

UW Academic Challenge and Engagement Study (UW ACES): Asian Languages and Literature

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INTRODUCTION

Research on learning in college shows that learning is profoundly shaped by the goals, practices, cultures, and values of the academic disciplines¹, particularly the disciplinary practices in students' majors. Therefore, if we are to understand the kinds of experiences that students find intellectually rigorous (and, thus, engaging), we need to examine challenge in the major. Understanding challenge in the major is important because at every stage of their college experience, students report that they want to be challenged, that they perform better in courses that are challenging, and that they value classes that stretch their thinking and ask them to demonstrate learning more than they value classes that ask little of them.² Although learning about where students experience challenge is important, asking students to describe challenging learning experiences in their majors requires some prior understanding of how those majors operate. The Office of Educational Assessment (OEA) designed the UW Academic Challenge and Engagement Study (UW ACES) to accommodate these needs.

Method

Qualitative methods are recommended when researchers are seeking to understand the complex learning experiences of students, as well as the meaning of those experiences³; therefore, we designed the UW ACES to be primarily an interview study.⁴ Using a "citizen science" model, OEA asked departmental advisers if they would be willing to volunteer to interview seniors in their departments who came in to advising to apply for graduation. Advisers are knowledgeable about their academic programs, understand disciplinary practice in their departments, and are trusted by students in the major, so they have the best chance of gathering good information from seniors about their experiences in the major.

Sixty-six advisers from 32 undergraduate programs volunteered to participate. During the 2012-13 academic year, the volunteer advisers asked students if they would participate in brief (5-10 minute) interviews about challenge in the major. If the students agreed, advisers asked them to respond to four open-ended questions, entering students' responses directly into a Catalyst survey form that OEA researchers had designed for that purpose. The questions were as follows:

¹ Beecher & Trowler, 2001; Bransford et al., 2000; Beyer et al., 2007; Donald, 2002; Pace and Middendorf, 2004; Wineburg, 2001, 1991; Neumann et al., 2002; Shulman, 1988; Biglan, 1973.

² Beyer, et al., 2007.

³ Merriam, 2001.

⁴ One participating department asked students to respond to the open-ended questions in writing.

1. What do you consider to be the most challenging work that you had to complete in this major? And by "challenging" I mean doing the work that stretched your thinking the most. This can be anything—a project, a paper, an exam question, homework, something else you did related to the major.
2. What made the project/class/activity challenging?
3. What did you do or learn that enabled you to meet those challenges?
4. What do you think you learned by completing this project/class/activity?

In addition, advisers asked students in what course the challenging work took place and how many quarters they had until they graduated.

Researchers in OEA conducted training workshops in interviewing skills with all participating advisers, provided individual departments with survey customization if required, and monitored all resulting interviews, reporting back to advisers about the interviews they had conducted. By the end of the academic year, departmental advisers had interviewed 1,237 students. Students' responses were analyzed using a constant comparison method⁵, an inductive process designed to let themes emerge, rather than imposing assumed categories on students' comments.

STUDY LIMITATIONS

If we interviewed students post-graduation, they would be likely to identify their capstone courses or their advanced senior-level courses as the ones asking for their most challenging work. However, because we wanted to attach the interview to a time when students would normally see their academic advisers, we interviewed students when they came into the advising office to apply for graduation, which often meant that they were two or three quarters away from graduation. Although this approach meant that we might not gather information about late-senior year courses, we felt that it would be interesting to departments to learn the kinds of challenges that lead to and prepare students for those more advanced experiences.

ASIAN LANGUAGES AND LITERATURE RESULTS

The Asian Languages and Literature department was one of the UW ACES' 32 participating departments. Abby Petty and Sun-Mi Kim asked 40 students if they were willing to be interviewed for the study and all of them agreed. This number represents about 61% of the 66 seniors in Asian Languages and Literature who graduated during the 2012-2013 school year.⁶

Students were asked which of the major options in Asian Languages and Literature they were completing for their undergraduate degree. Ten (25%) interviewees said that they were majoring in Chinese; 23 (58%) said they were majoring in Japanese linguistics or literature (three in Japanese literature); five (12%) reported majoring in Korean; and two (5%) said they were majoring in South Asian. Students' major options did not seem to affect their responses to the interview questions, as no clear patterns emerged by major area in our analysis of those responses.

