



## Innovative Content Courses Provide Authentic Context for Language Use

## Improving Language Teaching with Proficiency Assessment



Annie Liang, Kortne Keiko Oshiro-Chin, Maurice Hutchinson, and Chenoa Twogood (from left to right) engage in class discussion with Madeline Spring.

Domestic Flagship programs are breaking new ground in U.S. undergraduate foreign language education through the extensive use of content courses, which are taught completely in the target language and focus on content-based learning rather than language instruction. Content courses enable students to develop authentic language skills and specialized vocabulary in the study topic.

Nahal Akhbari-Saneh, director of the Persian Flagship Program at the University of Maryland (UMD), College Park, observes that content courses lead to high levels of language learning because of the range of complex language skills required to “express opinions, support opinions, agree, disagree, propose solutions, [and] have suggestions.” Ashley Kiani, a senior in the program, agrees. She says that content-based learning in her media analysis class helped her “to explore the language on a different level. Because the class is focused on examining sources intended for native speakers, reflecting on them, discussing them, and writing about them from a media literacy perspective, we are constantly challenged in new ways.”

Content courses also motivate students in their language study. James Stratton, a senior in the Arabic Flagship Program at the University of Texas, Austin (UT–Austin), says that contributing

original thoughts to classroom discussions “gives me ownership of my abilities in Arabic and makes me want to continue on in the language.” In addition, using the target language in context allows students to address real contemporary issues. According to Mahmoud Al-Batal, director of the UT–Austin Arabic Flagship Program, this approach allows students to “feel they are dealing with the language in its most authentic context.”

Content courses can be adapted to reflect different needs in each Flagship program. For example, Persian Flagship courses at UMD, College Park, range from more language-accountable classes (taught by language instructors, focused on specific vocabulary) to more content-accountable courses (taught by subject matter experts with superior skills in the target language). In the middle of this continuum, classes are structured so that students have one class with a content expert each week, flanked by sessions with a language professor to ensure that the students have the necessary background vocabulary beforehand and a chance to debrief afterward.

Students enrolled in full-fledged content courses are expected to learn the content in the target language and receive minimal support in small discussion groups that meet weekly. Because the content course instructors are not trained to teach language, students get a taste of

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The Language Flagship recently awarded three grants—to Michigan State University, the University of Minnesota, and the University of Utah—for proposals to demonstrate the value of proficiency assessments in guiding foreign language teaching and learning. The grants were awarded under the Language Flagship Proficiency Initiative, which seeks to introduce proficiency assessments into existing high-quality academic language programs in order to evaluate the impact of assessment on language pedagogy practices and outcomes.

According to Margaret Malone, associate vice president of world languages and international programs at the Center for Applied Linguistics, the initiative is significant because it addresses a nationwide gap in the study of language outcomes. She hopes that by providing an avenue for universities to focus on proficiency, the initiative will result in increased awareness about and integration of proficiency expectations into the curriculum. “This is terrific,” says Malone. “There are great people at the table, and I look forward to it.”

“We hope that test results will spur conversation and further investigation into how learners progress toward greater control of language structures, greater fluency, and greater degrees of complexity.”

—Dan Soneson

Michigan State University Co-Project Director Sue Gass is excited that the initiative “opens up so many avenues for ... improving language teaching.” At a recent meeting for the grantees in Washington, D.C., Gass and Co-Project Director Paula Winke presented their plans to use multiple data sources to determine a baseline and make recommendations for improvements. Data sources to be used include official assessment scores as

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*Swahili Flagship and African Flagship Languages Initiative students in Zanzibar experience biodiversity first hand before discussing it in the classroom.*

AMERICAN COUNCILS FOR INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION

what coursework in the target language will be like during their capstone year overseas. Madeline Spring, director of the Chinese Flagship Program at the University of Hawaii, Manoa, considers this type of content course ideal for Flagship students. The instructors in such classes “are purely disseminating and sharing and creating a class environment where students will learn about their subject, which is quite different from anything [the students] have experienced” in language-oriented classes, Spring says.

