

# Appendix F

## Stakeholder Feedback

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**Arlington Public Schools  
Focus Group Research with Teachers on the  
Implementation of the Foreign Language in Elementary School (FLES) Program**

December 13, 2011

## **Background**

Arlington Public Schools (APS) 2005-2011 Strategic Plan reflects the school system's aim that students be challenged, be proficient in at least one language other than English (Goals 1 and 2), and establishes the school system's desire to "prepare each student to succeed in a diverse, changing world through instructional and other school experiences responsive to each student's talents, interests, and challenges" (Goal 3). The Foreign Language in Elementary School (FLES) program, overseen by the World Languages Office (WLO), is an important response to these strategic goals in that the program provides students the ability to learn about others' cultures and develop proficiency in a language other than their native language at a developmentally critical time.

A multi-faceted evaluation of the APS World Languages Program is underway. The evaluation includes explorations of FLES ranging from testing students' language proficiency to discussing FLES implementation experiences with teachers. This report summarizes the qualitative research findings from a focus group conducted with FLES classroom teachers in December 2011. These findings will be most meaningful when considered together with findings from other facets of the overall WLO evaluation.

### **Research Purpose**

The overarching goals of the focus group were to:

- Learn how the FLES program is implemented day-to-day—including fidelity of implementation of the FLES models across and within schools, and
- Identify ways to improve implementation across FLES schools.

### **Research Method**

One 90-minute focus group discussion was conducted in December 2011 by an independent researcher, not employed by APS. Of the 11 APS elementary schools implementing FLES, 6 were represented in the discussion. In all, 13 FLES teachers participated. Six of them teach at schools informally described as "newer" to FLES and 7 at schools with longer histories with FLES. All of the respondents were teaching FLES in the 2011-2012 academic year.

The discussion guide is attached as Appendix A. The questions were developed in collaboration with the World Languages Office. In brief, the discussion guide explored:

- **Experiences as a FLES teacher** (e.g., the decision to become a FLES teacher, the benefits and drawbacks of the role, impact on teaching overall).
- **Thoughts on the FLES program itself** (e.g., positive aspects when it comes to helping children learn Spanish, recommended improvements).
- **FLES climate at school**, including how FLES fits into the day, how well-received the program is.
- **FLES implementation** (e.g., length of instruction time usually achieved each week, factors that support instruction time or make it difficult, school functions such as planning time, transitions, non-classroom duties).
- **General suggestions and recommendations for the future.**

In interpreting the findings presented in this report, it is important to note that focus group discussions are a qualitative research method. While the discussions produce rich, detailed information about the perspectives of those interviewed and opportunities to further explore relevant new perspectives, focus group findings are descriptive in nature and cannot be generalized due to sampling approaches and small sample sizes.

## Findings

### Experiences as a FLES Teacher

The decision to become a FLES teacher was often driven as much by practical matters as by a love of language and teaching.

*I taught ESOL...and I needed a break from that because it felt like it was all about testing and not actually teaching. And, I wanted to see what it was like to actually teach again. And, I thought I would see what the other side of language teaching was like. I had taught English as a second language and I wanted to teach a foreign language.*

*Being a native Spanish speaker, I had an interest in teaching languages.*

*My principal asked me [to be a FLES teacher]. And, I thought, 'If she trusts me enough to ask me, it deserves a try.'*

*I needed a job. When I moved here, I preferred to teach elementary [as opposed to middle- or high school] and things just kind of fell into place.*

*I was an immersion teacher for [X] years. For me it was just a matter of practicality. I wanted to be closer to my children's school so I could be more involved in what is going on there.*

*I taught high school for a number of years and took some time off to have children. FLES was being phased in so I could teach part-time [in another district], so that was perfect for me at the time. Because of having young children, I was more interested teaching young children as well.*

When they were asked to identify the “plusses” and “minuses” of being a FLES teacher, these teachers named several of both (see Table 1). Most of the drawbacks they named at the outset were repeated themes throughout the group. However, most were generally happy with teaching FLES as opposed to other teaching roles.

**Table 1. Advantages and drawbacks of being a FLES teacher**

Advantages	Drawbacks
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not as much formal grading/less volume of grading than classroom teachers (although FLES teachers conduct assessments, they have no progress reports, report cards)</li> <li>• Less paperwork</li> <li>• Not having the responsibilities of a classroom teacher—for example, academic responsibilities such as reading/writing, parent communication and conferences, field trips, etc..</li> <li>• Pleasures of teaching in general and of teaching a foreign language in particular (e.g., more students saying “Buenos días” upon arriving at school, seeing heritage speakers “shine,” introducing Mayan culture and other cultures).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The sheer number of students means less relationship-building with students because you see so many (i.e., 200 students to get to know as opposed to 25)</li> <li>• Class sizes (in some cases 30-45 students at once)</li> <li>• “The cart” (i.e., being itinerant, being a “visitor,” moving classroom supplies from room to room for instruction throughout the day)</li> <li>• Teaching so many different grade levels and having to undertake so many different “preps” in order to be ready for each</li> <li>• “Implied lack of respect” (e.g., students are “pulled out” of FLES more than other specials, teachers of other specials have own classrooms, off-curriculum requests such as cooking lessons)</li> <li>• Duties (e.g., bus duty, recess duty, etc.)</li> <li>• Difficulty securing substitute teachers who speak Spanish, who are willing to take on the FLES role</li> </ul>

*I think I sometimes feel somewhat marginal in the schools. We’re technically a core subject, but we’re not always treated like that.*

Teacher 1: *I taught K through 5<sup>th</sup> and it’s just crazy to prepare.*

Teacher 2: *I teach K through 5<sup>th</sup>. I don’t have weekends, nights. I’m totally stressed out. The 90 minutes of planning I get a day is not enough.*

Teacher 1: *It would be nice if one person could do K through 1. And another could do [another narrow band of grade levels].*

Being a FLES teacher has influenced their teaching in general, say these focus group participants. Specifically, they said they have developed skills to help manage some of the drawbacks of being a FLES teacher, including:

- Improved classroom management by virtue of teaching large groups.
- Improved organizational skills because of moving from class to class.
- Better time management skills. As a classroom teacher, one can be flexible allowing more time for one topic and making up time, if needed, elsewhere in a lesson or in a day. The way FLES is implemented, start and stop times are very specific and enforced which diminishes flexibility.
- More skilled at multi-tasking—for example, being able to administer a one-on-one testing interview to a young child while having others work independently in class.

*I am [still new to FLES]. I am still feeling overwhelmed. And, I hear the things you are all saying. We have the same problems [at my school]. But, I don't have the same feelings. [I would tell a new FLES teacher], you will learn to be resourceful and you will find out that you have skills you didn't know you had.*

### **Thoughts on the FLES Program Itself**

In general, the teachers felt positive about FLES—specifically, that the program and their efforts were helping students learn Spanish language and culture.

*I think the children are really learning a lot. FLES is opening up a window to them...the idea that people in different countries, dress differently, speak differently. It's a whole new world. That's awesome.*

*It's like putting on a show every time. The puppets, the songs. You have to do it. The vocabulary, the stories, the pictures, everything. You're a part of the show. You're making a show for them. And, they're loving it and they're learning it. And, it's not just once. It's from morning until the end of the day.*

*Keep the amount of time. Our program is doing really well. We're in our [X] year. And, now they want to cut the time. We're at 135 minutes a week and they want to cut us back to 90, but we're very successful with what we're doing and the kids are clearly making progress. We don't want to lose the time. It's not going to be successful if you keep changing it.*

### **FLES Climate at School**

The topic of school climate came up spontaneously early in the conversation without these teachers being asked specifically about climate. As shown earlier in this report, several teachers used terms like “marginal” and “implied lack of respect” from the outset of the discussion to describe how they feel.

*Teachers of other specials have their own classrooms, their own domain. We are always a guest [in others' classrooms].*

*We're at the bottom of the totem pole in terms of teaching staff.*

*In my school, I see it as almost two-sided. The parents are excited about [FLES], the kids are excited about it, and the administrators tell people that it's a good thing. But, the actions—the way it's scheduled so it's class-and-a-half<sup>1</sup> or the back-to-backs with no transition or the fact that kids are pulled out. I almost feel like we have the FLES program so there's an opportunity to pull kids out.*

*Part of the issue is convenience. When the teacher needs to pull a kid out, she can because there is another adult in the classroom [when the FLES teacher is present].*

Several teachers—particularly those at schools that have newly adopted FLES—indicated greater difficulties when it comes to school climate. Some described their schools' reception as “guarded.” However, the term “improving” also came up with some who had more years' experience saying that the climate improved at their schools over time. In addition, some at schools with newer programs said they believed the climate would get better over time. These teachers attributed improvement to other staff growing accustomed to them and their role, and also to students' and parents' enthusiasm for FLES.

*I feel like they [other teachers, staff] are used to us now. But, in my first year, I definitely felt that lack of respect...Because of us, they got rid of early release day. That's why we had to put up with a lot. It's our [X] year and it's a lot better.*

*At [a more veteran FLES school] there was greater friendship and collegiality. Here [at a new school], it's like, 'They took away our Wednesday.' They usually schedule assemblies and things during FLES time, so we're losing instruction time....Like she [another participant] said, maybe the first year is the hardest and people are like, 'Let's see what [you] can do.'*

*I'm seeing the climate as improving. There was anxiety and [miming guardedness w/ folded arms]. I heard from the Spanish resource teacher that for years she's been saying, 'Buenos días' in the mornings to the kids and nobody answered. And, now with us in the classroom, kids are saying 'Buenos días' and parents are getting excited.*

*I do have to say, the parents in my school are wonderful, the parents are being so welcoming. My principal has told me that they say nothing but great things about the FLES program. In our school, that has really helped. Parents are so excited, so happy to be getting Spanish.*

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<sup>1</sup> Class-and-a-half is the approach some teachers have experienced when there are three classes needing FLES instruction at the same time, but only two FLES teachers. The three are split, with each FLES teacher taking “a class-and-a-half.”

## FLES Implementation

### Instruction Time

These FLES teachers were shown a chart summarizing the recommended FLES instructional time (see Table 2) and were asked whether those time targets were ones they usually find that they reach.

**Table 2. Summary of recommended FLES instructional time**

	Existing or longer-standing programs	Newer programs
K	90 minutes of instruction each week	
Grades 1-5	All students get 120-135 minutes of instruction each week	
K-5		All students get 90 minutes of instruction each week

Several teachers said, “Yes.” Several teachers said, “No.” Some said that they hit the mark, “with the exception of the transitions” (i.e., when classes are back-to-back with no transition time allocated, thus transition time must come from instruction time).

*I always thought [FLES time] was a fixed thing and there was no way around that. It's on the books. But, our administrator supports Spanish a ton. The requirement is in there. [The administrator] wouldn't have us cutting it out.*

Teacher 1: *With the exception of the transitions, I think we're pretty solid [in hitting instruction time goals].*

Teacher 2: *I would say so too.*

Teacher 3: *[To Teacher 2] But, you're one of the longest running FLES programs.*

Teacher 2: *Yes, we're in our [X] year.*

Teacher 3: *I can tell you at my school, it's 60 minutes give or take 5 or 10. Like she said, it's back-to-back so I have to end [class a few minutes early].*

*Mostly we hit it. I think it's pretty good for being our [X] year.*

The teachers made it clear that the core implementation challenge is fitting into the school schedule. Those with the greatest struggles at their schools were keenly interested in the schools in which the timing seemed to have been worked out—which were most often those with longer experience with FLES.

Teacher 1: *A huge challenge is fitting into the schedule. We were supposed to meet three times a week for 30 minutes, each class. But, the schedule wouldn't permit it.*

Teacher 2 [same school]: *So, we meet 45 minutes twice a week with each class. Forty-five minutes with first graders or preschoolers is ridiculous.*

Teacher 1: *But, there was literally no more time where we could fit in.*

Teacher 2: *A lot of our classes are supposed to be 45 minutes, but we're back-to-back w/ other specialists. So, you're cutting the time off the first class and the second class. Or, everybody's always behind and you're late. It's a no-win situation.*

*So, it's supposed to be 90 minutes. But, right out of the gate, it's 60 minutes.*

*I'm thinking about my school, and the other schools where the schedule seems to work except it doesn't at my school.*

Most of the teachers had a general sense that students are more likely to be “pulled” out of FLES for particular needs or attention than they are to be pulled from other special classes like music or PE.

*FLES is a special like art, music, and PE. But, there is no pulling out of kids from their specials except for FLES. And they're pulled out for everything.*

*FLES was two hours [thus, FLES teachers are in classrooms allowing teachers to do other school tasks for the same amount of time they had previously had on early-release Wednesdays]. Now that FLES is moving to 90 minutes, I don't know what schools will do. We've just become babysitters for kindergarten for half an hour, I mean 'handwriting teachers.'*

### Planning Time, School “Duties”

Other implementation matters were also explored. As designed, the FLES program calls for classroom and FLES teachers to have a common planning time in order to achieve more cohesion between their lessons. None of the teachers in the focus group said that they have common planning time with teachers in whose classes they teach Spanish.

Moderator: *Do you have common planning time with other teachers or get to attend grade level team meetings?*

Teacher: *No, we're scheduled to teach Spanish when the other grade levels are on their prep.*

*And, the other FLES teachers and I are supposed to meet as a team three times a week. That never happens. We can only meet once—just on [day of the week] can the three of us have a good thirty or thirty-five minutes.*

Participants' responses were mixed to a question about the duties they have at school, with some saying they had amount that is fair and just the same as other teachers and others saying that their schedule and role at school mean that they are assigned more duties. Among those in the latter



situation, some were bothered by it, but others were not. All-in-all, the question of duties was less compelling to these teachers than other matters such as nonexistent transition time and students being pulled from class.

*We have more duties than other teachers at [school]. But, we also have less instruction, so that's kind of the trade-off according to the administration.*

*We have four duties every day. Four!*

*At [school], teachers have either morning or afternoon duty. Usually it's half an hour. It doesn't go into my class time. All the specialists have to do something.*

### Heritage Speakers

As with the question of instruction time, these teachers had mixed responses to the question of how well they feel students who are native Spanish-speakers are served in FLES.

*I am so thankful—especially because I know that some of my colleagues do not have this—that in my school, they separated the heritage speakers into whole separate classes because their numbers are so high. [So, there is one class or more of heritage speakers at the grade levels she teaches.] To me, that's great because my goal there is to support them in the science curriculum. To me, it comes naturally. Switching to the classes that are more novice, [I must think] 'Stop. Cómo te llamas? [transition to simpler language].' It's a different world, but I think that has helped a lot. I think the heritage speakers are getting a lot more out of school. And, parents are delighted to help.*

*I worry that they are being lost in the shuffle, or pulled out of class because they need reading help or English.*

*In my school, everyone is integrated. I have to say the plus side of that is that the heritage speakers are the ones who shine in FLES class. All day long, they're the ones who don't get it, who aren't reading up to grade level. But, when I read a book that's in Spanish the English speakers will say, 'Is it in Spanish?' And, I say, 'Yes, but our friends [the heritage speakers] are going to help us.'...It's so empowering for them to feel able, when the rest of the day that might not be the case.*

### The Cart

Second only to scheduling challenges, was teachers' universal dislike of "the cart." The cart not only presents logistical challenges (e.g., what to do when the elevator breaks down, how to load material so everything stays put in transit) but, perhaps more importantly, it symbolizes these teachers' itinerant status. While the packing and moving was considered a hassle, the matter of not having a classroom and difficulties that come from being "ever the visitor" were more these teachers' focus. Issues they

raised included sharing classroom materials ranging from crayons to laptops to bulletin board space. A couple mentioned a need for uniformity in behavior management tools across classrooms. Overall, these FLES teachers did not anticipate that the situation would change in the foreseeable future.

*...and, then there is traffic at the elevator with the other specialists and their carts. I wish we just had our own classroom.*

*The administrator really has to step in and say, 'This is how it has to be whether you like it or not' [when it comes to sharing between visiting FLES teachers and classroom teachers]. Otherwise, you get one teacher who doesn't mind sharing, another will yell at you if you don't have your own crayons, another can't stand that you have a special Spanish folder because it doesn't jive with her colors. Or, with transitions, [administrators need to say], 'No, this is how we're doing it.' Or, 'They're going to be 5 minutes late and you have to be ok with that.'*

Teacher 1: *Even with technology. You have to carry your USB and the teachers complain about viruses. There has to be communication and a sense of community.*

Others: *[Agreeing]*

Teacher 2: *I have always wanted to use the smart board. It's always awkward because the teacher feels like you're kicking them off the computer.*

Teacher 3: *We're very lucky to have one computer per teacher this year. But, in the past, you'd come in [to a class] and sometimes the teacher would say "no" and not let you use the laptop. So, then your lesson plan is shot because you need the computer but they won't let you use it.*

Teacher 4: *I bring a USB drive and my own laptop and just plug it in.*

Teacher 2: *I walk outside so it's risky to do that.*

*Of course, if we come to their classroom and it's their planning time...of course they want to use their resources for planning. I wouldn't want to give my computer away during my planning time. I use it 90% of the time when I'm planning.*

*We just had a meeting. The school system is overcrowded. So many schools need additions put on. So, forget about the idea of getting your own classroom. [Laughing] We'll be teaching on the roof.*

*I go into a second grade classroom and she uses a system of heart points. In another room, they do the little tickets. If that can be unified, that would be helpful. I think the art teacher and others in the building would probably be supporters on that one because it's really difficult.*

When these teachers were pressed as to what they thought the reasons were for difficulties in climate and implementation, they pointed to the challenges of scheduling, testing demands, and requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act (e.g., a Title 1 school that did not make AYP was said to be "getting a gazillion interventions" to implement). To a lesser degree, some mentioned that colleagues think Spanish will interfere with learning English. They hoped to have the research-based evidence more widely shared to quell concerns.

*Interventions [associated with AYP] take away from the reading block, and the writing block. And, the general ed teachers are going to be stressed out, of course. And, it has to be compensated [the time must come from somewhere] and it's going to be FLES that is going to pay the price.*

*When I said 'overscheduled,' I meant from the top down. The principal is being told you've got to have this, and you've got to do these tests, and you've got to do the AYP, and you've got to do this. It just whittles down to us at the bottom.*

*I still hear comments that Spanish is interfering with English—like, 'How are they going to learn to spell if we're teaching them phonetic Spanish?'*

*Sometimes general ed teachers are not aware of so much research in the field and sometimes they think that kids are getting confused if they are beginning to read in English and they listen to Spanish.*

## **Suggestions for the Future**

Advice that these teachers would give to FLES teachers, other teachers, and administrators at a school that was about to adopt FLES for the first time includes the following.

### Advice for FLES teachers

- Be organized.
- Flexibility is required.
- Communicate with teachers.
- It takes a special person to be a FLES teacher.

### Advice for other teachers

- Believe. Believe in the research that a second language is not going to be detrimental to learning English.

### Advice for administrators

- Look at schools where FLES works—especially at schedules.
- Figure out a common planning time if possible. Keep the lines of communication open between FLES teachers and other teachers. We are a resource.
- Create space for professional development around language, so teachers can learn what the research says about language acquisition and the benefits of learning a second language.
- Keep power with the principal as opposed to a particular department such as language arts—then a single department cannot dictate the schedule for the school.
- Set the guidelines that FLES teachers need classroom teachers to work in a spirit of sharing—whether it's a bit of space on the classroom wall, use of the classroom teacher's crayons or other supplies during FLES time, or how to share technology such as laptops and smart boards between two teachers.
- Establish uniformity for behavior management.

- Give us a special ed assistant. Teachers indicated that during general education classes, special ed assistants are present, but not typically during FLES classes.

In addition to their verbal responses, focus group participants were given an opportunity to provide suggestions in writing at the close of the group. Their verbatim responses are shown in Appendix B. The teachers focused their answers on four topic areas: 1) Scheduling, 2) Encouraging greater understanding of FLES and foreign language learning, 3) Other climate-related matters such as administrators showing support, and 4) Resources such as books and technology for FLES teachers.

## Conclusions

- **Integrating FLES into the school day is a central challenge.** Some schools have found ways to make it work, and at least one with a longer-standing FLES program does so at the level of 135-minutes/week of instruction. Other schools meet the challenge creatively, but may ultimately fall short on instruction time—for example, by scheduling “specials” classes back-to-back (without transition time) to achieve on paper the required minutes of instruction time, or by splitting three classes that need FLES simultaneously between two FLES teachers so each person teaches “a class and a half.” Teachers attribute the scheduling challenge to external factors such as AYP interventions and testing requirements that emphasize other subjects. Teachers at schools still struggling with logistics were keenly interested in those that had found solutions. In sum, teachers’ responses were mixed on the question of whether they are achieving the targeted number of instruction minutes each week—about as many said “yes,” as said “no.”
- **From these teachers’ viewpoint, FLES instruction time commonly gets short-changed when special demands arise—such as the need to pull a student from class or a school assembly.** In other words, FLES teachers voiced their perception that FLES classes and teachers are convenient tools for meeting these kinds of needs. For example, a general education teacher who needs to “pull” a student for extra instruction may do so during FLES time because the rest of the class is covered by the FLES teacher. Also, because language proficiency is not tested in the way mathematics and language arts are, administrators and teachers were said to view short-changing FLES as the more acceptable option when time conflicts arise.
- **“The Cart” is a logistical challenge, and, more importantly symbolizes the itinerant nature of the FLES teacher’s work.** As these teachers put it, the FLES teacher is “always a guest.” As guests, these teachers encounter some colleagues who share classroom resources openly and others who feel differently. For example, the latter may not want to give FLES bulletin board space, may insist FLES teachers bring their own crayons and supplies, and may balk at matters like a FLES folder that does not work with the color-coded subject folders the teacher uses. Even for the most accommodating classroom teachers, sharing technology can be an issue as concerns about viruses arise when USBs are used to bring files to class. One FLES teacher described feeling like she was “kicking the teacher off” her computer during the other teacher’s planning time when the computer was understandably needed by the other teacher most.
- **These factors—scheduling issues, short-changing, and being nomadic—contribute to FLES teachers feeling undervalued.** Focus group participants used terms like “marginal,” and “implied lack of respect.”
- **These FLES teachers voiced concern that other teachers believe that learning Spanish will cause difficulty in English Language Arts learning.** This concern was not a prominent theme in the focus group. But, it was raised and when FLES teachers were given an opportunity to share final suggestions for improving FLES in writing, several chose to focus on teaching teachers and families about the research evidence on the benefits of learning a foreign language.

- **None of the teachers in the focus group said that they have common planning time with teachers in whose classes they teach Spanish.** Although the lack of common planning time did not raise these teachers' ire, they did emphasize that communication and understanding between teachers could very likely help FLES implementation.
- **Participants' responses were mixed to a question about the duties they have at school, with some saying they had amount that is fair and just the same as other teachers and others saying that their schedule and role at school mean that they are assigned more duties.** However, all-in-all, the question of duties was less compelling to these teachers than other matters such as nonexistent transition time and students being pulled from class.
- **Even with these limitations, teachers are convinced that students are learning Spanish and increasing their understanding of other cultures.** The teachers see anecdotal evidence (e.g., "Buenos días" in the halls) and testing evidence. For heritage speakers, FLES class can be a chance to shine.
- **These FLES teachers also believe that both the logistics and appreciation for their work are certain to improve with time.** Several focus group participants said that they and FLES had not been warmly received as schools gave up early release time one day a week in adopting FLES. However, those with more years of experience at a particular school went on to say that they now feel more valued than they did.

**APPENDIX A – DISCUSSION GUIDE ARLINGTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS**  
**DISCUSSION GUIDE ARLINGTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS (APS)**  
**Focus Group Research with FLES Teachers**

**December 2011**

**RESEARCH PURPOSE STATEMENT**

The purpose of this qualitative research with APS FLES teachers is to learn how the FLES program is implemented day-to-day—including fidelity of implementation of the FLES models across and within schools—and identify ways to improve implementation across FLES schools.

**INTRODUCTIONS/WARM UP (15 minutes)**

Good afternoon everyone. My name is \_\_\_\_\_. First, thank you for taking the time to join us. A word on our purpose today... Everyone here is teacher in Arlington Public Schools' FLES (Foreign Language Elementary School) program. We are here today to talk about your experiences as a FLES teacher with the intention of learning from your experiences and insights in order to improve how FLES is implemented in the future. So, again, I thank you for your time. And, I thank you on behalf of the teachers and students who will benefit in the future from the insights you give us today.

