

Foreign Language Instruction in the United States: A National Survey of Elementary and Secondary Schools

Executive Summary¹

Foreign language education in the United States is at a unique moment historically. Foreign languages have been recognized as part of the "core" curriculum in the Goals 2000: Educate America Act, and the document on national standards, Standards for Foreign Language Learning, was released to the profession in 1996.

The Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL), through funding from the U.S. Department of Education, conducted a survey of elementary and secondary schools in 1997 to gain greater understanding of current patterns and shifts in enrollment, languages and programs offered, curriculum, teaching methodologies, teacher qualifications and training, and reactions to national reform issues. The survey was designed to replicate CAL's 1987 survey in an effort to show trends during the decade of 1987 - 1997.

The survey was sent to a randomly-selected sample of principals at approximately six percent of all public and private elementary and secondary schools in the United States. This report is a summary of the results of questionnaires completed by principals and foreign language teachers at 1,534 elementary schools and 1,650 secondary schools (an overall 56% response rate). The respondents represented public and private schools, ranging from pre-school through grade 12, throughout the 50 states and the District of Columbia. The survey was designed with two purposes in mind: to provide a national portrait of foreign language education at the elementary and secondary levels, and to produce information on foreign language education on a state by state basis. Highlights of the study follow in terms of key national results and conclusions.

Amount of Foreign Language Instruction in Schools

In the past decade, foreign language instruction in elementary schools has increased by nearly 10 percent. In 1987, just over one in five (22%) elementary schools reported teaching foreign languages; by 1997 the percentage had risen to 31% (approximately one in three), a statistically significant increase. (*See Figure 1 on page 2*). The percentage of secondary schools teaching foreign language remained fairly stable--87% in 1987 and 86% in 1997. (*See Figure 2 on page 2*).

¹This summary is compiled from A National Survey of Foreign Language Instruction in Elementary and Secondary Schools (expected publication date, 1998) by Lucinda Branaman and Nancy Rhodes. The research was funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Postsecondary Education, International Research and Studies Programs, under grant #P017A50054 to the Center for Applied Linguistics. The opinions expressed here do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of the Department of Education. For more information, contact Lucinda Branaman or Nancy Rhodes, Center for Applied Linguistics, 4646 40th Street NW, Washington, DC 20016-1859 (survey@cal.org) 12/97

Figure 1: **Elementary Schools** Teaching Foreign Languages
(Public, Private, Total) (1987 and 1997)

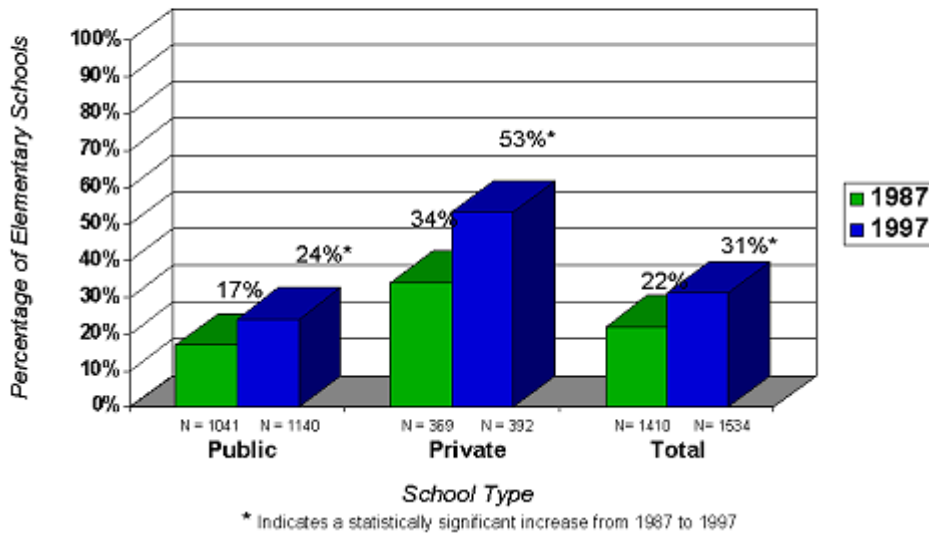
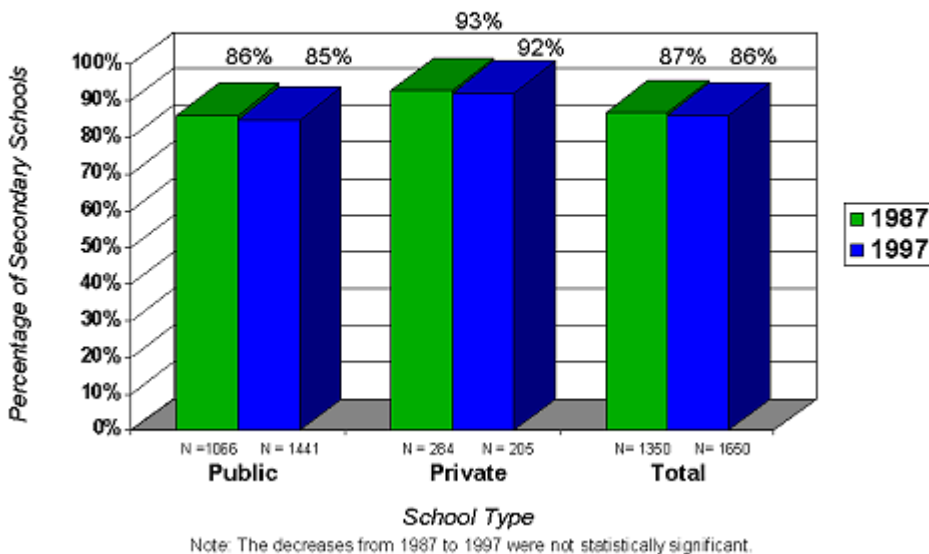


