Prepared for: The National Foreign Language Center

“Best Practices for the Teaching of Critical Foreign Languages”

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Title: Best Practices for the Teaching of Critical Foreign Languages

Client: The National Foreign Language Center

Recommendations (Page 16):

I recommend that universities teaching critical foreign languages adopt the following best practices:

1. Recreate an immersive environment for students studying critical foreign languages by teaching in the target language to the greatest extent possible and by requiring students to take part in language-related extracurricular activities that reinforce their intra-classroom studies.

2. Design course curricula in accordance with the fact that foreign languages present students with challenges that vary on a language-by-language basis and therefore require teachers to adopt different teaching approaches and focus more on certain concepts.

3. Where possible, divide foreign language students into groups of beginners and heritage speakers so instruction can be tailored to more specifically suit their exact needs.

Problem (Page 1):

The United States currently has a foreign language deficit with, depending on the source, anywhere from 18 to 25 percent of Americans capable of speaking a foreign language. This number pales in comparison to that of many of the United States’ peer countries and has caused a number of problems.

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1 This student paper was prepared in 2013 in partial completion of the requirements for PPS 808, a course in the Masters of Public Policy Program at the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University. The research, analysis, and policy alternatives and recommendations contained in this paper are the work of Greg McDonald, a second-year MPP student, who authored the document, and do not represent the official or unofficial views of the Sanford School of Public Policy or of Duke University. Nor do they represent the views of the client for whom the document was prepared. Without the specific permission of its author, this paper may not be used or cited for any purpose other than to inform the client organization about the subject matter. All mistakes and inaccuracies are those of the author.
Regarding critical languages more specifically, the United States’ foreign language deficit can lead to a number of national security-related problems. For instance, law enforcement and intelligence agencies lacked the necessary translators to make sense of terrorism-related intercepts they received before September 11th, 2001, intercepts that, if translated, could possibly have forestalled the attacks. After invading Afghanistan and Iraq, the problem persisted. The United States’ lack of facility in the relevant foreign languages prevented its military from effectively engaging with local populations, an important first step in conducting successful counter-insurgency operations. Similarly, a lack of Arabic, Dari and Pashto proficiency has prevented diplomats working in these two countries from interfacing with the public and generally doing their jobs as representatives of the United States.

Foreign language study, mostly irrespective of the language being studied, is also important in a number of other ways. Some of the other benefits foreign language study confers are increased economic competitiveness globally, professional competitiveness on an individual level, increased academic achievement and improved cognitive processes. These are all benefits that individuals and countries forgo if they choose not to engage in foreign language study.

**Determination of Best Practices (Page 8):**

I decided on the best practices listed in this paper after conducting numerous interviews with foreign language teachers at NC State University, UNC Chapel Hill and Duke University. Their input was also crucial in settling on the criteria used to evaluate whether their proposed best practices would be recommended in this paper given the constraints most universities face.

I selected my interviewees mostly based on the languages they teach. I specifically chose to interview only teachers of critical languages, as that is the focus of this paper. Restricting my interviews to teachers of these languages also helps me to control for the difficulty of the languages they teach. Including professors that teach a number of different languages that vary considerably in difficulty likely would have prevented me from being able to aggregate their interview responses and make best practice determinations. The languages taught by my interviewees are Russian, Arabic, Farsi, Chinese and Urdu-Hindi.

**Criteria (Page 9):**

- Effective in terms of improving students' facility in the languages they are studying
• Easy to implement from an organizational and budgetary standpoint

**Alternatives (Page 9):**

1. Making a distinction between beginners and heritage speakers by dividing them into different classes and teaching them separately.

2. Recreating an immersive setting by teaching in the target language and requiring students to take part in extracurricular language-related activities.