**A. Disclosures and ground rules**

- Audio taping. The tape will only be available to me to help me write my report. Once my report is accepted in final, I will delete the tape. I will not share it with anyone else.
- Confidentiality.
  - This focus group is unusual in that you may know one another or know people in common. I hope that you will feel comfortable sharing your opinions. And, I ask that you keep what is said here in confidence. That said, I cannot legally bind anyone here to keep what they hear confidential. Therefore, you may choose *not* to say some things. If that happens and you wish to share information with me later, please feel free to contact me by phone or e-mail.
  - When I write my report, it will not identify anyone by name. Rather, I will use phrases like, "Several teachers expressed the opinion that \_\_\_\_\_." Or, "Almost no one experienced \_\_\_\_\_ in the FLES program."
- I am a professional moderator, and not an expert on teaching, school administration, or evaluation of professionals. My job is to listen to you and convey your input to the Offices of Planning and Evaluation, and World Languages. I want to emphasize that this discussion is about understanding the *program* as it is implemented in the real world and not about judging teachers in any way. The World Languages Office wanted me to specifically say that the Office will not in any way use this report as a teacher evaluation measure, but rather as a tool to determine fidelity of implementation according to the adopted model and ways to improve the program.

- A few other items:
  - Important to hear from everyone.
  - Please turn off cell phones.
  - No right or wrong answers—and, no need to reach consensus.

B. Participant introductions

- Your first name
- Your school
- What grade level you're teaching this year.
- And, since we'll be talking about learning new languages...Tell me about how you came to be bilingual or multilingual—whether you learned more than one language primarily at home, at school, or another way.

**EXPERIENCES AS A FLES TEACHER (10 minutes)**

1. Tell me about your decision to become a FLES teacher....Complete this sentence, "I became a FLES teacher because..."
2. What are the "pluses" of being a FLES teacher for you? And the "minuses"? [Easel list.]
3. In what ways, if any, would you say FLES has influenced your teaching overall?
4. What advice would you give a colleague considering FLES?

**THOUGHTS ON THE FLES PROGRAM ITSELF (10 minutes)**

1. What do you like best about the FLES program?
2. What aspects work well when it comes to helping kids learn Spanish and appreciate other languages/cultures? [Generate list on easel.]
3. And, how about the flip side...dislikes about the program itself or recommended improvements? [Easel.]

**FLES CLIMATE (15 minutes)**

1. Think about day-to-day life at your school. How well would you say FLES "fits in"?
  - What challenges have you observed or experienced? [Probe the source of the challenge and whether each is "ongoing" or "resolved," in the teacher's opinion.]
    - [For ongoing challenges] In your opinion, what makes it so difficult to work out solutions?
    - [For resolved challenges] What worked and why?
  - [If needed, prompt] Complete this sentence, "When it comes to FLES, I'd say the climate at my school is \_\_\_\_\_." If needed, offer a scale: Warmly/fully accepted; received in a lukewarm way; coldly received/not accepted. [For context, ask how that compares to the climate overall or for other programs.]



**FLES IMPLEMENTATION (30 minutes)**

1. [If not mentioned] The recommended instructional time for FLES ranges from 90 to 135 minutes/week. [Read specifics from table and show table on easel.] Is that a level that you usually reach?
  - If so, what factors do you think make it possible?
  - The World Languages Office recommended 30 minutes of instructional 3Xweek as the optimal schedule. Where is that happening?
  - If not, what factors make it difficult?

	<b>Existing programs</b>	<b>New Programs</b>
<b>K</b>	90 minutes of instruction	
<b>Grades 1-5</b>	Everyone gets 120-135 minutes of instruction	
<b>K-5</b>		Everyone gets 90 minutes of instruction

2. Do all of your students come to your class all the time, or are they pulled for other instruction during FLES? [For each answer] Tell me about that.
3. Help me understand some other particulars of the day.
  - How are transitions managed? And, what are the reasons they're handled that way? Your thoughts/feelings on that?
  - Describe the planning time you have. Is it common planning time with other teachers?
  - Do you typically attend grade level team meetings [why/why not]?
  - How about other "duties" and teaching responsibilities, if any, do you have in your building beyond FLES? Are these an appropriate use of time as you understand the FLES implementation guidelines? If not, what factors contribute to your having these responsibilities?
4. Tell me about how needs of heritage speakers are handled.
  - How well do you feel they're being met?
  - In what ways, if any, is differentiation taking place?
5. Let's create a list of recommendations for schools adopting FLES in the coming years—specifically recommendations for FLES teachers, non-FLES teachers, and principals [3-column list on easel].

**CLOSING (10 minutes)**

Let's use our last few minutes to boil down the most important points we've talked about.

[Distribute written exercise. "The most important step(s) my school could take to strengthen how FLES is implemented is/are.... \_\_\_\_\_."]

As you write, be aware that I am planning to put quotations from these papers in my report. No name will be associated with any quote, but I'd like you to know that as you write. [After writing is complete] tell me what you focused on in your suggestion.

## **Concluding Handout**

### FLES Teacher's Focus Group

As a concluding exercise, teachers were asked to indicate in writing the most important steps that their schools could take to strengthen how FLES is implemented. Their answers are shown verbatim below. The teachers focused their answers on four topic areas: 1) Scheduling, 2) Encouraging greater understanding of FLES and foreign language learning, 3) Other climate-related matters such as administrators showing support, and 4) Resources such as books and technology for FLES teachers.

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#### **The most important step(s) my school could take to strengthen how FLES is implemented is/are....**

##### Scheduling

- Looking at and working out the entire school schedule from scratch so that the FLES curriculum can be implemented as designed/intended (i.e., stick to the 120-90 mins). Principals and F.L. Supervisor should look at schedules at other schools where they have been able to meet the timeframe required to make FLES successful.
- Keep 135 minutes/week of FLES instruction for grades 1-5! We are successful and do not want the program to be cut.
- Create a schedule that is consistent—the students see the same teacher each time, classes are not split between other classes. Class size should be maintained so that all students have their own learning space.
- Support the FLES program with the schedule and logistics.
- Administration should try to rearrange the schedules and make them more productive for every teaching subject.

##### Encouraging Better Understanding of FLES/Foreign Language Learning

- Educate other teachers/parents/administrators on language research so that everyone supports the program.
- Get more involved in researching the benefits of implementing a foreign language program in their children's community.
- Inform parents about the FLES program, its goals and importance.
- School wide discussion to parents of the focus and importance of FLES.
- Familiarize the community with the program and the benefits.

##### Climate

- Respect class time. Do not allow pull-outs from FLES. Do not assume Latino students already speak Spanish and therefore do not need to participate fully in the FLES program.
- Support FLES teachers with uniform policies—behavior, schedule, culture of accepting the Foreign Language Program as an asset and not a hindrance to school.
- Support teachers by allowing grade-level planning schedules.

- Please be supportive, encourage the staff to support FLES. Administrators should express their support for FLES as encouragement.
- Help build a sense of community and validate the work that FLES teachers do.

### Support and Resources

- Continue providing resources. We create much from scratch and constantly need more authentic resources such as books, music, monetary resources for classroom supplies as well as professional development opportunities and time to be able to plan to the best of our abilities.
- Consider that teaching K-5 requires a lot of rushed, less-quality lesson plans. Each FLES teacher should only teach two to three grade levels.
- Allocate class loads considering amount of planning needed to carry out classes.
- We need more organized curriculum planning and professional development in general—too many changes, receiving assignments too late, etc. And, thank you for providing us with this focus group opportunity to share our point of view.
- Make technology more available.
- Have the necessary resources and materials to support the program.
- Improve the communication among teachers, FLES, and administrators.
- Educate families and other teachers on how to differentiate instruction.

**Arlington Public Schools**  
**Focus Group Research with Teachers on the**  
**Implementation of the Spanish Immersion Program at the Elementary School Level**

January 27, 2012

## **Background**

Arlington Public Schools (APS) 2005-2011 Strategic Plan reflects the school system's aim that students be challenged, be proficient in at least one language other than English (Goals 1 and 2), and establishes the school system's desire to "prepare each student to succeed in a diverse, changing world through instructional and other school experiences responsive to each student's talents, interests, and challenges" (Goal 3). The Spanish Immersion program, overseen by the World Languages Office (WLO), is an important part of the response to these strategic goals. In the Immersion program in elementary schools, students learn Spanish through content instruction and Spanish Language Arts instruction for half the school day.

A multi-faceted evaluation of the APS World Languages Program is underway. The evaluation includes explorations of Immersion ranging from testing students' language proficiency to discussing Immersion implementation experiences with teachers. This report summarizes the qualitative research findings from a focus group conducted with grades K-5 Immersion classroom teachers in January 2012. These findings will be most meaningful when considered together with findings from other facets of the overall WLO evaluation.

## **Research Purpose**

The overarching goals of the focus group were to:

- Learn how the Immersion program is implemented day-to-day, and
- Identify ways to improve implementation across and within Immersion schools.

## **Research Method**

One 90-minute focus group discussion was conducted in January 2012 by an independent researcher, not employed by APS. Both of the APS elementary Immersion schools were represented in the discussion. In all, 16 Immersion teachers participated.

The discussion guide is attached as Appendix A. The questions were developed in collaboration with the World Languages Office. In brief, the discussion guide explored:

- **Experiences as an Immersion teacher** (e.g., the decision to become an Immersion teacher, the benefits and drawbacks of the role).

- **Thoughts on the Immersion program itself** (e.g., integration of instruction in Spanish and English, recommended improvements).
- **Immersion climate at school**, including logistics of the school day, how well-supported teachers feel.
- **Immersion implementation** (e.g., proportion of instruction time in Spanish usually achieved each week, factors that support Spanish-language instruction time or make it difficult).
- **General suggestions and recommendations for the future.**

In interpreting the findings presented in this report, it is important to note that focus group discussions are a qualitative research method. While the discussions produce rich, detailed information about the perspectives of those interviewed and opportunities to further explore relevant new perspectives, focus group findings are descriptive in nature and cannot be generalized due to sampling approaches and small sample sizes.

## Findings

### Experiences as an Immersion Teacher

#### Deciding to Become an Immersion Teacher

For these teachers, the decision to teach in the Immersion program was often driven as much by practical matters as by a love of Spanish and teaching. For most participants, their Immersion job was the right fit at the right time. Several appreciated that, in the context of Immersion, being a native Spanish-speaker was an asset in the job market. In addition, a few teachers specified that they saw their role as a special opportunity to help their own “people”—that is people who are native Spanish speakers.

*For me it was not really a decision that I made...when I saw that I had an advantage because they needed a bilingual teacher, then I thought, “This is just a good place for me.” The fact that I was a fluent and native speaker of Spanish put me in a good position to apply. It was a practical matter.*

*I heard in [my country of origin] that there were many of our people in Arlington. So, [after living in another U.S. state] I moved here. If I was to move anywhere, I wanted to come to Virginia, to Arlington, to help my people.*

#### Advantages and Disadvantages of Teaching in the Immersion Program

When they were asked to identify the “plusses” and “minuses” of being an Immersion teacher, the teachers said that the core advantages of being an Immersion teacher are having:

- Freedom to teach creatively within the approved framework as opposed to having to teach in a more prescribed or scripted way.

- Closer relationships to students who are learning Spanish, and learning *in* Spanish, than would be available to them in other settings (e.g., as FLES teachers in Arlington, or in non-Immersion schools).
- Reduced lesson planning because the same lessons are given twice in a day—to one group of students in the morning and another in the afternoon.

*One thing I like about Immersion is that we have more freedom [in teaching Spanish Language Arts]. Our curriculum is set up so that we have our framework. We're responsible for teaching Spanish language, but within that we have some freedom to pick poetry or to use certain stories. We have a series. But, we still have some freedom. As we move into a more scripted type of education, as the trend seems to be, I appreciate being an Immersion teacher because I don't have to be on another's script. I feel that's the only area where I'm respected as a teacher, where I'm allowed to use my creativity and my understanding of children to teach.... Teachers are talked to down to a lot. For me, being an Immersion teacher is sort of the ultimate area where I don't feel that.*

*[Previously, as a FLES teacher] I had 5<sup>th</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, and pre-k and I would only see them once or twice a week. The joy of teaching in an Immersion school is that you get to see that growth in the language. I agree that there is more freedom and there are more resources than there were in FLES because FLES is still pretty new. So, I can see my first- and second-year students and how they're progressing with their language.*

*An advantage would be that we do not have to prepare that many lesson plans. You repeat the lesson. You have the group in the morning and then you repeat the lesson for the afternoon. But, we still have to make comments for 40-something kids, write parents' notes.*

These Immersion teachers also offered various thoughts on the drawbacks of their role, most of which focused on student testing and the number of students each teacher is responsible for. In sum, they said:

- Testing in core subjects puts stress on teachers in general and a “time crunch” on language-learning, in particular.
- Measuring student performance on learning *in* Spanish by testing them in English was regarded as problematic.
- Because Immersion teachers' days are “split”—spent with one group of students in the morning and a different one in the afternoon—they are required to plan and manage approximately twice as many students as at non-Immersion teachers. Yet, they have the same amount of allotted planning, teacher conference, and grading/report card time.

*I think it's the testing. The testing is what drives a lot of the stress, because there is so much pressure around the testing in general. That [emphasis on testing] creates an enormous amount of pressure on us as Immersion teachers. It completely takes over, takes over the Spanish time... for me, what's behind it all is the pressure of testing. That's what spills over into every part of Immersion.*

*This is my [X] year teaching a grade where they have SOLs. Every single meeting that we have, once a week, it's about the test. "How they are doing? How we are going to do? How to do it?" Oh my gosh. With all the teachers, the Principal. The parents are emailing. Everything now is about the tests.*

*Participant 1: Not a uniform system for measuring results against the non-Immersion side.*

*Participant 2: If we teach something in Spanish...the tests are in English.*

*Participant 3: There is the issue of measuring a result and then there is the issue of something like vocabulary, how does our vocabulary translate to English and the things they're reading, to Science...*

*Participant: The children are taught in one language and tested in another, but yet you're not allowed to explain. But, in some schools, the explanation is given and in others it is not. So, it's inconsistent.*

*Moderator: If there is a right way to do it, what would you prefer?*

*Several participants: If you teach in Spanish, test in Spanish.*

*Participant: Or, let teachers explain, especially vocabulary, in English.*

*A regular classroom teacher in elementary school might have 20 or 25 students, whereas we have like 50 or 48. We have to prepare and manage them with the same amount of allotted time.*

*For parent/teacher conferences, we have to meet with twice the number of parents. But, we're given the same number of days as any other school. For writing comments for grades, we also receive the same amount of time.*

*Our job is really rewarding but when it gets to [parent/teacher conference] time, it does remind me how difficult it is to be an Immersion teacher. I especially think parent/teacher conferences is huge. At the beginning of the year, we had almost 50 children. As a first-grade teacher, I like to meet with **all** the parents. But, we can't do that because we're not allotted enough time to meet with 48, 50 parents. To me that's huge.*

One teacher, who very much agreed with the difficulties testing causes, offered this thought on the appropriate role of testing and key advantage she has seen of testing over time.

*I want to say not all testing is bad. When I started working [in APS schools] and they started SOLs, at the beginning I didn't like it. But, back then I might see kids, minority kids, who when they were in 2<sup>nd</sup> grade couldn't count up to 20...so, in that sense, I was happy when they had the SOLs because they were making sure the minority kids were getting the learning they needed to at school. So, at the beginning it was good...making everybody accountable. But, now testing is turning into something else.*



## Immersion Climate

In terms of status, some of the teachers feel as if the Immersion program is worn publicly as a “feather in the APS cap,” but is not fully supported. Again, standardized testing plays a role in these feelings of lower status. Many teachers said that testing priorities clearly demonstrate that core subjects like mathematics matter most and tend to overshadow the needs and priorities of language immersion. With agreement voiced by others, one mentioned that the demands of the current mathematics curriculum exceed the time allotted (one hour per day). The additional needed time, then, comes from Spanish Language Arts. A few said they also saw issues such as not making time concessions for language learning and a lack of Spanish-language material as evidence that Immersion is not quite as important as it is purported to be.

A couple tempered the discussion by pointing out that some issues such as testing and class size are challenges throughout the county and not solely related to Immersion. In addition, in written comments another anecdotally compared the progress of APS Immersion students to those the teacher knows in a nearby school system and emphasized that APS students excel by comparison. To this teacher’s mind, APS students’ superior language acquisition signals that the APS *is* deeply invested. (See Appendix B for this and all written comments.)

*I think that by saying “not enough time,” [another teacher] means that Spanish is kind of on the back burner. Everything else is so important—the math, the science—that Spanish is just something that happens to be there.*

*...we have these huge requirements for Math, which is taking more time [from Spanish].*

*I think the Spanish-language schools don’t have the same status in the system. In Arlington schools, there are many elementary schools where the teaching is only in English. But, we are only two schools where instruction is in Spanish. So, we are at a disadvantage in many things.*

*I was drawn to Arlington because not even Montgomery County as big as it is and as full of resources as it is has a full Immersion school. So, I thought “Wow, here’s Arlington.” But, I think it’s only in name, it’s not in reality. If a county is very committed to Immersion, they would look at things like class size. To learn a language, you need interaction, you need back and forth. You need a lot more “wait time” for a child to process and think in another language.*

*One reason that I say [Immersion has lower status] is because every school has a resource teacher for English Language Arts. Her only job is to guide the teachers, make sure they’re doing their assessments, organize the reading room...provide workshops for teachers. But, we don’t have that on the Spanish side. And, no matter how we voice the need for that, our administrator has made it clear that it will never be provided.*

*One of the joys and the challenges, for example, is we have to take all of the curriculum in math and make it accessible in Spanish. And, as much as the books are translated, everyone goes home and makes a million materials to teach that curriculum.*

In many cases, individual teachers and administrators were said to contribute greatly to improving the climate at school.

*Being an Immersion teacher, you have to work with the English side. It has to be teamwork. My personal experience has been great because I have a partner who supports me. So, anything that needs to be retaught in English, she will do it. We share the same stories, Spanish and English. So, in that way, the students are not receiving different concepts...different languages but the same thing. It melds.*

*Collaborating and integrating is key. Teachers need to support each other. When kids know that, they are more willing to speak Spanish. For example, when the English-speaking teacher is talking about, say, adjectives or language structures in Spanish and English, then the child is getting that message that "Yes, Spanish is valued."*

*I do feel valued. I do feel welcomed. I feel that parents, teachers, and the administration appreciate my work. From my experience, I've had a lot more positives than negatives. I do agree that I would benefit from having fewer students. I would benefit as a teacher from having more materials. But, I feel valued. If you evaluate the program from where we started and where we are right now, we are going up.*

## **Immersion Implementation**

### Estimated Proportions of Instruction Time in Spanish

Estimates of how much of a typical school day is conducted in Spanish were firmly at 50 percent or very close to it. Even when teachers were asked to also consider specials such as P.E., assemblies, etc., most felt confident that 40 to 50 percent of the school day was conducted in Spanish. A couple put the estimate lower, at about 30 percent of the day in Spanish. They emphasized (and others agreed) that when children socialize (e.g., at lunch and recess), they do so almost entirely in English.

*I was thinking...Science is in Spanish. Art is mostly in Spanish. P.E. is the only one [special not in Spanish].*

*When they are socializing, like at recess, they speak English.*

*Some assemblies are in Spanish.*

*I think, in my case, it's lower in Spanish. The students are with me 45 minutes [in Spanish], might take Science and depending on the day they're with Social Studies and Spanish Language Arts—a different teacher, it's split in two—then they have 45 minutes of specials that might be in Spanish. Like the others said, the majority of the day, the students speak in English. Even in the class, they speak English with each other in the class.*

*Sometimes the native Spanish speakers aren't even hanging out with the English speakers, yet they're speaking English to each other.*

Regardless of the rest of the school day, these teachers felt confident that the class time they are responsible for is almost always conducted in Spanish. Even when the moderator pressed that observations had shown less-than-optimal class time spent speaking Spanish and acknowledged that it can be difficult to measure oneself using just recall, the teachers still felt confident that their classes were conducted almost completely in Spanish. They acknowledged some extenuating circumstances when they may find English necessary, such as an acute disciplinary situation or a student who is crying. At least one wanted to be sure that observers differentiate between whether the teacher always speaks Spanish, which is within teacher's control, and whether students always do, which is somewhat less controllable.

*In Math, there is an emphasis now on explaining in detail. From a Math perspective, that is great! But, from a Spanish-language perspective that presents a huge challenge. Sometimes the children really want to say something about math in English that they can't say well in Spanish. And, I don't want to squelch that because that's important in the advancement of mathematical thinking....so, with permission, the student can explain in English. Then, I ask another student to try to help with an explanation in Spanish.*

The moderator explored the challenges that teachers find they must work through to maintain a Spanish-language-only class and also asked for advice these teachers would give a new Immersion teacher for sticking to Spanish. As described by teachers, instances or factors that tend to drive down Spanish time include testing, reprimanding, and reviewing rules. To help teachers stick to Spanish, this group suggested remembering that the students will appreciate it one day and that observations will come.

*If we need to talk about rules, that's in English.*

*It has to be an extreme situation and maybe just to one kid—like if somebody is crying or I have to investigate something.*

*Someday the kids will thank you [for sticking to Spanish in the class room].*

*[Laughing] You need to use Spanish in the classroom because when they come to observe you, they'll see, know if you don't do it.*

*I think that you're the model. I worked in an Immersion school where I was specifically told, "You are not allowed to speak English in your classroom." And, I went for six months where the kids didn't know I spoke English. But, once they **heard** me speak English, then it broke down and they would speak English to me and I would have to try to get them to speak in Spanish.*

*What I tell students when they try [to speak English to me] is, "Que? What? What did you say?" Then, they change.*

*Participant 1: I would tell a new Immersion teacher to believe that students **will** be learners. Participants: Yes, don't give up. Don't give up.*

*I also feel like I need to let the children know that, "Yes, I can speak both languages. And, I **want you** to be able to speak both fluently, too...because I want you to be able to grow up and be like me. Be bilingual. Be fluent in both languages. Yes, I can speak [English], but no, I'm not going to speak it to you right now."*

*It's the teachers, too. When my switch partner steps into my room, she speaks Spanish.*

### Transitions During the School Day

The many transitions required at an Immersion school in order to accommodate the "English part of the day" and the "Spanish part of the day" were considered a bit of a difficulty. These teachers believed that transitions were problematic, although some acknowledged transitions are an issue at most schools. Looking for a silver lining, one speculated that experience with transitions might help in middle school. Teachers' different classroom management approaches were thought by some to contribute to transition difficulties (e.g., different hand signals or whistles for quiet).

*The transitions cause the environment to be more chaotic. I've taught at a non-Immersion school and I thought the environment was a lot calmer. I had the kids for longer. Now, by the end of the day, I'm so worn out.*

*It's just a lot of transitions, speaking from the kids' point of view.*

*And, when the transition is at "1:00" and I need students to be there at 1:00 but there is no actual "transition" time. It's impossible. It's in every school, though.*

*A disadvantage about an Immersion school...there are a lot of transitions. And with a lot of transitions, we lose a lot of time. And, some students aren't used to that and some get thrown off by it. Of course, some adapt well and then do really well when they get to middle school because they're used to it.*

*One of the reasons I think our children have difficulties with transitions is that teachers have different classroom management tools. One example would be signals to ask them to be silent. It could be this [hand] signal, or in Music it could be clapping...kids have to learn all these signals in Music, Science, Art. It's really too much to ask them. If they all had common language, it would just be easier for classroom management.*

Immersion teachers with experience teaching older students talked about difficulty with students who do not want to be in Spanish immersion, but whose parents have placed them there. In general, they

felt that most students were happy in Spanish immersion until second grade, after which learning content in Spanish becomes more challenging.

