

ERIC/CLL News Bulletin

ERIC Clearinghouse on Languages and Linguistics

Volume 11, No. 2

March 1988

U.S. FOREIGN LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION: ASSESSING NEEDS AND CREATING AN ACTION PLAN

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"Our nation's indifference to foreign languages and cultures is unique among advanced industrial countries," stated a blue-ribbon panel five years ago (National Advisory Board on International Education Programs, 1983, p. 12). This assertion still rings true, according to the findings of a nationwide survey of U.S. foreign language instruction at elementary and secondary schools, conducted in late 1986 and early 1987. Although substantial numbers of foreign language programs exist, many are plagued by shortages of funds, teachers, and materials, according to survey respondents. Survey findings also suggest that existing programs suffer from inadequate foreign language exposure time and that they seriously slight some key world languages.

Why a Survey Was Needed, and How It Was Done

In the last decade, three high-level advisory groups independently concluded that the U.S. system of foreign language instruction needs a major overhaul, to include starting foreign language instruction in elementary grades (National Advisory Board on International Education Programs, 1983; National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983; President's Commission on Foreign Languages and International Studies, 1979). To paint a national portrait of U.S. foreign language instruction for planning purposes, the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement asked the Center for Language Education and Research (CLEAR) to conduct a comprehensive survey of foreign language teaching in American elementary and secondary schools.

As the first step, a 5 percent stratified random sample (about 5,000 schools) was selected representing all U.S. elementary and secondary schools, both public and private. Using input from foreign language supervisors and teachers, two four-page questionnaires were designed and field tested, one for elementary and the other for secondary schools. Following an advance letter to the principal of each sample school, the questionnaires were mailed, and each principal was asked to complete the questionnaire or ask a foreign language teacher or supervisor to do so. Mail and telephone follow-ups were conducted to increase responses. The final response rate was 52 percent, representing 2,765 schools (1,416 elementary and 1,349 secondary). This response rate provided reliable estimates for the nation as a whole; see Rhodes and Oxford (1988a) for technical details.

Key Findings

Key results fall into three areas: (a) amount and kind of foreign language instruction; (b) background and training of teachers; and (c) the major problems cited by

respondents in their foreign language programs. See Rhodes and Oxford (1988a; 1988b) for more detailed results.

Amount and Kind of Foreign Language Instruction. First, secondary schools greatly outdistanced elementary schools in teaching foreign languages. Approximately one-fifth (22 percent) of the responding elementary schools and 87 percent of the responding secondary schools reported teaching foreign languages. A greater percentage of private schools than public

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schools at both levels reported offering foreign language instruction.

Second, language enrollments were not high in schools offering foreign languages. Of the responding schools that teach foreign languages, the majority (58 percent of elementary schools and 77 percent of secondary schools) reported that less than half their students were enrolled in foreign language classes.

Third, the most popular languages were the same in elementary and secondary schools. The four languages most commonly offered in the responding elementary schools that teach languages were Spanish, French, Latin, and German, offered by 68 percent, 41 percent, 12 percent, and 10 percent, respectively. Among the responding secondary schools that taught languages, the top four languages offered were Spanish, French, German, and Latin, offered by 86 percent, 66 percent, 28 percent, and 20 percent, respectively. The proportion of schools offering other major world languages, such as Russian, Chinese, Japanese, and Arabic, was minuscule, ranging up to 3 percent of the responding schools that teach languages.

Finally, nonintensive foreign language programs were prevalent at both elementary and secondary levels. Of the 22 percent of the responding elementary schools that offer foreign languages, almost nine out of ten (86 percent) provided only introductory, nonintensive programs (called FLEX or FLES programs), whose goals are to expose students to the language and develop limited language skills. The rest--only 14 percent of that one-fifth, or about 3 percent of all responding elementary schools--provided more intensive programs (known as

intensive FLES and immersion programs), which provide greater exposure to foreign languages.

At the secondary school level, 96 percent of the responding secondary schools that offer foreign languages said they provide "standard," or nonintensive, foreign language programs covering the four language skills. Foreign languages are generally taught only one to five hours per week in the secondary schools; only a handful of the responding secondary schools said they teach languages more intensively than five hours per week.

