



Evaluating Learner and Teacher Perceptions of Program Outcomes in the Foreign Language Major

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Abstract

This article discusses a survey study that adds to the literature on program evaluation. Using a mixed-methods approach, we examine feedback on learning and teaching experiences from instructors and graduating seniors in Spanish, French, and German major programs in a modern languages department. The results are grouped into four major themes: learners' communication ability (the four language skills), learners' connection to another culture, learners' expectations of their programs, and learners' preparation for their futures. The alignment of student and teacher perceptions for each of these topics is discussed, and the learner needs that emerged and the extent to which teachers expressed an awareness of these needs is examined. Curricular improvements based on survey findings are also proposed, which include: incorporating more speaking and free student-student communication opportunities into the curriculum, and establishing an activity where students can showcase evidence of oral skills upon graduating; creating service learning opportunities and advertising them adequately; offering phonetics and translation courses; and increasing the focus on preparing students for real-world tasks related to the job market. Because the surveys were constructed to address concerns that various foreign language programs may face, this study's results may be useful to an array of language educators.

1 Introduction

Evaluating how well a foreign language program has met its goals is useful, because it lends itself to highlighting the strengths of a program as well as areas of improvement (Kiely, 2009; Patton, 2008; Sullivan, 2006). The present small-scale study adds to the existing literature on program evaluation by focusing on students' and instructors' perceptions of program outcomes in the foreign language major. Assessing students' attitudes towards their programs and their outcomes can contribute important data when examining program effectiveness (Kiely, 2009; Liskin-Gasparro, 1995), and this study adds to the research on student learning outcomes and student satisfaction (e.g. Houston, 2005; Kondo-Brown, Davis, & Watanabe, 2014) by specifically looking at survey data from both students and instructors, and examining if graduating seniors perceive similar program outcomes as their instructors. The results may help educators identify strengths and areas of improvement of their own programs, and may encourage faculty collaboration on program evaluation, which can help make those projects successful (Ricardo-Osorio, 2011).

2 Literature review

2.1 *Evaluation in foreign language program outcomes assessment*

Program evaluation is part of the outcomes assessment process, which Houston (2005) succinctly defines as “a multilayered process by which an academic unit defines and articulates its program goals and assesses its attainment of those goals” (p. 366). The evidence of quality instruction and accountability that accreditation bodies request from institutions and faculty in higher education, together with the rising public concern over quality education, provides the catalyst for increased interest on outcomes assessment in foreign language programs at all levels (see Norris, 2006; Norris & Watanabe, 2012, for discussions). As Norris (2006) discusses, it is critical that foreign language programs are proactive about outcomes assessment, particularly so that programs can gather evidence of what students are learning, which can then be used to show the value of language education to learners, universities, and the community. Norris and Mills (2014) also note that program evaluation is especially needed, given the current cost-conscious higher education environment. Indeed, given declining enrolment numbers in foreign languages (see the 2015 Modern Language Association Report – Goldberg, Looney, & Lusin, 2015), showcasing the importance and strengths of language programs through evaluation may be more important than ever.

Language educators are acknowledging the benefits of program evaluation not only for external accreditation purposes but also for increasing their understanding of student learning and of student learning outcomes (e.g. Byrnes, 2008; Watanabe, Norris, & González-Lloret, 2009). Importantly, Norris and Mills (2014) discuss specific benefits of program evaluation, which include identifying successful instructional practices, contributing to curriculum reform and materials selection, evaluating student learning, and providing an opportunity for faculty to communicate better and to collaborate with each other.

Program evaluation studies have used various different instruments to gather their data. For example, Mathews and Hansen (2004) discuss an outcomes assessment project that involved evaluating the stated goals for Spanish, French, and German major programs. Graduating seniors were asked to complete and turn in a senior assessment, which consisted of a speaking proficiency test and a portfolio with samples of written work. The evaluation revealed that overall students were meeting program goals, but that more attention should be placed on developing awareness of similarities and differences that exist among cultures. Similarly, Morris and Cooke-Plagwitz (2008) also discuss a program evaluation project involving an electronic portfolio that included artifacts (e.g. audiotapes, videos, essays, term papers, creative pieces) from the courses that graduating seniors had taken throughout their studies. The results of the portfolios suggested that, although the majority of students had achieved sufficient competence in Spanish (for writing, reading, speaking, and cultural understanding), there were certain issues, such as a need for increased amount of required credit hours as well as study abroad experience for all majors.

