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The issues of East Asian language programs at the University of Georgia

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Abstract

The paper looks into the current situations of the four Asian language programs, including Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese, at the University of Georgia in the fall of 2018, in order to point out similar issues among them as well as different problems particular to some of them. Reflecting the local, national, and international circumstances, the findings largely, but not entirely, confirm the recent data provided by the Modern Language Association and the United States Census Bureau. Possible solutions to the issues include the hiring of non-native graduate teaching assistants as language teachers, the creation and expansion of exchange programs, and more effective utilization of funding for recruitment.

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Introduction

As the flagship public university in the southeast state of Georgia, U.S.A., the University of Georgia (UGA) offers many language courses, of which I have been directing four Asian language programs housed in the Comparative Literature Department since the fall of 2018, including Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese. This new vantage position enables me to delineate succinctly the situation in which each of those programs was placed as I found it then,¹ thereby elucidating points of comparison not only among the four Asian programs at UGA but also potentially with language programs in institutions of higher education elsewhere. It turns out that, apart from some elements particular to them, the UGA programs largely follow the national trends that a 2018 report by the Modern Language Association (MLA) reveals on foreign language education at American colleges and universities in 2016 (Looney & Lusin, 2018).² The 2017 demographic data by the United States Census Bureau (USCB) also support the current findings.

Geographical Background

According to the MLA report, Georgia is one of only four states that scored a positive percent change of language enrollments from 2013 to 2016 along with Idaho, Rhode Island and Indiana, with 6.6% gain only second to Indiana's 8.0% increase, while absolute enrollment numbers place Georgia in the twelfth with 45,603 in 2016 (Looney & Lusin, 2018). The state's outstanding success with foreign language education is hardly accidental, and at least two factors contribute to these statistics. With Atlanta as its capital city pivotal to the southeast region of the United States, the economy of Georgia has steadily been growing. As a place of vibrant opportunities, the state has attracted a large influx of new residents and corporations, international as well as domestic, over decades, and the long-term tendency has resulted in certain demographic changes in urban areas. Then, to ensure further growth based on international trade, the state government encourages foreign language education on all levels. Accordingly, a Georgia Department of Education website stresses the importance of "[d]eveloping international perspective and advanced language proficiency, particularly as this relates to college and career readiness" (GaDOE, 2019).

The Japanese Language Program

As forerunners of Asian language education, Chinese and Japanese language courses had been taught at the University of Georgia for years before the minor programs in Japanese and Chinese were established in 1991, followed by the Japanese major program in 1992. As part of the Comparative Literature Department, these major/minor programs consisted of two components of language and literature, thereby called a major/minor in Japanese Language and Literature and a minor in Chinese Language and Literature respectively. Between the two, the Japanese Language Program offers good starting points for contrast with the other Asian language programs. In line with the

nationwide data that find Japanese the most popular among Asian languages (Looney & Lusin, 2018), the Japanese Language Program tends to have the largest enrollments of the four Asian language programs (Figure 1). In the fall semester of 2018, the total enrollment number amounted to 290, comprising six sections of the first-year course, three of the second year, two of the third year, and one class of the fourth-year course. Four teaching assistants, one part-time instructor, and a faculty member taught those classes.

With major and minor programs in place and yearly enrollments constantly around 500 over the past decade, the Japanese Language Program has not only a stable basis but also potential for further growth. For instance, all the six sections of JPNS 1001 were full or almost full in the 2018 fall semester. To meet the large demand for the entry course, the language program began to offer a class of the first basic course, JPNS 1001, for the first time in the spring of 2018, and the class has been full with 30 enrollments for two successive springs in 2018 and 2019. On the other hand, a problem that hampers the growth lies in the difficulty of finding qualified teachers. Due to the budget limitation, to hire a new assistant professor or a lecturer has not been attainable. To acquire an additional teaching assistant should be more feasible, but, apart from the budget restriction, few graduate students with native or at least a certain high level of Japanese proficiency attend UGA. Most of them already have some form of financial support from their home departments. Attempts to recruit a new graduate student directly from Japan for studying Comparative Literature with a teaching assistantship have not been successful.

