

When Less becomes More: On the Growth of Less Commonly Taught Languages in Adult Immersion Language Programs¹

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Abstract

This article identifies factors of successful adult immersion language programs. After describing the history of and current learning environment at the Middlebury Language Schools, a comparison of enrollment patterns from the Middlebury Language Schools in Vermont with national enrollment data shows that less commonly taught languages (LCTLs) appear to be more successful in adult immersion language programs compared to commonly taught languages (CTLs). The article will discuss factors that may contribute to the strength of LCTLs at adult immersion language programs and conclude with recommendations that support LCTL programs in adult immersion language programs and beyond.

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Introduction

Every summer, the Middlebury Language Schools welcome around 1,500 students who enroll in intensive language programs. Currently, participants can choose among eleven languages that include both commonly taught languages (CTLs) and less commonly taught languages (LCTLs).² This article will use the Middlebury Language Schools as a case study to identify factors that contribute to the growth of LCTLs in adult immersion language programs. After describing characteristics and the history of this learning environment, this article will compare current enrollment patterns at the Middlebury Language Schools with nationwide figures. This comparison shows that the CTL are smaller and LCTLs are larger at the Middlebury Language Schools compared to their relative size across post-secondary education in the United States. After discussing factors that can explain the strength of LCTLs at the Middlebury Language Schools, I will conclude by proposing a set of factors that can support LCTLs in adult immersion language programs.

The Setting: Middlebury Language Schools

The Middlebury Language Schools are part of Middlebury College in Vermont and offer intensive language summer programs for adult learners in eleven languages. Whereas the programs in Spanish, French, German, Russian, Chinese, Japanese, Portuguese, and Hebrew are held on the main campus in Vermont, the programs in Arabic, Italian, and Korean are currently located at Mills College in Oakland, California.³

The student body at Middlebury during the summer is heterogeneous. Less than 10% of participants in the Language Schools are also enrolled as undergraduate students at Middlebury

² In this article, I classify Spanish, French and German as CTL and Russian, Chinese, Italian, Korean, Japanese, Portuguese, Hebrew, and Arabic as LCTL regardless of current program size at the Middlebury Language Schools.

³ In 2020, all eleven programs will return to Vermont as a result of a new partnership with Bennington College.

College during the academic year. Whereas the majority of participants are enrolled as undergraduate and graduate students at other institutions of higher learning, the Language Schools attract a significant and growing number of post-traditional college learners who join an intensive summer language program for career purposes or for personal enrichment.

In addition to 7-week and 8-week programs for non-degree seeking students, Middlebury offers MA and DML (Doctorate of Modern Languages) degree programs in some languages. Students enrolled in these graduate programs sign up for up to ten summers for 6-week sessions to fulfill degree requirements. Middlebury's graduate programs are an attractive option for established professionals, who are not able or willing to enroll as full-time students in conventional graduate programs at research universities due to the opportunity costs that are associated with leaving the workforce for several years. To this day, a large number of Middlebury's graduate students are secondary school language teachers who enroll in a degree program for professional development purposes while continuing to teach foreign languages in their local communities during the school year.

The Middlebury Language Schools use a full-immersion approach to language learning. Pioneered at Middlebury in 1915, all programs have continuously used a language pledge (Freeman, 1975). At the beginning of each summer, participants publicly declare to only use the language they intend to study for the duration of the entire programs. The Middlebury Language Schools enjoy an excellent academic reputation. Although it is difficult to exactly quantify the contribution of the language pledge to the impressive educational outcomes that participants of the Middlebury Language Schools achieve, the overall effectiveness of Middlebury's intensive summer programs has been highlighted in the context of numerous studies conducted by external researchers (Dewey, 2004; Dewey, 2007; Freed, Segalowitz, and Dewey, 2004; Fukuda, 2014; Isabelli-García and Lacorte, 2016; Liskin-Gasparro, 1998; Rifkin, 2005).

In order to support participants to exclusively use the target language for the entire duration of the summer program, all language programs offer co-curricular activities that include clubs focusing on athletics, culinary arts, calligraphy, and crafts as well as an ambitious program of cultural events focusing on performing arts and guest lectures. Muramatsu's (2018) monograph on language learner agency within the School of Japanese suggest that the co-curricular activities contribute to the foundation of a robust community of practice that allows students to use and refine their language skills while exposed to a broad variety of cultural products, practices, and perspectives from the target languages' cultures.

Historical Development: From CTLs to LCTLs

In order to understand the dynamics between CTLs and LCTLs in this unique educational setting, one has to consider both the early years as well as the growth patterns of the Middlebury Language Schools. Table 1 provides an overview of the languages and identifies the year the program was added to the curricular offerings. It also identifies current degree program offerings.

