
Issues and Answers in Foreign Language Teaching and Learning: Students Speak Out

It is not so important to be serious as it is to be serious about important things. The monkey wears an expression of seriousness which would do credit to any college student, but the monkey is serious because he itches.

— Robert M. Hutchins

If monkeys are serious because they itch, Americans are serious because they are exceptional. The American exceptionalism—which de Tocqueville maintained made Americans unlike any other nationalities—revolves around important things: life and death, right and wrong, man and God, liberty and law, and heaven and earth. Americans—in greater numbers than any other group of people on this planet—believe in life after death, in a personal God, in individual freedom, and in the technological subjugation of the earth. How do we know that Americans believe in those important things? Surveys have been conducted, and respondents have indicated what they think and how they feel.

Because the use of surveys to poll populations has become so pervasive, the survey as research tool is in danger of becoming as important as the “important things,” namely, the issues which surveys are designed to uncover and showcase. Page through any five issues of *Time* and *U.S. News & World Report* (June-August, 1989) and you will find out how Americans think and feel about abortion (57% oppose new state laws restricting access to abortion), the Middle East hostage crisis (58% want the U.S. to negotiate with terrorist groups for the hostages’ release), parenting (64% say parents just don’t do a good job with their children), and teenage violence (72% think it is caused by lack of parental supervision). It is not an overstatement to say that

if you can name it, someone has probably administered a survey questionnaire about it.

Though pervasive, surveys are not without limitations. In the days when Dora Russell and others were journeying about giving out survey questionnaires on sex at most of our leading colleges and universities, a Wellesley girl became tired of the seemingly endless round of intimate questionnaires. Summoned to a personal interview with the visiting psychiatrist, she meekly answered the many questions fired at her, and upon rising to leave, guilelessly asked, “Oh, doctor, tell me. Does it mean anything that I am so passionately fond of pancakes?” The doctor laughed heartily with professional geniality. “Why, my dear girl, of course not. I’m very fond of them myself.” “Oh, I’m so glad,” replied the girl, “over in my room, I’ve a whole bureau drawer full, and I love to take them out and stroke them.” The young lady was never troubled again by questionnaires, but reported that from time to time, the housemother dropped in and quietly went through her bureau drawers. As this story illustrates, perhaps the greatest limitation of survey questionnaires is their dependency on what people *say* they think and feel. As we all know, what we say and what we truly think and feel need not—and at times do not—coincide.

Vital Survey Statistics

Research Problem: What students think (attitudes and beliefs) and feel (likes and dislikes) about foreign language courses and language laboratory practice

Sample Size: 2,024

Return Rate: 94%

Date of Survey: May 1989

Population: Freshmen, sophomores, juniors, seniors, and others enrolled in lower level (101-103) foreign language courses at a large, state university

Languages: Sample population was enrolled in French, Spanish, Italian, German, Japanese, Portuguese, and Russian courses

Survey Instrument: One-page (front & back) three-section questionnaire with 26 combination (open-ended/fixed alternative) funnel structured items

Method: Self-report, anonymous, semi self-administered paper-and-pencil questionnaire completed in the language laboratory

Average Completion Time: 10 minutes

Sampling Procedure: Convenience Sampling

Purpose of Survey: Gathering information about a particular group of people participating in a continuing and specific phenomenon; description of the specific phenomenon as opposed to determining causal relationships

Objectives of Survey: Determine trends; make predictions about the future; investigate the status quo of the foreign language-language laboratory experience

The Research Problem

In our attitude survey, 2,024 lower level (101-103) foreign language freshmen, sophomores, juniors, seniors, and others (post-graduate and non-degree adult learners) were given an opportunity to express what they thought and how they felt about foreign language courses and language laboratory practice. The consensus about language courses and the language laboratory is generally hopeful and optimistic; however, students view with concern and criticism issues that influence the teaching and learning of languages. Of particular concern is the foreign language requirement and the implementation of compulsory language laboratory practice.

Our 1989 survey questionnaire is divided into

three parts. The first part of our survey focuses on the student. In this "something about you" section, we wanted to find out (1) what students say motivates them to study foreign languages; (2) how much time they devote to the study of foreign language outside of class; (3) what grades they get and expect in their language courses; (4) what foreign countries they have visited and expect to visit; and (5) whom do they prefer as their language teachers (teaching assistants (TAs) or professors).