Another structural problem that besets the Japanese Language Program is the gradual, yet significant loss of enrollments through four years of course offerings from basic to the most advanced levels. Full, or almost full to the capacity as all the sections of JPNS 1001 are at the beginning, the program loses enrollments as students move up to take each successive course. While a natural process of attrition partly accounts for this shrinkage in size, the program sustains a great loss at some point because of an institutional requirement. Aligned with the emphasis that the state places on foreign language education, many departments at UGA require students to take foreign language courses for three semesters.³ As a result, about a half of the students stop learning the Japanese language after completing the third course, JPNS 2001, in the fall of the second year. The attrition rate from JPNS 2001 in the fall of 2018 to JPNS 2002 in the spring of 2019, for instance, was 44.9%. Generally speaking, interest in Japanese popular culture, technology, and economy is high, but that interest alone is not sufficient to keep many students above the third course.

A very small presence of students with a Japanese familial background partly accounts for this enrollment decline. The situation reflects the low Japanese(-American) population

¹ For this reason, unless otherwise noted, I refer to the fall of 2018 for the most recent data at UGA, such as enrollment numbers at the beginning of an academic year.

² I utilize the publication's fall 2016 statistics and disregard the summer 2016 data.

³ For instance, see Franklin College Foreign Language Requirement (2017).

estimates with overall 770,546 mostly on the West Coast, and mere 9,622 in Georgia (USCB, 2019). Three of the Japanese language courses offered in the fall of 2018, including JPNS 1001, JPNS 2001, and JPNS 3010, had 6.1%, 6.0%, and 10.0% of their enrolled students with Japanese heritage respectively, and the most advanced JPNS 4110 had none (Figure 2).⁴ As a result, no more than twenty students remain to take the most advanced JPNS 4110 in the end. The ratio of enrollments between first- and second-year Japanese language courses and third- and fourth-year courses at UGA was 5.9:1 (Figure 3), comparable, yet slightly inferior to the national ratio that stayed 5:1 from 2009 to 2016 (Looney & Lusin, 2018). A smaller ratio indicates a better retention rate in this case. As discussed below, the Japanese Language Programs makes sharp contrast to the Chinese and Korean counterparts in this respect.

The Chinese Language Program

Following the minor program initiated in 1991, the major program in Chinese Language and Literature came into existence in 2006. In the fall of 2018, the enrollments totaled 216 in ten classes from four levels of Chinese language courses taught by five teaching assistants and a faculty member. Another professor of Chinese did not teach a language course at that time. Although reasonably successful, the Chinese Language Program appears short of its full potential, especially compared with the Japanese Language Program (Figure 1), considering the growing presence of China on the world stage. In fact, the enrollment situation at the University of Georgia corresponds to a recent national tendency in which Chinese is the seventh largest among the fifteen most commonly taught foreign languages with 53,069 enrollments, compared with 68,810 for the fifth Japanese. And, in contrast to the Japanese enrollments that registered a 3.1% gain, the Chinese enrollments suffered negative growth by 13.1% in three years ending 2016, although the language increased enrollments by 1.03% in the ten-year period from 2006 to 2016 (Looney & Lusin, 2018).

Political circumstances aside, this less than ideal status of the Chinese Language Program at UGA is attributable to two factors, one internal to the language program, and the other originating in the very nature of the language. First, often not well coordinated and administered, the program supervision functioned not as expected and ill affected the program as a whole for decades despite of occasional attempts to redress the situation. This inherent problem, for instance, at least partially accounts for the delayed creation of the Chinese major by fourteen years after the Japanese major as well as for a consistently low number of graduates with Chinese majors.