Figure 2: **Secondary Schools** Teaching Foreign Languages
(Public, Private, Total) (1987 and 1997)



Student Enrollment in Foreign Language Courses

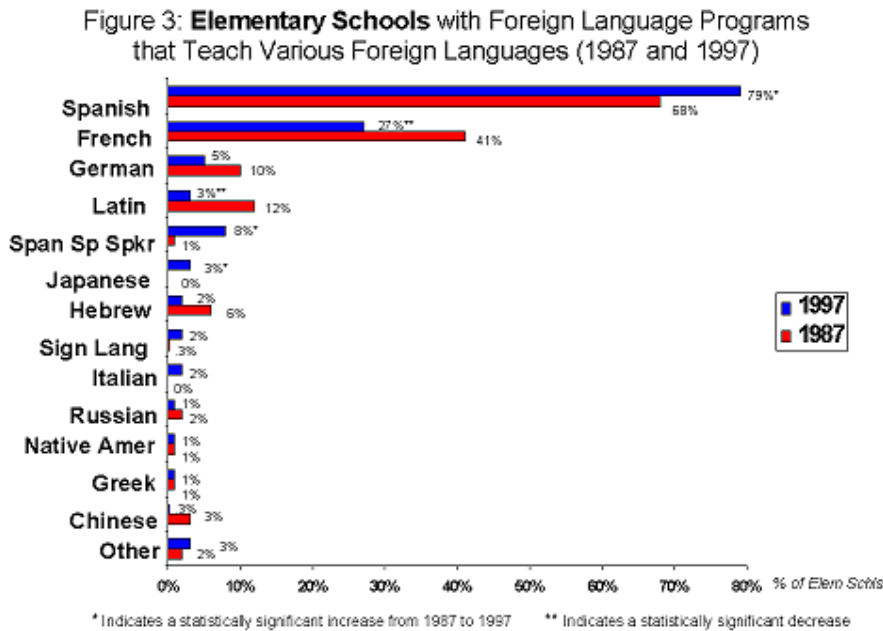
In 1997, over four million elementary school students (out of 27.1 million) were enrolled in foreign language classes across the country. Over two-and-a-half million students were in public schools and one-and-a-half million in private schools. (Comparable data were

not collected in 1987.) In the public elementary schools that taught foreign language, approximately half the students were provided foreign language instruction.

At the junior high/middle school level, about three million students (out of 8.2 million) were studying foreign languages in 1997. Over seven million high school students (out of 13.5 million) were studying foreign languages. Private enrollments represented 12% of the junior high/middle school and high school totals. Those students studying languages represented over half the students in a school (51% at public schools and 78% at private schools).