*I want to touch on the kids. We see the vast majority of the kids really learning another language and it's very satisfying to see that. In 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, we talk fluently in Spanish to them. They understand. They're writing. They're making progress. You see the results, which is just fantastic. But, you see those kids who do not want to be in Spanish. And, they know they have a choice. Their parents have chosen for them to be in Spanish immersion. So, you [the Spanish teacher] will be the bad one because you're making them talk in Spanish, write in Spanish, read in Spanish and they don't want to do it. But, their parents have chosen this....I have had some kids who will act up for me and be very undisciplined but they will not do that to the English teacher. We become the enforcer for something they don't want to do.*

*Participant 1: I know that this is public school, but I do wonder why there is no filter after 2<sup>nd</sup> grade.*

*Moderator: Is that where you would put a filter if you had one, after 2<sup>nd</sup> grade?*

*Participant 2: I've been teaching Spanish language for [almost 20] years. And, they say that 3<sup>rd</sup> grade is kind of a filter. There is more content. It is harder. Some parents start removing them. That's when they start dropping out if they're not going to make it, not going to continue. There is a lot pressure when they go to 3<sup>rd</sup> grade.*

#### Estimated Proportions of Native English- and Spanish-Speaking Students

When they were asked to estimate the rough proportions of native English- and Spanish-speakers at their schools, these teachers estimated their schools had more native English-speakers and that the proportions were roughly 60 percent English- and 40 percent Spanish-speakers. They were careful to point out that many of their Spanish-speaking students are second (rather than first) generation immigrants.

*As the kids get older, the English gets much stronger. So, even if they were speaking in Spanish at home when they were in kindergarten or first grade, they just stop doing it. So, by the time we get them in 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, grade, they're almost not speaking Spanish at home.*

*We're not talking first generation here.*

#### Recent Changes to Immersion Model at APS

Under a past APS Immersion model, Mathematics and Science were taught in Spanish, with Spanish Language Arts being integrated into the Spanish block of time. Also, Music and Art were taught in Spanish where there was a Spanish-speaking teacher available. In the new model, Math and Spanish Language Arts are taught by the "homeroom" Spanish teacher, while Science has been added as an academic special.

This change was generally regarded as a positive one. Overall, several teachers felt that the new model allowed for more reinforcement of the same concepts and of skills like writing across both Spanish and English. Generally speaking, the teachers believed that curriculum integration across Spanish and English was the responsibility of the “teacher partners” in each school and could be better supported at higher levels and by APS curriculum.

*It was a good change.*

*We are also able to do much more and support the English much more...if students were doing a specific [clause?] for example, then we'll do it in Spanish and the kids will hear it twice. Before the new model, we didn't have a chance. We only had the chance to teach them very specific things about Spanish, for example spelling in Spanish, but nothing to support the English. So, now we can do more reading comprehension, writing, grammar. And, things are duplicated from the English side to the Spanish side.*

*[Visited a California Immersion school.] It was completely different. The curriculum was set up so English and Math were taught in English. Social Studies, Science, and Spanish Language Arts were taught in Spanish and it allowed for more integrating. And, at least Reading and Math were taught in English so you didn't have to worry about translating for the test. The Spanish Language Arts curriculum was integrated with English. Here, Spanish has been kicked to the side. If I want to integrate, it's my responsibility. In California, integration was at the county level.*

A second benefit of the new model according to these teachers is that the Science teacher's presence helps ensure that Science does not get short-changed. A couple of teachers emphasized the importance of the Science teachers' Spanish-language competence as a factor in making the new model work.

*I see what the Science teachers do, as a parent and a teacher, and I see how fun they make it and how hands-on they make it. I taught Science in another county as an Immersion teacher [as a regular classroom teacher also teaching math, language arts, etc...]. I couldn't do [what the dedicated Science teachers do]. There was just no time. It was like crash and burn. Get the curriculum out, get the information out....not to mention all the time spent translating. So, to teach science as it should be taught, I can't imagine going back the old way.*

*...sometimes [with the demands of Math] I would find myself thinking, “OK, I'll do that [Spanish Language Arts material] tomorrow. Years ago when I was also teaching Science, I'd find myself also using Science time [for math]...looking at the clock saying, “Oh my gosh, I need to [move on to] Science.” But sometimes, the lessons can take more time. So, having a Science teacher who will dedicate that time teaching science means we can be sure that they are learning science and that is very important for the SOLs.*

*It's relative to the teacher teaching Science. We've had a great person. The person who is taking my students right now [for Science] is also providing a full Spanish immersion. So, I think it is a positive. Yes, the people who have staffed it are keeping the Spanish time.*

There was some spontaneous discussion among teachers on the topic of whether Science or Mathematics would be the better “academic special.” The general idea behind the discussion was that science subject matter may be better suited for use as a part of language-learning. This theme was not prominent, but interested some teachers and echoes the idea that the teachers desire added ways to integrate content. Expanding on this topic, several indicated that vocabulary is the most basic building block of learning another language, yet mathematics offers less flexibility and opportunity than other subjects to introduce new vocabulary.

*From a kindergarten perspective, I would love to teach Science because you can integrate it a lot easier with Language Arts. And, if Math was the special...that would be easier for the students and for the teachers for integrating. When you're doing science you can also do language. I do integrate math as much as I can [but science content would be better].*

## **Suggestions for the Future**

In addition to their verbal responses, focus group participants were given an opportunity to provide suggestions in writing at the close of the group. Their verbatim responses are shown in Appendix B. Most of the suggestions were related to one of four topics:

1. **Time and scheduling**—for example, allowing enough time for such areas as vocabulary and reading, allowing extra time for Immersion students when it comes to “math talk” because the language processing they must do means math talk goes more slowly.
2. **Students and classroom**—emphasizing the need for fewer students per class to allow for more verbal interaction, and mentioning the idea of redirecting students after 2<sup>nd</sup> grade who should not continue Immersion and the challenges in acquiring new students who lack Spanish background.
3. **School-based activities and staffing**—suggestions range from increasing cultural learning opportunities at school, to counseling parents on second language acquisition, to adding language labs and Spanish-language specialists in the school building.
4. **Curriculum integration, other curriculum-focused comments, and resources**—emphasizing the need for greater integration between Spanish- and English-language curriculum and a desire for more materials and books in Spanish.

To a far lesser degree, teachers commented on how committed APS seems to be when it comes to Immersion—with one teacher saying APS *is* committed and another suggesting the school system say its program is “partial Immersion”—and a couple others commented on a perceived disconnect between instruction in Spanish followed by testing on the same content in English.

## Conclusions

- **Immersion is valued by these teachers for the creativity it allows them in the classroom and for the closer relationships it affords with students learning a language (as opposed to FLES or non-Immersion settings).**
- **The drawbacks teachers see include the pressures of standardized testing in core subjects—which create time pressure and contribute to a sense that language acquisition is a lower APS learning priority.**
- **In fact, teachers felt that APS takes pride in having Immersion schools, but many saw the Immersion program as being on the “back burner” or “kicked to the side” by other priorities such as mathematics.** Emphasis on testing contributes greatly to this perception. In addition, the way time and other resources are allocated sends a similar message (e.g., resource teacher in the building for English Language Arts but not Spanish Language Arts).
- **Two other key challenges were identified.** One was the issue of using English-language tests to assess content learning students have done in Spanish. And the other, the time pressures Immersion teachers face. Specifically, their “split day” (seeing one group of students in the morning and one in the afternoon) means they have double the number of students that non-Immersion classroom teachers have while retaining the same responsibilities and time allotments as others for parent/teacher conferences and grading. In the classroom, students need more time to mentally process in a newer language and benefit from more verbal interaction, thus teachers wished for more time and fewer students as well.
- **Although observations suggest that more English is spoken in Spanish immersion classrooms than would be ideal, these teachers felt confident that their classes are conducted virtually exclusively in Spanish.** They indicated that English is present, even dominates, other parts of the day (e.g., assemblies, social times like recess). Even so, most generally felt that students had about 40- to 50-percent of their day’s communication in Spanish.
- **The importance of teamwork and integration with the “English side” was a major, prominent theme and a key area teachers would like strengthened.** These teachers felt that this integration is currently the responsibility of teacher teams and many would like to see it built into the curriculum. They wished for more and better ways for Spanish-language and English-language content instruction to support and reinforce one another. Moreover, they were enthusiastic about being involved in strengthening integration day to day.
- **Recent changes to the Immersion model at APS—Math and Spanish Language Arts are taught by the “homerom” Spanish teacher, while Science has been added as an academic special—were regarded positively and thought to support curriculum integration.** Moreover, the teachers thought the presence of a dedicated Science teacher helps ensure that Science is not short-changed.
- **There was a universal appeal for more materials (e.g., reading material, homework and worksheets) in Spanish.** The teachers indicated they do much translation and materials development to support their classrooms.



**APPENDIX A – DISCUSSION GUIDE ARLINGTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS (APS)  
Focus Group Research with Immersion Teachers**

**January 2012**

**RESEARCH PURPOSE STATEMENT**

The purpose of this qualitative research with APS Immersion teachers is to learn how the Language Immersion program is implemented day-to-day and identify ways to improve implementation across Immersion schools.

**INTRODUCTIONS/WARM UP (15 minutes)**

Good afternoon everyone. My name is \_\_\_\_\_. First, thank you for taking the time to join us. A word on our purpose today... Everyone here is teacher in Arlington Public Schools' Immersion program. We are here today to talk about your experiences as a Immersion teacher with the intention of learning from your experiences and insights in order to improve how Immersion is implemented in the future. So, again, I thank you for your time. And, I thank you on behalf of the teachers and students who will benefit in the future from the insights you give us today.

**A. Disclosures and ground rules**

- Audio taping. The tape will only be available to me to help me write my report. Once my report is accepted in final, I will delete the tape. I will not share it with anyone else.
- Confidentiality.
  - This focus group is unusual in that you may know one another or know people in common. I hope that you will feel comfortable sharing your opinions. And, I ask that you keep what is said here in confidence. That said, I cannot legally bind anyone here to keep what they hear confidential. Therefore, you may choose *not* to say some things. If that happens and you wish to share information with me later, please feel free to contact me by phone or e-mail.
  - When I write my report, it will not identify anyone by name. Rather, I will use phrases like, "Several teachers expressed the opinion that \_\_\_\_\_." Or, "Almost no one experienced \_\_\_\_\_ in the Immersion program."
- I am a professional moderator, and not an expert on teaching, school administration, or evaluation of professionals. My job is to listen to you and convey your input to the Offices of Planning and Evaluation, and World Languages.
- A few other items:
  - Important to hear from everyone.
  - Please turn off cell phones.
  - No right or wrong answers—and, no need to reach consensus.

## B. Participant introductions

- Your first name
- Your school
- What grade level you're teaching this year.
- And, since we'll be talking about learning new languages...Tell me about how you came to be bilingual or multilingual—whether you learned more than one language primarily at home, at school, or another way.

### **EXPERIENCES AS AN IMMERSION TEACHER (10 minutes)**

1. Tell me about your decision to become an Immersion teacher. [Reasons?]
2. What are the “pluses” of being an Immersion teacher for you? And the “minuses”?
3. In what ways, if any, would you say Immersion has influenced your teaching overall?
4. What advice would you give a colleague considering Immersion?

### **THOUGHTS ON THE IMMERSION PROGRAM ITSELF (10 minutes)**

1. What do you like best about the Immersion program?
2. What aspects work well when it comes to helping kids learn Spanish and appreciate other languages/cultures? [Generate list on easel.]
3. And, how about the flip side...dislikes about the program itself or recommended improvements? [Easel.]

### **IMMERSION CLIMATE (15 minutes)**

1. Think about day-to-day life at your school. How well would you say Spanish-language and English-language instruction fit together in the day?
  - What challenges have you observed or experienced? [Probe the source of the challenge and whether each is “ongoing” or “resolved,” in the teacher’s opinion.]
    - [For ongoing challenges] In your opinion, what makes it so difficult to work out solutions?
    - [For resolved challenges] What worked and why?
  - [If needed, prompt] Complete this sentence, “When it comes to Immersion, I’d say the climate at my school is \_\_\_\_\_.” [For context, ask how that compares to the climate overall or for other programs.]

### **IMMERSION IMPLEMENTATION (30 minutes)**

1. Roughly speaking, what proportions of native English-speakers and native Spanish-speakers do you think are in the program at your school?
2. And, what percentage of the typical school day would you say is conducted in Spanish and what percentage in English—including everything from class time to specials to recess to assemblies.
  - Tell me how you arrived at that estimate. What factors did you weigh?

- What reasons do you think contribute to [more English/more Spanish/equal amounts] in your building?
3. [If not mentioned] It is recommended that Immersion classes be conducted 100% in Spanish. But, not every teacher reaches that level every day. Is that a level that you usually reach? [If needed, prompt] I understand that observations showed that less than the ideal amount of Spanish is being used. I'm exploring the reasons from your point of view in hopes of finding ways to make it easier to reach the goal.
    - If so, what factors do you think make it possible?
    - If not, what factors make it difficult?
  4. I understand that the Immersion model has changed relatively recently. Originally, Mathematics and Science were taught in Spanish, with Spanish Language Arts being integrated into the Spanish block of time. Also, Music and Art were taught in Spanish where there was a Spanish speaking teacher available. In the new model, Math and Spanish Language Arts are taught by the "homeroom" Spanish teacher, while Science has been added as an "academic special." Describe the impact of that change....[Show categories on easel to help participants remember.]
    - ...on the amount of instruction students typically get in Spanish each day. Has this new model truly increased the amount of Spanish Language Arts instruction the students receive (which was the goal of this change)?
    - ...on the logistics and timing of the school day and activities in the building.
    - ...on your role as an Immersion teacher.
    - ...on students' learning.
    - ...on how well students manage the transitions.
  5. Let's create a list of recommendations for schools adopting Immersion in the coming years. What would you recommend?

**CLOSING (10 minutes)**

Let's use our last few minutes to boil down the most important points we've talked about. [Distribute written exercise. "The most important step(s) my school could take to strengthen how Immersion is implemented is/are....

\_\_\_\_\_."]

As you write, be aware that I am planning to put quotations from these papers in my report. No name will be associated with any quote, but I'd like you to know that as you write. [After writing is complete] tell me what you focused on in your suggestion.

## APPENDIX B—IMMERSION TEACHERS’ WRITTEN RESPONSES

“The most important step(s) my school/county could take to strengthen how Immersion is implemented is/are...”

**NOTE:** To aid readers, the Immersion teachers’ suggestions have been loosely categorized. If one person’s response covered several topic areas, the parts of the response are shown separately. The six categories of responses are: 1) Time and Scheduling, 2) Students and Classroom, 3) School-Based Activities and Staffing, 4) Integration/Curriculum/Resources, 5) Status of Immersion, and 6) Evaluation.

Time and Scheduling
Respect the "necessary" amount of time needed to promote the acquisition of a second language in the school environment.
Allow more time to teach Spanish-language structure (syntax, grammar). Perhaps choose a more open-ended content to teach in Spanish instead of mathematics.
If kids in Immersion are expected to do "math talk" in Spanish, then we <i>cannot</i> be held to the same 75 minutes of Math as everyone else. Immersion students need more time to think of vocabulary, which means we need more time to teach a lesson if we're to do "math talk" correctly.
More time to focus on the implementation of vocabulary, reading, and writing. There is too much emphasis on testing and SOLs.
Review how the Spanish language time is scheduled. There are many ways of meeting the county requirements, but in different ways. For example, Monday and Tuesday could be all in Spanish, Wednesday and Thursday all in English, and Friday half and half.
Administrators should support the development of Spanish language through scheduling and staffing.

**APPENDIX B—IMMERSION TEACHERS’ WRITTEN RESPONSES**

**“The most important step(s) my school/county could take to strengthen how Immersion is implemented is/are...”**

<b>Students and Classroom</b>
If APS is committed to providing quality Immersion programs, they will reduce class sizes. Children in Immersion programs can learn everything that their non-Immersion counterparts learn, but they can show their learning in two languages. In this day and age of globalization, this process should be supported and enhanced.
Reduce classroom size in order to increase oral interactions in the target language.
Reduce the number of students per classroom.
Assure there is an appropriate ratio of Spanish/English speakers and that the amount of students allows teachers to create <i>multiple</i> speaking opportunities.
To do a better Immersion program, we will need some way to test the students' Spanish abilities in 2nd grade [and determine whether they should] continue in Immersion in the upper grades.
We still get new students who don't speak Spanish. When they arrive in our classrooms, it is very hard to start from the beginning if they have no background.

**APPENDIX B—IMMERSION TEACHERS’ WRITTEN RESPONSES**

**“The most important step(s) my school/county could take to strengthen how Immersion is implemented is/are...”**

<b>School-Based Activities and Staffing</b>
Have more external Spanish speakers, more cultural activities, more historical activities that focus on other countries' pasts.
Promote more "cultural awareness" or knowledge about Hispanic countries.
Provide specific time or labs for listening and speaking (drills, practice). Theater classes in Spanish.
Have a language lab?
Promote more target language (Spanish) activities inside and outside of the classroom.
Have days where students are not allowed to speak in English--in the cafeteria, at recess. Use the morning announcements to promote language and not just as a tool to announce (e.g., mini language lessons: <i>I can, you can, he can</i> , etc...because many students, even in 4th grade, don't use these words correctly).
Educate native Spanish-speaking parents about the acquisition of a second language. I've found that students who are struggling don't receive enough support in their native language (the language parents use at home). As students are entering kindergarten, or even pre-K, they should hold an orientation where parents are informed about the expectations and natural behaviors a student can experience (e.g., confusing vowel sounds, switching languages).
Hire a lead/coach Spanish specialist to be <i>in</i> the building and accessible for teachers' needs. Also, hire resource teachers who can help Spanish-language struggling students. By "resource teacher," I mean soemthing like an ESL teacher, so perhaps an assistant teacher.
Our school could recognize and build on the work that has been done in the past--i.e., vocabulary teaching aka "robust vocabulary." These valuable programs are sometimes put aside in favor of something new. In other words, we don't have to reinvent the wheel every year.

**APPENDIX B—IMMERSION TEACHERS’ WRITTEN RESPONSES**

**“The most important step(s) my school/county could take to strengthen how Immersion is implemented is/are...”**

<b>Integration/Curriculum/Resources</b>
Consider changing Science to become part of the general teachers' [responsibility] integrated with Spanish Language Arts and Math to be an academic special. This way, Spanish teachers would have more time to teach language, vocabulary words, concepts, etc. Math would benefit because [math time] would focus on the subject and not have to be integrated with Spanish.
I would love for more integration among subjects. I feel that many times there is no cohesion between not only what English Language Arts and Spanish Language Arts are doing, but also what Science and Social Studies are doing as well.
Spanish Language Arts curriculum needs to be coordinated with English Language Arts curriculum and not left to the teachers to do. Many do not and have very little interaction with their partners.
Align Spanish curriculum to English curriculum.
Consistency in developing the same spiral curriculum from K to 5.
Curriculum support--we need to further develop our curriculum, particularly grammar.
Have a FLES program implemented so students learn how to speak. That is, have a lot of pair work activities. The LECTURA series has little or no pair work. Offer Rosetta Stone as a backup. It's about \$10K per school for 500 students and it comes with staff training and another language of choice for the student.
...strengthen the Immersion program by supplying more resources. For instance, in Math, it would be nice to have materials in Spanish without always having to translate.
More resources. There is a lack of grade-level appropriate reading material, which makes it very difficult to teach reading (trade books).

**APPENDIX B—IMMERSION TEACHERS’ WRITTEN RESPONSES**

**“The most important step(s) my school/county could take to strengthen how Immersion is implemented is/are...”**

<b>Status of Immersion</b>
One question came up about how invested APS is in Immersion. All but one teacher who spoke up said, "not at all." Has APS compared its interventions to other VA counties? Look at FCPS in particular. At Laurel Ridge in FCPS, a great Immersion school by reputation, kids <i>cannot</i> speak Spanish in 6th grade. My 2nd and 3rd grade Anglo students speak better Spanish than Hispanic/Latino 5th and 6th graders at Laurel Ridge. APS is <i>very invested</i> in Immersion. There is much to be done, but progress is formidable.
We are <i>not</i> an Immersion school. We are a <i>partial Immersion school</i> in both Spanish and English. So, we should call ourselves that.

<b>Evaluation</b>
Spanish evaluations need to be reviewed. They are irrelevant or outdated. The same with the language forms since many cannot be obtained at the grade they are required. Evaluations do not measure those language forms.
Find a way to measure student outcomes in a more appropriate way related to Spanish immersion.



**Arlington Public Schools  
Telephone Interviews with Parents of  
Children who Opted Out of the Spanish Immersion Program at  
the Elementary School Level**

February 12, 2012

## **Background**

Arlington Public Schools (APS) 2005-2011 Strategic Plan reflects the school system's aim that students be challenged, be proficient in at least one language other than English (Goals 1 and 2), and establishes the school system's desire to "prepare each student to succeed in a diverse, changing world through instructional and other school experiences responsive to each student's talents, interests, and challenges" (Goal 3). The Spanish Immersion program, overseen by the World Languages Office (WLO), is an important part of the response to these strategic goals. In the Immersion program in elementary schools, students learn Spanish through content instruction and Spanish Language Arts instruction for half the school day.

A multi-faceted evaluation of the APS World Languages Program is underway. The evaluation includes explorations of Immersion ranging from testing students' language proficiency to discussing Immersion implementation experiences with teachers. This report summarizes the qualitative research findings from telephone interviews conducted with parents in January-February 2012. These findings will be most meaningful when considered together with findings from other facets of the overall WLO evaluation.

## **Research Purpose**

The overarching goals of the interviews were to:

- Understand why families initially chose Spanish Immersion,
- Explore their reasons for opting out
- Hear the advantages and disadvantages of participating in immersion from their perspective, and
- Listen to any perceptions about the role that race played, or did not play, in their children's immersion experience.

## **Research Method**

Thirteen telephone interviews were conducted in January and February 2012 by an independent researcher, not employed by APS. The interviewer took notes during discussions, but did not audiotape.

Both of the APS elementary Immersion schools were represented in the discussion. Six parents of students formerly at Francis Scott Key Elementary, 5 of students at Claremont, and 2 who opted not to specify their child’s school participated. Among them, five were fluent Spanish speakers. One interview was conducted in Spanish with the help of a staff member from the Planning and Evaluation Office. Parents were asked how they describe their child(ren)’s race. Their answers are summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1. Races/Ethnicities of children whose parents participated in these interviews**

Race/Ethnicity	Number of Parents Who Described Their Child(ren)’s Race in That Way
Asian American	1
Hispanic or Latino	2
African American or black	2
Caucasian or white	4
Mix of Hispanic/Latino and Caucasian/white	4

The discussion guide is attached as Appendix A. Interviews were intended to be just 10-minutes long, to reduce the burden on participants and increase interest in participation. They tended to last 10 to 20 minutes, depending on the participants’ interest and availability. The questions were developed in collaboration with the World Languages Office. In brief, the discussion guide explored:

- Reasons families chose Immersion,
- How well-informed they felt about what to expect in the program,
- The primary reasons they opted for the child to leave the immersion elementary school before 5<sup>th</sup> grade or to not continue immersion in middle school,
- Advantages and drawbacks of immersion participation overall, and
- Their thoughts on the degree to which their child’s race factored into his or her Immersion experience, if it did at all.

In interpreting the findings presented in this report, it is important to note that focus group discussions are a qualitative research method. While the discussions produce rich, detailed information about the perspectives of those interviewed and opportunities to further explore relevant new perspectives, focus group findings are descriptive in nature and cannot be generalized due to sampling approaches and small sample sizes.

## Findings

### Reasons Families Chose Immersion

The main factors driving families' choice of the Immersion Program were the beliefs that:

- Being bilingual will better prepare children or give them a competitive edge in a diverse world.
- Immersion provides exposure to diverse families and friends and fosters a broader worldview.
- (Among Hispanic/Latino families) Immersion helps children understand their own culture. Spanish at school will help children better develop their Spanish language skills, which is important to parents and will help the children better communicate with family.

*I believe strongly that American children to be competitive should be versed in other languages just like other children speak English.<sup>1</sup>*

*I'd recommend promoting the diversity [of the Immersion Program]. North Arlington is not diverse. I enjoyed that my daughter made different kinds of friends, learned about the world.*

*I speak Spanish. Our cultural background is Hispanic, that's one reason [for choosing immersion]. But, the primary reason is that I think going forward in the U.S., Spanish is the fastest growing language. I wanted my son and daughter to have the advantage of having Spanish as second language.*

*We are a bilingual couple, we wanted bilingual children...want them to communicate freely with family in Chile.*

For a couple families, simple convenience was the main factor—for example, an Immersion school was the first school to accept the child or location was convenient. However, convenience was not at all a driving factor for most at the elementary school level. In fact, some families accepted *inconvenience* in order to have children at an Immersion school.

