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FLARR Pages #41: Foreign Language in the Rural High Schools

Mara M. Gust

Greenbush/Middle River High School

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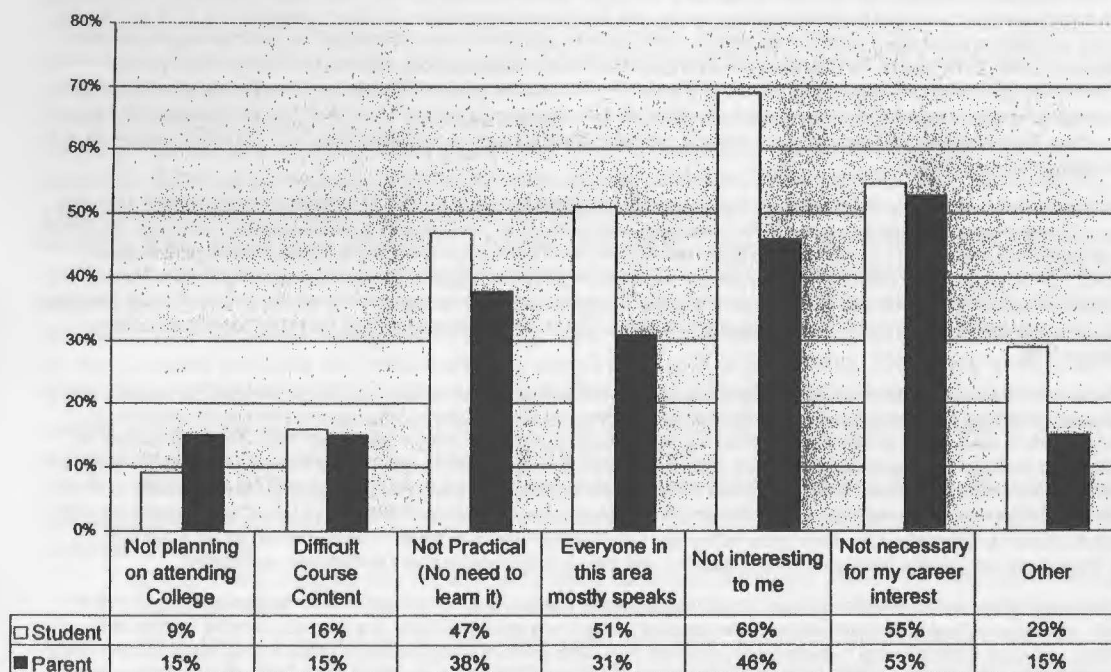
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FLARR PAGES #41

The Journal of the Foreign Language Association of the Red River

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Language in the
Rural High
Schools, M. Gust

Top 3 Reasons to NOT take Foreign Language (Figure 4)



Teachers and administrators in the district, as well as in neighboring districts, were asked about their perceptions of foreign language study and its importance in the high school curriculum. Most teachers agreed that in a perfect world (or should one say, a "perfect America"), all, or nearly all students would study foreign language at some time. However, some teachers indicated reasons that foreign language should not be required, such as it may limit the other electives the student can take, or that realistically the college bound are the only students who "need it." Many teachers noted that although all students should have the opportunity to study foreign language, some truly cannot because of learning disabilities. Being placed in a foreign language course for the first time at high school age is not appropriate for some students. Some feared that foreign language education may become "watered-down" if all students were required to take it (instead of primarily the college-bound students).

Teachers and administrators were also asked, based on their own knowledge, what the benefits to foreign language study are to the learner. Most stated reasons such as expanding one's cultural knowledge/global appreciation and improving English skills. Very few or none at all mentioned some of the other well-documented benefits of foreign language education such as improved reading, writing and mathematic abilities, critical-thinking skills, higher standardized test scores, job marketability, travel opportunities, general communication skills, learning to think about issues in a different way (thinking "outside the box"), self-awareness, and a sense of empowerment when one knows another language.

Action Plan

The objective of the study was ultimately to determine how to best promote foreign language education to students and parents. Based on the research and data collected, several areas of interest are discernible.

Unfortunately, some solutions are beyond one's control. It is true that in a small school district where most courses are offered only once or twice in a school year, scheduling all of a student's desired classes is impossible. Another disappointing find was in the teacher survey, where several administrators commented that at the present time, since foreign language is not a priority for the No

Child Left Behind initiative, administrators have no choice but to assign it a status of low-priority. Foreign language does not factor into the school's annual "report card" and since this is what the public and government observes about the district, the topics included in the report card are the areas in the district to which resources are directed. More funding and the government making foreign language a priority are vital components to changing foreign language perceptions.

