



# Development and Assessment of the Effectiveness of an Undergraduate General Education Foreign Language Requirement

**Robert J. Thompson, Jr.**  
*Duke University*

**Ingeborg Walther**  
*Duke University*

**Clare Tufts**  
*Duke University*

**Kunshan Carolyn Lee**  
*Duke University*

**Liliana Paredes**  
*Duke University*

**Luciana Fellin**  
*Duke University*

**Edna Andrews**  
*Duke University*

**Matt Serra**  
*Duke University*

**Jennifer L. Hill**  
*Duke University*

**Eleanor B. Tate**  
*University of Southern California*

**Laura Schlosberg**  
*Independent Scholar*

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*Due to the large number of authors, complete author biographical information is available online only as Supporting Information Appendix S1.*

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**Abstract:** *This article describes a faculty-led, multiyear process of formulating learning objectives and assessing the effectiveness of a foreign language requirement for all College of Arts and Sciences undergraduates at a research university. Three interrelated research questions were addressed: (1) What were the levels and patterns of language courses completed under the language requirement compared to those under the previous curriculum? (2) To what extent was the oral proficiency learning objective being attained? and (3) How did oral proficiency vary by course level and the patterns of courses completed to satisfy the language requirement? The oral proficiency of 614 students was assessed with the Simulated Oral Proficiency Interview and categorized in terms of ACTFL ratings. Study findings indicated that 76% of students met or exceeded the objective of the Intermediate Mid level of oral proficiency and that oral proficiency differed by course level and the pattern of courses completed to satisfy the language requirement. In particular, the impact of completing an advanced-level course was clear, which in turn had implications for curricular policies and academic advising. It is argued that faculty-led evaluation of program effectiveness, in which assessment approaches are both summative and formative and findings are routinely used to improve educational practices as well as document student learning, is the necessary context for developing an evidence-based approach to undergraduate language education.*

**Key words:** *assessment, foreign language program evaluation, foreign language requirement, postsecondary/higher education, proficiency*

The purpose of this report is to contribute to the ongoing efforts to enhance foreign language education and assessment through an analysis of a multiyear faculty-led process of formulating learning objectives and assessing the effectiveness of adding a foreign language requirement to the general education curriculum at a research university. The

new foreign language requirement included objectives for both language proficiency and cultural understanding for all undergraduates, not just foreign language majors, in the College of Arts and Sciences. Once the requirement was in place, faculty collaborated with the Office of Assessment to evaluate the extent to which the learning objectives were attained and then used the findings to guide improvements in educational practice and assessment processes.

## Context

A review of the curriculum, in conjunction with the university's 1997 reaccreditation process, had made it clear that the curriculum did not adequately prepare undergraduate students for the challenges of the 21st century and did not reflect the values and aspirations of a national research university. The curriculum was characterized by an emphasis on student choice; one unintended consequence was that many students were graduating without having completed at least one course in each area of knowledge (i.e., science, social sciences, and humanities). One simple but telling metric was that 47% of graduating seniors in 1997 had omitted taking a single course in one of the major areas of knowledge, with the largest percentage (19%) having omitted the study of a foreign language. To provide students with a broader set of foundation courses, the dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences established a curriculum review committee comprising highly regarded faculty from the arts and humanities, social sciences, and sciences. Included in the dean's charge to the committee was an expectation that the committee "find a way in which to ensure that at the start of the 21st century, all ... students will be able to converse in and to understand a non-English language."

## *Instituting a Foreign Language Requirement*

After a two-year process, a new general education curriculum in the College of Arts and Sciences was instituted beginning with the

class entering in 2000. Among a number of changes designed to broaden and deepen students' engagement with courses across a range of areas of knowledge, the new curriculum included a foreign language requirement for all students graduating with a bachelor of arts or a bachelor of science degree. The rationale for the language requirement stemmed from the commitment to internationalization as an institutional priority and to preparing students to live in an increasingly diverse and interdependent world. The study of foreign language by all students was viewed as essential to attaining cross-cultural competency, one of the learning objectives of the new general education curriculum.

In conjunction with the curriculum review committee, the Language Task Force,<sup>1</sup> comprising faculty from the language departments within the College of Arts and Sciences, was charged with formulating the overall goal, specific learning objectives, pedagogical approaches, and assessment procedures through which the foreign language requirement would be operationalized.