In the second part of the survey, we asked students to say what they thought and how they felt about foreign language courses. Should such courses be required or optional? Are foreign language courses too lax and easy? How enthusiastic, well-prepared, and organized are language instructors? How worthwhile do students say their foreign language course experiences are?

In the third part of the survey, we wanted students to tell us what they thought and how they felt about the language laboratory: its usefulness in language acquisition; their instructor's attitude toward language laboratory practice; the weekly, one-hour laboratory requirement; should lab be required or optional; and, how the language practice experience in the lab could be improved.

Return Rate

Undoubtedly, a major weakness or disadvantage of using survey questionnaires is the problem of non-returns. Obviously, non-returns decrease the sample size on which results are based—a relative problem if the sample is large. Less apparent is the bias non-returns can inject into the survey results: Non-returns are very likely to differ from respondents in fundamental ways. Such difference could have a definite bearing on the validity of the results obtained.

Of the 2,024 students who received our survey, 97 did not return their surveys to us, and 17 of all surveys returned could not be used because they were not completely filled out. As a rule of thumb, 75% is considered the minimum rate of return; 94% of our total surveys were usable.

High returns are attributable to many factors

and generally hard to obtain. Among the many factors that promote high return percentages such as ours is the combination of select topic and select population: Students enrolled in lower level foreign language courses—at an institution that requires foreign language study with a compulsory language laboratory practice component for many of its degrees—have both academic and psychological interests in the topic. Be it positive or negative, the psychological meaning inherent in the topic of foreign language study is important to the student population. Largely because of the interest in the topic, many students responded and made significant contributions to the success of the survey.

The Questionnaire

The use of questionnaires as research tools dates back to 1847 and Horace Mann who reportedly was the first to use them. In the construction of survey questionnaires, the form that questions and responses take is an important consideration. The use of a combination item (open-ended format requiring respondents to reply in their own words and fixed alternative format providing respondents with ready-made choices) was largely determined by the nature of the research problem.

In a similar survey conducted Spring Quarter 1985 (see *J.E.T.T.*, Volume 20, No. 1, pp. 57-61), we found that 58% of respondents will reply in their own words if given the opportunity. Based in part on the content of the open-ended responses in the 1985 survey and on the professional experience of working with students in a foreign language teaching-learning environment, we amassed a pool of typical, fixed responses students tend to make about foreign languages and the language laboratory. By combining fixed alternatives and opportunities for replying in one's own words, we were pleased to find that nearly 75% of all respondents added their own remarks—either to explain or expand upon their choice of a fixed alternative or if no fixed alternative matched what they thought and felt, to write their own.

Because the length of a questionnaire can be a significant factor in rate of return and completion (the shorter and less demanding, the higher

the return and completion), we limited the instrument to 26 items which the average respondent completed in ten minutes. These 26 items were divided into three sections: Something About You, Something About Foreign Languages, and Something About the Language Laboratory. Wherever possible, we funnel structured each of the 26 items: Like a funnel, the questions initially are very broad, simple and neutral and then become more narrow, complex and personal. In addition to funneling, we also tried to word each item as clearly as possible in order to avoid ambiguity; we tried to word each question to ask only what we wanted to know; and, we asked questions that students were able and willing to answer.

In addition to the wealth of information gathered by the 1985 survey, we also ran a small pre-test for this questionnaire in order to determine the adequacy of our fixed alternative responses: In addition to unambiguous wording, we wanted to ascertain whether the alternatives offered actually represented the manner in which our 1989 target group would respond.

In order to remind students and help them understand the importance of the survey, we prepared a “cover” paragraph at the beginning of the survey in which we explained the survey and put it into the appropriate context. We assured students of their anonymity.

Method of Administration

Although our survey questionnaire was a paper-and-pencil self-report instrument, it was administered in what can, perhaps, be described as a partial or semi self-administered fashion. Given the established language laboratory procedures, laboratory assistants asked students—as they checked in for language practice—to fill out the questionnaire; if the student was willing, he or she was given a questionnaire, asked to fill it out, and drop it in a drop box before leaving the facility. Although students were free to refuse to participate, non-participation was not a problem. A small percentage (4%) did not drop a completed survey into the drop box. Since all surveys were numbered consecutively, we have a record of what surveys were not returned. Additionally, to guard against the same student doing the survey

more than once (we did not think this would be problematic, and it wasn't), the laboratory assistant who gave a specific student a questionnaire, placed a check mark on the student's time card to indicate that this was the case. Our survey excluded students who were enrolled in language courses requiring laboratory practice but who never came to the lab.

