

# **Innovations in Language Learning: The Oregon Chinese Flagship Model**

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## **Introduction**

Language learning in the United States suffers from a culture of low expectations. Lacking bilingual role models around them, students often view language class as, at best, a way to become a tourist in a country with a language different from their own. Monolingual policymakers assume that learning another language fluently is impossible and inconsequential, since they themselves are capable professionals with one language. Educators, discouraged by years of inadequate funding and support, have come to hope for nothing more than incremental improvements.

The National Flagship Language Program (NFLP) aims to break this cycle of low expectations and low results by providing funding to institutions willing to accept the challenge of producing Superior (Level 3) language users through a radical re-engineering of the language learning enterprise. The need for fundamental change in language education is longstanding, but the events of September 11 brought the importance of this need to the awareness of national policymakers. Due to the emphasis of critical languages, responsibility for carrying out this fundamental re-examination of language learning has fallen to those engaged in the less commonly taught languages.<sup>1</sup>

This article outlines how the Oregon Flagship program, funded by NFLP, plans to implement and disseminate a sustainable

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<sup>1</sup> The “critical languages” include Arabic, Chinese, Korean, Persian, and Russian. It is useful to think of these languages as a subset of less commonly taught languages with special importance to the U.S. government.

K-16 language learning model in Chinese. NFLP constitutes a major partnership between the federal government and higher education to implement a national system of programs designed to produce advanced competency in languages deemed critical to United States security. Funded through the National Security Education Program, Flagship programs are charged with producing speakers able to use critical languages for professional purposes. In other words, students graduating from Flagship programs must be at the Superior (ILR 3) level of proficiency.

### **Goals**

NFLP strives: 1) to produce Superior (Level 3) users of critical languages; 2) to radically re-engineer the language learning enterprise; and 3) to develop and disseminate replicable and sustainable models of language learning. Each of these goals merits close examination.

#### ***1. Produce Superior (Level 3) users of critical languages***

Language education in the United States is designed to give many students a little taste of another language. This model may have worked in the days when many considered a bit of French or Latin a nice touch to complete a young person's education, making the student more cultivated or sophisticated. However, such an approach inevitably leaves the learner unable to function in the language with any degree of proficiency. Instead, students leave language classes with the memory of studying foreign language as a type of "add on"; certainly these courses were never as core to the educational mission as were classes in math or social studies. The "add on" mentality holds particularly true in secondary schools, where many students and teachers essentially ignore the long-term social and economic benefits of language learning. Increasingly, government and business need workers with professional-level language skills, yet no public system currently exists to reliably produce learners with this level of ability.

**2. Radically re-engineer the language learning enterprise**

In order to achieve the goal of producing Superior-level users of critical languages, existing teaching systems must be dramatically revised. The language education field needs to develop a new paradigm that fundamentally re-examines long-held assumptions about learning and teaching languages in the United States. The table below shows some of these assumptions and how the Oregon Flagship has re-conceptualized them:

<i>Assumption</i>	<i>What if...</i>
American students cannot be expected to surpass Intermediate (Level 1) proficiency.	...students had sixteen years of learning instead of just two or three?
We must lower expectations for non-European language learners.	...students began learning the language early enough to minimize the difference?
Everything a student learns comes from the curriculum.	...students learned naturally in communities in the U.S. and abroad?
The effectiveness of teaching methods should be evaluated on the basis of how well they align with educational and language acquisition research.	...we based judgments on how students actually perform?

If one assumes a traditional program that has historically existed in most U.S. high schools and universities, then all of these assumptions in the table hold true. The “what if...” questions work beyond the current language-learning paradigm to imagine what must occur consistently to produce Superior-level speakers. This innovative spirit has guided the design of the Oregon Flagship.

