

Nontraditional Undergraduate Students: Who Are They and What Are They Saying About Foreign Language Learning?



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I look around and I go, "Man, I'm the oldest person in here!" —Charlotte, age 33

My problem with the computer is that I'm a little apprehensive because of just the fact that it is a computer and I wasn't raised around them. It's not natural for me. So I had trouble at the beginning with the CDs and finding the right track. The younger people didn't seem to have that trouble. If it were on an 8-track, I'd have had no problem! — Ron, age 45

Introduction

Enrollments in university-level language classes today include growing numbers of older undergraduates, single parents, full-time workers, and other students who must balance heavy work, family, and academic responsibilities. Nontraditional students with these characteristics face challenges not experienced by traditional undergraduates — single students without children who have begun university study immediately after graduation from

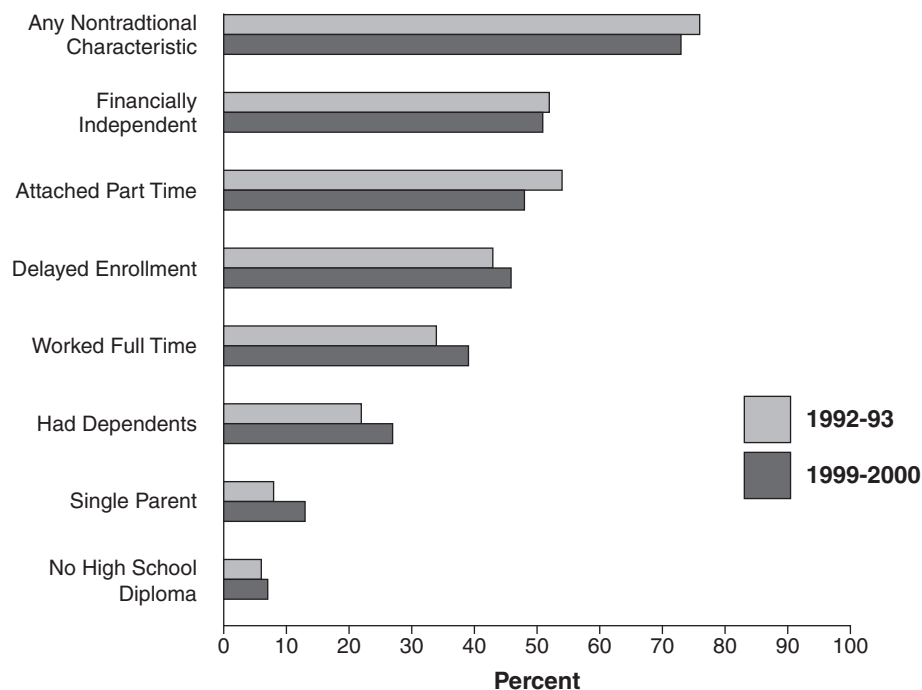
high school. While traditional students are able to devote most of their time and energy to academic endeavors and university-sponsored activities, their nontraditional classmates must juggle responsibilities and resolve conflicts regarding work and class schedules, childcare, financial obligations, and transportation. Given the multiple obstacles that nontraditional students face, it is not surprising that Horn and Carroll (1996) found that degree-seeking nontraditional undergraduates are less likely to complete a degree or to continue in a university after five years.

The purpose of this article is to describe the challenges and convey the perspectives of nontraditional undergraduates enrolled in foreign language classes. What are these students saying about their roles as language learners and their experiences in university-level language classrooms? What are their particular joys and frustrations with respect to the study of a language? What are some of

the measures that we, as their instructors, can take to enhance their language learning experiences and to increase their chances of being successful?

