

SPEAKIN' IN TONGUES

Foreign languages studies at UNL need revamping



You may never get out of here. You may spend the rest of your life shackled with the chains of a requirement you can't beat because the game is rigged, and there's no way to beat it.

Graduation is a myth, a dreamed-up concept for people to try and give them something to run for, a carrot in front of an ass, goading them on toward an imaginary line that says, "You've learned enough. Go on. Get out of here."

Early last year, there was a rumbling across the modern languages department. Word had it the ax was poised to fall. Hack! Slash! Cut! Gossip said that, at one point, nearly half of the 101-202 classes for foreign languages would be nixed. Budget cuts, the mill said.

Were they spared? This time, it seems. Is the possibility still there? Sure is.

There's a basic paradox involved. First, you need the modern languages requirement to get out of here. On the other hand, we don't want to give the department money. It's inefficient, we say.

Let's break it down.

Required Reading

Those of us who weren't privileged enough to finish the modern languages requirements in low school had to prepare for four semesters of raw, unabashed hell.

Even many teachers in the department think this is a bit much. Two teachers I talked to said they thought two semesters would be fine.

The idea of a foreign language requirement is to break people out of their circular thinking, to make an alien concept a little more domestic. Put people outside of their own brains for a moment and into someone else's.

Thinking in another language makes you adapt, adjust. It's like a tick in your crotch — there's that awkward sense that something's wrong, but you can't put your finger on it until it bites you in the ass — figuratively speaking, of course.

"If one less person looks at two people speaking another language and thinks to him or herself, 'This is America. Speak English, will ya?' we've done our jobs," Dan Hutt, a UNL Spanish teacher, told me.

When I was young and foolish, I thought English should be the official language of the United States. Maybe somewhere inside me, underneath the grime, scum and sinewy tissue, I still do.

But I understand that it ain't that easy. We need to extend a little tolerance to those who are forced to grapple with our barbaric tongue.

A lot of you, though, don't see it that way. You're still whining and bemoaning about how your neighbor barely speaks English. Grow up, will ya?

So, yeah, you should have to take a foreign language class. Four semesters is too much. Two five-credit classes is hard enough to squeeze into a schedule, but then you have to shoehorn in another six? Thanks, but no thanks. Keep your used car salesman, trust-in-us-'cause-we're-giving-you-a-sweet-deal-really attitude to yourself.

But a semester or two of thinking outside your circle of influence will do you some good. It will build you some character.

And trust me, you could use it.

Use vs. Grammar

There's a constant debate in the modern languages department over how the classes should be taught. There are two schools of thought, and while I listened to proponents of both sides, only one of them made any sense to me. The rest reeked of Grade A B.S.

Modern language classes are a bitch, just because students don't adapt well to them. In fact, most of the teachers I talked to think foreign



languages should be taught much earlier in life.

But this is neither here nor there, because the higher-ups in the Congress (opposite of Progress, and don't you forget it) think that schools shouldn't get another dollar from their pockets. Ain't America grand?

Here at the U. (as in U. Were Screwed), the modern languages department is suffering from a schism over the way foreign languages should be taught.

On one hand, you have those who want to teach language as an application. The focus is on communication. Having a language means nothing if you can't use it.

This school of thought is about the ability to interact with other people. I may not speak perfect Spanish, but I can ask where the bathroom is. And let me tell ya, when you need to take a crap, who cares how good your grammar is, as long as you find out where they keep the can.

I find logic in this. It makes some approximation of sense to me, learning a language in order to apply it and to use it. If I have to learn a language, I damn well better be able to ask for the toilet, the police and the fastest route out of town.

The other school of thought reeks of a foul odor, like the decaying corpse of a mongoose, squashed by an absent-minded semi-driver. It's that unforgettable stench of blood, feces and half-digested rattlesnake that says "Don't buy this, no matter how sweet the deal."

It's a school that believes in rite and rote, learning word for word in a boring, useless progression. Memorize all 30 conjugations of this verb, they say, because you might need to know the most obscure form for some arcane reason.

