Two Sides of the Communicative Coin: Honors and Nonhonors French and Spanish Classes in a Midwestern High School

Michael Morris
Northern Illinois University

Abstract: *This study compares the instructional practices in honors and nonhonors French and Spanish classes at a Midwestern high school, as well as factors influencing those practices. The researcher observed 54 class sessions and used questionnaires and interviews to obtain teachers' perspectives on instruction. Analysis revealed a statistically significant relationship between type of class and type of activity, with honors classes having more communicative activities. Teachers attributed differences to student expectations for the two levels, students' level of motivation for language study, and their maturity level. Findings generally paralleled those of other studies that have examined ability tracking. The researcher proposes that foreign language educators must address the issue of reserving communicative teaching for elite students for the profession's future viability.*

Key words: *factors influencing student enrollment in foreign language courses; secondary school honors vs. nonhonors classes; teacher beliefs and practices*

Languages: *French, Spanish*

Introduction

What happens in the secondary school honors foreign language classroom represents uncharted territory for researchers in language pedagogy. A number of researchers in language education (Freeman & Johnson, 1998; Freeman & Richards, 1996; Vélez-Rendón, 2002) have observed that our profession will not fully understand how and why teachers do what they do in their classrooms until researchers systematically investigate teachers' instructional practices and the factors that underlie them. Kleinsasser noted that understanding teachers' belief systems is crucial to understanding "how to refine and improve teaching and learning in school environments" (1993a, p. 2). Moreover, Johnson (1994) noted that teachers' beliefs regarding instruction exert great influence on what they do in the classroom and how they assimilate new information about teaching and learning into classroom practice. Examination of honors classrooms presents a real opportunity given our profession's current focus on the importance of language learning for all learners (Wing, 1996), consistent with the goals of the *Standards for Foreign Language Learning* (National Standards, 1999). Such research has the potential to increase our understanding of how tracking learners into distinct classes based on their aptitude, ability, and interests affects the profession's goal of having all learners become proficient speakers of a second language (L2).

Scholars in foreign language education do not represent the only population for whom the honors classroom represents uncharted territory. Indeed, Herr (1992a) reported a dearth of studies that might examine honors courses in any content area commonly taught in the U.S.

Michael Morris (PhD, The University of Iowa) is Associate Professor of Spanish and Foreign Language Education at Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, Illinois.

secondary curriculum. This lack seems especially curious in view of the fact that Astin, Green, Korn, Schalit & Berz (1988) reported that at least 50% of all entering college freshmen report having taken at least one honors classes in high school, a finding that points to the potential such classes have for shaping students' learning. Yonezawa, Wells, and Serna (2002) also noted the importance of developing greater understanding of these classes because they help to shape the personal and social identities of the students in them, and thus continue to have implications long after formal schooling is complete. Studies such as this one that examine honors classrooms, how they differ from nonhonors classrooms, and what factors underlie these differences promise to enrich our understanding of both language teaching and the secondary honors classroom, with benefits for teachers of all content areas.

Review of the Literature

The present study was informed by classroom-based research originating in the honors classroom, virtually all of which came from content areas other than foreign languages. Research from two other areas of inquiry also enhanced understanding of the issues under consideration in this study. First, findings from research in the area of teachers' professional cultures promoted understanding of the factors that shape their instructional practices. Second, studies that analyze the effects of ability grouping on students in secondary schools illuminated teachers' beliefs and attitudes toward honors classes, thus suggesting motivations that may lie behind their instructional practices.

An ERIC search performed in October 2003 revealed just one published research study that includes the foreign language honors classroom even tangentially, that of Szostek (1994). She examined the use of cooperative learning in two honors Spanish II classes at the secondary level. Unfortunately for the purposes of the present study, careful review of Szostek's study revealed that her focus on honors classes was motivated by her desire to maintain the homogeneity of her student sample: She chose to observe honors classes because all students in these classes had earned a 95% or above average in Spanish I. Selecting a group of students whose performances in previous language classes were approximately equal enabled Szostek to minimize students' aptitude for formal language study as a variable that might affect the outcome of her study. Consequently, Szostek's research does not inform the study of instructional practices in honors classes to any extent.

Other research comes from content areas outside foreign languages. Gamoran (1986, 1989, 1992) reported that secondary honors English classes feature more reading of classic literature, writing assignments, and participation in discussions about literature than do nonhonors classrooms. He speculated that such a curriculum provides an entrée for honors students to participate in elite social groups where familiarity with such high-status works proves beneficial. Research by Herr (1991, 1992a, 1992b) examined teacher perceptions of secondary honors science courses. Three of Herr's findings are of particular interest. First, he noted that teachers in honors classes assert that the format of such classes provides them with the opportunity to work with better students. Second, teachers report they learn more themselves in honors than in regular classes. Finally, they claim that honors classes stimulate students' creativity to a greater extent than do regular classes.

Several researchers have examined the question of ability grouping in schools. Lucas (1999) defined ability grouping as placement of students in specific courses on the basis of their perceived ability and the satisfying of course prerequisites. Scholars who work in this field observe consistently that students' access to high-tier (i.e., honors) classes remains unequal and subject to influence by factors such as their prior educational socialization and judgments by teachers as to their capability to succeed. Yonezawa, Wells, and Serna (2002) concluded that learners' need for respect and the leveling of their aspirations by outside factors represent important influences on students' election of high- and low-tier classes. They also noted the role of teachers in shaping learners' attitudes. Numerous educators, these researchers suggested, harbor suspicions that many learners are incapable of success in high-tier classes, reinforcing the idea held by many learners that such sections are too difficult for them. Other research focuses on the personal qualities learners develop as a consequence of their enrollment in high- and low-tier classes. Oakes (1985), and Oakes, Gamoran, and Page (1992) asserted that honors classes promote independence and self-expression among learners, while low-tier sections encourage control and conformity.