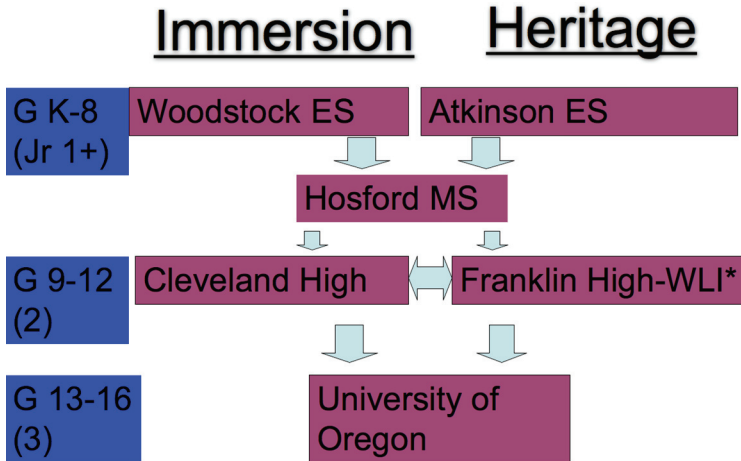
### *3. Develop and disseminate replicable and sustainable models of language learning*

An innovative language program leading to Superior proficiency that cannot be sustained in the real world will be of little value. Therefore, the challenge is to engineer a language learning enterprise that not only fundamentally differs from current models but also thrives within the existing system. In order to meet these challenges, serious attention must be given to disseminating successful models and to supporting other programs that adopt this approach.

#### **The Model**

The Oregon Flagship, a true kindergarten through university partnership, builds upon the successful Chinese immersion and heritage-speaker programs in the Portland Public School District (PPS). With nine immersion programs and two heritage programs in Chinese, Japanese, and Spanish, PPS leads the nation in advanced-level language education. The Chinese heritage and immersion programs were established, successful programs well before Flagship funding became available. Through the mandate to create a national model, the additional funds, and the partnership with the University of Oregon (UO), PPS expands upon its solid foundation to develop and document a new model of language education leading to Advanced-level proficiency.

A complex undertaking, articulation for a K-16 program of this magnitude requires the Oregon Flagship to align the PPS programs with one another and also with the curriculum at the UO. Diagram 1 below represents the basic structure of the program:



\*WLI: The World Language Institute is a content-based program designed to improve the academic Chinese of heritage speakers.

### **Pedagogical Approach**

While learning at all levels from kindergarten through university must be tailored to students’ developmental and cognitive levels, three learning components prevail throughout the program: 1) content-based learning, 2) experiential learning, and 3) explicit instruction.

#### ***1. Content-based learning***

To reach Superior levels of proficiency, learners must be able to use language for academic and professional purposes. Native speakers without formal education often cannot communicate at this level due to a lack of control over academic and professional content. Infusing language learning with intellectually rich content, therefore, is a cornerstone of the Oregon Flagship and a critical aspect of ensuring the development of professional-level language skills.

Rather than thinking in terms of a “language class” as opposed to a “science class” or a “geography class,” the Oregon Flagship program creates contexts where learners are mastering content

*through* the language, concurrently improving their language abilities. Thus, time is not taken away from other curricular areas. In fact, research shows that children learning in immersion environments generally master the content more comprehensively than their monolingual peers.<sup>2</sup> In a sense, language learning is a “bonus” that goes beyond mastery of the regular curriculum. In elementary school, for example, children learn basic arithmetic, social routines, cultural practices, and science concepts in Chinese. High school students take biology and humanities courses in Chinese, and college students take one specific Flagship course, taught exclusively in Chinese, each term in subjects such as history, math, or literature.

Merging content and language also addresses the practical problem of finding time for intensive language learning within a traditional curriculum while maintaining an economically viable model. After some initial start-up costs, the per student cost of educating a child in an immersion environment at the K-12 level is no greater than the cost of educating a child in a monolingual classroom. At the university, students receive regular college credit for all of their work completed in Chinese, allowing them to graduate in four years.

## ***2. Experiential learning***

One limitation of content-based learning is that students may not have sufficient exposure to social language. While a major issue for immersion students who may not have ready access to language outside the classroom, it can also be an issue for heritage speakers who may only control the informal register used within the household. Experiential learning outside the classroom, therefore, represents a critical component of the Oregon Flagship.

