

Beyond Requirements

WHY DO STUDENTS
CONTINUE WITH
LANGUAGE STUDY?

BY DAVID JAHNER

A Survey of Upper-Level Language Learners Reveals Motivating Factors

What motivates students to go beyond the perceived “two-year requirement” of language study for college entrance that is pervasive around the United States? How well do students think they are progressing in developing skills to communicate in their chosen language of study? Is it possible for school systems to build viable upper-level programs in a time of increasingly tight budgets and an ever-increasing emphasis on testing?

To answer these questions, the Gwinnett County Public Schools (GCPS) in Georgia surveyed the majority of all students enrolled in upper-level courses during the spring of 2012. For purposes of the survey, upper-level students were defined as anyone taking a Level 3 course or higher.

Gwinnett County is the largest public school system in Georgia, with slightly over 163,000 K–12 students enrolled. Of those students, approximately 54,000 are enrolled in language courses. The majority of students take language classes in high school, although middle school enrollment has increased steadily over the past several years and elementary programs are offered at several schools. The district has 19 high schools. One reason the Foreign Language Office undertook the task of developing and surveying students is because upper-level course enrollment has increased 24.5% in the past five years, from 5,450 in 2007–2008 to over 6,783 in the 2011–2012 school year. During this same time, the overall high school enrollment increased from 25,763 to 28,363, an increase of 10.1%.

This dramatic increase in upper-level language learners becomes even more interesting when looking at the trends for each of the five languages offered in GCPS high schools (shown below). French upper-level course enrollment has nearly doubled in the past five years, with healthy increases across the other languages:

Level 3+ Enrollment Across GCPS			
Language	2007–2008	2011–2012	% Increase
Chinese	0	80	N/A
French	755	1,439	90.6%
German	369	443	20.1%
Latin	482	604	25.3%
Spanish	3,844	4,217	9.7%
TOTAL	5,450	6,783	24.5%

To learn more about what motivates students to take an upper-level language course, and to see how well students feel they are progressing in the language, the high school department chairs and district coordinator developed an electronic survey. Approximately 4,500 students completed the instrument. More than 50% of the respondents (2,274) were in 11th grade, with 27.6% (1,242) in 12th grade. Because GCPS is also one of the most diverse school districts in the nation, 44.7% of the respondents indicated that they speak a language other than English with their family, with Spanish being the most predominant.

“Before learning Spanish, I was already bilingual. I thought it would be nice if I knew a third language so that I could tell people that I know how to speak three languages,” remarked one student from Norcross High School.

More than 1,700 of the students completing the survey began their language study in middle school, with 78% of them indicating that they either “Strongly Agreed” or “Agreed” that they are glad they started learning a language in middle school. As a motivated language student from South Gwinnett High School noted, “Taking an upper-level class is rewarding in all ways possible. It opens your eyes and ears to the language like never before. It takes you to a place that you would have never thought about before. The class is rewarding. Take it!”

Examining Motivation

In order to help gauge what motivates students to enroll in an upper-level language course, students read various factors and ranked each on a Likert scale from “very important” to “not important.” The five factors with the highest percentage ranked by the students as “very important” were:

Factor	% “Very Important”
I want to make my college application competitive.	57.5% (2,535)
I want to be prepared for my future career.	52.8% (2,329)
I want to become better at using the language.	45.4% (2,012)
I like the language.	40.0% (1,769)
I like the teacher.	35.0% (1,541)

The two factors which received the most “not important” responses were “I want to take the AP or IB course in the language I’m learning” (39%) and “My parents/guardians want me to take the class” (21.8%). Students ranked “I am interested in the culture” and “I liked my other language courses” as important, but not as important as the other above mentioned factors. Based on the survey results, most students clearly understand the importance of taking language courses for their futures and also want to continue to improve their ability to communicate in their chosen language of study.

