

# Foreign Language Department Self Study

## **Section One: Purposes and Outcomes**

In addition to traditional foreign language academic goals and objectives as outlined and promoted by the traditional university curriculum, all of which we, too, believe are very important and adhere to, this Foreign Language Department feels additionally extremely strongly that foreign language study should also focus on and fulfill an ever increasing need within our American society to reduce ethnocentrism and make university graduates more acutely aware of foreign peoples, cultures, histories and civilizations. Such concerns are especially important at this university because of our association with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. At the conclusion of each and every semester, relatively large numbers of students interrupt their studies to depart for foreign lands to serve at their own expense for two years as church missionaries charged to share the philosophy and beliefs of our particular way of life. Such young people must not only become fluent in the language of the culture where they are called to serve, but even more importantly, they must become aware that although each society has different cultural mores and attitudes, it is those differences that make this world such a wonderful and diverse place. Foreign language study begins the process of understanding the beauty of such differences and when assimilated, results in a more meaningful and better rounded university graduate. As such graduates mature and move out into the mainstream of society, they see far beyond their own borders and become what we often refer to as “world citizens.” Such people build bridges of understanding between and among societies rather than the traditional walls of prejudice and misunderstanding. In addition to our traditional role therefore, it is the Foreign Language Department’s sincere desire to promote and instill such additional admirable qualities in our students.

## **Section Two: Description of the Department**

The Foreign Language Department serves a relatively large number of students by offering a variety of first- through fourth-year language and literature courses in Chinese, French, German, Russian, and Spanish. At the bachelor’s level a B.A. degree may be earned in Spanish Education, while minors in education are offered in French, German, and Spanish. Noneducation minors may be earned in all five languages. For those seeking either an Associate or Bachelor of Arts degree in other disciplines, an eleven credit three-course foreign language sequence is offered in all five languages. An additional second-year three-hour Portuguese literature course is designed primarily for returned Portuguese-speaking missionaries who have subsequently earned eight hours of Portuguese credit by exam.

The Foreign Language Department is comprised of twelve full-time faculty: five in Spanish, two each in French, German and Russian, and one in Chinese. A second tenured Chinese hire has been approved, and the position will be filled at the earliest possible date. The full-time faculty is augmented each semester by as many as ten adjunct faculty members who teach primarily first-year introductory language courses in Chinese, French, German, and Spanish. Such adjuncts play a valuable and important role by relieving and allowing full-time faculty to focus more heavily upon upper-division course development and refinement. This is especially important at this time as the university transitions steadily into its new role as a four-year

institution.

The educational level and training of the foreign language faculty favorably reflect the competency of the department. All permanent faculty hold advanced degrees, and eight of the twelve have earned doctorates from various prestigious universities throughout the United States including the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, The Ohio State University, Pennsylvania State University (2), Purdue University, the University of Texas, Vanderbilt University, and the University of Wisconsin.

With continuing increases in student enrollments across the entire campus over the past several years, foreign language facilities remain constrained but adequate. The department presently has six classrooms dedicated solely to foreign language instruction. As might be expected, they are fully occupied throughout the entire academic day. Facilities within the classroom are adequate and are continually being updated. Presently, four of the six classrooms have been upgraded with the latest computerized sound and projection equipment, and the remaining two classes are scheduled for such upgrading. Foreign language faculty offices have also been remodeled and upgraded during the past year and are presently ideal. Each office is adequately spacious, equipped with upgraded Pentium computers, and has the latest appropriate software.

### **Section Three: Significant Changes**

Since the accreditation of 1999, significant changes have occurred within the Foreign Language Department. Most significant has been this institution's transition from a two-year junior college to a four-year university. This has had a major impact within the Foreign Language Department as long-standing faculty members accustomed to a two-year curriculum have had to upgrade, rethink, and then develop third- and fourth-year courses. Without question, such changes have been not only challenging but also frustrating and time consuming. Now, in our second full year of university status, slow but steady progress continues to be made. Almost all courses in our four-year offerings have now been taught at least one time, and based on limited student evaluations of these courses, it appears that we are achieving an overall improved quality. As one might expect, course refinement for these upper-level courses will continue across all languages and over several iterations before expectations are achieved. During this period, student evaluations of classroom instruction will be monitored closely in order to identify areas for specific focus and improvement. Underlying the entire course development process is a department understanding and philosophy that course development and refinement at any level is a task that is never completed. It is our desire that each ensuing semester will result in better and more refined courses leading to increased student satisfaction and learning.

