

Study Abroad

Q's & A's



by

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Q: What about those "Courses for Foreigners?"

A: Well, that depends...!

Cursos para Extranjeros, Cours de Civilisation pour Étudiants Étrangers, Deutsch für Ausländer...perhaps no programs are more representative of the dilemma facing study abroad advisors than those comparatively low cost academic experiences available at universities around the world which have been especially designed to provide language and "culture of the country" courses for non-native speakers. The model of month-long language courses in the summer prior to the opening of the university year in Germany, France, and Spain, or three- to six-week courses at the École de Langue et de Civilisation Française at the University of Geneva have been duplicated from universities in Eastern Europe to Latin America. Support courses and free-standing language programs exist during the regular academic year as well.

The dilemma is that U.S. study abroaders, with the exception of exchange students and a few others who intend to gain admission to regular classes for an academic year, are not planning to be in degree programs abroad.

Many of us who work and teach at U.S. universities have enrolled in these programs to the great benefit of our language skills. My first exposure was at the University of Havana at age 19. It gave me a head start in Spanish that the equivalent exposure in a U.S. classroom

could never have accomplished. Studying *and* living a language is an unbeatable combination for rapid advancement in proficiency. The low cost of these programs compared to U.S. college and university sponsored programs provides an attractive incentive, particularly during summer vacation for students, language teachers and everyone in between! The challenge of dealing with transportation, registration and finding housing in a foreign language can result in giant steps forward in self-confidence for the independent student, although this aspect of these programs can be overwhelming for beginners.

Your student may already be casting around for an inexpensive yet rewarding way to earn credit overseas this summer. If you're looking for information on courses for foreigners, prepare to be frustrated. With a few notable exceptions, such as the Goethe Institutes in Germany which operate in the U.S. as well (I mention these institutes because they are popular--if expensive--options for students preparing for regular German university programs) one common element seems to be the lateness of arrival of pamphlets describing what's available for the coming summer. Even if the material is printed in good time, it usually comes by slow boat. The universities offering these programs are not geared up for major promotional efforts, despite the fact that these courses generate revenue. Their regular courses, being free of charge to their own nationals (and

fellow EC members in the case of Europe), have never required any marketing effort.

Q: What are the eligibility requirements for admission to courses for foreigners?

A: These are the equivalent of our extension classes which provide a service to the community at large. Being aged 17 or older and having the ability to pay is just about all these programs ask for. This means that university level students can be in class with both an energetic grandmother and a gum-cracking teenager still in high school with very different motivation levels, to say the least.

Q: Most courses for foreigners teach foreign language on three basic levels: beginners, intermediate and advanced, or superior level, with some offering steps in between. By what means are students placed at these levels?

A: Some programs do an excellent job of placement by traditional written tests created by each institution and in some cases, oral interviews. As one expert in language testing told me, "these programs use tests that produce results that are pretty much within the ball park. They are 85% accurate." The Universidad Internacional Menéndez Pelayo summer school, in Santander, Spain, for example, has been consistently good at placement at their beginning, second, third and fourth levels. In France, a consortium of universities has been working on stan-

Standardizing placement procedures for these courses over the past two years. German universities work independently of each other on the issue of language placement.

Q: Who are the instructors and what are their qualifications?

A: This can be a lottery, especially in the summer when regular academics want a break (offering regular courses during summer vacation is not part of the European educational tradition). Again, the programs in Regensburg, Marburg, Kiel and Bonn, to name a few in Germany, are currently known to U.S. Germanic language departments to have faculty with good credentials who take their jobs very seriously. All over Europe, particularly during the academic year, students can get very lucky at the advanced levels and have instructors who are major writers, historians and well-known academics; at lower levels they may find themselves faced with a recent teachers' college grad on his/her first job who has no idea how to teach the native language as a second language.

Q: What is the range of subjects available?

A: This varies widely by country and university. In all European countries there are some programs that concentrate on language exclusively; Spanish universities concentrate on language, culture, history, geography and history of art on three levels. Some French and German universities offer content courses in culture, literature,

politics, economics, film, and the press. A complete listing of programs at French universities can be obtained from the French Cultural Services; in Spain from the Agregado Cultural at the Spanish Embassy, and so on. Don't go by this alone; such lists are usually out-of-date. Both courses and prices will not be reliable. You need to contact each institution directly, with uncertain results.

Q: Where do the other students in these courses come from?

A: Sometimes the brochure itself will show a chart indicating nationality enrollments by class for the past year. If not, the general rule is that there will be more students from neighboring countries. The obvious problem is that these students are not native speakers of the host country and may speak to the American student in English. Ideally, the common language between these different nationality groups is the language of the country.

Q: What about class size?

A: Most programs are good about this except for "content courses" which may be large lectures rather than smaller lecture-discussions that our students are used to. Language classes tend to be limited to no more than 20.

Q: Can you use classroom hours to determine credit?

A: Most programs provide a transcript with the total number of contact hours listed. Having once ob-

served registration and the first week of classes at the University of Coimbra, Portugal, summer school, I can attest to the unreliability of calculating such credit from dates provided on the program materials. Because of organizational glitches, instruction in Coimbra actually began almost a week later than promised. Since it was summertime and the wine was great, nobody seemed to care too much.

In tropical countries, it is not uncommon for instructors and students to not bother to come to class during one of those tropical downpours.

Local customs can make calculations of credit hours an exercise in futility!

On the other hand, cutting classes at one of the Goethe Institute program courses in Germany is very risky. You can be sure that your student attended classes faithfully if a document arrives at the completion of the program.

Q: Do these programs give grades? If so, how are they determined?

A: In the first place, it is important to understand that in keeping with their service tradition, courses for foreigners are accustomed to students who are not looking for credit. Because of the law of least resistance that can prevail on many of these programs in the summer, located as they are in cities with a great night life, many students opt out of the final examination. It is important to warn your students that they must obey attendance policies and take a final exam if one is available in order to receive a certificate of attendance *with a grade*. Absolutely NOTHING

ELSE should be even remotely considered for credit. If there is no exam, as is the case with Level I at the Goethe Institutes, the student will only receive a certificate of attendance anyway. In this and similar cases, I would definitely recommend that students take a proficiency exam as soon as possible upon return to campus.

There are other concerns, such as teaching methods and cost, which, with the falling dollar, is not the bargain it used to be. A month in Santander, Spain will cost \$1000 for tuition, room and board. Tuition at the famous Cours de Civilisation at the Sorbonne is now \$1200 a semester, not \$200 like the old days, and students report that the antiquated lecture methods make the program expensive *and* boring. Furthermore, exams at French university programs are harder to pass than students may realize.

It is obviously essential for study abroad advisors to consult with their language departments each year about the relative value of each of these programs. Quality can rise or fall and language faculty are in a better position to know, or find out. Students should not wander into these programs and expect credit if they do not plan to have the work at least approved before they leave. These courses for foreigners can be excellent experiences under the right circumstances. The cultural opportunities, international friendships and advances in language proficiency gained by "doing it yourself" can have a payoff for students far greater than any organized group program. □