As part of a small, qualitative study during the 2000-2001 academic year, I interviewed six nontraditional undergraduates enrolled in various language classes at a medium-sized, four-year state university. Although the small sample size of this study will not allow for generalization of its findings, the perceptions of these students with regard to their experiences in the foreign language classroom illustrate that they do see themselves as fundamentally different from traditional undergraduates in a variety of ways. Their views, as conveyed through this article, may not only raise questions concerning some of the possible effects of instructional procedures used by university instructors of languages, but also may be used to inform the work of those whose class lists include growing numbers of nontraditional undergraduate students.

Figure 1. Percentage of Undergraduates with Nontraditional Characteristics, 1992-93 and 1999-2000.



Source: U.S. Department of Education, NCES

The Nontraditional Student

Definitions of the term "nontraditional student" vary significantly, as do statistics regarding the prevalence of such students at undergraduate institutions. While a number of authors (Hughes, 1983; Spanard, 1990; Yarbrough & Schaffer, 1990; Sheehan, McMenamin, & McDevitt, 1992) use age (over 25) as the primary defining characteristic of nontraditional students, Bean and Metzner (1985) emphasize both age and part-time student status. More recently, however, Horn and Carroll (1996) define the nontraditional student as one who possesses any of a number of characteristics, including part-time academic status, full-time (more than 35 hours) work status, financial independence, dependents other than a spouse, single parenthood, delayed enrollment in college, and even completion of high school requirements through a GED or other high school completion certificate. Horn and Carroll's statistical report (1996) also categorizes nontraditional students as minimally nontraditional (one characteristic), moderately nontraditional (2 or 3 characteristics) or highly nontraditional (4 or more charac-

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teristics). According to the National Center for Education Statistics [NCES] (2002), nearly three-quarters of all undergraduates in 1999-2000 had one or more of these characteristics and were considered to be in some way at least minimally nontraditional. This agency also reports that there have been some changes in the percentages of students with the various nontraditional characteristics between 1992-93 and 1999-2000 (Figure 1). Most significant among these changes are increases in the percentages of students working full-time, students with dependents, students who are single parents, and those who delayed enrollment.

Although both minimally and highly nontraditional students are more likely to choose to attend 2-year institutions, as many as 41 percent of students at public, four-year institutions in 1999-2000 possessed at least one of the characteristics of nontraditional students discussed above (Figure 2). Of the mostly highly nontraditional students, 64 percent attended public two-year institutions and 17 percent attended public four-year colleges and universities. It is clear, then, that large percentages of students with special situations and needs are attending institutions where they might undertake foreign language study for the first time in their lives. Certainly this phenomenon merits a closer look at the feelings and perspectives of nontraditional undergraduates who are studying languages at one such public institution.

Review of the Literature

Adult Learners

While age is not the only or perhaps even the most important defining characteristic of the nontraditional undergraduate student, literature regarding adult learners, i.e., students over 25 years of age, is abundant and should be considered in an

investigation involving this group. In his seminal work, Knowles (1970) emphasized the role of prior experience and the ability of the adult learner to tap into that experience in a classroom setting. He asserted that adult learners are likely to feel rejected in learning situations in which the value of their life experience is minimized, since their identities are closely associated with that experience. Caffarella and Barnett (1994) pointed also to the concept of experiential learning as a fundamental aspect of the education of adults. The context of an adult's life, including prior experiences, current roles, and future aspirations, is of tremendous significance as he or she approaches new material and learning situations. Mezirow (1991) likewise underscored the importance of the adult learner's frame of reference and highlighted critical reflection and the open-minded assessment of one's interpretations and beliefs as means by which the adult learner might be able to organize and assimilate new concepts and future knowledge.

A number of studies focusing on nontraditional students have examined age as a variable possibly affecting several outcomes. Regarding achievement and success rates, findings have been mixed and inconsistent. While Nunn (1994) suggested that students over the age of 25 are more achievement oriented than younger students, years earlier Lindgren (1976) did not find a significant difference between these two groups in their respective need for achievement. In an investigation of a related variable, Sheehan, McMnamin and McDevitt (1992) found that older students, in fact, were more highly motivated to learn than were their traditional student counterparts. Similarly, Eppler and Harju (1997), in reporting the findings of an extensive study of goal orientations and academic performance of traditional and nontradi-

tional students, asserted that older students are more likely to endorse learning goals over performance goals than are younger students. The same study showed, however, that the existence of positive goal orientations was a better predictor of academic success than was a learner's status as a traditional or nontraditional student.

