Challenges in the 1990s for College Foreign Language Programs

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Reconsidering the FL Requirement: From Seat-Time to Proficiency in the Minnesota Experience

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Introduction

The past decade has seen a renewed interest in foreign language study, manifested both in increased enrollments in secondary foreign language programs and in new or strengthened FL requirements at the postsecondary level. Between 1982 and 1985, the number of high school students enrolled in FL classes increased by 38% (Cheney, 1989, p. 30). According to MLA surveys of B.A.–granting institutions, the percentage of these institutions having a FL requirement for entrance jumped from 14% in 1982-83 to 26% in 1987-88, while those with a degree requirement rose from 47% to 58% during the same period (Brod & Lapointe, 1989, p. 17).

These increases, noted in the late 1980s, constitute the first rise in interest in foreign language study since the decline of the late sixties, presumably due to a perceived lack of relevance of the foreign languages. The current renaissance of foreign language study can be attributed to a new awareness penetrating society as a whole of the importance of international and multicultural studies, due to the increasingly interdependent nature of political and economic systems worldwide. This

new international consciousness has resulted in the promotion of new educational goals, including both practical language competence and knowledge of specific cultures, as well as the less tangible "understanding" of cultural differences. Discussion of these goals and their underlying rationales has led to debate over the relative importance of training in practical skills vs. instruction leading to appreciation of cultural differences (Nichols, 1988; Perkins, 1988; Patrikis, 1988). However, there appears to be a general consensus, at least within the profession if not more widely as well, that language study is a central vehicle for the acquisition of cultural understanding.

Coinciding with this new-found general enthusiasm for other languages and cultures, the FL profession has witnessed a new emphasis on instruction leading to the achievement of practical, functional competence in the language being taught. This development represents not so much a change in goals as a realization and acknowledgement that previously stated goals such as communicative competence were often not being realized. It is this realization that has led, in a few cases, to a significant innovation in the nature of the postsecondary FL degree requirement, namely to a reformulation of the requirement in terms of minimal levels of proficiency to be attained, rather than in terms of a number or level of courses to be completed. Such a formulation explicitly recognizes that *seat-time* does not necessarily entail competence. The reasoning is: if in fact linguistic competence is the actual goal, why not state the requirement in precisely these terms?

The notion of a proficiency-based requirement raises a number of issues, both practical and theoretical. Such a formulation clearly makes both the students and those planning and delivering instruction decisively more accountable for the results of their efforts. Some will ask whether such an approach is not excessively product-oriented, focusing on skills training at the expense of the less tangible goals referred to above. While it is true that a proficiency-based requirement may appear to slight the goal of cultural understanding, this need not and should not be true. Few teachers would claim that a set of proficiency-oriented objectives, based solely on listening, speaking, reading, and writing, determines the total content of the curriculum. Cultural learning can and does remain an important element of the curriculum, particularly if linguistic and cultural learning are thoroughly integrated, as the profession has stated that they ought to be. The major reason that cultural learning has not been assessed is our inability to objectively describe and evaluate this kind of learning to the same extent as the linguistic skills.

Some critics of the proficiency-oriented approach have suggested that a proficiency-based formulation may actually weaken the FL re-

quirement by showing that, even in programs with relatively strong requirements (i.e. two years at the university level), only limited practical skills can be achieved in the time available. Several responses are possible. First, we should acknowledge the time necessary for learning foreign languages, especially in the classroom, and work toward educating the public about the realities of the language learning experience. Second, a FL requirement is best viewed not as an end in itself, but rather as preparation for actual use of the foreign language in subsequent undergraduate coursework or in the culture; and this goal applies to *all* students, not just to language majors.

Rather than weakening the requirement, we believe that a proficiency-based requirement has the potential to significantly strengthen the FL requirement. From the students' perspective, a proficiency-based requirement makes more sense since it does not impose coursework for its own sake, but rather as a means toward the desired proficiency. Given Morello's (1988) finding that progress in the oral/aural skills is the most important element in a favorable student attitude toward language study, a proficiency-based requirement would appear to be consonant with students' primary interests. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, a proficiency-based requirement avoids the trap of the seat-time requirement that leads Nostrand (1988, p. 33) to describe the latter as "a mixed blessing in the long run" given that "it eventually self-destructs because it protects complacency".

