

From Students to Teachers: An Investigation of Why Students Choose to Teach Spanish

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Although teaching is an ancient and honored profession, only within the past 20 to 25 years has the teaching of foreign languages evolved into a discipline separate from that of teaching literature. Enrollment patterns in foreign language study are also changing, as all children, regardless of cognitive abilities or career plans, are allowed to study languages as early as pre-kindergarten. Despite these changes, however, many policies challenge the worth of foreign language study. In Georgia foreign language is the only discipline required of college-bound students that is not included in the post-secondary core curriculum. Given these current changes in policy and profession, several interesting issues arise: what factors influence students' decisions to major in foreign language education; how early do students decide to teach a foreign language; why do students decide to teach a foreign language, and how can this information benefit the profession.

In order to find out as much as possible about students' decisions to major in foreign language education, I decided to ask students to talk with me about the process of becoming a teacher, using classic qualitative research protocol. I met individually with approximately seven students who were Spanish education majors, or who had plans to declare this as their major. I recorded the initial interview, during which students talked about their decision and events that led to that decision. At the end of each interview, I asked students to keep a journal, e-mail me letters, and return for further discussions with me.

Although I plan to follow these students for four to five years, the early findings are interesting. Bearing in mind that the sample size is small, it was, nevertheless, fascinating to discover that none of the participants declared Spanish education as a major when initially enrolling in college. The most influential factor in changing their majors was success in their first college Spanish course. It was surprising to discover that students with no previous study of a foreign language made the decision to major in Spanish education while enrolled in the introductory 101 course. This would seem to indicate that students who did not take Spanish in high school may choose Spanish as a major if they are successful in their first college Spanish course. Although the belief among faculty and administrators used to be that the "core" courses did not support the major, findings from this study show that early success in courses required of non-majors may indeed influence students' academic career plans. It will be interesting to follow this trend as new admissions policies route students with foreign language deficiencies away from senior institutions.

A second finding concerns the motivation for teaching Spanish. The participants in this study consistently, and without collaboration, used the phrase "to give something back." When explaining what they meant by this phrase, most became emotional. Several recalled a moment when they first realized the power of the language, and their subsequent desire to use what they knew to affect change and learning. Others explained how important it had become to them to influence children in a positive way about people in other countries. Others confessed that they had been discouraged from attending college, and that the success in a seemingly difficult foreign language course had heightened their self-esteem. They wanted to teach Spanish to show that all students can learn another language.

A third finding is a sense of awareness of the process of becoming a Spanish teacher. This was articulated in participants' descriptions of their individual strengths and weaknesses in such phrases as "I know (the courses) will get harder, but I can do it; I know I should remember how to say this in Spanish; You know I said that wrong, but you know what I mean; I taught the whole lesson in Spanish; I was proud of myself for not speaking English when I went to Mexico."

Although these findings are tentative and perhaps limited at this point in time, they offer insight regarding students who major in Spanish education. As I analyze the data collected so far, I am made more keenly aware of the importance of first impressions. I had no idea that so many of the students in the introductory courses were considering Spanish as a major. I had assumed that they were only enrolled to meet the "core" requirement. This finding has influenced how I approach teaching those required courses. To me the data also show that students who declare Spanish education as a major need mentoring, not just advisement to complete their program of study. I believe that the findings regarding self-awareness show that students look to their academic advisors as tutors in the content area, as well as professional role models. I am eager to continue the research for this project, hoping to inform the way I teach, the way I advise students, and the way I mentor those who aspire to join me in my profession. •

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