Background and Training of Teachers. From the responding elementary and secondary schools that teach languages, the following facts emerged about teachers: 44 percent of the elementary schools and 63 percent of the secondary schools have no foreign language teachers who are native speakers of the languages. About half of the elementary schools and nearly a third of the secondary schools said their foreign language teachers had no in-service training in the previous year. Finally, about half of the elementary schools said that none of their foreign language teachers are appropriately certified for elementary foreign language teaching.

Major Problems Cited by Respondents. The most severe problem with foreign language programs cited by more than half of the responding elementary and secondary schools that teach foreign languages was a shortage of funding. Three additional problems--shortage of teachers, lack of high-quality materials, and difficulties in articulation or instructional sequencing--were cited by one-fourth to one-third of the language-offering schools at both levels.

The articulation problem is complex and needs special explanation. In response to a question on the elementary school survey concerning articulation, one-third of the schools that offer languages said that many students who started learning a foreign language in elementary school had to repeat all their earlier work in the language when they reached secondary school, as if they had never studied the language. Other respondents reported that elementary school foreign language students, when moving up to secondary school, were sometimes required to drop their initial foreign language and begin a different one before achieving proficiency in the first one, or were offered no foreign language at all for the first few years of secondary school.

Other serious problems cited by many schools with language programs included lack of an established elementary school foreign language curriculum, inadequate testing and counseling, unrealistic public expectations, and lack of time for foreign language instruction.

The Broader Context

In the broader context, these results have three general implications. First, the results (when compared with background information on the number of hours needed to reach language proficiency) suggest that the amount of foreign language exposure typically received is inadequate to produce language proficiency. Second, some key world languages appear to be perilously ignored in U.S. elementary and secondary schools. Third, many foreign language education problems are explainable by a scarcity of resources; this scarcity in turn appears to reflect an underlying belief system.

Inadequate Foreign Language Exposure. A fundamental issue is whether the existing foreign language programs are capable of producing proficient foreign

language users--that is, students who are able to use their foreign language for communication. The survey showed that almost all elementary and secondary school foreign language programs are nonintensive, providing only limited exposure to the new language. The following example is representative. Assuming five hours a week of foreign language exposure and approximately 30 weeks in the school year, only about 150 hours would be spent in learning a language each year. Is this rate of language exposure adequate to develop an acceptable level of language proficiency?

Foreign language proficiency can be seen as a continuum ranging from no functional ability (Level 0) to the equivalent of the skill of an educated native speaker of the language (Level 5).² A reference point is Level 3, the proficiency level at which the learner is able to use the new language fluently in most situations but still makes a few errors and lacks some vocabulary precision.

How long does it take to reach Level 3 proficiency? For native English-speaking adult language learners with high language aptitude in an intensive, 30-hour-per-week program under relatively ideal circumstances (i.e., small-group learning), it takes *24 weeks (720 hours)* to reach Level 3 proficiency in "easy" languages such as French, Spanish, or Swedish. It takes up to *92 weeks (2,760 hours)* to reach Level 3 proficiency in very difficult languages, such as Japanese, Chinese, or Arabic, with moderately difficult languages such as German or Russian falling between the extremes (Liskin-Gasparro, 1982).³

Assuming that it takes 720 to 2,760 hours, depending on the language, for high-aptitude students to reach Level 3 proficiency in intensive programs under ideal conditions, it would take high-aptitude students in non-intensive programs of about 150 hours per year (i.e., five hours a week of instruction for 30 weeks) a *minimum of 5 to 18 years* to reach Level 3 proficiency in the very best of circumstances. Naturally, it would take even longer for low- or average-aptitude learners in less than ideal language learning situations, especially if they were exposed to the foreign language less than five hours a week.

Survey results suggest that in the responding schools, students do *not* receive foreign language exposure that is sufficient to enable them to reach Level 3 proficiency, no matter how good the teachers or the instruction. In the responding schools, most students appeared to receive relatively short-term foreign language instruction; and for those few students who receive longer-term instruction bridging elementary and secondary schools, the likelihood is that this instruction is inadequately coordinated across levels. The current survey results make it easier to understand Liskin-Gasparro's (1982) disturbing finding that high school Spanish students, some of whom had studied Spanish for four years, were typically rated at Level 0 or 0⁺, reflecting *no functional ability to use the language for communication*. In still another investigation, even college foreign language majors after almost four years of language study were generally found to reach only Level 2 or 2⁺, at which speakers are able to handle conversations about concrete topics (Carroll, 1967).

