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# The Foreign Language Requirement: An Alternative Program

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**ABSTRACT** For various reasons, some college-level students experience great difficulty in fulfilling their foreign language requirement. This paper reports on a new program at Boston University which 1) identifies students with severe language learning problems, and 2) offers an alternative sequence of courses designed to help these students achieve foreign language learning success. MLAT pre- and post-test scores indicate significant increases in language aptitude after completion of the first semester of the new course sequence.

### Introduction: The Students

As the traditional foreign language requirements for university and college graduation have been either maintained or, after a period of decline, gradually reinstated, administrations and language programs have increasingly faced the problem of what to do with students who give all signs of being unable to meet this requirement.

In the past, the problem was less severe for several reasons. First, the percentage of the population prepared to attend college has increased until now about three-quarters of Americans twenty-five years of age and older have completed high school, and a majority of current high school graduates are expected to go on immediately or eventually to college. Many of these students do not come from high school programs repre-

senting the more restricted and, in the conventional academic sense, higher-achieving groups of former times. Second, as recent concern has brought out, secondary schools frequently have not prepared students in the traditional higher education basics; their linguistic skills are, by traditional measures, lower than those of the previous generation. Finally, with the rise of professional, technical, and vocational college programs, students' incentive to learn foreign languages has greatly decreased. (The notable exceptions are students of bilingual or international backgrounds and liberal arts students who see international relations and international business in their future.)

In addition, educators and institutions are increasingly conscious of the diversity of this student population. We tend to make allowances for disadvantages that are perceived as not being "the student's fault:" weak academic backgrounds, poor secondary education, inappropriate programs of study caused by parental pressure or other poor orientation, and, of course, low aptitude. In the past, it was possible for many educators to dismiss students who were unable to pass language requirement courses as being simply "unintelligent!" Now, with greater awareness of the multiplicity of "intelligence" and growing mistrust of standardized examinations, it would be hard to maintain such a simplistic position as that which decreed, as recently as the 1940s, in at least one university to which others have often looked for guidance, that even legally blind students were expected to take a reading test in a foreign language.

Our experience at Boston University has confirmed that the inability to meet a language requirement can have a number of causes and symptoms. Certainly, some of the students with this inability have been

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formally identified, either during their pre-college education or at Boston University, as being dyslexic. Typically, these are students who experienced difficulty in acquiring a working knowledge of English, needed special tutoring in primary and/or secondary school, and still, despite admirable perseverance, suffer from an inability to write English without numerous errors of spelling and construction. These students sometimes were authorized to take the standardized college admissions tests with an extended time limit, yet usually still have low verbal SAT scores (in the 400's or even, in the case of some of our transfer students, lower). It would be administratively helpful if these rather easily recognized signs of pending problems in foreign language were sufficient to identify the entire group of students to whom we have felt the need to give special conditions concerning the foreign language requirement. However, these students with a clearly identified history of disability are rare, constituting less than 10% of the total to whom our program has given special treatment.

Hence, one must resist the impression that all students who are not clearly disabled from the start should be able to go on successfully. Along with many other language teachers, we have observed that different students reach the limit of their abilities at widely varying points, as they are called on to surmount new hurdles that bring new skills into play. While some students already show signs of severe lack of ability at the beginning of the first semester of foreign language study, whether in high school or in college, there are many others who get through one or two semesters with high C's or low B's before totally losing their footing. These are the students who must be rescued from a challenge that they have no chance of meeting successfully. As some students have pointed out, at a certain point in the second semester, it is no longer even marginally sufficient to memorize vocabulary and forms. Despairing at the need to assimilate complex written and spoken structures, and especially to produce original utterances in increasingly spontaneous fashion, one student perceptively said: "I can't get along by treating French like Math any more!"

#### Administrative Background

For several years, there were only two possible conclusions to Boston University's evaluation process: the student was either exempted from the language requirement or was obliged to continue in the normal sequence of courses. The faculty and administration, however, increasingly became concerned that the exempted students were not "paying their dues" to the language requirement (since they might attempt just

one language course and then be exempted outright). There was also an issue of fairness involved when some students were exempted from a requirement while others, whose abilities in that area might be only slightly better, were required to go through the complete sequence of foreign language study. In the fall of 1984, as a first response to these concerns, we began, on an experimental basis, replacing the exempted language courses by other courses that, while not in a foreign language, at least improved either English-language skills or broadened the student's knowledge of the world, preferably including countries associated with the language that the student had started learning. For example, a student who barely passed first-semester French might have contracted to take three "substitute" courses: one on intermediate English composition, one on western European history, and one on existentialist philosophy. Or, a student exempted after two semesters of Spanish might have taken a course in Latin American government and one on Hispanic literature in translation. Students were always grateful for such alternatives.