Surveys as part of an evaluation plan have also played an important role. For example, Houston (2005) discusses an outcomes assessment project for beginner and intermediate Spanish programs where the evaluation process included looking at the results of student surveys along with placement test scores, oral proficiency interviews, and student portfolios. The survey results revealed important insights about the curriculum: on the whole, students thought the program had been successful in achieving its goals. However, an interesting finding was that students thought that interacting in a safe classroom environment was seen more as a given for a language curriculum rather than a goal that needed to be met. Subsequent student surveys also indicated that a change in textbook was successful in helping students develop more critical thinking skills (a goal associated with the reason for the textbook change), but that students preferred a more survival-skills approach to language learning.

More recently, Kondo-Brown et al. (2014) discuss a large-scale student exit survey project for program evaluation in the college that houses languages at the first author’s institution. The results

of the yearly surveys have not only revealed program strengths, weaknesses, and areas of improvement, but they have also provided the impetus for important curricular changes such as creating new courses, revising existing course curriculum and requirements for graduation, and changing the frequencies and scheduling of course offerings.

2.2 Program evaluation and learner needs

As evident from the above discussion, student survey data can be useful for program evaluation, but it can also highlight important learner needs that might otherwise go unnoticed. Alalou (2001) discusses a needs assessment survey study for beginner and intermediate students of Spanish, French, and German. This survey investigated students' motivations for language learning, their thoughts on language skills, and their intended use of the language in the future, as well as how well these students' needs were aligned with mission statements. The study also incorporated interviews with language program directors in order to understand the program goals, how the program meets those goals, and the approaches utilized for language teaching. Several notable results of the study included that students intended to use their language skills for practical purposes – namely for their careers and for personal use (to speak to family members in that language) – as well as some curricular improvements: for example, renewed approaches towards teaching culture should make the inherent relationship between cultural awareness and communication skills clearer to learners, and conversation courses should incorporate various text types and diverse activities and assignments that respond to learners' communicative needs.

In another needs assessment study, Worth (2007) also used surveys to document how students' attitudes towards language learning may change over the course of one semester. Students, who were beginner-level Italian learners, were provided with a rating-scale survey at the beginning and at the end of the semester. Overall, attitudes became significantly less positive at the end of the semester, though students did report a reduction in anxiety with learning Italian. The shifts in the negative direction were associated with factors such as course activities and course requirements, and thus pointed to potential curricular improvements. Open-ended responses offered further insights, and highlighted that when the goals of a course are not made explicit or when the goals of a course marginalize those of students, disillusionment on the part of the student can occur. The study's findings therefore also have implications for teachers, and more specifically for graduate student teaching assistants (TAs) who are often teachers for basic language programs. Specifically, TAs should be aware of the objectives of their courses, and rather than make assumptions about their students' goals, they should make themselves aware of those goals and of learners' needs. In fact, and on a related note, teacher communication to students about classroom teaching methods has also been suggested since perceptions of effective instruction may not always align between students and teachers (see Brown, 2009).

3 The present study

3.1 Purpose of the study

The present study adds to the existing research on program evaluation by using surveys to explore feedback on both learning and teaching experiences. When taken together, this type of feedback can lead to better informed decisions about curricular changes that are needed and can also serve as a type of needs assessment, which as seen from the above discussion, may be helpful in developing (and then evaluating the achievement of) program goals. Thus, this study is guided by the following research questions:

- (1) How well aligned are learners' and instructors' perceptions of outcomes in foreign language major programs?
- (2) What are learners' needs as highlighted by them?
- (3) Are teachers aware of these needs?

3.2 General overview of the Spanish, French and German majors

This study focuses on Spanish, French, and German programs in a modern languages department at a large university in the United States. At the time of the study, language majors in Spanish and French were required to complete 24 credit hours at the 300-level or above (nine credits at the 400-level were required, three of which had to be in literature for the French program), and German majors were required to complete 20 credit hours at the 300-level or above (six credits at the 400-level were required). Courses that were offered largely covered literature, culture and civilization, grammar and translation, linguistics, and composition and conversation. The Spanish program required six credit hours of 300-level advanced reading and writing prior to entering into the program. Unlike the French and German programs, in which tenured or tenure-track professors are specialized in literature, the Spanish program has Spanish linguistics professors. Therefore, each semester the Spanish program can offer more and various types of upper-level linguistics classes (e.g. history of the language, phonetics and phonology, sociolinguistics). The Spanish program also offered two different “tracks” where students had the option of choosing more 300-level and 400-level classes in either literature and culture or language and linguistics. Regardless of the track chosen, all Spanish students were required to take at least one 300-level linguistics course (introduction to linguistics or phonetics and phonology).

All programs encourage study abroad for their students. Several of these programs are faculty-led: The Spanish program offers two summer programs in Spain (Bilbao and Soria), the French program offers a summer-long program in Angers (France), and the German program offers semester-long and semester-long plus summer programs in Berlin (Germany).

