

The College Foreign Language Requirement: An Action Plan for Alternatives

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Foreign language requirements for college admission and/or graduation often pose problem for students with learning disabilities. This paper describes an action plan for the implementation of foreign language waiver/substitution policies and procedures to assist students and university staff in resolving the dilemmas that a foreign language requirement may pose.

The foreign language classroom at the college or university level is for most students a unique learning environment with unique demands. Under the best of circumstances it is a place where the mastery of new verbal skills must take place through intense practice in an atmosphere of constructive pressure. It is a place where students are likely to be called upon to "perform" orally or in writing at least once per class period and usually more often. It is a place where students learn through listening and responding, in contrast to the typical classroom where the student attends a lecture and takes notes that can later be reread and reorganized, condensed and studied. In the typical classroom there is seldom anything like the pressure that exists in the foreign language classroom to produce grammatically correct utterances and to respond to correction when answers may be inaccurate. At its best, the foreign language classroom challenges students to active participation and pushes them constantly to try out newly learned material by responding to situations and challenges from the instructor and other students. It is clear that for many students foreign language courses present a difficult and demanding learning environment; for students with learning disabilities, the foreign language classroom even at its best may constitute the worst of nightmares.

Foreign language teachers have always suspected that certain of their students were virtually incapable of learning under the constraints of the typical foreign language classroom. These were baffling students who would earnestly claim that they had spent extraordinary amounts of time in study and who would often produce copious evidence to prove it: meticulous notes and endless lists of vocabulary and verb endings. But when faced with a situation in

the classroom that forced them to produce a coherent utterance in the foreign language, these students would become absolutely paralyzed, unable to say or write anything. If they did respond, it often consisted of a hopelessly garbled version of the correct response. This group of struggling students often would have a long history of failed attempts at foreign language courses, sometimes with several different languages, and even in different institutional settings. How did the foreign language professor, and ultimately the institution, deal with these baffling students? Often, the solution was a mutually embarrassing "gift" of a passing grade "for effort." But then the student would be moved along to the second level and into the hands of yet another teacher. The same humiliating pattern of performance would be repeated, and this time perhaps without such charitable results. In several cases known to us, these students would leave institutions without receiving their degrees when all requirements for graduation were met except the foreign language.

More and more universities are discovering that a significant number of students exhibit specific, and for the most part, measurable learning disabilities that make mastering a foreign language, even at a level of minimal competence, virtually impossible in the context of the usual college classroom. Indeed, many students are identified as learning disabled after college entry primarily *because* of their difficulties with foreign language learning. Consequently, the problem for the college or university becomes one of identifying these students and offering them some kind of alternative route for satisfying the foreign language requirement.

The passage of legislation to protect the handicapped has prodded institutions of higher education to acknowledge that something must be done to address the needs of these struggling students. For example, in 1975 Public Law 94-142 was passed, guaranteeing all individuals with handicaps the right to a public education in the most appropriate and least restrictive environment. A second law, Section 504 of the Re-

habilitation Act of 1973, assures protection for individuals with handicaps in institutions of higher education. Section 504 states that "no otherwise qualified handicapped individual shall, solely by reason of his handicap, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving federal financial assistance." Section 504 also mandates that **reasonable** modifications of academic requirements must be made for students with disabilities. The impact of these laws was not recognized by most colleges and universities until the mid-1980s (Vogel, 1985), and the past five years have seen a dramatic rise in college programs and services for students with learning disabilities (Astin, Green, Korn, Schalit, & Berz, 1988). Recent surveys indicate that many colleges with a foreign language requirement for graduation are complying with Section 504 by acknowledging the need for special accommodations (such as alternative test formats, untimed exams, and specialized tutoring), as well as foreign language **waiver/substitution** policies for their learning disabled students (Keeney & Smith, 1984; Ganshow, Myer, & Roeger, 1989). Questionnaire results from a national survey of institutions of higher learning (Ganshow et al., 1989), showed that 74% of 105 responding institutions had a formal (25.4%) or an informal (48.4%) policy in place. However, these policies and procedures generally were neither well delineated or advertised, so that faculty and students alike were unaware that they existed.

The alternative route for satisfying the foreign language requirement usually involves the granting of a waiver of the foreign language requirement or a substitution for the foreign language coursework. Some reasonable options for substitution might include courses on the history, culture, literature (in English translation), art, religion, geography, or political and social structure of countries where the language being waived is spoken (e.g., Spain or Latin America, France and Francophone Africa, Germany, etc.).

Considering these options and then developing guidelines to implement petition procedures is a formidable task, yet one that many institutions currently face. Only one article to date has addressed the need for such guidelines (Freed, 1987). In this article Freed, former Vice Dean for Language Instruction in the School of Arts and Sciences at the University of Pennsylvania, provides a general review of the literature, the

problems, and the policy issues related to exemptions of the foreign language requirement. Freed suggests that there is a critical need for institutions, and college personnel in particular, to understand the difficulties that students and institutions face in establishing these policies and procedures.

