Over the past few years, the Arabic teaching field in the United States has witnessed unprecedented transformation. Through various initiatives undertaken in the areas of assessment, materials development, and K–12 outreach, The Language Flagship has played a key role in helping the field meet its new challenges and in fact has propelled it into new spheres of development. At the same time, it has created opportunities for hundreds of American students in various disciplines to reach professional proficiency in Arabic.

Arabic Flagship programs include five stateside centers and partners (located at Michigan State University; University of Maryland, College Park; University of Michigan, Ann Arbor; University of Oklahoma; and University of Texas, Austin) and two overseas Flagship centers (at Alexandria University, Egypt, and Damascus University, Syria). With the successful results of its current focus on undergraduate education, The Language Flagship is providing evidence that the right mix of quality instruction, learner-based curriculum, and culturally and linguistically engaging study abroad experience gives a committed undergraduate the ability to attain Superior-level proficiency (as defined by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) scale) in Arabic. This achievement is considerable for Arabic, commonly perceived to be a “difficult” language that requires many years to master.

The Language Flagship has transformed the undergraduate Arabic curriculum by providing significant instructional and programmatic support to all Arabic Flagship programs, in the United States and abroad; emphasizing communication skills and content-based instruction; and conducting ongoing student assessment. Because of its focus on communicative ability and cultural competence, The Language Flagship has encouraged the integration of colloquial Arabic and Modern Standard Arabic in the undergraduate curriculum and challenged programs to develop innovative models for such integration. These models will be of immense benefit to all Arabic programs in the United States and will result in improved training for all students. In addition, the various Arabic Flagship centers are developing instructional materials and assessment tools that will be made available to all Arabic programs in the near future as part of the of The Language Flagship’s diffusion of innovation model.

The Language Flagship also is helping to build stronger instructional and curricular infrastructure within Arabic study abroad programs. Over the past 3 years, U.S. Arabic Flagship programs have hosted faculty members from Alexandria University and Damascus University who each spent one semester teaching and observing classes. This year, faculty members from stateside Arabic Flagship centers will be visiting these two overseas Arabic Flagship centers to provide on-site training workshops for their faculty. This effort enhances the overall quality of curriculum and instruction in these Flagship programs and will result in a much-improved learning environment for American students of Arabic in general.

As someone who has been involved in Arabic teaching in the United States for more than 25 years, I believe that The Language Flagship has “raised the bar” of expectations in the Arabic field, enabled more students to take the fast track to professional proficiency, and changed the way that Arabic is taught and learned.
A Revolution in Korean Language Education

Ho-min Sohn

Before the Korean Language Flagship Center was established at the University of Hawai‘i, Mānoa, Korean language educators worldwide endeavored — and many still do — to train students to achieve a proficiency of up to American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) Advanced—Low level (Interagency Language Roundtable [ILR] Level 2). In 2002, the Korean Language Flagship Center opened a new horizon in language learning, offering not only individual growth for highly qualified students but also national security and international competitiveness for the U.S. workforce. No non-Flagship Korean language program had ever attempted training in Korean to the ACTFL High—Advanced or Superior level or tried to combine students’ academic subjects or professional domains with advanced Korean language training. The Language Flagship has significantly broadened and enhanced the philosophy, goals, standards, and architecture of Korean language education. In brief, the field has undergone a revolution. The Korean Flagship curriculum, instruction, assessment, textbooks, class size, and contact hours are all designed and practiced with the overarching Flagship goals in mind.

The curriculum is what makes the Korean Language Flagship Program unique among other Korean-focused language training programs. Four distinct features are professional-level language training, domain-specific innovative curriculum, the tutorial program, and a mandatory overseas component.

First, the curriculum aims to produce students with professional-level proficiency — far beyond conversational fluency and reading ability — who are effective global professionals. Whereas mainstream university language programs focus on beginning- and intermediate-level courses, with classes meeting only a few hours a week (even for Korean language majors), the Korean Language Flagship curriculum is intensive. Its students are required to study 16 or more hours per week in class and tutorial sessions. Despite living in an otherwise English-speaking environment, the students live and breathe Korean.

Second, the post-baccalaureate program offers a domain-specific, task-based language teaching curriculum designed around real-life tasks that students are expected to perform as global professionals. Students learn the language in their major area of study. Language is contextualized; therefore, language learning is meaningful. Domain specialists provide input to the curriculum. Language teachers facilitate students’ understanding of the domain-specific materials and their performance on tasks in terms of language.