⁵ Merriam, 2001.

⁶ The number of undergraduate degree completions is based on the 2012-13 UW Profiles reports published by the UW Office of Planning and Budgeting (https://bitools.uw.edu/views/13-SummaryandTrendsDegreeAttributes_0/13-Dashboard#1)

Quarters to Graduation and Where Students Experienced Challenge

In terms of how long students had before graduating, three students (7%) had only the quarter in which they were interviewed to complete before graduating; 14 (35%) students had two quarters left; 21 (53%) students had three quarters to complete before graduation; and two (5%) had four quarters to complete before graduating. Because more than half of the interviewees had a full year left at UW before completing their major, the courses they could most often discuss regarding academic challenge were limited to courses they had taken prior to their senior year in the major.

When asked which courses in the major had presented them with the greatest challenges, the 40 interviewees listed 28 courses or course sequences in the Asian Languages and Literature major, along with eight experiences related to the major and four courses offered by departments outside the major. Students' responses were consistent with their areas of focus in the department. The list of courses and experiences, as well as the number of students who identified them (only one if not noted parenthetically) were as follows:

ASIAN 498, special topics (2)	KOREAN 101-103
CHIN 101	KOREAN 201-203
CHIN 102	KOREAN 499, Independent study with
CHIN 201	Soohee Kim
CHIN 202	Third year Korean courses
CHIN 201-203	Applying to study abroad
CHIN 301-303	Capstone seminar
CHIN 451	Language and linguistics courses
CHIN 452	Learning Korean language
First year Chinese courses	Memorizing Chinese characters
JAPAN 311	Open-ended projects
JAPAN 313	Study abroad in Japan (3)
JAPAN 311-313 (2)	Study abroad, Taiwan
JAPAN 342	HDCE 461-463
JAPAN 343 (3)	HSTAS 424/SISEA 440, Post-war Japan (2)
JAPAN 421-423 (2)	HSTAS 402, History of Medieval and Mughal
JAPAN 423	India
JAPAN 440	I BUS 490
JAPAN 441 (3)	
JAPAN 442	
JAPAN 443	
Japanese History class	
Third year Japanese courses (2)	
All JAPAN language course	

1. Students' Greatest Challenges

Students were asked: "What do you consider to be the most challenging work that you had to complete in this major? And by "challenging" I mean doing the work that stretched your thinking the most. This

can be anything—a project, a paper, an exam question, homework, something else you did related to the major.”

Several themes emerged from students’ responses to this question.

Language courses/language learning. Half of the interviewees (50%) said that a language course, a language course sequence, or learning Chinese, Japanese, or Korean was their most significant challenge in the major. Sometimes students noted particular aspects of the courses that were challenging—such as memorizing Chinese characters or translating—but most often they identified a class or course series. The following examples illustrate this category of response:

- *It was simply going through the Chinese language course in my first year. There were many Cantonese speakers [in the class] who already knew the characters, but I was new to the language. No one believed I could make Chinese as my major. Most of my Cantonese classmates finished their second year Chinese classes through the summer, but I took them in the academic year, so I felt more comfortable without those students. In China, I took third year Chinese and felt uncomfortable again!*
- *Learning a new language, itself, is challenging, especially without being in the country where the language is used.*
- *The fourth year (Japanese) language course at UW is very intense. It’s very good, but hard to keep up with.*
- *Learning the Korean language, both speaking and listening (beginning through upper level) [was the most challenging experience].*

Other courses. One in five interviewees identified a course other than a language course as presenting a significant academic challenge to them. For example:

- *Linguistics courses in general.*
- *Modern history class. I took two, and they covered the Meiji period to modern times. I learned more about Asian-Pacific history and America’s involvement after that. It was very interesting.*
- *I’ve taken three separate Asian 498 special topics courses with Professor Soohee Kim, and each time I took those classes every topic was very intellectually challenging. It advanced my Korean skills in all areas (reading, writing, speaking, and listening) every time I took the course.*

A project involving research and writing. Six students (15%) noted that projects involving research and writing were challenging, as the following examples illustrate.