Under the Former Seat-time Requirement

In the years before the advent of the proficiency-based requirement, we had to deal with the whole range of problems traditionally associated with seat-time requirements. Foremost among these problems was that of student apathy. Since students did not perceive any connection between the seat-time requirement and the general education requirements for the B.A. degree, they often conceived of their task as one of survival: the least amount of effort to rid themselves of an obstacle between them and the degree. As directors of language instruction (DLIs), we had to face a problem common to virtually all seat-time requirements: students, irrespective of the amount of prior language instruction, would place themselves in the very first quarter of the sequence in order to improve their GPAs. This practice not only demoralized true beginners in the same classes, it left most teachers with a sizeable student segment that was bored to tears. And yet, the seat-time concept left us few weapons to get at the root of student apathy, namely a perception of a FL requirement disconnected from the rest of their educational experience. As Patrikis (1988) recently asked:

> What, after all, would impel a student to master a foreign language? Not a foreign language requirement, the pieties and platitudes of which even a naive freshman can see through. If a requirement specifies three or four semesters in the classroom with a mediocre final grade, we can scarcely claim that incentives are built into the curriculum... What would impel a student to study a foreign language if he or she had little or no opportunity to make use of that language in the other courses and other activities of the undergraduate years (p. 17)?

We also faced another problem which is fairly common in seat-time requirements. When departmental administrators seek to impress collegiate administrators with the need for an increase in instructional support, they often embark on a cycle of increasing student numbers per section in the first and second years of instruction, i.e. in that part of the departmental program taught almost exclusively by TAs. During the seat-time requirement, section limits of 25 were raised to 30 and then to 35 over a period of several years. Even at 35, TAs were encouraged to take on additional students so that the chairpersons would have sufficient ammunition to present to the deans. This effort at gaining a competitive edge over other language departments placed an inordinate burden on TAs and also on the DLIs who functioned as the sole link between disgruntled TAs and the departmental faculty.

It is not surprising that the seat-time requirement produced strong feelings of job alienation among the TAs, who felt caught between apathetic students and graduate faculty, indifferent to the beginning language program. As they observed the faculty who were their advisers for M.A. and Ph.D. programs, most often in literature, they often decided to adopt a similiar attitude of indifference toward the beginning language program. Given the inflated numbers of students they were being asked to teach, indifference and alienation may have been the most appropriate survival mechanisms. The seat-time requirement seemed to produce a sense of entrapment at all levels: students felt trapped by a senseless requirement; TAs felt trapped by an indifferent faculty; faculty felt trapped by a retrenchment-minded collegiate administration; and collegiate administrators felt trapped by demands for financial accountability from the university's central administration. Most trapped of all, of course, were the DLIs, because every constituency mentioned above held them ultimately responsible for resolving the unworkable situation.

The position of the DLI in these seat-time programs became one of isolation, as this individual was held responsible for all the problems in the language program but was empowered to solve none of them. In

addition to the burdensome workload, DLIs also faced a lack of respect from colleagues when it came time to evaluate their research. Dvorak (1986) deals with this point as a major factor in the frequent "burnout" problem among DLIs:

> the motivation required to continue to invest large amounts of energy and time is gradually eroded by the awareness that one's efforts are not highly valued in the dean's office, and are also considered by a number of one's colleagues to be inferior to the work of those in literature or "pure" linguistics in that they are perceived to involve little true expertise and scholarship (p. 220).

All these factors involve DLIs in what Dvorak terms "ghettoization":

> For LPCs [language program coordinators], the language program becomes a ghetto, a small preserve within which they spend almost all their time, but which their colleagues enter only on occasion, and then generally with condescension rather than admiration or enthusiasm. It is perhaps not necessary to mention what happens to one's self-esteem in finding that increasingly one works for a department, but not in it (p. 221).

The seat-time requirement also gave rise to unrealistic expectations among our students, many of whom were remarkably similiar to students surveyed by Horwitz (1988) at the University of Texas:

> Upwards of 40% of them felt it possible to become fluent in a second language in two years or less, and over 60% of the Spanish and German students felt that learning a foreign language was mostly a matter of translating from English (pp. 291-92).