The programs emphasize as their goals the ability to communicate effectively, the knowledge and use of appropriate grammar and stylistics, the awareness and knowledge of culture, and the ability to read, discuss, and analyze literary works. As a department, the overarching goal of instruction (as stated on their website) is for students to develop proficiency in the four basic skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) as well as an understanding for the target culture, life, and literature.

For the purpose of program assessment, these three programs collect samples of students’ written work taken from different stages of the programs. Additionally, German students are asked to write a personal reflection in English at the end of their program. All students are asked to complete an anonymous and voluntary departmental exit survey as well.

4 Methodology

4.1 Participants

There were 33 participants in total in this study. Participants were graduating seniors from the Spanish, French, and German majors, as well as their instructors. For the student participants, there were a total of 24 students: 18 Spanish majors, four French majors, and two German majors. Of these students, 15 had more than one major and 11 students had minors (see Table 1 for a breakdown of how students combined their language majors with other majors and minors). Out of the 24 students, 17 had studied abroad: 13 Spanish majors, two French majors, and two German majors. Students indicated various reasons for choosing a language major, which were mainly the following: because they liked the language and culture; because it would help them acquire a job; because it was necessary for a future job (e.g. foreign language teacher), and for travel purposes. For the instructors, there were a total of nine participants. There were five Spanish instructors, three French instructors, and one German instructor. See Table 2 for a breakdown of job titles and areas of specialization for each language.

Table 1. Students' majors and minors for each language

Students	Other Majors	Minors
<i>Spanish majors</i>	agribusiness; construction management; chemistry; political science and global studies; sociology; psychology (2); English; biological sciences	French; psychology (2); biology; early childhood education and communication; human rights & humanitarian affairs; humanities in medicine and in psychology; chemistry; mathematics and communication studies; history, philosophy, and religious studies
<i>French majors</i>	English (2); textiles communication; studio art	classics and psychology
<i>German majors</i>	global studies; foreign language secondary education	

Note. When two or more majors/minors are listed for a student, that student had those majors/minors; the number written in parenthesis indicates the number of students (when more than one) with that particular major/minor.

Table 2. Teachers' job titles and degree areas for each language

Teachers	Job titles	Degree areas
Spanish teachers	Professor of Practice (2); Associate Professor (3)	Spanish literature (2); linguistics; applied linguistics; curriculum & instruction and second language acquisition
French teachers	Assistant Professor; Associate Professor; Lecturer	comparative literature; French studies/literature (2)
German teacher	Professor	German literature

4.2 Materials and procedure

For a total of four semesters, an online survey was sent out to graduating seniors via email. The survey was administered before the optional departmental exit survey was sent out. At the same time, a counterpart online survey was sent out to instructors who taught courses that language majors were taking. Students and instructors were asked to complete the survey within two weeks, and participation was anonymous and voluntary.

The questions focused on background information (see Participants section above) as well as learners' and teachers' perceptions of students' learning outcomes and experiences in the language programs. Although some of the survey questions were created taking into consideration the goals of the department (discussed above), they were more generally meant to gauge overall opinions and thoughts on foreign language programs and outcomes, which could be useful to educators outside of these particular programs. Participants were asked both quantitative and qualitative questions (seven quantitative questions and 12 qualitative questions, for a total of 19 questions – see the Appendix 1 for questions; a summary of them appears below).

Out of the seven quantitative questions, six were Likert-scale and one was a yes/no question. Participants rated program preparation for each of the four skills (a four-part question), the importance of study abroad and the usefulness of service learning (only those student participants who had studied abroad and who had taken service learning courses were asked to answer these two questions, respectively), students' development of a second identity/connection to another language and culture, if the curriculum could prepare students better in any way, and overall student satisfaction with their programs; the yes/no question asked if an additional requirement should be added for graduation. There were seven counterpart qualitative (open-ended) questions that asked participants to further elaborate on quantitative responses. The remaining five open-ended questions asked about: expectations for what should be learned in the language program that is not part of the program of studies, the importance of a language degree, thoughts on how students are assessed in

courses and thoughts on course grades, the benefits of language programs other than gaining language proficiency, and the alignment of students' and teachers' goals and expectations with respect to the program/courses.

5 Results and discussion

Since a mixed-methods approach to the data analysis was used, quantitative questions are discussed in conjunction with open-ended responses. The discussion of results is grouped into four themes: learners' communication ability (the four language skills), learners' connection to another culture, learners' expectations of their programs, and learners' preparation for their futures. These themes were a result of the topics covered in the survey questions as well as of the recurring topics that arose in participants' open-ended responses. We relate all four of these themes directly to our three research questions, and therefore for each topic, we address: (1) the alignment of learners' and instructors' perceptions of program outcomes, (2) learners' needs as they relate to various aspects of language program curricula, as well as (3) teachers' awareness of these needs.