Because not all schools have the faculty resources to provide semester-long content courses outside of the language department, some innovative solutions are required. One such innovation is the modular course developed as part of the Persian Flagship Program at UMD, College Park. The model consists of one overarching theme, broken into related segments (this year, art, graphic design, and architecture) and taught by three content experts who speak the target language. The model attempts to make the most of faculty with limited time to offer by allowing them to teach the course for 1 month at a time. The primary instructor is a language professor who ties together material from the content lecturers to create a unified classroom experience. The format assumes students’ ability to function in the target language without help.

Al-Batal believes that content courses aimed at advanced Arabic Flagship students require an instructor who understands the content but also knows how to teach language, that is, “someone who can modify and adjust the language to make it accessible to the students.” These individuals may be experts in the field or language instructors with intellectual interests in a particular topic. Even though content courses do not explicitly teach language, Al-Batal explains that they feature a “natural recycling of vocabulary and structures that ... is a great learning tool.” Previous content course titles in the UT–Austin Arabic Flagship

Program include Lebanon Between Formation and Transformation, The Arab Spring, Urban Problems in Modern Arab Cities, and Science Fiction and Utopia in Arab Culture.

Al-Batal believes the biggest innovation in his content courses has been empowering students to help create syllabi. Instead of setting an entire course syllabus himself, Al-Batal allows students to choose themes that interest them and are related to the main topic. Every week, two students choose a theme, identify materials for classmates to read or watch, and lead a class discussion. In this environment, students participate in class as active partners.

Another innovation that provides language support while addressing the problem of limited faculty resources is found in the Portland State University Russian Flagship Program’s Russian liberal arts classes. Sandra Freels, immediate past director of the program, describes these classes (Globalization at the freshman level and American Studies, European Studies, and Environmental Sustainability at the sophomore level) as an attempt to provide the equivalent of a liberal arts education in Russian. The classes are planned by Russian language instructors in collaboration with faculty from other departments who teach liberal arts in English. The focus is on language, and students are graded on their Russian skills. Seniors complete the series with a Russian capstone, *Effecting Change*, which meets the university’s general education requirement for graduation.

Despite their various forms, all content courses share the common goal of producing students who are comfortable using their language skills in authentic, professional settings. By teaching students how to operate in situations that require high-level language skills, content courses play an integral role in preparing students to make the most of direct-enrollment courses and professional internships overseas, thereby ensuring that they develop the language skills and practice they need for a successful capstone experience.



*Arabic Flagship student Grace Paulter co-leads a class discussion as part of a content course on the Arab Spring at UT–Austin.*

## Word from Flagship

Sam Eisen  
Director  
The Language Flagship



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The Language Flagship welcomes new partners in the innovation and continuous improvement of foreign language teaching and learning. At the University of Hawaii, Manoa, and the University of Minnesota, new Chinese Flagship programs draw on a wealth of resources and large student enrollments in Chinese and other Asian languages. Meanwhile, the University of Minnesota and the University of Utah are joining Michigan State University in the Language Flagship Proficiency Initiative. These institutions will pioneer proficiency assessment testing in speaking, listening, and reading across multiple languages to gain insight into the effectiveness of their programs and use the feedback for program improvement. Even though instruments for assessing proficiency have been available in higher education for more than 30 years, very few institutions have implemented systematic proficiency assessments or expectations. In Flagship programs, assessment results have been invaluable for identifying the improvements and interventions needed to allow students to reach higher levels of language learning.

Assessment also can be used to improve articulation between language courses at the community college level and elsewhere in the state university system. Under the Language Flagship Proficiency Initiative, the University of Utah is partnering with Salt Lake Community College to use proficiency assessment to better align language programs across campuses, including Romance languages and less commonly taught languages. This simple and powerful idea is implemented rarely, if ever. Articulating foreign language course standards between community colleges and 4-year institutions in the state system can greatly increase access to higher-level study abroad and other international experiences for a diverse student body.

Breaking down the barriers to cooperation (administrative, institutional, and political) is one of the great challenges that The Language Flagship faces. We hope that awareness raised through efforts such as the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages’ *Lead with Languages* campaign will bolster support for bold initiatives that require renewed commitment from students, faculty, administrators, and communities at large.

FATEMA WALJI

## Improving Language ... (from page 1)

well as observational classroom data, focus group data, and self-assessments. The ultimate goal is to integrate testing into the curriculum to move toward a more proficiency-based model.