Drawing on a half dozen years of experience advising students and working to design policies and procedures at our own institution, we have developed the following guidelines to be used in setting up an institutional action plan for a foreign language waiver or substitution process. We offer a model petitioning process that answers both the need of the unsuccessful foreign language student for educationally sound and viable alternatives and the need of the college or university for an equitable policy.

Figure 1 outlines the seven steps that we recommend a university take to establish and implement an action plan for assisting the student and university personnel with foreign language petitions.

The first three action steps address the issues involved as students investigate their foreign language problem and deal with an institutional system. These steps are intended to guide the activities of students and the actions of institutions prior to the time a decision is made to petition the foreign language requirement.

Action Step 1: Appoint an Advocate

The first step in establishing a working system to handle student foreign language petitions is for the university to designate an advocate to work with students. The Learning Disabilities Coordinator or a learning specialist or a staff member from the Disability Services Office would be an appropriate choice for this role. The advocate should work with the **aca-**

UNIVERSITY ACTION PLAN

1. Appoint an Advocate
 2. Develop and Publish Guidelines
 3. Develop and Disseminate Referral Forms
 4. Appoint Advisory Committee
 5. Document Foreign Language Disability
 6. Process Petition
 7. Monitor Student Progress
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Figure 1

fessors, major advisors, academic advising offices, department chairs, and deans. Statements should be inserted into policy manuals and student handbooks so that individual students know who the advocate is and how to initiate the petition process.

Action Step 3: Develop and Disseminate Referral Forms

The third step in the action plan is for the advocate to develop and distribute a referral form (see Figure 2) to foreign language faculty, tutors, and advisors on campus.

The purpose of the form is to ensure that the student is directed to the advocate; it also facilitates communication among the diverse university staff working with the student. The referral form puts the student in direct contact with the

FROM: (faculty|advisor|tutor) _____
TO: (advocate) _____
DATE: _____
RE: (student name) _____

	(language)	(grade)	(comments)
High school:			

	(language)	(instructor)	(grade)	(comments)
College:				

I agree to allow the advocate to share this information.

Signature of student: _____

Signature of referrer: _____

Return form to: (name)
(address and phone number)

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advocate, who can then help the student make decisions about a course of action. For example, one student option might be to seek outside testing for determination of a learning disability, and then, if warranted, to pursue the petition process. Another student might choose to remain in the foreign language classroom with additional assistance from a tutor and the professor.

The intent of the first three steps in the university's action plan is to establish a petition policy that has been widely publicized, to designate an advocate to determine student options and assist the student through the petition process, and to publish a referral form to facilitate communication among all of the parties involved.

The fourth and fifth steps of the action plan address the issues involved in documentation of the problem and collection of supporting information. They cover both student and institutional responses leading to the time when the completed packet of supporting information is submitted to the petition committee.

Action Step 4: Appoint an Advisory Committee

Step four in the action plan recommends that a standing advisory committee be appointed to assist the advocate. Though the membership of this body may change over the years, its duties and responsibilities should not. This advisory committee should work with the advocate to review all documentation supporting the need for a foreign language petition. In some circumstances the advisory committee may choose to meet with the student. The advisory committee could suggest to the advocate what additional sources of information might need to be gathered, and it might suggest the best way to interpret the student's learning and performance profile as described by the psychoeducational evaluation and report. The advisory committee's function is to ensure that what is sent forward to the petition committee is the most thorough and reasonable interpretation of the information gathered. Appropriate committee members for this advisory role might include learning assistance staff and faculty from the departments of teacher education, educational psychology, English, and foreign languages.

Action Step 5: Document the Foreign Language Learning Disability

Step five of the action plan recommends that

substantial and specific documentation be collected to describe the nature and extent of the disability. The advocate's role is to guide the student in the collection of information needed to document the foreign language learning disability and to ensure that a complete packet of the best quality is compiled and sent to the petition committee. This information should include, but is not limited to:

- appropriate petition forms;
- recommendations from the foreign language department head delineating course substitutions;
- letters from the student's foreign language professors (and, when possible, from high school foreign language teachers and tutors);
- approval from the student's major departmental advisor;
- a letter from the **Learning Disabilities Coordinator** detailing the nature and extent of the learning disability and its particular effect on the learning of a foreign language;
- a letter written by the student explaining his/her difficulties with the foreign language (giving historical perspective);
- a copy of the psychoeducational report that documents the disability and interprets the test results.

The student bears the responsibility for gathering this information. Then, after it has been reviewed by the advocate and the advisory committee, the student delivers the packet of materials to the petition committee.