Beginning in middle school, Flagship immersion students will conduct service learning projects. These projects, which have been successful in the Japanese immersion program at PPS, will involve focused interaction with the Chinese community or with local businesses that deal directly with China. In addition, middle school stu-

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<sup>2</sup> For examples of studies that focus on the relationship between second language learning and cognitive ability, see Margo Glew, CLEAR News, Vol. 5 No. 2, Fall 2001.

dents will be eligible for a “research residency” in China. The research residency differs drastically from the traditional abroad experience for young students, an excursion which generally focuses on sightseeing and consists of limited interaction with people outside of the specific tour or program. Instead, the research residency requires eighth grade students to develop research projects at their home institutions as part of the regular curriculum. Each project will involve collecting information that can only be gathered overseas. Students may develop questionnaires in Chinese, conduct interviews with local people, or visit a business or school to collect first-hand information. Upon returning to their U.S. schools, students analyze and organize the data as part of an exit paper and presentation, which serves as the capstone of their middle school experience. Further, high school and college students will be offered internships either in local businesses or abroad in which they must use their language skills. All of these experiences are designed to expose learners to language in social and professional contexts. Students will be supported by the curriculum, but the critical learning will take place beyond the traditional school setting.

### ***3. Explicit instruction***

Because learners do not need to demonstrate accurate control of syntax to achieve Novice- or Intermediate-level proficiency, explicit grammar instruction often has been downplayed in immersion programs. To reach the Advanced and Superior levels, however, learners must tailor their messages to specific audiences, narrate in multiple time frames, and produce only occasional performance errors. Every advanced society spends considerable amounts of time and energy educating its children to use their native language to accomplish these and other Superior-level tasks. How then could non-native speakers reach this level of sophisticated language use unless they, too, were in a structured program that similarly focuses on the language itself?

UO and PPS are working together to develop a language framework to specify the forms, functions, and semantic fields that learners should master at each grade level. These guidelines will spiral through ascending curriculum levels. The semantic field of “school,”

for example, may entail describing the daily schedule at the elementary level, summarizing a science class in middle school, giving an academic presentation in high school, and writing an undergraduate thesis in college. The first version of the language framework will rely on the judgment of practicing teachers and the existing literature on the order of acquisition. As the program develops, however, the validity of the framework will be checked regularly against actual student performance data.

### **Empirical Pedagogy**

Empirical pedagogy, the ongoing process of verifying curricular and instructional strategies according to student performance data, differs from the current methodology justified on the basis of its alignment with theories and findings in second language acquisition and educational research. Rather than beginning by dictating to teachers which practices are “good” or “bad,” the Flagship program starts with the methods teachers currently use in their classroom and provides feedback in the form of student performance results. This feedback helps identify which practices and approaches are most effective according to the only measure that truly matters: student performance.

Of course, composite proficiency scores remain important for determining and maintaining quality control. However, the real power of empirical pedagogy comes when teachers can review detailed qualitative and quantitative data that reveal individual students’ strengths and weaknesses. This review provides a concrete basis for the teachers from which to focus on their developing effective pedagogical strategies as well as on their evaluation of student portfolios so as to inform reflection on the effectiveness of those strategies. In addition to improving practice within the Flagship Program, these data provide documentation and justification for the model to be disseminated.

### **Program Development: The Initial Stages**

Drawing on the ideas and principles outlined above, the Oregon Flagship launched in fall 2005. The intervening year and a half



have revealed a great deal about how to (and how not to) create a K-16 program. While the learning curve remains steep, five issues have proven critical to the Oregon Flagship in the start-up phase: 1) creating key partnerships; 2) planning for proficiency; 3) assessing what matters; 4) identifying and recruiting potential Flagship scholars; and 5) attracting and mentoring talented instructors.