In contrast, at the University of Minnesota, proficiency assessments have been part of the requirements for graduation until recently. Even though assessments still are used in some classes, average scores are drastically lower than they used to be, indicating that assessment requirements play an important role in producing high-proficiency graduates. According to Project Director Dan Soneson, the project is built on the idea that ongoing assessments are invaluable for increasing student levels of language proficiency. The goal is to use these assessments in ways that will allow for improvements in both teaching and learning. Soneson says, "We hope that test results will spur conversation and further investigation into how learners progress toward greater control of language structures, greater fluency, and greater degrees of complexity."

In comparison, University of Utah Project Director Fernando Rubio believes he has "the perfect lab for studying acquisition" because of the large number of students at the university with direct experience using foreign languages. His project includes Salt Lake Community College (the institution's largest source of transfer students) and aims to standardize goals and pedagogies between the two entities so that student transfer will be based on language proficiency rather than seat time. As for how the Language Flagship Proficiency Initiative grant will help achieve this goal, Rubio says, "We believe that once faculty have been trained on proficiency-based pedagogies, and once they can see the effect that these practices have on their students, it will be much easier to have the cross-programmatic and cross-institutional conversations that are needed to reach our goals of curricular alignment, transfer, and placement."



Cynthia Martin addresses participants at a proficiency workshop held at the University of Utah.

## Op-ed: It's Time to Change the Language Learning Mind-set in America

Marty Abbott  
Executive Director, American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages



MARTY ABBOTT

If the United States is to meet the economic, diplomatic, and military challenges of the 21st century, languages must be a national priority. Success will require nothing short of a game-changing initiative that encourages the American public and the country's leadership to recognize the essential role of languages in shaping citizens that can compete and cooperate in a global age. According to the recommendations of the summit entitled Languages for All? The Anglophone Challenge, held in September 2013, change will require a "public awareness campaign on the personal and societal benefits, including national security and economic competitiveness, of language education."<sup>1</sup>

With many partners collaborating in this effort, the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) is taking the lead to launch such a campaign in early 2015. An unprecedented initiative, the campaign will start a sustained movement to make languages a national priority and create a new generation of Americans competent in other languages and cultures. Deploying through a wide range of media channels, partners, and public personalities, the campaign intends to create a cultural shift in awareness of and attitudes toward languages and to galvanize Americans to become a nation of multilingual speakers.

We at ACTFL look forward to engagement with The Language Flagship as integral to the campaign. Testimonials from Flagship graduates will be featured on the Lead with Languages website, and Flagship programs will be promoted as important options for high school students seeking to continue language learning at the postsecondary level. ACTFL looks forward to partnering with The Language Flagship to demonstrate that Flagship students reach high levels of language proficiency as they prepare for entry into the workforce, exemplifying the kind of global professional that the United States needs to remain economically competitive and diplomatically secure in today's global environment.

Learn about the campaign's message in a brief video on the Lead with Languages website, [www.leadwithlanguages.org](http://www.leadwithlanguages.org).

<sup>1</sup> Sponsors of the summit, held at the University of Maryland, include the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, the University of Maryland's Center for Advanced Study of Language, the American Councils for International Education, the Joint National Committee for Languages, the British Academy, and the Globalization and Localization Association.

## Grants Fund New Chinese Flagship Programs

Earlier this year, The Language Flagship awarded grants to the University of Minnesota and the University of Hawaii, Manoa (UHM), to develop and implement Chinese Flagship programs based on the universities' existing program structures. University of Minnesota Chinese Flagship Director Joseph Allen sees the Flagship grant as a challenge to bring the university's Chinese program to the next level. "We are most excited to be able to give our students, already hard working and highly successful, this opportunity to reach the highest level of training in Chinese possible," he says. He also hopes to spread the best practices and lessons learned from the Flagship experience throughout the university's Department of Asian Languages and Literatures.

UHM Chinese Language Flagship Program Director Madeline Spring is pleased with campus excitement and support for the new program. "The students at UHM are eager to be involved," she says, "and that enthusiasm and strong motivation is what drives The Language Flagship Program." Previously director of the Arizona State University Chinese Flagship Program, Spring believes that the UHM Chinese Flagship Program will attract students who previously might not have considered studying the language to an advanced level. She also believes that simply having the program on campus "sets the bar higher for all students of Chinese" and may influence other language teachers who are interested in offering a proficiency-based curriculum.

