

Madeline K. Spring explains how the Oregon Chinese Flagship Program has taken a new approach to articulation in foreign language programs



For decades now educators have lamented how hard it is to overcome the gaps in communication between those involved with primary, secondary, and post-secondary foreign language programs. Certainly few teachers and administrators question the notion that early exposure to foreign languages is helpful in producing proficient language learners. Nonetheless, developing and sustaining highly effective programs is often seen as an insurmountable obstacle. At last there is a K-16 program that is successfully making curricular articulation in public education a reality. The Center for Applied Second Language Studies (CASLS) at the University of Oregon and the Portland Public School District (PPS), co-beneficiaries of a generous grant from The Language Flagship, are collaborating to develop the first national model for a K-16 articulated language program. This program offers new approaches to attracting young learners and guiding them toward high levels of foreign language proficiency.

Flying the Flag for Chinese

What is The Language Flagship?

The Language Flagship, an initiative of the National Security Education Program, was developed to address the urgent and growing need for Americans with professional levels of competency in languages critical to national security. Targeting advanced language training in Arabic, Korean, Chinese, Persian, Hindi, Urdu, and a variety of Eurasian languages, The Language Flagship offers a partnership between the federal government and leading U.S. institutions of higher education to implement a national system of programs designed to produce advanced language competency (as measured by the federal Interagency Language Roundtable [ILR] level 3 and/or the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages [ACTFL] superior level.) Beginning in 2002, The Language Flagship has established programs that offer instruction in the United States and further instruction and professional externships at select sites abroad. Currently there are four Flagship programs in Chinese, housed at Brigham Young University,

Ohio State University, the University of Mississippi, and the University of Oregon. At present the Oregon program is the only Flagship program in Chinese that takes as its mission providing students with an articulated K-16 curriculum. This effort is the first in the nation and will serve as a national model for future programs. The Language Flagship is an impetus for changing how languages are taught in the United States. One of the key features of this project is reduplicability, i.e., how can the program be created elsewhere in Chinese and also elsewhere in other languages.¹

The partnership between Portland Public Schools (PPS) and the University of Oregon is unique, in that it offers all students, regardless of language or cultural background, an opportunity to reach high levels of proficiency in Mandarin and the ability to function in Chinese on a professional level in the field of their choice. This program brings together educators from different backgrounds who are committed to creating innovative learning environments for students who are motivated to use Chinese throughout different phases of their educational experiences. Ultimately these students will be well prepared for the challenge of interacting professionally on a global level.

The Chinese Immersion programs at Portland Public Schools

Drawing on extensive experience in their Japanese and Spanish immersion programs, PPS has been running an impressive program in Chinese immersion at Woodstock Elementary School since 1998. The success of this program, in which students spend half of the school day learning in Chinese and half a day learning in English, is largely due to administrative and parental support coupled with the dynamic expertise of a highly talented teaching staff. The PPS Chinese Flagship program continues for students in the sixth grade at Hosford Middle School, which focuses on social studies and Mandarin language arts. Subsequent Chinese immersion programs are currently being developed at two sites. Chemistry and Humanities are taught in Chinese at Franklin High School as part of their Chinese Heritage Program situated in the World Languages Institute. In 2007 Cleveland High School, which is the process of creating a Chinese immersion curriculum to be implemented in 2008-09, will offer a special Chinese language development class and a China Research Residency preparation course to be held at Hosford.

PPS considers the objectives of all Chinese immersion programs to have three aspects, namely, 1) content-based instruction, in which regular academic subjects, such as math, science, social studies, are taught in Mandarin, 2) explicit language instruction, which focuses on the systematic teaching of language and literacy skills for communicative purposes, and 3) experiential learning practices, in which students engage in real and meaningful life experiences requiring them to use their language and cultural skills. This third goal is currently being met in a number of ways. For example, elementary-age students are encouraged to participate in a new summer immersion camp; middle school students have an opportunity to participate in a two-week

research residency program in China in summer 2008; and plans for a China Summer Institute at the high school level are currently being explored. In addition, students in the K-12 Chinese immersion program are strongly encouraged to participate in community-based language learning experiences and other activities that offer opportunities for using language skills beyond the classroom setting.²

The Chinese Flagship Program at the University of Oregon

The University of Oregon recruits talented high school seniors or transfer students with intermediate-high to advanced-level proficiency in Mandarin. These students, who are committed to developing superior-level Chinese fluency for use in future careers, come from a variety of backgrounds. Participation in the PPS Chinese immersion programs is not a prerequisite for admission to the UO program. Indeed students from all over the country apply to participate in this competitive, honors-level program that offers a broad range of challenging and innovative courses and learning opportunities. Student applications undergo a rigorous review process, and top candidates are awarded generous scholarships.

Students can choose their major from over a hundred different programs at the University of Oregon. During their first and second years at the university, they take two Flagship courses each term. These rigorous courses, which are taught in Chinese using authentic materials, are a combination of language strategy and content classes. Most of the Flagship content courses fulfill General Education requirements that are distributed among humanities, the natural sciences, and the social sciences.

