

Foreign Languages and Literatures Department Assessment Reports for 2012-13

The Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures decided to focus in Spring 2013 on assessing the transition from high-intermediate language courses to the first content-based (CBI) course in literature and/or culture. Every section of the Department, except Spanish, conducted direct assessment of student writing. Below you will find the reports submitted by each section.

Chinese Section Assessment

The Chinese Section faculty Susan Chen and Mao Chen discussed assessment of 8 students' speaking and writing skills in FC 340 in the fall semester of 2013. We analyzed students' writing samples and conversation levels and categorized them into strong, average, and weak groups. The most representative of the average student work indicates that our students have a fairly strong basis in written skills.

Most of our students' speaking skills are at the level of Intermediate-Mid to Intermediate - High levels of ACTFL Chinese Proficiency Guidelines (1987, p. 473-474). The students' writing skills in FC 340 are on par with the ACTFL Guidelines for Chinese Writings Intermediate Mid, and only one or two students are at the level of Intermediate-High. Based on ACTFL Chinese Proficiency Guidelines (1987, p. 485) on Intermediate Mid and Intermediate High, students "writing style is still reflective of the grammar and lexicon of speech, but quantity is increased and quality is improved. Has control of simple non-perfective aspect (habitual action) in conjunction with time words and phrases: 我每天坐公共汽□去上班; 下午两点到我家来。" In our writing assignment, students were required to write a composition on a topic related to their daily life at school in 100-150 words. Most students wrote with the topic of personal nature. Their vocabulary level most of time matched the description of ACTFL Guidelines, which characterize as "able to meet a number of practical writing needs, can write short, simple letters. Content involves personal preferences, daily routine, everyday events, and other topics grounded in personal experience. Can express present time or at least one other time frame or aspect consistently." Although the themes chosen for the assignments remain simple, and were related to everyday events, much of the students' written work "tends to be a loose collection of sentences or sentence fragments on a given topic and provides little evidence of conscious organization."

Only two students were able to demonstrate Intermediate-High level of writing skills by increased quantity and improved quality. These students' essays rely "primarily on content words and time expressions to express time, tense, or aspect, some precision is displayed; where tense and/or aspect is expressed through verbal inflection, forms are produced rather consistently, but not always accurately. An ability to describe and narrate in paragraphs is emerging." Although the "grammatical features of writing style are still essentially reflective of speech," these students' uses of aspectual marker (了) "demonstrates a basic control of syntactic patterns, all typical of speech, beyond simply elaborated skeletal sentences such as pre-posed object for topic prominence (工作, 他□

没做完。) The students inconsistently constructed sentences with patterns such as “把 – structure” with errors and, as described in the ACTFL Guidelines, these errors are good indicators that they are reaching at Intermediate –High level of Chinese writing skills.

We will continue to assist our students to narrow the gap between their oral skills and writing skills. We will try to do our best to secure their Intermediate High-level skills, focusing more on the use of perfective aspect markers and aspectual markers in contrast to tenses in Chinese, and enhancing more study on relative clause modification, developing more syntactic and rhetorical control to avoid students’ first language interference to Chinese language study.

Respectively submitted,

Susan Chen and Mao Chen
Chinese Section
Submitted on May 15, 2013

French Section Assessment

Course assessed: FF 210 Introduction to French Literature
Faculty present: Cindy Evans, Katherine Brown, Adrienne Zuerner (scribe)
Date of assessment meeting: February 1, 2013

Professor Brown provided six essays from her section of FF 210 taught fall term 2012. These represented two low range, two mid range, and two high range essays. We evaluated these using the criteria outlined in two assessment documents: “Program Goals for the French major,” which specifies learning outcomes for 210, and the “FLL Assessment Initiative: Objectives for Language and Culture,” which delineates learning goals for four language skills: speaking, listening, reading, and writing. We focused on the latter two, as these are the primary skills we seek to develop in 210.

At the low range, essays demonstrated weakness in three areas: essay structure, command of grammar, and conceptual framework. The low range essays had little to no formal structure and logical flow; conclusions were absent. Students did not follow the form of the *explication de texte*. In terms of grammar, errors were abundant and interfered significantly with communication of meaning. These essays contained personal reaction and description in the form of plot summary rather than analysis. The students made unfounded generalizations rather than analyze, and the essays showed little sensitivity to context. Students did not refer to rhetorical figures, and integration of quotation was weak to non-existent. We noted, however, that students attempted some analysis of how characters functioned and attempted to introduce more difficult grammatical structures.