Second, although the program uses the textbooks that adopt the Chinese mainland's simplified characters, the Chinese language, especially its writing system, still poses a great challenge to American students, necessitating more time on the learning process than with Western languages like Spanish and German. Consequently, when the first basic-level textbook was not completed in CHNS 1001 at the end of the first fall semester, the book's last few chapters were

left untaught, and the students were supposed to study those untaught chapters by themselves over the winter break before they took the next course of CHNS 1002 in the spring with a new textbook. The curriculum obviously caused an academically awkward and difficult situation both for the students and for the teachers.

The program has addressed the last issue in the 2018-2019 academic year, and the students now learn those few last lessons of the first textbook at the beginning of the second semester, although this adjustment means a slower pace of textbooks' completion through successive levels. Unlike the Japanese Language Program, there is no difficulty in finding a new teaching assistant in Chinese when several people apply to the department's graduate program from China and Taiwan every year. Emulating the successful example set by the Japanese Language Program, the Chinese Language Program offers for the very first time a class of CHNS 1001 in the spring semester of 2019, resulting in additional 22 enrollments.

Certain demographic phenomena exist. With the estimated population of 56,488 combining Chinese(-American) and Taiwanese(-American) residents in Georgia as well as approximately 4.4 millions nationwide (USCB, 2019), a large proportion of students in the Chinese language courses have a Chinese familial background. Three of the Chinese language courses in the fall of 2018, including CHNS 1001, CHNS 2001, and CHNS 3010, found 36.6%, 43.8%, and 50.0% of their students with some of the background respectively (Figure 2). Highly interested in their familial cultural heritage or possibly seeking less academic rigor, many of these students tend to stay motivated enough until they take advanced-level courses. In addition, because many of these students already possess varying degrees of Chinese proficiency, they tend to start with an intermediate or advanced course without having taken basic courses, which explains the ascending percentage through the three levels. The ratio of enrollments between first- and second-year courses and third- and fourth-year Chinese language courses at UGA was 2.66:1 in the fall of 2018 (Figure 3),⁵ surpassing the 2016 national ratio of 3:1 although that national ratio itself was a proportional improvement from 4:1 in 2013 (Looney & Lusin, 2018). Thus, the presence of students with a Chinese familial background is an advantage that the Japanese Language Program does not share. From another perspective, however, less dependence on Chinese heritage students, like the Japanese case, will be desirable for the program's long-term success and expansion.

Meanwhile, with the recent, notable surge of students who are native speakers with high school diplomas from mainland China, some of them tried to take Chinese

⁴ The percentage of students with certain Asian heritage in a course is based on an estimate or estimates by the teacher(s) in charge of the class(es) of the course, and this might possibly leave a few students unaccounted for. A student with a certain Asian ethnic familial background or heritage in this case means that at least one of their parents is of that Asian ethnic descent.

⁵ The textbooks are Yuehua Liu, et al. eds., *Integrated Chinese 1* (Boston: Cheng & Tsui, 2017), 4th ed. and its sequel, *Integrated Chinese 2* (Boston: Cheng & Tsui, 2018), 4th ed.

⁶ Enrollments in CHNS 4110 (Advanced Chinese III) include native speakers with a high school diploma from China, who were allowed to take the fourth-year Chinese language course.

language courses, including CHNS 1001, simply in order to raise their Grade Point Averages. While they are allowed to take 4000-level language courses and thereby help those courses to maintain substantial enrollments, the presence of native students in the courses below the fourth-year level only has negative effects, such as demoralizing non-native students and taking seats from the American students who want to learn the Chinese language. To cope with the situation, the department has implemented a change with the course requirements, barring those native speakers from registering Chinese language courses below the fourth-year level.