The undergraduate program also offers domain-specific language training but takes a slightly different approach, using a combination of content-based and task-based instruction, where the latter can enhance the former. Undergraduate students in the Korean Language Flagship Program are strongly encouraged to enroll for a dual major in Korean plus the discipline of their choice.

Third, the curriculum emphasizes individual attention through the one-on-one tutorial program. All tutors in the Korean Language Flagship Program are native speakers of Korean who have academic training in the student’s domain. Students can use tutorial sessions to refine their understanding of the material or to practice newly acquired expressions and terminology outside of class.

Fourth, the Korean Language Flagship Program includes a mandatory 1-year overseas component, unique in many ways. The overseas program was not preexisting; rather, it was created specifically for Flagship students. Through language and cultural immersion, the overseas component expands on what students learn in their domestic studies, providing articulation rather than a disjointed partnering of components joined only in name. Students continue intensive language training while taking regular university courses with native speakers. They also complete professional internships in their fields. In sum, the overseas component provides a capstone experience — academically, culturally, and professionally — for the domestic component.

With support from The Language Flagship and through the efforts of students and teachers alike, this revolution in Korean language education will continue its march toward the horizon.

Ho-min Sohn is director of the Korean Language Flagship Center and a professor in the Department of East Asian Languages and Literatures at the University of Hawai‘i, Mānoa.

Word from Flagship

Michael Nugent
Director
The Language Flagship

With Discourse starting its second year of publication, we thought it important to step back and examine the impact that The Language Flagship has had on language education, as experienced by some Flagship center directors. They share with you how The Language Flagship has contributed to “unprecedented transformation” and “revolution,” not only at their individual institutions but also across their respective academic fields. Such transformation involves, as Mahmoud Al-Batal points out, changing faculty expectations of students’ ability to learn language. It also means, as Galal Walker discusses, a systematic and thoughtful application of effective lessons learned.

The importance of changing expectations in the academic environment cannot be underestimated. Before The Language Flagship, many members of the language teaching field believed that students with little to no prior knowledge of Arabic, Chinese, Korean, or Russian could not attain professional-level competency. However, Flagship undergraduate programs are now proving that students can reach these proficiency levels. As Dan Davidson indicates, graduate students in Russian Flagship programs are achieving Russian language proficiency levels of 3 and above on the Interagency Language Roundtable scale. Flagship programs produce these kinds of results, as Ho-min Sohn explains, by supporting rigorous, long-term academic language study for students of all majors that includes at least 1 year of direct matriculation in an overseas Flagship center.

However, change takes time and effort, and the Flagship idea that Robert Slater sowed 8 years ago has only begun to bear fruit. What was a small-scale experiment has grown into a burgeoning program in which our obligation to meet increasing student demand must be balanced with our goal of maintaining high-quality programs. One thing is for sure: Students and parents “get it” and are increasingly looking for similar opportunities in a broad range of institutions and languages. Our challenge in the year ahead will be to meet this demand.
Creating Global Professionals through New Strategies in Russian Language Instruction

Dan E. Davidson

The Russian language field has benefitted in past decades from the contributions of gifted teachers and scholars as well as substantial infrastructure investments by foundations and governments dating from the Cold War era. As a result, nearly one-third of the 24,000 undergraduate and graduate students currently studying Russian in U.S. colleges and universities are enrolled in advanced-level courses, and a substantial percentage of these students also will study overseas as part of their training. The impact of The Language Flagship on Russian language learning has nonetheless been powerful and, in many ways, revolutionary. Most important, The Language Flagship has opened the study of Russian to students of all fields rather than the traditional core of Russian language and literature majors who pursue graduate study in the field or become government linguists.

Russian Flagship programs enable participating institutions to focus instructional activity on discourse- or content-based learning of the language, thus opening advanced language study to more non-Russian majors and double majors. Russian higher education institutions offer a broad range of courses in science, engineering, social science, and the humanities, but American students traditionally have lacked the requisite language proficiency and cultural knowledge to enroll directly in such courses. Russian Flagship programs now make these options accessible to heritage and nonheritage students alike.

