SPOTLIGHT ON EDUCATION PROFESSIONALS IN THE SCHOOLS –
YESTERDAY, TODAY, AND TOMORROW (SEPPS):
A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE TIED TO DEMOGRAPHICS, STAYERS, MOVERS, AND LEAVERS

Demographics Characteristics and Career Paths for Foreign Language Teachers:
A Review of Literature

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Introduction

There is optimism about the future. Scholars from a variety of disciplines are conducting more research than ever on teacher education... We must continue to openly discuss and debate the role of teacher education in a democratic society such as the United States (Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005, pp. 756-757).

This manuscript examines the scholarly literature to shed insight into the demographics characteristics and career paths taken by foreign language / world language teachers.

In 2005, Cochran-Smith and Zeichner edited the seminal book, Studying Teacher Education: The Report of the AERA Panel on Research and Teacher Education, which examined characteristics of our nation’s teachers, where they teach, and the influence of demographic variables. Gaining an understanding of how these and other factors relate to the progression of teachers’ career paths is critical, as Cochran-Smith and Zeichner report an average teacher turnover rate of 30 percent, with 6 percent never returning to the profession.

With the dean and associate dean professing interest in determining the influence of school of education alumni in the schools and on student learning, the Neag School of Education (herein, Neag School) at the University of Connecticut introduced an initiative -- A Spotlight on Education Professionals in the Public Schools - Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow (SEPPS). This initiative includes a review of literature (including information from professional organizations, NCES, AACTE, state departments, journals, etc.) of the demographic characteristics and career paths that are representative of educators from each field. This review would provide information such as background characteristics (including gender, race/ethnicity, age, type of employment), factors prevalent among stayers, movers, and leavers, and projections of future trends in the
field. While Cochran-Smith and Zeichner’s (2005) piece is now considered seminal, in many ways the information in this manuscript and accompanying documents updates the information from that 2005 book, and further elucidates field-specific teacher data (e.g., elementary, bilingual, world language, and music education). It also includes information about educators who are not teachers – including school counselors, school psychologists, and principals. Also, throughout this manuscript, we borrow from the writing of Billingsley (1993) in the area of special education to apply to the terms used across educators in all fields. As recommended by Billingsley (1993) and now illustrated in figure 1, “stayers” (retainees) is the label given to those who remain in the same position in the same school between school years; “movers” (transfers) refers to those teachers who stayed in a position but transferred to another school (in the same or a different school district), or who transferred to another type of teaching position; and “leavers” includes those who left the profession, for reasons such as retirement, finding another job in a different field, returning to school, or taking a job other than teaching at the school (e.g., school administration).

![Educators’ Career Path](image)

**Figure 1**: Educators’ career path as stayers, movers, and leavers.
Foreign Language Teachers

Foreign language (FL) education has been a valuable part of the United States educational system for almost a century. Pesark (1936) stated that one of the most meaningful benefits of learning a second language (L2) is “to make Americans better world citizens” (p. 479) and knowledge of second languages has been called “an essential characteristic of a well-educated citizenry that understands global perspectives so that all can prosper in the global community” (Jackson & Malone, 2009, p. 3). However, the main goal of learning an L2 has shifted over the last fifty years. In the past, a basic grammatical grasp of the language was the goal for the majority of students, while more advanced, complex learning was only expected for an elite selection of students (Bell, 2005; Guntermann, 1987; Heining-Boynton, 1991; Schick & Nelson, 2001). With the global economic and political forces of the world today, there is a need for all students to achieve a high level of language learning (Heining-Boynton, 1991).