These and related concepts also appeared in the work of Kleinsasser (1993a, 1993b), and Kleinsasser and Savignon (1991), regarding two instructional cultures whose presence they identify in secondary foreign language classrooms: the certain and nonroutine culture and its uncertain and routine counterpart. In the former, teachers believe all students can learn (hence the certainty of this culture) and integrate a wide variety of original and stimulating activities into their instruction rather than relying on the textbook (hence its nonroutine nature). Teachers and students alike use the target language for authentic communication, and the entire classroom community cooperates to create a successful learning environment. This instructional culture stands in contrast to the uncertain and routine culture of other classrooms. Here teachers may harbor misgivings about the ability or desire of learners to acquire the ability to speak the target language (hence the culture's uncertainty), and depend primarily upon a limited range of activities that originate in textbooks, workbooks, and mass-produced worksheets for the content of lessons

(hence its routine nature). Most classroom interaction takes place in English, while use of the target language is reserved for exercises that show that students have "learned" the language. This distinction between these two kinds of classrooms has important ramifications for honors and nonhonors classes in the present study.

The School, Faculty, and Language Curriculum

This study examines the instructional practices of secondary French and Spanish teachers teaching honors classes at levels I, II, and III in a high school located in a Midwestern state, as well as the factors that shape these practices. It incorporates both quantitative and qualitative research methods to compare the instructional practices in honors and nonhonors classes, as well as examining the factors that influence these practices. Analysis of nonhonors classes at these same levels provides an important context to promote understanding of the processes at work in the honors classroom. Upstate High School is located in a town of 5,300 people, and also serves a second smaller town and the semirural area that adjoins the two. Many parents of the school's students travel each day for employment to a city of 150,000 that lies 30 miles to the south. While the school retains some of the rural flavor of the small town where it is situated, extensive construction of upscale homes in the school's attendance area has brought an influx of families who place considerable importance on an education that prepares their secondary-age children for successful university careers. The teachers observe "great competitiveness for grades and class rank" (teacher interview, Hector) among the student body, at least partially at the urging of their parents. Furthermore, they report that "the parents went nuts at [that is to say, they opposed strenuously] the idea of eliminating honors courses" (teacher interview, Janet) from the curriculum when the school proposed doing so several years ago. Consequently, virtually all academic departments in the school provide extensive course offerings on the honors track. Whatever the academic area, students at Upstate themselves choose whether to enroll in honors classes.

At the time of the study, 7 full-time teachers in French and Spanish comprised the foreign languages department at Upstate High School. (See Table 1 for more information on individual teachers.) Four of the 7 (Hector, Kate, Linda, and Patricia) provided instruction in Spanish. Two others (Carl and Susan) taught both French and Spanish depending on enrollments and the department's needs, and the seventh (Janet) taught French and served as the department chair. All teachers in the department taught five classes per day with the exception of the department chair, who taught four. The school used traditional scheduling with eight daily periods of 50 minutes each. The department offered a full curriculum of both honors (levels 1–3) and nonhonors (levels 1–4) classes in the two languages, with Advanced Placement (AP) classes available in both languages to students in their final year. In nonhonors classes an average of 30 students were enrolled per class, a number that declined to 20 in the average honors class, largely due to the smaller numbers of students enrolled in honors French classes. At no time did any of the teachers indicate that the difference in average class size between honors and nonhonors classes affected their instructional choices. All faculty except Patricia had both honors and nonhonors classes as part of their teaching load, thereby facilitating

Table 1

STUDY PARTICIPANTS: TEACHERS, UPSTATE HIGH SCHOOL

Teacher	Highest degree earned	Years of experience at Upstate/ total years teaching	Classes taught
Carl	BA in Spanish/French	17/17	Spanish I, III Honors French I, II
Hector	BA in Spanish/History MAT in Instructional Strategies	6/8	Spanish I, II Honors Spanish III
Janet	BA in French MAT in English	22/31	French I, II, III Honors French I, III Department chair
Kate	BA in Spanish	17/32	Spanish I, II Honors Spanish I
Linda	BA in Spanish	15/17	Honors Spanish II
Patricia	BA in Spanish	6/6	Spanish I, II, IV
Susan	BA in French/Spanish MA in Education One year graduate study in French	16/30	Spanish I Honors French II, III

analysis and comparison of the teachers' instructional practices in the two kinds of classes.

Upstate's languages faculty brought to their positions strong educational credentials and extensive teaching experience. At the time of the study, the faculty was comprised of five females and two males. The faculty members had taught at Upstate for a minimum of six and for as many as 22 years, and for as many as 32 years in total. The teachers had worked at all levels: elementary, middle, junior high, and high school. One worked as an adjunct instructor at the local liberal arts college, teaching the foreign language methodology course for preservice secondary teachers. Five of the 7 either had lived for extended periods in areas where the target language is spoken or had come from families where the target language is spoken as a native tongue. All had at least a bachelor's degree, and three of the Upstate faculty had master's degrees.

Methodology

The present study avails itself of triangulation, in which data that originate in several different sources are used to provide multiple perspectives on a question. Janesick (1994) noted that the use of triangulation enables the researcher to combine the advantages of several methods while overcoming deficiencies unique to a particular method. This study incorporates various qualitative and quantitative instruments: class observations, statistical analysis of the lesson content of the two kinds of classes, questionnaires completed by the teachers, and open-ended interviews with each teacher participating in the study. Two broad questions guided the researcher as he conducted the study: (a) Do honors and nonhonors classes differ in terms of the teachers' instructional practices? and (b) What factors might account for such a difference in the view of the teachers in the program? The researcher directs a foreign language teacher development program at a large state university and teaches methodology and language courses. The teachers at Upstate agreed to participate in the research study as part of a school–university partnership designed to promote cooperation between the two institutions. Upstate personnel work with the university's preservice teachers and serve as co-instructors in university courses, while university faculty members use the school as a research site.

