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Trinity's Second-Language Requirement:

Focusing on students' perspectives

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Hartford, CT
Fall 2008

Introduction

“Language and culture cannot be separated. Language is vital to understanding our unique cultural perspectives. Language is a tool that is used to explore and experience our cultures and the perspective that are embedded in our cultures,” said an American singer and a song writer, Buffy Sainte-Marie, to prove that language and culture have close relationships. As the world globalizes, the importance of understanding different cultures has risen. Knowledge of a second language provides a window into different cultures. Especially after the terror of 9/11, government and accrediting agencies are insisting people to learn more foreign languages, such as Arabic. In addition, more and more companies are looking for people who can speak more than one language for their global businesses. Therefore, a number of colleges are including a second-language requirement to prepare their students for the real world. Trinity College belongs to this group.

Every year Trinity College publishes a Bulletin that contains information on the history of Trinity College, college calendar, graduating requirements and so on. In this year’s bulletin, a new graduating requirement was added:

Beginning with first-year students in the Class of 2012, matriculating in the fall of 2008, four additional general education requirements take effect...*Second-Language Foundational Requirement*—the purpose of this requirement is to ensure that all students possess knowledge of a language other than English. Some students will have attained the requisite degree of second-language knowledge prior to their enrollment at Trinity; others will have to take one or two college-level language courses in order to meet the requirement (Bulletin 2008-2009, p. 34).

The description of the Second-Language Foundational Requirement is addressed in the bulletin; however, the purpose of the requirement is not convincing enough for students to accept the new policy. Why do students have to have knowledge of a second language? The purpose of the requirement that is listed in the bulletin does not illustrate how the policy was

made and why.

My study will be significant for Trinity College, Trinity College students, and other institutions. Trinity College will be able to observe students' reactions toward the new policy and modify it according to students' needs. Since the second-language foundational requirement is new to Trinity College, my research will strengthen the policy and will construct it into a more efficient program for future Trinity College students. Moreover, students have the right to know how they ended up with the new requirement and what the main arguments were during the faculty discussions. Therefore, based on interviews with administrators and Trinity College policy makers in my study, Trinity College students will be able to understand how the new requirement was created. Once the students understand the purpose of the policy, and they are convinced by the thoughts of Trinity College policy makers on adding a new requirement, students will be more motivated to participate rather than argue. The agreement will boost up students' motivation toward the requirement and will bring to a beneficial learning, which will help in achieving the goals that the college expected. Furthermore, my study will be noteworthy to other institutions. My study will address both faculty and student perspectives on the second-language requirement and it may cause other colleges and universities to rethink their policy.

Research Questions:

What are the students' reactions toward the new second-language requirement at Trinity College? How do perspectives of students on the second-language requirement differ from those of their instructors?

Literature Review

“Without language proficiency, much of the value of international educational programs may be lost” (Kaplan, 2003). As Kaplan mentions, languages are the key to international studies. Languages are used not only to communicate with others, but also to

express the culture and the civilization. For that reason, learning a foreign language is important to understand other cultures. As globalization continues, a number of scholars agree that learning languages is essential in the near future. Yet, there are disagreement on the matter of deciding a foreign language as a requirement.

Dickman (1947) builds his argument on justifying the reasons for the foreign language requirement in liberal arts colleges. He quotes the report of Harvard, which is one of the first colleges to be founded in the U.S., to support his argument. According to the Harvard Report, the goals of general education are to broaden students' critical thinking so as to be acquainted with proficiency in their chosen field. Dickman (1947) also references Professor Henry Grattan Doyle in the Phi Beta Kappa *Key Reporter* to stress the importance of learning a foreign language and to justify why a foreign language should be a requirement:

Better social understanding through acquaintance with foreign civilizations; increased good will and tolerance; more analytical and objective appreciation of our language and culture resulting from study of others; improved command of English... ability to look at ourselves, our ideas, our life, our civilization objectively is extremely difficult to attainment, foreign language study provides opportunity to gain this detachment (Dickman, 339).

As Professors Doyle and Dickman illustrate, foreign language is a good tool to understand different cultures and to get objective views on oneself. Although Dickman (1947) focuses on the cultural reasons for the existence a foreign language requirement, he also points out the vocational reasons that seem more practical.

Parker (1957) also has a positive view toward a foreign language requirement. Like Dickman (1947), Parker (1957) also refers to the meaning of the liberal education to stress the importance of a foreign language:

Liberal education means broadening and training the mind by pursuing knowledge for its own sake, it should not be forgotten that mind-training is largely *verbal* training—and most “experts” in the liberal arts have signified their conviction that

a single language just does not provide a sufficient range of verbal perceptiveness for a liberally educated person (Parker, 197).