The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) contends that languages are “at the heart of the human experience” and believes that the U.S. should educate students to become “linguistically and culturally equipped to communicate successfully in a pluralistic American society and abroad” (ACTFL, “National Standards…”). ACTFL, in collaboration with the U.S. Department of Education and the National Endowment for the Humanities, established a set of five categories that encompass the 11 national standards of foreign language education: communication, cultures, connections, comparisons, and communities. These standards take into consideration not only the linguistic aspects of the language such as grammar, but also the more practical application of perfecting multiple forms of communication and making comparisons between cultures (ACTFL, “National Standards…”).
With an increasingly more interconnected world resulting in a global economy, learning languages and being able to act interculturally is imperative in the 21st century. In addition to the obvious advantage of communicating with other people and cultures, learning languages can help foster other 21st century skills, such as networking in “face-to-face interactions via technology, internships and volunteers opportunities in the community,” strengthening flexible thinking and the ability to adapt to new situations, and enhancing vital literacy skills such as exchanging opinions (ACTFL, “Languages as a Core Component…”).

Many schools throughout the nation offer language classes with an emphasis on the middle and secondary levels. According to research briefs released by the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE), Connecticut schools offer a total of 12 foreign languages such as Spanish, Latin, German, Italian, and French. Despite there currently being no language requirement to graduate high school in the State of Connecticut, 91 percent of schools offer at least one language program with Spanish (89.3%) and French (78.6%) the most commonly offered languages (CSDE, 2007). Also, the percentage of students taking language classes in Connecticut has steadily increased over time. For example, in 1991 38,000 students were enrolled in Spanish classes and in 2007 this number had climbed to 71,000 students (CSDE, 2007).

Despite this established need for language learning, the field has been recognized as a shortage-area category for the past five years (CSDE, 2007; CSDE, 2008). According to a National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) survey, of the foreign language teaching vacancies in 2003-2004, 39.7 percent and 29.5 percent were labeled somewhat difficult or very difficult to fill, respectively. The percentage of very difficult vacancies to fill was higher in rural communities (35.2%) than in urban communities (26.3%). Four percent of the vacancies were
unable to be filled for the 2003-2004 school year. For example, foreign language education in Connecticut was designated a shortage area for the 2013-2014 school year. Nearly 10 percent of the available teaching positions were left unfilled due to the lack of qualified applicants. Of the positions that were filled, 19 percent were filled with minimally qualified hires, defined as “those selected from small applicant pools whose quality had been rated poorly by districts” (CSDE, 2013; p. 2).

Characteristics of Foreign Language Teachers

According to the NCES, in the 2007-2008 school year there were 64,200 foreign language teachers within the U.S. Of these, 78.7 percent were female. Those numbers closely align with the gender distribution of foreign language teachers in the 2006-2007 school year within the state of Connecticut (CSDE, 2007). Within Connecticut, 71.4 percent were Caucasian and 22.5 percent were Hispanic, and the majority of the teachers were between the ages of 50-59 years (26.4%) or 30-39 years (25.7%). Over half had been teaching either 3-9 years (35.4%) or 10-20 years (26.9%); 79.9 percent had obtained at least a bachelor’s degree in foreign languages.

It has been argued that language teachers have distinct requirements and characteristics when compared to teachers of other subject areas (Bell, 2005; Borg, 2006; Hammadou, 2001; Hammadou & Bernhardt, 1987; Tedick & Walker, 1994). The focus of L2 learning is not just about learning grammar and vocabulary skills; there is a large emphasis on discovering other cultures and building relationships with these cultures (Heining-Boynton, 1991; Tedick & Walker, 1994). Borg (2006) also suggests that foreign language teachers face the following five challenges that are unique to foreign language departments: 1) the L2 medium of instruction is unfamiliar to the students, 2) constant interaction between teachers and students is mandatory, 3) there is quick deterioration of the subject matter if the foreign language is not consistently
practiced at a higher level, 4) isolation from the rest of the school, and 5) the need to provide many activities that present the foreign language in a real-world context (Borg, 2006; Hammadou & Bernhardt, 1987; Tedick & Walker, 1994).

Additionally, all teachers which include foreign language teachers must activate conversation and other interaction between students since learning and speaking foreign languages is communication-based (Hammadou & Bernhardt, 1987).