At the mid range, the essays contained more analytical content and included reference to literary concepts. Students incorporated more textual citation, but quotes were not consistently well integrated. Sentence structure was simpler than in the high range essays and vocabulary was noticeably less rich.

The essays in this mid range led us to ask about “cognitive overload.” That is, do the weaknesses in these essays result primarily from a conceptual or linguistic deficiency? We found it difficult to determine with precision whether or not linguistic interference undermines student ability to communicate complex thought. We wonder whether students do not possess the linguistic means to express their ideas, which results in a breakdown of writing, or whether they do not have the capacity for the level of analysis we ask of them. What role does intellectual maturity play in the quality of these mid-range essays? The deficiencies in the mid-range essays may tell us that our students need more grammar and writing preparation *before* enrolling in FF 210.

Students at the high level demonstrated the ability to perform a close reading, to rally evidence in support of an argument, and to use complex and varied sentence structures and a range of vocabulary. The essays included a clear introduction and conclusion. The analytical and conceptual content of the essays was markedly more advanced than that of the mid-range essays; personal reaction and generalizations were absent. We found little to no plot summary. These essays, although not without grammatical errors, were easily readable and would be considered so by a native speaker. Students did not incorporate analysis of rhetorical figures other than symbols.

Professor Brown noted as well a significant difference between those papers written by students who had studied abroad and those who were pre-study abroad. We acknowledge, then, the potentially significant role of study in France for some students, but not all. I introduce the qualification because I see evidence in my FF 214 course this term that some post-study abroad students still do not have proficiency in basic grammatical structures. Others clearly do. And the difference does not depend necessarily on time spent abroad (one semester vs. two). One student in my course who spent a semester abroad is noticeably stronger in all four skills than a student who was abroad for a full year.

Our assessment of these papers led to one general conclusion:¹ that students need more grammar and writing at the intermediate level (post 203). We concluded, as we have in the past, that we need a two-semester 208 sequence. We spoke hypothetically of a sequence that emphasizes, in the first semester, grammar and some writing, and in the second semester, that focuses almost exclusively on writing.

Given this, and thinking in terms of resources, we wonder whether the section would do better to focus on an improved 208 sequence rather than offer 206. We discussed the relative substance and value of these two courses in helping us achieve the learning goals for our majors and minors. We have anecdotal evidence that students want to do more upper-level grammar work. Our assessment of writing at the 210-level suggests that we might improve student writing proficiency by modifying our curriculum.

German Writing Direct Assessment – Vertical Articulation

¹ We can speak only of general conclusions given that individual ability and motivation play a role in student learning outcomes.

The German section focused this year on vertical articulation and how best to ensure that our students achieve the necessary language proficiencies to move from one level to the next. In particular, we addressed the transition from the last intermediate-high language course (FG 208) to the introduction to cultural studies (FG 216). This represents a critical point in the curriculum where students make the step from language to content-focused courses taught in the target language. Students are required to function in German in all skill areas (reading, writing, speaking, listening) in the context of studying contemporary German culture. This transition is challenging and we discussed ways to assure a well-coordinated articulation between the two levels. Mary-Beth O'Brien and Karin Hamm-Ehsani read and evaluated four different writing assignments from FG 216. Using the department's "Scoring Rubric for Written Essays" (see appendix), we determined that all students had successfully reached the stated learning goals.

Mary-Beth and Karin identified 4 written assignments and evaluated them based on the department's Scoring Rubric. All the papers consistently demonstrated a clear statement of ideas, good organization with smooth transitions, effective introductions and conclusions, and logical and cohesive sequencing both between and within paragraphs. All writing samples show strong evidence that students understand the cultural issues addressed in the course. As is typical at this stage where students are expected to focus on specific content, their grammar and syntactical skills are somewhat relegated to the background. The papers are characterized by some grammatical and syntactical errors as well as repetitive structures. Students support their ideas with evidence. Their writing shows a relatively strong mastery of narration and argumentation.

