

# ITL

## REVIEW OF APPLIED LINGUISTICS

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## From Lower-Division to Upper-Division Foreign Language Classes : Obstacles to Reaching the Promised Land

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For most foreign language departments at the university level in the United States, enrollments have been reported to drop dramatically once students have fulfilled the foreign language requirement (e.g. BROD and HUBER, 1992). One possible reason for this drop is that upper division classes are too difficult for the student who has not had extensive experience using the language outside the classroom. Supporting evidence is supplied by GRAMAN (1987), who reported that only eight of 85 students in advanced undergraduate Spanish classes reported no use of Spanish outside the classroom. Those who had outside experience reported more comfort in speaking and understanding Spanish in class. Graman concluded that such experience was virtually a prerequisite to reaching upper-division classes.

If it is the case that advanced students do not come up through the ranks and are expected to get their preparation elsewhere, the profession has a problem : In no other subject matter, with the possible exception of performing arts, is it assumed that students will get their preparation for advanced study in non-instructional settings.

The purpose of this study was to confirm and extend Graman's findings with three different target languages. It was predicted that those with

greater outside experience would feel more comfortable in class. It was also predicted that such experience would impact classroom behavior (seating and participation) as well as grades. This latter prediction is based on LOUGHRIN-SACCO (1992), who observed that "false beginners" in elementary foreign language classes chose to sit together, dominated the class, and received better grades.

**Method**

The initial sample consisted of 104 undergraduate students enrolled in five advanced composition and grammar classes in French (two classes), German (one class) and Spanish (two classes) at three different universities in Southern California. Seventy two students were retained after screening out 32 native speakers. All students had completed the basic language classes and at least two other language courses at the intermediate level.

Subjects were asked to fill out a questionnaire probing their experience with the target language inside and outside of the classroom, including participation in summer, quarter/semester and year abroad programs, and their ways of improving their foreign language competence outside of class. They were also asked to indicate how comfortable they felt speaking, understanding, reading and writing in the target language in class on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 indicated discomfort (only the speaking results were analyzed in this study). In order to assure that the students understood all the questions, a researcher went over them with the students before they took the questionnaires home. Following completion of the questionnaire, seating charts were made to document the seating pattern that students with and without outside experience exhibited in class. Three separate observations were made of three classes. In addition, students' participation patterns (asked and volunteered responses) were recorded. Final grades were collected after the semester was over.

**Results**

As indicated in table 1, most students in the advanced classes reported outside experience with the language. The percentages found (range from 82% to 86%) were close to Graman's results (93.8%). Table 1 also includes native speakers. Note that only a very small percentage of the students in these classes had no outside experience or were not native speakers, slightly more than 10% for all classes combined.

**Table 1 : The dichotomy of +/- time abroad as associated with reaching advanced foreign language classes**

Excluding native speakers of the target language :				
	NNS with experience abroad		NNS with no experience abroad	
French (n=20)	25 (86%)		4 (14%)	
German (n=11)	9 (82%)		2 (18%)	
Spanish (n=32)	27 (84%)		5 (16%)	
total (n=72)	61 (84.5%)		11 (15.5%)	
Including native speakers of the target language :				
	NS experience abroad	NNS with experience abroad	NNS&NS with experience abroad	NNS with no experience abroad
French (n=30)	1 (3%)	25 (83%)	26 (86.5%)	4 (13%)
German (n=14)	3 (21.5%)	9 (64%)	12 (86%)	2 (14%)
Spanish (n=60)	28 (46.5%)	27 (45%)	55 (91.5%)	5 (8%)
total (n=104)	32 (31%)	61 (58.5%)	93 (89.4%)	11 (10.6%)

NS = native speakers  
 NNS = non native speakers  
 experience abroad = time spent in the country where the target language is spoken

**Table 2 : Amount of time spent abroad and comfort speaking the target language (all groups combined)**

Degree of comfort speaking	0-3 months	4-6 months	10-12 months
1-2 (uncomfortable)	17 (36.2%)	3 (23%)	1 (8.3%)
3 (indeterminate)	22 (46.8%)	0	0
4-5 (comfortable)	8 (17%)	10 (77%)	11 (91.7%)

As reported in table 2, students who spent more time in the country where the target language is spoken reported more comfort speaking in class, confirming Graman's findings (statistical analysis not performed because of the low number of students without experience abroad). Closer inspection of the data revealed that students who spent at least a quarter or semester abroad felt comfortable speaking the language in class. A one-way ANOVA revealed a significant difference ( $F = 12.35$ ,  $df = 2/69$ ;  $p < .0001$ ) among the groups, and follow-up tests confirmed that the difference between the 0-3 month group and the other two groups was statistically significant (table 3).