**Common Trends in Teacher Attrition**

Many teachers have similar reasons for leaving the profession including lack of administrational support and lack of satisfaction with the hard work one completes (Hobson et al., 2011; Swanson, 2012), but foreign language teachers exhibit some other trends that are unique to the subject area. One example is the role of teaching students about the cultures of other countries. In teaching a foreign language, many teachers wish to inspire intercultural competency among students. However foreign language teachers may feel incompetent to teach the cultural aspects of the foreign language if they feel that they are not sufficiently familiar with the cultures associated to their language of instruction (Byram & Kramsch, 2008; Schrier, 2009; Swanson, 2012).

Secondly, there is the importance of teaching higher level thinking skills and critical awareness of sociocultural and linguistic issues, “but while they find the idea inspiring and exciting, they also find it difficult, if not impossible, to implement” (Byram & Kramsch, 2008, p. 21). Lacking competencies in these areas can lead to lower self-efficacy as well as other issues such as deterioration in classroom management as the students may begin to lose interest in the subject matter (Swanson, 2012).
Another common impediment for foreign language teachers may be the lack of support from administration and other staff (Borg, 2006; Hammadou & Bernhardt, 1987; Hobson et al., 2011). For example, the supervisors or administrators who perform teacher evaluations and observations may not understand the instruction in the L2; therefore, their comments or suggestions may be of little significance to the foreign language teacher (Hammadou & Bernhardt, 1987).

**Improving Foreign Language Teacher Preparation Programs**

It has been suggested that teacher preparation programs should modify the ways in which foreign language teachers are prepared to work within the field (Bueno, 2000; Farrell, 2012; Hammadou, 2001; Hammadou & Bernhardt, 1987; Schrier, 2009; Swanson, 2012; Tedick & Walker, 1994). There is now a desire for a more holistic approach which includes teaching cultural and conversational contexts. Foreign language teachers are required not only to master the language and to teach intercultural competence, but also to learn how to become qualified teachers who are capable of teaching these culture and language skills (Heining-Boynton, 1991). It is recommended that programs should focus on placing pre-service foreign language teachers into the classroom as early as possible alongside a veteran teacher. While working under the supervision and mentorship of a more established foreign language teacher, there is a probable chance that the pre-service teacher will develop a stronger sense of self-efficacy prior to entering the teaching profession independently (Farrell, 2012; Swanson, 2012).

Schrier (2009) agrees that foreign language teacher preparation programs need to be altered but focuses more on preparing pre-service teachers for the typical stressors faced by a foreign language teacher. These stressors may stem from issues with behavior management
within the classroom, or even isolation of the foreign language department from the rest of the subject areas within a school (Borg, 2006; Schrier, 2009; Tedick & Walker, 1994).

Because of a more globally based focus, it may now be necessary to supply pre-service foreign language teachers with more than just linguistic and pedagogical foundations. Tedick, Tedick, and Walker (1994) suggest that pre-service foreign language teachers required to take classes in sociology, anthropology, psychology and political science in order to see how those topics tie into the use of the L2 in its entirety in the world today.

Some teacher preparation programs may even lack a faculty member who is qualified to teach a foreign language-specific methods course (Hammadou, 2001). This leaves it up to the inexperienced, pre-service teachers to attempt to interpret the generic standards and morph them into meaningful goals for teaching a foreign language. In an effort to overcome this lack of clarity and support, ACTFL and countless other organizations, offer various webinars and professional development opportunities that connect qualified foreign language educators to pre-service teachers (ACTFL, “Professional Development Workshops”). For example, ACTFL offers an on-site workshop entitled “Technology Tools for Communication & Assessment” which enables foreign language teachers to have students “demonstrate language proficiency through communication.”

Finally, teacher preparation programs may feel that they need to do more in preparing foreign language pre-service teachers with proficiency tests, such as the Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) and Writing Proficiency Test (WPT), which are often required for state certification.

Hammadou (2011) studied a group of teacher candidates scoring at least an advanced low on the OPI (successful group) and a group scoring below advanced low on the OPI (unsuccessful
group) to discover what strategies were used while preparing. The successful group practiced the L2 for 19.2 hours on average per week outside the classroom versus only 6.2 hours for the unsuccessful group, which was a statistically significant difference ($t = 7.4$, $df = 554$, $p < .001$).