Because the educational trend in 1957 was against a foreign language requirement, Parker (1957) addresses his point of view more carefully than Dickman (1947) does. Parker (1957) lists controversial issues toward a foreign language requirement: “educational trends,” “practice elsewhere,” “relevancy,” “vocational considerations,” “the problem of exceptions,” and “the matter of alternatives.” He says that educational trends are difficult to avoid; however, colleges should follow their beliefs and construct their own curricula, instead of following the educational trends. Moreover, Parker (1957) states that the issue of the importance of learning a foreign language is irrelevant to the discussion of deciding a foreign language as a requirement. Because the purpose of the liberal education is to widen and to train students to have critical thinking skills, Parker (1957) continuously states that a foreign language requirement should be treated as an individual issue that should not involve relevancy or vocational considerations. He also points out that there should not be exceptions or alternatives toward the foreign language requirement. Although alternatives exist to decrease the “pressures” or “nuisance values” for students, Parker (1957) argues that there should not be alternatives to a foreign language requirement, because no curricula can satisfy both the equal educational value and the experiences that students will gain through a foreign language requirement. Parker (1957) concludes with the importance of learning a foreign language as the world globalizes:

We began this essay with a question about the foreign language requirement for the B.A. degree, and found a requirement warranted only when a faculty considers some knowledge of a second language an essential part of liberal education in the second half of the twentieth century (Parker, 203).

Despite writing several decades later, Kaplan (2003) has a similar argument as those of Dickman (1947) and Parker (1957). After World War II, foreign students increased in the

United States, which caused the government to create English-as-a-second-language (ESL) classes to help foreign students' English proficiency. Yet Kaplan (2003) points out how the government supported the ESL program, but not the study abroad program to globalize the United States. He also quotes articles from CNN, stating that the United States has a lack of foreign language professionals and American students are apathetic toward foreign language. He also addresses the hegemony of English and how languages should be more diverse. Kaplan (2003) argues that a foreign language requirement will offer a change to students' motivation toward foreign languages.

Unlike Dickman (1947), Parker (1957), and Kaplan (2003), Gardner and Lambert (1972) focused their research on the correlation between students' motivation and second-language proficiency. The study occurred in Louisiana, and 145 English-speaking high school students participated. Those students were in their first, second, and third year of French instruction. According to Gardner and Lambert's study (1972), motivation is the crucial factor for language proficiency. The motivation came from "a favorable view of the French teacher and the students' sensitivity for the feelings of others" (Gardner and Lambert, 44). As the study demonstrates, students' motivations by providing positive views on the second language help students' beneficial learning of a second language. For this reason, institutions should provide acceptable reasons for a second-language requirement and enhance students' motivations, which will lead to constructive learning.

As these studies show, since World War II, the issue of whether a foreign language should be a requirement in high education curriculum has been a controversial topic. In the fall semester of 2008, Trinity College took a stand on this issue by adding a new foreign language requirement. Different from most of the previous studies, my project will focus on the views of students on Trinity's second-language requirement.

Thesis

Among students, the importance of knowledge of a second language is not debated; however, as the faculty's close vote indicates, there is a never-ending debate on whether a second language should be a requirement or not.

Method

Participants

To observe the faculty's views on the second-language requirement, I interviewed Dean Alford, the dean of students at Trinity College, and Dean Spencer, who was the head of the curriculum committee during the debate of the second-language requirement. Although Dean Alford was not at the heart of the debating process on the second-language requirement, I thought that it would be appealing to hear from the dean of students, who has a close relationship with students. Moreover, since the changes in degree requirements begin with the curriculum committee, I thought it would be a suitable choice to interview Dean Spencer, who was at the center of the discussion.

To observe Trinity students' reactions toward the new policy, I created a survey and distributed it to the first year students. I contacted the first year seminar professors to get approval to use 10 minutes of their class time. Thankfully, 7 first year seminar professors allowed me to hand-out my surveys at the beginning of their classes. Some other professors asked their teaching assistant to hand out the surveys for me and dropped them off at my campus mailbox in a sealed envelope. Through the process of collecting the survey results, a total of 99 first year students, 52 male students and 47 female students of Trinity College participated in my research.

Materials

I looked over articles that are related to the second-language requirement debate among 2007 issues of Tripod. Because Tripod is a student based newspaper, I was able to

collect students' perspectives and the faculty's views through the interviews that were held by Trinity students in 2007, when discussion on second-language requirement first arose.