The researcher began by viewing multiple class sessions at each level of French and Spanish I, II, and III for both honors and nonhonors tracks. He made every effort to observe each class as many times as possible, given his own schedule and that of the school. (See Table 2 for a complete listing of the number of sections of each class observed.) The researcher observed each class at least three times for a total of 55 class sessions at all levels, 26 honors sections (13 in French, 13 in Spanish) and 29 nonhonors sections (12 in French, 17 in Spanish). In cases when a teacher taught two or more sections of the same class, the researcher endeavored to observe each section. He tape recorded each class session and took extensive field notes during each observation, then used the recordings to review his notes to ensure their completeness and accuracy after each session. He also collected handouts, worksheets, and other artifacts the teachers used in their instruction and analyzed them in terms of their instructional purposes. The researcher informed the teachers in advance that he was conducting a study analyzing the content of high school honors foreign language classes, but he was not more specific until after completing data collection in order to avoid influencing the teachers' instruction unduly.

Crookes and Chaudron (2001) identified a number of activity types upon which language teachers commonly draw in planning their lessons. These activity types guided the researcher's analysis of the teachers' instructional practices in the present study. He first established the purpose of each activity within the classes he observed (e.g., cloze exercise, creation and performance of a dialogue, teacher grammar explanation, students tell a story based on visual prompts, or verb conjugation). The researcher drew upon this data to create a master list of activities used in all classes observed for the present study, identifying 13 specific form-focused and 16 communicative activities. (See Table 3 for this master list.) He then coded each activity according to specific criteria. Form-focused activities were defined as those that emphasize mastery of formal features of language (verbs, pronouns, etc.), while communicative activities are considered those in which class members convey meaning to others through their participation and both message expressers and interpreters are involved in communicative interaction. VanPatten (1998) identified these features as necessary elements for all communicative activ-

Table 2

CLASSES OBSERVED

	Honors classes French	Nonhonors classes French	Honors classes Spanish	Nonhonors classes Spanish	Total classes observed
1st year	4	6	4	7	
2nd year	4	3	4	6	
3rd year	5	3	5	4	
Total	13	12	13	17	55

ities. After reviewing all field notes from class observations, the researcher tabulated the frequency of form-focused and communicative activities in honors and nonhonors sections. Finally, he calculated the total number of instances in which the activities appeared in classroom instruction, then used the chi-square procedure to determine whether a statistically significant relationship existed in terms of the frequency with which teachers used the two activity types in each of the two tracks of classes.

Following the class observations and analyses, the researcher asked each teacher to respond to a series of open-ended questions related to their beliefs about teaching and instructional practices. These questions were based on those used in a previous study by Morris (1999, 2001) that reported on the beliefs and practices of university instructors regarding their classroom practices, with additional questions related to the honors classroom created for the present study. (See the Appendix for the schedule of questions.) Teachers had the choice of responding orally or in writing to these questions; all 7 opted to provide oral responses, which the researcher then tape recorded and transcribed. Subsequently, the researcher drew upon the teachers' responses as the basis of semistructured interviews with each teacher. The semistructured interview is appropriate when interviewers have a general idea of the direction they wish the interview to take, but prefer not to use a list of prepared questions. Merriam (1988) noted that this interview format allows a researcher "to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging view of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic" (p. 74).

In the interviews the researcher focused on seven areas: the teachers' professional background, their own language learning, their teacher training, previous teaching experience, their perceptions of significant influences on their teaching, their own expectations for their instruction, and those of the school and the students. Morris (1999, 2001)

Table 3

MASTER LIST OF ACTIVITIES

Activities that focus on formal features of language:

1. Students read aloud for pronunciation practice
2. Students fill in tables with paradigms of verb, pronominal, and other forms
3. Students manipulate verb, pronominal, and other forms without a communicative context (e.g., choral repetition of forms, oral or written conjugation of verbs)
4. Grammar explanation by teacher
5. Grammar practice to demonstrate mastery of linguistic forms
6. Vocabulary review with word lists or flashcards
7. Translation from English to L2, either orally or in writing
8. Textbook or workbook activity that focuses on linguistic forms
9. Teacher leads class in drill
10. Choral repetition of vocabulary
11. Students spell out vocabulary orally
12. Students call out a word or phrase based on a visual prompt (e.g., flashcard)
13. Students read aloud from written texts to show mastery of linguistic forms

Activities that emphasize development of oral and written comprehension and communication:

1. Students listen to oral texts and complete post-activities based on their comprehension
2. Students construct oral/written texts based on visual or other extralinguistic prompts (e.g., pictures) which they share with the class
3. Class discussion of themes not related to formal language (e.g., culture)
4. Class members describe people/things/ideas and others identify what is being described
5. Peer editing of student essays
6. Class members ask teacher questions about course content
7. Teacher asks questions of students that require personal responses
8. Students ask questions of peers that require personal responses
9. Students create and perform dialogues
10. Vocabulary activities that do not depend on translation or memorization: games, definitions, L2 word associations, usage in context, circumlocution activities
11. Total Physical Response (TPR) activity
12. Students complete nonform-based activities based on their reading/comprehension of written texts
13. Students give presentations on themes of their choice
14. Class members ask questions of student presenters based on their presentations
15. Teacher reads story to the class followed by comprehension activities
16. Students plan a class event in the L2

previously identified these areas as influencing foreign language teachers' classroom practices and the beliefs that underlie them. The researcher subsequently recorded and transcribed these interviews. After transcription, he summarized the content and general themes from the interview, incorporating as many of the interviewee's own comments and quotations into the summary as possible. The process of summarizing also enabled the researcher to form his own ideas about emerging patterns in the data, which were then integrated into analyses of other interview data in the study. Grossman (1990, p. 157) valued the summarizing process as an effective "strategy both to preserve and to begin to interpret the rich qualitative data of the interviews."