- *Anything from the Technical Japanese Program, specifically, the current research project I’m working on. I’m only using Japanese sources. It’s using every skill we have—reading, speaking, working with others outside of the class.*
- *A research project [that includes a] presentation and writing a paper in Japanese with a partner.*

- *When I prepared for study abroad, I had to write three essays in Japanese as part of the process of applying for the program. I had to think hard about how the program would benefit me in the future, and why I want to study abroad.*

Study abroad. Four (10%) of the interviewees said that their study abroad experiences presented them with their most challenging learning experiences, including three who studied in Japan and one who studied in Taiwan.

Giving a presentation. Four (10%) students also said that giving a presentation was the biggest challenge they had faced in the major. For example:

- *Doing a presentation in Chinese, speaking in front of other people for an international business class I took.*
- *Presentations in Japanese 313 and 421.*

Other. The following were mentioned as especially challenging by one or two students:

- Reading (2)
- Open-ended projects
- Time management
- Exams in Japanese 343

2. What Made Those Activities/Classes Challenging?

There was little agreement among the students about what made their most significant challenges challenging. About a third of the interviewees' responses were idiosyncratic. Only two robust themes and several weaker themes emerged from our analysis of students' responses.

There was a lot of work in the course(s) and/or the work got harder as I progressed. Nine (23%) out of the 40 interviewees students said that the amount of work or the increasing difficulty of that work were the things that made the courses or the projects they had described especially challenging. Six of these students were speaking about language courses. The following examples illustrate this category of response:

- *As a transfer student, it was a lot. We had to memorize all the scripts, and there was also group work. There was a quiz every day.*
- *The instructor challenges us inside and outside class. He pushes us really hard. Everything we learn is applied to real language, not just a theory. It is very real.*
- *The class was a lot of work. There were readings, homework every night, a project [where we had] to collect data and interview. We had to go to the Japanese class, set up for recording two students, record them and whole class, transcribe the recording in detail, and analyze the data to write a paper. There were three projects in total.*
- *In the third and fourth year of the language it is becoming more challenging. You don't learn grammar and language in a straightforward way anymore. There are more factors that determine expressions with subtle differences that depend on the attitude and the knowledge of the listener.*

Speaking the language. About 18% of the students said that what had made the courses they had described challenging was speaking the language—Chinese, Japanese, and Korean. All of these students identified language courses in response to our first question about what their most challenging academic experience had been. In the words of three of these students, all of whom described language courses as their most challenging experiences in the major:

- *Speaking is the most difficult part. You need more time to think in advance, but speaking is not very natural after thinking too much.*
- *In Japanese, you need to think really fast before speaking. English is my second language, but there are many chances to practice English. But Japanese, you cannot practice unless someone who speaks Japanese is there. If you speak with your classmates, their language is not perfect either, and they don't correct you.*
- *I don't think I was at this stage [at the community college] in terms of speaking, and so having to do that every day in class was not easy.*

Listening. Four (10%) of the interviewees spoke of the challenges in listening to and simultaneously understanding the languages they were studying. All four of these students were speaking of what made their language courses especially challenging. As two of them put it:

- *I think it is how my brain comprehends. Learning characters or reading is easy, but listening is difficult, especially in Chinese 202. I like the class, though.*
- *In the fourth year, the lecturing is all in Japanese. You don't understand exactly what is happening.*

Level of thinking the course required. Three (8%) of the students noted that the level of thinking required by the course or project that they had described as challenging was what made that work challenging. All three were speaking of courses other than language classes. As one of them said:

They were 400-level courses and had many graduate students in them. Class discussion was challenging. Each student had to lead one of the discussions. The instructor is very challenging and doesn't allow us just assume or make a broad opinions. There were lots of readings.