Broader Findings

Fewer researchers have broadened the definition of nontraditional undergraduate students to examine characteristics such as full-time employment, financial independence, single-parenthood, and delayed enrollment in college. As mentioned earlier, Horn and Carroll (1996) provided an extensive report investigating trends in enrollment and the persistence and attainment of beginning post-secondary students. In this report, age was viewed as a "surrogate variable" that tends to subsume a variety of other characteristics such as part-time student status and financial independence. Using data from three administrations of the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study and the Beginning Postsecondary Students longitudinal survey, Horn and Carroll (1996) reported that nontraditional students were far less likely (31 percent) to reach their goal of obtaining a bachelor's degree within five years than were traditional students (54 percent). Furthermore, nontraditional students were more than twice as likely (38 percent) to quit school during their first year than were traditional students (16 percent). Looking more specifically at grades and continuing academic success, Eppler and Harju (1997) found that the least successful nontraditional students were those who worked more hours at a paid job.

Nontraditional Students and Foreign Language Study

Very little research has been done regarding the perceptions and challenges of undergraduate nontraditional students undertaking foreign language study. Schleppegrell (1987), focusing only on the age of nontraditional students, asserted that older students studying a foreign language are likely to have a specific purpose for learning the language and stated that they prefer lessons involving both content and contexts that are relevant to their goals. In a more recent, empirical investigation of the perceptions of 70 nontraditional students enrolled in foreign language classes at two public, 4-year universities, Turner and Supko (2000) reported that students in this population were keenly aware of and concerned about the special challenges that they face. While these nontraditional students did not see the traditional students as more capable than themselves of learning

Figure 2. Percentage distribution of undergraduates according to the type of institution attended, by student status: 1999-2000

Student Status	Public less-than-2-year	Public 2-year	Public 4-year	Private not-for-profit less-than-4-year	Private not-for-profit 4-year	Private for-profit
Total	0.7	44.9	33.4	0.8	14.9	5.2
Traditional	0.2	17.3	52.1	1.0	27.3	2.2
Minimally nontraditional	0.5	39.3	41.0	0.9	13.5	4.7
Moderately nontraditional	0.9	55.5	27.2	0.6	8.6	7.1
Highly nontraditional	1.2	64.2	17.2	0.8	10.1	6.6

Source: U.S. Department of Education, NCES

a foreign language, they did recognize that traditional students tend to have more time for study and practice and tend to access university resources more, such as language and computer labs. Students surveyed also indicated that they were highly motivated to learn to speak the languages that they were studying and showed less interest in the development of listening, reading, or writing skills.

The Interviews

During the fall semester of the 2000-2001 academic year, I extended an open invitation to all nontraditional undergraduate students enrolled in foreign language classes at a medium sized, public, four-year university to participate in a small qualitative study. Intended as an in-depth follow-up to a broader, questionnaire study (Turner & Supko, 2000), the qualitative investigation consisted of interviews with the six elementary and intermediate Spanish and German students who volunteered to participate. The study was not designed to produce results that might be generalized to the study of foreign languages at all universities; in fact, the small sample size and the gathering of data from only one source, i.e., interviews, preclude this possibility. Instead, the purpose of the study was to enhance the meager body of research in this area by providing an analysis of a small quantity of deep and rich data upon which to base future research.

During the interviews, each student individually discussed seven open-ended questions (see Appendix) about foreign language learning at the university level. These questions encouraged the students to express their views concerning perceived differences between traditional and nontraditional students, differences between foreign language courses and other university courses, the role of life experience in the foreign language class, their preferences with regard to class activities and teaching style, and the role of technology in language learning. Each interview was tape recorded and transcribed to allow for analysis of the data in the study.

