

OVERVIEW AND RESOURCES

Opportunities and Objectives for Language Study

The Language Education Council

Meaningful international experiences for undergraduates benefit from integrated language and cultural awareness, especially when course objectives include inter-cultural learning in the context of study, research, internships or service. Interpersonal engagement with contrasting, or even dissonant, cultural patterns, is an opportunity for students' cultural learning and this learning is deepened through encounters in the local language.

Successfully designing opportunities for students to engage with, learn about, and experience communities and populations that are culturally and geographically different from their own involves direct attention to understanding language and culture. The specific skills and proficiency levels needed will vary according to the content of the course, the nature of the planned interaction with a community, or the extent of the research or internship experience.

The overview and resources provided below are meant to support applicants for the Engaged Curriculum grants and the Internationalizing the Cornell Curriculum grants in considering language study as a facet of proposals based in non-English speaking contexts or countries.

Section 1: Relevance of language study

For an extended overview of the fields of intercultural competence and language proficiency, see Alvino Fantini ([ch. 16, "Language"](#) in *Routledge Handbook of Language and Intercultural Communication*, Routledge Press, NY, 2011). The article summarizes relevant theories and provides student testimonials about the importance of language use in abroad settings (p. 273).

Including language study across the disciplines – when and why?

Meaningful international experiences – if defined by student growth in cultural understanding and awareness – rely on students' abilities to communicate and to interpret their encounters. Without some knowledge of language, students miss, or can misinterpret even the most basic interactions they have in other cultures.

Cornell – through the Office of the Provost, the Language Education Council, the Internationalization Council, and the vice provosts for international affairs and undergraduate education – supports an increase in language study and inter-disciplinary language study opportunities.

Proficiency in language – how much is enough?

Students can, and do, learn language in classrooms. Without instruction, students may learn a language when fully immersed, but formal instruction can be beneficial even in these cases. Language learning takes time, work, and requires interaction.

The amount of time required for language learning depends on the language in question and whether students are monolingual or bilingual. Assuming the students are English speakers (and not bilingual), it takes longer to learn some languages than others. For instance, it takes 240 hours of instruction to reach mid-level intermediate proficiency in Spanish or French, while it takes three times as long in Chinese or Japanese. These figures come from the experiences of students taking government-sponsored courses with very few students per class in intensive programs. A listing of [language learning “times-to-proficiency”](#) is available from the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages.

The proficiency level required depends on what students will be asked to do in the course. If a Cornell course is focused on English-based content learning, work, or research in another country, but provides opportunities for students to greet people, buy items, and interact to some extent in a community, mid-level novice language understanding should suffice. To prepare for this type of experience abroad, students might take a pre-departure short-course on the language, they might engage in guided independent study of the language, or they may participate in formal language learning activities during travel.

If the students will use English to submit Cornell coursework, but have traveled to another country to collaborate with local partners in research, project, or service teams, the students may need mid-level intermediate language skills. To reach mid-level intermediate language ability, most students need two to three language courses in a language considered relatively easy to learn.

To rely on usable language proficiency, most students will need three to five semesters of college-level language study. The two most common systems for discussing language study and proficiency are the measures devised by the [American Council on Teaching of Foreign Languages \(ACTFL\)](#) and the [Council of Europe](#). The levels mentioned above are based on those in use by the ACTFL.

IES, the Institute for International Education of Students, reviews communication expectations for students in abroad situations at various levels. [An excerpt from this IES publication](#) outlines what speaking abilities students can be expected to have at three levels: Novice Abroad (corresponding to ACTFL Novice High), Emerging Independent Abroad (ACTFL Intermediate Mid), and Independent Abroad (ACTFL Advanced Low).

The full publication “[IES Abroad Map for Language & Intercultural Communication](#)” is an excellent source for understanding the relationship among student language level, expectations of student participation, and program responsibilities. A copy of the full report can be requested [online](#).

Course learning outcomes and language study

Language study can support many Cornell student learning outcomes. [University-wide learning outcomes](#) are online.

Section 2: Logistics of language study

Options for language study currently in use at Cornell

- **Cornell offers regular programs** in more than 30 languages, taught by experienced, professionally prepared and dedicated teachers. These classes are consistently given high ratings by students. Beginning classes meet 5 days a week and generally require 5-10 hours a week of preparation.
- **Jumpstart Language Courses.** The Language Education Council is experimenting with very brief courses to give students a “jumpstart” in learning the language of their abroad program. The data are not all in, but these one-credit courses, meeting 14 times a semester, may enable students to feel more engaged with the culture of the country or community they are visiting and to feel positive about learning more about the language and country. These courses orient students to the language and prepare them for some formulaic and basic exchanges. Most students find they are better able to adjust to cultural situations and many feel prepared to continue learning the language.

Examples

Elementary Swahili for Global Health was offered in collaboration between the Global Health Program in Nutritional Sciences and the Africana Studies and Research Center. The one-credit course, which meets for an hour and a half per week, is taken in the spring in preparation for the summer abroad experience in Tanzania. Most of the students found their language skills helped them act more appropriately and build better relationships.

The Global Environmental Service Learning Initiative accepts 10 students for a three-week experience in Thailand. The students work in project teams with 10 peers from a Thai university. During the fall, a faculty member in Natural Resources teaches a course preparing the students for this experience. The students are also required to take a one-credit course in Thai language and culture.

- **Intensive Four-Week Course.** To be delivered over four weeks in May, this intensive language course would bring beginner language students to mid- or high-level novice language use. Courses like this would be arranged through customized negotiations with the appropriate language department.
- **Foreign Language Across the Curriculum (FLAC) section of an existing course.** FLAC courses are a pedagogical approach that support students’ use of foreign languages (and learning about cultural perspectives raised in non-language courses), by offering 1-credit language courses (or “sections”, as they’re called) designed to complement a non-language course. In the past, Cornell has offered FLAC sections in Spanish alongside courses in Latin American Studies, but one can imagine them in many different languages alongside courses in other area studies or disciplines/colleges.

FLAC sections are typically discussion-based and meet one hour each week. These sections enrich the main course syllabus with readings in the target language and examination of cultural issues related to topics in the main (or non-language) course. They are voluntary (i.e., do not form a required part of the main course, but offered alongside the course for interested students). Cornell students have responded enthusiastically to FLAC sections so

far, citing increased cultural and global understanding of issues related to their course work, in addition to increased oral language proficiency.

Graduate students within the course discipline who have the target language fluency lead the FLAC sections (and are paid a stipend). The obligations of the faculty teaching the main courses are limited to approving the syllabus/reading list and general monitoring. For projects proposing to pilot FLAC sections, it is anticipated that the Language Resource Center will provide training and mentorship for the graduate student teachers.

Contacting language programs or instructors

Languages are (almost) all taught in the College of Arts and Sciences. The modern language programs are each part of a department concentrating on the literature and cultural studies of the language region. For example, all Cornell's Asian languages are taught in the Department of Asian Studies. The departments offering languages are:

Africana Studies and Research Center	Asian Studies
German Studies	Comparative Literature (Russian)
Near Eastern Studies	Romance Studies

For a list of languages taught in the college, see the [college's listing](#), with links to the courses. For a list of languages linked to programs and instructors, including those offered in an online consortium, see the [Learning Resource Center](#).

For general information about the language programs, how they are structured and courses offered, contact the Language Resource Center (Dick Feldman <rf10>).

To plan a course including some form of language study, contact the [department chair](#) in which the language resides.

For consultation about developing a new language course or a new form of language study, consult Scott MacDonald, Senior Associate Dean of the College of Arts and Science.