The Korean Language Program

Korean language courses began to be offered in the mid-1990s before the minor program in Korean Language and Literature started in 2000. The Korean major had to wait until the existing Japanese and Chinese majors were consolidated to create the new major program in Asian Languages and Literature in 2017 due to the yearly number of graduates that, per language, had often failed to meet the minimal standard of 10 set by the state's Board of Regents. As part of this tripartite major program, the new major of Asian Languages and Literature with emphasis on Korean, along with its Japanese and Chinese counterparts, came into being. In the fall of 2018, three teaching assistants and one part-time instructor taught eight sections of KREN 1001, 2001, and 3001, with total enrollments of 223, including two directed studies (Figure 1). The two Korean faculty members were not available to teach language courses then. All the three KREN 1001 classes were full or more than full with enrollments of 30, 30, and 36 respectively.

This high interest in the Korean language mirrors a national trend. While the MLA report locates Korean at the eleventh with 13,936 enrollments among 15 most commonly taught foreign languages at colleges and universities, "only Japanese and Korean showed gains in enrollments" from 2013 to 2016 when overall "enrollments in languages other than English fell 9.2%" (Looney & Lusin, 2018), and its 13.7% increase was larger by more than 10% than with Japanese (Looney & Lusin, 2018). The Korean growth turns out "particularly impressive" in a longer temporal span, considering the fact that enrollments in Korean were 26 in 1958, signifying a 53,500% increase over fifty-eight years (Looney & Lusin, 2018). This remarkable increase is obviously thanks to large immigration from the Republic of Korea since the 1970s that spread across the nation, including Georgia that counts the Korean(-American) population of 61,307 with high concentration in suburban Atlanta (USCB, 2019).

Although the Korean Language Program thus shows even more momentum for expansion than Chinese or Japanese, two factors stand in the way for its further growth. First, the percentage of students with a Korean familial background in the Korean language courses is even higher than in the Chinese case on the second- and third-year levels, with 57.3% and 62.0% respectively in KREN 2001 and KREN 3001 in fall, 2018 (Figure 2). The situation has dual aspects. On the one hand, as in the case of Chinese, the presence of motivated students interested in their cultural heritage

ensures high enrollments in the language courses, especially at the upper levels, demonstrated by the 3.28: 1 ratio of enrollments between first- and second-year courses and third- and fourth-year Korean language courses (Figure 3). The ratio at UGA is far better than the 2016 national ratio of 5:1 (Looney & Lusin, 2018). The particular UGA ratio stands out because no fourth-year Korean language courses were offered in the fall, 2018.

On the other hand, a division inevitably existed in the same course above the basic level between students with a certain level of fluency and those short of it. As a result, on the second- and third-year levels, at least one section of the same course had to be tailored for one of the two groups, and the others for another group. To cope with this issue, the program has proposed new "Accelerated" courses for students with more proficiency, planning to offer them in the fall of 2019. In addition, while the current enrollment dependence on students with a Korean familial background does not necessarily guarantee the program's long-term foundation, their percentage of 21.9% in KREN 1001 is lower than CHNS 1001's 36.6%, and far less than half of KREN 2001 and KREN 3001 (Figure 2). The low percentage in KREN 1001 probably signals an increasing number of students with no Korean familial background learning the language thanks to the economic status of South Korea and especially the popularity that contemporary Korean culture enjoys in the international arena.

Second, there is chronic difficulty in finding a new qualified TA with native fluency for teaching the Korean language. With one of the two Korean professors newly arrived, further faculty acquisition is not a likely prospect in the foreseeable future. Many of the Korean students who come to UGA for graduate studies either do not have a sufficient English speaking TOEFL score required for teaching undergraduate courses or are unwilling to undergo certain requirements of the department and the graduate school. A few Korean graduate students who expressed their interest in getting a teaching assistantship in Korean did not succeed for these reasons in the fall of 2018. Although all of the teaching assistants in the Korean Language Program have been native speakers of the language until the spring of 2019, it will probably become necessary to hire a non-native graduate student who is relatively fluent in Korean to deal with the TA candidate scarcity as in the Japanese case.