Instructional Practices in the Two Tracks

Tabulation of the activities used in honors and nonhonors classes in the study reveals in the 54 observed class sessions a total of 212 activities. The 12 honors French class sessions observed contained a total of 21 form-focused and 29 communicative activities, while the 12 nonhonors sessions in that language featured 23 form-focused and 13 communicative activities. Fifteen form-focused and 37 communicative activities were observed in the 13 honors Spanish sessions observed, while 46 form-focused and 28 communicative activities were noted in the 17 nonhonors sections.

The researcher chose to use the chi-square technique to analyze the frequency with which teachers use form-focused and communicative activities in their classes. Hatch and Lazaraton (1991) identified this statistical technique as an appropriate one to use to assess claims about "how different frequencies have to be before we can make claims about the relation of the variables with some degree of certainty (pp. 393–394)." Analysis of the frequency with which the teachers use form-focused and communicative activities show that a clearly significant relationship exists between the type of class and type of activities in classes in both languages, but particularly in Spanish. Use of the chi-square test with frequency for form-focused and communicative activities for all classes in both languages produces a chi-square (χ^2) value of 15.94, $p < .0001$ (1 *df*). In essence, this finding demonstrates that there is a possibility of less than .01% that the frequency with which teachers employ form-focused and communicative activities is attributable solely to chance. The finding is almost as robust when only Spanish classes are analyzed. Here an analysis of the 30 class sessions observed in Spanish yields

Table 4

FREQUENCY OF ACTIVITIES IN SPANISH

	Form-focused activities	Communicative activities	Total activities
Honors Spanish	15	37	52
Nonhonors Spanish	46	28	74
Total activities	**61**	**65**	**126**

Table 5

EXPECTED FREQUENCY OF ACTIVITIES IN SPANISH

	Form-focused activities	Communicative activities
Honors Spanish	25.17	26.83
Nonhonors Spanish	35.83	38.17

Table 6

CHI-SQUARE TABLE, FREQUENCY OF ACTIVITIES IN SPANISH

Row	Column	Observed	Expected	O - E	$(O - E)^2$	$(O - E)^2 / E$
1	1	15	25.17	-10.17	103.43	4.11
1	2	37	26.83	10.17	103.43	3.86
2	1	46	35.83	10.17	103.43	2.89
2	2	28	38.17	-10.17	103.43	2.71
						13.57

$\chi^2 = 13.57$, $p < .0001$, 1*df*

a χ^2 value of 13.57, $p < .0001$ (1 *df*), again a possibility of less than .01% that differences in Spanish honors and nonhonors classes can be explained through happenstance. Statistical data for the 24 class sessions in French are also clearly significant though less authoritative, perhaps owing to the fewer French classes observed for the study and the smaller number of total activities. Analysis of French courses yields a χ^2 of 4.01, $p < .05$ (1 *df*), indicating a possibility of less than 5% that differences between honors and nonhonors classes can be explained by chance (See Tables 4–12 for complete statistical calculations.)

The honors classes bear many similarities to the certain and nonroutine classroom previously described by Kleinsasser (1993a, 1993b), and Kleinsasser and Savignon (1991). In honors classes at Upstate, learners regularly engaged in activities in which they created and communicated messages with the language they were learning. They performed dialogues they wrote, gave presentations on topics they researched, engaged in interviews with other students and the teacher, participated in discussions of videos they watched and stories they read, and practiced communicative skills such as circumlocution. The use of Upstate's modern computerized language laboratory facilitated many of these activities. As one teacher, Linda, noted, "kids are more motivated with the use of technology. It facilitates group and pair work and enables the teacher to randomize pairings in order to make communication more authentic." It is true that from time to time, activities in honors classes focused on formal features of language, such as drills and direct explanation by the teacher of challenging aspects of grammar. Nevertheless, even in honors classes teachers clearly chose specific pedagogical techniques with an eye toward how they might provide support to learners in subsequent communicative activities, consistent with the findings of Kleinsasser (1993a, 1993b), and Kleinsasser and Savignon (1991). Moreover, the frequency of activities that emphasize linguistic form decreased after the first year of language study. While most of the first-year honors classes observed for the present study featured at least some activities that focused on language form and structure, honors track class sessions observed at the second- and third-year level revealed many fewer such activities.

A much different picture appears in the nonhonors classes, one that coheres with the uncertain and nonroutine classroom posited by Kleinsasser (1993a, 1993b), and Kleinsasser and Savignon (1991). While teachers continued to use technology extensively, they relied more often on activities that call upon learners to focus on lin-

Table 7

FREQUENCY OF ACTIVITIES IN FRENCH

	Form-focused activities	Communicative activities	Total activities
Honors French	21	29	50
Nonhonors French	23	13	36
Total activities	**44**	**42**	**86**

Table 8

EXPECTED FREQUENCY OF ACTIVITIES IN FRENCH

	Form-focused activities	Communicative activities
Honors French	25.58	18.42
Nonhonors French	24.42	17.58

Table 9

CHI-SQUARE TABLE, FREQUENCY OF ACTIVITIES IN FRENCH

Row	Column	Observed	Expected	O - E	$(O - E)^2$	$(O - E)^2 / E$
1	1	21	25.58	-4.58	20.98	0.82
1	2	29	18.42	4.58	20.98	0.86
2	1	23	24.42	4.58	20.98	1.14
2	2	13	17.58	-4.58	20.98	1.19
						4.01

$\chi^2 = 4.01$, $p < .05$, 1*df*

guistic forms for most of their class content. Learners regularly completed tables with forms of verbs and pronouns, repeated vocabulary in chorus, spelled out words, and filled in blanks in workbooks or on mass-produced worksheets. They translated words and phrases and transcribed sentences to demonstrate mastery of linguistic content. Teachers in these classes offered their students suggestions such as the following:

> One thing of which you want to be very careful is your spelling of these two vowels because it's very easy to get confused. (Susan)
>
> Please make sure you do all the exercises in the *paquete*. You are not taking the *paquete* seriously. Maybe you think this is tedious work. But there are rules, there are spell changes . . . and you have to know these. (Patricia)

In the nonhonors classes, teachers directed virtually all classroom interaction, calling upon students to respond to various linguistic prompts they supplied. Only occasionally did learners have the opportunity to use the target language to communicate any idea not first proposed by the teacher, and even on these occasions the teacher presented constraints on the learners' linguistic production. For example, when the learners in one class created dialogues, they were instructed to include three uses of the impersonal se in their exchanges. Only at the beginning of each class when teachers led the learners in an activity of oral questions called *puntos orales/points oraux* did the learners have the chance to contribute their own input to any extent. Nevertheless, even here the questions functioned at least partially as a review of previously introduced grammar points. The nonhonors classes functioned primarily as an environment in which the teachers and students used English to communicate, reserving the target language for teachers to present linguistic forms and model formally correct language, and for the learners to demonstrate their mastery of the content presented. Tedick and Walker (1994, 1996) described this model as focusing on language as object, (1996, p. 208) "an entity to be analyzed, scrutinized, and dissected into its smallest components." In classrooms where language is regarded as an object, there are few expectations on the part of teachers or learners for the development of communicative ability in the language.

Table 10

FREQUENCY OF ACTIVITIES

	Form-focused activities	Communicative activities	Total activities
Total Honors	36	66	102
Total Nonhonors	69	41	110
Total activities	**105**	**107**	**212**

Table 11

EXPECTED FREQUENCY OF ACTIVITIES, TOTAL

	Form-focused activities	Communicative activities
Total Honors	50.52	51.48
Total Nonhonors	54.48	55.52

Table 12

CHI-SQUARE TABLE, TOTAL FREQUENCY OF ACTIVITIES

Row	Column	Observed	Expected	O - E	$(O - E)^2$	$(O - E)^2 / E$
1	1	36	50.52	-14.52	210.83	4.17
1	2	66	51.48	14.52	210.83	4.10
2	1	69	54.48	14.52	210.83	3.87
2	2	41	55.52	-14.52	210.83	3.80
						15.94

$\chi^2 = 15.94$, $p < .0001$, 1*df*

Factors that Underlie the Teachers' Instructional Practices

In the responses the seven Upstate teachers gave in the questionnaires and interview, they recognized important differences between the instruction they offered in honors and nonhonors language classes. In their eyes, these differences were largely in the depth of content into which they entered and the methodologies they employed. As Kate explained, "sooner or later all the students have the same concepts. What is different is the amount of time spent on them and the manner of presentation." The teachers viewed theirs as a "balanced program" in which they "spent an extraordinary amount of time in productive skills" (teacher interview, Linda) while reserving enough time on listening and reading to facilitate speaking and writing.

In the teachers' eyes, the students made their own decisions regarding whether to enroll in the honors or nonhonors track classes on the basis of their goals and expectations regarding language learning. Analysis of the teachers' responses reveals their belief that two groups of students existed side-by-side at Update. One group of students enrolled in honors classes, reportedly either because they enjoyed the prestige conveyed by their status as honors students or because they were more actively engaged in and dedicated to their language learning. Other students demonstrated less enthusiasm for language learning. They studied languages due to external factors, such as requirements by colleges that applicants study languages in high school as a condition of admission. Janet (the department chair) reported that many parents fear that their offspring cannot handle honors foreign language classes since the middle schools that serve as feeders into Update do not offer a full language program, and so they encourage their children to enroll in nonhonors classes. As Janet reported, "I spend two evenings of eighth-grade orientation convincing students and parents that the honors level is not reserved for students who have previous foreign language experience." Other parents allow their own experiences as learners of foreign languages to color their perceptions and, by extension, their advice to their children about whether to take honors or nonhonors classes. Janet asserted that "when (the parents) sound negative, I always ask them what their experiences were in high school—their responses explain a lot to me about their perception of foreign language and its importance." In summary, then, the Upstate students' attitudes and motivations toward language study exerted a strong influence on the track in which they enrolled.

The teachers indicated that they note marked differences in the expectations of the students in the two tracks. One observation repeatedly made by the teachers concerned the kind of work the two kinds of classes expected, which in turn has important ramifications for the teachers' instructional practices. Linda, who taught Honors Spanish II, observed that honors students reject tasks that they viewed as "repetitive or busy work." She said:

> They are resistant to extensive practice. They don't need to have things broken down for them. They are much more interested in new material rather than review, and they respond well to more independence. They take more responsibility, and they're learning something they enjoy.

Patricia, who taught Spanish I, II, and IV, offered that "those kids are smart enough to ask questions that I have to think about before I answer." These remarks by the teachers demonstrated consistency with the findings of Oakes (1985) and Oakes, Gamoran, and Page (1992) regarding the development by learners in high-tier classes of a sense of independence through their learning, as well as refining their ability to express themselves through language.

Susan, who taught Spanish I and Honors French II and III, also cited the "maturity factor" as an important element distinguishing honors and nonhonors students. She saw the nonhonors students as unprepared to do the kind of work required in honors classes. Her main goals in the low-tier sections were "to see that they've done their homework" and teaching them "how to behave. They ask whether they need to bring their book or workbook to class. They interrupt, they talk out, and they are constantly off task." Such comments reinforce the assertion by Oakes (1985) and Oakes, Gamoran, and Page (1992) that low-tier classes concern themselves more with issues of control and conformity than with learning. Linda found the students' willingness to work lacking at times:

> Nonhonors students ask "do I have to do this?" They want to know specifically what the expectations are and how much they have to do. "How many lines do I have to write? How many verb tenses are on the exam?"