During the past two years, a significant amount of effort has been expended by the Spanish faculty within the Foreign Language Department to ensure our new Bachelor of Arts degree in Spanish education would be in compliance with requirements for Idaho State Teacher Certification privileges. This has required the department to meet sixty-one state standards referred to as "performance indicators/goals." Considerable planning has been necessary to guarantee not only our meeting those sixty-one standards, but also in outlining how we would assess their successful accomplishment and thus ensure desired goal-oriented learning had indeed taken place. In October 2002, our Spanish education program and materials were examined by a

state representative who granted the department provisional certification privileges. Full certification can come only after all required classes have been developed and the four-year degree fully implemented and completed by Spanish education majors.

As might be expected with the advent of a four-year university, foreign language enrollments have consistently and continually risen. During the 1998/99 school year, when our last accreditation as a two-year educational institution was held, foreign language student credit hours for that school year stood at 5,281. These enrollment figures represented an overall increase of nearly 23 percent from the same time period two years prior in 1996/97 (4,085). Four years later, during the 2002/03 school year, foreign language enrollment figures had risen to nearly nine thousand student credit hours (8,908), a nearly 41 percent increase over the 1998/99 totals. Every indication suggests that enrollments in foreign language courses will continue to rise over the next several years.

In the 1999 Accreditation Committee Evaluation Report, an exception within the Foreign Language Department was noted regarding the lack of a foreign language laboratory. It was suggested in the report that such a laboratory was a goal for the department and was in the planning stages. Since that time and those comments, however, an increasingly growing philosophy within the foreign language profession and within this department has arisen, and at many universities the focus is presently no longer on the development of such language laboratories. In recent years, with the advent of such outstanding computer equipment, the Internet, and textbook supplements available at significantly reduced costs, such laboratories have become less important and less popular. Today's textbooks are providing ever increasing amounts of supplementary computer material, especially at the beginning levels of foreign language study, where the focus is on the mastery of the four skills (speaking, listening, reading, and writing) through repetition. Such state-of-the-art textbooks, coupled with ever increasing Internet offerings, allow the student at his or her home computer to accomplish almost everything that previously was done in the foreign language laboratory. Our decision has therefore been to redirect our thinking and philosophy regarding this learning tool.

#### **Section four: Analysis and Appraisal**

Faculty within the Foreign Language Department are both competent and experienced. While we all recognize the value of and need for faculty research and continual refreshing and updating within the foreign language discipline, such activities are not given the primary emphasis within this department. Our foreign language faculty is strongly teaching and student oriented. A significant portion of faculty time is spent in advising and assisting students. We believe that special relationships between students and faculty can be and are developed through such service, and the results from such activities go far beyond educational material covered and time spent in the classroom. Our primary focus is therefore strongly student directed with the sincere hope that a "life will be touched and lifted" as well as a "mind educated." When the former occurs, the mind is always affected and behavior is changed. This generally results in "life-long learning."

To assess at least one aspect of the educational success the Foreign Language Department has been achieving, student evaluations are consistently administered near the conclusion of selected foreign language classes to evaluate student perception of three general areas: course objectives,

instructor competence, and character values students feel they have gleaned from the class. An analysis of student evaluations administered over a six-year period between the 1997/98 and 2002/03 academic school years reflects the following interesting findings displayed in Table XX. The student rating scale ranges from a low of 0.0-2.5 (poor) through 3.5-4.5 (good) to a high of 6.5-7.0 (exceptional).

Table XX

Student Classroom Faculty Evaluations

	DEPARTMENT OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES	COLLEGE OF LANGUAGE & LETTERS	BYU-IDAHO
<b>1997-1998</b>			
Fall	6.05	5.70	5.77
Winter	5.78	5.69	5.72
<b>1998-1999</b>			
Fall	6.20	5.67	5.84
Winter	6.06	5.86	5.87
<b>1999-2000</b>			
Fall	6.24	5.77	5.86
Winter	6.40	5.95	5.84
<b>2000-2001</b>			
Fall	5.63	5.72	5.81
Winter	6.22	5.73	5.79
<b>2001-2002</b>			
Fall	5.97	5.41	5.81
Winter	6.35	5.63	5.79
<b>2002-2003</b>			
Fall	6.08	5.84	5.71
Winter	6.06	5.84	5.70

All instructors within the Department of Foreign Languages receive student evaluations on a regular basis. New faculty members who have not yet achieved tenure, or as it is called at this institution “continuing faculty status” (CFS), are evaluated by their students each and every semester for a period of four years. The caliber of such evaluations plays a significant role in determining the awarding of CFS to new faculty. Classes taught by faculty members with CFS are evaluated every three years. This process ensures that the quality of teaching within the faculty remains constant and high. Table XX represents the findings of foreign language faculty student evaluations as compared with similar evaluations conducted within the College of Language and Letters and across the entire university faculty. Numbers of foreign language faculty members being evaluated during each time period range from as many as seven to as few as only one in one instance. On average, Table XX reflects 3.4 foreign language faculty evaluations per semester. With only three exceptions over the past twelve semesters, students have given their foreign language instructors “excellent” ratings (above six) only slightly below the highest “exceptional” range. In all but one instance during the twelve semesters, the Foreign

Language Department was rated higher than both the College of Language and Letters and the entire university faculty. Such findings strongly suggest a devoted and competent foreign language faculty.