Other. In addition to these challenges, two students also mentioned the following as the aspect of their courses or projects that had made them especially challenging:

- Understanding/switching between two forms of the language, for example, classical and modern (one language and one non-language course)
- I lost interest toward the end (one language and one non-language course)
- The course(s) required a different kind of learning than I was used to (both for non-language courses)
- It was hard to find information for my topic/paper (both for non-language courses)
- Keeping up with the reading (both for non-language courses)
- The writing (both for non-language courses)
- Speaking the language every day (both for study abroad experiences)

Finally, individual students identified the following as the aspects of their work that had made it particularly challenging, with the first four challenges in this group mentioned by students about language courses:

- I was behind the other students when I began.
- I lacked confidence.
- With all the daily work due, it was too much like high school.
- Translating
- Learning business terminology for the presentation
- I felt more obligated to do well because I had picked the topic.
- Analyzing historical events is difficult.
- Grading was tough.
- Linguistics exams
- Making presentations clear with a limited vocabulary.
- The short deadline
- Working with a partner
- Using all the skills I had learned in a real situation (study abroad)

3. What enabled students to meet those challenges?

More than half (53%) of the interviewees identified more than one source of help for meeting the challenges they described.

Their own efforts. The response most frequently given by interviewees was that their own efforts had helped them meet their most significant challenges. About 63% identified their own efforts as helping them meet the challenges they had described. They noted a range of behaviors, including studying more, making and using flash cards, reading texts multiple times, increasing how much they listened to the language, checking online resources, and watching movies in the language. In addition, students who noted their own efforts as helping them meet challenges included those who identified learning Chinese, Japanese, and Korean language as their greatest challenge as well as those identifying other areas of challenge in the major. The following four examples illustrate this category of response:

- *I used flash cards, study groups, and read texts over and over.*
- *I spent a lot of hours to prepare.*
- *I learned in a hard way. I developed different study habits, retook some courses to finish major courses in fall and winter with different instructors in each course as a trial and in spring with both. It became better. Sometimes I need to find my own way of learning.*
- *I studied more and met with my TA. I searched the internet, and the contents I found online reinforced the ideas, especially the Chinese websites.*

Working with peers. Half of the interviewees noted the importance of peers in helping them meet the challenges they had described. About half of those who identified peers as helpful were speaking of challenges associated with language learning and half were speaking of other academic challenges in the major. In the words of some of these students:

- *I made good friends with a classmate, and we worked hard together.*
- *I just spent more time for those classes. Also classmates helped me a lot. Chinese friends also help me.*
- *The test was the major challenge. Group study with classmates was helpful.*
- *Being in a classroom that fostered team work in the class more than just completing projects solo [was helpful].*

Faculty and TAs. Ten (25%) of the interviewees noted the help given to them by faculty members and teaching assistants as they worked to meet the challenges they described. For example:

- *I went to office hours. Throughout the entire process of learning, it was helpful to practice a lot with the instructor.*
- *Any visits to office hours and the kaiwa (conversation) table.*
- *Mostly talking to the teachers. Teachers checked the draft for the writing assignment.*
- *The professor and TA helped. Office hours and explanation of readings. Discussion sessions.*

Other. One or two students each mentioned the following as helps in meeting the challenges they were addressing:

- Family (2)
- Librarian/library
- Developed research skills
- Google
- Related one language's grammar to another;
- Making a friend (while studying abroad)
- Nothing helped

4. What did students learn by completing this project/class/activity?

We asked students what they felt they had learned by meeting the challenges they had described, and about a third of the 40 interviewees mentioned more than one lesson learned. Three strong themes emerged from their responses.