### *1. Creating key partnerships*

The key to any K-16 program is the relationship between the university and K-12 schools. Unfortunately, postsecondary institutions too often define such links as “outreach” or “service,” and this dubious terminology frequently colors the attitudes of faculty members who may already be hesitant about devoting time and energy to making connections with K-12 educators. Similarly, principals at elementary and secondary schools may be skeptical about the need to form direct contacts with teachers and administrators at the university level, and this reluctance will be obvious to K-12 teachers.

School districts and universities also have fundamentally different missions and cultures. Too often these differences are misunderstood, which results in a lack of respect and trust, the key elements in building potential partnerships. University faculty sometimes devalue the professional expertise of K-12 teachers, who, in turn, may see university faculty as arrogant interlopers who hold pedagogy in low regard and criticize K-12 teachers for not keeping up with the latest research. Undoubtedly, a K-16 partnership takes time to cultivate. In the case of UO and PPS, ten years of regular cooperation preceded the Flagship proposal. Without this base of trust, understanding, and personal relationships, a true partnership could not have emerged. Certainly not every potential partnership requires a decade of cultivation, yet, on the other hand, it cannot happen with a hasty phone call when a grant opportunity arises.

One of the greatest surprises in Year One of the Oregon Flagship was the emergence of unexpected alliances within the university. From the beginning, top administrators, including the president of the university, showed tremendous enthusiasm and support for the program. Similarly, the Office of Admissions, Office of Financial Aid and Scholarships, and the directors of the residence halls

and first-year advising programs expressed support of the Flagship mission to create a unique, honors-level program that also increases the diversity and quality of the student body at the University of Oregon. In direct accordance with the university's mission to achieve excellence and diversity, the Oregon Flagship attracts high-achieving minority students. The first class of Flagship, nine out of ten of whom are heritage speakers, entered the UO with an average GPA of 3.8 and impressive high school records that reflect academic promise and creativity. In future years, both the numbers of students and the breadth of their secondary-level Chinese-related experiences should increase. Students showing this type of quality and diverse demographic helps cultivate partners in the postsecondary institution, which is critical to the successful development of a K-16 program.

## *2. Planning for proficiency*

Efforts at articulation often target the development of common curricula for high school and college courses. Given the vastly different missions and cultures in school districts and universities, it is unlikely that a seamless match in materials or teaching strategies can be achieved. Nonetheless, instructors on the entire K-16 spectrum can accept the need to look closely at student performance levels. PPS and UO have agreed on the following global proficiency goals:

<i>Grade</i>	<i>Proficiency</i>
5	Jr. Intermediate-mid
8	Intermediate-high
12	Advanced
16	Superior

Teachers at all levels regularly dialogue about the details of what these performances should entail. Working in conjunction with a recognized expert on K-12 curricular issues, the UO Flagship academic director, and the PPS immersion program director, teachers involved with the K-12 Chinese immersion programs at PPS have embarked upon a two-year project to develop the Chinese language

framework. This ambitious undertaking involves specifying when particular functions, forms, and semantic domains that typify these proficiency levels will be introduced, practiced, and mastered. These goals serve to focus curriculum and instructional decisions and to allow both students and parents to gauge learner progress. Work on the Chinese language framework project has already been tremendously beneficial in terms of professional development for the PPS teachers, many of whom had never participated before in formal language pedagogy training. This project, which involves a series of workshops ranging from one day to one week, has built trust and camaraderie among the teachers and has developed strong alliances critical to successful articulation.

### ***3. Assessing what matters***

Many programs have global proficiency goals such as those articulated above. Few, however, actually measure progress towards those goals and hold students or teachers accountable. A good assessment system must measure what matters and report those results in a comprehensible manner to stakeholders such as teachers, students, and parents.

The Center for Applied Second Language Studies (CASLS) at the University of Oregon is developing Chinese versions of the Standards-based Measure of Proficiency (STAMP) to assess student proficiency from elementary school through university. At the end of each academic year, students will take STAMP to measure their overall progress. Teachers will then review the data over the summer and adjust curriculum and instruction as necessary. PPS will also develop performance assessments tied to the specific content covered at various levels. Both STAMP scores and performance assessment scores will be recorded in electronic portfolios. The combination of general proficiency assessment and content-specific performance assessment will provide a rich picture of student performance and ensure that curriculum and instruction remain aligned with overall proficiency goals.