Even Janet—who tended to be more supportive of nonhonors students—admitted that these learners "are indignant if they are asked to do as much as honors students." Patricia commented that "a lot of kids think honors is too hard. They think there's too much work on their own outside of class." Indeed, Loveless (1999) suggested that many learners elect to enroll in low-tier classes because they perceive their chances of success are greater in such sections. But some teachers attributed less positive characteristics to honors students as well. Janet claimed that "lots of honors kids whine 'how many points for that?' Regular kids do what they do, don't do what they don't, and accept what happens." For Susan, honors students were "manipulative, and know how to play the system. They try to get away with what they can." Such a comment seems to indicate that the teachers implicitly recognize that some learners may enroll in honors classes because they consider it

part of their entitlement as students identified as "high achieving," either by themselves, their parents, or teachers and administrators. As such, they possess greater familiarity with the entire system of honors and nonhonors classes and understand how to maneuver the system for maximum benefits (i.e., high grades) with minimal effort. Yonezawa, Wells, and Serna (2002) reported that many students see their placements in high tier classes as a birthright, a way to guarantee that they have the most competent teachers and best classes.

Susan also reported that some honors students enrolled in these classes for reasons other than their interest in language learning. "They like prestige, and sometimes they're there only because their friends are." Oakes, Gamoran, and Page (1992) and Yonezawa, Wells, and Serna (2002) asserted that students tend to form friendships within the tiers of classes in which they are enrolled, whether high or low. Furthermore, the groups that these students form often become impenetrable to learners who populate low-tier classes and serve to discourage them from attempting to move to higher tier sections.

Carl, who taught Honors French I and II and Spanish I and III, asserted that some learners recognized that teachers did not have the same expectations for honors and nonhonors students. Consequently, he said that some students who enrolled in honors classes wanted to move to nonhonors sections of the same class to relieve the academic demands they felt. In the view of Linda, the Honors Spanish II teacher, others opted for nonhonors sections because of "ego issues: They aren't getting the grade they think they should get, or they feel they're the only ones who don't understand. [Learners who elected honors classes] have to be comfortable with working with a level of language that's a little above their heads because, as nonnative speakers, that's the way it's going to be their whole lives." According to Linda, the oral aspect of honors classes also intimidated some students. "Some students don't like honors classes because they aren't comfortable; they don't like speaking in class. Nonhonors classes do a lot less speaking and listening than honors classes."

Some of the teachers asserted that the importance of honors lay in the fact that it existed for the "students who want to learn, to challenge the top kids," as Linda put it:

> I'm not going to limit the class to what the weak ones can do. I teach to the top 50% of the class, and the other ones can come along for the ride. I tell students and parents that if they don't enjoy Spanish they should find a class that they do enjoy—mine is an elective class and they don't have to be there.

This comment supports the contention that honors sections represent the territory of the top student and that those who are unprepared or unwilling to meet the expectations implicit in high-tier classes need not enroll. It also coheres with Herr's (1991, 1992a, 1992b) findings that teachers value honors classes because of the higher caliber of students who tend to enroll in them. Hector, who taught Honors Spanish III and Spanish I and II, contended that "nonhonors kids perceive that honors students are treated better, that they have more fun activities. That's probably true. But they see this as a product of the teacher. They don't see that they are responsible for making something interesting. If the students are dull, the class will be dull." What goes unexpressed is the notion that learners who do not receive encouragement to participate actively or share their own ideas in the classrooms are unlikely to invest the effort necessary to make the class interesting.

Discussion

This research demonstrates that the teachers at Upstate High School believed it best to reserve for high-tier honors classes an instructional approach that values and emphasizes communicative development in the target language. For a variety of reasons the teachers expressed doubts about the willingness or ability of students in lower tier, nonhonors classes to learn a language effectively and efficiently using an approach that privileges independent learning, self-motivation, and expression by students of their own ideas. Nevertheless, analysis of the teachers' narratives reveals that other factors enter into play as well in shaping the teachers' instructional practices. These factors can be grouped into the following categories: (a) Students' preferences for specific teaching styles and instructional emphases, (b) The influence of parents in their children's enrollment choices, (c) Honors students' desire for the prestige that comes from enrollment in honors classes, (d) Students' level of motivation for language learning, and (e) Their level of engagement in their language learning.

A statistically significant relationship existed between the tier of class (honors vs. nonhonors) and the type of activity (communicative vs. form-focused) in this study. The teachers contended that top students who had a high level of motivation for language learning generally accepted communicative approaches much more readily. They asserted that students in the nonhonors sections regarded these kinds of activities as too demanding, either academically or in terms of the level of personal and emotional risk the students must accept when they participate in class in the presence of peers and teachers. Nonhonors classes concentrated on the teaching of language forms, such as verbs, pronouns, and adjectives, to a much greater extent than did honors classes. In lower tier classes the development of communicative ability in the target language represented a secondary consideration, and even those activities that involved student interaction often had a clear if implicit grammatical agenda. In effect, actually learning to communicate in French or Spanish was a competency reserved for students identified as "elite." Just as Gamoran (1986, 1989,

1992) pointed out that the elements of the honors English curriculum prepare to move in rarefied circles that privilege such knowledge, Upstate honors foreign language curriculum prepared these high-tier students for success in realms where the attainment of a high level of proficiency is valued.

Meanwhile, learners in nonhonors sections were reduced to mastering the discrete parts of language, the focus described as "language as object" by Tedick and Walker (1994, 1996). Such an approach undoubtedly appeals to many, since it clearly defines the roles of all the actors in the classroom. It enables teachers to maintain their position in control of the class and as authority on the subject matter, while assigning to learners the responsibility to sit passively and provide correct answers when called upon to do so. What it does not do easily is empower learners to communicate their own messages and ideas in the target language.