For the interviews, I created my own list of questions to find out the process of how Trinity chose the second-language requirement. The questions slightly varied depending on who I was interviewing. Since Dean Alford was not involved in the process of adding the new requirement, I asked his personal views on the new requirement as the dean of students, such as: "Why do you think Trinity College added a second-language requirement this semester?," "Do you think adding a new language requirement will affect the enrollment rate at Trinity College?," "What do you think students' reactions toward the second-language requirement?," etc. Yet, because Dean Spencer was deeply involved in adding the new requirement, I asked more general questions to get the overview of the debate and the voting process, such as: "Who supported or opposed adding the language requirement?," "What were the main supporting and opposing argument during the debate?," "What were the results of the vote?," etc.

On the survey for students, I asked 9 multiple choice questions and 2 open-ended questions. I asked what their previous language course experience at their high schools was and their opinion on the language requirement at Trinity. My survey questions will be attached at the end of this paper.

Procedure

For the interviews, I thought that visiting the deans' offices—their comfort zone—would be appropriate to get frank answers. Therefore, the interviews took place in the deans' offices. Before the interviews, I notified Dean Alford and Dean Spencer that I would be using their names on my paper to increase the reliabilities and will be recording our conversations. After the interviews, I informed them that my research paper will be posted on the Educational Studies section of the Trinity website under senior research projects.

Both interviews were thoroughly transcribed.

When I handed out the survey, I gave notice to students that they do not have to participate in my study and they may stop participating if they do not feel comfortable answering the questions. I also told students who participated in my study that their confidentiality will be protected and that I will be the only one who will have access to the results. After I collected the survey, I announced to students that my study will be found on the Educational Studies section of the Trinity website under senior research projects in late December or early January.

Since I had 9 multiple choice questions, I used SPSS, which is a psychological data analyzing program, to find correlations between questions. While I was analyzing the data, I found general themes that appeared in the open-end questions. Therefore, I coded with general themes: views of importance of multilingualism, globalization, views of language requirement, personal choices, etc.

Results

Trinity College had a language requirement in 1969. However, Trinity opened up the curriculum by eliminating the second-language requirement along with the educational norms in late 1960s and early 1970s. The idea of bringing back the second-language requirement at Trinity was revisited in spring 2007. On March 27th 2007, the Tripod issued an article that included the perspectives of Associate Professor of Classics Martha Risser and Associate Professor of Modern Languages and Literature Johannes Evelein. They both addressed the importance of learning a second language. Risser says that “I think everyone should have the experience of studying at least one other language because it is through language that you really fully understand how differently people can think and approach the world from the way you grow up” (Dubowitz, 2007). Evelein stresses that the language requirement will broaden the views of Trinity students and will promote students to study

abroad; in that way, it will improve the Trinity students' relationship with the world. During the interview with Dean Alford, he also had similar opinions illustrating the benefits of the second-language requirement. He added that learning a language can help developing general learning skills: "Language also has great facility in terms of developing other mental capacities, memory, the ability to apply new knowledge and concepts. So I think there is aspect of developing one's mental" (Dubowitz, 2007). During the interview with Dean Alford, the difficulty of translating one language to another was mentioned, because of the nuances of the words. Not only Dean Alford, but also Professor Risser points out the difficulties of translating one language to another because there are some expressions that are not used or cannot be described with some other language. According to Dean Spencer, this was one of the supporting views that the second language should be a requirement. Another reason that the faculty supported the second-language requirement was to prepare students for globalization. Some professors said that they do not want English to be the dominant language and that they should teach students to accept different languages. Others said that the second-language requirement would bring back the purpose of "good" liberal arts education, which is stated in the Trinity mission statement: "our paramount purpose is to foster critical thinking, free the mind of parochialism and prejudice, and prepare student to lead examined lives that are personally satisfying, civically responsible, and socially useful" (Bulletin 2008-2009, p. 10). A few professors said that the requirement would increase the enrollment rate and help the financial issue with the college.

I was also able to hear some opposing opinions brought up during the faculty debate from Dean Spencer. Dean Spencer said that the modern language department opposed the idea of making a second language a requirement in 1980s. The modern language professors did not want students to take a second language unless they wished to. As Gardner and Lambert's study presented (1972), some professors were concerned about destroying

students' motivation by forcing students to learn a second language. Although times have changed, the same argument of giving students more liberty of choosing what students they want to learn was one of the reasons that some faculty did not support the idea. Moreover, the math and science department was not a big fan of adding a second-language requirement. They said that since students who want to major in math and science already have great amount of work load that is focused on their major, a language requirement will be overwhelming for students. The math and science department thought that a second-language requirement would drive away the "good science students." Furthermore, they felt that they may lose their expert science students that were opposed to a second-language requirement. Some other professors are against requirements in general. They believe that students should be in charge of their education. Dean Spencer briefly mentioned the budget issues of adding courses, recruiting new professors, and increase of the enrollment rate were brought up during the discussion of adding a second-language requirement.