Slighting of Some Important World Languages. Not only do the survey results imply insufficient foreign language exposure, they also reveal that some major world languages are almost completely ignored in U.S. elementary and secondary schools. The most commonly taught languages are Spanish, French, German, and Latin, the first three of which are major world languages;

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but other major world languages are seriously slighted. For example, Russian, Chinese, Japanese, and Arabic--some of the world's most important languages in terms of politics, economics, technology, geography, population, and military power--were reported as rarely taught in the responding schools. Although respondents did not cite the deemphasis of these key languages as a major problem, the United States ignores these major world languages at everyone's peril, including its own.

In contrast, in countries where Russian, Chinese, Japanese, or Arabic are spoken natively, students receive extensive exposure to English and other foreign languages, often starting in elementary grades and continuing for 10 years or more. Some of these nations, notably China, Japan, and Middle Eastern countries, actively recruit native English speakers to teach English in schools and universities, while the United States has no explicit native-speaker recruitment policy.

Scarce Resources and Dangerous Misconceptions. The two major issues just noted, inadequate foreign language exposure and deemphasis of several crucial languages, can be at least partially explained by scarcity of instructional resources. Scarcity of resources is also reflected in problems that survey respondents raised directly. For example, shortages of foreign language funds, teachers, and materials; poor articulation between elementary and secondary programs; and inadequate in-service training, testing, and counseling are all problems that relate in some way to resource-allocation decisions made by governments at all levels, schools and school districts, and (for materials) even publishers.

However, resource allocation does not operate in a vacuum; it usually reflects an underlying belief system. Three misconceptions appear to hold sway in U.S. foreign language education. First, foreign languages are optional academic frills rather than essential tools for communication. Second, Americans need not learn other languages, and the United States can afford to remain linguistically isolated as a nation. Third, the rest of the world's population is obliged to learn English to communicate with Americans. Before U.S. foreign language education will improve and the available resources will increase, these erroneous beliefs must be eradicated.

Action Plan

The survey results, placed in their broader context, prompt six general recommendations--the core of an action plan for improving U.S. foreign language education.

1. Start foreign language instruction in the elementary grades, and continue instruction in the same language until an acceptable level of proficiency is reached.

2. Expand foreign language offerings by: first, offering more intensive foreign language programs, including immersion programs at both elementary and secondary offerings of major world languages, including those that have not yet been emphasized.

3. Train more foreign language teachers (especially at the elementary level) and continue to improve their skills. Steps include recruiting more foreign language teachers; ensuring that they are proficient in the foreign languages they teach; developing guidelines for elementary foreign language teaching certification; and providing foreign language teachers with appropriate in-service training on language teaching techniques.

4. Encourage the development and use of high-quality language teaching materials.

5. Develop coherent local plans for foreign language instructional articulation between elementary and secondary schools.

6. To accomplish these goals, substantially increase funding by tapping present sources and finding new sources, such as international corporations and state-local matching funds.

NOTES

1. The Center for Language Education and Research (CLEAR) is a multi-year project funded under Contract No. 400-85-1010 by the U.S. Department of Education. CLEAR involves a consortium of organizations, including the University of California at Los Angeles, the Center for Applied Linguistics, Yale University, Harvard University, and the University of California at Santa Barbara. This article reflects the opinions of the authors and not necessarily the opinions of CLEAR or of the Department of Education. The authors express thanks to WESTAT, Market Facts, CEIS/CCSSO, and the Office of Management and Budget for their helpful contributions.

2. Proficiency levels refer to language proficiency rating scales, as described by Omaggio (1986) and Liskin-Gasparro (1982). Levels 0 through 5 are used in the federal government (Foreign Service Institute) scale, while levels such as Novice, Intermediate, Advanced, and so on, are used in the academic (ACTFL/ETS) verbal-descriptive scale. The scales are directly linked to each other. Since all the research cited here used the numerical scale, it is reported in that way.

3. Although differences might exist in language learning rates of adults and children, Liskin-Gasparro's adult-related figures give at least a rough estimate of the exposure time needed to reach proficiency in a formal learning environment. Oxford (1982) discusses advantages of various age groups in foreign language learning.

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