The six study participants ranged in age from 25 to 46, and each possessed one or more of the other characteristics of nontraditional students, as defined by Horn and Carroll (1996). The following is a brief description of each of the participants, using pseudonyms:

Charlotte was a 33-year-old single mother of two who was married immediately after graduating from high school 16 years earlier. At the time of the investigation, she was a full-time commuter student, majoring in chemistry, and enrolled

in her second semester of German study. Her reason for taking German was primarily the 6-credit language requirement of her major; however, she had found that she was enjoying the language and planned to continue taking German beyond the required two courses. Having worked in a bank for 10 years, she had grown tired of the routine and lack of opportunities for advancement. Her professional goal was to work for a chemical company or for a medical supply company near her home, which was about an hour and a half away from the university.

Ron was a 45-year-old social work major enrolled in his fourth-semester of Spanish, which was the first foreign language that he had ever studied. After graduating from high school, he chose not to attend college because of his desire to live on his own and "become a man." Single and living on campus at the time of the interview, Ron had sold everything he had and had begun university study in order to get a better job. A requirement for his undergraduate degree in social work was four semesters of language study.

Terry described himself as a "not-very-traditional nontraditional student" because he had previously graduated with a teaching degree and had returned to the university solely for the purpose of studying Spanish. Combining interests related to his experience as a former professional football player and his current position as a Baptist minister, Terry conducted sports camps for children in Spain every summer and was very motivated to become a more fluent speaker of Spanish. Terry was enrolled as a part-time student and was taking his third semester of university-level Spanish.

Karen was a 44-year-old nurse who had suffered a back injury and could no longer do her work to her own satisfaction. When her son started college, she realized that she then qualified for grants and loans, so she began studying for a new career in social work. At the time of the interview, she was enrolled in her second semester of German, having already completed a semester of Spanish study as well. Although she felt that her career in social work would necessarily involve some use of the Spanish language, she switched to German because of an unpleasant experience in her first Spanish class at the university.

Carolyn was 27 years old and a single mother of two. She had studied Spanish for two years in high school and had enrolled at the local community college after graduating. Unable to continue after two years because of her responsibilities as a single mother, she "took a break" from

university study for five years. A senior at the time of the interview, Carolyn had returned to the university to prepare for a career in social work. She decided to study Spanish and to fulfill the degree's four-semester language requirement because she felt that it would be the most useful language for her career. She was enrolled in her third semester of that language.

Blake, who was 25 years old, had begun university study during the summer immediately following high school graduation. After two semesters, however, it had become necessary for him to begin working full-time, so he "sat out" for one semester, then returned to the university on a part-time basis. Blake was grateful for the tuition discount that he received as a full-time employee of the university. This was particularly helpful because he had found it difficult to choose a major and had changed his plans on several occasions. A social work major at the time of the interview, Blake was enrolled in his fourth semester of Spanish, which would complete the language requirement for his degree.

What Were They Really Saying?

Although the seven interview questions (see Appendix) highlighted particular topics that were chosen prior to beginning the interviews, analysis of the interview data revealed that several other key issues emerged from the discussions. While at times the nontraditional undergraduates interviewed appeared to focus on their life situations and the differences that they perceived were due to their non-traditional status, more often they tended to see themselves simply as students. In fact, they frequently could not determine if their preferences for class activities and teaching styles were at all related to their ages or life situations, yet all felt fairly certain that these variables did affect their attitudes toward technology and its utilization in the learning of a foreign language.

The four key issues that surfaced repeatedly during the interviews, either with or without direct prompting from a particular interview question were: (1) the importance of the attitude and demeanor of the instructor; (2) strong feelings regarding the type of foreign language classroom activities utilized; (3) the availability of time to practice and engage in learning experiences outside of the classroom; and (4) appreciation of technology accompanied by discomfort in using it. A more detailed discussion of each of these issues follows.