Meanwhile, the Department of Modern Foreign Languages and Literatures was planning a more permanent solution: a special three-course sequence designed, first, to help students look at language as a rule-governed entity that has its own logic, and then to progress in a specific foreign language. The approach of the first semester—which was taught for the first time in the spring of 1986—is, of necessity, highly cognitive, since the course consists largely of an introduction to general linguistics, along with contrastive analysis of either French or Spanish to English. The second and third semesters will also use a cognitive approach to emphasize reading skills. This new sequence will be required of all students who previously were exempted—whether outright or "conditionally"—from the language requirement, plus a smaller number of students whom we judge as being only marginally capable of getting through the usual four semesters. (Whether some particularly disadvantaged students will have to be exempted from the new sequence is a question we will be able to answer only with additional experience.)

The decision to concentrate on only one of the four language skills merits explanation. A majority of the students interviewed have greater problems with oral than with written work. Often, they can get by on written homework and in fact sometimes write good compositions; yet in class, under the pressure of needing to comprehend and produce utterances with no time to reflect, they collapse. Typically, they testify that in the "regular" sequences of courses, the teacher has virtual-

ly given up calling on them or expecting them to contribute, since the effort is so embarrassing and unproductive. There are admittedly certain students who are so disadvantaged in written skills that they perform better in the oral skills, particularly when these can be picked up informally outside of the classroom, by living abroad, for example. However, we have seen only one or two such students; for the vast majority of our language-disabled students, a "reading-only" track was deemed preferable.

### Identifying the Students

With this preamble, we would like to turn to the specific conditions that we have observed at Boston University and to the solutions that we have devised. In the period covered by this study, September 1984 through July 1986, the evaluation process has been greatly refined and the range of solutions increased. During this period, 132 students in Boston University's College of Liberal Arts have been in one way or another exempted from our language requirement or given substitute work. In the College of Liberal Arts, the language requirement can be met 1) by completing the fourth college semester of a foreign language (or, in the case of our accelerated Spanish track or the French reading-only sequence, three semesters); 2) by scoring 540 points or higher on the College Entrance Examination Board Achievement test in French, German, Hebrew, Italian, Latin, Russian, or Spanish, or 3 or higher on the Advanced Placement test; 3) in other languages, by demonstrating equivalent performance on a written test; or 4) by having attended a high school in which the chief language of instruction was not English.

In addition to our work with Liberal Arts students, we have recommended various types of foreign language exemption for twelve students from other divisions of Boston University. However, we exclude these students from our statistics and discussion, because the other Boston University schools with language requirements require only two semesters and because we were not personally responsible for making a decision in those cases. Finally, twenty-seven College of Liberal Arts students have completed the screening process but have been denied special treatment with regard to the language requirement, since the evidence showed that they should be able to complete one of the regular sequences.

### Student Self-Evaluation

Until the middle of the fall semester of 1985, students who were experiencing severe difficulties in foreign language classes usually identified themselves by coming in to the Office of Academic Advising of the Dean's Office in the College of Liberal Arts. Often,

these students would describe their fruitless efforts to progress in the foreign language sequence and would explain that "their other courses were suffering too much" as a consequence. Typically, they would either say that they "wanted to know what was wrong with them" or, in the case of the more administratively minded, would "request exemption from the language requirement." In many cases, students were visibly upset, and all the more so because, up until recently, the solution was "all or nothing:" either exemption (usually a cause for rejoicing, but often also for a depressed self-image among the students affected) or non-exemption (which condemned the student to further frustration in the language classroom). Contrary to what some might believe, few students attempt to bluff their way to an exemption, and only a relatively small number of students have been stopped at the outset of the process.

