
14. to watch foreign films ( $n = 1$ )
15. to research genealogy ( $n = 1$ )
16. to work with exchange students ( $n = 1$ )

Summarizing, colleagues in other disciplines believe that knowing other languages heightens respect for and awareness of other people and that language study prepares students for work and travel both locally and abroad. The fact that individuals had not used the particular language they studied does not appear to negatively influence beliefs about the importance or usefulness of language study.

### *Perceived Problems with Foreign Language Study*

Despite overall support for language study, four faculty members expressed their opposition to including foreign language in the core curriculum requirements. Three of the four commented that research in cognitive development shows that languages can only be learned before puberty; and that, therefore, students who begin language study during college will not be successful.

Although research shows that bilinguals who learned a second language at an early age have denser grey matter, the ideas that children are the best language learners and that languages cannot be learned past puberty are based largely upon anecdotal evidence and regarded in the profession as persistent myths<sup>1</sup> (ADFL, 2004; BBC News, 2004). Adult learners have many learning advantages by virtue of their life experiences, their

ability to incorporate prior experiences into new situations, their wide frame of reference, and their heightened motivation for learning. They are likely to have a specific purpose for learning another language, and they do not perceive others as more capable as themselves when it comes to learning another language (Brown, 1994; Lightbown & Spada, 1999; Owens, 2004).

Two respondents called for the college to forgo a foreign language requirement. Perhaps because these faculty members teach courses in science, they drew comparisons between the core curriculum requirements for language and science. The foreign language requirement was perceived to be excessive in comparison to other core curriculum requirements. In making their case, they explained that regardless of prior high school coursework, both science majors and non-majors begin in elementary-level chemistry and biology courses. Non-science-majors have a two-semester science requirement, as compared to a four-semester language requirement for some non-language-majors. The same science faculty critical of the language requirement commented that the college loses and frightens away students by requiring they study another language. Research, however, does not bear out this belief. In fact, a study by Goldberg, Lusin, and Welles (2004) found that a foreign language graduation requirement is strongly associated with growth in enrollment in advanced language courses and the American Council of Trustees and Alumni strongly recommends foreign language study as one of seven key fields of study in the general education offerings (Latzer, 2004).

Although language professionals view culture as one of five integral components of learning another language (National Standards, 1999), analysis of responses from individuals who did not support foreign languages revealed a disjointed relationship between language and culture. While the majority of the respondents in this study stated that a liberal arts education should teach students about other

people and about other cultures,<sup>2</sup> three participants stated that these goals can be accomplished without proficiency in another language. As justification for their belief, they commented that it is possible to travel to a country and appreciate its people without speaking the local language. No mention was made by these respondents of the need for cultural knowledge within the United States, despite multiple linguistic and ethnic communities in the immediate vicinity of the college, international faculty and students on campus, multinational corporations in the area, the proximity to multiple international airports, and the importance of tourism to the area.

Other faculty members, although supportive of the goal to internationalize the curriculum and teach students about other cultures, expressed mixed feelings about the popularity of study abroad programs to England and Ireland. Three faculty members suggested that the college develop programs to support the (foreign) languages that are taught instead of “taking students to places where everyone speaks English.” One respondent asked, “What is more central to the role of the liberal arts than exposing students to the reality that more than 80% of the world does not speak English?”

During follow-up interviews by phone and e-mail, several common factors emerged among the responses of faculty with negative opinions and beliefs about foreign languages. These respondents consistently described their initial language learning experience, in each case during high school, as unpleasant and unsuccessful.

My (high school) teacher didn't know much herself. All we did was memorize words. I learned more Spanish on a mission trip than in two years of high school.

I was an A student (in high school) except for Spanish. I made Cs. On the tests the teacher . . . would say a sentence and we would write the translation. Spelling counted!

Language was very hard for me, with no long-term benefit. I was too busy trying to memorize vocabulary, whether a word was masculine or feminine, or get the right verb conjugation. I would have rather learned about the people and their culture, rather than focusing on their language.

### *Challenges to Learning Another Language*

When asked to list challenges to learning another language, all faculty, whether supportive or not, offered a response. Whereas critics stated that the college years came too late developmentally to learn another language, this belief accounted for only 9% of all responses given. Instead, the main challenges were time constraints, motivation, perceptions that language learning is difficult, and no known value for one's efforts to learn another language. Rather than being challenges unique to learning another language, these perceived challenges might apply to most academic subjects—finding time to read Shakespeare, understanding the symbols in the Periodic Table, or the applicability of the quadratic equation outside of a math class. The responses given in order of frequency are:

- Lack of time because of other priorities and curricular requirements ( $n = 10$ ; 21%)
- Lack of enthusiasm, motivation, and commitment for study ( $n = 10$ ; 21%)
- Perceptions that language is difficult, not fun, requires memorization ( $n = 9$ ; 19%)
- No perceived need or value in knowing another language ( $n = 7$ ; 15%)
- No real-life application, no experience beyond the classroom ( $n = 6$ ; 13%)
- Age ( $n = 4$ ; 9%)
- Bad high school courses create mental blocks ( $n = 1$ ; 2%)

### *Implications of Faculty Attitudes Toward Languages*

Although the respondents in this study who do not support college-level foreign

language study are in the minority ( $n = 4$ ;  $N = 27$ ), the implications to the campus community are far-reaching. This phenomenon is most evident in the comments that faculty members reported saying about foreign language and the college's foreign language requirement during advising sessions with students. In response to question 10 of the questionnaire describing what they tell students about the foreign language requirement, faculty members with unpleasant initial experiences answered that they told students not to take a language if it was not required for their major; they reported telling students that college is too late to learn another language; they advised students that certain programs of study are too demanding to spend time taking a foreign language; and they said that foreign languages are hard. They told students whose programs of study require they take a language to take as little language as possible and to get it over with as soon as possible. In contrast, colleagues in the same department or degree program whose initial experience with foreign language was positive told student advisees that even though a language was not required for their degree program, they should consider taking Spanish if they planned to work with the public; they encouraged students to begin studying another language as early as possible because work, travel, or research opportunities might present themselves; and they advised students to take as much foreign language as possible. The lasting impact of a faculty member's initial language learning experience, whether positive or negative, should not be overlooked—faculty members' beliefs are perpetuated upon student advisees and the campus community at large.

One participant in this study who teaches education courses commented that he did not take a language in high school and avoided it when he entered college, going so far as to choose his major because it did not require a foreign language. His fear was that he would be unsuccessful because he did not study a language in high

school. However, after enrolling in non-credit language courses during his late 20s and again in his 40s, the respondent is an advocate of foreign language study and of a foreign language requirement. Education majors are as likely to be advised by this faculty member as they are to be advised by his colleague, who believes that languages can only be learned by children. It is obvious that a faculty colleague's initial language experience has far-reaching effects. This example shows how future teachers, counselors, principals, and other school personnel receive mixed messages about the importance of languages, and they hear from professors whom they respect that research shows that languages cannot be learned after puberty.

Whereas two faculty members felt that the institution loses students because they are required to study a foreign language (see previous section), an equal number of faculty expressed their disappointment that the college does not include foreign language among courses required of entering freshmen. The latter said that competitive peer institutions require at least two Carnegie units of foreign language study for admission, but Carson-Newman College does not. Underlying these comments is the subtle perception that students who have studied a foreign language in high school are academically superior and better prepared for college than those who have not. These comments also reveal the faculty's chagrin regarding the college's admission policy, and the faculty described the lack of a foreign language entrance requirement as a mark against the institution's overall academic reputation.

## Discussion of the Findings

From discussions with faculty who prepare students for careers in service professions such as business, nursing, and education, the biggest objection to foreign language study is that the amount of time they perceive it takes to become fluent will take away from courses in the respective majors. To remain competitive with programs at

other institutions, faculty feel pressured to streamline the program of study in these majors, to offer courses directly related to the major, and to graduate students as quickly as possible. Knowing another language, while acknowledged to be a useful and desired skill, was not considered worth the investment of time it takes to become fluent.

None of the critics of the language requirement in the service professions commented upon the benefits of language. However, in every case, a colleague in the same department or program of study gave a personal example of how knowing another language had been a professional asset. Once again, students' perceptions of the desirability and utility of knowing another language may be influenced by chance and by the person to whom they are assigned as advisees and that advisor's perceptions about language study.

The religion department, which prepares students for a variety of different types of ministry, was a noteworthy exception to the beliefs held by other service professions. Support for foreign language study was uniformly strong among respondents in this department, where courses are taught in Greek and Hebrew.<sup>3</sup> In their advice to religion majors, faculty respondents stated that students preparing for seminary should study Biblical languages and those preparing for immediate work in churches should study a modern language to prepare themselves for diverse congregations in the United States and abroad. Some advisors mentioned they routinely encouraged advisees take *both* Biblical and modern languages. For them the issue was not how to streamline the curriculum, but how to plan schedules to ensure that students who graduate are proficient in the language or languages they would need in the future.