Since our seat-time requirement allowed for one or two years of language study, it specifically confirmed the totally unrealistic beliefs already held by many of our students about the amount of study it takes to become "fluent" in a second language. Most left our programs as soon as permitted by the seat-time requirement, and they departed with a sense of betrayal. As Byrnes (1988) urged recently: "it seems appropriate to own up to what foreign language programs can achieve and not to blissfully promise the unattainable" (pp. 35-36). In our experience as DLIs, we found that students believed the College of Liberal Arts, by tying the FL requirement to seat-time, was guaranteeing "fluency" after one or two years of study, a highly unrealistic goal.

The Minnesota Second Language Proficiency Requirement

In 1983, the Dean of the College of Liberal Arts, Fred Lukermann, appointed a task force to study the effectiveness of second language instruction in the College, with particular reference to the outcomes of the second language requirement. The finding of the task force was that students completing the requirement had not acquired, for the most part, a level of proficiency that would permit any real-world use of the language. The task force consequently recommended a change in the second language requirement, which was subsequently ratified by the appropriate bodies and took effect in Fall 1986.

The former second language requirement allowed students to take either five quarters of a language, or three quarters of a language plus three culture courses in English. Approximately 67% of the students chose the latter option. The new language requirement is innovative in a variety of ways:

1) It is a *proficiency-based* requirement, not a "seat-time" requirement.

2) It mandates attainment of a proficiency level normally attained after *two years of college-level study.*

3) Through an *entrance standard,* it recommends attainment of proficiency normally attained after *one year* of college study (or approximately three years of high school study) in French, German, and Spanish, i.e. the languages available in most high schools. Students who do not attain the required level of proficiency for entrance may study first-year French, German, or Spanish at the university, but will *not* receive graduation credit for first-year courses.

4) It rewards the study of less commonly taught languages, such as Russian, Japanese, Portuguese, and Dakota, by allowing students to receive credit for first-year courses in those languages.

In order to set proficiency standards for the entrance and graduation levels, language departments needed some common framework for describing various levels of proficiency. In spite of their shortcomings, we decided to use the framework provided by the *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines,* since these furnish a comprehensive set of descriptions of proficiency levels which are fairly accessible to the nonspecialist. A working group of language educators from various secondary and postsecondary institutions in Minnesota agreed upon the following minimal levels for French, German, and Spanish:

Entrance (equivalent to approximately 1 year of university study)
Reading and Listening: *Intermediate Low*
Writing and Speaking: *Novice High*
Graduation (after approximately 2 years of university study)
Reading and Listening: *Intermediate High*
Writing and Speaking: *Intermediate Mid*

The same working group began developing the series of tests required to evaluate students' proficiency, with the major test development accomplished by directors of the language programs working with graduate research assistants provided by the College, all working under the direction of Dale Lange. We are still refining the tests and developing alternate versions. Proficiency is evaluated through a separate test for each skill (reading, listening, speaking, writing) and for each level (entrance and graduation), for a total of eight different tests. The Graduation Speaking Test consists of a modified Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI): since it is only necessary to verify attainment of the Intermediate Mid level, the interview is reduced to about 10 minutes in length. The form of the other tests is analogous to the structure of the OPI. That is, the distribution and ordering of items is according to the particular level of the function targeted by that item. Items are arranged so as to simulate the Warm-up, Level Check, Probes, and Wind-down phases of the OPI. The tests are administered at the beginning of Fall Quarter and at the end of Fall, Winter, and Spring Quarters. Test administration and scoring, as well as continuing test development, are carried out by a director of testing and three graduate assistants, one in each language. Scoring of writing tests and administration and rating of the speaking evaluations are done by TAs employed by each department.

The Transition from Seat-Time to Proficiency

A university does not move easily or swiftly from a seat-time to a proficiency requirement, and there was considerable confusion among students in the transitional years. First and foremost, beginning language classes were populated by two kinds of students, one on the old seat-time requirement and one on the new proficiency requirement. The same course could serve both groups, but the student attitudes created obvious tension in most classes. Students working on the seat-time requirement complained incessantly that the course was becoming too intensive; the proficiency group worried equally incessantly that the course might not be intensive enough to prepare them for the Graduation Proficiency Test. Fortunately, the seat-time group usually yielded first; in a few happy cases, these students were even motivated to take more FL courses than were minimally required in their degree programs.

