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The Foreign Language Requirement: Advising the Anxious Student

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INTRODUCTION

With renewed emphasis on core curricula, many students are for the first time being forced to meet a foreign language requirement. This change is accompanied by a general tightening of academic standards and stricter attitudes. Some students cope well with foreign language study, but a large number perceive it as an obstacle to their future because they do not see its usefulness. Faculty and administrators, on the other hand, view this change in terms of its intellectual and long-range benefits.^{1,2} The academic advisor is often caught in the middle.

In the extreme, the kinds of problems precipitated can be exemplified by students who choose a major solely to avoid a foreign language requirement. Such poorly reasoned decisions to avoid the requirement serve no one well, least of all the student. An advisor who is aware of some of the major issues and concerns in this area can play a pivotal role at a critical time in a student's college career. The advisor's attitude and method of dealing with these problems can either give students the confidence necessary for success or further increase their anxiety level. This paper addresses some of the misconceptions about foreign language study, discusses sources of student anxiety, and offers some practical suggestions to advisors.

MISCONCEPTIONS AND SOURCES OF ANXIETY

Students' foreign language anxieties are very often based on misconceptions and/or half-truths. Advisers constantly have heard, "I'll never use it," or, "I don't have time for it," implying that courses in the student's major are far more important. Others are prone to rationalization: "I don't have an ear for languages." And finally, there are the pragmatists: "If

¹"Strength Through Wisdom: A Critique of U.S. Capability," A Report to the President from the President's Commission on Foreign Language and International Studies (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, Nov. 1979), pp. 1 and 5.

²M.G. Sadley, "Require Foreign Language Studies, Presidential Panel Urges Colleges," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 113 November 1979, p. 1.

won't get me a job." Advisors should recognize these kinds of statements for what they are: delaying tactics. Such half-truths and misconceptions may provide critical insights into sources of anxiety for students.

Although expressed in various ways, students' concern for their grade-point averages (GPAs) has almost become an obsession. It is understandable, and indeed admirable, for students to want to succeed academically, and, to do so, a foreign language requirement must often be satisfied. Approximately one-eighth of the coursework required for a baccalaureate degree is often in a foreign language, a fact that cannot be easily dismissed. Further, excellence in one academic discipline does not guarantee the ability to perform at an "A" level in another. Many bright students are not gifted in foreign language study; even those who are often find that they may only do average work, and a grade of "C" is often perceived as average. In addition, required foreign language classes focus on basic skills and can be tedious and not very intellectually stimulating.

Another facet of the GPA concern is related to the nature of the discipline and the level of commitment foreign language study entails. A student may be required to spend three or four semesters in a foreign language classroom as well as countless hours in independent study. Most first-year courses meet five days a week and regular attendance in the laboratory is also expected. The temptation to slack off in the face of other demands is real — but fatal to the words of one fourth-semester French student, "Take the first semester very seriously. If one has a shaky foundation, the rest gets shakier." Unfortunately, many students come to this realization only in hindsight. And the rumor mill grinds on.

Students are often frustrated by their unrealistic expectations: "After four semesters, I still can't speak it." They tend to forget that it took years to develop their present level of competence in English. Time as well as consistent effort is essential in learning any skill, including a second language.

Self-esteem can also be an important issue. No one enjoys looking foolish or "dumb" in front of peers and teachers. Yet, foreign language study inevitably involves frequent initial performance in the classroom. Furthermore, errors are of necessity corrected privately and publicly, and all too often at the expense of a student's feelings of self-worth.

Campus lore describes foreign language teachers as notoriously unrelenting and picky. Students can't take it. It's right, or it's wrong; there's no middle. For example, accent marks may be grave (˘) for acute (´), but they are never horizontal (ˉ). Similarly, "half-hearing" is totally unacceptable. When you go to a restaurant, you order *poisson* (fish), not *poison* (poison).

Most undergraduate students view the baccalaureate degree as a means to an end, whether that be graduate study or a job. Few students appreciate the value of foreign language study; rather they see it as a hurdle or an obstacle to attaining their goal. Unfortunately, there is a dearth of readily available information on most campuses to counteract this attitude. Advisors and advising centers are in a position to provide balance and foster more positive attitudes toward what can be a very enriching experience.

RATIONALE

Why do many educators believe so strongly that foreign language study should be an integral part of the college experience? One administrator explains, "It's hard to say that two

semesters of French will make you a better architect or engineer, but we feel like it will make you a better individual."¹ Expanding one's mind and broadening one's intellectual horizons are what college should be about. Foreign language study is a well-recognized way to break stereotyped thought patterns and to increase mental flexibility. Since only 15% of high school students in the U.S. are studying a foreign language today, this important task is unfortunately delayed for most students until the college years.