Responses to the question "what should average college students be able to do with the language that they study?" fell into three main categories: (a) those that help the individual without direct interaction with another person who knows the language,

(b) those that require interaction or negotiation with another speaker of the language, and (c) those whose benefits were primarily intrinsic (see Table 1). Faculty expectations of what college students should be able to do with a foreign language requirement closely resemble reasons given by faculty to learn another language (see previous section). The reasons given by faculty underscore their perception that language study has the potential to enhance students' knowledge of the world, to facilitate study,

**TABLE 1**

**What Should Average College Students Be Able to Do with the Language That They Study**

**Acts Not Requiring Participation by Another Individual Who Knows the Language**

Read newspapers	n = 5
Read online material	n = 4
Read great works (books)	n = 3
Watch movies	n = 3
Listen to news	n = 3
Translate works into English	n = 1

N = 19

**Acts Requiring Participation by Another Individual Who Knows the Language**

Speak or write with native speakers	n = 9
Study or work abroad	n = 2
Ask/answer responses to health history	n = 1
Ask for directions, restroom, hotel, etc.	n = 1
Help others in this country	n = 1

N = 14

**Acts with Intrinsic Benefits**

Understand other cultures	n = 2
Understand etymologies	n = 1
Think more broadly and carefully	n = 1

N = 4

work, and travel, and to facilitate communication with others.

Common among the responses of both critics and supporters of languages were references to grammar and translation in their foreign language courses. In response to the question "how have you used the foreign language that you have studied?" 22% ( $n = 6$ ,  $N = 27$ ) of the respondents commented that study of a foreign language had helped them better understand English grammar. When recounting their language learning experiences, most activities that respondents remembered related to vocabulary and grammar, specifically verb conjugations, vocabulary tests, dictation transcriptions, and translation exercises. Only two respondents mentioned learning about culture in their language classes. While perhaps not intentional, the omission of references to culture by the majority of respondents raises the question of whether faculty perceive language and culture as distinct, as described earlier in the findings section. These recollections may also be a reflection of the manner in which languages were taught 20 to 40 years ago, when respondents were in high school. This finding may warrant the inclusion of out-of-class language assignments in the courses required in the core curriculum. For example, many of the service learning opportunities included in advanced language courses could be accomplished by novices by modifying the course assignments, thereby exposing students to language communities and infusing elements of culture early in their language experience (Long, 2003; Overfield, 2004; Wehling, 1999). In any case, the fact that there are limited responses mentioning culture deserves further study.

### Future Directions

This study examined the perceptions and beliefs about foreign languages by the faculty at one liberal arts college. It points to the lasting impression of an individual's first language learning experience and the potential that experience has to influence

others' beliefs. More research needs to be conducted to determine to what extent these findings may be generalized to other postsecondary institutions, such as non-liberal arts institutions and institutions without a foreign language requirement in the core curriculum.

Because participation in this study was voluntary, it is possible that faculty who support languages were more likely to respond to a survey of attitudes toward language; and those not supportive of language may have chosen not to respond. This possibility does not necessarily negate the findings, but it invites replication at other postsecondary institutions.

It appears from the findings in this study that individuals' initial language learning experience influences their beliefs and perceptions about languages and that these beliefs persist relatively unchanged throughout adulthood. The profession would benefit from an examination of how and when American students are introduced to languages to attempt to ensure, as much as possible, that their initial experience is positive, interesting, intentional, and meaningful.

### Notes

1. See Snow and Hoefnagel-Höhle (1982) for empirical evidence refuting the critical period hypothesis for learning a second language. The other articles in the same volume set forth a variety of opinions on the differences between children and adults learning second languages.
2. At the other extreme, one administrator wrote that students should not be required to study other cultures.
3. The responses of religion faculty who also teach Biblical language courses (Koine Greek and Hebrew) were not included in this study.



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## Appendix

### *Cover Letter and Questionnaire to Faculty*

Dear Colleagues,

With your help, I would like to explore what faculty members think about foreign language study. If you are willing to help, I will ask you to fill out a questionnaire regarding your attitude and experience with foreign languages. Ultimately, I would like to publish the information that I gather to inform the profession about current trends and thinking among non-language faculty.

Thank you in advance for your help with this project.

### *Foreign Language Survey*

1. Describe your experience learning a foreign language. When did you start, how long did you study, what language(s) did you study?
2. Give examples of how you have used your foreign language knowledge—in your research, travel, daily life, etc.
3. What other language would you like to know and why?
4. What are the three most important reasons for learning another language?
5. Should American college students be required to know another language? Why or why not?
6. What should average college students be able to do with the language that they study? For example, listen to news broadcasts, watch films, conduct business transactions, etc.
7. What are the three biggest challenges to learning another language at the college level?
8. Do (did) your children study another language? If so, what language? When did they study—elementary, middle, high school, college, etc?
9. What subjects do you teach or what is your main job at this college?
10. What do you tell students regarding the foreign language requirement at this college? For example, which language do you advise your majors to take and when during their academic careers?
11. How old are you? (Sorry to ask, but I am looking for trends.)
12. Additional comments you would like to add:
13. If I may contact you for more information, please give your phone number.