As noted earlier, survey questions were designed to examine overall opinions of foreign language programs and outcomes, and the questions were also created taking into account the overarching goals of the department (and thus the goals of all three language programs). This allowed us to analyze the three language programs together, and to therefore consider all participant responses when drawing conclusions (a separate analysis for each program would also not have been appropriate given the number of subjects from each program). Thus, throughout our discussion, and when providing an explanation of the numerical data through open-ended responses, care was taken to be representative of all language programs by seeking out trends in the overall data set. Therefore, unless otherwise noted, the trends (and responses) that are discussed are representative of the participants as a whole. When responses indicated variation due to differences in the programs, this is specifically highlighted in the discussion.

5.1 Learners' communication ability

To examine whether learners' and teachers' perceptions aligned, ratings regarding preparation for students' communication ability (in listening, speaking, reading, and writing) were analyzed with two-tailed between-subjects t-tests. Table 3 below contains student and teacher mean ratings, as well as the results of the t-tests. Significant or marginally significant differences were found for each skill except for speaking. These results indicate that students and teachers disagreed with the level of preparation in most of the language skills (i.e. teachers did not believe that students were as prepared as they thought), but teachers and students aligned on their beliefs about speaking preparation – both groups believed that speaking preparation was the weakest area. Given that research suggests that oral proficiency (speaking and listening) is often seen by students as their most important goal (e.g. Alalou, 2001; Harlow & Muyskens, 1994), this result is interesting. It may be that students feel they receive sufficient listening practice (perhaps because all students listen to their instructors daily in class), but that more uniform and extensive speaking practice is needed.

Table 3. Student and teacher mean ratings and analysis for preparation in the four skills

Skills	Student Mean Ratings (1 = not at all well; 4 = very well)	Teacher Mean Ratings (1 = not at all well; 4 = very well)	t-tests
<i>Listening</i>	3.6	3	$t [31] = 2.42, p < .05$
<i>Speaking</i>	2.6	2.3	$t [31] = 0.84, p > .05$
<i>Reading</i>	3.6	3	$t [31] = 1.97, p = .058$
<i>Writing</i>	3.6	2.8	$t [31] = 3.98, p < .001$

Student comments also highlighted that they felt they needed more fluency in the language in order to live or work in the target culture and to be able to converse with native speakers about various topics. They also believed the curriculum emphasized writing and reading at the expense of speaking. Students suggested ways to include more oral proficiency opportunities into the curriculum: for example, “more classes that emphasized speaking and conversation”, more casual conversation practice, offering courses that include student-led conversations on student-selected topics, and dedicating one weekly class day “to the oral aspect of the language”. Importantly, students also indicated that study abroad was key for improving oral proficiency.

Teachers were aware of students’ need for acquiring speaking skills. In their open-ended comments, they echoed the need for both study abroad as well as curricular improvements related to speaking proficiency, such as “more courses focused on conversation at the 300 and 400 levels” or pushing students to speak in the target language more.

Finally, the open-ended comments discussed above also help to explain the ratings given on two rating-scale questions, namely (1) whether the curriculum could prepare students better in any way, and (2) if students were satisfied with their programs. Both students and teachers were generally aligned in their views, and believed that there was some room for improvement, with one of the largest overall contributing factors being a need for more preparation in speaking proficiency. Table 4 below shows students’ and teachers’ mean ratings.¹

Table 4. Student and teacher mean ratings for questions regarding overall preparation and satisfaction levels

Question topics	Student mean ratings	Teacher mean ratings
<i>Curriculum could prepare students better? (1 = no; 4 = yes)</i>	2.6	3.4
<i>Students satisfied with their programs? (1 = no; 4 = yes)</i>	3.1	3

In summary, when it comes to communication ability, teachers’ and students’ perceptions were both aligned and not aligned: Teachers believed that the curriculum could prepare students better for reading, writing, and listening, whereas both students and teachers believed that students needed to be better prepared in speaking skills. It could be that unlike listening skills that can be practiced by all students at the same time (e.g. when listening to instructors), creating more opportunities for speaking practice may require more effort. As discussed above, students in this study saw oral proficiency, and speaking skills in particular, as a large need, perhaps for their futures in the workplace and in social situations, a need that teachers seemed to be aware of. Study abroad, courses including more speaking practice time, and other avenues allowing for more spontaneous conversations were all ways that were suggested to fulfill this need.