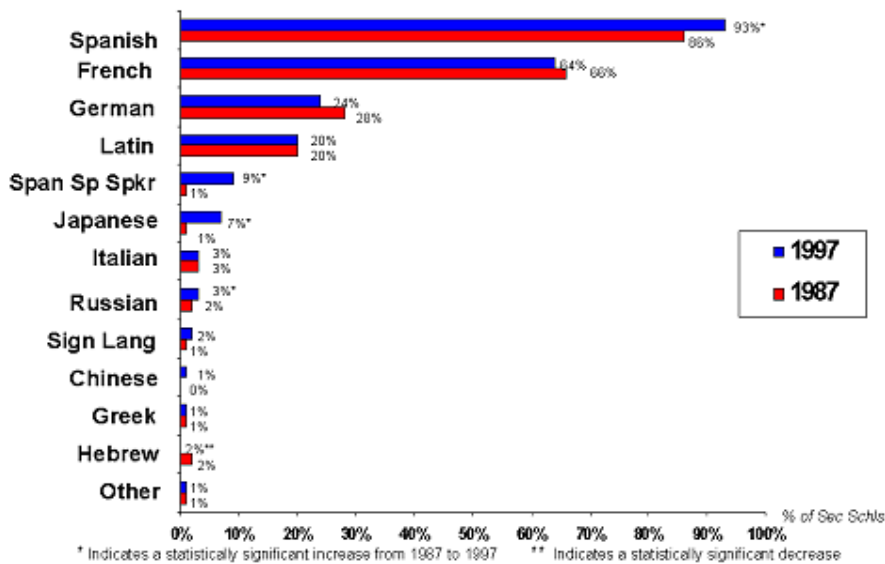
Languages Taught

Spanish and French continue to be the most common languages of instruction in elementary schools. Spanish instruction has increased significantly from 68% of schools in 1987 to 79% in 1997, while French instruction has decreased. (See **Figure 3 below**). Forty-one percent (41%) of the elementary schools offering foreign language instruction taught French in 1987 versus 27% in 1997, a statistically significant decrease. In fact, all other languages remained stable or decreased during the decade except for four--Spanish for Spanish Speakers (up to 8% from 1%), Japanese (up to 3% from 0%), Italian (up to 2% from less than 1%), and Sign Language (up to 2% from less than 1%).



Spanish instruction also increased significantly at the secondary level over the past decade--from 86% to 93% of secondary schools with foreign language programs. (See **Figure 4 on page 4**). French instruction remained fairly stable over this time period (66% of schools in 1987 vs. 64% in 1997). Instruction increased for Spanish for Spanish speakers (up to 9% from 1% in 1987), Japanese (up to 7% from 1%), and Russian (up to 3% from 2%), while all other languages remained fairly stable or decreased in frequency.

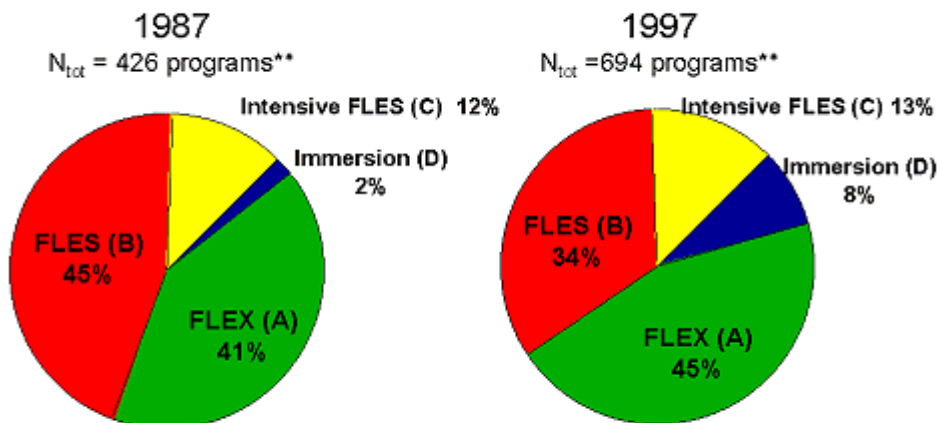
Figure 4: **Secondary Schools** with Foreign Language Programs that Teach Various Foreign Languages (1987 and 1997)



Program Types

Among the one-third of elementary schools that offered foreign language study, the majority (79%) of them provided programs aimed at various kinds of introductory exposure to the language, while 21% offered programs having overall proficiency as one of the goals. (See *Figure 5 below*). This means that only 7% of all elementary schools (increased from 3% in 1987) offered instruction in which the students were likely to attain a high level of fluency, as recommended in the goals of the national standards.

Figure 5: **Elementary Schools** with Foreign Language Programs that Offer Various Program Types (1987 and 1997)



Note: No statistical significance tests were conducted on this data.
 Note: Some schools have more than one program type.