*When I was picking schools, I did applications for all schools. Claremont was first to respond...just trying to get him into school from daycare.*

### How Well-Informed Families Felt about Immersion

Most parents felt well-informed about what the Immersion program is and how it functions. In other words, they felt like they had a good grasp going in, and none felt as if their immersion years blindsided them in terms of the basics. However, about a third of the parents said that APS's online descriptions

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<sup>1</sup> Quotations are drawn from typewritten notes, not audiotape. They capture much of the language as well as the spirit of the parents' statements, but are not always word-for-word quotations.

of what the program is like should be more detailed. In order to feel well-informed enough about choosing Immersion, most parents also drew on their connections to other parents.

*I felt well-informed. They provided nights for parents to find out.*

*I was very well-informed. There were info nights. I visited the school and spoke with principal.*

*We did our homework and were well-informed not as a result of anything School Board did. There is information on the website, but it's not comprehensive. We researched the school, got information from other parents and from blogs. Our neighbor had daughter in immersion school.*

*I felt well-informed. If you want it you'll find it out.*

Although they felt well-informed going in, parents developed questions over time about topics such as whether immersion can be executed in a way that *really* ensures students keep up with other schools in content areas such as math and whether non-Spanish-speaking parents can *really* provide the kind of support at home that students need although APS tells them they can. One parent suggested developing a frequently-asked-questions list or handbook that covers topics like these.

### **Reasons Families Opted Out of Immersion**

Because this question is so central to the purpose of this research, the primary reasons cited by each participant are enumerated below. To the degree possible using notes parents' own words are shown. Overall, 8 of the 13 parents cited school- or learning-related problems as the main reason their children left immersion. Among those 8, as the list below reflects, 3 indicated that their children's special learning needs were a particular factor —especially given the physical and language transitions of immersion. The remaining 5 parents interviewed said they were satisfied, and cited distance to the Immersion middle school or said that they were more strongly attracted to another APS school.

#### School or Learning Problems

- *It just wasn't working. The school needs more resources in order to find more high-quality teachers, provide more staff to deal with widely ranging abilities and behavior issues among students. (Left middle of 3<sup>rd</sup> – non-Spanish-speaking household.)*
- *All APS schools follow the same curriculum and in the Immersion school they were behind. I would [look at my son's work] and talk to friends and call schools and ask what they are doing. The Immersion school was just behind in everything. The Spanish is important, but not if it's at the expense of math, reading. (Left middle of 3<sup>rd</sup> – Spanish-fluent household.)*
- *He had trouble comprehending what the teacher was saying. It became too overwhelming with both languages. It was a struggle for me also because he'd bring home the homework and it*

*would be in total Spanish. I used all the options I could—and it just got to be too much. (Left after 4<sup>th</sup> – non-Spanish-speaking household.)*

- *He is little bit low in English, needed more English. His English is not that good and would be good for him in the future [to improve English]. (Left after 5<sup>th</sup> – non-Spanish-speaking household.)*
- *My son needed help academically. Big factor was not getting enough help on Spanish side. We could not do Escuela Bolivia on Saturdays, and my son needed tutoring help which we could not afford. (Left after 3<sup>rd</sup> – non-Spanish-speaking household.)*
- *We felt that the school was not providing an environment for his success. At school, each student has two teachers a day. And some of those pairings are good and some are not. Each teacher is seeing 22-24 kids normally, and in Immersion they see double that so their relationships suffer and they are not always good at communicating what is happening between classes. We don't know what the recipe for success for him is [son has an IEP], but we eliminated Spanish to help him succeed. (Left middle of 4<sup>th</sup> – non-Spanish-speaking household.)*
- *Pulled her out partly because of immersion and partly because of bullying. Safety in her school was questionable. Also, she tested into special education and the school was not able to provide the support she needed. Also, there are so many transitions—the constant physical and language transitions are really, really tough for a special ed kid. (Left middle of 3<sup>rd</sup> – non-Spanish-speaking household.)*
- *We left because of our struggle with his academic performance. He had a fabulous accent but didn't know what he said. Our concern was with his attention issues and language issues, he might not be getting the content he needs. To ask a child with attention issues to understand important topics like math and science in Spanish was asking too much. (Left after 2<sup>nd</sup> – non-Spanish-speaking household.)*

### Geography

- *We live closer to a non-immersion school. Want to keep a close eye on son in middle school. (Left after 5<sup>th</sup> – Spanish-fluent household.)*
- *No immersion school near me for middle school. No other reason. (Left after 5<sup>th</sup> – Spanish-fluent household.)*
- *Main reason is we live in North Arlington and the school is in South Arlington. Plus [daughter] didn't enjoy the Spanish so she wanted to leave. (Left after 5<sup>th</sup> – non-Spanish-speaking household.)*

### Liked Another School More

- *[My daughter] liked the [IB] program at Jefferson Middle more. She was going to go to keep going with her Spanish anyway (family has access to Spanish classes through the Spanish Embassy, thus felt they were not giving up anything by opting for IB over Immersion in middle school). (Left after 5<sup>th</sup> – Spanish-fluent household.)*
- *Got into HB Woodlawn. Great program, great history, great reputation. The model of the school is students' responsibility and privilege. Attraction of HB Woodlawn, not a rejection of immersion. (Left after 5<sup>th</sup> – Spanish-fluent household.)*

### **Perceived Advantages and Drawbacks of Immersion**

#### Advantages/Pros

By far, language learning and exposure to non-U.S. cultures were seen as the greatest advantages of immersion. For Hispanic/Latino parents, learning about parts of one's own culture was a particularly gratifying aspect of the cultural exposure in immersion.

*[Immersion enables children to] embrace multicultural society, enables diversity. They see others who are different from themselves. In the classes, they didn't have "language" class, rather tried to incorporate it into real teaching, which is successful in classes like social studies [but, not mathematics].*

*They not only were exposed to a foreign language...but immersion also has big cultural component so they got to know Latin and European Spanish cultures...it was a nice way to get them out of the rut of being so focused on America all the time, thinking internationally.*

*...children are able to learn about different cultures and also to be bilingual. They can learn about **our** culture, about Hispanics.*

#### Disadvantages/Cons

Concerns about academics dominated the discussion of the drawbacks to the Immersion program.

*I think that they lag, even those who are not special ed kids, in learning math, English grammar. There is quite a bit of confusion that happens with the kids—is this an English rule or a Spanish rule?*

*Upon going to middle school the English teacher said...spelling and grammar [among Immersion kids] is weak, partly because of learning in Spanish and English. Still, if these kids are going to come out of the U.S., their English writing must be impeccable. They can learn Spanish anywhere. But, if they're not perfect in English they are not going to do well in a career. My [other] daughter loved Spanish so we went ahead and let her go to Gunston. But, [school] needs to up its game in grammar.*

*Ultimately, the academics. She was always getting As and Bs, but when I did homework with her I realized what she didn't know. And, her reading was not good. So, that was another reason we left because I felt like she wasn't keeping up.*

*...our concern about content being transmitted effectively so they understood the important areas without having to compromise. I'm talking math, reading, science, spelling.*

*Academically, is my child going to be hurt by this?*

*If [students] are not comprehending, that's not good. That's Spanish getting in the way of basic math.*

The second most-discussed concern was about how well parents who do not speak Spanish can support their children's learning.

*If I don't speak Spanish can my child succeed? They say the answer is 'yes' but that's not necessarily the case. We can't practice at home in a meaningful way.*

*They didn't provide resources for parents. My daughter's math was in Spanish. I don't speak it. Nowhere I could call. And, science, 'Uh oh.'"*

*With more support, we might've stuck it out. Some families went outside and paid \$50 an hour for help. I looked into it, but we can't afford it and [needed to respond urgently because] his grades were slipping.*

A few parents questioned whether the pool of qualified and skilled Spanish-speaking teachers is sufficiently deep to support the Immersion program. By the same token, a few parents complimented their children's teachers.

*I think it's really hard to get quality bilingual teachers. Most of the Spanish-speaking teachers were not qualified enough to be in classroom and did not speak good enough English to speak to parents.... in attempting to get culturally sensitive fluent people willing to teach a class of kids [the principal] sometimes had to compromise on teacher quality.*

*Teacher quality. I'm sure there's a small universe of [bilingual] teachers. But there was a pretty big turnover in that school. Is that normal?*

*[So few...] so, teachers come and go and switch around a lot.*

*I can't say all the teachers are great. But, most have their hearts in the right place.*

*I was very fond of the teachers. I have another kid in immersion in 1st grade. I'm very happy with school teacher, Principal and Vice Principal.*

A small number of parents mentioned difficulties with what they described as Spanish-speaking teachers' tougher classroom style.

*I think honestly teachers from other countries especially Latin American countries are not as much into bedside manner...as what we're now used to.*

*Spanish teachers teach differently. Our kids are used to nurturing and hand holding. [Hispanic/Latino teachers are] culturally very different. They will say, "[Another student] got an A. Why didn't you?" [One teacher] wasn't subtle about favorites. I know teachers will have them. But, it was obvious. Spanish teachers are not as acclimated with the way our kids have been trained to learn.*

*I'm sure it's a stereotype, but I'll say many of the Spanish teachers are old school. They're disciplinarian types. I think they could be warmer and more current in teaching approaches.*

### **Roles of Race/Ethnicity and Household Spanish Fluency in the Immersion Experience**

#### Race/Ethnicity

These parents were asked to describe the role that their children's race/ethnicity played in the immersion experience—prompted by a question of whether race played a positive role, negative role, or no role at all. Most parents said that race did not play a role at all, or that students' widely varied races/ethnicities at school was a positive for their children. Two mildly speculated completely opposite views—one saying that school staff treated Hispanic/Latino students with favoritism and another saying that they treated non-Hispanic white students with favoritism. The two African American parents said that race played no role at all.

*Race played a role in a good way. Ten percent of the school does not speak Spanish or English. Very international school, so that's a plus. She had people from Mongolia, Middle East, and every continent in her school.*

*Race/ethnicity played no role. I don't think it did. The school is much more inclusive than that.*

*My son is Hispanic, but he is very Midwestern-looking. I thought my son had a disadvantage in the way [school] is run in that it caters to the kids who are more Hispanic looking.*

*Being Hispanic had a negative role. School staff may have a better relationship with people of non-Hispanic background.*

*He is African American...I don't think that had anything to do with [his immersion experience].*

#### Household Spanish Fluency

As the interview guide shows, parents were not directly asked whether their household's Spanish fluency—or, lack of it—had an impact on their immersion experience. Interestingly, each interviewee



spontaneously mentioned whether or not there were any Spanish-speakers in their household, without being asked. Most of those without said they experienced difficulty helping their children. In this way, it seemed that Spanish fluency played a greater role as a positive or negative force in the immersion experience than did race or ethnicity.

### **Parents' Concluding Comments and Other Observations**

- The idea that immersion becomes more challenging at 3<sup>rd</sup> grade was widely known. Almost all of the parents mentioned that they observed that phenomenon or heard about it from others.
- A couple parents who felt the immersion experience was not good for their children complained that APS “toots its own horn” or otherwise aggrandizes immersion but the program’s quality does not warrant it.
- A couple parents who were fluent in Spanish thought too much English was spoken in the immersion schools.
- Several parents were proud that many “diplomats send their children” to APS immersion schools.

## Conclusions

- **Most of these parents shared similar reasons for choosing immersion. These were the ideas that second language acquisition broadens children’s worldview and gives them an edge as adults.** In addition, immersion gives children an appreciation for other cultures—for Hispanic/Latino families, an appreciation of their own culture.
- **Immersion seemed to deliver on those particular hopes.** Both the reasons parents cite for choosing immersion and, looking back, the advantages of having participated that they noted suggest it is so. Specifically, language learning and exposure to non-U.S. cultures were seen as the greatest advantages of having participated in immersion by far. For Hispanic/Latino parents, children’s learning about their own culture was especially gratifying.
- **But, parents’ responses suggest there is much tension between learning content areas (math, reading, science) and language learning.** The reasons students left and the disadvantages cited by many parents demonstrate this tension. Many of the parents interviewed said they liked the idea of language learning and cultural exposure, but left immersion because they believed their children were falling behind academically.
- **These interviews suggest that one area for further quantitative study is the role that household Spanish fluency plays in families’ immersion experience and their children’s success.** This research is qualitative, so it is not generalizable. But, four of the five interviewees with at least one Spanish speaker at home left immersion for reasons other than academics—such as geographic convenience or liking another school more. Parents with non-Spanish-speaking households spoke of their struggles supporting their children’s learning. They acknowledged the supports the schools provide, but felt either that it was not enough or that no matter how much support was available it would not be enough.
- **In general, parents felt well-informed of the basics at the outset.** Although some felt that more could be done, none felt blindsided or overly surprised at the basics of how the Immersion Program works.
- **Although they felt well-informed about the basics, many of these parents still had questions or doubts that persisted over time, and sometimes grew.** These questions centered on:
  - Whether immersion causes children to fall behind when it comes to learning and developing skills in content areas like math, science, and reading.
  - Whether it is realistic to expect that non-Spanish-speaking parents will be able to provide the kind of learning support at home that children need.
- **A few parents questioned whether the pool of qualified and skilled Spanish-speaking teachers is sufficiently deep to support the Immersion program.** This opinion was offered not so much as a critique of APS immersion, but as a question about how well-staffed an immersion program can realistically be.

## APPENDIX A – DISCUSSION GUIDE ARLINGTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS (APS)

### Interviews with Parents of Students

#### Who Chose to Leave the APS Immersion Program

#### Between Elementary and Middle School

Final –February 1, 2012

#### Introduction (2 mins.)

[After greetings...] Thank you so much for agreeing to have this brief conversation with me about Arlington's Immersion Program. Before I ask any questions, I have a few points to share that will help you feel oriented about our conversation:

- As you know from the letter you received, APS is evaluating its World Languages activities including the Immersion Program.
- As part of the evaluation, I'm speaking to many parents whose students initially enrolled in an Immersion school, but later left to attend another APS school.
- Your confidentiality will be protected in that no names will appear in my report. I am an independent consultant, not an APS employee. Parents' input will be reported in aggregate (e.g., "several parents described their experience as \_\_\_\_\_").
- The Office of Planning and Evaluation, which handled interview logistics has the names of the potential interviewees, but will use them only for scheduling purposes.
- I will type notes as we talk, but not record our conversation.
- Also, this interview is completely voluntary. You may opt not to answer any question and "I don't know" is a perfectly fine answer. You may also stop at any time.
- Most important of all—the purpose of this conversation is to learn from your experiences and choices in order to improve Immersion. In other words, there are no wrong answers, just your opinions. And, it is important to remember that we are evaluating *the program* and not parents or students in any way.
- One last point... A key goal of this evaluation is to ensure that APS programs serve all children well. So, we're ensuring that we research the topic of serving diverse families. In my interviews I am talking to families of various races and ethnicities.
- Just so I'm sure--and, if you don't mind my asking--what would you say is your child's race or ethnicity? [Continue interview, whether answered or declined.] OR Just so I'm sure...let me ask if the notes I've been provided are correct that your child's race is best described as [RACE/ETHNICITY]."
- Do you have any questions before we start?
- And, moving to my more general questions...

**Immersion Decision (7 mins.)**

1. **Why did you initially choose** for your child to go to an immersion school? How **well-informed** did you feel about immersion? And, about other APS programs?
2. What would you say was the **primary reason your son or daughter did not continue** Immersion in middle school?
3. Tell me about the **decision process**. As your family considered not continuing Immersion in middle school, what factors were you thinking about? And, how did you arrive at your final choice?
4. And, very briefly, let's touch on the **pros and cons of the Immersion experience**. Looking back, what were the advantages or what did you like? And, the disadvantages or dislikes?
5. What **changes, if any, to the Immersion program** might have increased your interest or your child's in continuing?
6. [If race not mentioned in previous answers] I mentioned race and ethnicity at the start of our conversation. As you answered my questions, did you find yourself thinking that race or ethnicity played a role—either positive or negative—in your child's Immersion experience? [If so, in what way?]

**Closing (1 minute)**

As we conclude, let me say again that my goal is to understand your family's experiences in order to strengthen the Immersion program. Before we conclude, is there anything else you would like to say about the program that might help future planning?

## World Languages Distance Learning Survey Responses

In the spring of 2011, middle and high school students enrolled in one of the distance learning courses offered in Arlington Public Schools participated in a survey that sought feedback on the impact and value of their current distance learning experience. Around 340 students provided feedback on their online experience learning Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Japanese, or Latin.

The following report provides quantitative and qualitative data for 34 questions related to students' distance learning experience in 5 of the 6 languages. The response rate from French students was too low to report.

### Question 1: Which World Languages distance-learning course are you taking?

**Table 1: Participation Rate in World Languages Distance Learning Courses by Class**

Language	Course	Frequency	Percent
Arabic	Arabic I	39	50.6
	Arabic II	23	29.9
	Arabic III	11	14.3
	Arabic IV	*	2.6
	Arabic V	*	2.6
	Total	77	
Chinese	Chinese I	50	50.0
	Chinese II	32	32.0
	Chinese III	12	12.0
	Chinese IV	*	4.0
	AP Chinese V	2	2.0
	Total	100	
French	French III	*	
German	German I	25	31.6
	German II	21	26.6
	German III	21	26.6
	AP German IV	9	11.4
	AP German V	*	3.8
	Total	79	
Japanese	Japanese I	20	41.7
	Japanese II	13	27.1
	Japanese III	15	31.3
	Total	48	
Latin	Latin I	15	41.7
	Latin II	20	55.6
	Latin III	*	2.8
	Total	36	

\* Fewer than 5, not reported.

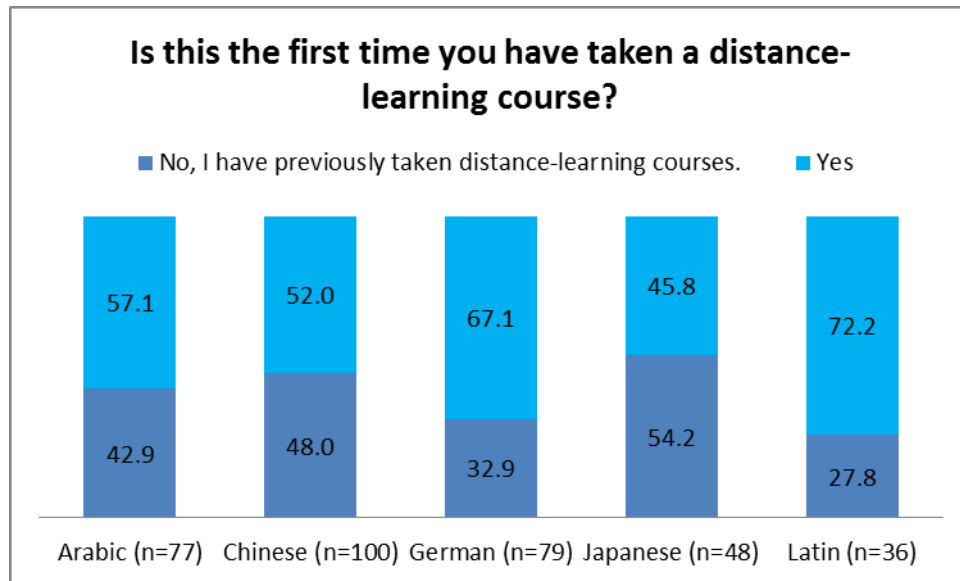
**Question 2: What is the delivery method (type) of World Language course you are taking?**

**Table 2: Distance Learning Delivery Type by Language**

Response	Arabic		Chinese		German		Japanese		Latin	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Completely online	8	10.4	23	23.0	0	0	2	4.2	7	19.4
Televised class with computer access (known as 2-way A/V)	2	2.6	1	1.0	28	35.4	2	4.2	19	52.8
Traditional teacher and computer-based instruction (combination of online and face-to-face, known as “blended”)	65	84.4	76	76.0	51	64.6	42	87.5	10	27.8
Traditional classroom setting (face-to-face)	2	2.6	0	0.0	0	0.0	2	4.2	0	0.0
Total	77		100		79		48		36	

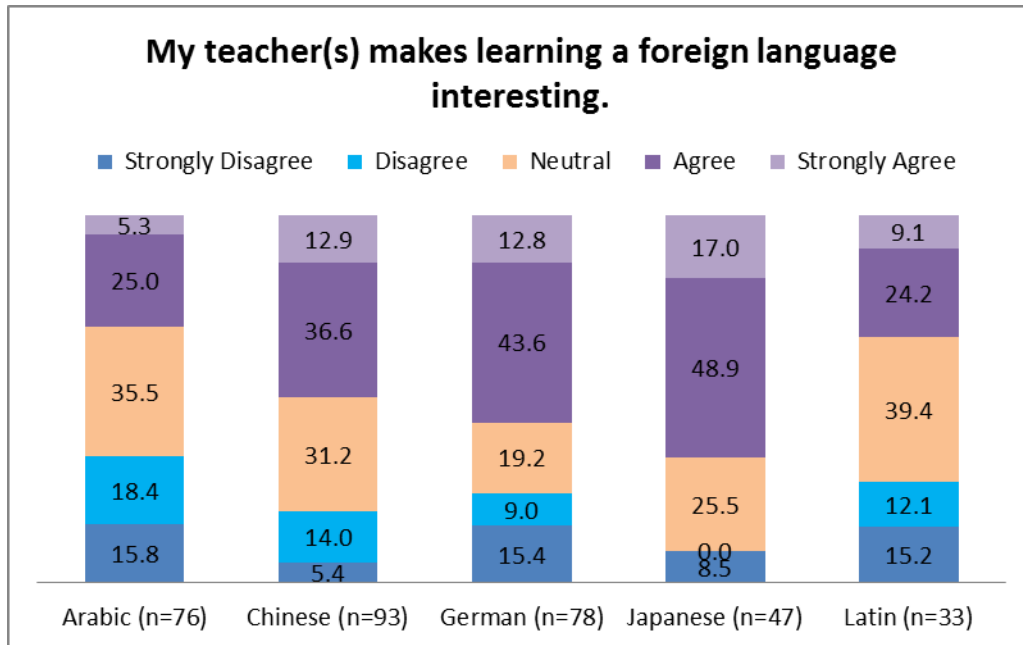
**Question 3: Is this the first time you have taken a distance learning course?**

**Figure 1: Distance Learning Repeat Enrollment**



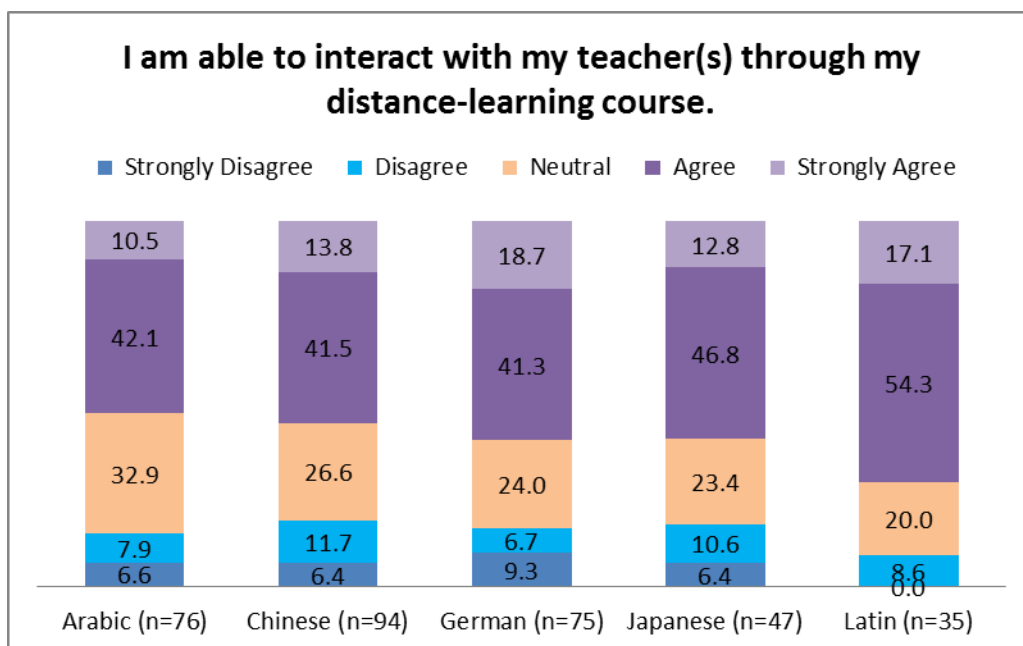
**Question 4: To what degree do you agree with the following statement? My teacher(s) make learning a foreign language interesting.**

