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Centre for Language Training

Why do we teach what we teach?

That is a question students at the Centre for Language Training often ask us! The training programs we currently offer were developed on the basis of a needs analysis. You may, in fact, have participated in this analysis if you were working for the Department in 1992.

At that time, we sought the co-operation of 106 respondents (76 employees and 30 spouses) who formed a representative sample of the different sectors of the Department and the nine languages deemed most important at that time (Spanish, Italian, German, Portuguese, Russian, Arabic, Mandarin, Japanese and Korean). The respondents, who were posted abroad, were asked to complete a questionnaire indicating what oral communication, reading and writing tasks they had to perform and ranking them in order of priority. In addition, respondents were asked to identify any linguistic considerations associated with these tasks. For instance, when they were required to express themselves

orally, was it more useful for them to be familiar with idiomatic expressions, to have an extensive vocabulary, to have good pronunciation or to be able to use nuances in meaning? When listening to a native speaker, how important was it to be able to adjust to the speed at which the person spoke or to understand the person's dialect, accent and nuances? Respondents also had to rank by order of importance the cultural aspects that needed to be considered. They were asked what factors were most important in their particular situation: rules of etiquette, body language, social status, ways of socializing, taboos, values, humour, etc.

Seventy-one per cent of the individuals in the sample responded to the questionnaire. We completed the study by interviewing 16 respondents posted in Ottawa at the time. After compiling the results, we were able to identify, for instance, the most important tasks for the senior management and operational sectors. Public speeches are a priority for senior management, whereas understanding radio and television broadcasts is an important concern for the operational sector. Moreover, when we looked at the languages being taught, respondents learning Asian

languages found that making arrangements was the most common task, while respondents learning Spanish saw answering the telephone and giving directions as main concerns. Reading the newspaper was a priority for all respondents, with the exception of those residing in a Spanish-speaking environment, where reading correspondence took precedence.

Grouping the tasks enabled us to develop a core curriculum as well as determine who and what situations were involved. Using the core curriculum as a basis, we were able to develop customized training plans for all 40 languages taught. The plans are guides to help teachers structure the training they provide. Individual needs and particular situations of learners are also taken into account.

Validation exercises are conducted regularly, to check whether the language training offered allows students to function on their own in their new environments. We also use these exercises to check whether respondents, in fact, perform the tasks identified. So far, the tasks continue to be relevant.

Message from Joseph Caron

One of the defining characteristics of the Foreign Service is our ability to deliver Canada's interests abroad. Foreign language skills are fundamental to that. When we speak "the local language" we add enormous value to all we do, winning respect for the Department from both Canadians and our contacts in the countries where we serve.

I have learned a difficult foreign language - Japanese - and I speak from personal experience in saying that it has enriched my career and my personal and professional experiences. It is for this reason that I agreed to chair the Foreign Language Board. Its purpose is to generate systemic will and pressure for improving our foreign language training effort.

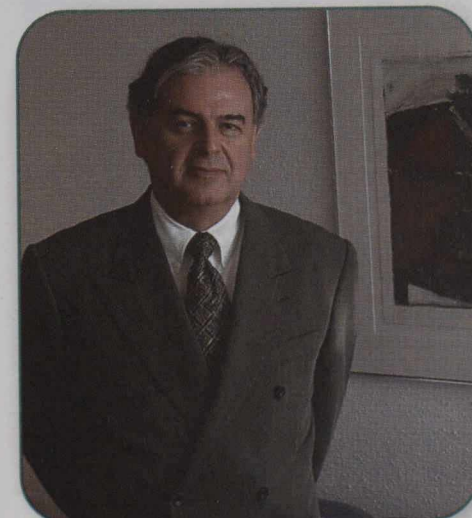
The FLB's members are DGs responsible for missions where foreign language training is

essential, as well as DGs from Human Resources and key functional bureaus. To date, working with missions, we have re-defined the Department's foreign language requirements and re-identified the positions overseas that absolutely require foreign language proficiency.

The impact and success of the FLB will eventually be measured in simple terms, whether there is a continuous increase in the number of fluent foreign language speaking employees filling the designated positions.

Behind that progress will lie a considerable array of inter-connected decisions involving our training, recruitment, staffing and assignment policies.

I look forward to reporting periodically on the work program of the FLB. My intent is that it will have a major impact on our foreign language speaking capabilities.



Joseph Caron, Assistant Deputy Minister (Portfolio: Asia Pacific and Africa) chairs the Foreign Language Board.