Table 1: Language, Year of Formation, and Current Degree Options at the Middlebury Language Schools

Language	Year	Non-Degree	MA	DML
German	1915	+	+	+
French	1916	+	+	+
Spanish	1917	+	+	+
Italian	1934	+	+	+
Russian	1945	+	+	+
Chinese	1966	+	+	-
Japanese	1970	+	-	-
Arabic	1982	+	+	-
Portuguese	2003	+	-	-
Modern Hebrew	2008	+	+	+
Korean	2015	+	-	-

The Middlebury Language Schools' start-up phase more than a century ago is marked by offerings in the three big European languages: German (1915), French (1916), and Spanish (1917). Lilian Stroebe, Professor of German at Vassar College, founded and led the German School in Middlebury during a time when students and teachers of German were unable to go to Europe due to World War I (Matthias, 2019). For nearly the first two decades, no additional languages were added. The legacy of the Language Schools are languages that are still regarded as CTLs. Moreover, the foundation of the Language Schools happened in response to geopolitical realities in the shadows of World War I.

Eight languages joined the three original CTL over the next 100 years, often in response to external stimuli. For example, Russian (1945) and Chinese (1966) clearly resonated with political priorities of the post-WW II era. (Merrill, 2015; Bai Jianhua, 2018), whereas the establishment of programs in Japanese (1970) and Portuguese (2008) was inspired by economic booms in East Asia and Brazil (De Biaji Moriera, 2011). This is not surprising, since Brecht and Walton (1994) observed 25 years ago that the rise and fall of LCTL correlates strongly with globalization, geopolitical developments, and national security concerns.

Until the 1960s, the Middlebury Language Schools only admitted advanced speakers into their graduate degree programs. Only with opening of the School of Chinese, non-degree seeking students at the beginning and intermediate level were admitted (Freeman, 1975). Today, the non-degree seeking students represent more than two thirds of the student body. The younger and traditional less commonly taught languages tend to have fewer or no opportunities for graduate studies.

Program Size at Middlebury vs Enrollment in Post-Secondary Foreign Language Education

This article will consider current enrollment in the eleven languages taught at the Middlebury Language Schools and compare the relative

size of the program to post-secondary foreign language enrollment in the United States. The data for the Middlebury Language Schools were provided from the administration. The data on post-secondary foreign language enrollment in the United States are based on a report published by the Modern Language Association of America (Looney and Lusin, 2018). Percentages of values larger than three are rounded.

Table 2 lists the eleven languages offered at the Middlebury Language Schools. The eleven languages in the table are not the top eleven languages taught in the United States post-secondary education. For the sake of this analysis, enrollments for ASL, Latin, Ancient Greek, and Ancient Hebrew were omitted, because these languages are not offered at Middlebury. Percentages of values larger than three are rounded.

Table 2: Language Enrollment at Nationally and the Middlebury Language Schools

Language	National	Middlebury Language Schools
Spanish	712,240 (58%)	267 (18%)
French	175,667 (14%)	227 (16%)
German	80,594 (7%)	117 (8%)
Japanese	68,810 (6%)	64 (4%)
Italian	56,743 (5%)	60 (4%)
Chinese	53,069 (4%)	133 (9%)
Arabic	31,554 (3%)	197 (14%)
Russian	20,353 (1.7%)	199 (14%)
Korean	13,936 (1.1%)	36 (2.5%)
Portuguese	9,827 (0.8%)	43 (3%)
Hebrew (modern)	5,521 (0.5%)	106 (7.3%)
Total	1,228,314 (100%)	1449 (100%)

In the 2015/2016 academic year, a total of 1,228,314 students at post-secondary institutions across the United States were enrolled in classes in the eleven languages offered at the Middlebury Language Schools. Of these 1,228,314 students, 58% were enrolled in Spanish

classes. Close to four out of five students, 79%, were enrolled in programs representing the three classical commonly taught languages (Spanish, French, and German). Only roughly one-fifth of language learners enrolled in a language other than Spanish, French, and German.

During the 2016 summer session at the Middlebury Language Schools, 1,449 students were enrolled in one of the eleven language programs. As in the national statistics, Spanish (18%) and French (16%) take the top spots and are the most commonly taught languages at Middlebury during the summer. However, the dominance of Spanish is less pronounced at Middlebury Language Schools compared to the MLA data for the United States. Not even one out of five students at the Middlebury Language Schools is enrolled in a Spanish class.

Whereas German is generally considered a commonly taught language nationally, in the context of the MLS one would have to characterize German as a LCTL. In 2016, fewer students enrolled in German (8%) than in Russian (14%), Arabic (14%), and Chinese (9%).

The smaller the language, the more pronounced is the difference between the enrollment at Middlebury and elsewhere in U.S. post-secondary education. Whereas only one in 222 language students in the United States is enrolled in a Modern Hebrew class, at the Middlebury Language Schools one in 14 students focusses on Modern Hebrew.