### Goal and Objectives

Largely as a result of the proficiency and National Standards movements, foreign language program leaders in the field and at this institution had already been expanding their goals beyond a focus on linguistic competence to include content that promoted communicative, cultural, and critical competence. Mindful of these goals, the members of the Language Task Force formulated the overarching goal of the new foreign language requirement, articulated broadly as follows: "for all ... students to have a level of competency in a second language sufficient to enable them to engage meaningfully with another culture in its own language" (Report of the Language Task Force, Duke University, October 1998, p. 2. Please contact authors for further information). The rationale situated this goal in the larger educational context of preparing students for 21st-century challenges:

In our increasingly diverse and interdependent world, it is imperative that students acquire the ability to understand both global and local events from multiple perspectives. Beyond providing the ability to communicate with persons from other cultures, the study of language, literature, and culture, like the study of history, philosophy, or mathematics, contributes to the development of analytic, critical, and interpretative abilities. Acquiring proficiency in another language will enable students to become effective participants in the local, national, and international debates of the next century. (p. 1)

Based on the goal and rationale, three specific learning objectives were formulated for the study of foreign language at the university: students would (1) develop sufficient proficiency in a second language to engage foreign cultures, histories, and literatures; (2) gain an understanding of the nature of culture in as far as it is embodied in language; and (3) bring a cultural perspective to bear to enhance understanding of issues of similarity and difference.

### Program Characteristics

Over the course of the 1990s and the first decade of the 21st century, the language faculty, like many across the country, had been increasingly designing the curricula around communicative, content- and performance- or task-based objectives, and pedagogical approaches, with an emphasis on developing students' communicative abilities as well as cultural knowledge and awareness. This was a result not only of developments in the fields of second language acquisition and foreign language pedagogy, but also of the growing proficiency and National Standards movements. At this research institution, the number of contact hours in introductory courses across all language programs was increased, not only to promote language proficiency but also to strengthen the connections between lower- and upper-division courses in terms of cultural content. The ACTFL proficiency guidelines were, and continue to be, used

to guide specific language proficiency outcomes at each level of instruction. Courses are largely taught in the target language from the very beginning levels of instruction, and they integrate authentic texts from a wide array of media and genres, including literary texts. Particularly since the advent of the Internet in the late 1990s and the unprecedented technological advances that followed, the language programs aimed not only to increase students' interaction with authentic materials but also to assign individual and group tasks and projects that included communication with native speakers from across campus and beyond, using digital technologies to facilitate communication and access.

### Course Completion Requirements

The Language Task Force advocated for a proficiency-based requirement, while acknowledging that administering ACTFL proficiency tests to each graduating student every year could not be accomplished without considerable investment of time and resources. Because the members of the task force determined that meaningful engagement with another culture in its own language required the level of proficiency that is achieved only after completing fifth-semester, upper-level courses and beyond, they decided that the requirement should be satisfied with the completion of one upper-level course.<sup>2</sup> It was recognized, however, that setting the criteria at completing an upper-level course would dissuade students from beginning the study of a language different than the language they had studied in high school, since it would require a minimum of five semesters of foreign language coursework. Therefore, the Language Task Force established criteria for satisfying the foreign language requirement in terms of the number, sequence, and level of courses to be completed depending on the level at which the student began his or her language study.

- Students who entered the university with some proficiency in a language would

satisfy the language requirement by completing one course at the upper level, which was operationalized as fifth semester or beyond in that language. Depending on where the student began in the course sequence (in the third-, fourth-, or fifth-semester course), these students would be required to take one (fifth semester or above), two (fourth and fifth semester), or three (third, fourth, and fifth semester) courses in that language.

- Students who entered the university with very limited experience in a foreign language, or who wished to begin the study of a new language, could meet the requirement by completing three courses in that language: semesters 1, 2, and 3, or semesters 2, 3, and 4.

The Language Task Force set this requirement with the aim that all students would reach at least the ACTFL Intermediate level of proficiency in a foreign language, which is the level normally expected of students who complete the first-level intermediate (third-semester) course, and that many students would achieve even higher levels of proficiency. Thus there were five patterns of course sequences through which students could satisfy the language requirement.<sup>3</sup>

- Pattern 1: students who started at semester 1 and completed semesters 2 and 3;
- Pattern 2: students who started at semester 2 and completed semesters 3 and 4;
- Pattern 3: students who started at semester 3 and completed semester 4 and a course at the fifth semester or beyond;
- Pattern 4: students who started at semester 4 and completed a course at the fifth semester or beyond; and
- Pattern 5: students who fulfilled the language requirement by completing one course at the fifth semester or beyond.

Thus, all students, including international students and students who were already fluent in one or more languages other than English, were required to satisfy the requirement, either by starting a new

language, continuing in another second language, or taking an upper-level course in their native language. In this way, the requirement allowed students to extend their learning sequence beginning at whatever their current level in a given language might be and move them forward, and helped students, even those who were native or heritage speakers of other languages, further increase their proficiency by taking at least one course that provided a space for intellectual engagement with issues of language and culture.