The top five test strategies that the successful group reported were 1) reading newspapers or literature in preceding weeks (39.7%); 2) reading newspapers and literature in preceding months (34.4%); watching television shows and movies in the preceding weeks (30%); practicing with a native in preceding weeks (28%); and listening to music in preceding months (27.8%). These practices were different from the unsuccessful group, which mainly reported listening to music in the preceding weeks (59%) and months (59%). Therefore, perhaps teacher preparation programs can focus on incorporating the strategies of the successful group within the curriculum.

**Language Teachers and Study Abroad**

Some researchers (Wilson, 1982; Yang, 2001) state that the advantages of studying abroad are so great that pre-service teachers of all subject areas should be encouraged to study abroad to experience cross-cultural learning which can then be incorporated into the classroom. The benefits of studying abroad for gaining linguistic and cultural competency in the L2 have been long understood (Bell, 2005; Cushner & Mahon, 2002; Schick & Nelson, 2001; Yang, 2011). However, some (e.g., Hammadou 2001; Morgan, 1975) caution that studying abroad does not automatically ensure higher oral proficiency but suggest that students should “be more purposeful in seeking out opportunities to develop oral proficiency for themselves in study abroad settings” (p. 252).

Researcher (i.e., Brecht & Walton, 1994; Kalivoda, 1977; Wilkinson, 2002; Yager, 1998) have found that study-abroad programs enable students to increase their L2 proficiency through their studies in many different settings. These programs usually offer university classes in a
formal setting, but much of the learning tends to also occur outside of class while participating in “real world” activities. Brecht and Walton (1994) state, “There is little doubt that the bulk of the learning opportunities take place through informal interaction in unstructured environments” (p. 222). For example, when living with a host family, the host family may take the opportunity to correct any grammatical mistakes that are heard during conversation (Wilkinson, 2002).

Bell (2005) found that when 457 postsecondary foreign language teachers ranked the characteristics of an effective foreign language teacher, the item that yielded the highest mean (4.30 out of 5) was “foreign language learners should interact with native speakers of the target language as often as possible” (p. 264).

Furthermore, foreign language teachers who study abroad may gain cultural competency. Fichtner and Chapman (2011) suggest that when studying abroad, foreign language teachers may develop a direct affiliation or identity with a target culture which they can then bring into the classroom. This “may affect…their confidence and level of comfort when teaching about a specific target language culture” (p. 121). On the contrary, if a foreign language teacher has not identified with the target culture, then he or she may be less enthusiastic and/or confident when teaching about it. However, despite living or studying abroad, one student teacher stated that it is extremely difficult to claim to have all of the knowledge and credibility to speak authentically about a target culture within the classroom: “…if I’m trying to represent what actually is going on in Cuba now, it’s not – it’s a farce. I don’t have the practical experience to do it” (p. 127). Also, many languages are spoken in multiple countries, which makes it more difficult for a foreign language teacher to be culturally competent for each of the cultures: “…the problem with Spanish is that there are so many different countries that speak Spanish and I haven’t been to most of them” (p. 127). However, researchers of intercultural competence suggest that
knowledge about cultures is only one part of intercultural competence (e.g., Byram, 1997; Byram, 2008; Byram, Perugini and Wagner, 2013; Holliday, Hyde, & Kullman, 2010; Kramsch, 1993). Knowing how to teach all components of intercultural components has become an important part of the foreign language profession.

**Professional Development for Foreign Language Teachers**

Another common obstacle that foreign language teachers may face throughout their careers is language loss (Colville-Hall, 1995; Hammadou & Bernhardt, 1987; Oxford, 1982; Schrier, 2009). Oxford (1982) defines language loss as “the loss or attrition of one’s native language (L1) or a second or foreign language (L2)” (p. 160). Colville-Hall (1995) attributes foreign language teacher language loss to being absent from the classroom for a number of years, teaching another subject, ceasing travel to a country where the target language is spoken, or continuously teaching a basic introductory level of the L2 without practicing the L2 at a more advanced level of communication. This language loss can lead to lower levels of self-efficacy for foreign language teachers. It is also of enormous concern for teachers “whose primary responsibility is to enable students to communicate in a second language” (p. 991).