**Figure 2: The Degree to which the Distance Learning Teacher Makes Learning Interesting**



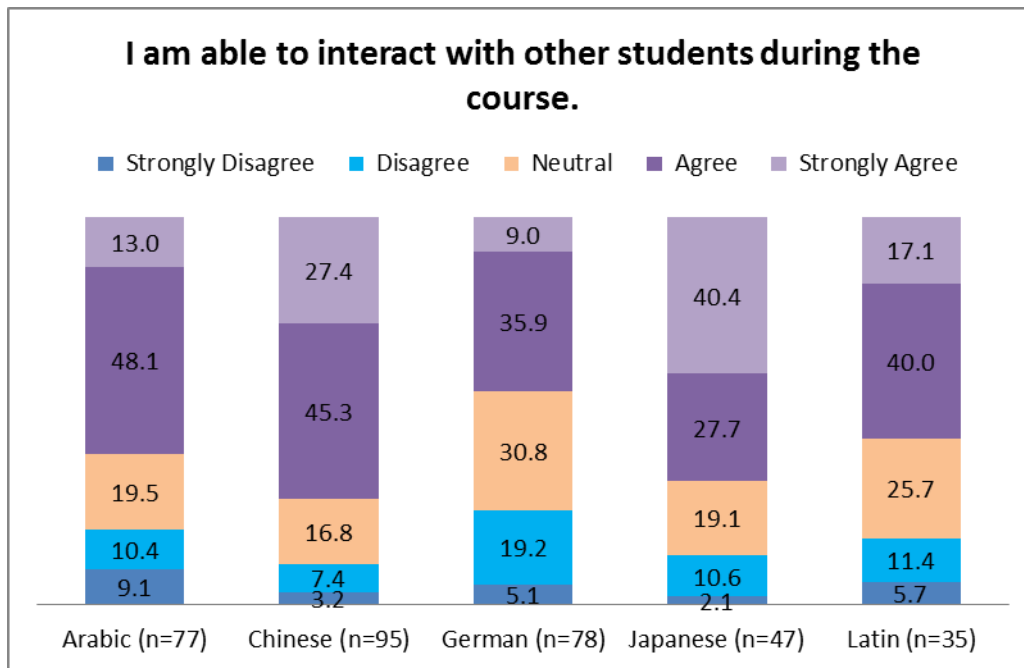
**Question 5: To what degree do you agree with the following statement? I am able to interact with my teacher(s) through my distance-learning course.**

**Figure 3: The Degree to which Students are able to Interact with their Distance Learning Teachers**



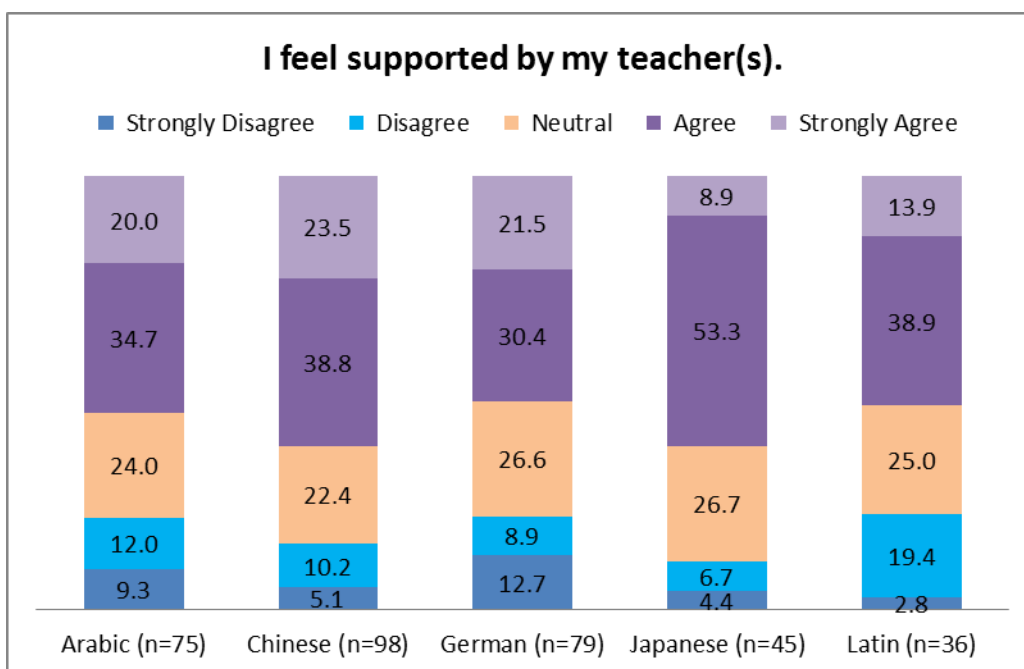
**Question 6: To what degree do you agree with the following statement? I am able to interact with other students during the course.**

**Figure 4: The Degree to which Students are able to Interact with Other Distance Learning Students**



**Question 7: To what degree do you agree with the following statement? I feel supported by my teacher(s).**

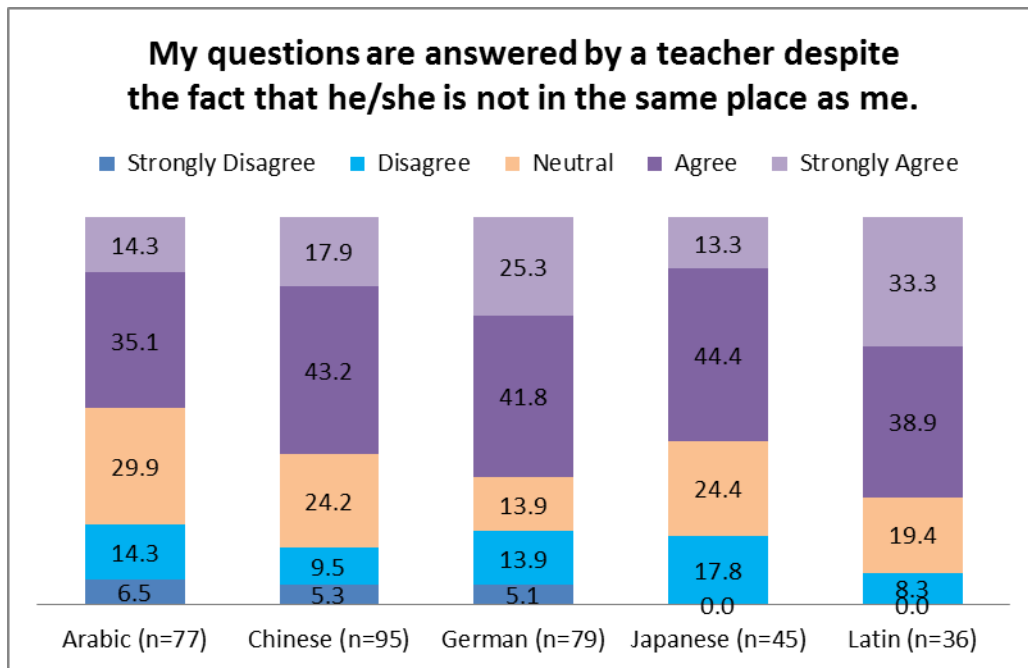
**Figure 5: The Degree to which Students Feel Supported by their Distance Learning Teachers**





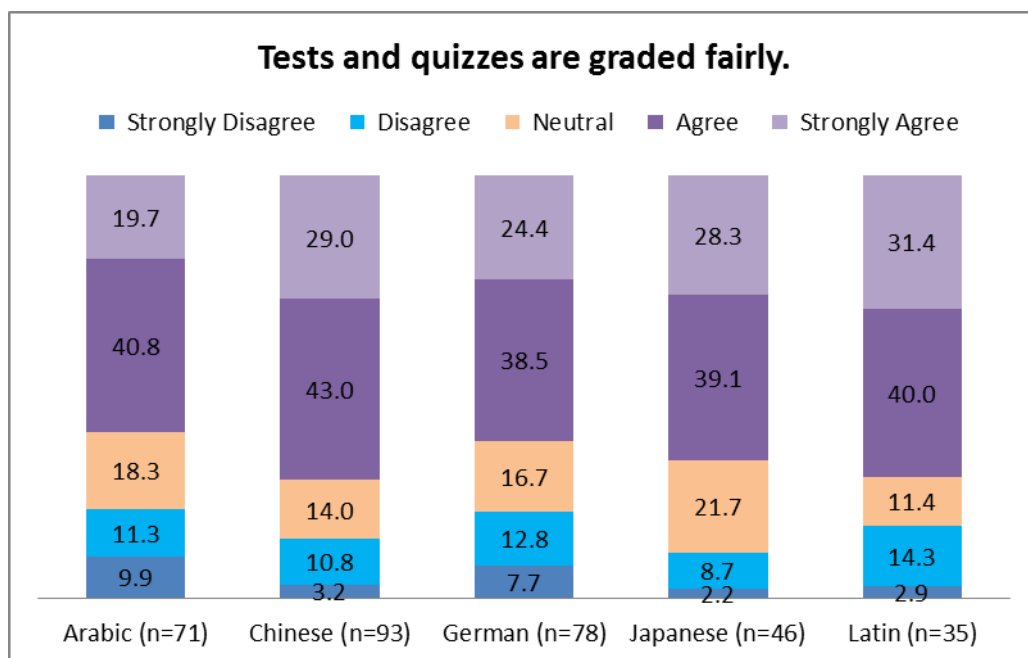
**Question 8: To what degree do you agree with the following statement? My questions are answered by a teacher despite the fact that he/she is not in the same place as me.**

**Figure 6: The Degree to which Students' Questions are Answered by Distance Learning Teachers**



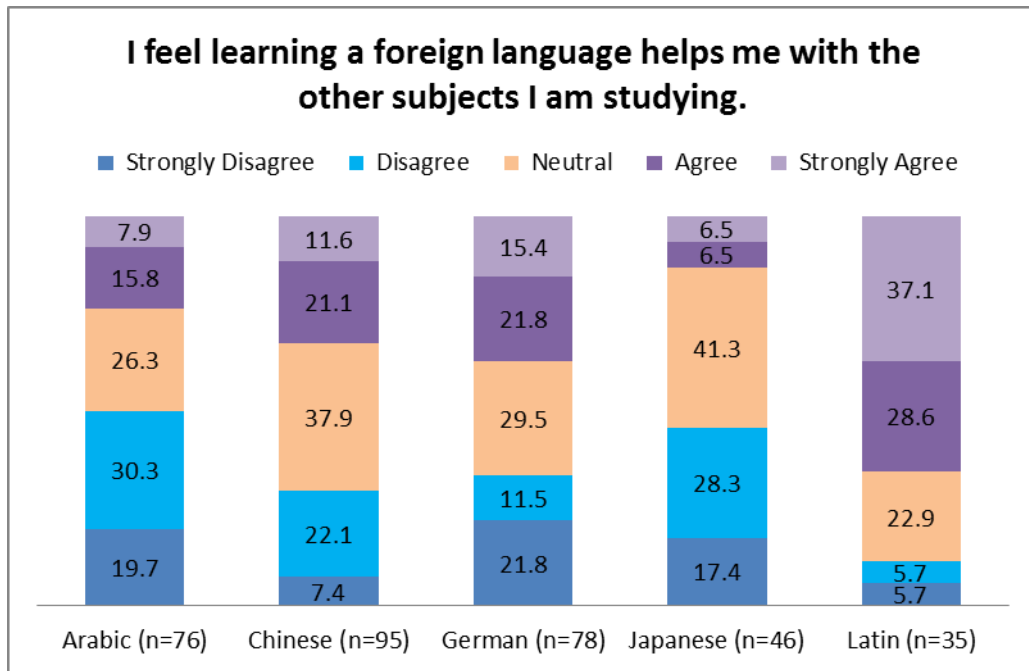
**Question 9: To what degree do you agree with the following statement? Tests and quizzes are graded fairly.**

**Figure 7: The Degree to which Students Feel Tests and Quizzes are Graded Fairly**



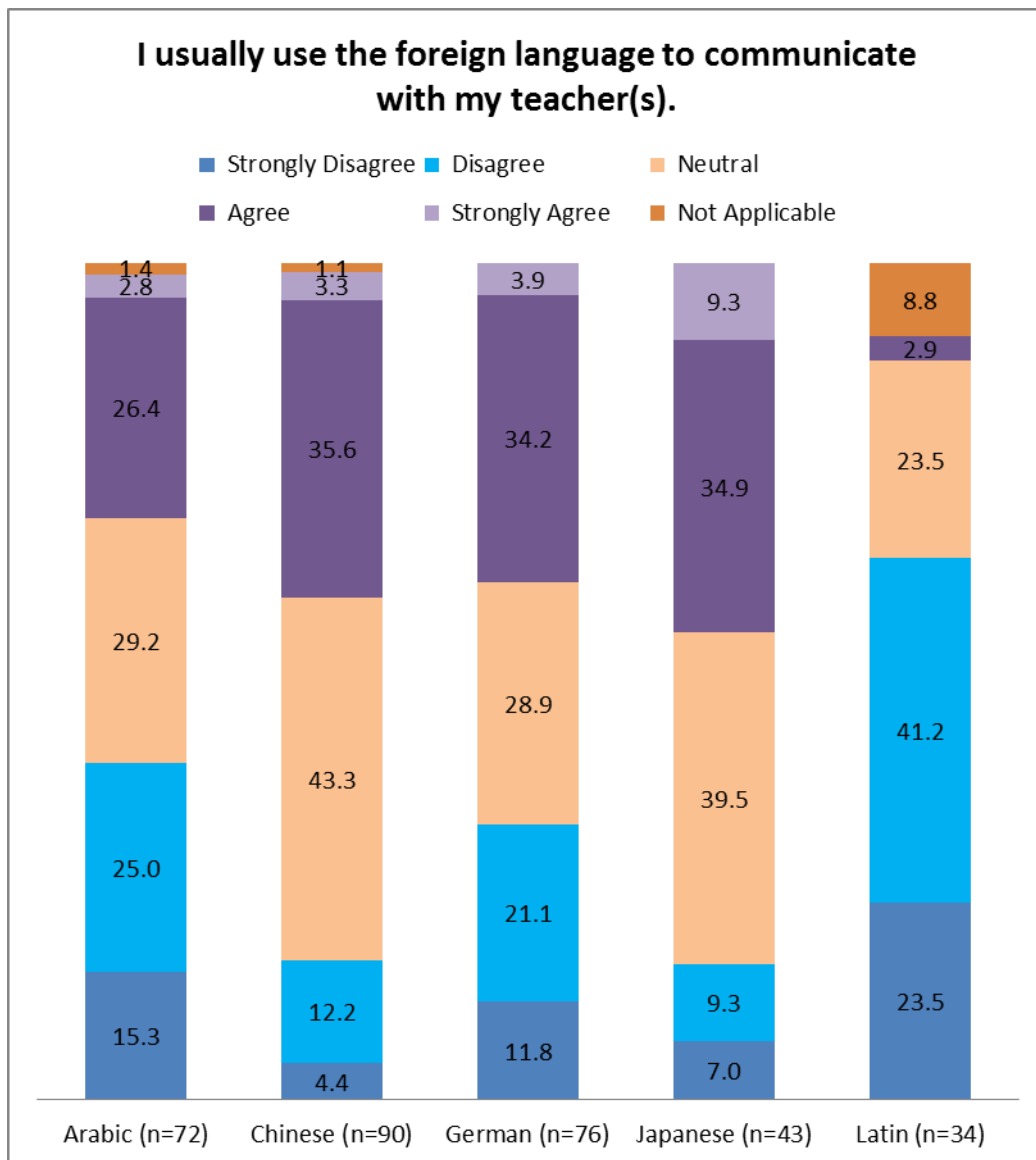
**Question 10: To what degree do you agree with the following statement? Learning a foreign language helps me with the other subjects I am studying.**

**Figure 8: The Degree to which Students Feel a Foreign Language Helps in Other Subjects**



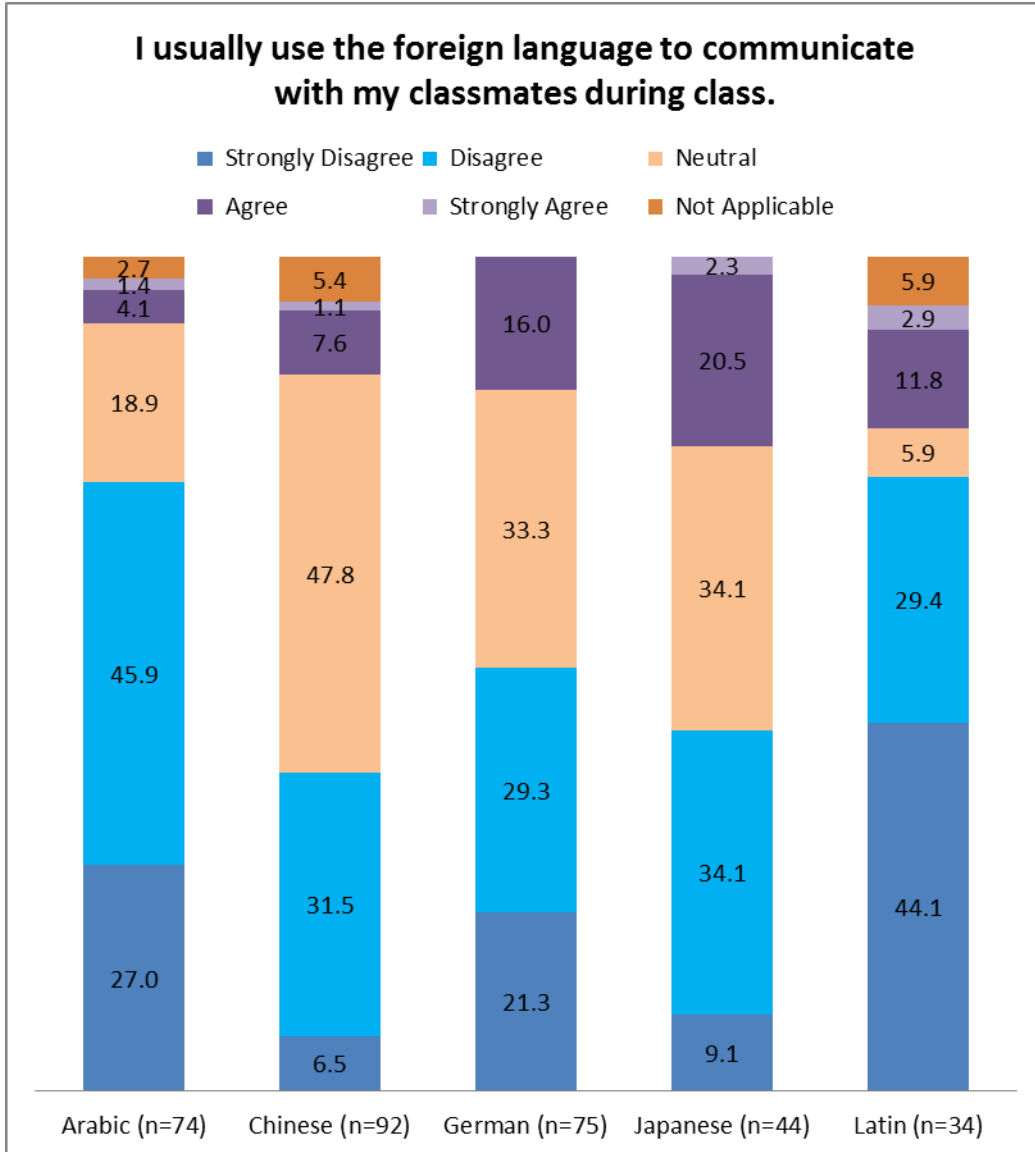
**Question 11: To what degree do you agree with the following statement? I usually use the foreign language to communicate with my teacher.**

**Figure 9: The Degree to which Students Use the Foreign Language to Communicate with their Teacher**



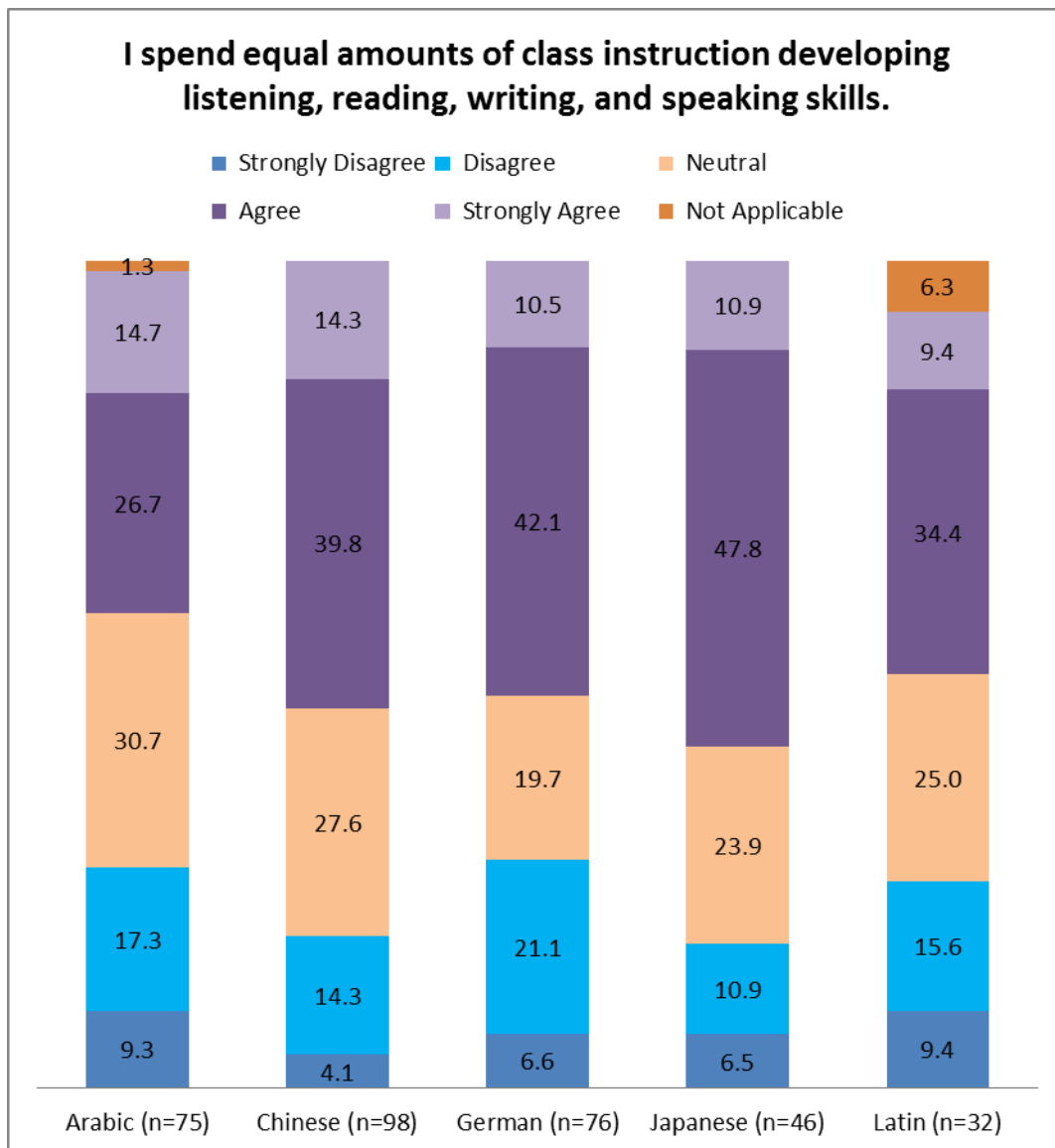
**Question 12: To what degree do you agree with the following statement? I usually use the foreign language to communicate with my classmates during class.**