**Base = Total weighted foreign language program types in elementary schools.

As in 1987, almost all secondary schools in 1997 with foreign language programs offered standard classes that included listening, speaking, reading, writing, and culture. There was a significant increase in the percentage of advanced placement classes offered-- 16% of secondary schools, up from 12% in 1987. Language classes for native speakers also increased significantly over this time period (from 4% in 1987 to 7% in 1997). These increases show a modest trend to offer more advanced levels of instruction aimed at producing students competent in a second language and culture. However, it is difficult to generalize from the survey data about the overall proficiency goals of the majority of the programs. Because of the limited number of hours per week of instruction (see below) and the small number of schools offering conversation classes (4%) or regular subjects taught in other languages (2%), it is hypothesized that most of the secondary school programs do not have students attaining a high level of proficiency.

Levels Offered and Hours per Week (Secondary schools only)

Secondary schools usually offered courses ranging from Level 1 to Level 4, reflecting the number of years of instruction, with some schools offering Levels 5 and 6. As in the last survey, 1997 secondary schools with foreign language programs offered a variety of levels of foreign language instruction, and the majority of these classes tended to be taught in a non-intensive manner. The most common length of class-time for almost all of the languages was five hours of instruction per week. At the high school level, 13% of schools offered a variation of year-long classes. The most common option was 80-90 minutes/day for 18 weeks (block scheduling).

Scheduling Classes (Elementary schools only)

As in 1987, the vast majority of elementary schools that had foreign language programs in 1997 taught language classes during the regular school day (92% in 1997 vs. 89% in 1987). More than three-quarters of the elementary schools offered classes for the entire school year. The schools that did not offer classes for the whole year offered classes anywhere from two to twenty weeks.

Funding Sources (Elementary schools only)

As was the case a decade ago, the majority of elementary school language programs used regular school funds for salaries, materials, and expenses incurred by teachers.

Curriculum Guidelines

Most of the elementary and secondary schools teaching foreign language reported having an established foreign language curriculum or set of guidelines for their program (elementary = 70% in 1997 vs. 64% in 1987; secondary = 88% in 1997 vs. 85% in 1987). More high schools than middle school/junior high schools reported that there was an established foreign language curriculum. The curricula at all school levels tended to be developed by the teachers at the school.

Teaching Materials

As in 1987, the three most popular types of materials for teaching foreign language at the elementary level were teacher-made materials, audio-visual materials, and commercially published textbooks/workbooks (94%, 94%, and 85% of elementary schools with foreign language programs, respectively). All of these materials were used significantly more frequently at the elementary level than a decade ago. In addition, literature and materials from the target culture were used by about 7 in 10 elementary schools with a foreign language program in 1997. Computer-based instructional materials were used by a significantly greater percentage of elementary schools in the current survey (41% in 1997 vs. 14% in 1987).

At the secondary school level, the three most common instructional materials used by schools with foreign language programs continued to be audiovisual materials (99%), commercially-published textbooks/workbooks (98%), and teacher-made materials (95%). The percentage of secondary schools that used these types of materials increased significantly since 1987. Materials and literature from the target culture were also used quite frequently--92% and 83% respectively, in 1997. Computer-based instructional materials are now used by over half of the secondary schools with foreign language programs (52% in 1997 vs. 20% in 1987), a statistically significant increase.

Sequencing

Sequencing (articulation) of foreign language instruction from elementary to secondary levels is still a major issue facing the schools. Twenty-six percent of elementary school respondents (down by 5% from 1987), indicated that their districts place students who have studied foreign language in elementary school in Level I foreign language classes along with students with no prior knowledge of the language.

Although the majority of the secondary schools surveyed did not have students who had previously studied languages in elementary school, those that did either placed those students in Level 1 classes (14% of schools), in classes specifically designed to provide continuity (9%), in exploratory classes (5%), in more advanced classes (4%), or in subject matter classes taught in the language (fewer than 1%).

Teacher Qualifications

The average number of foreign language teachers in both public and private elementary schools with language programs was two. At the secondary school level, the average number of foreign language teachers was three (3 public; 4 private).

Nearly half (46%) of responding elementary schools reported that one or more of their foreign language teachers is a native speaker of the language being taught (44% public; 48% private). One out of three secondary schools (33%) reported that one or more of their foreign language teachers are native speakers of the language being taught (31% public, 44% private; 29% middle/junior high, 39% high school).