The Instructor

Although the participants were not asked directly about their instructors, all indicated

at some point in the interview that the ways in which the instructor interacts with the students and the perceived demeanor of the instructor were considered extremely important. Karen, in fact, had switched her choice of languages from Spanish to German, primarily due to the ways in which two different instructors interacted with the students. Even though Karen believed that Spanish might be more pertinent to her career in social work, she felt that her Spanish instructor “looked down on nontraditional students” and embarrassed them in class. She pointed out that the several nontraditional students in her Spanish class had taken the language very seriously and tended to ask questions and request explanations frequently. “We would get flippant answers to questions in class,” she explained, “then we got frustrated and felt like we couldn’t approach him.” In her German class, Karen believed that traditional and nontraditional students were treated equally and that all received thorough answers to all of their questions. “He is wonderful,” she said of her German instructor. “Language study involves such a different, abstract way of thinking. If the instructor can explain that abstract way of thinking, it makes it much easier.”

Also emphasizing the importance of the instructor, Charlotte said, “He makes it fun. He makes it interesting. You can feel free to ask a question, and he’s joking around and we have fun. It’s not just boring — take notes and that’s it.” Charlotte pointed out that a part of the instructor’s job is to motivate and believed that her instructor was an excellent motivator. “You can be in a bad mood, but after a few minutes you feel better because he’s so lively!” Carolyn saw that her preference for her Spanish instructor at the time was due to the good fit between her teaching style and Carolyn’s learning style. “She writes down a lot, and I like to see it. When there was lots of talking, I didn’t learn as much.” Carolyn explained that she had not learned Spanish well in high school but felt that it was “not hard to catch on” as an adult, adding that her success with the language depended much more on the instructor than on her own age as a learner.

Foreign Language Classroom Activities

While one of the interview questions specifically addressed preferences regarding foreign language classroom activities, this issue also surfaced spontaneously throughout the interviews. The participants individually either clearly preferred hands-on, interactive and communicative activities or written, drill-like, form-focused work in class. Carolyn, Charlotte, Blake, and Karen stressed their need to “see the words” and felt that repetitive written work, i.e., worksheets, grammar exercises, and

form-focused homework, were mostly helpful to them. “I like it when he writes on the chalkboard because I like to see the answer right away,” explained Carolyn. According to Charlotte, “Written exercises help me because I have more time to think about it. And then I can go back and read and interpret it.” Blake added that “listening activities are the worst,” pointing out that he found differences in regional accents and the speed at which native speakers spoke to be very problematic.

These same four participants also expressed some degree of dislike for pair and small group work. “As a nontraditional student,” Karen said, “I already feel so different.” She went on to explain some additional and more specific reasons for her aversion to working in pairs:

If I’m paired up with someone in a class that I’m really kind of lost in, and I really don’t know, that just makes me that much — clam up, you know. Even if the other person is fluent. Case in point, in my Spanish class, the girl that I was paired up with, she was pretty fluent. It was intimidating to me, but I also felt bad for her because I knew that I was holding her down.

Blake admitted that he enjoyed small group work, even though he disliked pair work. “I can get more input from the rest of the people in the group,” he explained. “I like to think in terms of what somebody else knows and how that can help me.”

Ron indicated that his preferences had changed throughout his ongoing study of the Spanish language. “I was a little nervous and apprehensive at the beginning when I had to speak because I didn’t feel like I could do it, and I would be embarrassed,” he said. Smiling broadly, he continued, “But as time went on, now I enjoy speaking because I can actually pronounce the words. Now I’m a big show-off!”

Only Terry expressed a very clear preference for proficiency-oriented activities from the start of his university-level study of Spanish. “I prefer hands-on learning and lots of practice time. I enjoy it when Spanish is spoken in class,” Terry explained. While the other participants each told of their fears of making errors and having them corrected by the instructor, Terry described very different feelings:

Being older, you don’t feel as intimidated in making a mistake, in mispronouncing a word. Whereas [traditional] students, they’re among their peers, and somehow there is this fear that I don’t want to be made fun of, I don’t want to say something goofy. When you’re older, you tend to get over that somewhat. Not really over it, but — I’m not among my peers.