FG 216 requires a wide variety of writing assignments. Daily one-page homework writing assignments did not require revision but are graded. Longer essays required revision and students were graded on both versions. It should be noted that the quality of work was in direct correlation to the time on task. Homework assignments were not as grammatically accurate as graded essays. Faculty, however, were generally satisfied with the amount of writing required and the attention given to the subject matter at hand. Students demonstrated a typical phenomenon at this proficiency level. They amassed a great deal of information about significant cultural developments in Germany from WWII up to the present and were able to debate important issues. However, their strides in knowledge were not matched by the level of grammatical and syntactical accuracy and sophistication reached by the end of FG 208 the previous semester. When mistakes were pointed out to them, they recognized the rules and were able to correct them. They have not yet internalized the concept of self-correction. This is to be expected, and faculty will continue to challenge students and encourage them to polish their work as a routine. We discussed at length the current curriculum in FG 208 and FG 216 and are confident that FG 208 clearly provides a strong foundation for FG 216.

Respectfully submitted,
Mary-Beth O'Brien and Karin Hamm-Ehsani,
German Faculty
May 2, 2013
Italian Section Assessment

Course assessed: FI 310 Il Rinascimento Italiano
Faculty : Barbara Garbin, Shirley Smith, Giuseppe Faustini

Professor Garbin provided 8 essays from her FI 310 taught spring term 2013. The essays were based on literary readings assigned as homework and discussed in class. These represented 2 low range (fair to poor), 5 mid range, (good to average) and 1 high range essays (excellent to very good). We evaluated these using the criteria outlined in the Foreign Language Rubric for Written Essays in upper level courses (attached).

All essays showed relatively good organization, with clear statement of ideas, clear structure and smooth transitions. Introduction was generally concise and efficient; conclusion was mostly logical and effectively summarized the main ideas. However, students did not incorporate textual citations except for one occasion, and in that case citations were incongruous to the discourse and poorly integrated.

All essays showed an acceptable range of analysis and synthesis, though in the lower range synthesis often prevailed on the analysis, with a dominance of plot summary over analytical observation.

What determined the different final overall quality of the essays were two factors: the command of grammar and understanding and knowledge of the subject.

At the low range, inappropriate word choice and frequent word/idiom errors in addition to significant mistakes in the use of complex grammatical constructions often interfered with meaning and made comprehension difficult. The essays also revealed a limited understanding of key concepts, which can be attributable to lack of reading and listening comprehension. In other words, students did not properly grasp the material due to linguistic deficiency. Such misunderstanding consequently led to error in critical interpretation of the primary texts and limited thematic development and use of examples in their essays.

At the mid range, the essays showed a better understanding of the material and contained more analytical content. Yet, accuracy in the use of the language was scarce and grammar errors were still significant.

Our assessment indicates that linguistic deficiency undermines students' ability to understand and communicate complex thought. Therefore, we conclude and underscore the importance of emphasizing grammar accuracy in the lower level courses; furthermore, we encourage intensified reading comprehension activities to foster students' ability in approaching a text in the foreign language. We agreed that the 208 course should be strongly dedicated to develop reading and writing proficiency in order better to prepare students for literature courses.

Japanese Section Assessment

In the academic year 2012-13, the Japanese program assessed the overall learning outcomes (specifically, vocabulary/character, reading, and listening skills) of the students in FJ363 using the past Japanese Language Proficiency Tests (hereafter referred to as JLPT). FJ363 in the spring semester of 2013 was the highest-level language course in the program, and therefore this test served as an exit-exam for all enrolled students. Three seniors were enrolled in the course, all of whom began studying Japanese without any background in FJ101 Elementary Japanese in the fall semester of their first-year at Skidmore in 2009.

JLPT, developed and administered by joint organization of the Japan Foundation and Japan Educational Exchanges and Services, is the most recognized Japanese language standardized test in the world. It has five levels from N1 to N5 with N1 being the most difficult and N5 the easiest. Using the most recognized standardized test appropriate for the students' proficiency levels, we hoped to evaluate not only the students' learning outcomes in the program but also to assess where the program stands compared to the standard set by the two educational organizations in Japan.

The students in FJ363 have received 350 hours of classroom instruction in our program by the end of the spring semester of 2013. All have spent some time in Japan during the summer but none of them had studied abroad during a regular semester. Because of these facts, we decided to use the N3 test, which is designed for those who have studied Japanese for about 450 hours, rather than N4 that is for a student who has studied the language for about 300 hours. The N3 test was administered in FJ363 in the last week of the spring semester. It should be noted that this was the very first time the students have seen and taken the JLPT.