Our evaluation procedure consisted, and still consists, of the following basic elements:

1) a preliminary screening interview with the student, conducted by a faculty advisor experienced in this area;

2) a two-page questionnaire filled out by the student, including information on all foreign languages attempted in school or college, a checklist of areas of greater or lesser difficulties, and a paragraph proposing a solution. In addition to the factual answers, the questionnaire often reveals problems that have a bearing on the student's application, such as frequent spelling errors, faulty grammatical constructions, inversion of letters, and even, in particularly severe cases, inversion of numbers in the student's own identification number;

3) a two-page questionnaire filled out by the student's latest foreign language teacher, and preceding ones if it seems useful;

4) administration of the Modern Language Aptitude Test (MLAT), distributed by the Psychological Testing Corporation (a division of Harcourt Brace Jovanovich);

5) finally, a second interview, with the administrator (who is also a language teacher) responsible for making a decision about the student's language studies.

### Interviews

The two interviews are extremely valuable in assessing the student's frame of mind. In particular, it has become clear that a certain number of students are incapable of learning a foreign language, not because of any constitutional disability, but because of adverse experiences that have produced a high degree of anxiety. Typically, these students report appalling treatment in pre-college language classes, and sometimes

totally counterproductive pressure from parents who themselves are fluent or even native speakers of a foreign language. This is a factor that probably no test can identify, and it helps explain the fact that a small number of the students who perform poorly in foreign language courses actually have rather high SAT or MLAT scores. The interview often reveals a great sense of frustration on the part of some students who do well in their other classes but, as they explain, "their GPA is being wrecked by Spanish" (or whatever language). The interview brings out, more clearly than any questionnaire, many students' long history of moving from one foreign language to another. We have seen some students who have failed Spanish in high school, attempted and abandoned Russian as freshmen, and received a D in French (or similar combinations) before they finally make it in to our office. Finally, the interview can reveal speech or hearing problems that, in a small number of cases, clearly affect the student's ability to learn languages.

#### *Teacher Evaluations*

A questionnaire filled out by the student's language teacher or teachers is equally vital. Rarely have we given special conditions to a student without strong support from the teacher; in fact, with the recent raising of consciousness about this problem in our Modern Foreign Languages and Literatures Department, the teacher now usually takes the initiative to send the student in for evaluation, whereas in the past,

self-identification was more frequent. Clearly, the teacher is the professional most familiar with the student's background, efforts, and problems.

#### *The MLAT*

Next to the teacher's evaluation, the most useful factor for our purposes appears to be the MLAT. This exam was developed in the 1950s by John B. Carroll and Stanley M. Sapon, based on data obtained from testing groups identified by the authors as being college freshmen, air force enlisted men, men in intensive language training with the Department of State, and students at the Army Language School. It is evident that this test has aged considerably, because of the unrepresentative nature of three of the test groups and the passage of some thirty years in which student profiles have changed vastly. Still, although comparable figures for a random sample of the Boston University students are not available, the MLAT remains the best test instrument we have located for this purpose. In fact, we find a very high degree of correlation between students' degree of difficulty in learning a foreign language and their scores, which are as shown in the table below.

For the 132 students in the left column, the mean score is 5%; for the 25 in the right column, it is 40%; the difference is impressive. It should be stressed, however, that the MLAT in itself is an insufficient tool for our purposes. First, as already mentioned, there are always a few high-scoring students who need to be

**MLAT Scores of Students Evaluated for Foreign Language Difficulties**  
(by percentile, as established by criteria given by the MLAT producers)

Students Exempted or Assigned to Alternative Track	Students Not Exempted and Not Assigned to the Alternative Track
1%: 17	
3%: 17	
5%: 32	1
10%: 22	
15%: 13	3
20%: 9	1
25%: 7	
30%: 5	4
35%: 1	1
40%: 2	1
45%:	5
50%:	1
55%:	2
65%: 1	1
70%:	2
none: 6	1
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given special consideration. Second, although we would emphasize that we believe students have approached our whole process candidly, still there may be some who purposely plan a low performance on the MLAT; their numbers would certainly increase without the control exercised by the other factors in our evaluation. And third, there is the possibility of students' scores being vastly affected by panic or mechanical problems (particularly in the parts of the test administered by tape recorder).