Dean Spencer said that the final decision was made by a faculty vote and the vote results were extremely close. Students' votes were as close as the faculty votes of supporting and opposing the second-language requirement. 46% (46 students) of students said that a second language should be a requirement, while 54% (52 students) of students voted that it should be an elective course.

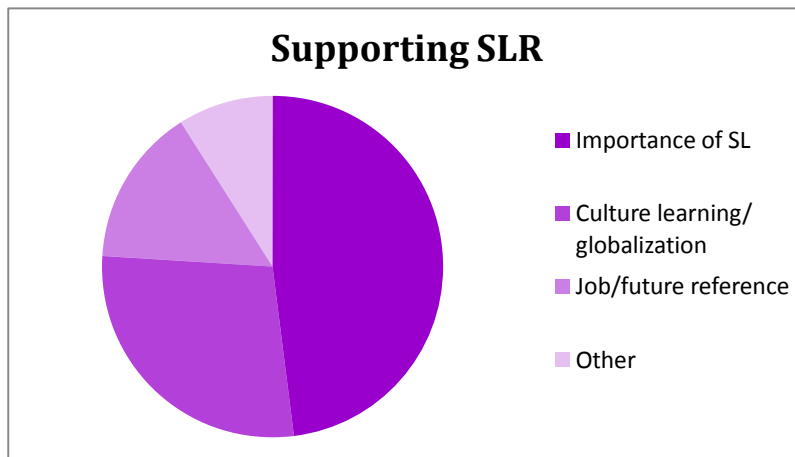


Figure 1. Supporting Second-Language Requirement: Students' reasons

Among 46 students who said that second language should be a requirement, 48% (22 students) said that learning more than one language is important. 28% (13 students) said that a second language is best way to learn and understand other cultures and prepare them for a globalized world. 15% (7 students) said that second languages will be useful in the future when they look for a job or traveling (*Figure 1*).

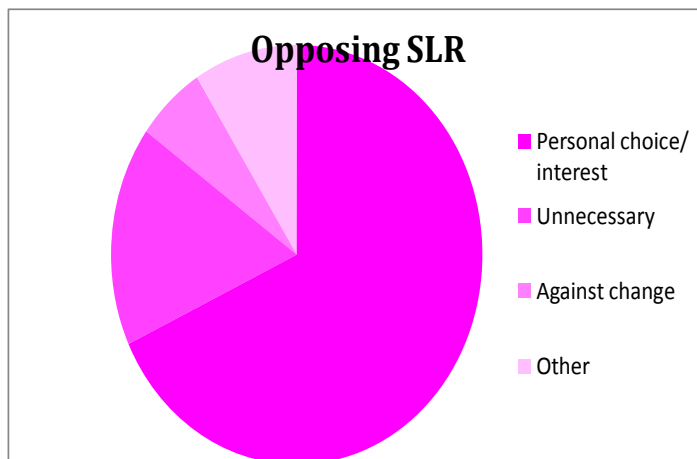


Figure 2. Opposing Second-Language Requirement: Students' reasons

Among 53 students who said the second language should be an elective, 68% (36 students) were against the idea of the requirement. They argued that it should be a personal choice

based on personal interests. 17% (9 students) argued that the second language is unnecessary. They said it is not relevant to their major and they want to take courses that are more related to their major instead. 6% (3 students) were against the sudden change of the new policy (*Figure 2*).

Although there were no significant numbers of students who addressed the following argument, there were unique contrasting views among outliers. 3% (3 students) answered that they are not familiar with the second-language requirement at Trinity and expressed their bitterness. Moreover, 2% (2 students) supported the second-language requirement because they wanted to break the stereotype of “ignorant Americans.” On the other hand, 3% (3 students) took the opposite side by saying that it is unnecessary to learn a second language because most of the people around the world know how to speak English.

I compared the answers of question 5, which ask whether they place-out of Trinity’s second-language requirement, with answers of question 10, which ask whether second language should be a requirement or an elective. 24% (24 students) placed-out of Trinity’s second-language requirement. Among those students, 50% (12 students) said that second language should be an elective. In addition, 54% (13 students) were taking a second language course this semester, even though they already fulfilled the language requirement. 76% (75 students) answered that they did not place-out of the second-language requirement, 45% (34 students) of students said that second language should be a requirement.

