PRACTICAL PROFICIENCY
ARABIC JOINS CHINESE AND TURKISH FLAGSHIPS AT INDIANA UNIVERSITY

Hilary Kahn, assistant dean for strategic collaborations in the School of Global and International Studies (SGIS), explained the flagship philosophy. “Flagships rethink the way languages are taught—proficiency based, using real-life materials and contemporary issues, less lecture and more interactive work. The aim is to establish a professional level of language proficiency, but also to be able to apply that skill in a variety of career areas.” Students move through language training sometimes twice as fast as they would in traditional approaches, and they apply those skills in internships abroad in total cultural immersion.

IU’s China Flagship is in its ninth year and has this fall enrolled 55 students, “a gold standard among flagships,” Kahn said. IU’s Turkish Flagship was established in 2011, partly in recognition of IU’s leadership in the teaching of Turkish and Turkic languages beginning in 1943 when it received a wartime contract for crash training in the languages of Central Asia.

IU got the news last winter that it would be designated a flagship institution for the Arabic language. In various ways, IU has been preparing for this opportunity for decades. Salman Al-Ani, program director of the new flagship, came to IU in 2012 to direct and further develop Arabic language instruction. “The program has strengthened greatly,” he said. “Four years ago, we had five hours of first-year and three hours of second-year Arabic. Now we have six contact hours in the first and second years, and five contact hours in the third and fourth years, the most of any IU foreign language program. In the last three years, we added important curricular components—a weekly conversation hour, weekly writing and reading components, and a weekly listening component.

Outside of class, we have cultural activities that did not exist before, including the Arabic talent show, Arabic poetry night, Arabic dinner, Arabic music night and Arabic film series. Now with the flagship, we are adding even more clubs—a journalism club, a Quran club, a Bible club, cinema club, literature club, and music club. Dialect tables provide students with practice in and exposure to Egyptian, Levantine, and Moroccan dialects. We have a guest speaker series, and field trips to places like Dearborn, Michigan, where Arabic is spoken.”

Morkus added that the flagship makes it possible to provide a graduate assistant to each Arabic lecturer.
“That frees up time for the lecturer to prepare more activities, to engage students outside of class, to do more office hours, and to participate in the cultural activities.”

Morkus described the arduous schedule for students wishing to complete the program. “Students have to finish four years of Arabic in two years by taking Arabic classes over the summer. Each student is assigned a tutor and conversation instructor; they meet four additional hours weekly. In their third year, they take content classes. At the end of that year, they will have reached advanced proficiency. They take an exam designed by the Language Flagship in Washington to determine if they are ready to spend a capstone year of total immersion in the Moroccan city of Meknes.” In Meknes at the Arab American Language Institute, students continue extensive study of Arabic—Modern Standard Arabic and the Moroccan and Egyptian dialects. Students take credit courses at Moulay Ismail University and live with local families. “They sleep there, they have their own room. They eat with the family and play with the kids; it’s a wonderful arrangement,” said Al-Ani.

Students in their capstone year in Morocco also complete an internship in the local community. “Students can work in the banking sector, in an NGO, or in the media,” Morkus said. “Some may prefer the manual labor of artisans, learning the art of pottery and other skills.”

Students interested in this program are not necessarily Arabic majors. “We ask students in a survey why they want to study Arabic, and the majority say they are doing it for their careers and for academic and career goals,” said Morkus. “Some of our students major in neuroscience, or business, or music, but I would say the majority have majors in the humanities; many of them major in international studies at the School of Global and International Studies.”

Alumni of the IU Department of Near Eastern Languages and Literatures “now occupy really important positions,” said Al-Ani. “They are ministers, professors, deans—not only in the Middle East, but also in North Africa and Pakistan. One of our students, the deputy minister of information in Saudi Arabia, received the distinguished alumni award two years ago.” The deputy minister encouraged a student to attend IU, and through that student’s connections, Prince Mansour, grandson of the first king of Saudi Arabia, visited Indiana University in October. “Prince Mansour has had a lifelong commitment to developing education in Saudi Arabia and to enhancing international university cooperation,” said Al-Ani.

Educating students to fulfill effective and productive roles in communities around the world is one of the chief goals of the U.S. Language Flagship. Kahn notes how well the flagship philosophy fits with what the School of Global and International Studies wants to provide: “That student who is proficient at languages, deeply understands different areas of the world, and has been engaged through deep cultural immersion, but has a practical edge to their studies as well, applying their skills and knowledge. The idea that you are creating someone who has a sense of responsibility, who can work across cultural differences, who understands trans-border issues both with a practical and deeply academic edge—in many ways the Language Flagship goals are perfectly aligned with the goals of SGIS.”