**Figure 10: The Degree to which Students Use the Foreign Language to Communicate with their Classmates During Class**



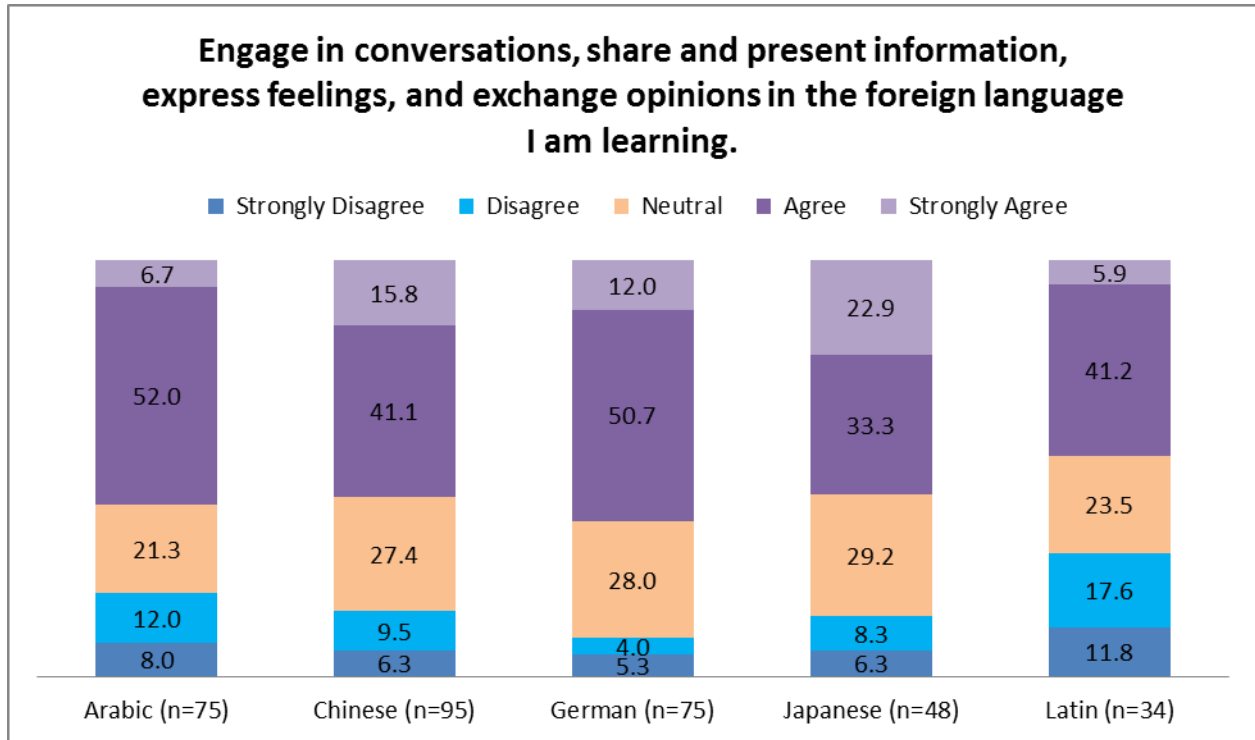
**Question 13: To what degree do you agree with the following statement? I spend equal amounts of class instruction developing listening, reading, writing, and speaking skills.**

**Figure 11: The Degree to which Students Feel they Spend Equal Amounts of Time Developing Listening, Reading, Writing, and Speaking Skills**



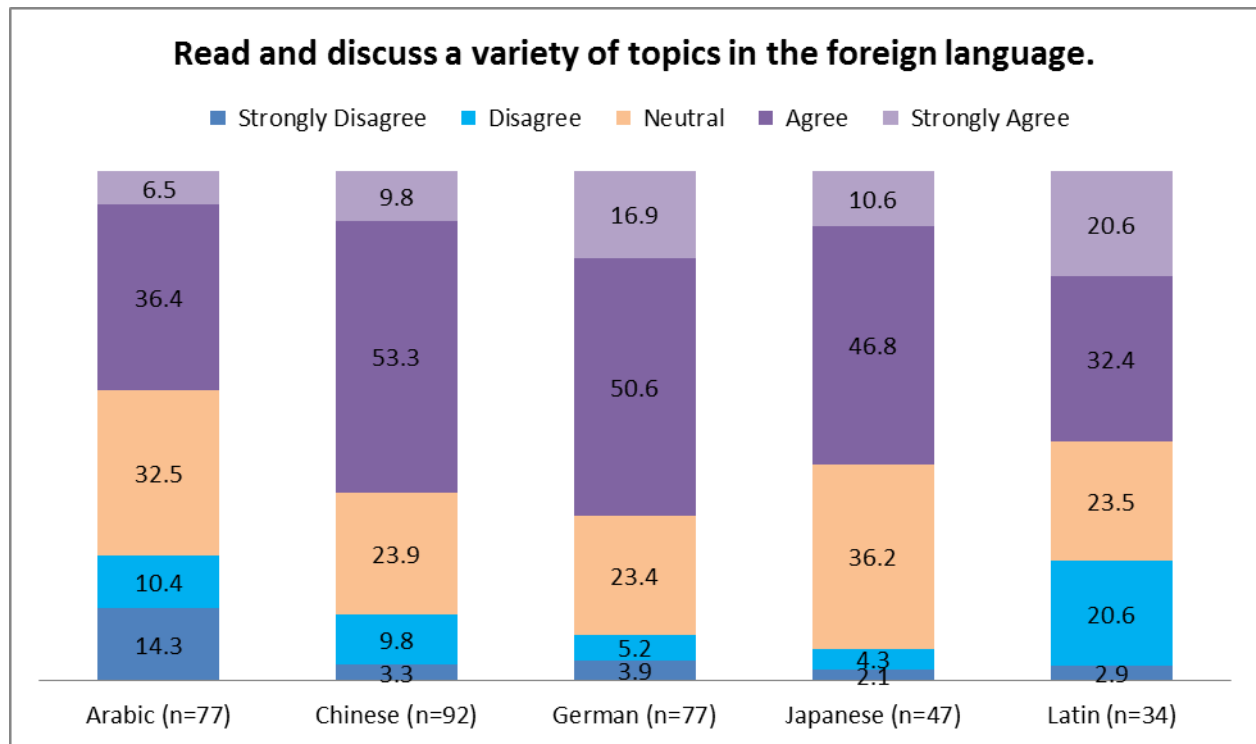
**Question 14: To what degree do you agree with the following statement? Throughout this course, I have had opportunities and have been encouraged to engage in conversations, share and present information, express feelings, and exchange opinions in the foreign language I am learning.**

**Figure 12: The Degree to which Students Feel they Spend Equal Amounts of Time Developing Listening, Reading, Writing, and Speaking Skills**



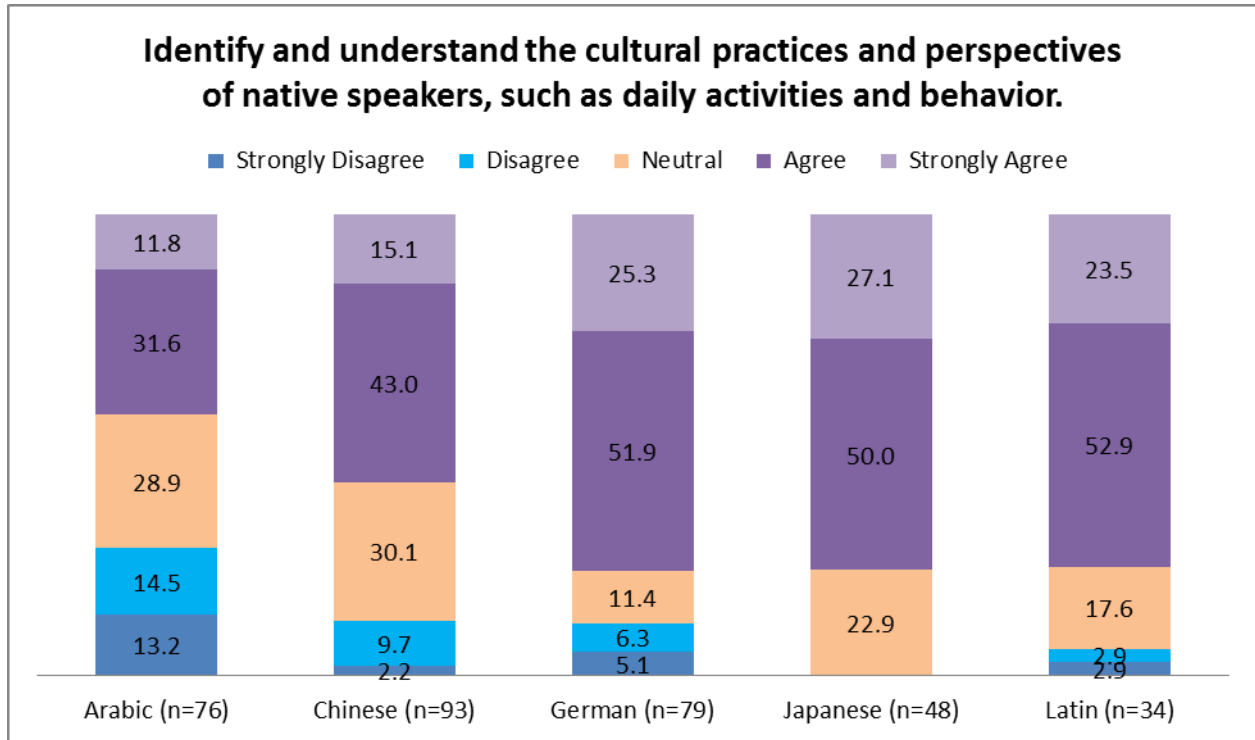
**Question 15: To what degree do you agree with the following statement? Throughout this course, I have had opportunities and have been encouraged to read and discuss a variety of topics in the foreign language.**

**Figure 13: The Degree to which Students Feel they Read and Discuss a Variety of Topics in the Foreign Language**



**Question 16: To what degree do you agree with the following statement? Throughout this course, I have had opportunities and have been encouraged to identify and understand the cultural practices and perspectives of native speakers, such as daily activities and behavior.**

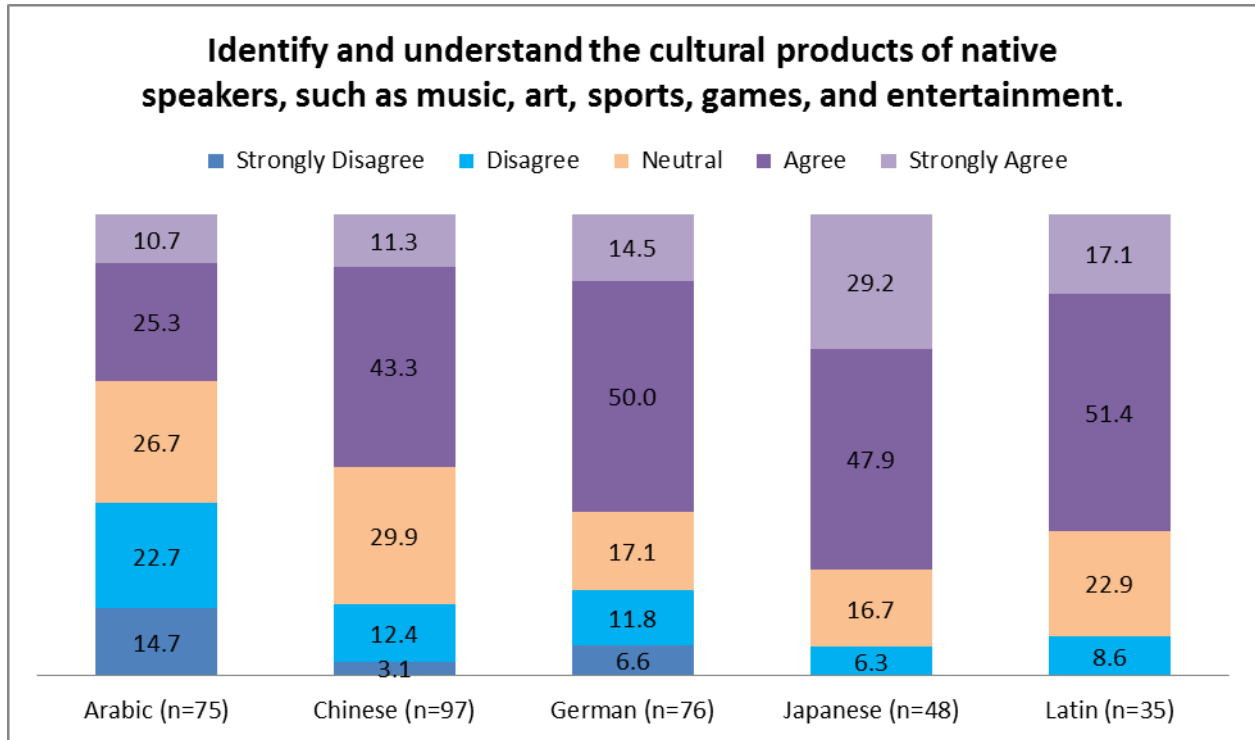
**Figure 14: The Degree to which Students Feel they Identify and Understand Cultural Practices and Perspectives of Native Speakers**





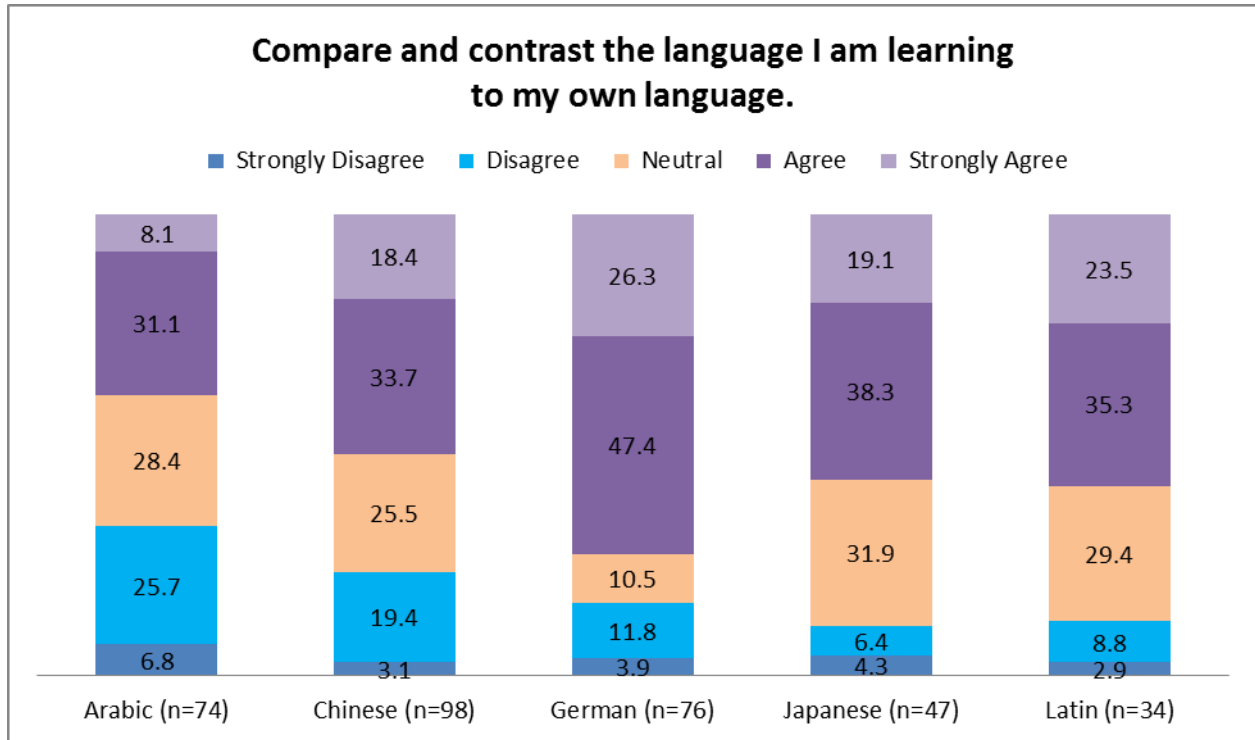
**Question 17: To what degree do you agree with the following statement? Throughout this course, I have had opportunities and have been encouraged to identify and understand the cultural products of native speakers, such as music, art, sports, games, and entertainment.**

**Figure 15: The Degree to which Students Feel they Identify and Understand Cultural Products of Native Speakers**



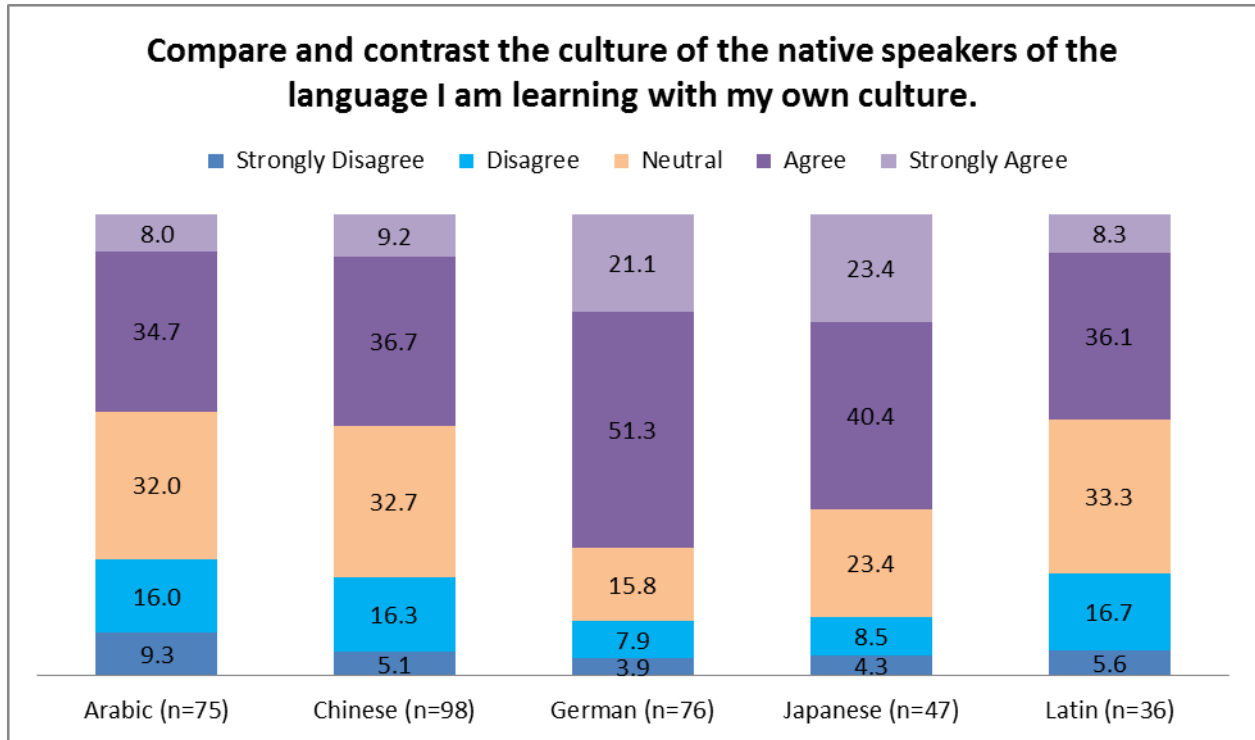
**Question 18: To what degree do you agree with the following statement? Throughout this course, I have had opportunities and have been encouraged to compare and contrast the language I am learning to my own language.**

**Figure 16: The Degree to which Students Feel they Compare and Contrast the Language they are Learning to their Own Language**



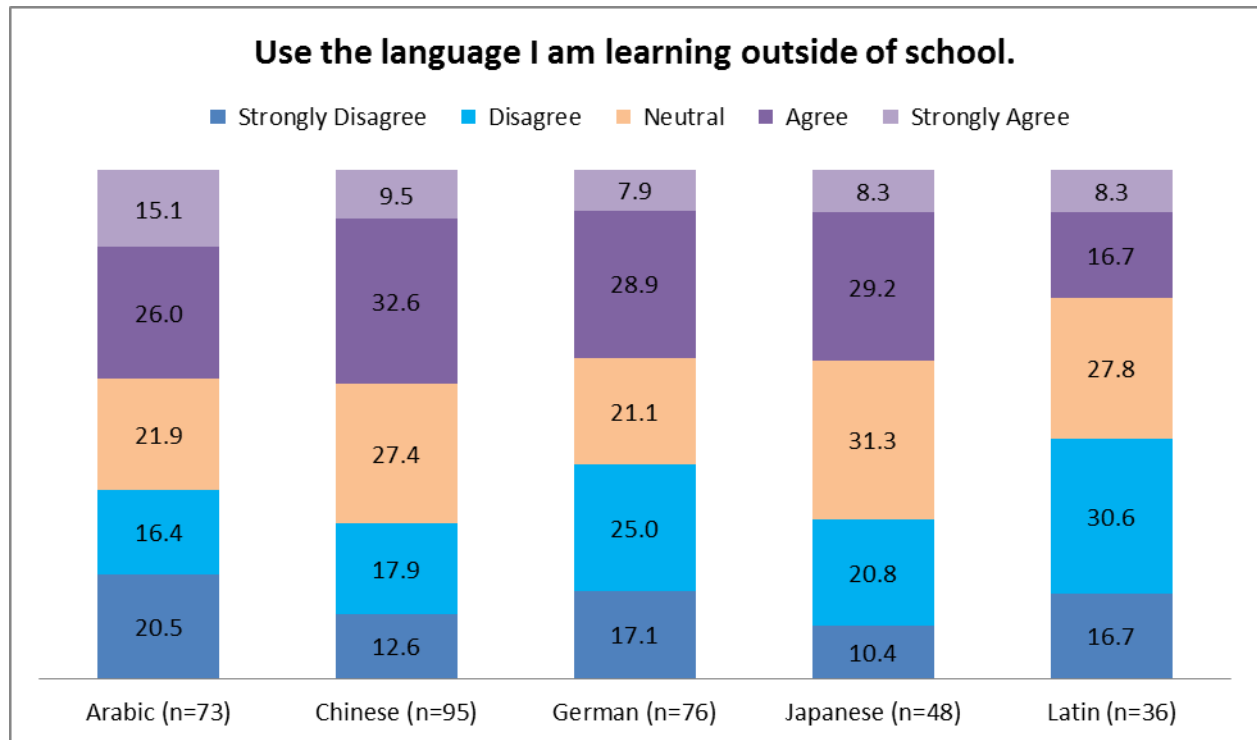
**Question 19: To what degree do you agree with the following statement? Throughout this course, I have had opportunities and have been encouraged to compare and contrast the culture of the native speakers of the language I am learning with my own culture.**

**Figure 17: The Degree to which Students Feel they Compare and Contrast the Culture of the Language they are Learning to their Own Culture**



