

E-LCTL Project – Western Europe

In his article “Collaborative Planning for National Needs in the Less Commonly Taught Languages: defining Criteria for Priorities in the Languages of the World Regions,” David Wiley sets the goals for “developing priorities in language instruction among area studies and language experts” and does so specifically with an eye on setting priorities “in the investment of scarce federal and private grant funding.” (page 2) Working within the context of African languages in particular, Wiley formulates the following set of six major criteria.

1. The number of speakers
2. Is the language a national language or the official language or the lingua franca for a nation?
3. Is the language used widely in teaching, the press and contemporary written and/or oral literatures?
4. Is the language important for scholarly research? Is it the language of important archival resources for certain scholars and users?
5. Is the language important because of its political, cultural, and social usage even though only spoken by a small, but influential number of people?
6. Is the language important for U.S. national interests, such as scholarly research, business, media, diplomacy and development assistance, and other government programs?

For our discussion of the Western European Less-Commonly-Taught Languages (LCTL’s), we took the criteria above as our point of departure, even though the categorization seems to have been developed with the African, not the Western European, language landscape in mind. The majority of Western European languages, even the LCTL’s, are national languages and are, therefore, almost automatically “widely-used” (i.e., nationally-used) as languages for teaching, scholarship, the media, politics, culture and in everyday life. At the same time, some European LCTL’s fall under category 4 and are important for scholarly research, but they are non-living languages (e.g., Homeric and classical Greek, classical and medieval Latin, Old Norse, Provençal, etc.) and should probably not be included for consideration.

Proposed Prioritization of Western European LCTL's

The European Bureau for Less Used Languages (LUL's in EU parlance) lists a total of xx official, EU-recognized Western European minority languages or LUL's. If, for the sake of this discussion, we disregard the languages which one could term language variations or dialects (for example the French Oïl languages, or such Mosalects as Limburgian or Luxembourgian), we are left with xx languages. Xx of those can be termed "national" languages as intended under category 2 of the Wiley list.

For the e-LCTL Project discussion at the NRC directors meeting in Washington DC in November 2003, we proposed that these national languages comprise a Group A list of languages and be assigned the highest priority. We also proposed that the second highest priority be assigned to languages that are not national languages, but are of political, cultural, social and regional significance. This Group B would include such languages as Basque, Catalan, Turkish, and Arabic. Turkish and Arabic were included even though they are not, strictly speaking, Western European languages. Because of recent immigration patterns, these languages are so widely spoken by large minorities in Western European countries that we felt their inclusion advisable. The third priority group would then include all the other languages not listed in groups A and B.

During our discussion with Western European NRC directors, participants agreed in broad outlines with the categories and the proposed prioritization of Western European LCTL's. Some discussion ensued over the status and importance of Turkish and Arabic. The group felt that both Turkish and Arabic belong in group A, the highest priority group, because of the importance these language have for a proper understanding of the current political situation in many European countries. It was pointed out that, for example, Berlin is the city with the second most Turkish speakers in Europe after Istanbul. Moreover, Turkey as a country could be regarded as a European nation, especially in light of its future membership in the EU.

Proposed Priority Grouping of Western European LCTL's

Group A (Highest Priority) – National Languages + Arabic

Arabic
Danish
Dutch
Finnish
Modern Greek
Icelandic
Italian
Norwegian
Portuguese
Turkish
Swedish

Group B (Second Priority) – Languages of political, cultural, and social significance

Basque
Catalan

Group C (Third Priority) – All other languages.

Western vs. Eastern Europe - The discussion participants did express strongly that dealing with Western and Eastern European languages separately does not serve the goals of the project. With the implosion of the Soviet Empire and the expansion of the EU towards the east, the old West-East political division is quickly disappearing. Area studies programs and NRC's are also moving more and more towards pan-European models. In the European language landscape too the terms East and West are more fluid and create confusion. Where, for example, do Western Slavic languages such as Czech and Serbian belong? In the old model Czech would fall in Eastern and Serbian in Western Europe. At the same time some languages such as Greek are traditionally regarded as belonging to the Western camp, although spoken in regions far to the east of Europe.

The NRC directors urge that for the e-LCTL project purposes Europe be regarded as one single region and that recommendations for the two areas be combined.

Instructional Models: Academic Year

Formulating a comprehensive recommendation for instructional models is not as easy a task as prioritizing LCTL's. What is needed first and foremost is a clear understanding of what languages are taught at what institutions in the US and at what levels. Some of those data can be found in the most recent MLA Foreign Language Enrollment Survey and the LCTL database of the Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition (CARLA) at the University of Minnesota. The information contained in the latter is purely based on voluntary reporting by individual schools and thus might not be a complete listing of all institutions and offerings.