A suggestion by a few teachers was to try to integrate foreign language into another class such as geography or history, or to offer a foreign culture-based class to stimulate interest. Excellent ideas, but difficult in a small school district in which scheduling is already a problem.

There are some hopes for change, however. When only one foreign language is offered, some students may truly not be interested in that particular course of study, but may show interest in another language if given the opportunity. Although interactive TV courses, on-line learning and other methods of distance learning are not a true replacement for classroom instruction, they provide avenues of study for students interested in other languages. Any means of exposure is better than none at all. Another course of action would be to remind students hesitant about studying the only foreign language offered that any study in high school will help them in college, even if another language is studied at that time. Research shows that once a second language is studied, further language acquisition is facilitated because the learner has already experienced foreign language learning.

Showing the practical benefits of foreign language is key to the success of any foreign language program. One approach would be to bring in guest speakers from the area who use foreign languages in their work (Marcos & Peyton, 2000, p. 2) to promote practical interest. Other ideas include "job-shadowing" experiences, tours of business, and foreign language career fairs. As in the Connors (1994) study, hidden opportunities may exist for foreign language use in the local job market. Of the students surveyed, 55% not studying a foreign language included in their top three reasons why that it was not necessary for their career interest. 47% said it was not practical, and parents responded similarly. Apparently, many students and parents are not aware of the need for employees with foreign language skills. Even though the district in question is in rural Northwest Minnesota, the ethnic make-up of the area is evolving, mirroring the rest of the country. Regardless of whether or not a student plans to migrate to a more metropolitan area, the need for foreign language speakers is ever-increasing. As stated earlier, one parent mentioned that his or her child's choice of a career in nursing was a reason that foreign language study was *not* needed. Educating parents and students about the need for employees with foreign language skills is crucial.

Educating those not choosing to study foreign language is not the only pertinent strategy. 93% of students studying foreign language stated "it was a requirement for college" as one of their top three reasons to do so, with parents providing similar responses. The belief that it is an impractical requirement is regrettable. These students, too, need to be informed about the other benefits such as those stated above. The district's career counselor offered the parent/student high school registration night as a possible avenue for educating parents and students about foreign language education. As stated earlier, very few students surveyed chose foreign language because it was an interesting topic or for challenging course content. The intrinsic values of foreign language education are being overlooked, as well.

It appears that teachers and administrators need to be informed just as much as parents and students about the benefits and necessity of foreign language learning. Some stated in their questionnaires that they had studied foreign language in school and hadn't used it since. Although there are benefits to their study beyond the use of the language, they need to understand why this situation may be different for their students. One tactic might be to ask them if they used a computer when they were in school. Most would say no, as computers were not used in any school before 1977, and not used routinely until the mid-1980's (Roblyer & Edwards, 2000, p. 9-10). Do they see a need for the use of computers now either in the workplace or in other areas of their lives? Using faculty meetings and workshops to educate teachers about the importance of foreign language learning in a rapidly-changing world would hopefully persuade them to promote foreign languages to their students, and even link foreign language to their own curriculum.

Many of the teachers and administrators surveyed stated that beginning foreign language education at an earlier age, as opposed to ninth grade, would be preferable. It would decrease the shock of a brand new course of study at a later age, increase interest and participation, and allow the students to become more proficient with more years of study throughout their school years. Marsh (1995) affirms that middle school exploratory foreign language classes create favorable attitudes toward continued foreign language study in high school. If beginning foreign language education at an earlier age is not feasible, methods to stimulate interest in earlier grades include language fairs put on by high school students, mini-units with elementary students, ethnic food fairs, foreign language club activities, and the possibility of future foreign travel.

Aside from all these strategies, old-fashioned public relations campaigns could help the image of foreign language instruction. Publishing classroom newsletters, websites or bulletins showcasing the daily events in the classroom would create interest. One could use the school or local newspaper to promote foreign languages and their benefits from the fun to the functional to all citizens. Inviting parents and community members to observe what is happening in the classroom benefits any program.

In conclusion, it is perceived that the majority of students, parents and teachers in the rural district in question do not necessarily hold negative attitudes toward foreign language education and nearly two-thirds of students do study foreign language. In spite of this, much can be done to increase the awareness of the benefits, both obvious and somewhat covert, that foreign language study provides. Although all students should not be required to study foreign language, especially at high school age, the gains for most students are evident and immeasurable.

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