The intent of action steps four and five is to give clear and accurate guidance to students about the kinds of options that they may have and to attempt to optimize each student's ability to decide upon and follow the most appropriate course of action. During this investigation and documentation period, referrals may be made for psychoeducational testing or for more intensive tutoring or help from the professor. Specific materials and information are collected from diagnosticians, foreign language professors and high school teachers, tutors, and others with information about the student.

Action Step 6: Process the Petition

Step six makes the petition committee responsible for reviewing the student's package and deciding to approve or not to approve the petition. The petition committee's decision then needs to be communicated to the student as well

as to the advocate, who in turn informs members of the advisory committee of the decision.

Action Step 7: Monitor Student Progress

The last action step in the plan addresses the roles of the student and the advocate after a decision has been rendered on the petition.

The student continues to bear the major responsibility for maintaining contact with the advocate and reporting on **his/her** performance in the substitution courses. The student is also responsible for following suggestions made by the petition committee or the advocate (**e.g.**, meet regularly with professors, participate in small study groups, etc.).

The advocate will continue to work with students whose petitions have been successful to ensure that their progress in substitution courses is satisfactory. It is not uncommon for students to continue to have difficulties in the substitution courses. For example, one of our students consistently missed the matching questions on examinations in his Latin American history course because the terms and names were in Spanish and Indian languages. Multiple choice questions with Spanish terms or names were also a problem for him. (This same student failed the written exams but did quite well on specially arranged discussion-type exams covering the same material but given orally.) Experiences like this indicate that the advocate must work closely with the student as well as the instructor to ensure that students do not continue to be penalized because of their lack of facility with a foreign language.

The advocate will also continue to work with students whose petitions were denied to ensure that all avenues of assistance have been explored. This phase of the process can function smoothly only when the advocate has established good working relationships with language department chairs and faculty. For example, selection of course section and professor may need to be carefully planned when the student must continue with foreign language study. Special arrangements may have to be negotiated to allow more time on tests or to alter test formats to use the student's learning strengths. Tutor selection may have to be made keeping in mind the specific needs of clients with diagnosed learning problems and special tutor training may be necessary to provide adequate learning support. The advocate will monitor the classroom and tutoring settings to verify the level of

effort being put forth by the student, the effectiveness of the accommodations, and the results that are being achieved.

Conclusions

In this paper we have outlined an action plan to address hurdles faced by students and universities when students are unable to complete the foreign language requirement. These action steps are meant to assist advisors and college student personnel in helping unsuccessful foreign language learners who believe that they have no options other than changing majors, transferring to a different college without a language requirement, or dropping out of college.

What we have not done in this paper, however, is to examine alternatives to the petition process. We would encourage colleges and universities to explore ways in which students with disabilities that affect foreign language learning might be successful in foreign language classes. A recent survey (Ganshow et al., 1989) suggests that some institutions are including computer and sign language courses as alternatives to a foreign language; some are providing special classes for at-risk students which focus on the structure of English first and then introduce the second language in a carefully paced sequence (Demuth & Smith, 1987). Some instructors are using multisensory teaching strategies (Bilyeu, 1982; Myer, Ganshow, Sparks, & Kenneweg, 1989) and allowing self-paced learning. Others are modifying traditional expectations to include alternative ways of evaluating students' knowledge of materials (Vogel, 1985). Some are testing students' learning styles to match them to instructional approaches (Oxford, 1990).

Like other academic areas, foreign language instruction can be adapted for students with disabilities. Why, then, have we elected to focus on this particular alternative, the **waiver/substitution**? We suggest that at this time it may be easier to change a policy than to modify an entire system of instruction. For the most part, neither foreign language educators nor special educators are prepared to accommodate the foreign language instructional needs of all students, in large part because of a lack of understanding about the nature of the foreign language disabilities and their effect on students (Ganshow & Sparks, 1987; Sparks, Ganshow, & Pohlman, 1989). In addition, special approaches to foreign language teaching will be more demanding on staff than conventional approaches. For **ex-**

ample, students may need intensive one-to-one or small group work and/or increased instructional time. Much research is needed to identify what it will take for these struggling students to experience success in the foreign language classroom. Meanwhile, we would urge institutions to reconsider their expectations for these students and to encourage their advisors to take a supportive role in guiding students through the petition process. Furthermore, institutions should take a leadership role in conducting research on accommodations and alternatives that will enable these students to succeed in the foreign language classroom.

Levin (1987), a physician who specializes in learning disabilities, summarizes our concern in his book, *Developmental Variations in Learning Disabilities*:

Certain students, specially those who have not been able to benefit from an intensive program of remedial help, should be exempted [from foreign language requirements] . . . for graduation and college admission. . . . Some students indeed seem unable to learn a second language. Often, they spend numerous hours struggling in vain. Ultimately, the wasted time and anxiety begin to erode other subject areas as well. At some point, it seems appropriate to call a halt to such a losing effort. It is certainly not worth sacrificing a child's academic career for the sake of a foreign language. (p. 382)

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