While comparing students’ opinions on the second-language requirement, I found no significant difference between the responses of male and female students on the issue of whether the second language should be a requirement or an elective, $t(96) = -0.049$, $p = 0.961$. According to the analysis of the survey data, the mean of male ($M = 1.54$, $SD = 0.503$) and female ($M = 1.54$, $SD = 0.504$) students were the same. I also examined whether their high school education affected students’ perspectives on the issue. There was no

significant difference between the responses of students who attended private high schools ($M = 1.61, SD = 0.49$) and students who attended public high schools ($M = 1.45, SD = 0.50$), $t(94) = 1.55, p = 0.124$.

The mean score on the importance level of students' consideration toward second language was 3.97 ($SD = 1.18$) out of maximum score of 5. In addition, there was a significant difference between students' responses for importance level of second language to themselves and the second-language requirement, $t(96) = 5.21, p < 0.001$. The mean score of 45 students, who supported the second-language requirement, was 4.57 ($SD = 0.56$), while the mean score of 53 students, who were against the second-language requirement, was 3.45 ($SD = 1.34$). Furthermore, comparing the responses of students, who were not planning to study abroad ($M = 3.07, SD = 1.69$) from those who were ($M = 4.13, SD = 1.02$), their consideration toward second language was significantly lower, $t(95) = 3.21, p = 0.002$.

Conclusion

Among the first year students at Trinity, the importance of knowledge of a second language is undeniable; yet, there is a never ending debate on whether the second language should be a requirement or not. Supporting arguments of the second-language requirement were globalization of the world, disagreement on popularity of English, vocational reasons, and the purpose of liberal education. On the other hand, opposition on requirements, educational budget, possibility of losing "good" science students, and decrease of students' motivation toward a second language were the opposing arguments of the second-language requirement.

The debate on the second-language requirement started after World War II and it is an on going debate. There are arguments that stress the importance of foreign language in this globalized world; but, there is not enough research that are base on this issue. According to previous studies, foreign language requirements tend to follow the educational

trend of the particular time period. Therefore, it was difficult for me to answer why the second language should be a requirement in higher education. However, it was possible to observe different perspectives on the matter and carefully conclude that foreign language is considered moderately important in these days.

Before the research, I hypothesized that significant number of students would be against the language requirement. Surprisingly, during my research, I realized that there were debates sparking among students as well. The only difference that I noticed between faculty and student perspectives was the effect of the second-language requirement toward the enrollment rate. Some faculties thought that the second-language requirement will increase the enrollment rate, while students said that it will decrease the enrollment rate. Since outliers of participants touched on the issue of enrollment rate, I did not include one's result in that section of my study. Although I did not look into the change of enrollment rate in my study, it would be interesting to see whether the enrollment rate has changed since the second-language requirement was added. In addition, for a future study, it would be interesting to distribute another survey to students who participated at the end of their college education. It would be interesting to see whether their thoughts on the second-language requirement changed and, if so, how.

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Attachment

Second-Language Requirement at Trinity College - Survey

Please check appropriate circles.

1. Are you a male or a female?
 - Male
 - Female
2. Did you attend a private high school or a public high school?
 - Private high school
 - Public high school
3. Did you take a second-language course during your high school years?
 - Yes
 - No
4. Did your high school have a second-language requirement?
 - Yes
 - No
5. Did you place-out of Trinity's second-language requirement by taking the placement test?
 - Yes
 - No
6. Are you planning to study abroad?
 - Yes
 - No
7. Are you taking a second-language course this semester?
 - Yes
 - No
8. If you are taking a second-language course, what language are you learning?

9. How important is it to you to learn a second-language?
 - Very important
 - Important
 - No opinion
 - Not so important
 - Not at all important
10. Do you think a second-language should be a requirement or an elective course at Trinity? (please explain your answer)
 - Requirement _____
 - Elective _____
11. Please write few sentences on how you feel about the second-language requirement of Trinity College (use back of sheet if necessary).

Code Sheet

- Q1. 1 = Male 2 = Female
- Q2. 1 = Private high school 2 = Public high school
- Q3. 1 = Yes 2 = No
- Q4. 1 = Yes 2 = No
- Q5. 1 = Yes 2 = No
- Q6. 1 = Yes 2 = No
- Q7. 1 = Yes 2 = No
- Q9. 1 = Not at all important 2 = Not so important 3 = No opinion
4 = Important 5 = Very Important
- Q10. 1 = Requirement 2 = Elective