Improved language skills/knowledge. More than half of the interviewees (53%) noted that they had improved their language skills and their understanding of the languages they were studying. This group included students focused on Chinese, Japanese, and Korean. In addition, about half of the group had identified learning the language or language courses as their greatest challenge at the beginning of the interview. As four of these students put it:

- *I learned Chinese—my first foreign language.*
- *I still remember those vocabulary words. I still use them. After memorizing the whole script, I learned lots of grammar points as well.*
- *I gained general fluency in the language.*

- *It improved my speaking and listening skill a lot and gave me a more extensive vocabulary.*

Learned more about the people, history, and culture of China, Japan, or Korea. About 28% of the interviewees said that they had learned more about the culture or history of the place whose language they were studying. Students who gave this response included students who noted that language learning was their most challenging aspect of the major, as well as students who identified other areas of challenge. In the words of three of these students:

- *The course gave me a deeper understanding of culture.*
- *I learned a lot about a different culture—the people of China, what they are going through now. And through study abroad, I learned what they are like.*
- *I'm getting better at listening comprehension. Writing ability also improved and the cultural aspect of language study.*

It takes time to learn a language/how to persevere and be patient in the learning process. About 23% of the interviewees noted aspects of the learning process that they grew to understand by meeting their most challenging experiences in the major. As with the other themes, this one crossed areas of concentration and types of challenges. For example:

- *I learned it is okay to take your time to learn, even if it is frustrating. Ask for help and use the resources around you.*
- *My Japanese got better just by trying harder. Learning a language, especially Japanese, is hard, but I continued and didn't give up. I studied more and reviewed.*
- *I learned that I am quite capable. Anyone can achieve what you want if you try hard.*

Other. In addition to these major themes, two interviewees each identified the following as what they had learned by meeting the challenges they described:

- How to use all available resources to help learning
- Research skills
- How to ask for help
- To learn via conversation

Finally, one student each noted the following:

- I can survive in China
- How to be more independent
- How to organize;
- How to learn the language
- More about linguistics;

SUMMARY

As the student's responses in the box below exemplify, the most significant challenges that students in the Asian Languages and Literature major noted focused on learning the languages offered in the major, particularly Chinese, Japanese, and Korean. Students noted that language courses were challenging because they required a great deal of hard work, and they identified speaking as an especially challenging part of language learning.

In terms of help for meeting challenges, most interviewees spoke of their own efforts—trying harder, making flash cards, reviewing, and re-reading—as helping them meet the challenges they had described. In addition, many interviewees also noted the help they received from peers and from faculty and TAs. Students seemed to particularly appreciate working together both inside and outside the classroom.

When asked what they had learned by meeting challenges in the major, Asian Languages and Literature majors noted that they had gained both skill in the language they were concentrating on and knowledge about the culture, history, and people in those language-speaking regions. Some students also noted learning about learning itself—that it takes persistence and patience to learn a language.

A few interesting aspects of these results might suggest ways to help students navigate the major more easily. First, many students felt that their language classes held the most challenge for them, but some students also expressed surprise at the level of challenge in their non-language courses. Letting students know that doing well in one kind of class does not guarantee success in another because the language courses and other classes, such as history courses, are focusing on developing differing skill sets might be helpful to majors. Second, focusing on ways to help students with the speaking part of language learning might be beneficial to students, as several of them found that aspect to be particularly challenging. Also, continuing to emphasize learning with peers both inside and outside the classroom seems important for helping students move through the challenges they are meeting in the major.

Finally, students' responses to the UW ACES interview questions suggests that Asian Languages and Literature majors felt that the challenges they described were rewarding. This is consistent with research on student learning, which shows that when an assignment is challenging for students and when instructors help students meet those challenges, students are engaged in their courses and, therefore, learn more than when coursework is easy.

One Student's Responses to All Four Questions

Course where greatest challenges occurred: Chinese 201

Q1. What was the most challenging work you did? Language classes. When first entered UW, the Chinese course was harder than high school Chinese classes.

Q2. Why was it challenging? I was behind. I was bad at speaking, compared to students who took the first year at UW. I didn't understand many things the teacher explained. It was also my first quarter at UW. My grade was okay in the end, but in the beginning, i considered dropping the class.

Q3. What helped you meet that challenge? I just studied a lot. I practiced speaking with my conversational partner who I found at a UW language exchange program.

Q4. What did you learn by meeting that challenge? As long as you try hard, you can meet your goal.

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