5.2 Learners’ connection to another culture

When looking at two rating-scale questions related to this topic, teachers and students both indicated (1) a mixed view regarding learners developing a connection to another culture and language (i.e. developing a second identity), and (2) a strong belief that study abroad was important, particularly for helping learners form a connection to another culture (recall that only those student participants who had studied abroad were asked to answer this question). A two-tailed between subjects *t*-test revealed that students’ and teachers’ views did align statistically (i.e. there was no significant difference) with respect to the importance placed on study abroad. However, the other *t*-test (two-tailed, between-subjects) showed that students believed they had developed a second identity to a marginally significantly greater degree as compared to teachers’ perceptions about this. See Table 5 below for mean ratings and the *t*-test results.

Table 5. Student and teacher mean ratings and analysis on questions concerning learners' connection to another culture

Question Topics	Student Mean Ratings	Teacher Mean Ratings	t-tests
<i>Students develop a second identity? (1 = not at all; 4 = yes)</i>	3.6	3	$t [31] = 1.97, p = .058$
<i>Importance of study abroad? (1 = not important; 4 = very important)</i>	3.8	4	$t [24] = 1.24, p > .05$

In their open-ended responses, students discussed the important role that study abroad experiences had on their ability to connect to another culture. As noted above, teachers were aligned with students on their views regarding the “essential” role that study abroad played in forming a connection to another culture and “becoming a citizen of the world”. Interestingly, one teacher’s comment also brought up that study abroad opportunities should be “more accessible, affordable and visible” to all students, and one student alluded to this issue by pointing out that a curriculum should account for “non-traditional” students who may not be able to study abroad. Although no other students commented on the accessibility or cost of study abroad programs specifically, this may indeed be a concern for many students.

In response to this concern, alternative ways of connecting to another culture may need to be sought out, and service learning is one possibility. Service learning, defined broadly, is an approach to learning where real-life community service is built into an academic curriculum (McPherson, 1996). In foreign language service learning courses, students carry out community service projects in their own communities with the target culture while communicating in the target language (for descriptions and impact of various service learning projects, see Bettencourt, 2015; Bloom, 2008; Grim, 2010; Lear & Abbott, 2008; Plann, 2002; Zapata, 2011). In fact, successful service learning projects can be so impactful that they may offer students “a mini abroad experience, allowing them to apply classroom knowledge, develop communicative competence, and increase their cultural awareness in an immersion setting” (Plann, 2002, p. 332).

In the present study, although no language majors rated or commented on the usefulness of service learning (since no students had taken this type of course)², the teachers did rate its usefulness, and they commented on the benefits of having students apply their language skills in the real world. Teachers rated its usefulness at a 3.4 (out of 4: very useful) because language use is “contextualized”, it has “real-world relevance”, and students “are likely to be highly motivated to communicate successfully”.

Finally, participants also addressed the topic of learners’ connection to another culture when discussing the types of skills and knowledge that language majors gained from completing their coursework. Students mentioned gained cultural knowledge and information about history, respect for other cultures, awareness of the differences in other cultures, and also a profound understanding of both the target and their own culture. Several students also discussed how learning a foreign language can help with functioning in a new culture and gaining “traveling confidence”. Teachers’ views were aligned with students’ insofar as affirming that courses in the programs helped students to be “open to the global economy and culture”, and helped to develop “an enthusiasm for travel” and the ability of “thinking differently”.

In summary, when it comes to the extent of learners’ connection to another culture, the data shows that learners and teachers were generally aligned in their perceptions (although teachers did not think that students were as connected to another culture as they may have thought). The results suggest that students need to be made more aware of study abroad opportunities, as study abroad appeared to be the largest need that learners had with respect to gaining a deep cultural connection to their language. Teachers were aware of this need, but they also highlighted the advantages of service learning, which can offer some of the same benefits as a study abroad experience. Due to factors such as funding, study abroad may be difficult for some learners to take advantage of, but taking service learning courses may be a viable alternative. Having access to these courses may

therefore be a learner need that students themselves are not aware of, and departments may want to create and advertise these courses with this need in mind. Furthermore, it was found that although study abroad (and service learning) is highly important, teachers and students agreed that the actual courses in the programs can assist students in connecting to another culture and forming a profound relationship with it.