The Russian Flagship curricula at Bryn Mawr College; the University of Maryland, College Park; Middlebury College Summer School; Portland State University; and the University of California, Los Angeles, offer undergraduate students the essential extended sequences of language courses (and multiple entry points) that will position them to pursue advanced subject-matter work in Russian. Russian Flagship institutions reach out to prospective K-12 students through popular social networking sites and support of major field incentive programs, such as those organized annually by the American Council of Teachers of Russian (Russian Scholar Laureate Awards, Olympiada of Spoken Russian, and Summer Golden Ring programs) and the U.S. Department of State’s National Security Language Initiative for Youth. Russian Flagship programs are informed by a culture of formative assessment in which students, instructors, and program administrators are jointly held accountable for learning and for setting realistic goals at all critical junctures in the undergraduate program (i.e., before college admission, before summer study, before and after junior year abroad, before transfer, and before graduation).

The Language Flagship also is changing the instructional process by emphasizing self-managed learning from the earliest levels of study, strengthening existing intensification and immersion learning models, statewide and overseas; improving tutoring programs; increasing opportunities for contextualized language use; and improving individual- and group-level monitoring of language learning. The overseas Russian Flagship Center at Saint Petersburg State University, Russia, administered by the American Councils for International Education, produces professionally focused graduates with certified Russian proficiency levels of 3, 3+, and 4 (based on the Interagency Language Roundtable scale). The Russian field has rarely seen such outcomes from any comparable training period.

It is hoped that the curricular and training models now under development or in operation at the domestic and overseas Russian Flagship programs can serve as models and supportive partners as more U.S. programs join The Language Flagship movement in coming years.

Op-Ed: Bridging the Language Gap

Robert Slater
Director, National Security Education Program

During the past almost four decades, I have witnessed the serious implications that the United States has experienced partly due to a lack of knowledge of other languages and cultures. Vietnam was my first direct experience in a long history of American involvement in regions across the globe where an inability to communicate in another language and understand another culture has had serious consequences for national economy and security. Indeed, the National Security Education Program (NSEP) itself is a major response to the aftermath of post-Desert Storm testimony that underscored the price our nation pays for this inadequate capacity.

Eight years ago, we at NSEP began an effort to explore whether elements of the American education system were attracted to the concept of building an entirely new approach to language learning. Were U.S. higher education institutions capable of graduating students who could bring to the workforce an unprecedented level of proficiency in a broad array of languages and cultures critical to the nation’s future? From a modest beginning — a handful of colleges and universities experimenting with an advanced language learning model at the post-baccalaureate level — The Language Flagship has expanded to include a diverse array of undergraduate language programs across the country that apply new and highly innovative learning models.

The success of The Language Flagship has clearly begun to dispel a prevailing perception that students cannot achieve professional-level proficiency in a critical language by the completion of their academic study. This year, Flagship programs are administered and taught by more than 100 of the nation’s top language experts and instructors at more than 20 domestic and 9 overseas institutions. Equally important are the hundreds (soon to be thousands) of Flagship students drawn from across the spectrum of undergraduate majors who are motivated and energized by a new curricular approach that challenges them to become truly global citizens. A conversation with any Flagship student reinforces the importance of this transformation in language learning.

As the accompanying energy and excitement propel forward the new Obama administration and its renewed commitment to U.S. education, The Language Flagship must continue to examine the role of language and international education in not only colleges and universities but also in elementary and secondary schools. And we at NSEP have an important obligation to educate a new generation of Americans equipped to address the challenges that confront a complex and interdependent global environment.
and their measurable language gain over a short period will be truly remarkable.

The success of Flagship interns from the OSU and the Brigham Young University Chinese Flagship Centers has proven this concept to be both operational and routinely productive. As other Chinese Flagship programs (at the University of Mississippi and the University of Oregon) and the newer Chinese Flagship partner programs (at Arizona State University, Indiana University, and University of Rhode Island) train their students to perform as independent, task-oriented professionals in the Chinese workplace, the students’ ability to function effectively in work settings demonstrates that American students are willing and able to reach the highest levels of proficiency.

The Language Flagship’s emphasis on results — that is, graduating global professionals — provides the focus for our efforts. By combining Chinese language training with work in an academic discipline or career area, students learn to express themselves professionally in a subject area before a Chinese audience. In the process of gaining this capacity, they recognize the prestige and significance of gaining Superior-level proficiency (according to the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages scale) in Chinese and continue to expand their knowledge base in the language over the course of their careers.

Results of the OSU Chinese Flagship Program — graduating students who begin their careers using professional-level Chinese — demonstrate the possibility of consistently training Americans to the highest measurable proficiencies and filling a substantial void in language and culture knowledge. By striving for high-level outcomes and documenting results, The Language Flagship provides open and public evidence of its achievements.