3. Making an allowance for different languages in course curricula and in the approaches teachers use to teach them.
PROBLEM

The United States’ Language Deficit

According to a 2001 Gallup poll, only 25 percent of Americans could hold a conversation in a foreign language. Citing other numbers in 2010, Arne Duncan, the United States Secretary of Education, placed this number at around 18 percent. This lack of foreign language ability seems to stem largely from the diminished value Americans place on second language proficiency. According to the same Gallup poll, 80 percent of Americans believed that foreign language competency was either valuable—but not necessarily essential—or simply not important at all.

When compared to other industrialized countries, most of which are in Europe, the United States is far behind in terms of second language proficiency. According to a 2006 study, 56 percent of Europeans could speak at least one foreign language, and 28 percent—a larger percentage than can speak one foreign language in the United States—could speak two. Eleven percent of Europeans could speak three or more foreign languages, while 44 percent could speak their native language alone.

Statistics & Trends in Foreign Language Instruction

The lack of interest in foreign language study in the U.S. is reflected in the number of schools offering foreign language instruction, particularly at the elementary school level. According to a 1997 Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL) study, only 31 percent of elementary schools in the United States offered foreign language instruction. Among these schools, there was a sizeable difference in the frequency with which foreign languages were taught in private and public schools. Fifty-three percent of private elementary schools offered foreign language instruction, as opposed

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4 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
to a mere 24 percent of public schools. A more recent CAL study reported that by 2008 only 25 percent of American elementary schools were offering foreign language instruction. In large part, these trends can be attributed to reduced funding in schools across the country. To offset reductions in government allocations, schools at all levels are scaling back foreign language course offerings, or, in some cases, are removing foreign language requirements altogether.

Engaging students in foreign language study before high school is of particular importance. This is the case because it has a significant impact on students’ future chances of achieving a basic level of oral and written communication skills in the languages they study. A 2010 Center for Applied Second Language Studies (CASLS) study reported that students beginning foreign language coursework in elementary school were 70 percent more likely to achieve a basic level of language proficiency than students starting in high school. And students commencing with foreign language study in middle school are 50 percent more likely to achieve a basic level of proficiency than if they had started in high school.

Compared to elementary schools, the percentage of high schools offering foreign language instruction is markedly better, but still insufficient. According to the same CAL study, 86 percent of high schools in the U.S. offered foreign language instruction. At the high school level, there is again a difference between private and public schools. Ninety-two percent of private high schools offer foreign language instruction, compared to only 85 percent of public high schools. This number had actually decreased from 1987, when 87 percent of all American high schools offered foreign language instruction. In addition, only 10 states in the U.S. currently require high school students to study foreign languages before graduating.

According to a 2012 U.S. English Foundation report, there are numerous universities and university systems around the United States that lack foreign

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8 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
15 Ibid.
language requirements. These universities include Auburn University, the University of Oklahoma, Penn State University, and Indiana University.¹⁷

**Benefits of Second Language Study**

There are a number of benefits strongly associated with foreign language study. Some of the most prominent benefits conferred by the study of critical languages include an improved ability to predict, prevent and address emerging national-security related threats. Proficiency in critical foreign languages also helps to foster improved diplomatic relations with countries relevant to the United States’ national security, such as Iraq and Afghanistan. Some of the other benefits studying any foreign language can provide are improved global economic competitiveness on a national level, increased professional competiveness on a personal level, increased academic achievement and improvements to cognitive processes.

**National Security**

In May 2012, representatives from a number of government agencies, among them the Department of Defense, FBI, and Department of Homeland Security, testified before Congress that they currently lack a sufficient number of foreign language speakers to carry out their intended functions. Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Readiness Laura Junor pointed out at this hearing that foreign language ability enables both the United States’ military and diplomatic missions to more effectively communicate with local populations.¹⁸ In addition, increased foreign language ability helps the United States to more easily and effectively communicate with its international partners, many of which speak languages other than English.¹⁹ In a 2006 report, the Department of Education noted, “American students must master critical need foreign language skills for our nation to remain competitive and continue the progress in securing our nation.”²⁰ The United States Department of State, in conjunction with other government agencies, launched the National Security Language Initiative for Youth (NSLI-Y) in 2006 in recognition of this fact.²¹ The

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¹⁹ Ibid.