The language problem has reached crisis proportions in America. According to the Presidential Commission on Foreign Language and International Studies, "Americans' incompetence in foreign language is nothing short of scandalous . . . nothing less is at issue than the nation's security."² Much has been recently written about the "threat that America's dogged monolingualism imposes."³ The shrinking world coupled with increased mobility and interdependence underscore the necessity for facility in a second language. A little knowledge of a foreign language is *not* a dangerous thing! Clearly one does not have to speak another language like a native to benefit. Increased understanding and appreciation of cultural differences enrich one's own life as well. For a reasonably succinct discussion of some of the more traditional benefits of foreign language study, see Lippmann.⁴

SUGGESTIONS

Reason and Empathy

How can the academic advisor help students develop a more positive attitude toward foreign language study? Honesty is of primary importance, followed closely by the necessity to communicate an understanding of and an empathy with legitimate student concerns. It is an ineluctable fact that not everyone — including many bright students — can excel in the learning of a second language. Consistent and conscientious effort does not necessarily guarantee an "A" or a "B". It is too easy to suggest that students work harder, but the perceptive advisor will help them recognize their academic strengths, realizing that these may not include foreign languages. Some students need reassurance that lack of foreign language mastery need not preclude a productive professional career. In fact, foreign language teachers are often in a unique position to provide insightful evaluations and/or recommendations for these students whom they have watched struggle on a daily basis.

Exuses vs. Facts

A few basic facts can greatly enhance an advisor's credibility with anxious students. Advisors should be familiar with some of the traditional reasons for studying a foreign language and be supportive of the rationale for maintaining it as a requirement on their campuses.

Very few students have a *real* foreign language learning disability. For example, records maintained at The University of Texas at Austin show that only 38 students were referred to the Department of Speech Communication's Program in Communication Disorders for

¹ L. Austin, "Forgotten: Lack of language skills hurts Americans," *Dallas Times Herald*, (December 19, 1983), p. 1, cont'd on p. 18.

² J.N. Lippmann, "Rationale for Language Study," in G.A. Jarvis, Ed., *The Challenge of Communication*, (Skokie, IL: National Textbook Co., 1974), pp. 37-70.

³ J.N. Lippmann.

testing during the past two years.⁶ Of these 38 students, only 18 were recommended for a foreign language waiver on the basis of a documentable learning disability. The 38 students identified from among approximately 13,000 enrolled in freshmen- or sophomore-level courses during that period, represented less than 0.5% of the students in foreign language classes. Problems of auditory discrimination were the most common. Dyslexia sometimes resurfaced, and occasionally other neurological problems were diagnosed. The large majority of these referrals were made by academic advisors, not by teachers. This fact underscores a unique role of academic advisors. Students with difficulties are often more comfortable talking with an advisor than they are with an instructor who they know must assign grades. However, advisors should be cautious not to confuse problems that have a physiological origin with those that are psychological and stem from poor attitudes. As the data indicate, students who say "I can't" mean "I don't want to."

Self-discipline Is Essential

To maximize one's effectiveness in working with this group of students, the advisor should be prepared to deal with issues that are almost unique to foreign language study. Although most advisors will have studied another language at some time, a more psychological vantage point can often provide a clue to student problems as well as uncover possible solutions to recommend.

Foreign language learning typically requires mastery of four very different skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Not all courses emphasize these four skills equally. Also, individuals do not normally develop competence in each of these skills at the same rate. The active skills of speaking and writing are considered difficult by most students and the precision required is threatening. The issue is further complicated by the sequential nature of the discipline and the many variations in teaching styles. From an advisor's point of view, this means that first-year foreign language students should be encouraged to strive for excellence from the very first day because the lack of a solid foundation can only spell disaster. The well-known adage that it's difficult to break old habits is particularly true of foreign language learning. To paraphrase an old saying, "*his facit qui facit celeriter*" (If you do it carelessly, do it twice).

Unfortunately, many students are lulled into a false sense of security in the early weeks of a beginning course but are quickly overwhelmed shortly after mid-semester. During those first weeks students should be developing effective study habits and the self-discipline that will be required as the material builds and becomes more complex. The second semester picks up where the first leaves off and continues at the same intense pace. In contrast, much of the second year is normally devoted to assimilation and improvement of skills. Stated another way, rigorous first-year classes with students' schedules planned to accommodate the work required can lay the foundation for a second year which is fun as well as productive.

An Opportunity for Creativity

Foreign language learning can be difficult but interesting. On one hand it is rigorous and exacting, but on the other there are numerous opportunities for humor and creativity, even

in the early stages. Unfortunately, students are so often frustrated by grammar and syntax that they don't recognize occasions to be inventive, and if they do they are afraid to do so. Advisors might help students overcome this fear by suggesting that they try to give humorous answers in class. An unexpected (but grammatically correct) response can also relieve classroom anxiety. The goal is for the teacher to laugh with students and not at them.