### *Assessment of the New Language Requirement*

With the institution of the new curriculum in 2000, a language committee was established, comprising the program directors for each of the languages, to monitor the implementation of the language requirement and address ongoing policy issues. The language committee also participated in formulating an assessment plan, designing and implementing program evaluation studies conducted through the Office of Assessment, and interpreting the data so as to refine instructional practice. To better understand the impact and implications of the foreign language requirement, three interrelated research questions were formulated:

1. How did the course levels and patterns of course completion under the new requirements compare to the levels and patterns under the previous general education curriculum?
2. To what extent were the language proficiency objectives of the foreign language curriculum being attained?
3. To what extent did oral proficiency vary by the levels and the patterns of courses that students completed in order to satisfy the language requirement?

To address these questions, two studies were undertaken. Study 1 compared course completion patterns for students who had graduated between 2003 and 2007. Study 2

was undertaken to address just the language proficiency outcomes of students who were enrolled in language classes between 2008 and 2011, both by course level and by pattern of courses taken in order to complete the foreign language requirement.<sup>4</sup>

### *Oral Proficiency Assessment*

Since the mid-1980s, a series of empirical studies has documented students' oral proficiency outcomes in the postsecondary context. Shrum and Glisan (2005) summarized studies conducted between 1986 and 1996 that showed a range of Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) scores for students after one, two, three, and four years of college instruction in French, German, and Russian (p. 221). The analysis by Swender (2003) of ACTFL ratings of OPIs conducted with 50 undergraduate students majoring in French, German, Italian, Japanese, Mandarin, Russian, and Spanish in the United States found that 47% of those students tested attained a rating of Advanced Low or higher and 53% attained a rating of Intermediate High or lower, with the typical ACTFL level of oral proficiency after two years of language instruction being Intermediate Mid or Intermediate Low depending on the language (Norris & Pfeiffer, 2003). Another study by Mathews and Hansen (2004) found that the average oral proficiency rating for graduating seniors was Advanced Low and that 74% of the students they tested rated Intermediate High or better. However, as Chambless reported in 2012, "[r]esearch on the oral proficiency levels of graduating foreign language majors paints an inconsistent picture, both across institutions and across languages" (p. 145). Several studies have been conducted on foreign language instructor candidates (Glisan, Swender, & Surface, 2013; Sullivan, 2011; Swender, Surface, & Hamlyn, 2007 [as reported in Glisan et al., 2013]), who are now in many states required to demonstrate a minimum oral proficiency rating of Advanced Low in French, German, and Spanish or Intermediate High in Arabic, Chinese,

Japanese, and Korean. Results and methods varied: Sullivan's study, in which 72% of candidates reported OPI ratings of at least Advanced Low and included heritage and native speakers, relied on candidate self-reports, whereas the 2007 study by Swender et al. and the 2013 study by Glisan et al. reported between 54.8% (2013) and 59.5% (2007) of candidates reaching the requisite levels of proficiency using official OPIs (Glisan et al., 2013).

With regard to assessment methods, a survey of 97 language department chairs at baccalaureate and comprehensive institutions found that evaluation of student learning is typically accomplished by a combination of traditional faculty-designed tests and performance-based measures including student papers and presentations, translation exercises, and oral proficiency ratings derived from live (OPI) or Simulated OPI (SOPI) interviews (Ricardo-Osorio, 2008). In fact, in a recent review, Malone and Montee (2010) reported that the OPI has become the major approach to oral proficiency assessment in the United States.

To better understand the extent to which students whose program of study included the new language requirement were meeting program-wide and university internationalization goals, the language committee decided that a meaningful method of assessing students' proficiency in addition to seat time and course completion must be incorporated. Based on some of the above-mentioned studies as well as experience in the classroom, the members of the committee set the target proficiency level for all students completing the foreign language requirement at Intermediate Mid.<sup>5</sup>

## Study 1 Methods and Results

Study 1 addressed the question of course completion patterns under the new foreign language requirement compared to the patterns under the previous requirement. The method adopted was to analyze the course completion records obtained through the registrar for two groups of students: the first

four undergraduate classes (2004 through 2007) who had graduated under the new general education curriculum and the last graduating class (2003) under the previous curriculum. One obvious and intended result was that 100% of the students under the new requirement studied a foreign language, compared with 63% (871/1,376) of the students in the last graduating class of students under the previous curriculum.