During their freshman and sophomore years, Flagship students live and take some of their classes in the University of Oregon's International House. An on-site Chinese Flagship program assistant works with Flagship staff to coordinate structured study groups, social and cultural activities, guest lectures, and dinners with faculty and graduate students who do research in China-related fields. This enriched residence hall experience fosters a sense of community and also offers opportunities for students and faculty to interact in Chinese beyond the classroom.

In their junior year Flagship students travel to China, where they enroll for two semesters in regular Nanjing University classes in subjects that match their interests and major fields of study. Students can apply language skills and expertise through the various volunteer and internship opportunities available in Nanjing and in a subsequent summer internship program run through the Flagship Qingdao Center. Using the information collected in China during their junior year, students return to the UO campus in their senior year to participate in a capstone class that results in a final project and/or senior thesis, written and presented formally in Chinese. Students' language proficiency at that time is also assessed through a nationally-administered exit exam. In addition, personalized career counseling and introductions to prospective employers is an integral part of each student's senior year.³

Pathways to Articulation: PPS-UO Collaborative Endeavors

1. The Chinese Language Curriculum Project

As part of the Oregon Chinese Flagship Program, Portland Public Schools, in collaboration with faculty from the University of Oregon, is currently developing an articulated K-12 Chinese language curriculum framework that sets proficiency-based outcomes at each grade level and for the subsequent post-secondary Flagship courses at UO. This curriculum framework, which provides a clear roadmap enables teachers to set language objectives along with their content objectives. At the same time, it ensures that students develop solid oral and written language skills while learning content. The functions and forms section of the framework provides the focus for language instruction. Other components, such as grammar, vocabulary, cultural literacy, etc. are cross-referenced to help instructors consider how to incorporate these and other important elements of language learning in lesson plans without compromising the primary goal of facilitating authentic communication. The framework allows teachers and programs to better achieve alignment in curricular development and assessment, which will result in more informed and effective classroom instruction.

Despite the fact that the Chinese immersion program at PPS had been in place for some years, teachers had yet to define an explicit, articulated language curriculum. This should come as no surprise, given that developing and running a new immersion program seldom affords the luxury of additional time and reflective collaboration that a major curricular project entails. Generally in new programs instructors need to focus on the language curriculum at the lesson and unit level; a program must be fairly mature before it can address the less obvious issues of articulation across grade levels. In addition, immersion programs, as opposed to programs that are only geared to foreign language instruction, usually build curricula based on statewide and national content standards, and one of their primary concerns is to assure that their students gain the same content as their counterparts in non-immersion programs.

The benefits of establishing a language curriculum that is independent of the standard curriculum are enormous. Teachers will turn to such a resource in setting long- and short-term goals, regardless of shifting content standards, new textbook adoptions, changes in teaching staff, or other decisions that that may be dictated by school districts or other factors beyond their control. In addition, given that immersion programs generally give greater attention to academic language rather than social and informal discourse, teachers need a mechanism to determine whether their students will truly become proficient language users who have mastery of a range of registers and linguistic functions. This is especially important in a non-cognate language such as Chinese. Thus, by presenting both academic and social language, the framework helps define the special and overall proficiency goals for the Chinese immersion program. It simplifies planning of units and lessons, focuses the medium of instruction, facilitates

assessment, and brings better accountability. Since this framework is independent from the standard curriculum, teachers can use it to understand the broader implications of instructional strategies that will lead to seamless articulation, be it from grade to grade, from elementary to middle school, to high school or to post-secondary level. Another benefit of this project is that it assures clearer transition for late entry students. This is important because not all students who want to participate in the Chinese Immersion program will have begun Chinese at the kindergarten level. Some will have transferred from other schools, or have other language experiences that allow them to join the program at a level that better matches their linguistic and cognitive abilities.

Once convinced of the need for a unified, systematic guide to curricular planning in the Flagship program, teachers and administrators from PPS and UO moved ahead to set the goal for the project as follows:

- To create a comprehensive, articulated K-12 Chinese language curriculum framework that will provide teachers with a clear set of language expectations by grade level. The online document will include functions, grammar, vocabulary, reading, writing, and other important aspects of the language program. The curriculum will be compatible with state second language standards and benchmarks.
- The curriculum project is expected to be completed in Summer 2007 and will shortly thereafter be posted on the Flagship website for easy access by language educators, parents, and others interested in learning more about the explicit language goals of PPS' Chinese immersion programs.

2. Coordination of Measures of Assessment

Discussions of curricular matters need to be coupled with issues of assessment. After all, any curricular decisions are irrelevant if they are not tied closely to multiple, objective measures of evaluating student performance. In addition to the development of individualized language portfolios, Portland Public School and the University of Oregon are aligning curricular materials with benchmarks and standards that are geared to a set of benchmarks that form the core of the formative assessments created by teams of educators nationwide.