Sampling

Because the question of generalization or representativeness is important for survey research, sampling procedures are a critical element in surveying populations. Of the two general types of sampling—probability and nonprobability—nonprobability sampling was the procedure of choice for this survey. Like the use of introductory psychology students for research, we also decided to use the nonprobability sampling technique known as convenience sampling: We used students who were conveniently available. True, convenience sampling excludes those students who never came to practice language skills in the laboratory. However, by polling all those who did come, we got much more feedback about foreign languages and the language laboratory than a random sample would have given us. Since our purpose was to find out what students thought and felt, that is, those students who actually used the laboratory facilities, we wanted the contributions of as many of those students as possible in order to identify present conditions and needs as they exist in language courses and the laboratory.

We do not necessarily accept the respondents' responses as ultimate truth; we do, however, take them for what they are: the thoughts and feelings respondents say they have about themselves, the language courses in which they are enrolled, and

the language laboratory in which they practice their language skills. Our interpretation of what students say they think and feel about foreign languages and the language laboratory is imbedded in the context of this survey, its objectives, and its limitations. Data do not interpret themselves; we interpret them and pass judgment on their meaning in the framework of the problem under investigation.

The results of this survey will not make any decisions for us; what they can do is provide us with information on which we can base decisions that will be better, more appropriate, and far-reaching than the uninformed, inappropriate, and near-sighted decisions we would have to make without the results of this survey. Students are the reason universities, faculties, and administrators exist; they deserve to be asked, and their thoughts and feelings must be taken into consideration when decisions that affect them are being made by faculty and administrators.

Student Motivations for Enrolling in Foreign Languages

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 languages because they were required by their schools to take them for graduation. In our 1985 survey, 71% of the students we surveyed studied foreign languages because they were required to do so. In this 1989 survey, 59% indicated that the reason they studied foreign languages was because their degree program required it. Since fewer students say they are taking a foreign language solely because of requirement, the trend seems to be away from requirement and toward other reasons as motivation for foreign language study.

Reasons for Taking Foreign Languages								
Classification	Required	Enjoyment	Usefulness/ Career Travel	Required/ Enjoyment	Required/ Useful	Required/ Useful/ Enjoyment	Enjoy Useful	Other
Freshmen	43%	7%	11%	11%	5%	11%	6%	4%*
Sophomores	61%	6%	7%	8%	8%	5%	4%	1%
Juniors	70%	7%	7%	6%	9%	3%	1%	2%
Seniors	70%	6%	8%	2%	4%	4%	4%	3%
Other	11%	16%	32%	0%	5%	0%	41%	0%
All Students	59%	6%	8%	8%	7%	6%	4%	2%

* Percentages in all charts may total more than 100 because of rounding and/or multiple responses.

Encouraging as the overall trend toward motivation as something other than requirement is, another apparent trend is less encouraging and more perplexing. It appears that as students progress from their freshman through their senior years, the direction of this overall trend is curious: Whereas less than half (43%) of freshmen surveyed say requirement is their motivation for foreign language study, nearly three quarters (70%) of seniors rely on the requirement as motivation. A commonly held shibboleth asserts that externals as motivators—in this case the fact that a course is required—is more characteristic of freshmen than of seniors.

Of the 41% of respondents who gave reasons other than requirement as motivation for foreign language study, only 6% unequivocally stated that personal enjoyment was the reason they studied languages. This represents a steep decline from the percentage who felt this way in our 1985 survey. In 1985, 17% said enjoyment was their motivation for enrolling in language courses. Strangely enough, there is only a 1 percentage point variation among the four classification of students in this regard. Apparently, studying foreign languages is not as enjoyable for students as it was even four years ago.

Not only did enjoyment become less motivating, but the usefulness of foreign language—for career, study abroad, and travel—as motivation also decreased. In 1985, 12% of students surveyed reported that such practical uses of languages motivated them to take courses. In 1989, such foreign language usefulness motivates fewer students: Only 8% said career and travel reasons motivated them to take language courses. Interestingly enough, more freshmen—who, as some seniors will tell you, don't know very much—seem to know that foreign language skills can be useful in career,

study, and travel plans: 11% of freshmen surveyed took foreign languages for such practical reasons; only 8% of seniors surveyed did likewise.