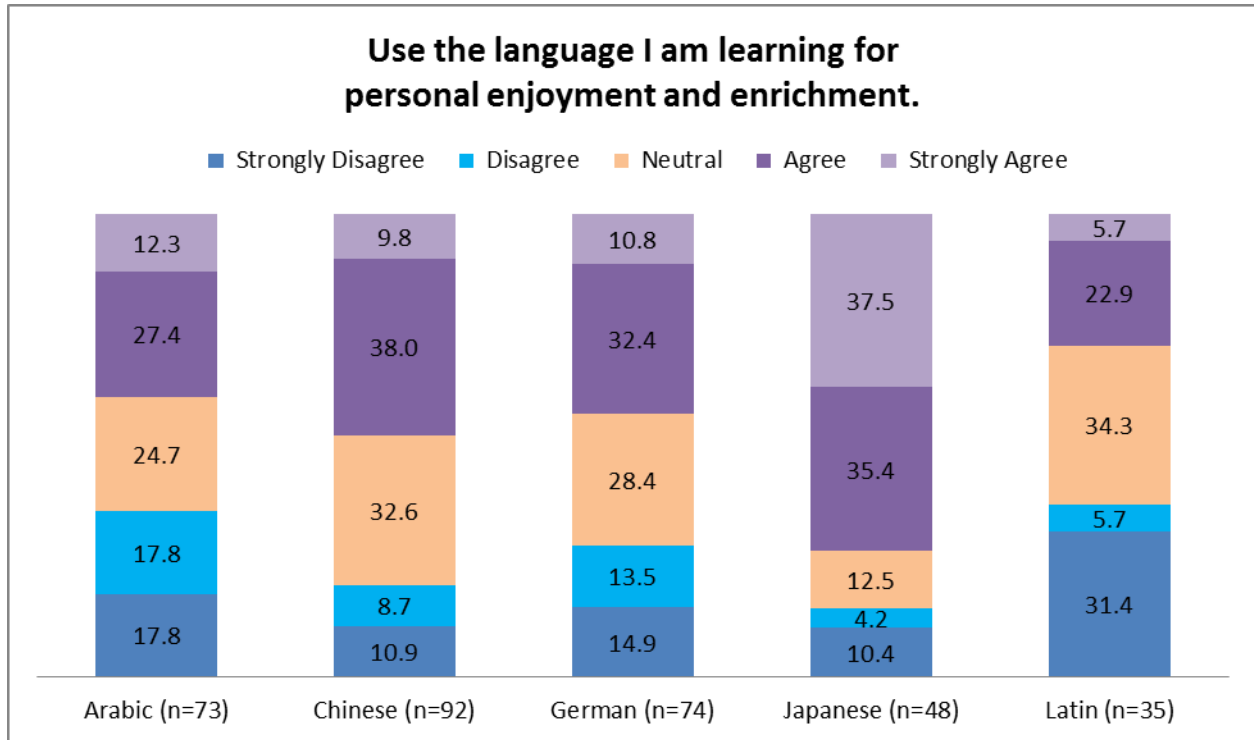
**Question 20: To what degree do you agree with the following statement? Throughout this course, I have had opportunities and have been encouraged to use the language I am learning outside of school.**

**Figure 18: The Degree to which Students Feel they Use the Language they are Learning Outside of School**



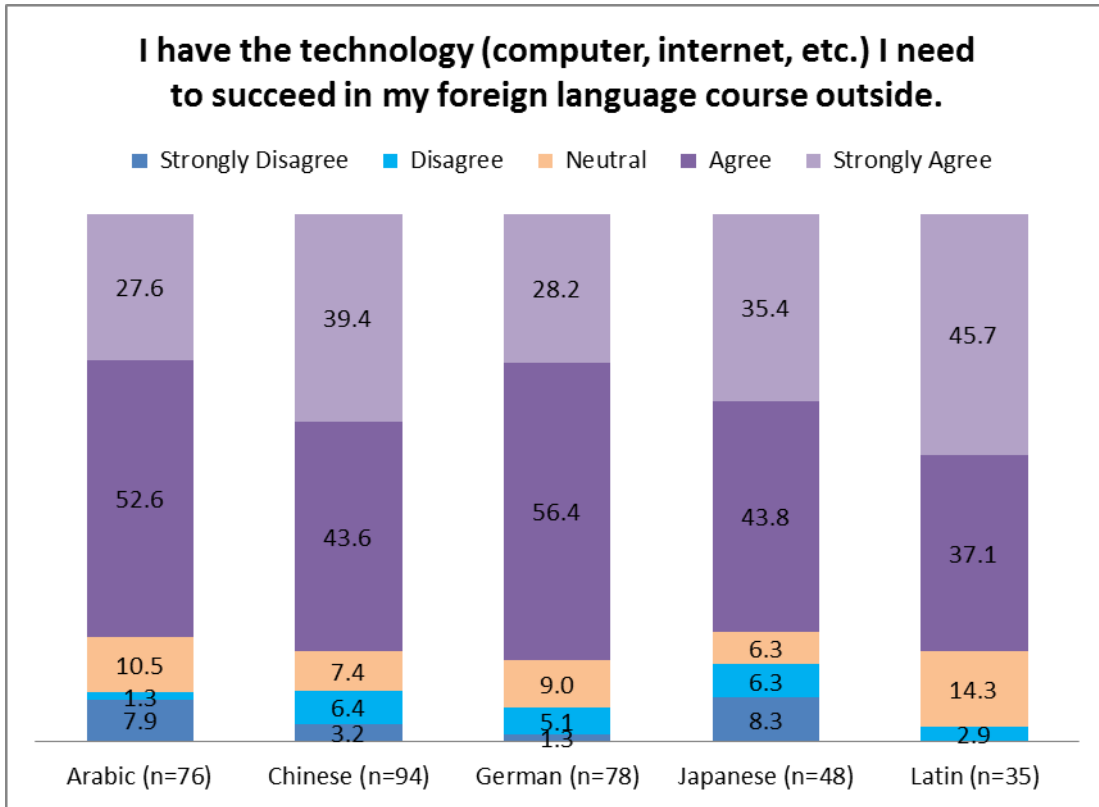
**Question 21: To what degree do you agree with the following statement? Throughout this course, I have had opportunities and have been encouraged to use the language I am learning for personal enjoyment and enrichment.**

**Figure 19: The Degree to which Students Feel they Use the Language they are Learning for Personal Enjoyment and Enrichment**



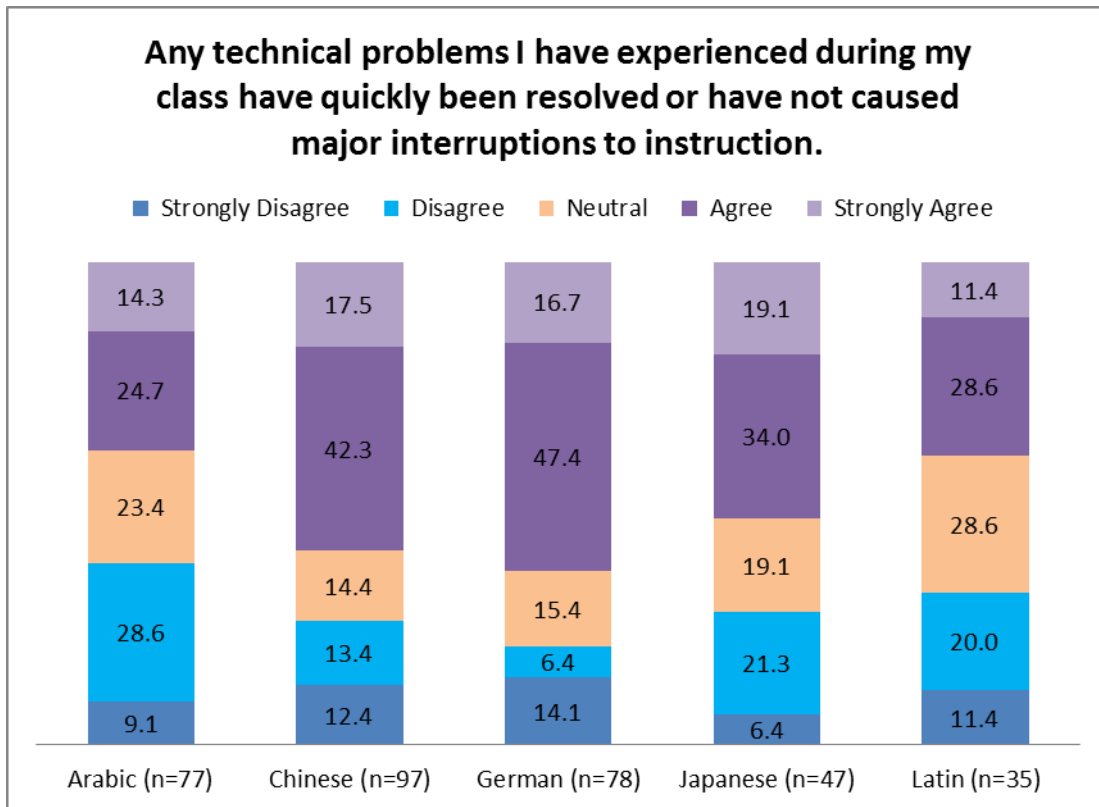
Question 22: To what degree do you agree with the following statement? I have the technology (computer, internet, etc.) I need to succeed in my foreign language course outside the classroom.

Figure 20: The Degree to which Students Feel they have the Technology Outside the Classroom to Succeed in their Foreign Language Course



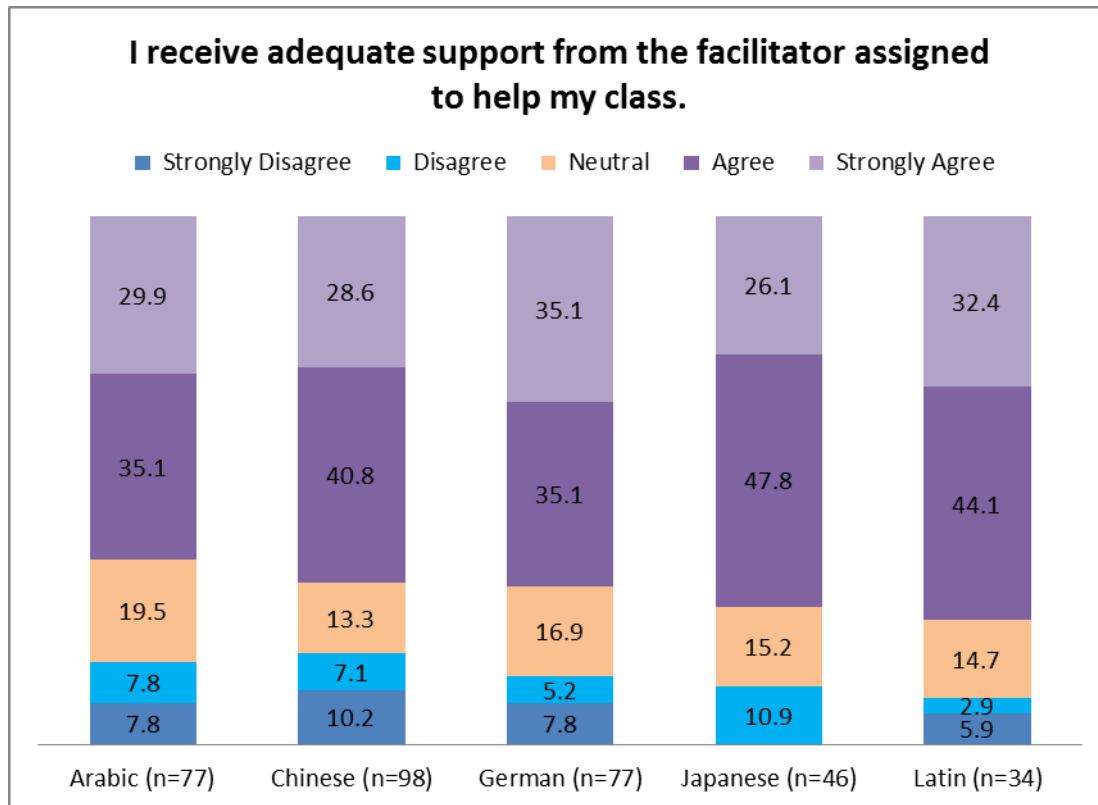
**Question 23: To what degree do you agree with the following statement? Any technical problems I have experienced during my class have quickly been resolved or have not caused major interruptions to instruction.**

**Figure 21: The Degree to which Students Feel Technical Problems have been Resolved Quickly or Not Caused Interruptions to Instruction**



**Question 24: To what degree do you agree with the following statement? I receive adequate support from the facilitator assigned to help my class.**

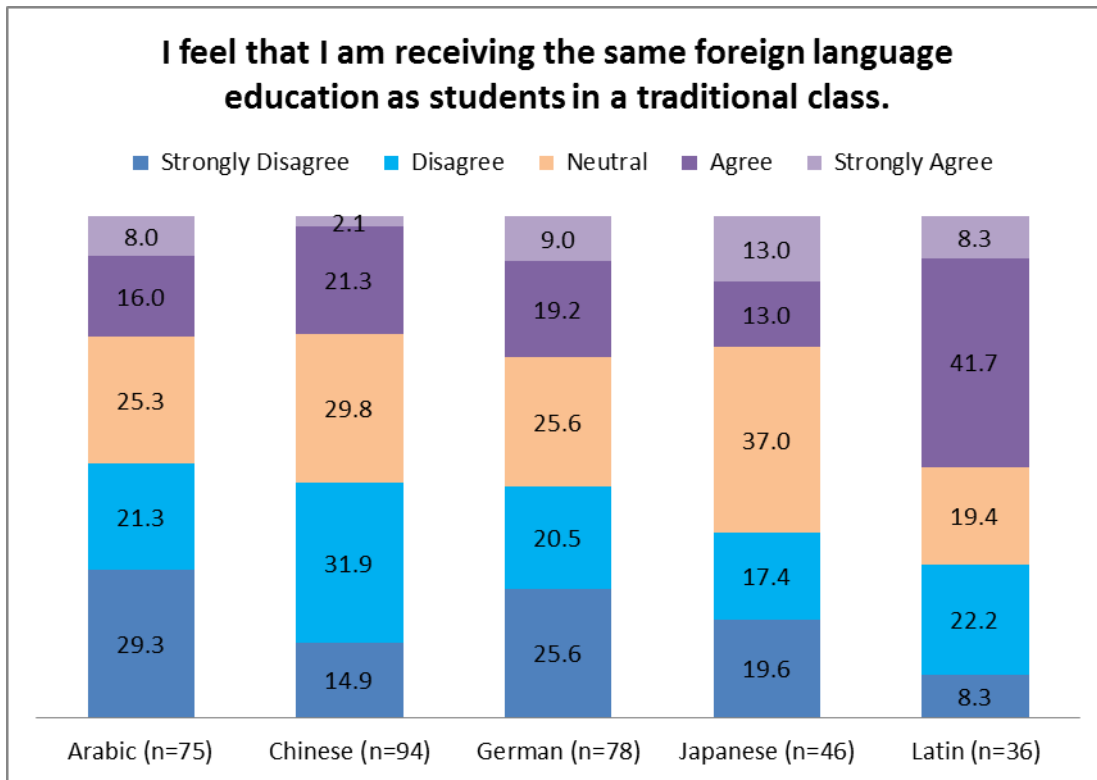
**Figure 22: The Degree to which Students Feel they Receive Adequate Support from the Facilitator Assigned to their Class**





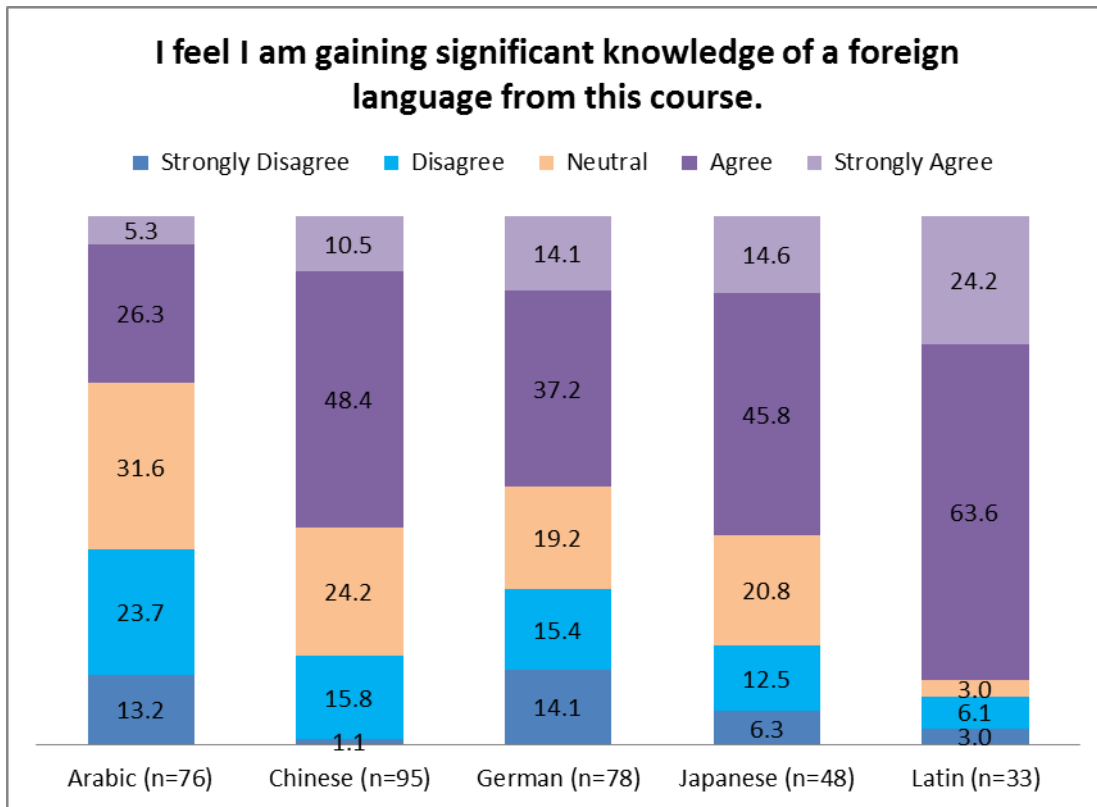
Question 25: To what degree do you agree with the following statement? I feel that I am receiving the same foreign language education as students in a traditional class.

Figure 23: The Degree to which Students Feel they Receive the Same Foreign Language Education as Students in a Traditional Class



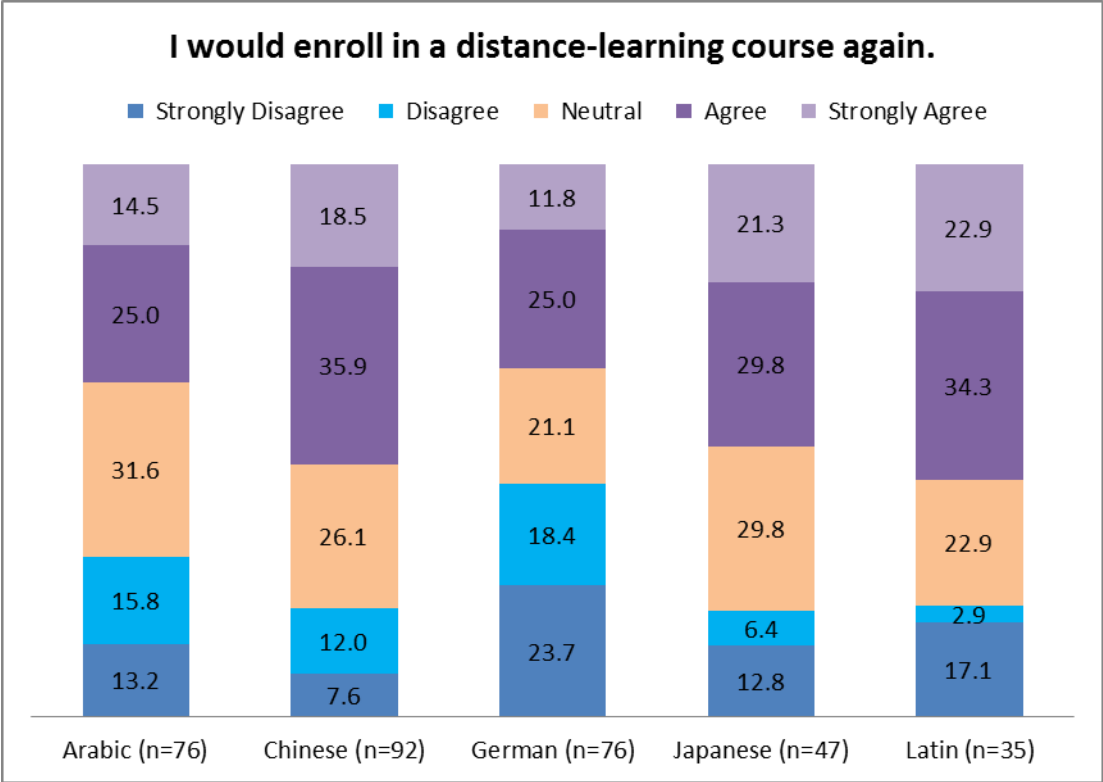
Question 26: To what degree do you agree with the following statement? I feel I am gaining significant knowledge of a foreign language from this course.

Figure 24: The Degree to which Students Feel they Gain Significant Knowledge for a Foreign Language from this Course



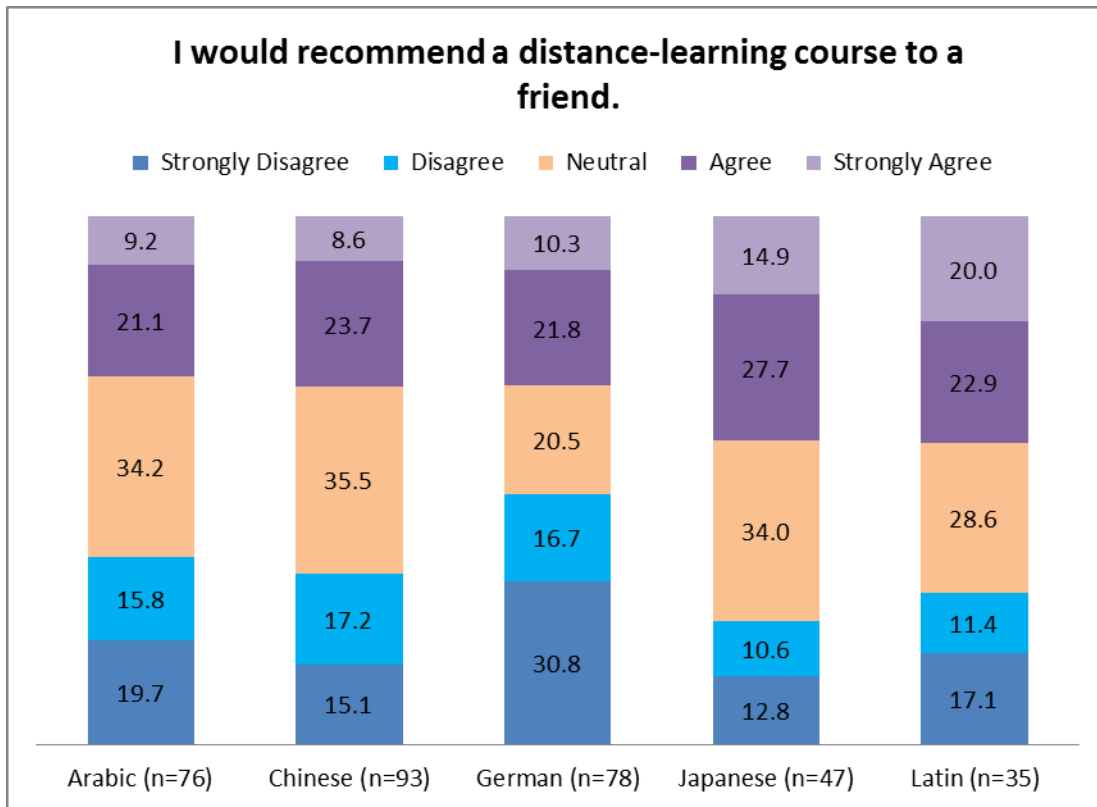
Question 27: To what degree do you agree with the following statement? I would enroll in a distance-learning course again.

