



Evaluation of the California Subject Matter Project

California Foreign Language Project
Case Study

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California Foreign Language Project and STARTALK

This case study describes a partnership between the California Foreign Language Project (CFLP) at Stanford University and the Palo Alto Unified School District (PAUSD). The partnership developed due to the confluence of the national need to increase the number of Mandarin speakers, a district's desire to create a strong high school language program, and the CFLP's expertise in language instruction. The CFLP and the district applied for a federal grant, STARTALK, which has funded the development and implementation of a multi-faceted program in response to these needs. This case study describes the needs addressed by the CFLP/PAUSD STARTALK program and the multi-faceted response designed by the CFLP.

Defining the Need Nationally and Locally

As the political and economic environment functions on an increasingly global scale, the United States needs to increase the number of citizens who are fluent in multiple languages. This is an admirable goal in general, but it is of special importance that U.S. citizens increase their ability to communicate with citizens from politically and economically ascendant regions such as Asia and the Middle East. In 2006, the George W. Bush Administration decided to actively address this national need by creating the STARTALK program (Exhibit 1). STARTALK is a program designed to improve the nation's skills in speaking languages that will be critical in the next century but are not commonly taught in American schools. STARTALK funds programs that use a variety of strategies to meet the national need including teacher development programs in foreign language instruction, study abroad programs for students, and student summer language institutes.

Exhibit 1 STARTALK

The STARTALK program aims to increase the number of people in the United States teaching, learning, and speaking what it termed critical need foreign languages. These languages are Arabic, Mandarin, Japanese, Korean, and Russian and the Indic, Persian, and Turkic language families. The goal was to increase the number of people in the US studying these languages and to start their language study at an earlier age. Furthermore, they aimed to increase the number of advanced-level speakers of these languages and to augment the number of trained and certified teachers of these languages.

To this end the Secretaries of State, Defense, and Education and the Director of National Intelligence embarked on the National Security Language Initiative (NSLI) in 2006. Founded in January 2006 under the auspices of the NSLI and the direction of the National Intelligence Agency, STARTALK provides summer language learning opportunities for students and professional development for teachers in Mandarin and Arabic, languages the administration designated as critical for national security. For more information go to: <http://www.startalk.umd.edu/about>.

Mirroring the national interest in expanding foreign language study, the Palo Alto Unified School District (Exhibit 2) decided to expand its foreign language program to include Mandarin in 2006. Native English speakers typically take longer to master Mandarin than other languages that are more similar to English for a number of reasons including the fact that spoken Mandarin has tones (vocal inflections) and written Mandarin uses characters.¹ To address this challenge, PAUSD sought a partnership with the CFLP at Stanford to design a Mandarin program (Exhibit 3). The district's program has two parts. In the 2008–09 school year, the district

began a Mandarin immersion program with its first cohort of kindergarten students. This program will add a grade each year as the initial cohort ages. Additionally, the district worked with the CFLP to design a high school language program that would provide students additional learning opportunities so they could successfully complete an AP Mandarin language course of study and demonstrate the advanced level of language and

**Exhibit 2
Palo Alto Unified School District**

Palo Alto Unified School District, located in a suburb halfway between San Francisco and San Jose, serves a comparatively affluent population. With the highest student performance in the state, 15 of its 17 schools are in the top 10% of schools in the state on the Academic Performance Index in 2007–08. There is substantial community support for high schools to offer AP courses and prepare students to achieve top scores. During the 2007–08 school year almost 60% of the district's eleventh and twelfth graders took at least one AP exam. Of the over 1200 AP exams taken by these students, 80% (as compared to 33% statewide) received scores of 4 or 5, the levels that most universities accept for college credit.

**Exhibit 3
California Foreign Language Project**

The goal of the California Foreign Language Project is to challenge language professionals to improve and expand language programs in California and to promote access and equity within educational institutions for every student. The Project strongly supports efforts to involve every language teacher in a supportive professional community which respects diverse ideas, provides opportunities for leadership, promotes linguistic and cultural competence and advocates for the retention, expansion and articulation of foreign and indigenous language offerings across educational levels beginning in the elementary grades.

culture competence required by the exam by the end of high school. The remainder of this case focuses on that program and how it simultaneously supports research-based second language acquisition for students and works to increase the number of teachers prepared to provide high-quality instruction.