Language is full of odds and ends that never make much sense, and even a native speaker doesn't know them all. Hell, I just use this crazy language called English — don't expect me to know what class the word "were" falls under.

Does it honestly make sense to anyone to teach the near useless possibilities of a language that no one in his or her right mind is ever going to need? *Donde el baño, donde es el baño or donde esta el baño* — it doesn't really make any difference as long as I get the answer I need and find out where to drop my drawers.

This is something that is obvious to those of us on the lower rungs of society. Sure, we don't have degrees in education, no hundreds of hours studying the way language is taught — we're just people in need of a place to take a shit.

We need to break out the whips and start

cracking them at the people of the second school of thought, yelling "Back! Back!" like people possessed by an ancient thunder god, passing lightning bolts down from our lofty cloud perch. Strike these bastards in the ass with a few million volts of unquenched power.

Making the grade

On the other hand, you gotta get out of these classes, and since I've decided that you need to take at least one class, here's a few things that need to get fixed, and quick.

A few people at the university, both in and out of the department, are willing to say that the modern languages department isn't doing its best for students. They spoke under condition of anonymity, and, frankly, I don't blame them — something is rotten in the state of Nebraska, but hell, they need to make a living too.

"We fail a ton of students," one teacher told me. "Within a semester, I've watched half a class withdraw or fail. It's more common at the upper level classes, too."

Even if these allegations are only partly true, they're more than they should be. You're paying to learn; they gotta help by teaching.

Some people claim grade inflation is the major kink in the system. Are they being inflated? Is it a problem?

People can get through the system without speaking a word of the language. I've known them and met them. Other people simply have problems with memorization and are trapped for years. Is this a sign inflation might be a problem? Perhaps.

But accusations of grade inflation are indicative of a bigger problem — some teachers just aren't doing their jobs. If some students can get to 202 and barely speak a word of a language, that's bad. It's also just as bad if a student takes 101 three times and still hasn't picked up a thing.

These kids just ain't learning squat. You can blame the students if you want, but they aren't the only ones at fault here. Maybe it's time the department went through a major reevaluation of itself, because as it stands right now, it's not working.

Learning by committee

Another thing that's killing the foreign language classes is that the tests are composed as a section. That means that during any semester, all the people taking Spanish 101 will take the same

tests, even though the teachers are different.

While teachers all offer input to the tests, no one teacher controls what his or her students are to be tested on. This also means that you may not have learned what you will be tested on. Don't let them blow sunshine up your ass; this is a bad idea.

In one of the classes I took in my attempts to get some grasp on Spanish, one teacher actually crossed a section off the test, saying, "Ignore this. You haven't learned this, and I told them not to put it on the test, but they did."

What, we got a bunch of monkeys making up these tests? Is the department so paranoid that they don't trust teachers to make individual tests? Does some section head know better what a teacher's students have learned than the teacher?

More than this, almost all the foreign language classes are listed as being taught by "staff" in the N-Roll, as if all teachers were the same, which they aren't. Force this college to play hardball with the rest of us — list the damn teachers so that we as students can tell you who's teaching us well and who isn't.

This would also add a sense of continuity from semester to semester. If I could have taken four semesters from the same teacher, hell yes, I would've done it.

Shedding the chains

Students get stepped on a lot. The modern languages program's got lots of little things wrong with it that need to get fixed, 'cause they're adding up to a hailstorm of hell for students wanting to graduate. I dug my way out, and it nearly killed me, so you, too, can fight the battle and win. But it shouldn't be impossible.

Nixing the foreign language requirement isn't the way out, but neither is ignoring this problem and hoping it'll go away. Students are tired of being bent over the desk and told that "teacher knows best."

Someone's got to break the chains, so let's bust loose.

The journalism guerrilla still encourages you to aid in the fight. He is continuing military maneuvers with the university presently, but targets are still more than welcome. All communiqués should be sent to journalisticwarfare@hotmail.com. All pleas for mercy will be duly ignored.

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