The administration of the College of Liberal Arts also discovered during the transitional period that they had taken on a much larger project than anticipated. We are convinced that our experience in this respect is not unique, and we offer, as examples, these financial implications which were largely overlooked by our administrators.

1) Since student performance on the Graduation Proficiency Test was the sole means for satisfying the new requirement, language use in the classroom became a critical factor, and thus the average section size needed to be reduced dramatically and quickly. New staff needed to be hired to teach the greatly increased number of FL sections.

2) Proficiency tests needed to be developed, tests which required that staff be trained in ACTFL OPI procedures. Additional staff were also required to administer and edit the new tests. Specialists were needed to set and administer a new testing research agenda. Administrative budgets needed massive increases for record keeping, for communication with students and parents, and for copying and supplies. Finally, the need for more extensive and careful advising of students significantly increased the workloads of College advisory staff.

3) Less commonly taught languages, 25 of them in Minnesota's case, were also required to develop Graduation Proficiency Tests by Spring 1990, and thus these languages also required budget increases for training existing staff, for hiring new staff, and for supplies.

The fact that we are still negotiating for a number of the budgetary items above should be a clear signal to DLIs elsewhere that they must settle these financial issues *before* deans hand them a proficiency requirement without the necessary funding to implement it.

The new proficiency requirement also imposed confusion on TAs and DLIs during the transitional phase. New training responsibilities were required of the DLIs and new duties were required of the TAs.

1) DLIs needed to receive intensive ACTFL OPI training and to provide all TAs with familiarization training in the *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines*.

2) DLIs needed to train selected TAs in the administration and evaluation of the writing and speaking tests for entrance and graduation. With the continual turnover of TAs, this training is necessarily ongoing.

3) DLIs needed to review the first six quarters of instruction and introduce changes which would bring about a stronger proficiency orientation.

While these adjustments were viewed as essential for the success of the new requirement, administrators also needed to understand that TAs could not be expected to assume additional duties without compen-

sation. A more serious and unexpected problem was encountered among TAs who had already been teaching in the seat-time program for several years. Many had been assigned to the same courses several times, had worked to develop these courses, and had acquired a sense of ownership. They viewed changes of any kind as a threat and an implied repudiation of their curricular contributions. A few were openly hostile; one or two attempted to organize the other TAs in opposition to the proficiency requirement.

Our colleagues also seemed confused by the transitional years of the proficiency requirement and now had to help us deal with language program issues on a weekly basis. As we introduced them to the finer points of the new program and provided research on testing and implementation, they grew increasingly familiar with the issues a DLI must confront daily. Though we hoped this increased awareness would draw our colleagues into greater involvement with the teaching and administration of the language program, we have not seen the realization of Byrnes'(1988) utopian dream "of an ideal situation, in which all full-time faculty members of the department are involved in language teaching as well as in their own specializations" (p. 38). Instead, our colleagues who were not already involved in the language program kept their distance. Whereas they had earlier insisted they were overqualified and too "expensive" for language courses that any graduate student could teach, they now insisted that the changes introduced a new field of research and teaching, one for which they had not been trained and for which they did not have the time to be trained.

Under the Current Proficiency Requirement

Although the transition from a seat-time to a proficiency requirement was difficult at times, with the implementation of a proficiency-based language requirement, we have noticed a number of improvements in the language programs. These are reflected in the change of students' attitudes and motivation, in the degree of administrative support for and TA involvement in the language programs, and in the increased level of respect for the position of director of language instruction.

First, there has been a major change in students' attitudes and motivation in the classroom. Students have begun arriving at the University more prepared in terms of language study than before. Students in the College of Liberal Arts are aware that they will not receive graduation credit for courses in the first-year sequences of French, German, or Spanish. Many are beginning language study in high school and attempt to place as high as possible to avoid paying tuition for

courses that will not count towards graduation. Thus, we are reducing the number of "false beginners," one of our previous problems and one of the placement problems most frequently mentioned by directors of Spanish language instruction nationally (Klee & Rogers, 1989; Loughrin-Sacco, this volume). Since students are penalized for not meeting the entrance standard in French, German, and Spanish, most attempt to pass the exams and enter directly into the second-year sequence. It appears that some students who have not begun language study in high school are turning to the less commonly taught languages, because they will receive graduation credit for first-year courses in those languages. Enrollments in the less commonly taught languages have increased considerably over the past two years.

