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## FLARR Pages #40: Foreign Language in the Rural High Schools (Continued)

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# FLARR PAGES #40

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Continues from  
FLARR Page  
#39: Foreign  
Language in the  
Rural High  
Schools, M. Gust

A significant portion of the research focused on *why* students study or don't study foreign language. What factors influence the decision? Many citizens across the United States feel that foreign language is practical only for those who might use it in their employment or those who travel to other countries. Marsh (1995) states:

To many Americans...the attainment of foreign language proficiency is considered important only for foreign language teachers and interpreters. This limited view of its use fosters an attitude that foreign language study is not a necessary part of the basic educational system. (p. 3)

In fact, According to the NCSSFL position paper, "Each year 200,000 Americans lose out on jobs with business because they do not know another language" (n.d., p. 4), and "Four out of five new jobs in the United States are created as a result of foreign trade" (n.d., p. 4). One may rebuke foreign trade as a field not pertinent to most students, but sometimes foreign languages are required in job markets never previously considered. A report by William Connors (1994) discusses a rural high school in New York State that discovered a need for foreign language study among its non-college bound, vocational track students in the fields of law enforcement and tourism (p. 6).

In addition, foreign language study provides cognitive benefits such as increased creativity, problem solving abilities, and divergent thinking, academic benefits such as improved reading, writing and mathematic abilities, and societal benefits like the job opportunities mentioned above but also improved managerial skills as people learn about interaction among people from other cultures. Kruger (2002) agrees that "Gaining even minimal competency in a foreign language demonstrates respect for other cultures. Learning another language forces us to think outside our standard frame of reference, to recognize that our mode of communication is just one of many" (§11). She goes on to say that, "Understanding a new language changes the way we see ourselves and makes us aware that those who know our language know more about us than we do about them" (§12).

Many educators feel that it is unfair to discourage students with certain labels from foreign language study. As stated earlier, there are countless benefits to be had that should not be denied to any student. NCSSFL (n.d.) concurs:

Perhaps the broadest and most important function of all foreign language study is to provide a more liberating educational experience for students—the vocationally oriented as well as the college bound, the poor, as well as the middle-class and the rich. As students are given the opportunity to learn a foreign language, they have the unique opportunity to understand the nature of themselves as young men and women and their relationship to the world about them, benefits which all of our students need and will carry with them far beyond the language classroom. (p. 4)

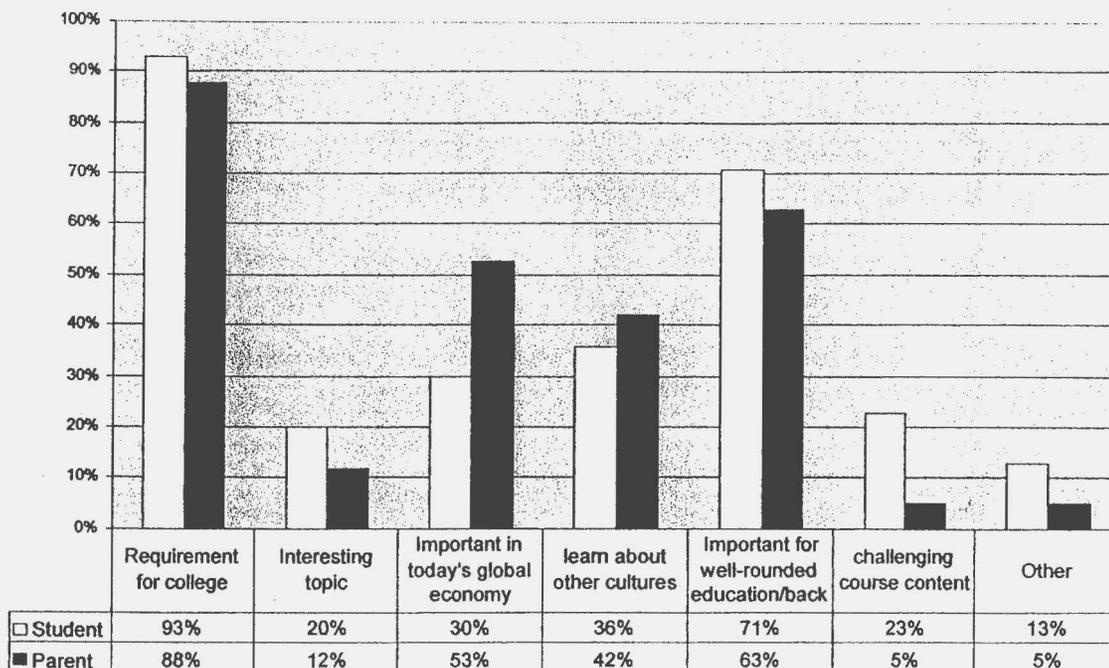
Why do the students in this study choose to study foreign language or not? Students and parents were each asked to rank from most-influential to least-influential, the reasons considered in their decision to study foreign language. They were instructed to leave blank any reasons that did not influence their decision.

*Choices for reasons to take a foreign language were:*

- Requirement for college
- Interesting topic
- Important in today's global economy
- Learn about other cultures
- Important for well-rounded education/background
- Challenging course content
- Other (Please explain: \_\_\_\_\_)

83 student surveys and 41 parent surveys indicated reasons why the student chose to study a foreign language. Results were compiled in the manner of the percentage of respondents in each group who ranked that particular factor in the top three reasons that influenced their decision. The results are presented in Figure 3 below. The parents' and students' top three reasons that influenced their decision to study a foreign language. The overwhelming reason for both parents and students, was "Requirement for college." A disappointing number chose foreign language because it was an interesting topic or for challenging course content. Among the "other" reasons given by students were simply "to learn a new language", "because my mom made me", "for job marketability," and "for fun." One parent noted as a reason to encourage his or her child to take foreign language, "Because I always regretted not getting the choice [to study a foreign language]."

Top 3 Reasons to TAKE Foreign Language (Figure 3)



Students and parents who chose to *not* study a foreign language were also asked for their reasons why. They were instructed to leave blank any reasons that did not influence their decision.

Choices for reasons to not take a foreign language were:

- \_\_\_\_\_ Not planning on attending college
- \_\_\_\_\_ Difficult course content
- \_\_\_\_\_ Not practical (no need to learn it)
- \_\_\_\_\_ Everyone in this area mostly speaks English
- \_\_\_\_\_ Not interesting to me / my child
- \_\_\_\_\_ Not necessary for my child's career interest
- \_\_\_\_\_ Other (Please explain: \_\_\_\_\_)

45 student surveys and 13 parent surveys indicated reasons why the student chose not to study a foreign language. Results were again compiled in the manner of the percentage of respondents in each group who ranked that particular factor in the top three reasons that influenced their decision. The results are presented in Figure 4 below. The parents' and students' top three reasons that influenced their decision to *not* study a foreign language. Most parents and students perceived foreign language study to be not interesting, not necessary and not practical. The fact that most everyone in their geographical area speaks English also influenced their decision.

Surprisingly, the students' college plans did not factor heavily in the decision, as this factor did with those students choosing to study foreign language. Among the "other" reasons given by students were that "Everyone in the U.S. speaks English," and, illustrating the disadvantages of a small school district, that they didn't want to take Spanish (as opposed to another language), didn't like the teacher, or could not fit the class into their schedule. One parent stated the fact that his or her child was planning a career in nursing as a reason that foreign language study was not needed. This is one of the many indicators of parents' and students' mis-information revealed in the surveys.