NSLI-Y is a program that offers scholarships to high school students interested in studying languages of critical interest to the United States.22

Foreign language ability—specifically as it pertains to certain, “critical” languages—is also crucial because those who seek to do the United States harm very seldom use English to communicate. The intelligence the U.S. gathers as to the operations, movement, and plans of terrorists, for example, is useless to policymakers as long as it effectively remains “encrypted” in another language. Former Secretary of Defense and CIA Director Leon Panetta went on record as saying, “To gather intelligence and understand a complex world, the CIA must have more officers who read, speak and understand foreign languages.”23 And the 9/11 commission report itself cites a lack of language abilities in organizations like the FBI as resulting in a backlog of intercepts that weren’t translated.24 The FBI has specifically claimed that these intercepts could have possibly been used to “connect the dots” and forestall the 9/11 attacks.25

Of particular relevance in Afghanistan, foreign language ability also has a direct impact on the United States military’s ability to interact with local populations and conduct successful counterinsurgency operations. As Jason Lyall and Isaiah Wilson point out, the more a military becomes disconnected from a local population—which could be caused, in part, by lack of relevant foreign language ability—the less capable it is of distinguishing non-combatants from actual militants.26 This often leads to indiscriminate violence by the military, which causes resentment on the part of the local population.27 In addition, because non-combatants are as likely to be killed as actual insurgents, they often side with militant groups for protection, causing the insurgency to become more robust and intractable.28 And relying on local citizens for translations and interpretation is questionable for two important reasons. First, it gives the enemy another way to infiltrate the military and gain access to information it wouldn’t otherwise have had. Second, the translators and interpreters cooperating

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22 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid.
with the military often become targets of violence when it is no longer there to provide them with protection.29

Diplomacy

Lack of proficiency in foreign languages also hurts the United States’ diplomatic efforts around the world. Notably, as of 2007, the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad—one of the world’s largest and most expensive—had only 10 employees with a working knowledge of Arabic.30 The situation is no better in Afghanistan. Chris Mason, a member of the Interagency Group on Afghanistan from 2002-2005, has stated the United States would need “thousands of Pashto31 speakers” to win over the Afghan people. The population of Afghanistan is, in his words, “exceedingly resistant to the imposition of external order.”32 However, the United States has turned out only 18 Foreign Service officers who can speak Pashto. And, as of 2009, only two of them were serving in Afghanistan.33

Global Economic Competitiveness

Chinese students have been learning English at an impressive rate in recent years in recognition of the world being more globalized. In China there are around 200 million students learning English, whereas in the U.S. only around 60,000 students are learning Chinese.34 This is a 1,333 to 1 ratio; when accounting for China’s larger population, it is still a ratio of 333 to 1. In terms of economic competitiveness, it is not in the short- or long-term interests of the U.S. to fall so far behind a global competitor like China. By falling behind, the U.S. prevents itself from fully exploiting business opportunities in China and elsewhere. This is the case due to the limited number of Americans familiar with foreign business customs and the languages of foreign countries in which they would like to conduct business.

31 Pashto is the language predominately spoken by the Taliban and its supporters.
33 Ibid.
Professional Competitiveness

Second language study also helps to foster an understanding of foreign cultures and peoples. This increased understanding is beneficial and desirable in its own right, but it can also aid professional competitiveness. A 2007 National Education Association (NEA) report specifically makes mention of a survey of 581 alumni of the American Graduate School of International Management where, when asked, most respondents said they had gained a competitive advantage from their knowledge of foreign languages and other cultures. They noted that language study was often a critical factor in hiring decisions and in enhancing their career paths. In addition, they claimed it provided them with a sense of personal fulfillment, mental discipline, and cultural enlightenment.