The Vietnamese Language Program

Started in 2001 as the newest among the four Asian Language Programs at the University of Georgia, the Vietnamese Language Program has the greatest momentum for future growth, considering the fact that its overall fall semester enrollments have increased more than fourfold or by 437.5% in seven years from 24 in 2011 to 105 in 2018 (Figure 1). Two reasons account for the rapid expansion. First, starting in 2012, one instructor has taught all the Vietnamese language courses single-handedly with great enthusiasm, care and skills for the last seven years. Dependence "on a single instructor," if fact, is often the case with "less commonly taught languages," including Vietnamese (Looney & Lusin, 2018). Second, Georgia is the fifth largest state of the

Vietnamese(-American) population after California, Texas, Florida, and Washington in the United States, and its total population nationwide is larger than the Korean(-American) counterpart (USCB, 2019). In Georgia, the Vietnamese(-American) population counts 60,306, which is the third largest and closely behind the Korean population by 1,001 among Asian groups (USCB, 2019). A growing number of children from families of that group has been reaching the college age.

To better serve their need, I proposed the minor in Vietnamese Language and Literature in 2015, and the minor became effective in the spring of 2017. As one of the nation's only two minor programs in Vietnamese at the time of the proposal together with the one at California State University, Fullerton, it was also expected to attract motivated students not only from Georgia but also from the American southeast region and beyond. The program counts twenty declared minors in February, 2019. In the fall of 2018, the instructor taught four classes of VIET 1001, 2001, and 3001 with the total enrollments of 103 in addition to directed studies for two students. This enrollment number makes, for instance, 36.2% of 290 enrollments in Japanese at UGA, proving far superior to the nationwide statistics in which Vietnamese finds itself among "the sixteenth to twentieth most commonly taught languages" with 1,922 enrollments or 2.8% of 68,810 for the fifth Japanese in 2016 (Looney & Lusin, 2018).⁷

In spite of this success, the Vietnamese Language Program faces an awkward situation. Even more than the case with Chinese and Korean courses, students in the Vietnamese language courses are predominantly those with a Vietnamese familial background, with 90.5%, 93.6%, and 100% of enrollments respectively in the first-, second- and third-year courses (Figure 2). Nevertheless, the attrition is high after the third semester course, VIET 2001, similar to the Japanese case, and the ratio of enrollments between first- and second-year courses and third- and fourth-year courses records the worst among the four Asian language programs with 8.55:1 (Figure 3). Further encouragement to minor in Vietnamese and the eventual creation of a major program as well as promotional cultural activities for recruitment should be instrumental to improve the situation.

At the same time, the program can develop further only by hiring a teaching assistant (TA) for the first time because the current teacher already teaches the maximal load of courses as an instructor. In fact, a federal regulation requires her to teach less for her instructorship from the fall of 2020 on, necessitating her to find a good TA candidate and train him/her beforehand in order to maintain the quality of overall language teaching. The dominant presence of students with a Vietnamese familial background will likely undergo a gradual change over years, as has taken place or has been happening to the other three language programs, for an increasing number of non-Vietnamese American students are expected to show interest in Vietnamese along with Vietnam's growing international recognition. That change will contribute to the future expansion of the Vietnamese Language Program.

Recommendations

One problem shared by all the language programs except for Chinese is the difficulty to find qualified teachers, more specifically graduate teaching assistants who are native speakers of the target language. Native speakers are usually desirable as language teachers of primary choice, because they speak the language fluently. Their fluency, however, does not necessarily ensure that they can teach the language with competency unless they undergo certain pedagogical training in foreign language education. Non-native speakers of the language, on the other hand, are not very likely to speak the language with comparable fluency, but the lack of native fluency can actually turn them into good, potentially even better foreign language teachers precisely because they understand the students' specific difficulties in acquiring a new language after they have learned it in a pedagogically similar, if not identical setting, method, and process. Therefore, to have both native and non-native speakers in the teaching staff would be beneficial for a foreign language program not only to alleviate the scarcity of qualified native teachers but also for a synergetic effect between the two groups.