When we look at the “Other” classification—which includes post-graduate students and non-degree adult learners—we find the kind of percentages that are most encouraging: 89% of post-graduate and non-degree adult learners took foreign language courses for reasons of enjoyment and usefulness in career and travel plans; only 11% enrolled because of degree requirements. Enjoyment and usefulness are powerful motivators in anyone's psychology book; certainly, they are more powerful than an external degree requirement. The nature of our foreign language classroom teaching and learning experiences would dramatically change if nearly 90% of the learners in our classrooms were there because they enjoyed foreign languages and found them useful. Perhaps, the poet is right after all: Higher education may truly be wasted on the young.

Those of us who have shared foreign language teaching and learning experiences with students over the years, indulge in some commonly held shibboleths of our own when it comes to languages and students. In particular, we seem to think that, generally, certain types of students are attracted to certain languages, that is, students enrolled in French differ significantly in some respects from students enrolled in Spanish. For example, we often hear it said that many students are motivated to enroll in Spanish because they think it is easier to learn than other languages. According to our survey, the motivation is not so much that Spanish is perceived as easy to learn, but rather, that foreign language is required. Sixty-seven percent of students motivated to take Spanish do so because of requirement; only 2 percent say they chose Spanish because “it's an easy way to get an easy A.”

Language	Required	Enjoyment	Usefulness/ Career Travel	Required/ Enjoyment	Required/ Useful	Required/ Useful/ Enjoyment	Enjoy Useful	Other
Spanish	67%	5%	7%	6%	8%	5%	2%	2%
French	53%	6%	8%	12%	8%	6%	5%	2%
German	34%	3%	20%	9%	16%	9%	8%	2%
Italian	52%	8%	6%	7%	8%	7%	9%	2%
Japanese	15%	0%	46%	0%	8%	15%	23%	0%
Portuguese	84%	5%	3%	2%	1%	3%	1%	2%
Russian	38%	0%	38%	3%	0%	7%	10%	0%

One thing survey results can do is deny or confirm commonly held assumptions and truisms. For example, it is commonly believed that students who enroll in German courses do so for career and professional reasons: Since much of the literature in science and engineering is written in German, students in those fields often choose to fulfill their language requirement with German courses. Over half (53%) of students who had elected to take German did so for career, travel, and otherwise useful purposes; just over one third (34%) of them indicated that the requirement itself was their motivation for enrolling in German courses.

A clearly surprising result of our survey was the high percentage (84%) of students enrolled in Portuguese who indicated their motivation for doing so was because of the foreign language requirement. In spite of the fact that it was not the objective of this survey to uncover why students said what they said or if causal relationships were seminal in producing the kind of responses made by those surveyed, one cannot help but wonder why so many students in Portuguese are not motivated by a sense of enjoyment or practical applications of Portuguese in career, study, and travel plans as students in languages like Spanish, French, German, Italian, Japanese, and Russian seem to be. It is tempting to conclude—as a colleague did—that there is really no other reason than degree requirement for taking Portuguese. Proclaimed the colleague, “There are few places on earth where Portuguese is spoken, not much professional literature is written in Portuguese, and opportunities for travel and participation in study abroad programs in Portuguese-speaking countries are fewer—by comparison—than in European countries. The students in your survey are not stupid; they know

that the opportunities for having Portuguese help them climb the corporate ladder are few and far between. It’s to the credit of the Portuguese program at your university that so many students who are motivated primarily by the requirement choose Portuguese and not any one of the other languages they could take to fulfill their requirement.” Perhaps. The survey results, however, neither confirm nor deny such assumptions.

Student Perceptions of Foreign Language Teachers

It has been said that the single, most important element in foreign language learning is the teacher. How students perceive the men and women who teach them how to “speak in tongues” affects the experience of learning a foreign language. Our survey did not uncover how well students learned the foreign language they elected to take to meet their degree requirements. However, it did seem to support the old shibboleth some of us who teach believe in: Even if our students do not know much about the subject we teach, they learn a great deal about us; like it or not, we do teach ourselves first. It is in their perception of foreign language teachers that this survey supports a hopeful and optimistic consensus about the state of foreign language study.