As one student at Duluth High School said, “Not only is a foreign language challenging, it’s fun. Taking a foreign language course makes your college application look ten times better.” At Peachtree Ridge High School, another student remarked, “Learning a second language is actually practical—unlike many other classes. The content learned in this class can be used for the rest of your life and improves your resume as a job candidate in the future. It also opens up more job opportunities.”

These results clearly reveal how important it is for everyone in the language education profession to continue to emphasize the usefulness of language study for students’ futures and to ensure that counselors, administrators, and others have current information and research about the importance of language learning.

Later in the survey, a large number of students corroborated these findings by indicating that they intended to continue studying the chosen language in college. Only 16.5% said that they did not plan to take a language in college. In fact, many students responded by stating that they planned to take multiple languages as part of their postsecondary studies. While students mentioned many languages for college studies, the two mentioned most often were Italian (89) and Japanese (74). Clearly, students see the versatility in learning languages and believe they will be able to apply their current experience to future language classes.

Measuring Progress and Proficiency

Another goal of the survey is to determine how well students perceive they are doing in their language classes. Their responses will help inform overall program design and suggest areas for improvement. Students read a variety of statements about how they are using the language they are learning and ranked them on a scale from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree.” In this section of the survey, each statement is tied to one of the National Standards with the exception of the final statement, which asks students to give an overall reaction about how well they think they can communicate in the language they are learning. The results of the survey indicated that the most often selected response was “agree.” What follows is a percentage of students who selected “strongly agree” or “agree”:

Statements	% Strongly Agree/Agree
I can have a conversation with a friend.	77.4%
I can understand increasingly more complex written texts.	80.9%
I can understand increasingly more complex listening prompts.	71.3%
I can give short (3–5 minute) presentations.	72%
I can write increasingly more complex essays.	68.6%
I can use things I’ve learned in my language class in other subjects at school.	64.7%
I can compare the language I am learning to English.	83.8%
I am satisfied with how well I can communicate in the language I am learning.	66.9%



What is most interesting about these results is that even though two-thirds of the students felt satisfied with the progress they were making in learning the language, it was the second lowest percentage of all the statements posed in this section of the survey. Nearly 21% of the students disagreed with the final statement.

It is therefore extremely important for teachers to work with students to better understand what proficiency level they have achieved and to chart their progress. Some students gave open-ended responses that indicated the survey helped them to think more about what they can do in the language and how well. For example, one student from Mountain View High School wrote, “I think the survey is a good way to show what people are getting out of upper-level Spanish and how they are reacting to the teaching styles. I think this might encourage others to do upper-level courses.”

Students also responded to a series of statements about the cultures of the language they are studying. Examples of products, practices, and perspectives were included in the student survey to help ensure they understood the terms. Across the board, students tended to agree or strongly agree with each statement.

Statements	% Strongly Agree/Agree
I enjoy learning about the cultures.	81.2%
I can make comparisons between the cultures of the people of the language I am learning with my own culture.	78.1%
I have learned information about products from the cultures.	89.1%
I have learned about the behaviors and social practices of people from the cultures.	88.6%
I have learned about the perspectives of people from the cultures.	82.0%
I am satisfied with the amount I have learned about the cultures of the language I am learning.	79.7%

In addition, students selected from a list of ways they have used the language they are learning outside the classroom. The most often selected response (62.7%) was “with my classmates,” the second most selected was “with my teacher” (51.1%), followed by “with my family” (40.3%) and “reading/viewing sites on the Internet” (40%). The fact that students are using the language with their families indicates a large number of heritage speakers in upper-level courses, which is not surprising given the tremendous diversity in GCPS. The comparatively low percentages of students who recall accessing a website in the various target languages indicate a need to more explicitly teach the Communities standard.