The National Online Early Language Learning Assessment (NOELLA) is the first affordable, universally accessible, and nationally norm-based assessment of proficiency for early language learners. NOELLA provides the means to measure the performance of young students accurately and reliably in all four skills. In 2006 educators involved with the Oregon Chinese Flagship Program at PPS and UO, along with experienced master teachers in primary and secondary schools from across the country, participated in workshops to set benchmarks and create test materials that are currently being piloted nationwide.⁴

Another on-line, easy-to-administer proficiency assessment tool that is being used at the Oregon Chinese Flagship Program is the Standards-based Measurement of Proficiency (STAMP). A criterion-referenced test that is textbook— and curriculum—neutral, STAMP pro-

vides educators, parents, and students with a clear and comprehensive evaluation of students' level of competency in reading, writing, listening comprehension, and speaking. This assessment tool is being used by students beginning in the seventh grade and as part of the application process for all students interested in becoming Flagship scholars at the university level.⁵

In addition to the computer adaptive, proficiency tests outlined above, the Oregon Chinese Flagship, along with the Flagship programs in all languages, are currently moving to implement a comprehensive, on-line portfolio system that will provide students, educators, and potential employers with profiles of learners as they progress in their language careers. Among the materials that will be amassed in digital form are the following: 1) a language biography, detailing programs a student has participated in, types of curricular materials used, etc., 2) video/audio language samples, such as formal presentations, debates, spontaneous interviews, etc., 3) writing samples in Chinese and English that show students' familiarity with different genres and of text types, 4) resumes in Chinese and English, 5) self-assessment essays in Chinese and English, 6) official documents, such as transcripts, certificates, diplomas, and 7) language test scores, with an indication of whether tests are proficiency or achievement based. Clearly this is an ambitious effort and of course such portfolios will vary depending on educational settings or student/teacher needs and expectations. Nevertheless, this model has tremendous implications for providing students with a detailed record of their language careers. Such documentation implicitly alleviates the need for placement testing or reliance on single test scores that often give faulty impressions of language proficiency. As such, electronic language portfolios are certainly one aspect of the Flagship model that educators in all settings should seriously consider implementing.

3. Creating a Collaborative Culture

Many of the issues central to the development and sustainability of the Oregon Chinese Flagship Program are similar in the Portland Public School district and at the University of Oregon. Working with existing departments and centers, developing support from administration, maximizing resources, and providing support to students and teachers all are high priority and require careful planning and concerted, ongoing efforts by dedicated staff. The idea of team building is integral to every aspect of the program, be it technology, public relations, or even the selection of classroom materials. In addition to frequent formal meetings between people working on the PPS and UO Flagship initiatives, explicit connections between the PPS and UO Flagship teams have been built into the program. For example, the PPS Immersion Administrator works with UO committees to screen applications from future UO Flagship scholars, the UO Academic Director works with PPS Chinese teachers on the curriculum project, and both partners have pooled resources to hire a media specialist to coordinate public relations efforts on behalf of the program. In addition, all Flagship per-

sonnel are keenly aware of the need to recruit and train highly qualified teachers and other education specialists and are working together to develop programs, such as those resulting in state certification for K-12 teachers and summer workshops for the instructors of the UO language strategy courses. These kinds of joint efforts may not seem that remarkable, yet it is this commitment to working together that forms the fabric of successful articulation. As such it must not be overlooked.

Challenges Ahead

As the Oregon Chinese Flagship Program moves forward to the next academic cycle, a number of areas of improvement have been identified. Creating programs that maintain student, teacher, administrators, and community enthusiasm and commitment is not easy and is not a one-time effort. Coordinating a diverse group of teachers and accommodating the special needs of different schools and programs is fundamental to the success of the program and requires flexibility, patience, and long-term planning. Like many Chinese initiatives nationwide, the Oregon Flagship Program is exploring ways to establish programs that will train certified K-12 Chinese teachers and is also working to support and strengthen the teaching staff at the university program. Finding the most qualified students to be Flagship Scholars on the post-secondary level is also a priority and this has involved concerted recruitment efforts. National and international interest in the Oregon Flagship Program has been overwhelming, and educators from PPS and CASLS have striven to address the growing demand for leadership in K-16 articulated language programs through presentations at conferences, workshops, and written documentation for scholarly and non-scholarly venues. In addition, the Flagship teams are involved in statewide efforts to bring greater awareness to the importance of Chinese in the global context and to work with local and statewide China-related business initiatives as well as local Chinese communities and organizations. **IX**

Notes

- 1 More details about The Language Flagship and the Chinese program in Oregon can be found at <http://www.thelanguageflagship.org/> and <http://casls.uoregon.edu/ORflagship/>.
- 2 More details about the Chinese Flagship Program at Portland Public Schools can be found at <http://casls.uoregon.edu/pps/>.
- 3 More details about the Chinese Flagship Program at the University of Oregon can be found at <http://casls.uoregon.edu/flagship/>.
- 4 For more information on NOELLA, see <http://noella.uoregon.edu/noella/do/login>.
- 5 For more information about STAMP, see <http://casls.uoregon.edu/stamp2.php> and <http://www.onlinells.com>.

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