To illustrate, consider the following straightforward question and responses: "If you were rich, what kind of car would you buy?" — "I'd buy a Porsche." — "If I were rich, I wouldn't need a car; I'd hire a chauffeur." Clearly the second student had more fun, and so did the class!

Allow Time to Succeed

Students' problems with foreign language courses frequently stem from unwise course schedules and/or unrealistic priorities rather than from poor intellect. Students who are trying to work 40 hours per week and carry a full-time course load often expect the impossible of themselves and the institution. More specifically, trying to carry courses such as accounting, computer science, and Spanish simultaneously may be unwise. Each of these subjects requires daily and thorough preparation; their demands are relentless. The advisor should certainly alert students who propose such schedules to the commitment involved, especially if the foreign language is a first-year course. Students should recognize that they need to spend two to three hours of preparation for each foreign language class meeting, which could translate into as many as 8-15 hours of study time per week. Since this does represent such a substantial block of time, the temptation to "borrow" in light of other academic pressures is very real. Faced with a long term paper in their major and the need to spend time in the language laboratory, students will understandably give higher priority to the former. Yet, this decision could set the stage for disaster. A knowledgeable academic advisor can help students plan schedules that offer flexibility and minimize time conflicts and other attendant anxieties.

Similarly, a sensitive advisor will encourage a balanced curriculum. For example, organic chemistry, anatomy, and a foreign language in the same semester may well overwhelm students who do not memorize easily.

Procrastination Compounds Problems

In an attempt to spread out difficult and time-consuming courses, students are sometimes tempted to postpone foreign language. This temptation is particularly great for students who are anxious about their foreign language study and who don't realize that they would only be compounding an already difficult problem. Advisors should try to convince students that it isn't necessary to like every course they take and that they can't continue to run away from "dreadful" requirements. Foreign language learning demands self-discipline as well as intellectual discipline. These situations may well give advisors opportunities to help students understand why they resist certain courses and to teach them how to cope in situations where the rewards — if they are even perceived as rewards — are generally delayed.

Introductory foreign language courses such as those that satisfy core requirements for graduation are typically directed toward freshmen. Advanced undergraduates who have begun to develop a sense of responsibility for their own education often resent the seeming lack of flexibility and perceive these classes as excessively structured.

⁶These data were shared by Betty Jo Hinrick, Psychologist, Center for Communication Disorders, Department of Speech Communication, The University of Texas at Austin (1984).

Perhaps one of the most serious problems students encounter involves trying to complete the foreign language sequence after having interrupted it for a semester or more. Unfortunately, they fail to realize how quickly language skills can be lost if they are not practiced regularly. In cases where there has been a break, advisors should consider the benefits to be derived from auditing or repeating the last semester completed. While students may resist this advice, it is probably the most valuable and realistic that can be given.

Psychological Hurdles Can Be Surmounted

Many of the self-generated anxieties associated with foreign language study stem from fear of failure in individual performance. Successful methods for coping with these kinds of fears can be gleaned from athletics, drama, and music. For example, students can be encouraged to view their teachers as coaches rather than adversaries. There is a big difference between seeing a teacher as helping you learn so that you will fulfill a requirement as opposed to being a barrier between you and your degree. On the other hand, there is little difference between a play director's criticism and that of a foreign language instructor.

Students should make a special effort to get to know their foreign language teachers. In addition to suggestions for improvement, this more informal exchange can serve to help break down barriers imposed by the classroom setting.

Students' Experiences Are Insightful

Advisors should not overlook suggestions students can offer. Who knows the problem better than the person who has recently been there? For example, the student who recognizes the importance of continually "reminding myself that I am learning French at about the same pace that I acquired English" alludes to the frustration of setting one's expectations too high. With surprising frequency students attribute their fear of responding in class to previous experiences where they felt they were made to look foolish and/or were actively discouraged from asking questions. Students who are prone to ask "how" and "why" often put down by foreign language teachers who emphasize repetition and rote memory over than the fine points of syntax and grammar. In these cases, a simple reminder that most people learn their native language by the same techniques may improve students' attitudes and perspective.

"Concentrate on what is being said in class." "Keep up with the work." Foreign languages have to be learned "a little at a time, and constantly. . . . you can't cram the night before a test." Participating in language labs is critically important even though "this sometimes seems like the hardest thing in the world to accomplish. . . . The thing about language lab is that you really don't see how it's helping you until you're into the second or third semester." Although this student didn't realize it, she was addressing the issues of delayed rewards and long-term goals.