Figure 25: The Degree to which Students say they would Enroll in a Distance-Learning Course Again



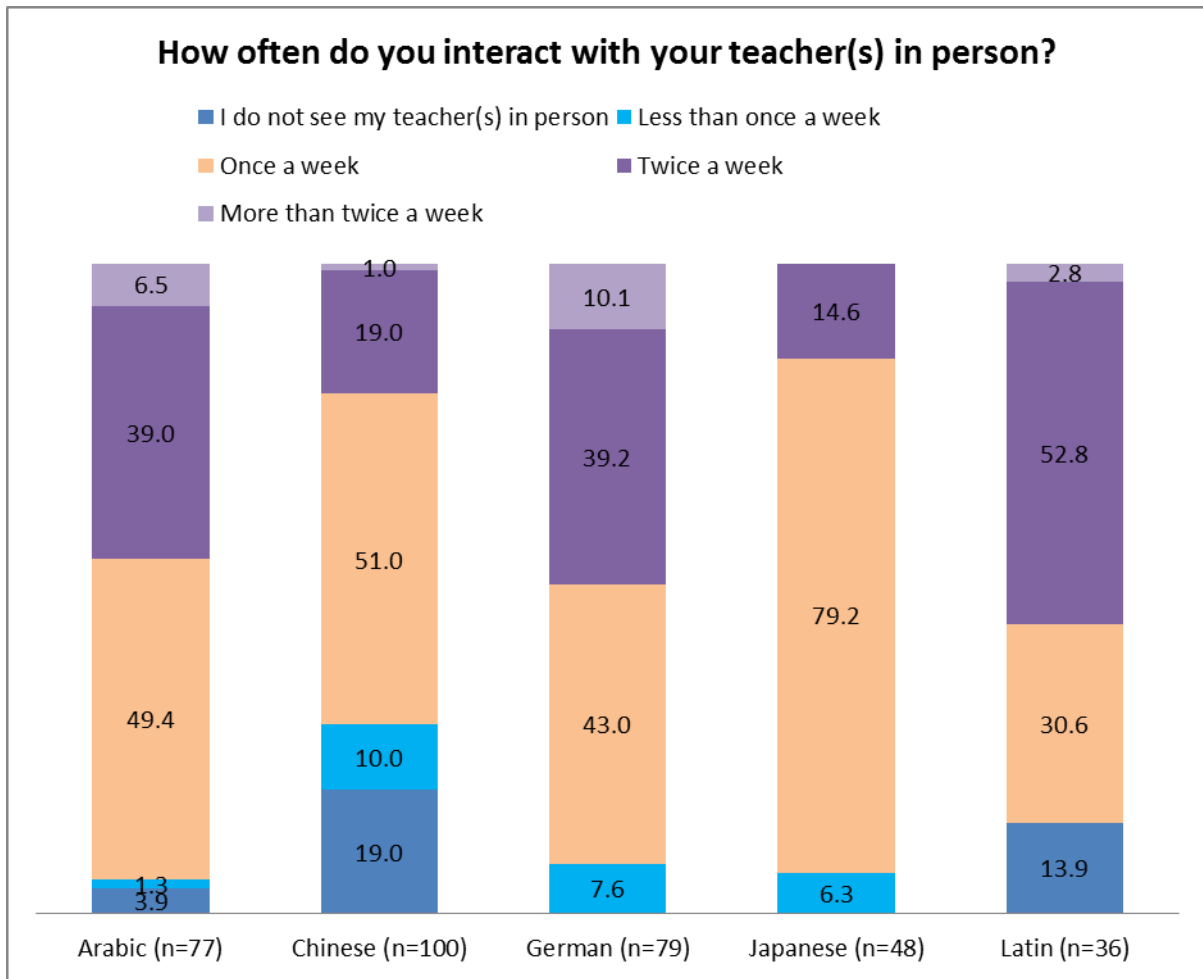
Question 28: To what degree do you agree with the following statement? I would recommend a distance-learning course to a friend.

Figure 26: The Degree to which Students say they would Recommend a Distance-Learning Course to a Friend



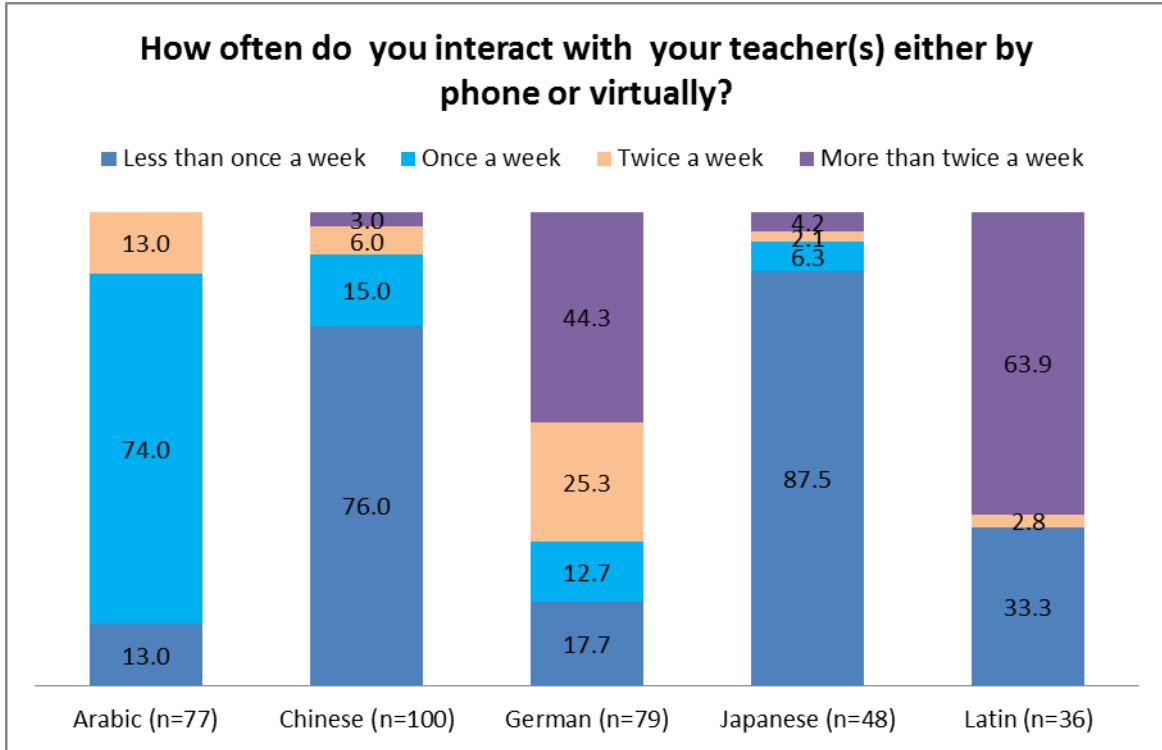
**Question 29: How often do you interact with your teacher(s) in person?**

**Figure 27: How Often Students say they Interact with their Teacher(s) in Person**



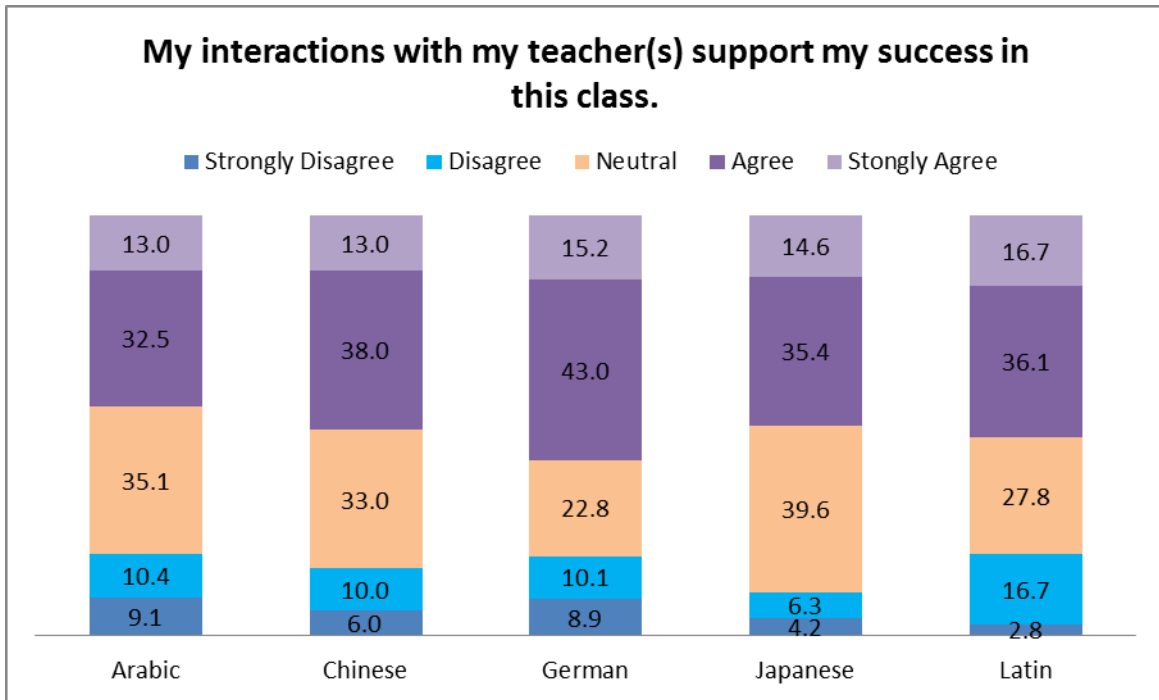
**Question 30: How often do you interact with your teacher(s) either by phone or virtually?**

**Figure 28: How Often Students say they Interact with their Teacher(s) by Phone or in Person**



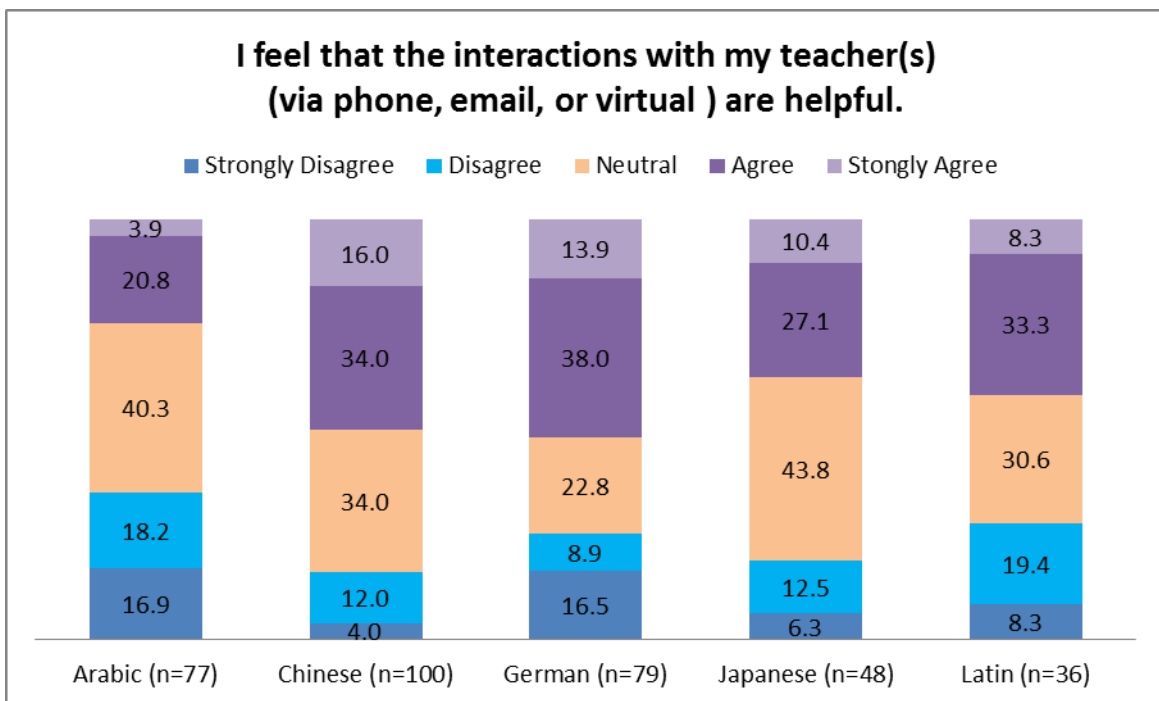
**Question 31: To what degree do you agree with the following statement? My interactions with my teacher(s) support my success in this class.**

**Figure 29: The Degree to which Students say their Interactions with their Teacher(s) Support their Success in Class**



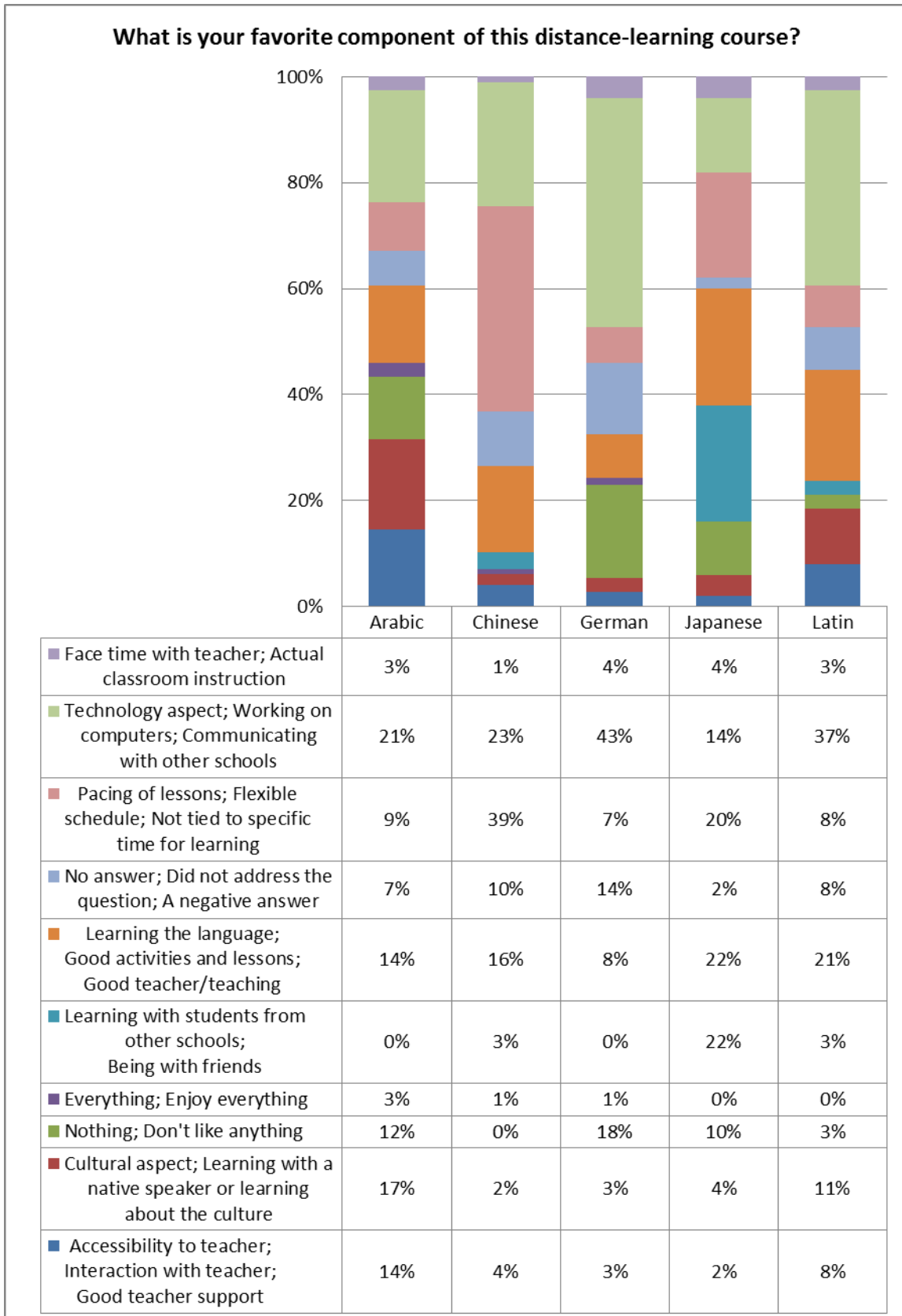
**Question 32: To what degree do you agree with the following statement? I feel that the interactions with my teacher(s) (via phone, email, or virtual ) are helpful.**

**Figure 30: The Degree to which Students Feel that Interactions with their Teacher(s) are Helpful**



**Question 33: What is your favorite component of this distance-learning course? (Open-Ended)**

**Figure 31: What Students Like about their Distance-Learning Course**





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For those students enrolled in **Arabic**, **German**, and **Latin** distance-learning courses, the technology aspect of the lessons was what they liked most. Students offered the following responses pertaining to technology:

- *I enjoy being able to review courses online if I need to go over them again. They are always available to me, because they are on the internet; rather than having to ask a teacher I might see in person. (Arabic)*
- *[I like] having individual computers available everyday as learning tools. (German)*
- *Interacting with kids from other schools, hearing their questions answered, improves my own learning experience... (German)*
- *I enjoy the ability to speak with students from other schools, which allows for different views on the things we are learning. (Latin)*

Students enrolled in the **Chinese** distance-learning course liked the pacing of the lessons the most. They offered the following responses:

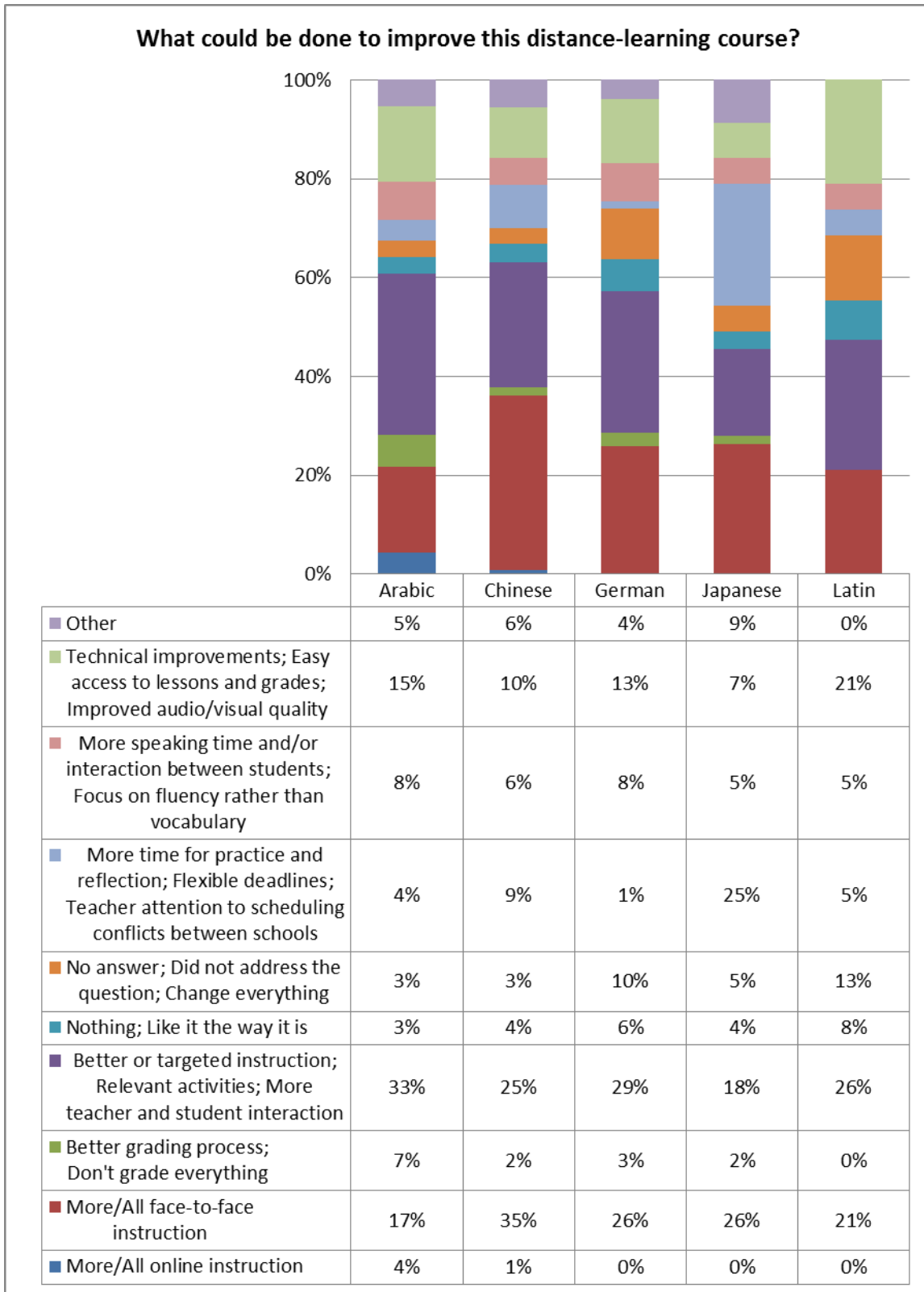
- *[I like] being able to work at my own pace and push myself at the speed that is right for me, while still getting the help that I need from teachers. (Chinese)*
- *I like how the distance-learning course lets you go at a comfortable pace. You don't feel rushed, but you also feel like you are moving along. (Chinese)*
- *[I like] that I get to choose when and where I can start and finish my lessons (I might do them at home) so that I may plan the time I need accordingly. (Chinese)*

Students enrolled in the **Japanese** distance-learning course liked the learning aspects of the lessons best. Responses ranged from good instruction to student support for learning:

- *[I like the] interaction with a native speaking teacher and clear directions on chapters that are given. (Japanese)*
- *I feel comfortable asking my peers questions and feel as though we are teaching ourselves rather than relying completely on the teacher and the program. (Japanese)*
- *The class I'm in is small so we know each other better making pair work, help and studying easier. (Japanese)*

**Question 34: What could be done to improve this distance-learning course? (Open-Ended)**

**Figure 32: Students' Suggestions for Improvement to Distance-Learning**



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A relatively high percentage of students in all five languages suggested that distance-learning could be improved overall through better instruction (i.e., relevant activities, targeted or individualized instruction, or more interaction with the teacher and other students). Students offered the following responses pertaining to this suggestion:

- *There needs to be more cooperation with the school and Arab Academy to develop a curriculum that is suitable for our level... (Arabic)*
- *I think the class should focus more on speaking and comprehending rather than just learning how to read the language. (Arabic)*
- *For the teacher to be fair and teach us well, instead of laughing when we say something wrong. (Chinese)*
- *I get easily confused with assignments... (Chinese)*
- *Don't talk in the foreign language at a level far above the student's understanding (German)*
- *A forum for questions to the teacher from the students. That way if one student has the same question as other students, the others can see the answer as well as obtain the answer directly from the teacher. (Japanese)*
- *[Find] more activities to do in class, because right now all we do is take notes, read stories, and do worksheets. (Latin)*

Another area that received a high student response for improvement in all five languages was a call for more face-to-face instruction. Student responses included the following:

- *Make it less of a "distance Learning" class, and make it more of a "traditional class." (Arabic)*
- *Take away the computers and all the technology and get a real teacher ... (Arabic)*
- *I think it would be better if the teachers would come to the classroom and have face-to-face interactions with the students. (Chinese)*
- *You can't really converse with anyone, and having no teacher to be with you to teach is tough. (Chinese)*
- *It would be greatly improved if the teacher could come to class even just once a week. (Chinese)*
- *A traditional classroom is much more effective for student's learning. I have so much difficulty paying attention and asking questions to a screen. (German)*
- *Hire a real teacher for classrooms. Learning through a TV is impossible. (German)*
- *I feel that a true classroom environment with a great learning atmosphere requires the presence and support of the teacher in person. (Japanese)*
- *More face-to-face time with the teacher. (Japanese)*
- *I feel that I [could] get more out of this class if our teacher was with us everyday. (Latin)*

It is also worth noting that a high percentage of students enrolled in the **Japanese** distance-learning course felt that their lessons moved too quickly, as evidenced by the following responses:

- *Some times I feel rushed and don't feel like I have enough time to learn things. (Japanese)*
- *If you get behind in a distance-learning classroom, it is impossible to make it back up. (Japanese)*
- *The lessons need to be WAY slower...I take two languages, and this one's going way too fast. (Japanese)*
- *Sometimes it feels like we're being rushed to do our work. (Japanese)*

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Seven-percent of Japanese students, 10% of Chinese students, 13% of German students, 15% of Arabic students, and 21% of Latin students stated that fixing the technical problems associated with online lessons would help improve the distance-learning experience. Actual responses included the following:

- *I have difficulty during the virtual calls over the internet to my teachers because it is either that I cannot hear them or they can't hear me. (Arabic)*
- *My teacher does a good job of making the assignments easy to understand and complete, but Blackboard has consistent problems. (Chinese)*
- *To take quizzes I have to allot time to check out an iPad from the library--checking out laptops don't work because the audio files don't display on those--and use that to take my quiz. Of course, you can't answer questions on the quiz on the iPad due to some glitch, so I have to concurrently listen to the audio while taking the quiz on computer. (Chinese)*
- *The microphone feedback NEEDS to be fixed. It's terrible, we have to stop class whenever it starts troubling us. (German)*
- *When we submit videos to grade they sometimes don't go through and get marked as "never completed." (Japanese)*
- *[I would like] to have better resolution in the cameras because sometimes we can't see what the paper says from the document stand. (Latin)*
- *[We need] better visual feeds/ better sound / better microphones. I feel that the technology used to communicate in our distance learning class is lacking; on occasion, we are not able to even communicate at all with the teacher. We can't always tell what the other kids say, and the visuals are very bad; often, you can't tell kids apart. (Latin)*