Of greater interest to the faculty, however, were data on the number of students who continued their study of foreign language beyond the third semester course—i.e., beyond the minimal level necessary to fulfill the language requirement for students who undertook the study of a language that they had not previously studied before. Under the previous curriculum, of those who studied a foreign language, 21% (179) ended their studies after having completed the introductory level (first- or second-semester course), 26% (223) after completing the intermediate level (third- or fourth-semester course), and 54% (469)—or 34% of the entire graduating class—after taking an advanced-level (fifth semester or beyond) course. Under the new curriculum, students were required to complete at least the third-semester course, but only 31–35% of the graduating classes discontinued their studies after having reached this level (2004 = 33%; 2005 = 31%; 2006 = 35%; 2007 = 34%) and 52–57% of students completed a fifth-semester course or beyond (2004 = 54%; 2005 = 57%; 2006 = 52%; 2007 = 57%). Thus, in addition to engaging all students in the study of a foreign language, another result of the new college-wide program requirement was an increase in the percentage of students who completed a course at the fifth semester or beyond, from 34% of the graduating class in 2003 to an average of 55% in subsequent years.

A second question raised by faculty was the extent to which the new general education foreign language requirement affected the number of students who chose to major or minor in a foreign language. Under the previous curriculum, 7% of the class of 2000

completed a first or second major in a foreign language and 8% completed a minor. Under the new curriculum, 6–8% completed a major and 9% completed a minor. Thus, although a greater number of students completed language courses and a large number of those students were enrolled in upper-level courses, the introduction of the new general education foreign language requirement did not result in a meaningful change in the percentages of students who elected to major or minor in a foreign language.

## Study 2

Study 2 addressed two interrelated questions: (1) To what extent did students meet or exceed the oral proficiency objectives set for the foreign language requirement? and (2) To what extent did attainment of oral proficiency vary by course level completed at the time of the assessment and by the patterns of course sequences that students followed in order to satisfy the requirement?

### *Study Design and Methods*

The language committee recognized that, since the goal of the study was to determine the language proficiency levels of students under the new foreign language requirement and thus evaluate the program as a whole, rather than test hypotheses concerning a particular pedagogical approach or curriculum design, it was neither necessary nor feasible, with regard to resources and time, to assess all of the students in all languages taught; thus, a sampling approach was adopted. It was also recognized that the study design needed to be appropriate to the aims of program effectiveness, in contrast to experimental research (Upcraft & Schuh, 2002).

### **Assessment Instrument**

The language committee selected the SOPI as the assessment instrument. The SOPI is a speaking proficiency test that is designed to elicit a representative performance sample of

speech in a short period of time. The examinee listens to directions provided in English for several types of speaking tasks on a master CD or cassette tape while following along in a test booklet. Picture-based speaking tasks include giving directions, describing activities in a familiar setting, and telling a story; topic-based speaking tasks include describing a procedure, presenting advantages and disadvantages, explaining and defending a point of view, or describing what would happen if a hypothetical situation were to come true; situation-based tasks include giving advice to a friend, apologizing for having offended someone, and making a formal presentation to a group. The examinee's speaking performance in response to each task is recorded on a separate response file that is later evaluated by a trained rater according to the proficiency guidelines developed by the ACTFL (Stansfield, 1992, 1996). Reliability and validity data for the SOPI have been reported (Stansfield & Kenyon, 1992).

### **Training and Reliability**

The SOPI test and rater training materials were obtained through the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL). Two-day training workshops, led by four certified trainers, were held for instructors and graduate students in summer and fall 2008, and all raters in Spanish ( $N = 27$ ), French ( $N = 18$ ), and German ( $N = 8$ ) received certification. Because a SOPI trainer could not be located for Chinese, the Chinese faculty ( $N = 3$ ) participated in an OPI workshop that was led by a certified Chinese OPI trainer sent by the ACTFL. These faculty members received an official certificate indicating their full participation in a comprehensive OPI training workshop. To learn the SOPI rating system, they studied the materials contained in the SOPI Rater Training Kit specifically designed for Chinese that had been sent from CAL. In the absence of a SOPI test for Italian, the French-language SOPI was adapted and a detailed scoring rubric was developed through the university's assessment office.

**Participants**

In Phase 1 of the study, the faculty directors of the Chinese, French, German, and Spanish language programs were asked to identify course sections within their respective languages at three levels: third semester, fourth semester, and fifth semester and beyond. The only selection factor was to include sections from each level. All students in each of the selected course sections who were present in class when the SOPI was administered were tested. Table 1 presents, for each language, the number of sections at each course level and the number of students with whom the SOPI was completed. As shown, a total of 484 students in Chinese, French, German, and Spanish were assessed: 201 at the third-semester level, 130 at the fourth-semester level, and 153 at the upper level of fifth semester or beyond. In Phase 2 of the study, the protocol was extended to include a sample of 130 students who were satisfying their language requirement by completing a third-semester course in Italian.

**Procedures**

In Phase 1, the SOPI was administered to students in Chinese, French, German, and Spanish by a trained examiner in the language lab during the last two weeks of the fall 2008 and spring 2009 semesters. In Phase 2, the SOPI was administered to students studying Italian in spring 2010, fall 2010, and spring 2011. All SOPI assessments

were conducted during class time in the language lab and required about 50 minutes to administer. Each examinee received a proficiency rating on the nine sublevels on the ACTFL proficiency scale ranging from Novice Mid to Superior.