Academic Achievement

According to the same NEA report, the benefits associated with second language study are numerous. Some of the primary benefits include improved performance in other school subjects, such as English, music, math, and reading. Students who study foreign languages also generally outperform those who do not on standardized tests. Studying foreign languages helps to close the “traditional” academic achievement gap between students from advantaged and less advantaged backgrounds. For example, the same report cites Cincinnati’s Foreign Language Magnet Program, which is composed largely of students from disadvantaged households. Fifty-two percent of students enrolled in the program received free/reduced lunches, and the student body was made up of 57 percent African-American and 43 percent Caucasian students. The level of academic achievement for these students far exceeded the national norms in reading and math. These students also outperformed the average scores for the rest of Cincinnati’s many magnet programs.

A 1993 report by William Nagy and Richard Anderson, then professors at the University of Illinois College of Education, found that even mild exposure to foreign languages provides educational benefits. They specifically found that children studying foreign languages at a young age had an increased awareness of their own

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36 Ibid.
37 Ibid., p. 5.
38 Ibid., p. 3.
39 Ibid.
writing system.41 This type of development has clear implications for early childhood literacy and generally gets students off to a faster, more productive start with their studies. Nagy and Anderson ultimately conclude, “It is the youngest, least advantaged, least able children who will benefit most from instruction that helps them to become aware of the structure of their writing system and its relationship to their spoken language.”42

*Cognitive Processes*

Research also suggests that foreign language study “enhances children’s understanding of how language itself works” and their ability to “manipulate language in the service of thinking.”43 Foreign language study also helps to foster cognitive development in students, helping them with things ranging from general problem solving skills, to listening skills, to increases in memorization capacity. 44 These and similar findings have been corroborated by a number of other researchers. Kenji Hakuta of Stanford University has, for example, identified what he calls increased “metalinguistic ability” in multilingual students.45 He defines this term as the general ability to think flexibly and abstractly about language. With children in particular, this can be seen in the ability to make judgments about grammar and the structure of sentences, as well as an increased ability to appreciate plays on words.46 The overarching theory is that while all children—both monolingual and multilingual—develop metalinguistic ability, being multilingual attunes children to better control of their mental processes.47

Further, Ellen Bialystok, a cognitive neuroscientist at York University in Toronto, has shown that the acquisition and sustained use of second language skills can help to delay the worsening of brain-based afflictions like Alzheimer’s disease.48 After looking at the medical records of 400 Alzheimer’s patients, Bialystok found that “bilinguals,” on average, showed Alzheimer’s symptoms five to six years later than those who spoke only one language.49 These findings do not mean that the bilinguals didn’t suffer from Alzheimer’s disease. They do, however, suggest that as the disease

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41 Ibid.
42 Ibid.
44 Ibid.
46 Ibid.
47 Ibid.
49 Ibid.
took root in their brains, they could maintain a higher level of verbal communication ability. Consequently, they were able to successfully cope with the disease for a longer period of time.

**ANALYTICAL STRATEGY**

*Analytical Approach Overview*

My analytical strategy primarily revolved around interviewing a number of foreign language professors to determine what they perceived to be best practices in foreign language instruction. I specifically interviewed foreign language professors at NC State University, UNC Chapel Hill and Duke University. Also, I interviewed only professors that teach what are typically considered to be critical foreign languages. I specifically interviewed teachers of Russian, Farsi, Urdu-Hindi, Chinese and Arabic. My justification for limiting the interviews to teachers of these languages is twofold. First, to some extent, this approach helps me to control for the difficulty of the languages the professors teach. Including professors that teach a number of different languages that vary considerably in difficulty could prevent me from being able to aggregate their survey responses and making best practice determinations. Second, these languages are most closely associated with the national security of the United States, which is one of this paper’s primary focuses.