As expected, secondary school foreign language teachers were more highly certified than elementary foreign language teachers. Eighty-two percent of the responding secondary schools said that their foreign language teachers were certified to teach foreign languages at the secondary level, while only 19% of the responding elementary schools reported that all their teachers were certified for foreign language teaching at the elementary level. These results reflect the lack of available teacher training and certification programs geared toward the elementary foreign language teacher. In addition, many states do not yet require licensure or endorsement for elementary school foreign language teachers. Due to changes in question format and wording, comparisons could not be made between 1987 and 1997 results for this question.

Use of Foreign Language in the Classroom (Secondary only)

Although still low, there was a slight increase in the percentage of time secondary foreign language teachers spend speaking in the target language in the classroom. (No statistical tests were conducted because of minor differences in question format.) In 1997, over one in five (22%) responding secondary schools reported that language teachers use foreign language in the classroom most of the time (75% to 100%), vs. 18% in 1987.

In-Service Training

Staff development and in-service teacher training has increased significantly in the past decade. In 1997, over two-thirds (67%) of elementary schools that offer foreign language classes reported that their language teachers had participated in staff development or in-service training during the past year compared to only half (53%) in 1987. At the secondary level, over three quarters (76%) of schools with foreign language programs reported that their teachers attended staff development or in-service training, a statistically significant increase over 1987 (69%).

Assessment

Respondents from elementary and secondary schools indicated a wide range of strategies for assessing students' language proficiency. The top three assessments at both levels, in order of those most used, were selected-response tests (multiple choice, matching, etc.), short-answer tests, and students presentations or demonstrations.

After the first three, the following assessment strategies, in order, were most used in elementary schools: authentic activities, oral proficiency interviews, translation exercises, student portfolios, student self-assessment, and others. For secondary schools, assessment strategies used most often after the first three were translation exercises, authentic activities, oral proficiency interviews, student portfolios, other standard exams, and student self- assessment. This was the first time this question was asked so there is no comparison data from 1987.

Standards

Thirty-seven percent (37%) of elementary school respondents indicated that teachers in their schools were aware of the national Standards for Foreign Language Learning (1996) and/or state standards. Over half of the elementary schools that were aware of standards noted that their schools' foreign language curricula had changed due to an awareness of standards.

More than six out of ten (62%) of secondary schools that have foreign language programs indicated that teachers at their schools had an awareness of the national Standards for Foreign Language Learning and/or their state's version of the standards. Over half of those respondents indicated that their schools' foreign language curricula had changed because of the standards. High school respondents were more aware of the standards than middle school/junior highs, who in turn were more aware than elementary school respondents.

Major Issues

The most cited problems in foreign language education in elementary schools continued to be funding shortages, inadequate in-service training, and inadequate sequencing from elementary into secondary schools. In 1987, the shortage of teachers was considered to be a major problem among respondents. In 1997, the ratio of teachers to students was an area of concern.

Shortage of funds, shortage of teachers, inadequate sequencing, lack of quality materials, poor academic counseling, and inadequate in-service training were all major problems in 1987 for secondary schools with foreign language programs. These same issues continued to be areas with which secondary schools cite considerable concern in 1997. In addition, 1997 respondents cited concern with the ratio of teachers to students.

Conclusion

The profile of foreign language instruction in the United States revealed by the survey shows that the amount of foreign language instruction in the last decade has increased by nearly ten percent at the elementary school level and has stayed relatively stable at the secondary level. At both levels, more than half of the schools not currently teaching languages were interested in doing so in the future.

A number of positive trends are evident from the survey results: (1) language classes for native speakers have increased dramatically at both elementary and secondary levels; (2) the teaching of less commonly taught languages has increased at the elementary level for Japanese and at the secondary level for Japanese and Russian; (3) computer-based instructional materials were used by a significantly greater percentage of schools in 1997 than in 1987 (although we have no data on the effectiveness of technology in the language classroom); (4) staff development and in-service training has increased significantly in the past decade in both elementary and secondary schools; (5) teachers at

the secondary level are using the target language more in the classroom; and (6) about half the schools teaching foreign languages said that their teachers were aware of national and/or state language standards; of those, over half the schools changed their curricula due to this awareness.

Despite these positive trends, there is still reason for concern about the limited number of K-12 long-sequence language programs that are designed to educate students linguistically and culturally to communicate successfully in the U.S. and abroad. Well-articulated elementary and secondary programs are still the exception rather than the rule, and intensive instruction that aims at a high level of proficiency, as outlined in the national standards document, is scarce.

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