## The Value of a Flagship Education

Lauren Dickey, a research associate for U.S. foreign policy at the Council on Foreign Relations, calls her application to The Language Flagship “the best decision that I made to date.” A 2011 graduate of the University of Oregon (UO), Dickey had reached an intermediate level of Chinese and was looking for a challenge when she transferred to UO for its Chinese Flagship program. Within only 1 year, Dickey had noticed a difference in the way she could interact in Chinese. “It made me a lot more attuned to cultural nuances and linguistic nuances that I would have missed otherwise,” she says. “When you’re able to talk about issues at a deeper level beyond just [daily] conversation, you’re able to really engage people—and with issues that matter.”

As part of her capstone year in China, Dickey completed a semester-long internship with Hunan Satellite TV in Changsha. She conducted field interviews in Mandarin and provincial Chinese dialects and expanded her vocabulary in many roles (e.g., a food critic at the 2010 Shanghai World Expo). Such experiences taught her important lessons in linguistic flexibility. In June 2014, Dickey drew on this flexibility as a last-minute simultaneous interpreter at the World Cultural Forum in Taihu, China. She believes that her Flagship experience made her ability to perform possible. “I don’t think with 4 years of conversational college Chinese one would be comfortable talking about China’s nascent soft power, or already deployed soft power, in this kind of forum.”



LAUREN DICKEY

Lauren Dickey, research associate at the Council on Foreign Relations

### Flagship Centers

#### Arabic

Michigan State University  
University of Arizona  
University of Maryland,  
College Park  
University of Oklahoma  
University of Texas, Austin  
*Alexandria University, Egypt<sup>1</sup>*  
*Moulay Ismail University,  
Morocco<sup>1</sup>*

#### Chinese

Arizona State University<sup>2</sup>  
Brigham Young University  
Hunter College  
Indiana University, Bloomington  
San Francisco State University  
University of Hawai‘i, Mānoa  
University of Minnesota  
University of Mississippi  
University of North Georgia<sup>3</sup>  
University of Oregon  
University of Rhode Island  
Western Kentucky University  
*Nanjing University, China<sup>4</sup>*  
*Tianjin Normal University, China<sup>1</sup>*

#### Hindi Urdu

University of Texas, Austin  
*Jaipur Hindi Center, India<sup>5</sup>*  
*Lucknow Urdu Center, India<sup>5</sup>*

#### Korean

University of Hawai‘i, Mānoa  
*Korea University, South Korea<sup>5</sup>*

#### Persian

University of Maryland,  
College Park

#### Portuguese

University of Georgia, Athens  
*São Paulo State University, Brazil<sup>5</sup>*

#### Russian

Bryn Mawr College  
Portland State University  
University of California,  
Los Angeles  
University of Wisconsin, Madison  
*Al-Farabi Kazakh National  
University, Kazakhstan<sup>1</sup>*  
*Saint Petersburg State University,  
Russia<sup>1</sup>*

#### Swahili

Indiana University, Bloomington  
*State University of Zanzibar,  
Tanzania<sup>1</sup>*

#### Turkish

Indiana University, Bloomington  
*Ankara University, Turkey<sup>1</sup>*

### The Flagship Mission

The Language Flagship leads the nation in designing, supporting, and implementing a new paradigm for advanced language education. Through an innovative partnership among the federal government, education, and business, The Language Flagship graduates students who will take their place among the next generation of global professionals, commanding a superior level of proficiency in one of many languages critical to U.S. competitiveness and security.

### What Do We Do?

Flagship Centers offer students intensive language instruction to enhance their academic degrees, graduating students with professional-level language proficiency. Programs include periods of rigorous language and cultural immersion at Overseas Flagship Centers. The Language Flagship also funds a select number of pilot K–12 programs designed to provide an articulated path of language instruction for students from elementary school through college.

Flagship graduates leverage their superior language and cultural skills in various careers, offering an intercultural perspective to employers in the federal and state governments, global businesses, and nongovernmental organizations.



## THE LANGUAGE FLAGSHIP

*Creating Global Professionals*

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