5.3 Learners' expectations of their programs

Students' open-ended responses revealed several recurring topics having to do with this theme. As discussed above, acquiring speaking proficiency was a skill that students expected to gain more of (a need that teachers also echoed). Students also discussed their expectations regarding course offerings. Namely, in programs that did not offer these courses as regularly (French and German), students discussed the need for phonetics courses (particularly for improving pronunciation), and, to a lesser extent, translation courses. Interestingly, both of these courses are connected to speaking skills: phonetics is directly related to speaking, and translation and interpretation courses can be connected to oral proficiency, which further illustrates the importance that students placed on oral ability. Moreover, from the Spanish program, another student stated that their phonetics and linguistics courses were their most valued classes, and several others discussed how those courses helped them to understand English better and to develop pattern recognition and critical thinking skills. Indeed, recent publications support the importance of incorporating phonetics and translation work into a language curriculum: Correa and Grim (2014) discuss the benefits of improving pronunciation skills specifically through self-created audio recordings; for translation, Correa (2014) and Enkin and Mejías-Bikandi (2016) discuss the value of using online translators as a way to raise metalinguistic awareness of first and second languages.

While several teachers also noted the value of phonetics, translation, and linguistics courses for both a curriculum and for remaining competitive as a "top-flight program", they also brought to light the role of literature courses in the foreign language curriculum. In their open-ended responses, many teachers agreed that literature is an integral component of any language program, though one teacher noted that it could fall "somewhat short" in a curriculum since more time may need to be allocated to language learning. Some teachers also expressed doubt regarding students' opinions of literature, acknowledging that expectations regarding familiarity with literature and history are "probably higher on the professoriate side than on the students'" and that students might feel there is "too much emphasis on literature too". The importance placed on literature at the expense of "speaking 'freely' opportunities" was also noted, which has recently been discussed elsewhere as well: Hertel and Dings (2014) found that teachers may be perceiving literature as less important partly due to an increased institutional focus on preparing students to use language as a communication tool in the world and workforce.

When it comes to students' opinions about literature, although several noted its importance for language learning, they seemed to place a higher priority on acquiring language proficiency and did not always see the strong connection between literature and the "speaking and practical skills" they wanted to acquire, which aligns with what teachers thought about their students' perceptions. Given these opinions, more activities requiring student-to-student conversations may need to become more integrated into literature classes. More specifically, activities involving whole-class or pair discussions, with the teacher serving as a facilitator and the students as the main dialogue controllers, may help students to freely communicate in these courses, thereby helping them develop higher-level speaking skills through extended discourse (Darhower, 2014). However, it should be noted that in order for students to take full advantage of such discussions, they must know they need to prepare for class adequately and read all material.

With respect to student assessment within the program, this was where expectations did not align as well. Overall, students believed that their grades and the way they were assessed accurately reflected what they knew, and therefore, their expectations of their programs regarding assessment were met. Teachers, however, overwhelmingly believed that grades do not accurately reflect what

students know, but what they “know right now”. Others said that grades are not necessarily correlated with proficiency and that “testing discrete bodies of knowledge [does not] adequately test [students’] ability to function in the foreign language”.

One way to address this misalignment in perceptions is to look at responses to the question, asking if there should be an additional requirement for graduation. According to students, 63% stated that there should be an additional requirement, and students overwhelmingly believed that some type of oral proficiency exam or study abroad or service learning/practicum experience (that would work to improve oral skills) should be required.

For teachers, 56% also stated that there should be an additional requirement. Teachers agreed with students that it should ideally address oral proficiency skills: several indicated the need for a proficiency exam, or that study abroad or an equivalent experience (i.e. service learning/internships) could be a useful requirement. One teacher specifically noted that requiring students to demonstrate a level of Advanced-Low proficiency on the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) scale (which is already a requirement for pre-service language teachers – see Moeller, 2013, for discussion) would help to ensure a credible level of proficiency. Teachers who did not suggest a requirement be added still noted the importance of Advanced-Low proficiency, as well as supported preparing students for a formal certificate of proficiency upon graduating.

In summary, when it comes to learners’ program expectations, teacher and student perceptions were mostly aligned except in a few cases. Both groups highlighted oral proficiency as a skill that needed to be practiced and incorporated more into the curriculum through several possible courses like phonetics and translation. The data also showed that teachers may place a larger emphasis on literary studies than students, although both students and teachers showed a need for literature courses that incorporate more free student-student communication. Where program expectations did not align as well was in regard to assessment: students believed they were assessed fairly, whereas teachers believed that exams did not and do not accurately test what students know. One way to achieve a more aligned view and expectation of assessment is to add either a graduation requirement or optional opportunity in which students’ oral proficiency skills could be addressed and assessed. Two suggestions were an oral proficiency exam or some type of experience (e.g. study abroad or service learning/practicum) that would help to improve and simultaneously display the oral skills gained from the program. This type of requirement or opportunity was a learner need that was highlighted by both students and teachers.

5.4 Learners’ preparation for their futures

The issue of preparation for the future was seen throughout students’ open-ended responses. For example, in order to be prepared for the workforce, one student suggested the creation of a portfolio of work that could be presented to prospective employers upon graduating, and they also noted the need for preparation in writing job-related documents such as resumes, emails, CVs, and cover letters. Another student also discussed the need for practicing oral proficiency in several mock job interviews throughout the semester, since, “after all, the job market is what [students] are preparing for as undergraduates”.

