

On the Background and Motivation of Students in a Beginning Spanish Program

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Abstract: *A number of recent articles have examined the motivation, purpose of study, and demographics of first- and second-year language learners of French or Spanish (see, e.g., Ossipov, 2000; Rava, 2000; Voght, 2000; Wen, 1997) This study surveyed the make-up of a sample of first- and second-year university-level Spanish learners at a major postsecondary institution in a city with a substantial, growing population of monolingual and bilingual Spanish speakers. The results of the survey were used to address questions about learner preparation prior to entering a four-year university course of study, preferred and desired activities in the current curriculum, and motivations for the study of Spanish. Generalizations about the nature of the typical learner in this context and the implications of the appreciation of and desire for grammar-related and communicative activities — as expressed by the respondents — in the contemporary liberal arts curriculum are discussed.*

Introduction

A number of surveys have reported on the ongoing changes in the constituency of students enrolled in university-level foreign language courses in the United States (see, e.g., Ossipov, 2000; Voght, 2000; Watzke, 2000). The overall number of students enrolling in beginning Spanish classes, for example, is increasing, whereas the relative percentage of students enrolling in beginning French and German classes is declining (Brod & Wells, 2000). The observed changes in enrollment are partially attributable to the growing population of heritage and native speakers of Spanish in the United States. As the size of this population increases, so does the perceived importance of the individual to be able to successfully communicate in Spanish (i.e., to comprehend, express, and negotiate meaning, according to Savignon, 1997).

In addition to the changing demographics of the U.S. population in general and the university-level student body in particular, the focus and purpose of the second language curriculum itself is in a state of evolution. As Rava (2000) points out, addressing all aspects of the beginning and intermediate language program is becoming more and more challenging, not only because of the changing student body, but also because of varied levels of experience held by instructional staff and differences in language program goals and available resources. Nevertheless, decisions about curricular design ought to reflect the motivations, interests, and purposes of the students in the language program.

A number of studies have examined the interests, motivations, and preparatory levels of university-level second-language learners. Ossipov (2000), for example, surveyed 279 first- and fourth-semester learners of French about “who is taking French and why.” The majority of Ossipov’s subjects had previously studied French at the secondary level. The two reasons that these learners gave for studying French were that they liked the language in general (90%) and had plans to travel to a place where French was spoken (79%). When asked whether they

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