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# Advanced Spanish Language High School Students: Perceptions of Spanish Instruction, Understanding, and Cultural Appreciation

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Advanced Spanish Language High School Students 1

Advanced Spanish Language High School Students: Perceptions of Spanish Instruction,  
Understanding, and Cultural Appreciation

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Abstract

The addition of foreign language study to high school core curriculum benefits learners, society and overlap into the success of other areas of study and critical thinking. The problem in contemporary high school curriculum is that foreign language is disappearing. High school students and educators are failing to see the benefit of foreign language and its benefit to all subjects.

The purpose of this study is to identify student perceptions of the importance of foreign language study in high school. The literature review documents the disappearance of foreign language study as part of a high school curriculum. Methodology includes conversations with high school students in third year and advanced placement literature in Spanish. Information from students was collected through the use of focus group discussions. Results indicated that these high performing students all plan to pursue Spanish and additional foreign language study in higher education and future professions. While this minority group of students anticipates a multilingual future, they are aware of an ignorant majority of students that fail to recognize the seriousness, utility and opportunities through mastering Spanish fluency.

Having foreign language as a part of the core curriculum needs to be examined. Language instruction can help enrich student high school experience and prepare them for a diverse world and international workforce.

## Chapter 1 Introduction

As a high school Spanish teacher I have witnessed the foreign language abilities of many students. More importantly I have noticed the lack of their abilities when it comes to their native language English. Some of my students do not know names of seasons or months of the year in their native language while other students struggle which "their", "there" or "they're" to use. These subtle observations are both shocking and saddening and express the need to demonstrate the importance of foreign language courses in the high school curriculum. Mandatory foreign language courses can also be used as a tool to increase English language knowledge along with other academic studies such as politics, history and culture.

Currently at an area high school, students are not required to participate in foreign language study. There is no minimum number of years that needs to be met for graduation, only two or three years when it comes to students applying to most four-year universities.

Students are feeling tremendous amounts of pressure to achieve high grades in core curriculum classes such as math, science, English and history not to mention competitive scores on standardized testing and SAT exams. Educators need to focus on the benefits and importance of integrating foreign language study to enrich the lives of all students and not just college bound graduates. The focus of this paper is to examine the benefits to mandating foreign language in public high schools to help students achieve better grades and insight to a very diverse world after graduation.

### Statement of Problem

High school administration and educators have overlooked foreign language courses and the benefits for students by allowing it to be an elective course. Foreign language teachers need to

work with other core curriculum teachers such as English, history, and politics, to collaborate and strengthen their students' knowledge.

#### Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study is to determine the benefits and logistics to requiring a certain number of years of foreign language study. Does foreign language coursework have the ability to increase comprehension in other areas of study? Can teachers cross-collaborate between departments successfully to benefit student learning and enrichment as a whole?

#### Research Question

Students who elect to take the maximum number of foreign language classes form a unique group in that they represent a small percentage of the total high school body. What are these students' perceptions of the importance of advanced foreign language study within the high school culture and connected to their plans post high school?

#### Theoretical Rationale

The theoretical rationale behind this proposal comes from The American School Board Journal. Foreign language learning in U.S. schools has been a low priority while our own government admits its importance on multiple levels. The U.S. Department of State claims, "Deficits in foreign language learning and teaching" hamper security, diplomacy, law enforcement, intelligence, and cultural understanding (Black, 2006, p. 46).

#### Assumptions

High school students are graduating from four years of study and entering a diverse world full of many languages, ethnicities, political standpoints and backgrounds. High school educators are not fully preparing these young individuals for the world they will meet and individuals they will compete with on a global level. The chances of a student using general scientific studies,

historical facts or mathematical equations in college, daily life and a future career are not nearly as high as that student someday finding themselves in a situation where foreign language skills are needed. Spanish, French, Mandarin, Italian and many other languages are spoken daily all around us. The U.S. News is quickly followed if not preceded by news of an incident or conflict in a foreign country.