There were several comments made by teachers that also had to do with this theme. One of them mentioned that “students do not have a lot of opportunities ... to engage in projects where they would put to practical use some of the things they learn in the classroom”. Another teacher brought up the possibility of having students demonstrate their language abilities by completing a portfolio of oral and written work in lieu of having an oral exam as a potential graduation requirement. Thus, students and teachers both expressed concern regarding preparing students for their futures. However, teachers did not explicitly express all of the same needs related to the job market that students did (e.g. wanting to know how to write a resume, wanting to have mock job interviews, wanting to create a portfolio of work specifically for prospective employers).

It is important to note that although teachers did not comment on all of the same types of preparation activities that learners discussed, teachers were very aware of the impact of a language major

on future job opportunities in and outside of the USA. Several students also commented on the value of a foreign language major for “any job market”: for example, “it’s a skill no one can take from you. Aids in business. Separates you from the pack of applicants”.

One way to bridge the gap between teachers and students when it comes to preparing learners for their futures is to recognize that students have a need when it comes to job market preparation. Language departments may therefore want to consider incorporating more business-type of writing into their upper-level writing courses (e.g. writing professional resumes and emails) as well as creating a workshop series for graduating seniors where students can develop skills needed for the job market. Another possibility would be to require students to create a portfolio of oral and written work at the end of their programs (portfolios were a suggestion made by both groups). Students could then use these portfolios for a variety of reasons, one of them being job interviews. Another relevant point to make is that a final project such as this could also be made part of a department’s assessment plan (see Liskin-Gasparro, 1995), which importantly, as one teacher put it, enables faculty “to monitor improvements in [a] program over a period of time”. Interestingly, the use of portfolios for this dual purpose has also been discussed elsewhere (Morris & Cooke-Plagwitz, 2008; Williamson, 1994, personal communication as cited in Liskin-Gasparro, 1995).

In summary, when it comes to preparing students for their futures, students and teachers were generally aligned in their opinions. Both groups affirmed the usefulness of a foreign language major for future job opportunities. Also, teachers and students both noted that more could be done to prepare students for their futures. However, a learner need that arose in the data was preparation for the job market, which was not a need explicitly discussed by teachers. Specifically, students noted particular types of activities (e.g. writing resumes, practicing for interviews) that they would have found useful. Several ideas that would work to fulfill this need could be the creation of a workshop series as well as having students create a portfolio of work upon graduation, which could be used to showcase their abilities during job interviews.

6 Conclusion

This study has discussed the alignment of perceptions of outcomes for teachers and students when it comes to the undergraduate foreign language major. Importantly, it also examined the learner needs that arose from the data, as well as teachers’ awareness of those needs. By considering three programs in our analysis, the study’s implications may be interesting to a variety of educators who teach in diverse settings. Overall, the results of the study suggest that students’ and teachers’ perceptions of program outcomes generally align well, and that teachers are largely aware of learners’ needs, and may bring to light potential learner needs that students themselves may not be aware of (e.g. the need for service learning courses). In summary, several important issues that educators may want to consider for language majors are: more speaking and free student-student communication opportunities in the curriculum, a required or optional activity where students showcase oral skills upon graduation, service learning opportunities and advertising them adequately, more phonetics and translation courses, and more opportunities (e.g. a workshop series and creation of a portfolio) where students can engage in real-world tasks that will prepare them for the job market.

Several of the curricular issues that educators may want to consider as a result of this study can also be related to ways a department can highlight its strengths to both administrators and the community, and to ways it can enhance recruitment and retention efforts. This can be important given various budget and enrollment concerns that many language departments now face in a cost-conscious education environment. First, creating service learning opportunities can help illustrate outreach implications of language education to students, administrators, and the community. Second, establishing a process for administering and keeping track of graduating students’ (or a sample of graduating students’) outcomes on an official exam that tests oral proficiency (e.g. the ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview [OPI]) can help demonstrate learners’ language ability on a larger scale to administrators. Learners may also value official exam scores, as they could be helpful for acquiring employment. Importantly, there is also another option using the ACTFL OPI, which may be more

cost-effective. With the OPI, teachers at an institution can become certified testers, and are then able to carry out the test and provide free “advisory” ratings to students; students can then use these unofficial ratings as evidence of their proficiency levels, and departments can use them for outcomes assessment. Lastly, developing a process for measuring students’ language abilities in a less costly way through exit/capstone-type projects (e.g. through an experience such as service learning/internship or through student portfolios) can also be helpful for students in attaining future employment, and can be useful for departments as a way to display evidence of successful program outcomes.