The Foreign Language Department continues to be in a state of flux primarily as a result of the transition from junior college to university status. As one might expect, the requirement to develop third- and fourth-year courses over a relatively short period of time has put considerable stress on the foreign language faculty. Such stresses, coupled with relatively heavy teaching loads brought about by increased student enrollments, have burdened to some extent everyone. Possibly as a result, two of our senior faculty members chose to retire in 2003. Although they were highly qualified and have been missed, they have been replaced with two young and enthusiastic doctoral-level hires who bring current teaching philosophies and excellent qualifications into the department. Viewing the faculty as a whole, our twelve full-time faculty members are all well trained, highly qualified, and most importantly highly motivated. Despite the pressures of the transition and rather heavy teaching loads, there appears to be very little, if any, faculty burnout. This must logically be attributed to the “spirit of place.” BYU-Idaho is considered by all foreign language faculty to be the “ideal” university with regard to work environment, administration support, and overall job satisfaction. Without question, it is our belief that this university has some of the finest, most highly motivated students who have the same high standards, moral philosophy, and general outlook on life as does the faculty. We believe this comes about because of the same basic religious beliefs held by almost all faculty and students.

On page 39 of the 1999 Accreditation Committee Evaluation Report, it was noted that “the Foreign Language Department has established a five-year plan in keeping with the institutional plan.” The plan, which was initiated during fall semester 1999 and was to continue through fall semester 2004, focused on three primary goals: professional development, curriculum development, and the need to have a state-of-the-art language laboratory. As mentioned in Section Three regarding the language laboratory, recent innovative textbook supplements, outstanding computer programs and equipment, and the expanded use of the Internet have basically eliminated the need for a foreign language laboratory. Students are now able to accomplish far more in much less time by simply utilizing supplements and programs provided by the textbook publishers. Regarding the other two five-year goals of the department, professional development and curriculum development, there has been a great deal of unplanned slippage and delays. Our emphasis on curriculum development, which was to focus on improving faculty language teaching and methodology techniques had to be basically put on hold in 2000 when Gordon B. Hinckley, president of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, announced that a decision had been made by church leadership to make Ricks College a four-year university which would be renamed Brigham Young University-Idaho. This monumental change resulted in great excitement but required that academic focus be shifted from our curriculum development goal to an almost consuming emphasis on the development of third- and fourth-year foreign language courses. One year later, on September 11, 2001, a similar situation arose with regard to our professional development goal which was to focus on increased faculty summer abroad study to improve overall language capabilities and foreign culture awareness. The terrible events of that day forced our department, and all Americans, to critically evaluate the need for and justification of such foreign travel. Such travel plans have continued to remain tenuous because of the subsequent Iraq invasion, worldwide terrorist threats,

and a variety of other unsettling world situations. It is the hope of this department that within the next year our faculty will be able to restructure and resume our focus on the latter two five-year goals: professional development and curriculum development. Much, however, will be dependent upon the overall world situation.

In 2003 significant emphasis was placed within the Foreign Language Department on first setting specific goals for each foreign language course offered in all five languages and then carefully determining how the faculty might best assess if those stated goals had been achieved. Overall goals fell into one of the following eight categories: speaking, reading, writing, listening, grammar, literature, culture, and pedagogy. Courses at different levels and degrees of difficulty were then assigned appropriate goals in one or more of the eight categories. The objective for each course was to decide what the key goal or goals of the course should be. For example, in an advanced literature course one would expect the primary emphasis to be on gleaning facts about assigned literature and reading selections and then being able to comfortably and capably write about them. In a beginning language class one would expect the major course stress to be on developing the basic skills and appropriate accompanying grammar principles. Major objectives for each course were carefully reviewed, and then specific assessment tools were established. The overall objective has been to determine specifically what it was we intended to teach in each course and then determine how to best assess our success in achieving that goal or goals. A follow-on objective has been then to track courses over time to see if students have been achieving our stated goals and objectives. By following such a plan, our department will be able to track our successes, see our mistakes, and thereby significantly improve the quality of our courses by making the appropriate adjustments.

In summary, the Foreign Language Department, though far from where we are aiming to be, is making continued and significant progress in improving the overall quality of foreign language education to the students of this university. There is much yet to be done, and achieving the highest quality education is a never-ending process. Such will continue to be the goal of this department, however.