My interviews took place in three forms: in-person, by telephone and via electronic surveys I sent out through email. In the case of my in-person interviews, I made audio recordings and later transcribed my interviewees’ responses. The interviews I conducted did not noticeably differ in terms of quality or the kinds of things the professors said, although the responses I received in-person and over the phone were somewhat more extensive.

**OBJECTIVE**

As the title suggests, the objective of this project is to determine what some of the best practices are for the teaching of critical foreign languages. Due to a number of constraints, the best practices I have identified do not represent an exhaustive list, nor are they intended to. Further, in identifying these best practices and in making recommendations, I tried to focus on “portability”: that is, my recommendations should be broadly applicable in universities across the United States.

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50 Ibid.
51 Ibid.
52 For interview questionnaire, see Appendix A; pp.17-18.
53 These are also known as “hard target” languages.
CRITERIA & ALTERNATIVES

In making recommendations as to which best practices universities should adopt, I will consider a number of alternatives and weigh them against two criteria I believe to be important.

Criteria

Any best practices I recommend for adoption by universities should meet two criteria. First, they must be effective. Second, they must be implementable within the existing budgets and organizational capacities of universities across the United States.

- **Effectiveness:** Any best practice I recommend should be strongly associated with marked improvements in students' foreign language ability, both in terms of their writing/reading and speaking skills. In developing a set of potential best practices, I relied heavily on input from the aforementioned professors I interviewed.

- **Ease of Implementation:** Any best practice I recommend should, from an organizational standpoint, be implementable by most universities in the United States. Specifically, the best practices I recommend should not require foreign language departments to radically overhaul existing intra-classroom dynamics or take actions that negatively affect other students or university departments. Relatedly, any best practice I recommend should also be implementable within the existing budgets of most universities. This is of particular importance given the budgetary constraints many (especially public) universities are currently facing.

Alternatives

1. **Making a Distinction Between Beginners and Heritage Speakers**

   Many students studying critical languages are first-generation Americans born to speakers of those languages. As a result, they have differing skillsets from those of students without such backgrounds. For instance, while heritage speakers have experience using and comprehending the spoken form of the language, they often have problems reading and writing it. This problem is particularly acute when the writing system used for the language they are learning is dissimilar from the one used for the language they use away from home. It is therefore often helpful to separate students into two groups: one with students who have developed competency with the spoken language but lack reading and writing skills, and one with true beginners who need instruction in both the spoken and written forms of the language.
2. **Recreating an Immersive Setting**

Foreign languages are best learned in an immersive setting: one that mimics how people acquired their native language. Immersive settings can be difficult to achieve in universities, but there are two ways in which—at least to some extent—they can be replicated. First, as my interviewees unanimously recommended, to the greatest extent possible, instructors should speak in the target language during class and require the same of students. This is particularly important in tonal languages where slight inaccuracies in pronunciation can cause drastic changes in the meaning of a sentence. Communicating in the target language acclimates students to the use of the language and also prevents them from being able to rely on another language to express themselves. Instructors can also encourage students to participate in language-related activities outside of class with native speakers. These types of activities can range from going to ethnic restaurants relevant to the language being learned, to making an effort to converse with native speakers in the area. Doing so encourages students to use their language skills in everyday, realistic settings and also further acclimates them to different speakers of the language who may have different accents, dialects or intonations.

3. **Making Allowances for Different Language Types**

Languages in different linguistic families—and sometimes within them—must often be learned in different ways. For instance, Russian and Arabic both have non-Roman alphabets. However, due to the nature of the Arabic alphabet—it is always written in script form, is written from right to left and omits many vowels—it is considered to be more difficult for English speakers to master than the Cyrillic alphabet used for Russian. Consequently, more time must usually be spent working with students to master the Arabic alphabet. The same applies to Mandarin Chinese, which, rather than using an alphabet, uses a system of complex pictographic characters. Such differences in teaching requirements also apply to grammar. While they essentially share a common alphabet, the grammatical rules of Farsi and Arabic differ considerably in terms of complexity. Arabic has a number of irregularities that must be learned on a case-by-case basis, whereas Farsi has many fewer irregularities and generally has simpler grammatical rules. It is important to recognize these types of differences and to refrain from resorting to a “one-size-fits-all” teaching approach or even having a uniform set of expectations with regards to students’ progress. Due to factors like the ones mentioned, progress happens more slowly in some languages than in others.
ANALYSIS