Core curriculum high school teachers have a great opportunity to collaborate with foreign language teachers. However the label of it being a "foreign" language only aids in the misconception that it stands alone and lacks relation and importance to American students.

#### Background and Need

According to the Center on Education Policy, Economic constraints and unintended effects of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation have negatively affected elementary and secondary foreign language instruction. At the same time, higher education institutions have faced budget cuts and are shifting the burden of foreign language education to the K-12 level (Pufahl & Rhodes, 2011).

## Chapter 2 Review of the Literature

### Introduction

A review of the literature was conducted. Studies and research ranging from the economic effectiveness of foreign language study to the benefits of global learning were examined. The research discusses how parents and educators alike believe that it is their responsibility to prepare our students and children for the 21st century and an international workforce. However, foreign language education programs in elementary and secondary schools are lacking. The literature review consists of the results of a national survey conducted in U.S. Schools along with a look at what inhibits students from pursuing their foreign language academics.

### Historical Context

The decline of foreign language instruction and enrollment has caused concern for many educators and researchers. In 1997, 31% of elementary schools taught languages, compared to 25% in 2008. It is believed that this significant decrease is the result of public elementary schools offering of foreign language instruction from 24% in 1997 to 15% in 2008. The percentage of secondary schools teaching foreign languages also dropped from 86% in 1997 to 29% in 2008 (Pufahl & Rhodes, 2011).

### Review of the Previous Literature

In 1998, Grosse, Tuman and Critz published a study reflecting on the economic utility of foreign language and the current foreign language enrollment in the U.S. The figures indicate that foreign language enrollment figures are disproportionately low in major world languages. It is believed that these low numbers display a limited development of American students and their proficiency in a second language.

While some high school students across the country are dealing with the difficulty of learning a second language of Spanish or French, the majority of students overseas are tackling multiple foreign languages. According to the Center of Applied Linguistics, some countries such as Finland, Germany and Denmark *require* that students study two foreign languages (Black, 2006). There is no doubt that this is just one of the many examples of U.S. students falling behind their future competition in a global workforce and economy.

Despite the decline in foreign language initiatives in the U.S., parents are taking foreign language education into their own hands and packing their bags. Jim Rogers and Paige Parker is one couple that sees the importance and future opportunities abroad and through achieving fluency in a foreign language. They left New York in 2007 to move to Singapore with their now eight-year-old daughter. Their daughter is enrolled in a bilingual school and learning Mandarin. According to Rogers, it's not enough that parents raise children who are brave, hardworking and curious. Parents must ask themselves, "Are we doing enough to raise 'global' kids?" (Miller & Samuels, 2011, para.3).

The level of interest in foreign language and issues are not comparable to the students that come from other countries to explore the United States' culture and language. During the 2009-2010 academic year nearly 700,000 students from around the world attended U.S. universities. Meanwhile, in 2011, only 37 percent of Americans had a passport and fewer than 2 percent of the United States' 18 million college students travel abroad (Miller & Samuels, 2011).

While Spanish and French are among the top languages taught in K-12 schools, many educators are failing to see the benefits of foreign language instruction when compared to core curriculum courses. In Indiana, some school officials scowled at a state proposal to offer foreign language instruction in every middle school. Meanwhile, one principal in New York State

eliminated some foreign language programs in order to allow more instruction for reading and math. The National Association of State Boards of Education finds these negative reactions and steering away from foreign language initiatives as the result of NCLB and state tests (Black, 2006).

When it comes to foreign language requirements, Florida and Texas are among the few that require foreign language as a high school graduation requirement. Students of low-income are already struggling on a national level to keep up with upper-class students in general education subjects such as math and English. Foreign language is just one more subject where education is failing to be an equal opportunity for all students across the U.S. Only 25 percent of students in low-income and low-performing schools study a foreign language. This is compared to 65 percent of students from wealthy, private suburban schools (Black, 2006).

The importance of foreign language instruction in U.S. schools in secondary education has proven to be invaluable, but at the same time inconsistent across the country. Maryland's Montgomery County offers foreign language instruction to more than 44,000 students, while Gaithersburg High School, also in suburban Maryland, offers one class in Arabic (Black, 2006).