In addition, even students who are taking language courses simply to meet the graduation requirement seem to be putting more effort and energy into their classes since they know they will have to pass the Graduation Proficiency Test to complete the language requirement. It is no longer adequate to slide by with a low C and a minimum of effort; students are very conscious of the fact that passing the courses is no longer sufficient to complete their degree requirements. Students who do not pass the Graduation Proficiency Test after six quarters of instruction are advised to audit the sixth-quarter course or work individually with a tutor and retake the section(s) of the exam they failed at the end of the following quarter of instruction. We hope eventually to provide special tutoring sections for students who have been unable to pass one or more sections of the proficiency exam.

An unexpected consequence of the proficiency-based language requirement has been a sudden increase in the enrollments in third-year language courses. Since students are arriving more prepared for language study and many are entering directly into second-year courses and completing the language requirement by the end of their freshman year, some have decided to continue their study of language and may eventually minor or even major in a language.

In addition to the change we have noted in students with the implementation of the proficiency-based language requirement, we have also noticed an increase in the level of administrative support for the language programs. Because of the proficiency-based graduation requirement, we have been able to make a very convincing case to the deans for the need to limit class enrollments in order to better prepare students to actually communicate in the language. Between 1985 and 1990, class size limits for French, German, and Spanish were lowered from 25 to 22 students. Targeted limits of 20 in first-year and 18 in second-year courses are to be phased in over the next few years.

As a result of the new language requirement, the involvement of TAs in the language program has also changed. Teaching assistants' frustration with large class size has obviously disappeared as the number of students per section has been reduced. However, TAs now feel more pressure than they did under the old requirement: they are more accountable for the quality of instruction than in the past, since it is unacceptable for a student to pass the second-year course sequence and yet be unable to pass the Graduation Proficiency Tests. We have noticed an increase in peer pressure among the TAs to avoid giving away grades and to uphold strict standards of performance. After a period of transition, most TAs have responded very favorably to the changed working conditions, and some have created supplementary reading and listening materials for the first- and second-year programs. They are also aware of an increased level of respect for their work from graduate faculty and advisers, who have finally recognized that language teaching in a proficiency-oriented program requires special training and expertise.

We are concerned, however, that the workload for TAs has increased too much with the proficiency-based requirement. TAs are expected to evaluate the Entrance and Graduation Writing and Speaking Tests. This increase in the workload has been handled differently by the three departments and is still under consideration. The French and German departments require TAs to rate the tests as part of their TA appointments. In the French department this work is done in lieu of assisting a professor in a large lecture class, as the number of English-language culture courses, such as literature in translation, has dwindled with the change in the requirement. Spanish Department TAs are required to evaluate exams during orientation week each fall as part of their regular appointments; however, after concern was expressed by the TAs over grading during the rest of the academic year, TAs are now paid an hourly wage to rate proficiency exams at other times. Since this is a College of Liberal Arts initiative and should not be the sole responsibility of the language departments, we hope that funding for the evaluation of these exams will eventually come from the College of Liberal Arts budget.

A final change caused by the new language requirement involves our positions as DLIs. First and foremost, we have experienced a tremendous increase in our workloads. During the initial years of implementation, we were expected to carry out proficiency test development in the four skill areas, make the necessary adjustments in course curricula, improve the training of the TAs and prepare them for the new requirement and the evaluation of the proficiency tests, and participate in outreach programs to inform high school teachers and counselors of the change

in the requirements. We did all this with no additional release time or administrative help. At first, our sense of ghettoization increased, rather than decreased, since our colleagues in literature and linguistics were no more involved in the language program than they had been originally, and the burden of implementation fell on us.

However, we also began to note an increased respect for our positions as DLIs. Colleagues and deans were aware that the implementation could not be carried out without us, and there was a recognition of the need for special expertise to carry out the direction of the language programs. It was no longer assumed that someone without proper training could do it effectively. The nonparticipation of our colleagues seemed to be due more to the fact that they lacked the proper qualifications to participate in the language program, rather than from the disdain for anything related to language instruction that is frequent at large research institutions.