The questionnaire items constructed to elicit from respondents what they thought and how they felt about their teachers provoked students to “comment.” Even when the fixed alternatives expressed exactly how they felt, many added additional comments to make certain we caught the precise meaning they wished to communicate about their teachers.

Student Perceptions of Foreign Language Teachers			
Language	Instructor is enthusiastic and prepared with excellent command of target language	Instructor is nice person but not well-organized	Other Perceptions
French	85%	7%	8%
Spanish	70%	16%	14%
German	85%	9%	7%
Italian	75%	17%	8%
Japanese	36%	57%	7%
Portuguese	87%	6%	7%
Russian	100%	0%	0%

With the possible exception of students enrolled in Japanese, most students in all language courses perceived their Spring Quarter 1989 instructors to be enthusiastic about teaching, well-prepared in the subject matter, and displaying demonstrable good command of the target language. A percentage of students—albeit less than ten percent except in the case of Spanish where 14% voiced complaints about their teachers—were concerned sufficiently about their instructors' classroom behavior and etiquette to write out their own responses in the open-ended portions of the questionnaire.

The 14% of Spanish students, who listed other perceptions than those offered in the fixed responses, expressed the following observations about their teachers:

- ◆ Hasn't taught us anything but tries to intimidate us
- ◆ Is rude, degrading, and condescending to students
- ◆ Lacks enthusiasm
- ◆ Is prepared but teaching strategy is often confusing; explains everything in Spanish and the class is often confused
- ◆ Too strict and doesn't teach the class very well
- ◆ Is very enthusiastic but does little actual teaching; is dull, boring, and ignorant
- ◆ Does not want to teach Spanish; extremely critical of students, very discouraging, and not very helpful
- ◆ Too keyed-up; should relax more; teaching Spanish isn't brain surgery
- ◆ Is good but very tough
- ◆ Very unreasonable; class feels hatred toward instructor

Seven percent of students enrolled in French also expressed the following perceptions of their teachers—perceptions that did not fit any of the fixed alternatives offered in the questionnaire items designed to elicit teacher perceptions:

- ◆ Prepared but not enthusiastic
- ◆ Gives the impression of never having taught before; intimidates class

- ◆ Doesn't explain topics well at all
- ◆ Very knowledgeable professor but doesn't take enough time to explain things well or slowly enough
- ◆ Doesn't feel comfortable with the class; hesitant in disciplining those who are rude
- ◆ Doesn't seem happy teaching in America; insulting to the class
- ◆ Knows material well but is an ineffective teacher
- ◆ Good instructor but sits in judgment on students
- ◆ Can't speak enough English so students rarely understand what's going on; very impatient with students who are just beginning foreign language study
- ◆ Well-prepared and knowledgeable professor but very moody and practices favoritism to a fault
- ◆ Doesn't really teach; I learn more from the book
- ◆ Doesn't seem too sure of the target language
- ◆ Has a smart mouth and makes students feel stupid

Just under ten percent (9%) of students enrolled in German wrote down the following perceptions of their teachers:

- ◆ Grades too harshly; seems to enjoy keeping students from doing well
- ◆ Well-versed in the target language; not a good instructor
- ◆ Cannot understand or manipulate English very well
- ◆ Thinks the lab requirement is stupid
- ◆ Nice person but a dreadful bore
- ◆ Teaches from book; too strict

Eight percent of students enrolled in Italian courses wrote the following perceptions about their teachers:

- ◆ Hates teaching altogether
- ◆ Very nice instructor but don't think this T.A. is ready for prime time teaching yet

- ◆ Lacks patience with students when they have difficulty grasping course content
- ◆ Expects too much from students; takes for granted we understand when we don't
- ◆ Not open with students and unavailable when students needs help
- ◆ Has no idea how to teach; speaks much too fast
- ◆ Maybe instructor is good but I can't understand a thing that's said; class is divided between those who get As and those who get Ds; we don't belong together in the same class
- ◆ Not only is my instructor very nice but she also cares whether we learn or not

Seven percent of students enrolled in Japanese offered the following two perceptions about their teachers:

- ◆ Needs to be able to explain and answer questions more precisely
- ◆ Enthusiastic and very motivating but command of Japanese needs to be better

Seven percent of students enrolled in Portuguese wrote the following perceptions of their teachers:

- ◆ Doesn't speak English; can't explain anything
- ◆ Teaches Portuguese by speaking Portuguese; I have a hard time relating to a foreign language; better teacher than the previous one
- ◆ Doesn't explain very well; seems to enjoy embarrassing students in class when they mispronounce, etc.