Alternative 1: Making a Distinction Between Beginners and Heritage Speakers

Effectiveness

Making a distinction between beginners and heritage speakers would be an effective way of designing curricula and teaching critical foreign languages. This is the case because it allows teachers to better tailor class material and the method of instruction to their students’ skill level. Instead of working on vocabulary, proper pronunciation or listening comprehension, heritage speakers can spend more time working on reading and writing skills—two areas in which they are often equivalent to beginners. This allows heritage speakers to focus on their weaknesses, but also helps to prevent frustration they might otherwise experience if they are forced to spend time working on aspects of the language they have already mastered. As a number of interviewees pointed out, making a distinction between these two groups of students is particularly important in areas where there are large numbers of heritage speakers.

Conversely, making such a distinction is also helpful for speakers learning critical languages at the beginner level. Because they are unfamiliar with the writing system and the language itself, beginners are often incapable of moving at the type of pace heritage speakers may prefer. Being separated from heritage speakers therefore allows beginners to move at a slower pace and gain familiarity with one set of concepts before moving on to another. In addition, teaching beginners separately allows teachers to focus on and teach concepts in a way that is more beneficial to students lacking prior experience with the language. Instead of focusing heavily on reading and writing, the development of speaking and listening skills can be focused on more intently. Finally, as one interviewee mentioned, it is generally advantageous to make beginning language students feel as comfortable as possible with the new language they are studying. Grouping them with students of a similar level of ability would, in part, help to achieve this.

Ease of Implementation

While separating beginners and heritage speakers is an effective course of action, its ease of implementation is questionable. Separating students into two groups requires a number of resources some universities may be unable (or at least unwilling) to expend. For instance, splitting students into two groups would require additional instructors or instructors willing to teach the additional courses necessitated by this division. In addition, as one interviewee pointed out, it can cause
serious logistical problems for universities and departments already suffering from a lack of classroom space. For such universities to make this type of recommendation possible, they may have to extend the time buildings are used to allow for more classes or possibly make use of rooms in other buildings. While this may be “budget-neutral” and logistically feasible for the foreign language department in question, it could have negative consequences for other departments that are forced to share classroom space. Either way, this recommendation may not be implementable within the existing budgets and organizational capacities of many universities. Also, given that student enrollment is often low in critical language classes, dividing students into even smaller groups may cause the resulting classes to be too small to justify the university funding needed to offer them.

Alternative 2: Recreating an Immersive Setting

Effectiveness

Immersive settings are generally considered to be most conducive to foreign language study and learning. Students studying foreign languages in an immersive setting by far outperform those studying foreign languages in a more “traditional” setting, i.e. one in which a language other than the target language is used as the primary medium of instruction and the target language is learned via rote memorization.

One interviewee went so far as to say that the concept of lecturing in foreign language classes is “obsolete.” While he does believe that some memorization is required in foreign language study, he prefers that this memorization be done away from the classroom. In this way, the time spent in class is as interactive as possible. By focusing on communicative applications of the concepts students have learned beforehand, a more immersive and interactive setting is created in which the students can develop their language skills.

When students are immersed in or surrounded by the target language, they reach higher levels of competence, but also learn the language as it is truly spoken. There is often a large difference between literal and spoken forms of a language. Lack of familiarity with the spoken form (slang and alternate pronunciations, for instance) of a language can hinder a student’s ability to understand and successfully communicate with native speakers.