Former president of the American Association of School Administrators, Sarah Jerome said, "I think we've been a pretty complacent bunch of school leaders, especially with not encouraging language courses and even letting languages drop from the curriculum." (Schachter, 2011, p. 52). While schools are recognizing the need for an international curriculum, not enough schools are stepping up to the global plate. In 2001, The Seattle Public Schools opened Hamilton International School, which had a waiting list of 250 students on opening day (Schachter, 2011).

The lack of numbers is easy to analyze on a national level, however the depth of language instruction is just as important and critical to the future success in a global economy. According

to Everette Jordan, a linguist with the Department of Defense, he says that it takes seven to nine years of intensive instruction, four years in high school and college and three to five years in additional training, to become skilled at translation, conversation, interpretation, and negotiation in any foreign language (Black, 2006).

Spanish has proven to be the top choice among many students across the country when choosing to study a foreign language. In the Fall 1990, national figures showed that Spanish attracted almost half of the 885,352 students studying foreign language at the university level (Grosse, Tuman & Critz, 1998). Being that all other languages other than Spanish, French and German enroll small percentages of students ranging from five to less than one percent, analysts believe these low numbers demonstrate foreign language educators' failure and inability to enroll students to study languages of critical economic importance.

Among reasons for studying Spanish, students and educators alike should see the economic benefits of implementing and promoting more Spanish language courses. Economic benefits of foreign language study were calculated in the 1994 collective GDP of nine languages. This was done by adding the GDP of countries where the languages were spoken. As a result, Spanish has the fourth largest aggregate GDP after Japanese, German and French (Grosse, Tuman & Critz, 1998).

Government agencies have been concerned about the lack of global minds in the United States. The National Security Education Act of 1991 was developed to provide funding for foreign language and international education (Grosse, Tuman & Critz, 1998).

Researchers from Thunderbird, The American School of Global Management published a study that brought an understanding of factors affecting college student foreign language choice.

Desire to speak with native speakers of a target language is important for students enrolled in foreign language education.

According to Myriam Met of the University of Maryland's National Foreign Language Center, only about 6 percent of the world's population speaks English as its primary language. However, when you consider English speakers as a second or third language, the number is about 25 percent. Mandarin Chinese continues to be spoken by more people than any other language (Black, 2006).

#### Statistical Information

In a cursory review of high school district websites, there are no minimum requirements to complete any foreign language study to receive a diploma or certificate of completion. The requirements for diploma are typically the High School Exit Exam, SAT-9 or Met-8 Exam, district course requirements, which exclude foreign language study. The high school district also has a list of required outcomes being communication, reading, technology and math. For admissions to the University of California, at least two years of foreign language completion are required prior to enrollment.

#### Teaching Methodology

TPR Storytelling (Total Proficiency through Reading and Storytelling or TPRS) is a method of teaching foreign language and is utilized in the local school district. This method was founded by Blaine Ray who was a high school Spanish teacher in California during the 1990s. His beliefs in the instruction of foreign language are similar to those of Stephen Krashen as his theories rely on material given through comprehensible input.

### Chapter 3 Method

#### Introduction

This non-experimental design study used high school Spanish students to collect qualitative data on their perceptions of the importance of foreign language instruction as a way to enhance their high school experience and prepare them for an international workforce. Studying a foreign language has implications for expanding one's social perceptions and gaining greater acceptance of the diversity around them.

#### Sample and Site

Fourteen students in an advanced placement Spanish literature class were asked to share their views about foreign language instruction in Spanish. This was conducted in an informal discussion. The location is a suburban high school located in Northern California. The demographic of these Spanish students are college bound students enrolled in an advanced placement class come from middle and upper socioeconomic levels.

#### Ethical Standards

This paper adheres to ethical standards in the treatment of human subjects in research as articulated by the American Psychological Association (2010). Additionally, the research proposal was reviewed by my advisor and approved.