Discussion

The differences between the program enrollment at the Middlebury Language Schools and the nation-wide post-secondary language enrollment can be synthesized as follows: At the Middlebury Language Schools, CTLs are smaller and LCTL are larger compared to post-secondary education across the nation. In the following paragraphs, I will discuss external and internal factors that can

explain the Middlebury Language Schools' unique enrollment pattern as well as the success of LCTLs in this learning environment.

Geopolitical factors, such as national security considerations and economic development are a significant drivers of student interest, public support, and philanthropic engagement. All of these aspects result in enrollment growth. One could hastily assume that geopolitical factors would affect national enrollment and the Middlebury summer programs equally. However, this is not the case. Study abroad programs offered by American universities overseas are among Middlebury Language Schools' greatest competitors for intensive summer language study. Hence, geopolitical factors that result in real or perceived concerns among Americans about potential safety issues in host countries, make domestic immersion programs a more appealing choice for some students. Often, the parents of traditional college-age learners are part of an enrollment decision. If students or their families perceive a particular study-abroad location as unstable, they gravitate towards a domestic intensive language program. Unfavorable perceptions among Americans of certain study abroad destinations partly explain the success of the Middlebury Language Schools' programs in Arabic and Russian.

Another factor that partly explains the success of LCTLs at Middlebury relates to the uniqueness of a program in the larger educational marketplace. Students of CLT have hundreds of choices for intensive summer programs, both internationally or domestically. In contrast, there are fewer options for most LCTLs. Sometimes a specialized curriculum further contributes to the uniqueness. For example, Middlebury's Modern Hebrew summer program offers the only MA with an emphasis on Teaching Hebrew as a Second Language.

LCTL summer programs at Middlebury are a week longer than programs focusing on CTLs to accommodate for the difficulty of languages with non-western writing systems and fewer cognates with the English language. Longer programs are more expensive to operate, and therefore the tuition fees are higher. Moreover, few professionals and students have the opportunity to dedicate an entire

summer to study a foreign language. Both the price tag and opportunity cost result in a higher enrollment barrier for LCTL at Middlebury. However, in order to the reverse these factors, some languages have developed specialized short-term refresher programs that run between one and three weeks and are targeted at life-long learners, heritage learners, or alumni. The LCTLs at Middlebury, most notably Russian, Italian, and Modern Hebrew, have been creative in increasing accessibility through offering more and more affordable flexible short-term offerings.

With the exception of the Middlebury Language Schools' program in Modern Hebrew, only those programs that were established before the end of the Second World War (German, French, Spanish, Italian, and Russian) offer Middlebury's doctoral degree. The degree option may add prestige to a program, but it requires disproportionately high levels of teaching, advising, and administrative resources to support the relatively small number of students that are enrolled⁴ in these programs. In contrast, most of the younger LCTL programs have a focus on non-degree seeking students and are thus geared towards beginning and intermediate language learners. By concentrating largely on non-degree seeking language students, these programs focus on a much larger market segment of potential participants.

Conclusion

The Middlebury Language Schools are in a fortunate situation. Despite collapsing enrollment numbers across CTL and LCTL in U.S. higher education (Johnson, 2019), demand for language studies at Middlebury during the summer has remained strong. Moreover, the financial health of the Language Schools allows generous distribution of student financial assistance that substantially reduces the sticker price. The Middlebury Language Schools provide the context for an insightful case study on the dynamic between CLT and

⁴ Over the past thirty years, the MLS have awarded less than 100 doctoral degrees. However, in the last few years the number of students who entered the DML program has grown.

LCTL in domestic intensive language programs. I will conclude by summarizing factors that enabled the growth of LCTLs in this environment and that may help growing programs in a variety of post-secondary institutional settings.

- In order to grow, LCTLs need to look forward. Whereas a long legacy creates a strong foundation for programs, it can also prevent necessary curricular or instructional changes. Instead of relying on tradition, successful programs find inspiration for curricular and instructional optimization in applied linguistics research findings and approaches endorsed by professional organizations. The shorter institutional histories must be regarded as an advantage of LCTLs and not as a liability.
- Successful LCTL programs must offer highly flexible curricula that are geared towards specific wants and needs of diverse groups of learners. These programs are nimble and attentive to shifting student demographics and are aware of different learning styles and preferences. Programs consider carefully their potential students' academic and professional aspirations. Content-based language classes that offer a variety of topics beyond the traditional literature and culture canons provide opportunities to appeal to the actual needs and wants of our students.
- Successful LCTL programs must invest in projects that help them to systematically assess and document outcomes and use this information to optimize instruction and curriculum. For the successful LCTL program, assessment is more than just another requirement mandated by the administration. These programs see assessment as a diagnostic toolbox in the context of a continuous improvement framework that helps instructors and curriculum developers to better understand and to address program strengths and weaknesses.
- Successful LCTL programs offer and encourage participation in high-impact professional development that is calibrated to state-of-the-art approaches endorsed by applied linguists and their relevant professional organizations. Offering such opportunities

does not only directly impact the quality of the teaching, but it also attracts engaged and engaging teachers to a program.

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