To determine the reliability of SOPI ratings, a subsample of 31 SOPI interviews completed during Phase 1 were independently rated by two trained raters. Proficiency ratings that differed between raters by more than one full ACTFL level (e.g., Novice, Intermediate, or Advanced) were considered as “non-agreement scores.” The percentage agreement between the two raters was 84% overall and ranged from 100% in Chinese (3/3) and Spanish (8/8) to 89% in French (8/9) to 64% in German (7/11). For this subsample of 31, the lower of two ratings, or a third rating, was used for those on which the initial reviewers were not in complete agreement.

**Results**

The level of language proficiency demonstrated by students was examined in two ways: (1) cross-sectional analysis by course level at the time of the SOPI interview, regardless of the course level at which they started their language study, and (2) pattern analysis for each of the five possible sequences of courses through which students could satisfy the language requirement.

**TABLE 1**

**Sample for Study 2: Number of Sections and Students by Language and Course Level**

Course Semester	Chinese		French		German		Spanish		Total	
	Sections	N	Sections	N	Sections	N	Sections	N	Sections	N
3	3	48	7	71	5	43	7	38	22	201
4	2	20	6	48	5	27	6	36	19	130
>4	3	31	6	66	1	9	6	47	16	153
Totals	8	99	19	185	11	79	19	121	57	484



**TABLE 2****Percentage of Students Demonstrating ACTFL Oral Proficiency Levels by Language Course Level**

ACTFL Level	Semester 3	Semester 4	Semester $\geq 5$
	N = 201	N = 130	N = 153
Superior	0	2	3
Advanced High	4.5	12	18
Advanced Mid	6.5	14	18
Advanced Low	14	28	20
Intermediate High	23	20	24
Intermediate Mid	27	17	10
Below Goal	(25)	(7)	(8)
Intermediate Low	22	5	6
Novice High	3	2	2

Table 2 presents the percentage of students in Chinese, French, German, and Spanish that were classified at each proficiency level as measured on the SOPI by course level, regardless of whether they were taking that course to complete the foreign language requirement and regardless of how many courses they had taken prior to that particular course. As shown, of all students who were completing a third-semester course, 25% were rated below the target goal of Intermediate Mid that had been established by the language committee. This was more than three times the rates (7 and 8%, respectively) for students who were completing a fourth-semester course or an advanced course (fifth semester or beyond). Data also showed that there were no meaningful differences in the distribution of SOPI ratings between the students who were completing a fourth-semester-level course and a course at the fifth semester or beyond.

Of the 484 students in the sample, SOPIs were obtained for 208 students at the end point in one of the five possible course sequences, described above, through which they would satisfy their language requirement; this subsample included 43 students in Chinese, 92 in French, 22 in German, and 51 in Spanish. In Phase 2 of

the study, SOPI data from 130 students who were completing the Pattern 1 sequence in Italian were added; thus, a combined sample of 338 students was used for the analysis of oral proficiency levels across the five course sequence patterns.

Table 3 presents the percentage of students, overall and by language completion pattern, that were classified in each of the ACTFL proficiency levels based on their SOPI ratings. Overall, 76% of the study sample met or exceeded the minimum level (Intermediate Mid) of oral proficiency that had been established as a desired learning outcome of the new university-wide language requirement. As expected, oral proficiency levels differed across each of the possible course sequences through which students could satisfy the language requirement, from a low of 66–67% reaching the goal of Intermediate Mid for Pattern 1 (completed a first-, second-, and third-level course) through 84% for Pattern 2 and 88% for Pattern 3 to 96% for both Pattern 4 (completed a fourth-semester course and a fifth-semester or beyond course) and Pattern 5 (one fifth-semester course or beyond).

When compared with data from previous studies, the finding that 25% of the students who completed a third-semester

**TABLE 3**

**Percentage of Students Demonstrating ACTFL Oral Proficiency Levels by Language Completion Pattern**

ACTFL Level	Total	Pattern 1		Pattern 2	Pattern 3	Pattern 4	Pattern 5
	N = 338	N = 83	N = 130*	N = 25	N = 34	N = 26	N = 40
Superior	1	0	0	0	6	4	5
Advanced High	8	1	6	4	9	15	22
Advanced Mid	8	2	2	4	20	19	22
Advanced Low	20	8	22	30	26	27	20
Intermediate High	22	20	22	30	18	23	18
Intermediate Mid	17	34	15	16	9	8	8
Below Goal	(24)	(34)	(33)	(16)	(12)	(4)	(4)
Intermediate Low	18	29	22	8	9	4	2
Novice High	6	5	9	8	3	0	2
Novice Mid/Low	<1	0	2	0	0	0	0

\* Italian

course received an oral proficiency rating of Advanced Low or higher warranted considerable additional investigation and explanation. To better understand these ratings and the possible impact of students' previous experience with the language they were studying, faculty completed an exploratory analysis using data from two items that were included on a student self-report survey

(survey available in Walther, 2009, pp. 134–137): (1) Are you a heritage speaker of this language? (2) Prior to coming to this university, for how many years had you been involved in formal coursework in this language? Table 4 presents the ACTFL oral proficiency levels demonstrated by students by their reported level of prior experience.