#### Access and Permissions

These students are enrolled in a class that I teach. As the teacher of record this focus group serves to reflect on their experience and articulate connections during their final year of high school Spanish instruction.

### Data Gathering Strategies

During one regularly scheduled class session students were asked a series of questions to elicit their views on the importance of their experience in an advanced Spanish class. Questions include the following:

Why did you make the decision to take an advanced placement class in Spanish?

Why is having all these classes in Spanish important to you?

What connections do you see between your experience in Spanish instruction and your general education classes?

What are the connections between advanced Spanish instruction and English language?

How do you plan on continuing your Spanish education?

### Data Analysis Approach

I took notes as the students responded to the above questions. Conversations were analyzed for reoccurring themes.

## Chapter 4 Findings

### Description of Site, Individuals, Data

The location is upper middle class suburban high school in the San Francisco Bay Area. The majority of the students are from white affluent families. Parents are making substantial salaries and own their homes. Approximately 1200 students are enrolled in this comprehensive public high school.

Students who participated in the focus group are in advanced placement Spanish class, ages 15 to 18. They are college bound and committed to continuing to invest in their foreign language education. They are completely motivated. They are sending applications to top tier colleges and universities throughout the country.

Data were collected through a series of focus groups where students were asked to respond verbally and in writing to a series of questions, which were delineated in Chapter 3. Students were assured that all information is confidential, and that their comments would be reported in summary form only. Students participated in two focus group sessions.

### Overall Findings, Themes

Students as a whole discussed how much they loved foreign language instruction. The majority of students do not have a cultural connection to language. They were very critical, very aware that they are in the minority, compared to the majority of students who that physically take a Spanish language course without being emotionally invested in it. They observed that the school culture regards Spanish as inferior and irrelevant to their high school education. They did bring up racism, the stereotypes around native Spanish speakers. Observations by the advanced Spanish students of other students include the following:

Student perception of Spanish, although it is not required to graduate, private and public universities want to see that check mark indicating completion of an introduction to foreign language. However, this check of completion is far from language proficiency needed to master any foreign language.

*Student Attitude*

They are fascinated with Spanish. They see the beauty. They understand and appreciate the art, culture and history around the language. They see racism, prejudice manifested in other teachers as well.

*The Cultural Divide*

There is neither formal nor public recognition of Hispanic or native Spanish speakers at school. Meanwhile, efforts of closing the achievement gap are focused on white, African American students. Spanish speaking people seem to form the invisible population. They are invisible and unrecognized.

## Chapter 5 Discussion /Analysis

### Summary of Major Findings

The research shows that there is a need to teach educators, students and policy makers the importance of foreign language education not only in secondary education, but at elementary levels as well. The country recognizes the importance of foreign language and demands that students be proficient in this language. However, until this expectation coincides with the foreign language course opportunities at an elementary, middle, and high school level, students will not be prepared to meet the demands of a multilingual and competitive global market. Few schools around the country are reassessing curriculum on a district level and moving toward an international based curriculum. These schools are showing tremendous community and parent support, but are still in the minority of schools recognizing the need for rebuilding curriculum with foreign language as an integral component to student education.

The Seattle Public Schools has established 6 of 12 international schools that focus on more than just teaching a foreign language. They understand that their offering of foreign language is just one small component of educating their students and faculty on a global level. In 2000, Karen Kodama was the first principal of the John Stanford International School in Seattle. She describes the key components to an international school as achieving proficiency in any foreign language, building a curriculum with an international perspective and using technology to build global relationships. This allows students to appreciate the cultural differences around the world and connect with people in their local community from these different cultures (Schachter, 2011).

A majority of students do not express a solid understanding of the value of foreign language proficiency and the benefits of continuing their foreign language studies in two and

four year universities. One study showed that the number one reason for students' desire to continue to take Spanish in college is the possibility to get good grades. Meanwhile, the students' infatuation of Spanish ranked seventeen out of eighteen in reasons for their continuance of foreign language study. What is happening here? Is districts' negligence to foreign language education transferring to students' inability to truly value the benefits of foreign language education and multicultural awareness? One study's results imply that students are more concerned with their enjoyment, interest, comfort and convenience rather than the lifelong benefits from foreign language education (Pratt, 2010).