Used in conjunction with other indications, however, the MLAT has been a very reliable element in our procedures. In the fall of 1985, we administered the MLAT to about twenty students whom first-semester language teachers had identified as perhaps being unable to go much farther in the foreign language. This "early warning" screening was very successful in stopping students before they entered their second semester of language and thus inserting them into the new sequence with minimal damage to their academic records. As a further way of investigating the utility of the MLAT, we will continue to administer a post-test at the end of the first semester of the alternative sequence, in order to see the extent to which additional language experience will alter students' MLAT scores; in other words, whether it is truly an "aptitude test." Our first pre- and post-test results to date indicate that the MLAT may indeed reflect language learning aptitude of some sort (see *Post-Course MLAT Results*, p. 75, and graph A).

*Other Measurement Devices*

There is another "objective" testing device, namely students' verbal skills in English, as reflected in SAT scores, which one might expect to follow a pattern

similar to that on the MLAT. But interestingly enough, the correlation between foreign language problems and verbal SAT scores is much lower, as shown in the table below.

While the left-hand column shows 49 rather low scores (those below 400) out of 118 and only a few very high scores (the three above 600), still the distribution between 400 and 600 is not very different from a cross-section of students. The mean SATV scores of students represented in the left column is 460/470, and it is 530 for those represented in the right column, while for Liberal Arts students entering as freshmen in 1981-84 it has been around 540, and about 550 for 1985 freshmen. The somewhat higher scores in the right-hand column do not suffice to prove that the SATV would be a significant predictor of difficulty in acquiring a foreign language since over one-third of these scores are 490 or lower. Still, at least we can say that a low SATV score can help confirm a problem diagnosed through other means. The mean Math SAT score, not surprisingly, is somewhat higher—480/490—than the SATV score for students in the left column, while students in the right column have a mean SATM score of 530, suggesting that the SATM score also has some correlation to language ability.

*A priori* one might expect that Natural Science majors—who presumably are less accustomed to dealing in words than are majors in the Humanities and Social Sciences—might have more language acquisition difficulties. The truth, however, is quite the contrary, as indicated by the table on the following page showing the breakdown by area and department of students known to have declared majors (joint majors are counted as two halves).

**SATV Scores of 144 Students Evaluated for Foreign Language Difficulties during the Period September 1984-July 1986**

Students Exempted or Assigned to the Alternative Track		Students Not Exempted and Not Assigned to the Alternative Track	
200-290	1		
300-340	5		
350-390	19		1
400-440	24		5
450-490	29		4
500-540	25		8
550-590	12		4
600-640	2		4
650-690	1		
unknown or none	14		

**Majors of 122 Students Studied from September 1984 to July 1986  
and Exempted from the Language Requirement or Assigned to the Alternative Track**

Humanities		Social Studies		Natural Sciences	
Art History	2	Anthropology	1	Biology	4
Classics	1	Economics	23	Chemistry	2
English	5	Geography	1	Computer Science	3.5
Philosophy	3.5	History	12	Math	1.5
		International Relations	10	Physics	2
		Political Science	25		
		Psychology	14.5		
		Sociology	10		
		Urban Studies	1		
	11.5		97.5		13
% of 122:	9%		80%		11%

**Declared CLA Majors (as of September 1985) out of 4511 Total**

Humanities		Social Studies		Natural Sciences	
Art History	74	American Studies	6	Astronomy	23
Classics	10	Anthropology	34	Biology	527
English	310	East. European Studies	13	Chemistry	78
Modern Foreign Langs. and Lits.	106	Economics	400.5	Computer Science	272
Music	19	Geography	11	Geology	42
Philosophy	48	History	135	Mathematics	121
Religion	21.5	International Relations	221	Physics	36.5
		Political Science	302.5		
		Psychology	476		
		Sociology	82		
Totals	1730.5		1681		1099.5
% of 4511	38%		37%		24%

Among the exempted or reassigned students, it is surprising that there are more English majors than Computer Science majors, but the most astonishing feature is that fully 80% of this group are Social Science majors (as compared to about one-third Social Science majors in a typical student body). This feature of our findings deserves study at a future time.

Another fruit of our experience is that the majority of students experiencing difficulties are studying Spanish. The breakdown by language studied at the college level (or the latest if more than one) is as follows:

French	22
German	8
Greek (Classical)	1
Hebrew	1
Italian	5
Japanese	1
Latin	4
Russian	3
Spanish	70
	102

The proportion of students of Spanish on this list (61%) is almost twice as high as the proportion of students of Spanish among all Boston University language students. Whether this is because of the way Spanish has traditionally been taught here, with a particular audio-lingual emphasis (which would be disadvantageous to the type of students we are studying) or because the weaker language students tend to take Spanish as being, by reputation at least, the "easiest foreign language," we are not yet sure.