- ◆ Prepared and a good teacher but intimidating
- ◆ Very well-prepared but can't speak English well; class gets frustrated because instructor can't understand what we say

Student Reactions to the Foreign Language-Language Lab Requirement

Listening to students, one often wonders if they would willingly take any course that was not, in some way, required. Even the elective courses of their degree programs are often viewed with an "I have to" attitude. At a school that has a foreign language requirement, foreign language courses do not escape the "I have better things to do than waste my time with requirements." At a school that has, in addition to a foreign language requirement, weekly, compulsory language laboratory practice, student dissatisfaction with required foreign language courses is thought to stem from the fact that lab is required. The shibboleth goes something like this: Students just love foreign language courses; it's having to go to lab that they hate, so let's drop the lab requirement.

The assumption that a required language laboratory component in foreign language programs is the root of all evil is not supported by the results of the survey. It would appear that large percentages of students are not so keen on foreign languages as requirement either and would opt not to take them if they were not required. Commented one student, "I make time for required courses; those that are not required, I don't make time for."

Language	Foreign language courses should not be required; they should be optional	Language Lab should not be required; it should be optional
Spanish	44%	52%
French	35%	39%
German	26%	24%
Italian	36%	31%
Japanese	14%	14%
Portuguese	52%	29%
Russian	34%	37%

When we tried to elicit from respondents what “bugged” them the most about language laboratory practice, it was not the weekly, hourly lab practice requirement; it was the fact that the language tapes (audio programs from the textbook publishers) which the language departments require students to practice are not an hour long.

What “Bugs” Students About Language Laboratory Practice

What “Bugs” Students About Lab Practice				
Language	Hour requirement; tapes aren’t an hour long	Old lab equipment; needs to be replaced	Lab should be optional	Tape program; boring; too fast, too difficult
Spanish	53%	4%*	35%	8%
French	67%	1%	21%	11%
German	38%	2%	20%	40%
Italian	31%	5%	25%	39%
Japanese	35%	49%	7%	9%
Portuguese	53%	4%	43%	0%
Russian	0%	67%	13%	20%

* Japanese, Portuguese, and Russian regularly use lab with old equipment; Spanish, French, German, and Italian use state-of-the-art equipment in renovated labs except for overflow and make-up tapes.

How Useful Is Language Practice in the Language Lab?

We asked students to tell us how useful they found language practice in the lab to be.

When we looked at the group of respondents who said they did not find language laboratory

practice very useful, we wanted to know specifically what they did or didn’t do while in the laboratory that contributed to their saying that lab practice was not very useful. Are the practice activities of students who say lab isn’t very useful different from those who say it is useful or very useful?

Lab practice is...	French	Spanish	German	Italian	Japanese	Portuguese	Russian
Very Useful	2%	2%	4%	7%	14%	1%	3%
Useful	41%	27%	40%	50%	43%	23%	38%
Not Very Useful	55%	67%	59%	38%	21%	71%	52%
Other	2%	4%	6%	4%	21%	6%	7%

How Students “Practice” Languages in the Language Lab

When we compared the in-lab activities of students who say lab is not very useful and those who say it is useful, we found that usefulness of laboratory practice may have something to do

with the nature of the practice activities. It would seem that students whose practice consists of working through the audio lesson once (regardless of whether or not they find the lab useful) will “sit off” the remaining minutes in order to meet the hourly lab requirement each week.

In-Lab Activities	Those who say lab is not very useful	Those who say lab is useful
Work through tapes; do exercises; work on pronunciation	7%	10%
Listen through tapes; do the exercises	3%	5%
Sit off 60 minutes; try to look like I’m working with tapes	38%	0%
Listen to lesson once and sit off the rest of the hour	41%	40%
Work on the exercises until I get them right	14%	45%

Student Suggestions for Improving Language Practice in the Lab

Although 83% of those who are required to engage in weekly laboratory practice showed up during Spring Quarter in the laboratory and depended on the points they get for coming to lab to help them achieve a good grade (laboratory practice in most instances is part of the participation component of the grade for the course), almost all students have suggestions for improvements—mainly in the implementation of the laboratory requirement. Said one respondent: “If coming to lab is important enough to be required, then what we do there should count for more than it does.” Many others echo that sentiment:

◆ “They should eliminate the required hour in lab per week and substitute it with the required tape of the week. If a student has worked through the lesson, and it it’s only 25 minutes, he or she should be given credit for having done the tape, not for physically having been in the lab for an hour. How is staring at the clock in the lab going to improve my language skills?”