Although he did not express any aversion to grammar learning or to written activities, Terry did see grammar as his weakness and frequently sought opportunities to speak the language both in and outside of class.

Availability of Time

All of the participants focused to some degree on the differences between traditional and nontraditional students with respect to the availability of time to spend on learning activities outside the classroom. Only Ron, because of having practically given up everything and prioritizing his university education above all else, felt that he, as a nontraditional student, had more time to spend on his studies than did his traditional student classmates. He explained, “I devote all of my energies to this. With me, it’s top priority, but the younger students have other interests. My only obligation is my coursework, and I live on campus to reduce complications like car trouble.”

Although they felt that nontraditional students generally take their studies more seriously and are more highly motivated to learn than are traditional students, the other five participants pointed to work and family obligations as factors that limited their time. “We have different things on our minds,” said Charlotte. “I’m here to study and get my degree, not socialize, so I have to budget my time very carefully,” she stated. Blake felt lucky that his job was on campus and had flexible hours because it allowed him to schedule his classes anytime. “Otherwise,” he explained, “I don’t know how I’d ever work out a schedule and finish this degree.” Referring to listening exercises on CDs and web-based computer activities, Carolyn, who was a single mother, felt that she didn’t have time to do any “extras.” “I realize the importance of money and education, and I don’t have the time to learn everything as thoroughly as I would like,” she lamented. In answer to a question about technology use, Karen expressed frustration at having to complete assignments in the language/computer lab. “You have limited time when you can use it,” she explained, “and the lab is open for only a limited time. You’re usually in class or not available.”

Technology

The nontraditional students involved in the study, with the exception of Blake, all found technology use to be a somewhat intimidating aspect of their undergraduate education. Because Blake had learned to use computers and other forms of instructional media for a campus job in media services, he was very comfortable using the computer lab for review and practice. His current campus job once again offered him

the flexibility that he needed to find time to complete required work in the language lab. He did, however, understand that other nontraditional students might find technology use to be somewhat more daunting. "It seems like some of the nontraditional students haven't had computer experience or something, so that's not gonna really help them as much." Sympathizing with his older, nontraditional classmates, he went on, "Maybe if you didn't have computers in high school and you come to school after ten years of being away from anything like that, and you come back in, it could be pretty stressful."

Admitting to having had significant problems with computer and compact disk use, Ron still was able to appreciate the advantages of using such equipment. "Technology is wonderful for a language!" he said, "You just need to get comfortable with it." Karen remembered feeling intimidated by technology when she first began university study, but she took an introduction to computers course, which she found to be very useful. "Older students probably need to take a course like that," she suggested, "unless they have work experience, but after the course, it wouldn't be a problem." Karen also recommended a type of technology application that has since become a standard option made available by most language textbook publishers. "I would love to be able to have the lab program to use on my computer at home for homework," she explained. "That would be such a help, not just for nontraditional students but for all students. That way, we wouldn't have to worry about when the lab might be open." Terry, who was not particularly intimidated by computers, had noticed that nontraditional students in his classes did not appear to be comfortable with technology use. He, however, was thrilled with the student audio CDs accompanying his Spanish textbook and felt that web-based exercises and CD-ROMs were wonderful additions to language programs. "The more different ways to be surrounded with the language, the better!" he declared.