55 Ibid.
Finally, there was also broad agreement among my interviewees regarding the importance of using course materials that are authentic and cover concepts that are relevant to the ways in which students might actually use their language skills. For instance, for students studying languages for eventual military use, a greater (albeit not exclusive) emphasis on military terminology and concepts would be sensible. For students without such a particular focus, a more general approach would be appropriate. Focusing instruction in this way helps to tailor the exact material being studied to the needs of the students and also helps them to stay more engaged with the subject. It would, according to one interviewee, make little sense to teach Koranic Arabic to beginning Arabic speakers. Not only is that form of Arabic considered more difficult, but it is generally inapplicable to the ways in which students would use Arabic. Some of the materials my interviewees mentioned include the textbook used in class, videos relevant to the language, audio recordings and interactive online applications.

**Ease of Implementation**

In a school or university setting, it is often difficult to recreate the types of conditions students need to reach their foreign language potential. Indeed, the best way to improve is for students to travel or study abroad and directly engage with different speakers of the language they are studying. But there are a number of ways in which an immersive setting can be recreated in a domestic context without placing additional strain on a university’s organizational capacity or budget.

To the extent possible, instructors should attempt to communicate solely in the target language and should require the same of their students. This essentially forces students to acclimate themselves to the language they are learning. In large part, it also removes students’ ability to use their native language as a crutch when expressing themselves. This best practice does not have any budgetary implications; it is simply a way of restructuring classroom interactions in an effort to make them more immersive in nature. And, unlike splitting students into two groups, it does not require any course rescheduling or concessions to be made by other university departments vis-à-vis their classroom space.

In addition, instructors can require that students participate in language-related activities outside the classroom. This serves a number of purposes. It serves as reinforcement for the work students are doing in the classroom. Extracurricular reinforcement also effectively increases students’ “contact hours” with the language they are learning and enables them to progress more quickly as a result. Foreign language ability is a function of a number of things, but as with most skills, the
amount of time spent practicing has an enormous impact on the level of competence students will achieve. Having students take part in language-related activities outside the classroom is a direct way of addressing this. In addition, it helps to provide students with cultural context for the language skills they are developing. As one interviewee pointed out, “When you are learning a language, you are really learning about a culture. You can’t learn a language without considering cultural, contextual factors.”

Extracurricular reinforcement also helps to acclimate students to different speakers of the language they are learning. According to one interviewee, when students are taught by a small number of instructors, they tend to “key in” on the way they speak. Students grow accustomed not only to their accents, but to their cadences and general manner of speaking. This can become problematic, however, when students are exposed to speakers from different areas of a country who have different accents or to other non-native speakers of the target language. With Farsi in particular, one interviewee pointed out that this problem becomes especially acute as native speakers from Iran often have accents quite different from those that students hear in class. Speakers from areas of Iran near Iraq and Azerbaijan in particular tend to have accents heavily influenced by other languages (Kurdish and Azerbaijani, respectively) and are consequently more difficult to understand.

As this type of reinforcement takes place outside the classroom, it has a minimal—and in some cases no—effect on the organizational capacities or budgets of universities. For instance, instructors can require students to take part in pre-existing internationally oriented events on campus that feature speakers of the languages they are learning. They can also encourage students to take part in cultural activities that reinforce language learning but also give students a better sense of cultural context. Such activities could include going to local ethnic restaurants, frequenting local ethnic grocery stores, watching films in the target language, or pairing with relevant foreign students at the university as a way of practicing the language they are learning.

**Alternative 3: Making Allowances for Different Language Types**

**Effectiveness**

By making allowances for different language types, instructors are able to tailor their method of instruction to the language they are teaching. From a technical perspective, there is no “one-size-fits-all” approach to teaching foreign languages. Languages, especially ones from different linguistic families, very often pose different challenges for both teachers and students in the classroom. Certain languages, like Chinese, are known to be difficult in large part because of their writing systems.
From the perspective of an English speaker, others, like Russian, are difficult not because of their writing systems but because of their grammatical complexity and the use of grammatical concepts that do not exist in English. Others are difficult due to a combination of the above factors. Japanese, for instance, has numerous writing systems (one of which is based on Chinese characters) and a grammatical structure unlike that of English or any Indo-European language.