**TABLE 4**

**Number of Students Demonstrating ACTFL Oral Proficiency Levels by Prior Experience**

ACTFL Level	Heritage Speaker		Prior Experience ≥4 years	
	Yes (N = 14)	No (N = 169)	Yes (N = 77)	No (N = 105)
Superior	0	3	2	1
Advanced High	1	14	8	7
Advanced Mid	0	17	8	9
Advanced Low	1	30	18	13
Intermediate High	4	34	13	26
Intermediate Mid	8	36	11	33
Intermediate Low	0	29	16	11
Novice High	0	6	1	5

Of the 183 students who responded to the question about heritage learner status, only 14 (8% of those responding) indicated that they were heritage speakers.<sup>6</sup> Of these, two (25%) had ACTFL ratings of Advanced and had self-placed into a third-semester course. A total of 182 students responded to the question about prior course experience and, of these, 77 (42% of those responding) reported having completed four or more years of prior coursework in the language. Of these 77 students, 36 (47%) received ACTFL ratings at the Advanced Low or higher levels compared with 30 (29%) of the 105 reporting less than four years of prior experience. Of the 66 students who had ACTFL ratings at the Advanced Low or higher levels, 36 (54%) reported four or more years of prior language experience in the language they were studying, compared with 30 (46%) who reported less than four years of prior experience. Chi-square analyses indicated that the frequency of Advanced Low or higher ratings was significantly higher ( $\chi^2 = 6.39$ ;  $df = 1$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ) for those reporting four or more years of prior experience, providing some support for the notion that prior experience was a contributing factor to the higher than expected ACTFL ratings.<sup>7</sup>

## Discussion

The purpose of this report was to describe one university's approach to internationalizing the curriculum and to report outcome data that may inform the college-wide program review and revision process at other institutions. Of greatest importance was the fact that the faculty were the intellectual driving force: those who served on the Language Task Force, shepherded the language requirement through the approval process, and formulated the foreign language learning objectives and requirements, as well as the foreign language program directors who served on the language committee and formulated the assessment plan, supervised the data-gathering and analysis, and "made meaning of" the findings. This commitment

to collaborative inquiry across all language programs and including graduate teaching assistants, instructors, tenure-track and tenured faculty, and staff from the university assessment office fostered the development of a community of practice within and across the language programs and departments and demonstrated a commitment to assessment as a process of inquiry. Participation in the program evaluation process provided both the opportunity and the motivation for language program directors to compare syllabi, assignments, and rubrics for evaluating speaking and writing activities and to discuss different ways of assessing language proficiency and cultural and intercultural competence on a program level.

Of equal importance has been sharing and making meaning of the findings. In particular, discussions that led to the adoption of the five different course sequences, particularly those that encouraged the study of a new language or rewarded students who had previously developed greater proficiency by limiting their requirement to one upper-level course, caused faculty to reconsider in greater depth their own philosophies on the teaching and learning of languages. In addition, although data were not reported by language due to the small and uneven sample sizes, in evaluating the findings of this study, faculty began to consider the differences in the number of hours of language instruction that are necessary across different languages to reach the same level of proficiency as well as the average total number of hours of instruction that were provided in each language within each of the five language completion patterns. For example, for French, German, Italian, and Spanish, the number of class hours based on a 14-week semester was approximately 182 for Pattern 1, 164 for Pattern 2, 126 for Pattern 3, 84 for Pattern 4, and 42 for Pattern 5. For Chinese, the approximate number of hours was 210 for Patterns 1 and 2, 203 for Pattern 3, 133 for Pattern 4, and 63 for Pattern 5. The data obtained from this self-study also led faculty to question the traditional view of students' opportunities to

learn a language with its implied distinctions between in-class instructional hours and out-of-class assignments. Particularly in a digital environment, where “instruction” can and does take place in out-of-class online environments, making links between levels of proficiency and number of class or instructional hours may be especially problematic.<sup>8</sup>

The findings regarding the oral proficiency learning objectives were meaningful to faculty at both the course and program level; in addition, the data provided insight into the extent to which the university as a whole was meeting the stated university-wide internationalization goal. Overall, 76% of the students met or exceeded the Intermediate Mid level of oral proficiency that was the targeted learning outcome for the proficiency objective of the language requirement. However, as expected, the percentage of students who met that goal varied considerably depending on the course pattern through which the students could have satisfied the requirement. The effect of allowing, or even encouraging, the study of a new language was clearly evident in the comparisons of the proficiency levels of the students across Patterns 1, 2, and 3, as was the impact of requiring students who brought some knowledge to the language to their university studies to complete an upper- (advanced-) level course.