Similarly, consider the insights the following students' statements show. "Classroom participation is the hardest thing for me because I always make plenty of mistakes. But, the thing is if you're not willing to make mistakes, you won't get the experience you need in order *not* to make them." "Speak aloud - don't just read to yourself. . . . in order to gain confidence in opening your mouth."

Learning how to overcome tenseness in the classroom is a high priority among students.

"Do anything you can to be relaxed. The more insecure or tense you feel, the less you can demonstrate how much you *do* know."

The astute advisor will learn by listening to students talk about their foreign language experience and even try to elicit information with leading questions. Indeed, students can be the source of ideas which are both timely and appropriate to the campus.

Know Your Resources

Language departments and their faculties can provide insightful information concerning course goals and teaching strategies. For example, some courses and/or some teachers place different emphasis on the skills to be learned. Students who are particularly apprehensive about the spoken language might benefit from the opportunity to devote their full attention to foreign language study during a summer session when they could be registered for no additional coursework. This intensive route clearly involves trade-offs in terms of assimilation, but it does allow students to complete a two-year foreign language requirement in one calendar year, a factor that can be psychologically important.

Development of time-management and study skills is essential for successful foreign language learning. Regardless of where or how these skills are taught, they must be realistic; emphasize the importance of regular, frequent study periods; and be sensitive to student needs.

Advisors may already have some readily available predictive information according to a recent study at The University of Texas.¹ The quantitative SAT score, high school rank, and freshman English grades showed significant correlation with performance in first-year French courses. Of the freshman-level English courses, correlation was better for the second semester which develops organization and analytical ability. The study also showed that there is no significant advantage to postponing foreign language study until the junior or senior year.

Review and Audit for Success

Students who for one reason or another do not complete their foreign language requirement in consecutive semesters present additional problems. Because of the sequential nature of these courses, teachers assume little or no review is necessary. Those who have broken their foreign language sequence are generally not ready to begin the next course without a substantial review of all four skills. Depending on the time lapse and the student's performance in previous foreign language courses, advisors may want to encourage auditing the last semester completed.

Advisors who have not studied a foreign language for a long time may also find it helpful to audit or even register for a beginning foreign language class and to test some of the anxieties students experience. In fact, advisors who have not recently assumed a student role may be missing a readily available opportunity to increase their rapport and credibility with students.

The temptation is strong to give students a list of general suggestions for dealing with foreign language problems. However, selectivity (one or two carefully chosen suggestions

1. N. Lieberman and L.M. Lieberman, unpublished results, 1981.

that can be easily implemented) is critical so students can see almost immediate results. Success begets success; anxiety builds on anxiety.

Misperceptions of what a college education demands and can provide frequently intensify problems with foreign language learning. The transition to becoming a self-motivated, mature learner who looks to the professor for guidance and evaluation is generally assumed to be well underway by most college instructors. One of the most important but difficult roles of the advisor is to help students gain a realistic view of the dynamics of a college education.

CONCLUSION

Although advisors may appreciate the value of foreign language study, it is not always easy to communicate these benefits to anxious students. Unfortunately, an element of faith is required since the full value is generally realized only after the fact. Therefore, the primary goal of the academic advisor should be to encourage attitudes and activities which are the keys to success. Study it, say it, write it, and do it — don't just read it.

Relationships Between Student Characteristics and Perceived Outcomes of a University Education

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There are a number of possible outcomes of a college education and students differ as to the extent to which various outcomes are achieved. In his review of the goals of higher education since the first days of The University of Paris and the Sorbonne, Brown found that "throughout history, almost without exception, the expressed or clearly implicit goals of colleges and universities have been to have an impact on students in ways more extensive than passing on facts, specific skills, or intellectual capacities." Miller and Prince suggest that "an institution must act on the knowledge that each student arrives on campus with many developmental needs which must be met in a variety of ways, both formal and informal, and that no two students have the same requirements."¹

Any consequence of a student's enrollment in a given educational institution may be considered an outcome. Within this broad definition, a number of distinctions among types of outcomes can usefully be made. For example, Astin, Pano, and Creager² categorize student outcomes as follow:

- psychological/cognitive outcomes, such as knowledge, critical thinking ability, basic skills, special aptitudes, and academic achievement;
- psychological/affective outcomes, such as self-concept, values, attitudes, beliefs, drive for achievement, and satisfaction with college;
- behavioral/cognitive outcomes, such as career development, level of educational attainment, and vocational achievements; and

¹ J.S. Prince, T.K. Miller, & R.D. Winston, *Student developmental task inventory guidelines*, Athens, GA: Student Development Associates, (1974), p. 4.

R.D. Brown, *Student development in tomorrow's higher education*. Washington: American College Personnel Association, (1972), p. 28.

² A.W. Astin, R.J. Pano, & J.A. Creager, *National norms for entering college freshmen fall 1966*, Washington: American Council on Education, (1967).