For intellectual and moral support we formed a new coalition of colleagues from across departments and across colleges. This team included the DLIs of French, German, and Spanish; the Director of Testing, Dale L. Lange; the Director of the Language Center, Nancy Stenson; and the Assistant to the Director/Coordinator of Special Projects of Student Academic Support Services, Lynn Anderson Scott. This team worked through the details of the implementation process, and we still meet regularly to discuss problems as they arise and to determine future needs of the testing project and the language programs.

The increase in respect for the position of DLI has also translated into material support from colleagues and deans. Specifically, because of the increase in the workload and the DLIs' desire for release time from the duties involved in directing the language program, the Department of French and Italian made a strong case to the deans for the need for another faculty line. Another faculty member was hired in fall 1989, and she and Betsy Barnes will rotate the directorship of the language program on a three-year basis. The Department of German and Dutch has made a similiar recommendation, but it has not yet been approved by the deans. It is expected that the Department of Spanish and Portuguese may eventually follow the example that has been set by the other departments.

Future Directions

There are a number of steps that remain to be taken at the University of Minnesota. Since 1986 when the new requirement was first implemented, we have been revising one working set of exams. Development of alternate versions of the exams is now underway, and we eventually

plan to use a computerized test bank that will generate multiple versions of the tests. There have been numerous requests that we market the exams, but we will be unable to do so until we have multiple versions of the tests and have been able to carry out studies of their reliability and validity. To carry out the research and development that should accompany this initiative, we hope to hire a permanent director of testing, who will have a faculty line in one of the language departments or in the College of Education. This individual would be responsible for the day-to-day administration of the testing program and would be expected to develop a coherent plan for research related to the tests. Although the position request has already been presented to the deans of the College of Liberal Arts, the position has not yet been approved.

The new requirement has increased our ties to departments in the social sciences which are now taking advantage of the increased number of students who are completing the language requirement at an early stage of their studies. For example, the Institute of International Studies, which has over 400 majors who all minor in a second language, received a Title VI grant from the U.S. Department of Education, designating it as an undergraduate National Resource Center in International Studies. One of the projects that it has pursued as a part of that grant is the "Integration of Foreign Language Usage and Materials into Regular Content Courses." A foreign language component, for which students receive one credit, has been added to regular courses taught in English in content areas such as political science and international relations. For example, one such course is "Latin American Government and Politics." Students in the foreign language component of that course read articles in Spanish, preferably ones that have not been translated into English and that add a new perspective on the lectures and readings assigned in English for the main course. A diversity of texts is chosen to expose students to different types of language as well as to different political sectors. Listening materials such as speeches and interviews have also been added. Students meet once a week for two hours to discuss in Spanish the assigned materials. Students in these classes have evaluated the experience very positively.

Such content courses will be expanded in the future, thanks to NEH funding of an Institute of International Studies' grant application for foreign language study across the curriculum. Over a three-year period beginning in the summer of 1990, eighteen faculty will prepare content courses in political science, sociology, history, and geography to be taught in a second language. Faculty in the social sciences will be paired with language/literature faculty to aid in the development of curricula appropriate to students' levels of proficiency. The languages in which

these courses will be taught include French, German, Spanish, Italian, and Russian. Students who complete a certain number of these courses will graduate with "language distinction," an honor that will be recorded on their transcript.

These initiatives have had an impact on us as DLIs, since we have been asked to serve as consultants for the implementation of these initiatives, and our expertise is recognized not only within our departments, but also within the College of Liberal Arts and the University as a whole. While our workloads have greatly increased, our sense of ghettoization has decreased considerably.

Conclusion

The national trend to reinstate and/or increase study of foreign languages at the high school and university levels will most likely continue as the pressure grows to better prepare students for an increasingly interconnected and interdependent world. The initiative undertaken at the University of Minnesota to change the language requirement from seat-time to proficiency is part of a much broader plan at our institution to internationalize the curriculum. The change in the language requirement is thus the first step in preparing students to use a second language to explore the ideas and research of others and to think critically about their own culture and values.

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