The unusually high ratings for some students in the third-semester course have clear implications for curricular policies and academic advising. First, note that the Spanish, French, and German programs allow students to self-place according to guidelines provided to them on the program Web sites (e.g., SAT scores, number of years of high school, Advanced Placement scores) but do not give placement tests. Thus, the third-semester course is frequently chosen by incoming students who have had four or more years of the language in K–12 settings, who are heritage speakers, or who have spent time studying or using the language abroad, but who are reluctant to begin their university language study in a higher level

course. Data reported here suggest that self-placement procedures could be reconsidered. In addition, due to the relatively short drop/add period, faculty are unable to determine whether students have placed themselves appropriately or if they should be required to enroll in a higher level course. Better means of reassessing students’ global proficiency during the first few days of class coupled with more flexible drop/add procedures could help resolve this problem. At the same time, it is critical to remember that even the more orally proficient students who self-place into the intermediate courses have different areas of strength and weakness and are not always necessarily misplaced or ill-served by taking these courses, for which oral proficiency is only one of several goals. Nor is their presence in these classes necessarily detrimental to the progress of the less orally proficient students. In fact, student course evaluations, as well as responses to various items on the student self-report survey, indicated a high degree of satisfaction and perceived learning gains from the large majority of students. With increasingly diverse student populations, efforts might be well spent developing curricula and pedagogical practices that accommodate and leverage this diversity in productive ways.

It is also important to recognize the limitations of this study. First, the research questions and corresponding assessment approach constituted a program evaluation case study and not a controlled, experimental study. That is, the faculty posed questions about the experience of students under the new foreign language requirement, more specifically about the pattern of course completions to satisfy the language requirement, and their relationship to the stated oral proficiency objectives. While the data indicated that most students were meeting or exceeding the oral proficiency objectives of the foreign language requirement, they yielded little information that could be used for identifying weaknesses and making specific improvements at the individual course level. Second, because SOPI interviews were

conducted during class time in the language lab, data across languages and courses for a relatively large number of learners ( $N=614$ ) were obtained. In contrast, the student survey was not routinely completed during class time, which resulted in a high level of incomplete responses, making it difficult to control for and interpret the results in light of students' previous experiences studying and using the language in formal and informal settings within and beyond the classroom. Third, whereas raters in French, Spanish, and German participated in SOPI training workshops, similar sessions were not available for raters in Chinese and Italian. While the reliability of the SOPI ratings in this study was within the acceptable range for all languages, the validity of the methods employed with students in Chinese and Italian has not been established. Furthermore, it might have been useful to have a larger sample of assessments, particularly for students whose ratings were distinctly higher and thus not well aligned with data from previous studies, scored by more than one rater.

## Conclusion

While this article reports mainly findings related to oral proficiency, it should be noted that the process has also engaged faculty in the exploration and use of a range of evaluation and assessment measures that can yield more information on how students are performing, not only on the proficiency objectives of the foreign language requirement but also on the more specific goals and objectives of each individual program. Some of the language program directors and faculty who were involved in this study have been able to take on leadership roles in their own departments' efforts at assessing the major program of study. In addition, several departments are also experimenting with assessments that use the Common European Framework levels. In the area of (inter)cultural competence, faculty have hosted workshops and engaged in other professional development opportunities to explore teach-

ing strategies and assessment measures, and most are using, or exploring the use of, portfolios and other tools to assess the critical and interpretive skills that students have attained through their engagement with the languages, literature, and cultures they are studying.

In their review of current practices, Norris and Pfeiffer (2003) pointed out the need for college foreign language departments "to address the critical relationship between setting valuable learning standards, developing curriculum and instruction that enables students to attain these standards, and engaging in assessment that illuminates and fosters student learning" (p. 573). More recently, Troyan (2012) argued for a national commitment to developing a science of education for foreign language. Developing an evidence-based approach to undergraduate language education involves making a sustained commitment to a systematic, iterative process of setting goals and objectives; designing and testing innovative pedagogical approaches and assignments; assessing learning outcomes for both specific assignments and semester-long growth; and using the findings to inform, and if warranted redesign, educational programs and practices. Such an iterative process demonstrates a critical approach to the scholarship of teaching and learning that is both self-evaluative and self-correcting and is critical to the development of learning organizations (Bok, 2006) in which a culture of experimentation and evidence-based discussion and decision making are fostered. The current case study serves as one example of both the feasibility and value of a faculty-led evaluation of program effectiveness, in which assessment is undertaken to document as well as improve student learning.