#### ***4. Identifying and recruiting potential Flagship scholars***

Attracting highly qualified students to the Oregon Flagship is critical to the mission of excellence and innovation. Recruitment efforts focus on generating local and national awareness of the program among Chinese language learners in public, private, and Chinese heritage schools. Regional and national presentations to Chinese language teachers, site visits to local high schools, and targeted personal contact are some of the means by which the Oregon Flagship has identified potential scholars. Another recently adopted strategy includes placing advertisements about the program in local and national Chinese newspapers. In addition, the Flagship program has received considerable regional and national publicity, which has generated student interest. The PPS and UO Chinese Flagship web sites offer extensive information about the program and explain how qualified students can apply.

All of these efforts are geared toward the initial stages of identifying and recruiting students from a variety of academic and socio-economic backgrounds. Once applications are reviewed, students considered for acceptance and funding undergo an extensive assessment process to ensure they are appropriate for the program. Among the factors considered are language proficiency (both in Chinese and English), academic experience and focus, and intellectual potential. Having identified the top tier of these applicants, the University of Oregon then actively recruits them. Similar to the way a football coach might recruit a star player, this stage generally involves direct contact with the student, the student's parents, and Chinese teachers. After all, these students are pioneers in setting the standard for excellence in Chinese language learning at the highest levels, and their choice to commit to the Flagship program should be acknowledged and rewarded.

#### ***5. Attracting and mentoring talented instructors***

Finding and mentoring quality teachers is especially challenging in the less commonly taught languages. The exploding demand for Chinese teachers exacerbated this situation for the Oregon Flagship. At the K-12 level, PPS already established Chinese immersion

and heritage programs; the challenges there are threefold: 1) to orient existing faculty to the concrete proficiency goals of Flagship; 2) to attract additional qualified teachers and a K-12 curriculum specialist; and 3) to explore ways that current and potential teachers can attain state certification from the Oregon Board of Education.

UO faculty, accompanied by external consultants with K-12 expertise, work with teachers to develop a language framework, assessment instruments, and instructional strategies. Teachers, like students, learn by doing. In the course of developing these tools, PPS teachers heighten their own awareness of pedagogical techniques and principles much more fully than if they were merely given materials developed by someone else. The second and third concerns of attracting qualified teachers/curriculum specialists and attaining state teacher certification are by no means endemic to the Oregon Flagship. Throughout the country, K-12 educators scramble to address the scarcity of qualified Chinese teachers and to meet the various criteria that will earn state certification, a situation exacerbated by the fact that most states have yet to determine exactly what these criteria are.

At the university level, the Oregon Flagship leverages the expertise of Chinese-speaking professors in a variety of disciplines to teach content courses. Many of these faculty members have the language ability and academic background to deliver instruction in Chinese but do not have experience teaching second language learners. Therefore, these instructors receive guidance from a language learning expert and the Flagship academic director who work with the instructors to find appropriate curricular materials and pedagogical approaches. In addition, faculty receive a summer stipend and assistance from a graduate student to help ensure the success of their course. Furthermore, each content course is paired with a language strategies course taught by the academic director and her teaching staff. The language strategies course identifies the particular challenges presented by each specific course and focuses on linguistic and meta-linguistic strategies to help students master the material.

Attracting faculty to teach these university-level Flagship courses and determining how course credits will be assigned has proven more challenging than previously expected. First, arrangements with faculty members require the support of department chairs

who may have difficulty releasing them from their previous teaching and research commitments. Second, both the departmental and university processes for approving new courses and the work with curricular committees to decide whether a course can fulfill a general education requirement proved time consuming. Hopefully, as the status and reputation of the Flagship program increases, these and other obstacles to attracting talented faculty at the university level will be overcome.