But the teachers encountered other obstacles that problematized communicative teaching as well. They reported that some parents considered studying and learning a language a challenge that their children would find overwhelming. As a consequence, these mothers and fathers discouraged their sons and daughters from enrolling in honors sections. Interestingly, this phenomenon at Upstate ran counter to the conclusions of Gamoran (1986, 1989, 1992) and Yonezawa, Wells, and Serna (2002) regarding the role of parents as advocates who fight, often vociferously, for what they see as their children's rightful place in high-tier classes (and which the Upstate teachers report does prevail in other subject areas at the school). This finding points to the negative impression that many adults have of their past language learning experiences, which emphasized production of linguistic forms, grammar explanations, and translation. That these very emphases prevail in nonhonors classes at Upstate in 2004 represents a profound irony: In parents' haste to discourage their children from enrolling in "difficult" honors classes, they compel their youth to repeat the same experiences that have produced such negative impressions on their own parts.

The desire for prestige motivated some students to enroll in honors classes even when their motivation for learning a language was lacking. These learners enjoyed the higher status that comes from being a student in a high-tier section even as they displayed ambivalence about doing the work required of students in such sections. As Susan noted, a number of her students enrolled in honors classes to be with their peer group rather than because of any intrinsic interest in language learning. This lack of interest may make it more difficult for teachers to conduct their classes in the way they consider most efficacious for learning. Consistent with the assertions of Owens, Gamoran, and Page (1991) and Yonezawa, Wells, and Serna (2002), enrollment patterns in which the same students enrolled in high-tier sections reinforce the idea that such classes provide elite groups an opportunity to perpetuate their dominance over others, whether in school or in other institutions within society.

What do our findings mean for language teachers? It should first be made clear that honors classes certainly have their place in our schools. They offer additional grade points and other benefits to students who plan to continue their studies at colleges and universities. Nor is anything about this research meant as a criticism of the Upstate teachers, who serve as role models in terms of their work ethic and high level of professionalism. These teachers also must answer to a variety of constituencies each day, which makes instructional change more difficult as a result. Additionally, anecdotal evidence abounds to support the idea that some learners have a predilection for language learning while others struggle to attain even a modest level of proficiency (Grigorenko, 2002. For information on a secondary course designed specifically for those with learning difficulties, also see Huck & Morris, 2003). Such evidence would certainly appear to justify a course structure consisting of two or more tiers. Nonetheless, what is problematic is the idea of separating learners, then granting some of them an opportunity that is withheld from others who are identified as less capable. Omaggio Hadley (2001) noted that, even at introductory levels, instructional contexts that provide learners the opportunity to communicate real messages are much more conductive to the development of language proficiency "than instructional formats that are primarily teacher-centered or that focus mainly on language forms or convergent answers (p. 95)." At Upstate the opportunity for students the ability to communicate in French or Spanish is largely reserved for honors classes, while their nonhonors counterparts concentrate on forms and correct responses.

Several possible remedies are proposed. Teachers might consider reducing the quantity of material in nonhonors classes but incorporating more review and representation of the content they do present. And teacher development programs must prepare practitioners who are prepared to offer valid instruction to learners of varying backgrounds and ability levels, not just the top students (Spinelli, 1996). Parents must come to understand the value of having their children know another language. At the core of the *Standards for Foreign Language Learning* (National Standards, 1999) rest two ideas of the utmost importance: that language and communication are inseparable parts of the human experience, and that all learners must learn another language besides English to communicate in "a pluralistic American society and abroad" (p. 7). Munks (1996) noted that new opportunities are appearing daily throughout society for those with the ability to interact in an L2, and that pointing out specific opportunities for persons with marketable language skills can only increase students' motivation for language study. It is also

important for teachers to communicate to parents that the language classroom they experienced as students finds itself in the midst of tremendous change to one where development of the ability to communicate in the language has primacy. Only in this way will the language classroom overcome its historical image as a place where languages are studied rather than learned.

Conclusion

While some might question the application of the data yielded by one school to much larger populations, the fact that so many of the findings from this study are consistent with those from other studies that examine the use of ability grouping, teachers' attitudes toward communicative language teaching, and related areas must give foreign language educators pause. Foreign language educators must act to ensure that all learners have the opportunity to actually learn a language—not merely to study one. Munks (1996) reported that educational constituencies are becoming more insistent in their demands that schools provide marketable skills and generally be accountable for the preparedness of the learners in their charge to function in society, and certainly development of communicative ability in an L2 qualifies as such a skill. Failure to meet these expectations means that schools will run the risk of alienating those bases of support they need to cultivate in order to prosper in the 21st century. In short, the profession must take steps to guarantee that all classes become honors, high-tier sections, at least in terms of having the same goals for instruction and student outcomes for all classes. Not to do so calls into question why the foreign language teaching should continue to exist in its present form.

References

Astin, A., Green, K., Korn, W., Schalit, M., & Berz. E. (1988). *The American freshman: National norms for fall 1988.* Los Angeles: Cooperative Institutional Research Program, UCLA Higher Education Research Institute.

Crookes, G., & Chaudron, C. (2001). Guidelines for language classroom instruction. In M. Celce-Murcia (Ed.), *Teaching English as a second or foreign language, 3rd ed.* (pp. 13–28). Boston: Heinle & Heinle/Thomson Learning.

Freeman, D., & Johnson, K. (Eds.) (1998). Reconceptualizing the knowledge base of language education. *TESOL Quarterly, 32*, 397–417.

Freeman, D., & Richards, J. (Eds.) (1996). *Teacher learning in language teaching.* New York: Cambridge University Press.

Gamoran, A. (1986). Instructional and institutional effects of ability grouping. *Sociology of Education, 59*(4), 185–198.

Gamoran, A. (1989). Measuring curriculum differentiation. *American Journal of Education, 97*, 129–143.

Gamoran, A. (1992). Access to excellence: Assignment to honors English classes in the transition from middle to high school. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 14*(3), 185–204.

