

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

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**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.

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