

BINGHAMTON UNIVERSITY

General Education Assessment of Foreign Language Teaching Executive Summary

1. Criteria for assessment
2. Procedure
3. Findings
4. Conclusion and Recommendations

1. Criteria for Assessment of Foreign Language Teaching at Binghamton University

The General Education guidelines at Binghamton University require that students complete either a third-semester college level course in one foreign language or a second-semester course in each of two foreign languages or satisfactorily complete some other significant activity that requires second-level foreign language proficiency as a prerequisite (requirements differ for students in the Watson School of Engineering and the Decker School of Nursing and for transfer students see <http://www.binghamton.edu/general-education/foreign-language/index.html>)

Special exceptions for fulfilling the foreign language requirement for non-native English speakers, heritage language speakers, and students with specific disabilities, are outside the purview of this report. Our campus requirement subsumes SUNY-General guidelines, which state that students will demonstrate basic proficiency in the understanding and use of a foreign language, and knowledge of the distinctive features of cultures associated with the language that they are studying.

2. Procedure

The Assessment Category Team based this report on course portfolios compiled by instructors for 22 courses. In addition to these portfolios, we referred to the previous Foreign Language Assessment from 2012. The portfolios submitted for the 2015 assessment demonstrate the impressive and diverse offerings in foreign languages at Binghamton University. Students may fulfill the language requirement by taking courses in languages that include Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Classical Greek, Hebrew, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Latin, Russian, Spanish, Yiddish, and American Sign Language. Given this diversity, some key aspects of foreign language pedagogy should be noted at the outset. As was noted in the previous assessments of foreign language teaching at Binghamton University, learning outcomes can vary considerably between languages and among groups of learners. For example, the time needed for a U.S.-American student (with English as his/her first language) to achieve proficiency in Chinese will differ significantly from the time needed to become proficient in a Germanic or Romance language. The level of proficiency expected upon completion of a third-semester (FL3) course cannot, therefore, be consistently defined across all languages offered. Additionally, the linguistic background of the learner – including whether or not she or he is a heritage speaker of the language – will also affect the amount of time it takes to achieve proficiency, as does the learner's knowledge of the grammar and syntax of his or her own first language.

The course portfolios included the following materials:

- Course syllabus;
- Brief descriptions of how the course fulfills the foreign language requirement;
- A reflective statement by the instructor on the degree to which students met the learning objectives;
- Instructor's estimate of proportion of students in the course who fall into the categories: exceed, fulfill, approach, or fail to meet the learning objectives;
- Other materials provided at the discretion of the instructor.

3. Findings

Some of the syllabi are quite detailed as to learning goals while others offer only a basic description of the course and an approximate semester schedule. The instructors' descriptions of the learning objectives reflect in part the varying levels of difficulty in acquiring proficiency in the target language. In more recent years syllabi have usually included a statement of the course learning goals that relates to the General Education requirement, often reworded to refer to the specific language of the course. Most of the portfolios demonstrate that the instructor has a grasp of current practice in communicative language teaching and is aware of the various methodologies needed to assist students in meeting the learning goals. Students are given varied opportunities to meet these goals through a wide range of activities.

Students' progress in all these courses is assessed through a variety of assignments, which typically include written homework, essays, presentations, weekly or bi-weekly quizzes, and exams. Most instructors integrate into the syllabus varied activities that elicit language production, including dialogues, skits, and essay writing and stress a communicative, student-centered approach to language teaching that emphasizes meaningful interaction in collaborative efforts of heterogeneous groups of students. Student work is no longer required and not provided by most of the instructors.

The instructors' reflective statements provide the most useful information regarding possibilities for improvement in these courses. As in previous reports, some of the instructors who provided portfolios for the 2016 ACT process mention the following areas as problems for their teaching and for their students' learning: class sizes that are too large; the lack of comprehensive placement exams to evaluate students' language proficiency and ensure that students are placed in the appropriate course; the difficulty of working with heritage learners and disparate levels of preparation in the same class; problems with student preparation in the fundamentals of English grammar; and the lack of a language lab/language resource center on campus.

Instructors took diverse approaches to the Outcome that students demonstrate knowledge of the culture(s) associated with their language of study. Methods used were discussed but few portfolios included formal assessment of the outcome—cultural topics were often explicitly limited to non-graded work; most portfolios only provided instructor observations.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

The ACT thanks the instructors for their efforts in compiling the course portfolios. Our recommendations are essentially repetitions of those suggestions made by the ACT reports of 2003, 2009, and 2012 but with two crucial additions. First, that the specific cultural-content goals of courses be more explicitly described, and that student mastery of cultural material be assessed as part of the course grade. Second, that instructors refer (at least in the portfolios if not in the syllabi) to specific foreign-language standards for proficiency at each FL level, either from discipline-specific organizations or by describing particular functional competencies (e.g., writing a postcard, asking for directions, conducting a conversation, reading a novel).

With regard to the evident difficulty in assessing the learning outcome concerning cultural features associated with the languages, and also in expressing proficiency standards for different languages, we recommend consideration of a workshop organized by the UUCC for the language departments to establish ways to structure the assessment.