Students' Backgrounds:

As mentioned above, all three students (Students A, B, and C) began studying Japanese when they entered Skidmore in 2009 and continued studying the language for eight semesters. Their summer experiences in Japan, however, varied. Student A studied the language in an intensive academic summer Japanese language program for 6 weeks (about 90 hours) in 2011 at a university in Tokyo. She, then, went back to Tokyo in the summer of 2012 to study the language for 4 weeks (about 60 hours) in a non-academic language school. Student B took a course in a non-academic language school in Tokyo for 4 weeks (about 60 hours) in the summer of 2012, and Student C studied for 12 weeks (360 hours) in a non-academic language school in Fukuoka, also in the summer of 2012.

Test Results and Findings:

The chart below shows the overall test results of the three students.

	Vocabulary/Character	Reading	Listening	Total
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Student A	63.6%	69.2%	85.2%	72.66%
Student B	45.5%	43.6%	77.8%	55.63%
Student C	42.4%	41.0%	55.6%	46.33%

The JLPT guidelines state that, in order to pass N3, the total score needs to be at or above 95 out of 180 points (52.77%), and score in each scoring section needs to be at or above 19 out of 60 points (31.66%).² According to this, Students A and B passed N3 but Student C did not, although she attained a minimum score for each section.

Both Students A and B have been stronger students. When they were in FJ206 in the Spring of 2011, right before the summer Student A enrolled in the intensive summer language program in Tokyo, their final grades were very similar (Student A's grade was 96% and Student B's 94%). Therefore, the large differences between Student A's scores and B's in Vocabulary/Character and Reading sections can be attributed to the fact that Student A has studied in the academic intensive program but Student B did not. Although Student C has not been a strong student compared to Students A and B, it is still disappointing to see that she did not do well on the test, especially in the Listening section, despite the fact that she had received 6 hours of classroom instruction every day for 12 weeks in a language school in Japan. The sample size is too small to draw any definite conclusions, but it seems studying in an academic program, rather than a non-academic language school, has made significant differences in the students' proficiency levels.

We further examined each test item to identify where the students' strengths and weaknesses lie, and we found out that student did well in short, sentence-level questions in all sections, but they did not do very well on long, paragraph-level questions.

Conclusion:

From the students' test results, it can be safely assumed that the Japanese program at Skidmore meets the standard set by the Japan Foundation and Japan Educational Exchanges and Services.

Based on the findings, we would like to incorporate the following points into our future instruction:

1. Inform the students of the importance of studying abroad in an academic program.
2. Incorporate a longer reading exercise even from the beginning level so a student will become more accustomed and less resistant to longer reading materials.

² See Section 3 "Determination of pass/fail" in JLPT Guideline Testing and Result Notification section. <http://www.jlpt.jp/e/guideline/results.html>. The actual calculation is more complicated than simply calculating the percentage of correct answers, but the simple calculation is suffice for our purpose.

3. Use the JLPT every spring semester in FJ363 to evaluate a student's learning outcomes in our Japanese program and to assess the program itself.

Respectfully submitted,
Masako Inamoto
Japanese Section
May 16, 2013

Spanish Section Assessment Plan

Submitted by Michael Mudrovic
March 4, 2013

The Spanish Section met on March 1, 2013, to discuss the assessment of FS 211 Survey of Spanish Literature and FS 212 Survey of Spanish American Literature. Below is a summary of our discussion.

For many years we have been confronting and discussing the issue of student enrollment in these courses. The student population in these courses is quite diverse, including those who began studying Spanish at Skidmore, advanced first-year students, those who have studied abroad (either in our program in Spain or in an approved program in Spanish America), heritage speakers, and occasionally a student whose first language is neither English nor Spanish. The diversity of this enrollment demographic creates unique pedagogical issues for an instructor who has to address the target language needs and language experience of the students.

Because we have been aware of this issue for many years, we have decided to approach the question more systematically. First, we will devise a questionnaire and distribute it to the currently enrolled students. This questionnaire will address the various constituencies listed above. Once we have collected sufficient data, we will begin to address the specific pedagogical issues that each group poses with regard to writing skills, grammar accuracy, syntactical complexity, vocabulary acquisition, reading comprehension, analytical skills, and critical thinking skills.

