

Issues and Answers in Foreign Language Learning: Are Teachers and Students Saying the Same Thing?

Using the ten most important issues in foreign language learning (as identified by foreign language teachers, administrators, coordinators, and consultants in the ACTFL/SCOLT task force's national survey), the author designed and administered a survey questionnaire which asked 1135 students enrolled in required foreign language courses at a large state university to rank the ten ACTFL/SCOLT issues in terms of which was most-important-least-important to them in their language learning.

On the basis of this survey, students and teachers are not saying the same things about what is important in foreign language learning: students in this survey did not rank a single issue the same as the teachers, administrators, coordinators, and consultants in the ACTFL/SCOLT national survey.

Gordon W. Allport once said, "If you want to know how people feel, what they experience and what they remember, what their emotions and motives are, and the reason for acting as they do, why not ask them? Why not indeed.

It appears that since the time of Caesar Augustus, so many of us in education have engaged in the business of surveying people about their feelings and opinions that the survey has become the most widely used research tool; in the form of the questionnaire,

it has also become the most criticized, censured, and abused instrument of its kind.

Nevertheless, because the survey questionnaire can identify factors and relationships worthy of investigation under more rigorously-controlled conditions, it is one of the most useful, forward-looking, and practical tools for providing the basis for plans of improvement.

Improving foreign language teaching and learning was an objective of the ACTFL/SCOLT (Southern Conference on Language Teaching) task force when it conducted its 1981 national survey of foreign language teachers, administrators, coordinators, and consultants.

Asked to list what they considered to be the most important issues in foreign language learning, the ACTFL/SCOLT respondents listed the following ten issues in order of importance:

- 1) Testing and Evaluation
- 2) Promoting/Maintaining Interest in Foreign Language Study
- 3) Language Learning Theory
- 4) Developing Oral Proficiency Among Students
- 5) Foreign Language Program Development
- 6) Dealing with Multi-Level Classes
- 7) Integrating Instructional Aids, Especially Videotapes and Computers

- 8) Teaching Culture
- 9) The Student as Learner—that is how best to prepare the student for language learning
- 10) Techniques for Partner/Group Work in Instruction

Using these ten ACTFL/SCOLT issues, we designed a survey questionnaire which asked students enrolled in required foreign languages courses at the University of Georgia to rank these issues and indicate what was most-important-least-important to them in their language learning.

The survey design was purposely descriptive, namely, oriented toward the description of what was important to foreign language learners and not toward an analysis of causes and effects.

We hoped the survey results would help us develop some insights into student priorities in foreign language learning, and point us in the direction of fruitful hypotheses that could be incorporated into future, tightly-controlled experimental designs.

Questionnaire

The survey instrument was a one-page questionnaire consisting of three parts: The first part was closed, that is, the ten ACTFL/SCOLT issues were listed and students were instructed to rank the issues on a scale of 1 to 10 (1 to be assigned to the issue of most importance; 10 to the issue of least importance). Since the list of issues to be ranked by students should ideally have been selected by students instead of someone else, we felt there was a chance that students may not have an opportunity to express "what's important to them."

To give them a chance to do so, the second part of the questionnaire was open-ended. In this part, students were instructed to reply in their own words and list any other concerns on their minds.

In the last part of the questionnaire, students were asked to indicate their year in

school, college major, language currently enrolled in, and the reason for taking a specific language course.

Subjects

Administered to 1135 students in the Spring of 1985, the questionnaire was given to students in the language laboratory, a natural setting for foreign language students at the University of Georgia since, except for most advanced levels, lower level students are required to attend language lab.

Our sample population was limited to freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors enrolled in required 101-104 language courses—not an unreasonable limitation because this is where the majority of language students are to be found.

Procedure

The procedure of administering the questionnaire was as follows: Students who came to the lab were asked to fill out the questionnaire. They were not instructed to give a signature or any other means of personal identification. We hoped the greater impersonality would elicit more candid replies.

We imposed no time limit on the completion of the questionnaire, hoping this would encourage more considerate and thoughtful responses. We kept records on the Weekly Lab Report Sheet of students who had filled out the questionnaire, thus minimizing duplication.

To cope with the major weakness of questionnaires—the problem of non-returns—we required students willing to fill out the questionnaire to complete it before they left the laboratory.

Survey Respondents

The survey sample consisted of 788 students: 107 (14%) were freshman; 260 (33%) were sophomores; 293 (37%) were juniors; and, 128 (16%) were seniors.

This sample represents approximately 70% of the 1135 students surveyed in the entire poll. About 30% of student respondents found it impossible to assign a single rank per issue, finding two or more issues of equal importance.

Respondents unable to assign a single rank to each issue were not a part of this survey sample; they are the subject of a separate investigation.

Of the 788 students in the survey sample, 12% were enrolled in German courses, 47% in Spanish courses, 39% in French courses, 6% in Italian courses, 2% in Russian courses, and 1% in Portuguese courses. These course percentages were roughly equivalent to departmental enrollment figures for the Spring Quarter of 1985.

And, what about the issues in foreign language learning? Are teachers and students saying the same thing? On the basis of this survey, teachers and students are not saying the same thing about what is most important and what is least important to them in foreign language learning.