## Notes

1. The formation of the Language Task Force provided a more formal structure for a group of language faculty from various departments who had come together informally since the mid-1990s to

discuss issues of contact hours and pedagogy. Now institutionalized as an advisory committee to the current dean of academic affairs, members continue to discuss issues related to foreign language education, as well as sponsor workshops and professional development opportunities for language faculty. While recognizing certain differences in specific pedagogical approaches within individual language programs, all programs share a commitment to proficiency and Standards-based approaches to foreign language education.

2. Our foreign language courses, like those at most colleges and universities, are described in terms of “introductory,” “intermediate,” and “advanced” levels, with two semesters of coursework at the introductory level; two semesters at the intermediate level; and one, two, or more at the advanced level. It is important to note, however, that the terms *intermediate* and *advanced* in this context do not necessarily correspond to the respective ACTFL proficiency levels. Depending on the difficulty of the particular language being studied relative to the native language of the student, the level of proficiency attained by students in these courses as described by the ACTFL guidelines may differ. Whereas most intermediate (third- and fourth-semester) courses target and assume the attainment of the Intermediate level proficiency as described by the ACTFL guidelines, we know that it generally takes longer for students to reach the ACTFL Advanced level of proficiency than it does for them to reach the ACTFL Intermediate level. Thus students taking what in our institutional context are called “advanced” or upper-level courses (fifth semester and beyond) are not necessarily able to function at the Advanced level of proficiency as described by the ACTFL guidelines. It is nevertheless common that in all but the most difficult languages, the ACTFL level of proficiency targeted in these advanced-level courses is Intermediate High or Advanced.
3. Students do not necessarily end their study of the foreign language at the point at which they have completed the requirement. Thus, for example, a number of students who completed the foreign language requirement in Pattern 1 (that is, having taken the first-, second-, and third-semester courses) continued on to take fourth-semester courses, and even beyond. Some students who complete the requirement even go on to major or minor in the language.
4. Cultural understanding was a specific learning objective, and the language committee indeed considered several methods of assessment. At a later phase of the study the decision was made to adopt the Global Perspectives Inventory (GPI) as a measure of cultural understanding. However, after administering this measure with a sample of students, the faculty decided that it was not useful, discontinued its use, and continue to explore other measures.
5. We set Intermediate Mid as the target proficiency level for all students completing the foreign language requirement, regardless of course level at completion, because we know it normally takes significantly longer to reach the Advanced level than it does to reach the Intermediate level. Thus, whereas we can expect most students in all but the most difficult languages to reach the Intermediate level after successfully completing three semesters, we may well expect them to remain at the Intermediate level even in semesters four, five, and beyond. It should also be noted that while Intermediate Mid is a target, we would expect that more students would fall short of this target in the third-semester course than in the fourth-semester course and beyond. If students fall below this target, they may still complete the requirement, since oral proficiency is not the only basis for determining whether or not a student passes the course, nor is it the only objective of the foreign language requirement.
6. The Chinese language program consists of a dual-track curriculum that includes a

regular track designed for traditional foreign language learners and an alternative track for heritage learners. Students who participated in the respective study from the Chinese program were all from the regular-track curriculum. The majority of those students started learning the language from scratch or had very limited prior exposure to the language before they came to this university. To ensure the integrity of the dual-track curriculum, the Chinese language faculty administered a placement test and held a face-to-face interview for each student who had a previous exposure to the language before students were enrolled in a Chinese course.

7. A subsequent analysis of the admissions and academic records of several students enrolled in third- and fourth-semester courses in the German language program who had received ratings of Advanced or above on the SOPI revealed that a few were heritage or near native speakers, while others were international students who were fluent in several other languages. Several had taken their first two semesters of German in our intensive study abroad program in Berlin, while others had gone on to study abroad and major or minor in German after completing the foreign language requirement.
8. It is tempting to speculate that technological advances of the past several decades have created conditions that allow students to spend much more time engaging in learning activities and authentic communicative practice outside of the classroom. Thus, what is meant by “hours of instruction” is less clear today than it was in the last century. Of particular interest here are the results of the Sullivan (2011) study mentioned earlier, which indicated a relationship between time engaged with the language outside of the classroom, e.g., reading newspapers and literature, watching movies and television, and speaking with native speakers, and advanced proficiency levels. One could indeed argue that students in foreign language classes today, particularly the most

motivated among them, spend more productive time-on-task outside of the classroom than they did in traditional classrooms of the past.

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