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**"The American university is
the worst place in the world to
learn a modern language."**

Learn languages *in situ*

The loosening of distribution requirements ("Building a Better Yale," January/February) is a welcome development. They should be abolished entirely. Distribution requirements exist as a compromise among interest groups within the faculty to ensure that each group has enough warm bodies in the classrooms. It is a paradox of the American economy that the customer is always right when buying a meal, clothing, or a car—yet always wrong when spending hundreds of thousands of dollars on a university education.

The foreign-language requirement in particular is a mistake. The American university is the worst place in the world to learn a modern language. Students want to learn a modern

language to converse, yet the American university exposes them to the bad accents of their instructors and their fellow students. They spend hours learning word endings and gender, grammar, and syntax; yet native speakers elide the endings, use ungrammatical slang, and speak in sentence fragments. Slang and idioms in textbooks are out of date before they are printed. Videos and tapes never convey the diversity of native speakers' accents, which vary according to region, class, education, ethnic origin, age, gender, and even sobriety. Americans who have studied a language in college are always noticeable by the way they overstress word endings and articles, speak in a flat monotone rather than the musical language of the native, and construct sentences with verbs where a native would use a sentence fragment.

One can learn more by spending four months in the country where the language is spoken than by studying that language for four years at Yale. By insisting on a language requirement, Yale has ensured that the world will be filled with more generations of Americans speaking foreign languages painfully and badly.

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Last fall, the faculty approved a series of changes to the foreign-language requirement recommended by the Committee on Yale College Education. One of these changes allows students to use an approved study-abroad program to fulfill the final semester of the requirement.—Eds.