The MLA survey, despite its misleading heading "More College Students Studying Foreign Languages Than Ever Before," paints a very bleak picture of language offerings and the number of students enrolling in language courses. A mere 8.7% of all American college students, less than one in ten!, enroll in language classes. And even though the MLA doesn't specify instruction or proficiency levels, it can be assumed from other data that a large majority of those students at best only take beginning offerings. Moreover, 53% of these language students are enrolled in one language, Spanish. A dismally small 1.8% of college students study LCTL's. The MLA Survey shows that only 3,623 students (0.26% of all college students) studied a Western European LCTL in fall 2002. Note, these last numbers do not include students in Italian and Portuguese which the MLA categorizes as somewhere between MCTL's and LCTL's.¹

In light of these sobering numbers, the first task or recommendation must be not only promoting certain instructional models, but increasing language learning per se. Simply offering more language courses or a more varied palette of instructional models does not automatically translate into more language learners. Language learning would dramatically increase, however, if American colleges and universities were to make learning a foreign language a graduation requirement. Compare: in most countries in the world, a foreign language is an entrance requirement!

Recommendation: All American colleges and Universities should make foreign language acquisition a graduation requirement.

¹ The MLA categorization: 1. Spanish (53%); 2. French and German (21.5%); 3. ASL, Italian, Chinese, Japanese and Latin (17%); 4. Russian, Hebrew, Ancient Greek (4.8%); 5. Korean, Arabic, Portuguese (1.8%); 6. All other languages.

The bleak picture even gets bleaker if one combines the MLA numbers with the LCTL offerings at the beginning, intermediate and advanced levels. The figure below gives the number of colleges and universities offering Western European LCTL's at the beginning (first year), intermediate (second year), and advanced (third year) levels. These numbers show a precipitous drop in language course offerings as students move from the beginning to the intermediate to the advanced instructional levels. The source of this information is CARLA's LCTL database at <http://carla.acad.umn.edu/lctl/access.html>.

	Levels		
	1st year	2nd year	3rd year
Basque	3	3	0
Breton	4	2	0
Catalan	11	5	1
Danish	21	13	8
Dutch	30	25	12
Faroese	1	0	0
Finnish	16	13	10
Gaelic	3	1	0
Greek-Modern	53	44	23
Icelandic	5	4	4
Irish	20	15	7
Norwegian	31	24	14
Sami	1	0	0
Scottish-Gaelic	4	1	0
Swedish	45	35	21
Welsh	7	6	2
Yiddish	23	14	6

Hence, one wonders how many of the 3,623 students actually are in the third year of language instruction or will end up finishing an advanced course: in all likelihood not too many.

Obviously retention is a major problem and should be addressed. Partly this can be done by setting potential language requirements at colleges and universities at a higher proficiency level (intermediate high/advanced low?). In other words, force students to take second- and/or third-year language courses. Alternatively, a possible solution might

be to make it more attractive for students to take higher levels through scholarships. Make FLAS fellowships available to undergraduates taking LCTL's at advanced levels.

At the same time, third-year enrollments might be slightly higher if offerings could be maintained. At many universities, advanced LCTL instruction suffers from low enrollments (very often minimum enrollment for a class to be offered is ten students), the result being that classes are cancelled. Once the word is out that classes get cancelled, students don't elect to take them. One way to break this vicious circle is to use subsidies and external funding to guarantee the offering of advanced LCTL instruction. This could be combined with distance learning models at the advanced level and/or with closer cooperation among related universities, e.g., by allowing students to travel to other schools to finish their language learning as is done in the CIC traveling scholar program.

Another point to keep in mind, when discussing retention levels in foreign language instruction, is retooling language curricula to reflect the interest of potential students that are not language and literature majors. Retention into second and third year language classes might increase if the reading material were concerned with politics, history, society, business practices and the economy of the countries whose languages are being studied. Particularly advanced courses tend to be directed towards students who major in the language, and not towards students in other disciplines. Language trailers to courses in the social sciences might be one answer, but at the same time, we urge that the content of language teaching in actual language courses include social science type themes as early as possible. Re-thinking and re-tooling the language curriculum in this light would certainly attract a wider constituency other than those interested in literature.

Instructional Models: Summer

Summer LCTL instruction is extremely important for the many students, especially graduate students, who do not have access to LCTL's needed for research at their home institutions. It is very important that summer LCTL instruction be intensive and that Title VI subsidies guard against cancellation because of low enrollments. Title VI support for summer intensive courses should be allotted in accordance with the priorities above: 1) Group A LCTL's; 2) Group B LCTL's; and 3) Group C LCTL's. Where possible, colleges and universities in the same region should coordinate summer

intensive LCTL offerings so that key LCTL's are not competing for scarce enrollments one summer and then completely unavailable the next summer.