*Other Procedures*

In order to streamline our procedures, we have taken steps to make it possible for some students to enter the "alternative sequence" without going through the pain, waste, and expense of taking a first-semester language course unsuccessfully. The first such target group is composed of transfers from Boston University's College of Basic Studies (a rigorous two-year division designed for underachievers in high school who show promise of "making good" academically). With their academic counselor's recommendation—

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based on personal knowledge, high school records, and SAT scores—some of these intra-university transfers were given the MLAT in the spring of 1986 and, when advisable, were assigned directly to the alternative sequence for the following semester. These students will take the three-course sequence plus one course related to the history, culture or literature (in translation) associated with the foreign language.

Ideally, all incoming Liberal Arts students would take the MLAT, either in summer orientation before their freshman year, or else upon transferring into the school. With the experience described in this paper, we feel that we would have a high rate of accuracy in assigning students to the appropriate language sequence. One of the benefits of our program has been the identification of problem students much earlier, so that the number of our seniors who have still not met or exempted the language requirement should decline significantly. With a raised consciousness on the part of all concerned, students will be meeting the language requirement earlier in the sequence that is better for them, and should view the requirement with an increasingly positive attitude.

We now move to a discussion of the first semester of the foreign language sequence, its rationale and its results.

**Language Learning: An Alternative Sequence**

Language Learning is the first in a series of three courses designed specifically for those students who, as discussed above, experience undue difficulty and frustration in trying to satisfy the Boston University College of Liberal Arts (CLA) two-year foreign language requirement. Through the testing and interview procedures described above, a group of 25 such students (24 CLA students and 1 from the College of Basic Studies) were identified as candidates who might benefit from the new series of language courses.

In the remainder of this paper we examine the theoretical rationale for the Language Learning course, the topics covered, student reaction to the course, and the subjective and objective results at its conclusion.

**Philosophy Behind the Course**

It was evident from the onset that, while each of the students identified to participate in the course had individual language learning histories, all manifested certain common reactions to the process. Students were asked to keep weekly journals for the duration of the class. Their initial entries included an account of their past language learning experiences, including successes, failures and aspirations. Many students expressed the fact that they were very motivated to learn

a language; some had parents or relations whose mother tongue was not English; others enjoyed foreign travel or realized that proficiency in another language would enhance employment opportunities in their field. Students noted that they did well at the beginning of a new language class, but by the end of the semester were doing very poorly. Most spent many hours on homework, but could not perform verbally in class. Many said they did all right when the class went slowly at the beginning and had few problems with reading and writing, but lost the class when it began to pick up pace and when the mode changed from predominantly written to predominantly spoken. All, needless to say, experienced great frustration and a feeling of hopelessness.

Due to the fact that most students analyzed in this study had found great difficulty in the verbal aspects of language learning, it was decided that the new sequence of courses should focus more on the written, rather than on the spoken word. Therefore, the sequence was planned so that the second and third courses would focus on the development of reading and writing skills. The first course, however, was designed to address a number of issues from grammar to sociolinguistics, all of which, it was hoped, would help provide students with skills that would prepare them to succeed in future language learning. In particular, it was hoped that the course would enable students 1) to develop an understanding of grammar, 2) to improve their ability to analyze language as an abstract system, and 3) to apply this knowledge to future language learning situations. We now outline the specific means used to address these goals.

**Course Description**

The course met for four 50-minute periods per week. Three of these periods were devoted to the discussion of language in general, with illustrations from cross-linguistic samples and problems. The fourth hour each week was reserved for more in-depth discussion of these issues in the students' choice of French or Spanish, the languages they would be pursuing in the sequel reading course.

1) The first phase of the course (10 weeks) was designed to provide the student with the basics of linguistic structure. It was not unlike an introductory linguistics class in the kinds of material covered. The main difference, however, was the focus of class discussion, which always included an examination of how these aspects of linguistic knowledge can be applied to the language learning process.

The discussion began with articulatory phonetics, practice producing and perceiving English sounds, and