

The French Review

From the Editor's Desk

Much has been said and written about Chinese and the huge marketing campaign undertaken by the Chinese government to promote the teaching of Chinese in the United States. This is also taking place in France by the way! Huge amounts of money are involved and many Chinese natives have been sent, their way paid by the Chinese government, to teach in schools all over the United States. In and of itself there is nothing wrong with this initiative. Indeed, we French teachers have always been about learning new languages and unlocking the language-locked U.S.A. We all remember when the French sent native speakers to Louisiana as part of the CODOFIL.

In the last twenty years or so the biggest increase in enrollments has come with Spanish, largely because of immigration patterns. Students know that they may well need to work closely with speakers of Spanish and they plan their studies accordingly. We are not talking about a fad here, but a reality that makes all of us richer from exposure to Hispanic cultures and language. The omni-presence of Spanish also drives home the importance of learning other languages. So, what is the problem? As far as I can tell, it seems to be about money and budgets. Unlike Europeans, *Etats-uniens* seem not to value (at least in monetary terms) learning more than one foreign language. Sometimes even one seems to be too many. So what happens is that in order to introduce the flavor of the month (We are nothing if not faddists!), adding a new language to the curriculum, such as Chinese, seems all too often to mean dropping another—say French or German—two of our heritage languages. I have discussed before how we can and must work together as parents, teachers, and students to promote French and preserve its place in the curriculum. There is even more work to be done now to convince school boards, principals, and state offices of public instruction to maintain transparency and the inclusion of concerned parties when making curricular decisions. That is one reason why we are publishing Ann Jensen's account of the demise of the AP French literature exam in this issue. In that case almost no concerned parties were consulted before the decision was made, primarily for budgetary reasons.

This said there is good news to report. The 2008 ACTFL Student Survey Report, which came out in August of 2008, states that this year French tops the list as the language of choice among high-school students at 18%. Italian comes in at 17% and Spanish at 16%. Chinese is sixth after German and Japanese. Latin is just after Chinese. Not surprisingly, high achieving students (50% of those earning "A's" and 28% earning "B's") believe that foreign language has helped in their other classes. The report also states that "Those who believe they will most likely use foreign language are those with aspirations to become business executives/entrepreneurs, political leaders, and hotel/resort managers."

Another interesting finding is that 28% say they are somewhat likely to study another foreign language in High School and College, 18% are likely to, and 12% very likely to. If this sentiment were to become a trend, it will bode well for many languages. A related statistic is that 22.1% say that they will stop taking foreign language classes when they are proficient in one or more foreign languages and another 24.7% when they have met their degree requirements. 66.6% of the students (152,800 sent back questionnaires out of an estimated population of 12, 682,137) said that they were either somewhat willing, willing or very willing (10.8%) to take a non-traditional foreign language course.

The study also covered teachers. 43.8% of them expressed the belief that the main reason most of their students chose to learn another language was in order to be admitted to college. 39.4% said it was in order to graduate, and 9.8% that students wanted to learn. So, requirements continue to drive student decision-making, something we should not forget when considering how, where, and when we want to lobby for languages. 34.4% of the teachers said that they needed more information on "Best Practices," (something not always easy to determine), and 31.3% wanted more professional development opportunities, a major priority of the AATF. It is also true that 46% felt that there is insufficient funding and 55% that enrollment issues are a major challenge for them.

For more information I encourage you to contact Ryan Munce at ryan@nrccua.org. In the meantime, we should take heart from this recent, encouraging news for French and keep doing what we do best in the classroom, one day at a time.

Christopher P. Pinet