To combat language loss, various solutions have been suggested. Recommendations have included attending foreign language teacher conferences, observing other foreign language teachers, networking, taking college courses, and spending a summer in an immersion program where only the L2 is spoken (Colville-Hall, 1995; Oxford, 1982; Schrier, 2009). Since the top three student expectations of outstanding foreign language teachers are 1) having a thorough knowledge of subject matter, 2) being well-prepared, 3) being fluent in the L2 (Moskowitz, 1976), it is imperative that foreign language teachers strive to maintain a high level of proficiency in the L2. Department heads also cite “evidence of proficiency in L2 to be taught” as
the number one requirement when searching for new foreign language teachers (Hammadou, 2004).

Unfortunately, increasing content area knowledge and skills can be particularly challenging for foreign language teachers. When other teachers wish to strengthen knowledge of the subject matter, they can read a book, visit a museum, or watch a movie (Borg, 2006; Hammadou & Bernhardt, 1987). Foreign language teachers, on the other hand, have a more difficult time finding authentic and meaningful experiences within budget and time constraints to practice and develop their L2 skills. In addition, there may not be sufficient time and resources provided to foreign language teachers by the administration of the school to foster high levels of professional development and language improvement. However, various resources are made available to foreign language teachers in Connecticut via organizations such as the Council of Language Teachers (COLT), the CSDE, and ACTFL at the national level. A quick glimpse at the COLT website reveals a list of over 50 opportunities for foreign language teachers to develop and advance their L2 skills both within the U.S. and abroad.

The Career Path of Foreign Language Teachers

When looking at all of the public and private school teachers who left the profession in the 2007-2008 school year (NCES, 2008), dissatisfaction with the administrators (12.8%) and dissatisfaction with the lack of support received from the administrators (12.3%) were the most common reasons following 1) change of career, 2) retirement, and 3) pregnancy.

Since foreign language teachers tend to deal with more stress than teachers of other subjects (Bell, 2005; Borg, 2006; Hammadou, 2001; Hammadou & Bernhardt, 1987; Tedick & Walker, 1994), it is essential that this support be in place in order to encourage foreign language teachers to stay.
A lack of self-efficacy with foreign language teachers may result from a feeling of inadequacy when teaching about foreign cultures and speaking the language fluently (Colville-Hall, 1995). Therefore, foreign language teachers who stay may participate in exchanges, immersion programs, or other cultural development experiences in order to maintain high levels of self-efficacy within the classroom. Many high schools throughout the country take part in exchange programs abroad, so the foreign language teacher’s role in facilitating and participating in such a trip would presumably strengthen his or her knowledge of the L2 and culture. In addition, immersion programs like those highlighted on the COLT website, for example, are probably frequented by those foreign language teachers who wish to strengthen knowledge of the L2. Also, foreign language teachers who stay are probably exposed to various professional development activities that provide academic support as well as keep them up-to-date with the latest technology and methods for teaching foreign languages.

Finally, with the improvement of foreign language pre-service teacher education programs, teachers might enter the profession feeling more prepared. With real-world experiences and mentors throughout the preparation program, foreign language pre-service teachers can be ready to enter the field with clear expectations and established methods and techniques.

**Summary of Yesterday and Today Foreign Language Teacher Characteristics and Tomorrow’s Potential Issues to Address**

Foreign language teachers face various challenges that teachers of other subject areas may not experience due to the nature of teaching the L2. Becoming highly proficient in a foreign language is a long process and requires perseverance on part of pre-service teachers who also complete their education degree. Foreign language programs also often suffered financial cuts
which may have caused language teachers to feel isolated and unsupported. Perhaps because of these challenges in addition to challenges all teachers face, the foreign language field is frequently found on the educator critical shortage lists in Connecticut and other states. Partly, these challenges could be addressed by teacher preparation programs by tailoring their offerings to better suit the unique needs such as mastering both the culture and language of the L2, and by putting mentoring services in place, just to give two examples.
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