◆ “Language lab is useful to those who need it. Why not devise a speaking/comprehension test and let those of us who have had three years of high school foreign language or are good in languages “test out” of the required lab; let us come if we want to, but don’t make us come if we don’t really need it.”

◆ “I think lab does help in learning a language, even though I often bitch about having to go. Overall, I guess I am glad that it is a “required” part of the course because if it were not, I probably would not always go.”

◆ “I personally practice in the lab for as long as I need to. However, if a person doesn’t really care about learning a language well and just comes to fulfill the requirement, it’s their money and time, so they shouldn’t be expected to stay in lab for the full hour. If they want so-so grades and a scanty amount of knowledge, then that’s their business. Also, those who know the material, should only have to stay as long as they feel necessary.”

◆ “Lab is useful if the student makes it useful; half the people in the lab are taking up space as they sit off time to get their hour’s worth of credit; it just makes it worse for those of us waiting in line to get a carrel.”

◆ “I think the language and language lab requirement is a good idea because it leads to a broader educational experience. I’m not at all supportive of the current audio tape program; it needs to be changed.”

◆ “Lab seems to be a real pain; the only reason I go is to make sure that if I’m on the line grade-wise, lab attendance will give me the higher grade. Lab is useful, however, if one uses his time wisely, but I don’t.”

◆ “Students should be encouraged (i.e., rewarded) for going to lab more than the required hour per week. Lab is a good idea but it’s easy to see it as “Oh, Hell, I have to go to language lab today.”

◆ “Like the sciences, I think we should go to class 4 days a week and to language lab one day a week and get separate credit for lab practice. Students complain about the language lab much more than the chemistry lab not because they love chemistry lab and hate language lab. Some of us spend a lot of time on the target language and a lot of time practicing it in the language lab, and we don’t get enough credit for it.”

◆ “I cannot believe the stupidity of bureaucracy! Language lab consists of six half hour tapes, yet students are forced to listen to ten hours in the lab. When I say “listen,” don’t misunderstand me because no one listens to the tapes twice; they sit in lab and do homework.”

The “Typical” Foreign Language Student

At a large, state university—with foreign language requirement and compulsory language laboratory practice—who is the “typical” foreign language student and what does he look like?

The typical foreign language student, circa 1989, exists in a world where more than 2,700 separate languages are spoken, 14 of which are world languages having at least 50 million speakers each, with Chinese having the largest number—over 1 billion. The next most-used languages are English, Hindustani, Russian, Spanish, Japanese, and German.

The typical foreign language student elects

Spanish as the language he will study to meet the foreign language requirement (40% of the entire sample population in our survey were enrolled in Spanish courses). In all likelihood, he is a sophomore (33% of the entire sample said they were classified as sophomores) who is motivated to study Spanish because there is a language requirement (61% of sophomores surveyed said they were taking Spanish because foreign languages were required) and not because he has heard Spanish is an easy way to get an easy A.

The typical foreign language student generally feels that foreign languages and language laboratory practice should not be required but optional. He is very likely to feel that language laboratory practice is not very useful (69% of sophomores said they did not find it very useful). However, what probably “bugs” him the most about lab practice is that the hour per week requirement and the length of the assigned audio tapes often do not coincide. When he comes to lab, his in-lab activities will probably consist of “sitting off 60 minutes” (55% of sophomores said they did just that).

The typical foreign language student perceives his instructor to be well-prepared, enthusiastic, and well-organized (68% of sophomores polled perceived their 1989 Spring Quarter instructors to be enthusiastic, prepared, and organized).

If asked how foreign language courses and laboratory practice can be improved, he is most likely to say that both should be optional (52% of sophomores said this would be the best solution), but if languages and the lab must be required, require students to do the tape, not the hour in the lab. The best solution would be to have class four days a week and lab one day with separate credit for lab.