Supporting Quality Instruction

The language teachers in Gwinnett County have made a concerted effort in the past few years to work on the amount of target language used during instruction. ACTFL’s position statement indicating 90%+ of classroom instruction should be in the target language has become a district-wide goal for teachers. As part of the survey, students indicated how much their current teacher uses the target language in class. When looking at the overall results, over half (50.2%) indicated their teacher used the language “all or almost all the time,” while 29% said their teacher uses the target language “about three-fourths of the time” for a total of just under 80%. When disaggregated by language, the results are even more interesting and show that the Spanish and French teachers have higher percentages than the others.

The data is also interesting when viewed by course level. The more advanced the course, the more time the teacher spends using the target language. The overwhelming number of students (79.2%) in Advanced Placement (AP) courses indicated that their teachers used the target language all or almost all the time, while only 43.9% of the third-year students said their teacher used the target language exclusively.

Language	All or almost all the time	About ¾ of the time	Total
Chinese	37.5%	27.5%	65%
French	52.4%	30.8%	83.2%
German	41.7%	32.8%	74.5%
Latin	18.4%	22.7%	41.1%
Spanish	53.8%	28.6%	82.4%

While these results are encouraging, they also show room for improvement. The survey provides excellent baseline data for the program as it moves forward. Again, the students' comments reinforce the importance of using the target language in class. As a Spanish student at Mountain View High School urged, "Speak in Spanish constantly. It helps me more when my teacher is actively USING the language than when he or she is just letting us get on the computer and read in another language."

Technology integration in language classes and its benefits were also surveyed. The district made a large investment five years ago to install language lab technology in classrooms, and 59% of the students indicated that the language labs were useful. However, comments from students ranged from "I love the language lab" to "Please don't use the language lab." Nearly 63% of students responded that they felt Internet websites that focus on skills practice (e.g., Quia, Word Champ, etc.) were useful, while only 54% found authentic target language websites helpful.

These responses indicate that there is room for improvement in integrating technology resources in a meaningful way across the district since a significant number of students indicated that social networking sites (e.g., Edmodo), podcasts, blogs, wikis, smartphones and interactive whiteboards were rarely used in their language classes. In order to provide effective and individualized language instruction, students need to encounter the language on a daily basis, which is certainly possible based on today's applications and interconnectivity.

Students also had many suggestions on how to improve their language learning experience. One common thread that emerged in many of the open-ended responses was to make classroom instruction more engaging and to rely less on textbooks and workbook activities. While hundreds of students addressed engagement in many ways, some got right to the point.

"Make it fun. Don't be too serious," said a student from Collins Hill High School. A Parkview High School student implored teachers to "Go beyond the book. Use technology that the students use like podcasts and websites in the language. That way they'll see how much is out there for them when they learn the language." Finally, a student at North Gwinnett High School wrote, "Make the language more lively, and interact with the students more. Students will appeal to what the teacher expects of them if they are more involved in activities within the class."

The survey provides teachers across the district valuable information about our current status and suggests areas for improvement. While the program can certainly be proud of the dramatic increases in enrollment, GCPS must continue to hone instruction and offer a great product to students. It's important to remember that not only the best and brightest should take languages, but instead that languages are for everyone. As a student from South Gwinnett High School stated, "I've taken four years of Spanish and I don't regret any one of them. My grades haven't always been the best, but the learning experience is one I will never forget."

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Tips For Surveying Students

Interested in administering your own program survey? Here are some points to keep in mind:

- Contact your district's research office. Staff can provide valuable information and assistance, and can review survey questions. In bigger districts, research offices may need to be involved in large-scale surveys.
- Be sure to give plenty of time for students and teachers to complete the survey. Local school schedules need to be taken into consideration.
- Practice giving the survey to a small group of students before giving it to a larger audience. The students will provide valuable feedback to make sure you are getting the kind of information you are seeking.
- Realize that no matter how much time you have put into giving a survey that you think is meaningful, some students will not respond appropriately.
- Share your results! Colleagues in your district and beyond, as well as administrators, school board members, and other decision-makers should be made aware of your findings—particularly if there are any current budget discussions concerning language program funding. Be sure to provide summaries and conclusions beyond the raw data.