Grigorenko, E. L. (2002). Foreign language acquisition and language-based learning disabilities. In P. Robinson (Ed.), *Individual differences and instructed language learning.* (pp. 95–112). Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Grossman, P. L. (1990). *The making of a teacher: Teacher knowledge & teacher education.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Hatch, E., & Lazaraton, A. (1991). *The research manual: Design and statistics for applied linguistics.* Boston: Heinle & Heinle.

Herr, N. E. (1991). The influence of program format on the professional development of science teachers: Teacher perceptions of AP and honors science courses. *Science Education, 75*(6), 619–629.

Herr, N. E. (1992a). A comparative analysis of the perceived influence of advanced placement and honors programs upon science instruction. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching, 29*(5), 521–532.

Herr, N. E. (1992b). Administrative policies regarding advanced placement and honors coursework. *National Association of Secondary School Principals Bulletin, 76*, 80–87.

Huck, H., & Morris, M. C. (2003). Teaching ALL learners: Forging a new path with a communicative course for students with learning difficulties. In K. H. Cardenas & M. Klein (Eds.), *Traditional values and contemporary perspectives in language teaching* (pp. 81–92). Milwaukee, WI: Central States Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages.

Janesick, V. J. (1994). The dance of qualitative research design: Metaphor, methodolatry, and meaning. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 209–219). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Johnson, K. E. (1994). The emerging beliefs and instructional practices of preservice English as a second language teachers. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 10*(4), 439–452.

Kleinsasser, R. C. (1993a). Changing teachers' task perceptions as a vehicle for improving foreign language instruction. *Die Unterrichtspraxis, 26*(1), 1–7.

Kleinsasser, R. C. (1993b). A tale of two technical cultures. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 9*(4), 373–383.

Kleinsasser, R. C., & Savignon, S. J. (1991). Linguistics, language pedagogy, and teachers' technical cultures. In J. E. Alatis (Ed.) *Georgetown University Round Table on Languages and Literatures 1991.* (pp. 289–301.) Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.

Loveless, T. (1999). *The tracking wars: State reform meets school policy.* Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.

Lucas, S. (1999). *Tracking inequality.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Merriam, S. B. (1988). *Case study research in education.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Morris, M. C. (1999). Beliefs and practices of teaching assistants toward target language use in first-year university language classrooms. In L. Heilenman (Ed.), *Research issues in language program direction* (pp. 101–141). Boston: Heinle & Heinle.

Morris, M. C. (2001). Factors affecting the congruence of beliefs about teaching and classroom practices of GTAs in elementary foreign language courses. *Journal of Graduate Teaching Assistant Development, 8*(2), 45–53.

Munks, J. J. (1996). The case for multilingual citizens in the 21st century. In B. Wing (Ed.), *Foreign languages for all: Challenges and choices.* (pp. 1–20). Lincolnwood, IL: National Textbook Co.

National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project (1999). *Standards for foreign language learning in the 21st century.* Yonkers, NY: Author.

Oakes, J. (1985). *Keeping track: How schools structure inequality.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Oakes, J., Gamoran, A., & Page, R. (1992). Curriculum differentiation: Opportunities, outcomes, and meanings. In P. Jackson (Ed.), *Handbook of research on curriculum* (pp. 570–608). New York: Macmillan.

Omaggio Hadley, A. (2001). *Teaching language in context*, *3rd ed*. Boston: Heinle & Heinle.

Spinelli, E. (1996). Meeting the challenges of the diverse secondary school population. In B. Wing (Ed.), *Foreign languages for all: Challenges and choices* (pp. 57–90). Lincolnwood, IL: National Textbook Co.

Szostek, C. (1994). Assessing the effects of cooperative learning in an honors foreign language classroom. *Foreign Language Annals, 27*(2), 252–259.

Tedick, D. J., & Walker, C. L. (1994). Second language teacher education: The problems that plague us. *Modern Language Journal, 78*(3), 300–312.

Tedick, D. J., & Walker, C. L. (1996). R(T)eaching all students: Necessary changes in teacher education. In B. Wing (Ed.), *Foreign languages for all: Challenges and choices*. (pp. 187–220). Lincolnwood, IL: National Textbook Co.

VanPatten, B. (1998). Perceptions of and perspectives on the term "communicative." *Hispania, 81*(4), 925–932.

Vélez-Réndon, G. (2002). Second language teacher education: A review of the literature. *Foreign Language Annals, 35*(4), 457–467.

Wing, B. (1996). Foreign language for all: Challenges and choices—An introduction. In B. Wing (Ed.), *Foreign languages for all: Challenges and choices.* (pp. vii–x). Lincolnwood, IL: National Textbook Co.

Yonezawa, S., Wells, A. S., & Serna, I. (2002). Choosing tracks: "Freedom of choice" in detracking schools. *American Educational Research Journal, 39*(1), 37–67.

Appendix

Schedule for Semistructured Interviews

1. Tell me about your education. How long have you taught your language? How long have you taught at this school? Have you taught elsewhere? Have you taught other subjects? If so, at what levels have you taught them?

2. What do you recall about your experiences as a language learner? What approaches and methods were used? Was there any formal analysis of language in those classes? Did you enjoy your learning experiences, generally speaking? Do you feel that your learning experiences have influenced your own teaching? If so, how?

3. How and why did you become a language teacher? Tell me about your formal teacher training. What were the most memorable aspects of the training?

4. What have the greatest influences on your teaching been? What are the most satisfying/most problematic aspects of teaching for you? Can you describe an especially positive experience you've had as a teacher? An especially negative one?

5. Do you think the students have preferences in terms of the kind of work they like to do? Does the school promote a particular kind of teaching? Does the department? Are there restrictions on the materials you use, or on the content/organization of your lessons? Do students expect particular kinds of teaching? Do their parents?