Selectively emphasizing different aspects of critical languages would give students more help where they need it and would generally make the language learning process more productive. According to one interviewee, when studying Russian, it is very important to stress certain grammatical concepts up front. This is the case because Russian makes use of very flexible word order. Unlike English, Russian conveys meaning largely through grammatical cases and adjectival endings rather than the sequencing of words in a sentence. If a solid understanding of these concepts and rules isn’t established early on, it can cause problems later as students move to other grammatical concepts. Chinese, on the other hand, is a language where competence in the writing system must be stressed at an early stage. In addition, a good understanding of the role of tones in Chinese must be developed early on. They convey much of the meaning in spoken Chinese and can cause misunderstandings and confusion if used improperly. As one interviewee, a professor of Chinese, demonstrated through use of an example, a slight difference in tone can change the meaning of a sentence entirely.

**Ease of Implementation**

In general, this type of best practice would be easy to implement and would come at no real cost to any university or foreign language department. Like a portion of the prior alternative, this best practice essentially only necessitates a modification to pre-existing classroom dynamics. There could be a time cost since teachers may be required to re-think their teaching approaches, redraft syllabi and assign different course materials to better serve the needs of their students. However, these costs would not be born by the university itself, nor would they be considerable. And some of these time costs would likely have occurred anyway, as, according to one interviewee, teachers routinely change some aspects of their courses and course materials from year to year.
RECOMMENDATIONS

I recommend that universities recreate immersive foreign language settings for students by conducting instruction in the target language and by requiring them to take part in extracurricular foreign language reinforcement. I also recommend that foreign language teachers take into account the particular needs of their students vis-à-vis the languages they are studying and tailor their teaching approaches, syllabi and assigned course materials accordingly. Finally, where possible, I recommend that universities split foreign language students into two groups: true beginners and heritage speakers.
APPENDIX

A:

Master's Project Questionnaire:

Module 1 — Learning about Interviewee:

1. How long have you held your current position (chair, professor, etc.)?

2. How long have you been at ____________ University?

3. Were you a department chair before holding your current position? (Only ask in the event they are not currently a chair, per Q1)

4. Have you done any kind of foreign language teaching that would be considered “untraditional” (i.e., have you ever taught intensive classes, or in an immersive setting)?

Module 2 — Best Practices:

1. At ____________ University, how are foreign languages taught? Is there an overarching approach used in your department or among language departments at ____________ University?

2. Given a choice (or the ability), is there anything you would change about the approach that is being used?

3. What are some best practices in foreign language instruction? What should teachers or programs aim to do?

4. Do you think these aforementioned best practices are a consensus among foreign language teachers, or are they mostly a reflection of your own views/personal experiences?

5. How would you compare what ____________ University does to these best practices?

6. To what extent do you think that these best practices are adoptable by universities not currently acting in accordance with them?
7. If they are adoptable, how long do you think this would take?

8. Do these best practices vary at all from language to language?

9. Have you seen schools that went from other methods of instruction to acting more in accordance with what you consider to be best practices? If so, what kind of difference did it make to the performance of students?

Module 3 -- Things to Avoid:

1. What (methodological approaches) should be avoided in foreign language instruction?

2. Is this a consensus view or a reflection of your own personal views/teaching experience?

3. How commonly do universities employ what you consider to be “worst practices” in foreign language instruction?

4. Do these “worst practices” negatively affect the teaching of some foreign languages more so than others?

Module 4 -- Wrap Up:

1. If you had only one suggestion for people designing foreign language curricula or teaching foreign language courses, what would it be?

2. If you had only one suggestion for what people designing foreign language curricula or teaching foreign language courses should avoid, what would it be?

3. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about foreign language pedagogy?

4. Would it be ok to contact you later with any follow-up questions I may have?