### **Key Issues**

Despite its infancy, the Oregon Flagship remains confident that its initial approach is theoretically sound. Nevertheless, the Oregon Flagship is cognizant of the need to adjust the language-learning model appropriately as new empirical data support or refute the initial hypotheses. The following are some of the key issues to be examined.

#### ***1. Cognitive development, academic development, and linguistic proficiency***

The ILR and ACTFL scales of proficiency combine cognitive and linguistic criteria. At the Novice level, for example, students speak in learned words and phrases (a linguistic criterion) and in simple, concrete situations (a cognitive criterion). At the Superior level, a learner must be able to support an opinion on academic or professional topics. It is not uncommon for even native speakers to fail to meet these criteria. Therefore, if the Oregon Flagship does not attend to learners' academic and cognitive development, the goal of producing Superior-level speakers cannot be achieved regardless of how excellent the language pedagogy may be. Critical thinking skills, knowledge of Chinese history, and a rudimentary understanding of distinctions between modern and classical Chinese are all examples of additional knowledge and skills that learners must acquire. A content-based approach at all levels makes the Oregon Flagship cautiously confident that students will indeed master these and related topics. However, establishing exactly what those cognitive and academic skills are and consciously developing them will be an ongoing topic

of research.

## ***2. Study abroad***

Given the stated mission of the Flagship program to produce Superior-level speakers, a traditional study abroad experience will not match the needs of Flagship scholars. Even fifth graders traveling abroad should have language skills that obviate the need for English support and render the traditional sightseeing and activities that allow students to “Meet real Chinese people!” meaningless. At the college level, students expected to attain Superior-level proficiency within a year should be able to attend regular classes with native Chinese students. Rethinking these abroad experiences at every level and implementing them within the traditional structures of schools and universities will be a long-term challenge.

## ***3. Heritage speakers and immersion students***

The PPS immersion program currently extends from kindergarten through eighth grade. As these students advance to high school and subsequently to the university, their classes will be integrated with heritage students. The profiles of these two populations, however, are distinctly different. Immersion students tend to be particularly strong in academic language, while heritage speakers are typically strong in social language. Both groups generally have strong listening skills, but heritage learners tend to be stronger in speaking. Differentiating instruction to meet the needs of both groups and, ideally, empowering each to help the other in areas of weakness will be a challenge. The goal of the Oregon Flagship program is to admit balanced cohorts of students from heritage and non-heritage backgrounds. Evaluating students with very different profiles and then providing instruction to raise each individual to the Superior level will constitute a major undertaking.

#### *4. Sustainability*

A grant from the Department of Defense allows the Oregon Flagship to initiate and validate the program model. This funding will not last forever, however, so the model must become sustainable on its own. Furthermore, political support within the school district and the university must be based on the quality of the program, not just the federal dollars it generates. As previously discussed, the Flagship programs attract the interest of educational leaders who see the value of a program that produces a diverse group of academically excellent students bilingual in Chinese and English. Involving other stakeholders such as local and state government, businesses, and community groups, who also stand to benefit from the program, is critical to sustaining the program without external government funding sources.

#### **Conclusion**

A cadre of young people with Superior-level skills in Mandarin Chinese could make a major contribution to social harmony, economic prosperity, and international understanding. Traditional approaches, however, have seldom been able to lead students to these high proficiency levels. While there are other ways to produce high-proficiency speakers, this paper has described one approach to re-engineering the language learning enterprise. The efficacy of this approach cannot yet be empirically evaluated. Nevertheless, it is hoped that the Oregon Chinese Flagship can serve as a model for similar programs in a variety of languages, regardless of whether they receive outside funding.

While the details of the model will likely be amended as student performance data become available, several core principles will certainly endure. Among the most salient are the following: 1) Learner performance is the primary measure of success; 2) Superior-level speakers must possess intellectual as well as linguistic excellence; 3) Learning can and must occur both inside and outside the classroom; 4) Effective communication requires explicit Chinese language arts instruction, and 5) Coherent articulation from kindergarten through university is the key to success.