Another challenge that pertains to all the Asian language programs except for Japanese is a relatively small number of study abroad programs available, especially exchange programs at the undergraduate level. To provide willing students with an opportunity to study on a foreign soil, where native, local residents speak the language, for an extended period of time is essential for any foreign language program to enhance its function and appeal. The University of Georgia has an exchange agreement with eleven partner schools in Japan, including Daito Bunka, Kagoshima, Kobe, Kwansai Gakuin, Kyushu, Meiji, Osaka, Sophia, Waseda and Yokohama National Universities as well as Kyoto University of Foreign Studies. The University of Georgia sends a few students to each of those partner institutions in exchange for about the same number of Japanese students from them every year. In comparison, although there are fourteen Chinese-related study abroad programs, only four of them, including those with National Taiwan University, National University of Singapore, Tsinghua University, and University of Hong Kong, are exchange programs open for language-oriented students. Each of the other ten programs has a specific, exclusive purpose intended for the department/college that initiated it. For instance, associated with the Terry College of Business, the exchange program with Peking University accepts UGA application from "[b]usiness and intended business major" (OGE, 2019). There are only two Korean exchange programs with Sogang University and Yonsei University,⁸ while none exists for Vietnamese.⁹ In order to strengthen the foundation of these three language programs and enhance their future prospect, it will be only

⁷ For the total number of enrollments in Vietnamese language courses nationwide, see Language Enrollment Database, 1958-2016 (2019).

⁸ A negotiation is underway to establish a new exchange program with Seoul National University.

⁹ An attempt in the mid-2010s to establish a one-semester exchange program with Ho Chi Minh City University of Social Sciences and Humanities fell through.

beneficial to initiate new exchange programs and, if possible, expand the existing exchange programs.

Lastly, to broaden its enrollment base, each language program should better utilize a small fund available from the department for cultural activities. Although the Asian language programs are encouraged to make use of that fund appropriated for a recruitment purpose, the fund is not always fully exploited, and their cultural activities, such as film screenings, tend to cater mainly to the interest of current students already enrolled in their language courses. While maintaining the departmental funding, it will be necessary to advertise the cultural activities more effectively in order to appeal to non-enrolled students and motivate them toward learning the language and the culture.

Conclusion

As a whole, the four Asian language programs in the Comparative Literature Department have proven successful with 834 aggregated enrollments in the fall of 2018. As pointed out above, they all have some problems, some similar, and the others different, but each of them has robust potential for future growth. Far from being a mere speculation, the expectation has a solid foundation on the rise of the East Asian nations to the forefront of the world's politics, economy, and culture as well as on the steady demographic increase of the Asian-American ethnic groups in the United States. As a result, the situations, both external and internal, greatly affect states like Georgia that are geographically remote from East Asia, necessitating the further expansion of Asian language education at all levels, especially at colleges and universities. Implementing the measures for improvement recommended above, the four Asian language programs at the University of Georgia should be able to secure more funding from the university in the coming years.

This study investigates into the current situation of the four Asian language programs at the University of Georgia, delineating similarities and differences among them. Although the scope is limited to a school in the United States, the narrative descriptions that explicate statistical data offer a useful sample for educators in other institutions to compare with situations of their Asian language programs. In this respect, the current study can make a preliminary basis for future research. While updating the data, it will be meaningful to place this UGA case side by side with multiple schools in a larger regional, national, or even international context, or to examine it in contrast to a targeted single school in another part of the country or in a different nation collaboratively or through publicly available information. That extended study will point out certain trends pertaining to Asian language education at colleges and universities on a national or global scale.