#### Comparison of Findings to Previous Research

It is interesting to see the similarities of what I found with my students to what I found in the reviewed literature. Students in the Advanced Placement Spanish Literature class started their Spanish education in middle school and some students were enrolled in additional foreign language education at an elementary level. Of these 14 students, a minority of Spanish language learners is represented at one school. They consist of a group of primarily junior and senior students in their final year of Spanish education in their high school career. While one study in the literature reveals that only 39 percent of students planned to continue studying Spanish in college, this unique group of students all have plans to not only continue foreign language education, but use it in the career and plans for living abroad (Pratt, 2010).

One student said that in their lower level Spanish classes, they were treated like kids. There was a lack of seriousness among the majority of fellow students along with the teachers. While singing songs and playing games using Spanish would be fun for anyone, these students didn't see its real-life value. While introductory Spanish classes can have over 30 students in a classroom, this Advanced Placement Spanish Literature class has an enrollment of 14 students.

How does foreign language enrollment start at such high numbers, but by the end of their high school career, students are barely hanging in there? As one Bay Area school district does not require foreign language as a requirement to graduation, it is no wonder that students are not achieving high levels of proficiency as one study shows. They are not studying the language long enough (Pratt, 2010). The Advanced Placement students shared the majority of attitudes toward foreign language: take enough classes that will look good on a college application and be done with it. Most accredited four year universities require two years of a foreign language, while three years is often recommended.

The lack of any district's recognition of the importance of language instruction would naturally take its toll on foreign language instructors as well. One effect of low percentages of students desire to continue Spanish language education is the teachers' resigning themselves to the fact that the majority of students are not intending to be lifelong learners, which can negatively influence and deteriorate instructional techniques (Pratt, 2010).

Educators need to closely examine the role of collaboration in schools. Studies have shown that schools are more successful when they work as a "communitarian" school. This implies that faculty work to develop a collective perspective about the goals and strategies of their work (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Foreign language educators are feeling isolated and neglected in the role of educating our students. The term "foreign" language is no longer appropriate for a language of such importance in the United States. Spanish is a second language and the benefits of its acquisition are immeasurable.

#### Limitations/Gaps in the Study

The limitations of this study are that this work examines one school site and a limited number of students. Multiple Spanish language classes weren't interviewed and assessed regarding their

perceptions and goals involving Spanish language acquisition and future use. Neither faculty nor district administration were interviewed to relate similar or dissimilar perceptions and beliefs among educators.

#### Implications for Future Research

I suggest that future researchers explore the strategies of how educators develop international curriculums and models to create global learners and multilingual students. It would be beneficial for a step-by-step approach of how to create an appreciation and recognition of the importance of foreign language education. How does one not only empower Spanish language students, but also foreign language, non-foreign language educators and administration alike? What cultural disconnect needs to be reestablished for students and educators to recognize significance of foreign language and its application locally and abroad?

#### Overall Significance of the Study

The study reveals that the majority of students do not recognize the importance of Spanish language acquisition. Educators and district levels need to reassess their lack of interest in foreign language courses and damage that it is causing their students. The demands of a higher education and global workforce demand that individuals be sensitive, educated, and competitive to the demands and situations of multicultural and multilingual societies. Higher education institutions and some progressive districts around the country are requiring international and more diverse curriculums. A high school district that does not even require foreign language for graduation sends students a diffused message: Foreign language coursework is a checklist to complete to enter higher education, not a necessary step in a lifelong learning and enrichment process.

About the Author

Susan Malanche Smith was raised in Ventura County, California and is the daughter of a Mexican immigrant father and United States born mother. She started learning Spanish at the age of 13 and currently resides in Northern California and is a high school Spanish teacher. She moved to the Bay Area in 2005 after living abroad in Madrid, Spain.

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