Although further and more large-scale research studies examining teachers’ and students’ perceptions of outcomes are needed, the findings from this small-scale study may be useful for language departments as they approach various curricular changes and improvements. Further research may want to focus on examining: the alignment of students’ and teachers’ perceptions of outcomes in individual programs, how well perceptions of program outcomes align with various other demonstrable measures of learning, and perceptions and outcomes of newly designed exit/capstone experiences (e.g. service learning, student portfolios). Indeed, further research on outcomes assessment is important, and it is also timely given that projects in this area may serve the dual purpose of advancing research and showcasing program strengths, thereby making them valuable for internal departmental use as well.

Notes

¹ A statistical analysis was not appropriate for these questions, because three different language programs were involved in this study, with an uneven number of student and teacher participants from each one. A statistical analysis was only run when questions dealt with global issues that were equally applicable to all three programs (e.g. questions asking about preparation in the four skills and about the importance of study abroad).

² No service learning courses were offered as part of a language major. However, service learning was included in the student survey, because a student could have taken a service learning course at a different institution, or a Spanish student could have taken a 200-level Spanish service learning course that is offered in the department (this course would not count towards the major because it is at the 200-level).

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Appendix 1

Student (S) and Teacher (T) Survey Questions on Perceptions of Language Program Outcomes

1. S: How do you feel your language classes/programs have prepared you?

T: How do you feel our classes/programs prepare our language degree students?

	1-Not at all well	2-Not enough	3-Well	4-Very well	I don't know (I don't have enough information)*
Speaking	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Listening	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Reading	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Writing	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

2. S: In addition to the above skills and other areas covered in the curriculum (e.g., literature, culture, linguistics), what other areas/skills do you think you should know about/possess upon graduation?

T: In addition to the above skills and other areas covered in the curriculum (e.g., literature, culture, linguistics), what other areas/skills do you think students should know about/possess upon graduation?

3. S: Do you feel the curriculum could have prepared you better in any way?

T: Do you feel our curriculum could prepare students better in any way?

	No		Yes
Please rate:	1	2	3
			4

4. S & T: Please comment on your answer above.

5. S: What did you expect to learn in this language program that is not part of the program of studies?

T: What do you expect students to learn that is not part of the program of studies?

6. S & T: What argument would you give a student to convince him/her to pursue a degree in your language?

7. S: How do you feel about the way you were assessed (that is, do you think your grades have reflected what you actually know)? How do you think your grades in classes should have been broken down to reflect what you really have learned?

T: How do you feel about the way students are assessed (that is, do you think grades have reflected what students actually know)? Do you think there should be a better way to break down grades in order to reflect what students really have learned?

8. S: Do you feel you have developed a "second identity" by being able to speak another language? In other words, do you feel connected to another culture and language?

T: Do you feel your students have developed a "second identity" by being able to speak another language? In other words, do you feel they are connecting to another culture and language?

1-Not at all 2-Barely 3-Somewhat 4-Yes I don't know (not sure)*

9. S & T: Please comment on your answer above.

10. S: In addition to language proficiency, what else have you taken away from your experience in your language classes/program?

T: In addition to language proficiency, what else have you seen that students take away from their experience in our classes/programs?

11. S: How do you think your goals and expectations for the program/your classes line up with the instructors'?

T: How do you think your goals and expectations for the program/your classes line up with the students'?

12. S: If you have participated in a study abroad program, how important do you think study abroad was for your language education?

T: How important do you think study abroad is, or can be, for students in B.A. language programs?

	Not important		Very important
Please rate:	1	2	3
			4

13. S & T: Please comment on your answer above.

14. S: If you have taken a service learning course, how helpful do you think service learning was for your language development and progress?

T: How helpful do you feel service learning courses are, or can be, for students' language development and progress? (Please note: If you do not know what service learning is, please leave this question blank.**)

	Not useful		Very useful
Please rate:	1	2	3
			4

15. S & T: Please comment on your answer above.

16. S: Overall, were you satisfied with the education you received in your language classes/programs?

T: Overall, do you think students are satisfied with the education they receive in our language classes/programs?

	No			Yes
Please rate:	1	2	3	4

17. S & T: Please comment on your answer above.

18. S & T: In addition to passing the courses in the program, do you think there should be an additional graduation requirement for students to graduate with a B.A. in the language?

Yes No

19. S & T: If you answered “no” above, please say why. If your answer was “yes”, what kind of requirement?

**Note.* No participant chose the “I don’t know” answer option in questions where it was provided.

***Note.* All teacher participants rated the usefulness of service learning.