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Appendix

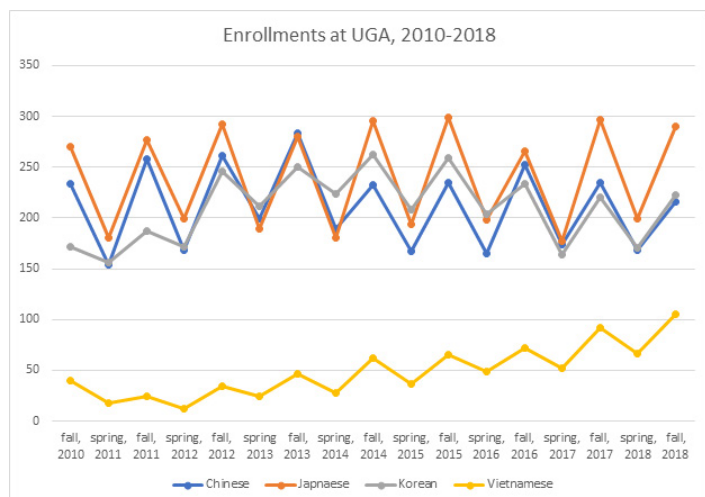


Figure 1: Enrollments at UGA from 2010-2018.

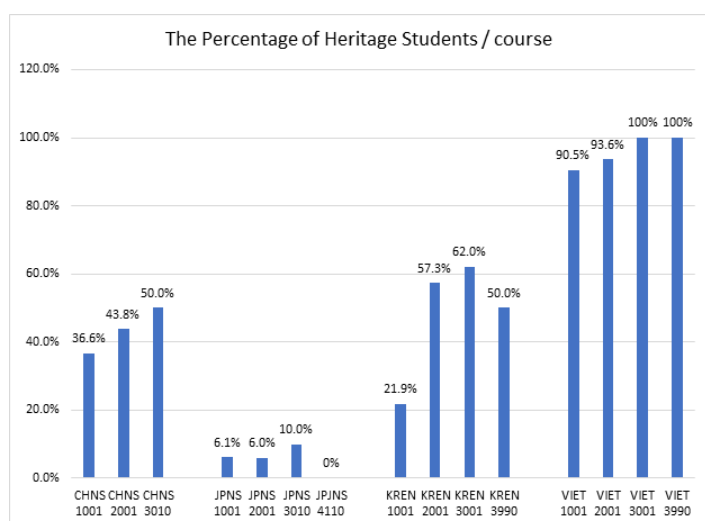


Figure 2: Percentage of Heritage students per course.

Note: CHNS 4110 is not included, because most of the students in the course were native speakers from China.

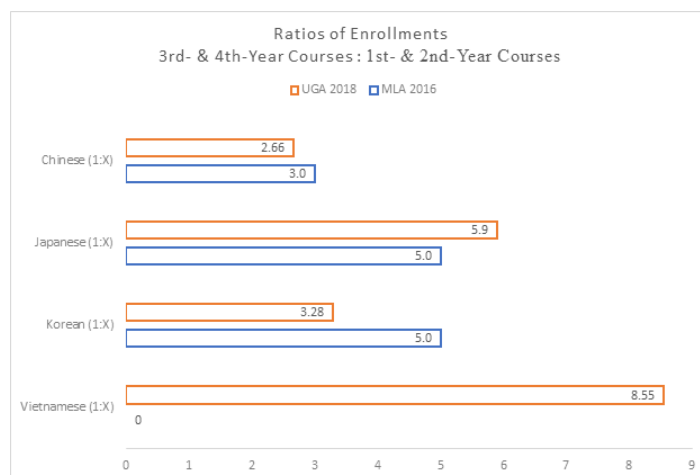


Figure 3: Ratios of Enrollments.

Notes: Directed studies (3990), if any, are included in the 3rd- & 4th-year course category. CHNS 4110 includes native speakers from China. No 4000-level Korean or Vietnamese language courses were offered in the fall of 2018. No MLA ratio is available for Vietnamese.