President’s Message
April 2018
Bill VanPatten

The annual meeting of the AATSP is almost here. The theme of the meeting in Salamanca is “Looking forward/Forward Looking.” This is an important time for us to think about the future—individually and collectively.

The MLA report on language enrollments in higher education was recently published (click here) and the data offer significant food for thought. First, for the second cycle in a row, language enrollments in higher education have decreased overall. Second, even the “giant” among modern languages—Spanish—shows some decline. Portuguese remains “low” in the number of learners—lagging behind Ancient Greek but just slightly ahead of Biblical Hebrew. (For trends in K-12 enrollments, see the American Councils report. Click here.)

That the decline in language enrollments in colleges and universities seems to be a pattern should be disconcerting. We should be asking ourselves “why?” Reports such as the ones cited here do not offer reasons: their job is merely to collect the data. It is our job to try to understand the phenomenon and dig into what is happening in the United States. We can speculate all we want but we will need research. Are programs being dismantled? Are requirements being eliminated? Is there a teacher shortage? Are students voting with their feet because of dissatisfaction? Is there a constellation of factors underlying the results we see over the last two cycles of data gathering?

As we wait to understand the causes of the decline in enrollments, we would do well to remember how different we are from other disciplines. We are not science. We are not math. We are not technology. We are not English. What we do and how we do it needs to meet the implicit promise in every registration of every student in a Spanish or Portuguese course: proficiency. Yes, although we tout intercultural competence, “thinking skills”, and other byproducts of language instruction, foremost in students’, parents’, and administrators’ minds is “What kind of proficiency can we expect after two years of study? After three years of study? And how do you show this?” We need to reflect on this implicit promise and the curricula that we offer students. Are we doing all that we can do? Are we meeting the promise? Are we measuring the promise? As we wait for the research to come in as to why enrollments are declining, we need not wait to reflect on how we can better position ourselves to make the arguments for language learning. We need to reflect on the implicit promise of proficiency. Our own best efforts in getting students interested in languages may well involve showing and not telling. Satisfied students who can say, “Look at what I can do” are some of the best advocates for language study.

I look forward to seeing you all in Salamanca. In the meantime, Happy Cinco de Mayo!

Bill VanPatten