Results

Charted, a comparison of the rankings of teachers and students looks like this:

CHART A
Issues and Answers in Foreign Language Learning
(Rankings: 1 = Most Important; 10 = Least)

Issues	All Teachers	All Students
Testing/Evaluation	1	2
Motivation	2	3
Language Learning Theory	3	5
Oral Proficiency	4	1
Foreign Language Curriculum	5	10
Multi-Level Classes	6	8
Instructional Aids	7	9
Target Language Culture	8	7
Student as Learner	9	4
Group Techniques	10	6

The most important issue for teachers—**TESTING AND EVALUATION**—is not the most important issue for freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors enrolled in lower level, required foreign language courses. The most important issue for all students is **ORAL PROFICIENCY** which ranks 4th for teachers. In fact, our survey did not find a single issue which all students ranked the same as all teachers in the ACTFL/SCOLT national survey.

Clearly, teacher and student foreign language priority agendas do not coincide.

In the ACTFL/SCOLT national survey, ten other issues were mentioned by teachers, but they did not appear frequently enough to rank among the top ten.

It is not within the scope of this discussion to comment about the issues teachers mentioned now and then; what is within the scope of this discussion is the fact that students in the open-ended section of the questionnaire mentioned nine issues in addition to ranking the listed ACTFL/SCOLT issues.

Approximately 58% of all students in our sample survey listed other issues, and of them, the largest group to do so were seniors (63%). The issues all students listed most frequently in the open-ended part of the questionnaire in rank order were as follows:

- 1) More Speaking Practice
- 2) Teacher Incompetence
- 3) Career and Future Use of Target Language
- 4) Fairness in Requirements/Testing/Grading
- 5) Updating Lab Equipment/Classrooms
- 6) Too Much Material/Too Fast
- 7) Classes Too Large
- 8) Improve Student/Teacher Relationship
- 9) Poor Textbooks

The fact that **MORE SPEAKING PRACTICE** was mentioned in the open-ended section more often than any other issue is not surprising because all students ranked **ORAL PROFICIENCY** as the most important issue of the ACTFL/SCOLT issues.

Apparently, students value oral communi-

cation skills, realize that more speaking practice is needed, but find that in spite of all the talk on the part of teachers about "communicative competence," there is, in fact, not enough speaking being done in the learning of foreign languages.

That the issue of TEACHER INCOMPETENCE would be important to students is predictable; however, the "sense" in which it was mentioned most often by survey respondents was a little surprising.

Students were concerned primarily with graduate teaching assistants in the sense that their competence tended toward extremes: they were either very good or very bad, with few, if any, "just right." This concern was with target language native teaching assistants as well as with non-native target language teaching assistants: the native target language teaching assistants were criticized because their command of English was poor; the non-native target language teaching assistants because their command of the target language—especially accent and pronunciation—was inadequate or varied dramatically from teaching assistant to teaching assistant.

The relatively high (3rd) ranking of CAREER AND FUTURE USE OF TARGET LANGUAGE is probably some indication and support of the fact that "commercial" target language courses—Business German, Commercial French, as well as others—are becoming increasingly popular on college campuses. There seems to be genuine concern on the part of students about the practical applications of foreign language communication skills—applications such as domestic and international employment opportunities.

This desire for and concern about practical applications of foreign languages cropped up again when students stated their reasons for taking a foreign language course.

Although we could easily guess that most freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors take foreign language courses because they are required courses, what is disappointing is

that the percentage taking foreign language courses because of requirement is going up.

In her 1976 survey of interest in foreign languages, Wilga Rivers found that 66% of the 1,298 students taking the Illinois Questionnaire of Interest were enrolled in foreign language courses because they had to take them. In our survey, 71% studied foreign languages only because they were required to do so; only 29% gave reasons other than the requirement.

Of the 29% who had other reasons for studying languages, a surprising 12% did so because of career and future uses such as travel, study abroad, etc. Only 17% stated clearly and unequivocally that their reason for taking language courses was personal interest and enjoyment.

It seems disturbing and somewhat contradictory that although students seem interested in other cultures, want to visit foreign countries, and are curious about the life and customs of other people, most of them would not be in our classrooms studying foreign languages if they were not required to be there.

Discussion

If the University of Georgia and the students enrolled in required foreign language courses are typical and representative of all students at colleges and universities throughout the United States—and if Wilga Rivers is correct in maintaining that "students determine our course objectives . . . and course objectives determine our content . . .,"—then what concerns students must concern us.

Given a chance to rank the ten top issues identified by the ACTFL/SCOLT national survey of teacher concerns in foreign language learning, given a chance to state in their own words what matters most to them in their foreign language learning, it appears that students and teachers are not saying the same things.

It is not TESTING but ORAL PROFICIENCY that matters most of all to students;

it is not necessarily the ten-issue priority agenda of teachers that encompasses major student concerns; almost 60% of student respondents stated other concerns.

If we in foreign languages are interested in student priorities, we must concern ourselves with providing foreign language students with more opportunities to practice speaking the target language; we must be competent in the classroom; we must put more emphasis on target language utility; we must be fair in our testing and grading; we must integrate technology into our curriculum; we must cover less material and allow more time for learning; we must insist on smaller classes; we must improve student/teacher relationships; and, we must select better textbooks.

When it comes to the apparent results of this survey, namely, that teachers and students are not saying the same thing about

issues and answers in foreign language learning, undoubtedly there are some who might say, "So, that's rather obvious and unimportant in the great scheme of things. What else is new?"

For those tempted to dismiss the obvious, consider the observation of anthropologist Clifford Greetz: "The really important facts of life lie scattered openly along its surface, not cunningly secreted in its depths. There is no need, indeed it is a fatal mistake, to deny the obviousness of the obvious."

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