Discussion and Conclusions

Although it is not possible to make generalizations based upon the views of the six nontraditional undergraduate students interviewed, their perceptions clearly add depth and richness to the meager amount of data available regarding this population and the study of foreign languages. The participants in this study were able to describe, sometimes passionately, their motivations for university study, which usually involved a concrete goal such as getting a better job or supporting a family. Perhaps not surprisingly, their interest in learning a foreign language appeared to be purely utilitarian as well. All lauded the goal of becoming fluent and speaking a

foreign language, yet, with the exception of Terry, each was actually engaged in the study of the language due to a program requirement. This would tend to support the assertion of Schleppegrell (1987) that adult students usually learn a language for instrumental reasons, although none of the participants expressed any lack of tolerance for lessons that do not seem to relate closely to their personal goals. To the contrary, when asked specifically about the role of life experiences in their study of the foreign language, none of the participants was able to see the relevance of life experience with regard to the foreign language class. Two of those interviewed stated that this would be a more important issue for other college courses, in fields such as literature or history.

Since all of the participants who were interviewed had persisted in their university enrollment as well as foreign language study for at least a year, no evidence emerged regarding possible reasons for the attrition of nontraditional undergraduates, as described by Horn and Carroll (1996). In fact, all of the participants felt that nontraditional students tend to work harder and are more strongly motivated than are traditional undergraduates. Future research is needed to investigate the underlying causes of the high level of attrition of nontraditional undergraduates; perhaps an in-depth qualitative study involving interviews with former nontraditional students who were not able to continue with university study would shed some light on this issue.

Possibly the most significant potential implications of this study pertain directly to classroom instruction and demeanor of the university foreign language instructor. The students interviewed clearly expressed strong views regarding the treatment that they received and would like to receive from their professors. While it may seem obvious to most, it is probably safe to say that all students, nontraditional or traditional, would like professors to listen to their questions, to offer clear and patient explanations, and to interact with students in a lively way. According to several of those interviewed, this is not always the case in our university-level foreign language classrooms.

It would be difficult to address concretely the preferences of nontraditional students regarding the types of classroom activities planned by the instructor and engaged in by the students. While some expressed a need to see the written word and some an aversion to pair work, these are most likely due to differences in individual learning styles. To investigate this further, an empirical study could be designed to determine whether certain learning styles are more prevalent among

nontraditional students than among traditional students.

University language instructors could, however, rather easily address the technology-related concerns of nontraditional students enrolled in their classes. Whenever possible, schedules concerning the due dates of assignments that must be completed using a computer could be arranged so that all students will have time to access the necessary equipment. Perhaps special technology tutorials could be implemented through the department in which foreign languages are housed, or the foreign language instructor could refer students who are not comfortable with computers to other campus services or courses, such as the one recommended by Karen. Instructors might survey students at the beginning of the semester to determine which students have computer skills and which might feel less capable of completing web-based assignments or of using CDs or CD-ROMs. "Technology partners" could be formed, and a special session in the computer/language lab would allow those possessing stronger computer skills to tutor those intimidated by technology specifically regarding the skills that would be needed to fulfill the requirements of the language class.

In short, we need to be cognizant of the important life-situation differences that exist among our students without unduly emphasizing these differences. Older students who have returned to the university after years of working and raising families can bring with them a wealth of information to broaden our own perspectives, yet we need to remember that they are likely to approach the notion of learning a foreign language in ways that are different from those of the traditional students who fill most of the seats in our classrooms. Perhaps simply listening to their voices could be the key to creating a more supportive and accommodating learning environment for the growing numbers of nontraditional undergraduates enrolling in university-level foreign language classes.

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Appendix

Interview Questions

1. What are the primary differences that you have seen between traditional and nontraditional students?
2. Do you believe that there are any significant differences between traditional and nontraditional students with regard to language learning ability?
3. What are the most important differences between your foreign language classes and courses at the university in other fields?
4. Do your life experiences play an important role in your learning in general and in learning a foreign language in particular? If so, what role do they play?
5. Which types of foreign language class activities do you prefer? Which types of activities do you like the least? Why?
6. Do you see the role of a foreign language instructor as that of a knowledge-giver or that of a learning facilitator? Please describe any language class experiences that you have had with regard to these roles.
7. How do you feel about technology use and foreign language learning?