Our initial strategy will entail gathering data to focus on common issues in our students' work. Thereafter, we will target the needs shared by specific groups of students. We will begin gathering data this semester, and we will assess and report those data regularly. However, we will need to collect data over the span of at least two years to attain a valid representation of the composition of these courses. See the proposed questionnaire below.

We also discussed the possibility of modifying the title of these courses to make them more reflective of the content and to "modernize" our curriculum. These courses have evolved naturally over the years, and the change in title (and a consequent change in the catalog description) will merely reflect the current state of the courses. For example, since the reconfiguration of the College curriculum and the change in the language requirement, all

of us who teach these courses are more aware of the cultural content and have strengthened that aspect, making it more explicit for the students. Therefore, the Peninsular instructors envision changing the title of FS 211 to Spanish Cultural History through Literature. Those instructors who teach FS 212 have not yet arrived at a new title for this course, although they are in agreement that we need to change it. We prefer to make the changes simultaneously. We will therefore continue to discuss the most appropriate title for the Spanish American course.

Survey

Please answer the following questions as briefly as possible. This information will aid us in our assessment project (a College-wide initiative mandated by our accrediting organization) and will remain anonymous and confidential. (You should not put your name on this paper.) We will use this information to improve the way we teach this course and address student pedagogical needs. Thank you for your cooperation.

1. When did you begin formal study of Spanish? (Circle one)

In high school At Skidmore

2. How many Spanish courses have you taken at Skidmore (including study abroad if applicable)? (Circle one)

1 2 3 4 5 more than 5

Please list the courses you have taken.

3. Are you a heritage speaker of Spanish (i.e., grew up speaking Spanish in your home)?

Yes No

4. Is English your first language?

Yes No

5. Have you studied abroad in a Spanish-speaking country?

Yes No

If yes, for how long?

A summer course One semester One year

In which country/countries? _____

6. What is your academic rank at Skidmore?

First-year

Sophomore

Junior

Senior

Preliminary summary of survey of FS 211 and 212

Submitted by Michael Mudrovic

May 8, 2013

The Spanish section completed a survey of the three sections of FS 211 and 212 this semester (Spring 2013) to determine the demographic of the students in these courses as part of our assessment project. We have combined the three sections for this preliminary report. A summary of the results follows.

1. All of the students in these sections began studying Spanish in high school.
2. A great disparity exists in the number of courses taken at Skidmore before taking this course.
 - a. Number of students who were taking their first course or had taken only 1 other course: 5
 - b. Students who had taken 2 courses prior to this course: 8
 - c. Students who had taken 3 courses prior to this course: 10
 - d. Students who had taken 4 courses prior to this course: 2
 - e. Students who had taken 5 or more courses prior to this course: 9
3. There are 3 heritage speakers, and 4 students do not consider English their first language (the heritage speakers and one other).
4. Sixteen students had studied abroad in a variety of countries (Spain, Panama, Bolivia, Argentina, and Chile), whereas 18 students had not.
5. Included in the sections are 1 first-year student, 16 sophomores, 11 juniors, and 6 seniors.

Conclusions:

1. Because of the number of variables involved and the extremely heterogeneous nature of the students in these courses, we are faced with a unique pedagogical situation. Because these courses lay the foundation for more advanced courses in literature, film, culture, and other content courses, it is abundantly clear that the optimal strategy for effective teaching

in these courses would be to lower the cap on enrollments. At the present moment, the cap is set at 23. In the past we have had as many as 35 students in one section of these courses. We attempted to alleviate that problem by consistently offering two sections of the more heavily enrolled course in the respective semester (211 in the fall and 212 in the spring). The next step, from our vantage point, will be to petition the College Curriculum Committee to lower the cap from 23 to 16 so that we can develop the students' analytical skills, critical thinking skills, and writing and speaking skills adequately.

2. The number of first and second year students is equal to that of juniors and seniors. The depth of thought and expression of upper-class students is significantly more mature and nuanced than that of under-class students. We need to address this difference when evaluating written and oral work.

3. We will need to target specific strategies and evaluation criteria for the writing assignments for different groups of students in these courses: students who have studied abroad; heritage speakers; first and second-year students vs. juniors and seniors. Ability to write well in a content course is crucial, and developing these skills in such a diverse group presents a pedagogical challenge, requiring individual attention and specifically targeted skills.