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Course Assessment Plan for Linguistics 307

This document explains how the effectiveness of Linguistics 307 *Introduction to American Indigenous Languages* in achieving the expected learning outcomes will be assessed over time.

1. Expected learning outcomes

As stated in the course syllabus, the expected learning outcomes for this course are the following. By the end of the course:

1. Students have developed an understanding of linguistic properties of indigenous languages spoken in the Americas, as well as the history and socio-political status of their speakers (see GEC Diversity International issues (western (non-United States) ELO 1 and GEC Social Sciences Individuals and Groups 1).
2. Students are able to think in an informed way about human language and assess its relevance to current intellectual and social issues (see GEC Social Sciences Individuals and Groups ELOs 2 and 3).
3. Students are able to critically evaluate and compare information across cultures and countries (see GEC Social Sciences Individuals and Groups ELOs 2 and 3).

2. Methods of assessment

Several measures of assessment are used to ensure that the learning objectives are met, including course surveys and evaluations of answers to midterm exam questions, the final paper and the reading reactions. Data collected through these measures will also allow the instructor to identify areas in which the course need to be improved. Details on how the data is used to improve the course of assessment are provided for each measure below.

Course surveys

Two student surveys will be conducted at the midpoint and the end of the course as an indirect method of assessing course instruction and course content. These surveys will include the following questions (additional questions may be asked):

- Is the course content clear?
- Have the goals of the course been provided? [Specific course goals will be listed.]
- How could the instructor make information more easily understood?
- Are the comments and instructions you receive clear and helpful?
- How has your knowledge of the subject area improved?
- Do you have any suggestions for improving the course?

The students' answers will be collected and read by the faculty member teaching the course, and then saved in a designated filing cabinet in the office of the faculty member. The percent change in yes/now answers and comments for *how* questions will allow the faculty member to identify areas and ideas for improvement. Such improvements may, for instance, involve clarifying the instructions for the final paper, or making it clearer to students how course topics relate to each other.

Reading reactions

Students are required to send reactions about selected readings to the instructor the day before the reading is discussed in class. These reading reactions serve to ensure a productive in-class discussion of the readings: students will prepare a clarification question or a contribution they would like to make to the in-class discussion. In addition to serving as preparation for the students for the in-class discussion, these reading reactions also allow the instructor to assess the extent to which students understand e.g. linguistic properties or the history of American indigenous languages, and are able to compare the particulars of one language in the reading to what has already been discussed in class (cf. learning outcomes).

At the beginning of the course, time will be set aside during which the instructor discusses with the students criteria for identifying what constitutes a good reading reaction. These criteria will then be made available in writing to the students, and serve as guidelines for both the students and the instructor in assessing the reading reactions. Possible criteria, which can also double as a grading rubric, include:

- Does the reading reaction contain a clearly stated question or comment?
- Does the question or comment made in the reading reaction reflect adequate engagement with the reading?
- Does the reading reaction provide sufficient background information and text citations for the reader to understand the comment or question raised?
- Is the reading reaction clearly written, with proper use of grammar, spelling and punctuation?

The instructor will evaluate students' reading reactions to two papers in the course of the class to gauge students' understanding of the paper topics, their ability to critically assess the material presented in the paper, and to relate it to course topics already covered. These evaluations will be used to identify how students' reading of papers can be improved by suggestion, for example, strategies for reading and note taking.

Answers to midterm exam questions

The (take-home) midterm exam will consist of about three to five essay questions. The essay questions will be of two types. First, some questions will require the students to reflect on their knowledge of the linguistic properties of American indigenous languages, their history or the socio-political situation of the speakers, as well as the methodology covered in the first part of the course to analyze these subject matters. An exam question could, for example, ask the students to describe and analyze the word order properties of a set of Mayan language examples provided to them in the exam. A second kind of question will require the students to apply their knowledge to a language (family) not yet covered in class. An example question here could, for example, ask students to identify the word order properties of a Quechua (not covered in the class) on the basis of a set of Quechua examples provided in the exam, and to compare the word order properties to that of a Mayan language covered in class and/or English. To answer both of these sample questions students will have to

1. Learn the vocabulary to describe the word order observed in a particular sentence,
2. learn the criteria linguists use to identify the word order of a particular sentence,
3. draw generalizations from a set of sentences of a given language to identify word order properties of the language, and (in the case of a comparative exam question)
4. compare the word order properties of different languages at the appropriate level.

In the weeks leading up to the midterm in-class exercises will provide ample opportunity for the students to develop the skills necessary for adequately analyzing word order properties and understanding the criteria on the basis of which they will be assessed. (The same holds for other topics covered in the exam.) This kind of an exam question assesses whether students have developed an understanding of a particular linguistic property of American indigenous languages, whether they are able to examine these properties in an informed way, and whether they can compare these properties across typologically diverse languages.

The students' answers to a subset of the midterm exam questions will be used for assessment of the students' learning. With respect to the word order questions outlined above, for example, students' answers will be assessed to identify the extent to which (i) the vocabulary for describing word order properties has been learned, (ii) the students' ability to describe and generalized word orders, and (iii) the students' ability to compare word orders. The instructor will use the data collected to identify concepts that need to be reinforced as well as which techniques for learning about word order properties (do not) work for the students.

Final paper

Each student will write a final paper (about 14-16 pages) for the class that is a comparative study of a topic pertaining to American indigenous languages. Students can, for example, compare

- the word order properties of two (or more) languages
- bilingual education policies in two (or more) countries in the Americas
- the writing systems of two (or more) American indigenous languages
- the history of settlement of two (or more) American indigenous peoples

Possible paper topics will be identified in class but students are also welcome to propose topics. At least one of the languages, indigenous groups or countries covered in a student's paper must be one that is not covered in the course.

To help students write the paper in a timely manner, requirements for the paper are spread out throughout the course. Students will be required to bring a one paragraph topic description of a possible topic for discussion to class 13, hand in a draft of the paper by class 18, and submit the final paper during exam week on the day determined by the Master schedule. The instructor will discuss the assessment criteria at each step with the students. In preparation for the one paragraph topic description, for example, the instructor will discuss with the students what a successful topic description looks like. Criteria (which again may double as a grading rubric) include

- Does the topic description contain a clearly stated research question?
- Does topic description identify literature that pertains to the research question?
- Does the topic description provide sufficient information for the reader to understand research question and the motivation behind the research question?
- Is the topic description clearly written, with proper use of grammar, spelling and punctuation?

A set of evaluation criteria for the final paper will also be discussed with and provided to the students as guidelines for writing the draft and the final paper. Here, criteria (rated on a scale from 1 = excellent to 5 = needs improvement) will include e.g.

- The paper identifies and develops a research question.
- The paper present material in an organized fashion.
- The paper synthesizes material from multiple sources according to main points.
- The paper uses evidence to support the main ideas of the research question.
- The paper cites and documents sources appropriately.
- The paper uses appropriate grammar, spelling and formatting.
- The paper uses an appropriate tone and word choice for an academic paper.

Students will receive handouts which lay out in detail the expectations about the format and content of the draft and the paper itself.

The rubric will also be used by the instructor to assess the extent to which the final paper submitted by the student meets the learning outcomes. For example, students' ability to analyze linguistic properties, think about language in an informed way, and engage in cross-linguistic comparison (learning outcomes 1-3) can be assessed on the basis of the final papers. The results of this assessment of the final paper will allow the

instructor to identify topics that need to be covered in more detail or a different fashion in the next instalment of the course.