

Report on the “q” requirement

After reading and discussing the material provided by the CRC, the Committee reached a consensus on the question of language courses and the “q” Core Curriculum requirement.

Our basic position is that Language Departments should submit a limited number of language courses, rather than their full roster, to the CRC.

It seems to us that the following should suffice:

- at least one standard language course per language actually taught – and in some cases two such courses, depending on the needs of the particular language and department and the backgrounds of the students involved (see below); these courses should be somewhat adjusted to better meet the “q” requirement;
- where possible or appropriate, one or two new or revised courses, more specifically designed with “q” in mind but standing apart from the standard language acquisition sequence.

1) Standard language courses

We believe that elementary language courses should not be counted in fulfillment of “q”; instead, language Departments should identify and submit one or two “late-intermediate” or “early-advanced” (e.g. higher 100-level or lower 200-level) courses for each of the languages they teach.

The timing and content of a particular level in a particular language acquisition sequence vary with the languages themselves. For example, a “late-intermediate” competence corresponding to a fourth semester of study in Spanish or French may imply another time frame in Chinese or Arabic, or in ancient languages such as Latin or Biblical Hebrew. Individual Departments will have to make this determination for each of the languages they offer.

The above-mentioned levels offer a reasonable terrain for compromise between the need to include actual language courses in the Core Curriculum and the need to make such an inclusion meaningful, rather than mechanical. Students who have reached or just exceeded the intermediate level of competence are in a good position to reflect on their own experience as practitioners of a new language; accordingly, Departments should partly adjust the content of the language course they want included in the Core, so as to include a “reflexive” dimension that encourages students, for instance, to recognize and analyze discrepancies, rather than assuming equivalences, between what they end up saying and thinking in the new language and what they would in English.

When submitting these courses for approval, Departments should explain how they think this analytical objective can be achieved, e.g. by including a few special sessions in the syllabus, or by altering the content of the entire course. (It should be noted that although these alterations would technically be implemented for the sake of non-majors and non-minors, they would obviously affect all students taking the course, thus also strengthening the “body of work” done on the subject by majors and minors.)

It is also important to point out, however, that best practices and formats may take a little time to emerge especially in the newfangled standard courses: as exciting as the prospect of an improved late-intermediate level can be, for example, we also know that this is a crucial, fragile moment in any language-teaching sequence; tinkering will require a great deal of prudence and may demand further revisions down the line.

We acknowledge as well that heritage speakers are bound to experience this “reflexive” aspect somewhat differently; but it does not follow that the experience would be useless to them. In fact, heritage speakers who place at the intermediate level or below are likely to benefit as much as their classmates, albeit in their own specific way, from the “reflexive” practices mentioned above. In any case, it would be difficult for us or the CRC to establish sensible general criteria allowing for the individualized treatment of such speakers, whose situation and competence vary enormously.

However the presence of relatively more fluent heritage speakers, which is significant in several language programs, is one of the reasons why a given Department might want to submit two standard language courses instead of just one, so as to allow, for example, non-majors placing directly at the 200 level to meet the requirement through a slightly more advanced course.

Hence a rule of thumb: if a Department chooses to submit two standard courses in a given language instead of just one, the second course should correspond to a higher level – typically the level that immediately follows the “intermediate” course sequence.

2) New – or renovated – course(s) on the subject of language(s)

This second category of offerings would not necessarily fit a Department’s standard language acquisition sequence, and may diverge from regular proficiency objectives, thus attracting a different audience. The level at which a course of this kind should be offered is a matter to be determined by the Department. Such courses, for example, could deal with more than one language and compare them, or focus on specific types of proficiency (reading, conversation...), or assume a theoretical or historical stance and be developed in conjunction with another (language or non-language) Department.

Several such courses already exist and can be refurbished for the occasion; others could be created. The idea here is to recognize and encourage innovation by taking the “q” requirement at face value: all kinds of formats and contents can help “understand the nature of human languages and their speakers,” and language Departments should be encouraged to seize the opportunity.

Several questions remain. One concerns the students who place beyond the levels targeted here (e.g. directly at the 300 level) without pursuing a major or minor. Such students could focus on the other requirements (such as “p”), but as far as “q” is concerned, we may have to decide whether they can be assumed to have fulfilled it, or are still supposed to do so. Students like these might perhaps be encouraged to take on another language.

Another question concerns teaching. It is clear that most (or all) of the relevant standard courses and at least a few of the “new” ones will be taught by TAs, PTLs or instructors, keeping in mind that a successful language class must be kept small by definition. The requirement would not be viable otherwise. It follows not only that the CRC has to be comfortable with this, but also that Departments will need time to properly train their teachers according to the new goals.

Finally, and assuming that the CRC endorses the ideas above, we would like to suggest that it might be best if we approached language Departments first (informally) on this matter, so as to explain our reasoning and get a sense of the kind of course they could submit. Would the CRC agree with this procedure?