**Table 3 : Analysis of variance of degree of comfort speaking the target language by amount of time spent abroad.**

Source	df	SS	MS	F-test
Between groups	2	27.752	13.876	12.35
Within groups	69	77.526	1.124	$p < .0001$
Total	71	105.278		
Model II estimate of between component variance = 6.376				
Group	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Std. Err.
0-3 months	47	2.745	1.052	.153
4-6 months	13	3.923	1.256	.348
10-12 months	12	4.167	.835	.241
Comparison	Mean diff.	Fisher LSD	Scheffe F-test	
0-3 months vs. 4-6 months	1.178	.663*	6.293*	
0-3 months vs. 10-12 months	1.422	.684*	8.602*	
4-6 months vs. 10-12 months	.244	.847	.165	

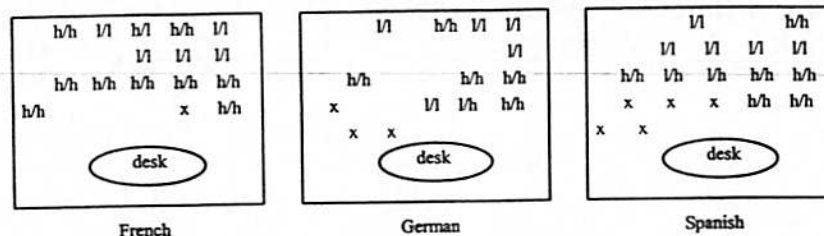
\* significant,  $p < .05$

Among the students who spent over four months abroad, only four felt uncomfortable speaking the target language in class. It is interesting to note that all four of these students indicated on the questionnaire that they started studying the language in college and left for a semester abroad when they were still beginners. It is likely that the "real world" input was too complex for them at that point; they thus did not profit as much from the acquisition-rich environment as intermediate students do.

Figure 1 shows that students with both outside experience and a high degree of comfort speaking in class (4 or 5 on a scale of 5) tended to sit in the front rows, while those who reported little or no experience and low comfort (1 or 2) tended to sit in the back (figure 1 also indicates where native speakers sat.) While we cannot generalize about seating patterns from observing only three classes, it is interesting that LOUGHRIN-SACCO (1992) reported similar results for true and false beginners. Native speakers and outside-experience high comfort students were also more active participants in class; they volunteered more frequently and were also called on more (table 4).

**Figure 1 : Students' class seating pattern**

(In the letter combination, the first letter represents the amount of time spent abroad (High or Low), the second letter stands for the degree of comfort in speaking the language (High or Low). Xs represent native speakers. All native speakers sat in the front rows.)



**Table 4 : In-class participation for high comfort students and low comfort students (all groups combined)**

Groups	Times volunteered	Participation Types	
		Times called on	
Native speakers (n = 9)	39 (34.5%) 4.33/student	18 (23%)	2/student
High comfort (n = 22)	68 (61%) 3.10/student	38 (49%)	1.73/student
Low comfort (n = 16)	5 (4.5%) .31/student	22 (28%)	1.38/student
Total	112	78	

As indicated in table 5, students with outside experience received significantly higher grades.

**Table 5 : Final course grade distribution of students with and without outside experience**

	A	B	C	D	E
All groups combined (n = 72)					
Little or no outside experience (0-3 months)	9	31	7	0	0
Outside experience (4-6, 10-12 months)	22	3	0	0	0

Chi square = 31.753, df = 2, p = .0001; Cramer's phi = .664

### Discussion

Our analysis was limited to five classes, but our results coincide with those of Graman (1987) and our personal experiences as students and teachers: Upper division foreign language classes are composed of two groups, the "haves" and the "have-nots," those with superior preparation, far more than the institution officially demands, and those who have only the required preparation. The "haves," those with extensive outside experience, dominate the class and receive higher grades. Clearly, there are official prerequisites to advanced foreign language study and unwritten, unofficial prerequisites. The former are hopelessly inadequate, and many students know this: In our sample, only 10% of the students had no outside experience or were not native speakers of the target language.

Such a situation is not acceptable. It suggests that only the wealthiest of our students (those who can afford the cost and time of traveling or studying abroad for an extended length of time) can contemplate pursuing advanced foreign language studies. The solution is clear: Improved instruction at the beginning level and a longer, improved intermediate level (for some suggestions, see KRASHEN 1995).

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