¹ The characters used to write Mandarin are graphemes, where symbols represent the smallest possible meaning. This is structurally different from the written system in English, where the alphabet represents sounds. It is estimated that people need to learn between three and four thousand characters to achieve literacy in Mandarin.

The CFLP’s Approach

The CFLP at Stanford University is located within the boundaries of PAUSD and there are long-standing connections between the project and the district. For example, one of the veteran foreign language teachers in PAUSD has been affiliated with CFLP in a variety of leadership initiative over the years, including serving on the Project’s Advisory Board. When PAUSD approached the CFLP with a desire to add Mandarin to its offerings, they jointly decided to pursue federal STARTALK funding to support their efforts.

The CFLP/PAUSD’s STARTALK program in Mandarin² began in 2007 and just completed its third summer. It has three main components: 1) additional student instruction in Mandarin to enable more students to complete the AP curriculum by their senior year in high school, 2) CFLP work with the high school’s Mandarin teachers on curriculum development and alignment to ensure that the instruction is tied to best practices in second language acquisition and pedagogy, 3) professional development for non-PAUSD adults to expand the pipeline of highly-effective and credentialed Mandarin teachers.³

Student instruction and curriculum development

The CFLP worked with PAUSD teachers to develop a research-based curriculum in Mandarin. The curriculum was designed to offer students an immersion experience in the language in which Mandarin was the sole medium of instruction and provided students with many opportunities to communicate with each other in the target language. . Additionally, units were designed to expose students to Chinese culture while they were learning the language. The basic version of this curriculum is offered as a four-year course sequence at Palo Alto High School. Due to the challenges native English speakers face in learning Mandarin and the fact that there are currently no Mandarin programs in the district’s middle schools, students completing the typical sequence would not be sufficiently prepared to be able to take an AP Mandarin course during their high school

Courses	Typical	STARTALK
Freshman		
Fall	1a*	1a
Spring	1b	1b
Summer		2a
Sophomore		
Fall	2a	2b
Spring	2b	3a
Summer		3b
Junior		
Fall	3a	4a
Spring	3b	4b
Senior		
Fall	4a	APa
Spring	4b	APb

*1a, 1b, 2a, etc. represent the course numbers.

² The CFLP also offers a STARTALK program in Arabic.

³ Because core features of the program remained constant over those three years, we note the year only when providing information about participants in a given summer’s program or program features that were added over time.

careers. As part of the STARTALK program, the CFLP and PAUSD partnered to offer students the possibility of taking two extra “semesters” of Mandarin during four-week intensive summer programs, one each summer after their freshman and sophomore years. Students attend 5.5 hours a day of class and complete daily homework as part of the program. Exhibit 4 shows how these summer programs enable students to add the equivalent of an additional year of study during high school.

While the CFLP/PAUSD STARTALK program is a structurally simple way to facilitate students’ completion of AP Mandarin coursework it presents a challenge: How do you get adolescents to engage actively enough to complete a semester’s worth of work in a five-week summer program? Due to the CFLP’s expertise in language instruction, they were able to support the development of a communication-based curriculum (Exhibit 5) that built students’ language skills and cultural competencies. They also integrated technology fully into the program to engage a student body that is typically very technology savvy and acquired and created podcasts in Mandarin that students downloaded into iPods provided by the program. They were then able to study these podcasts as part of their daily homework. As the program’s federal evaluator wrote, “Unlike many programs where technology is almost an afterthought, the use of technology is integral to this project. The use of the language lab and podcasting through which assignments are disseminated and gathered are examples of how this program takes advantage of the technological sophistication and lifestyles of today’s high school students.” To support a technology-rich program, the CFLP/PAUSD STARTALK program included a technology specialist on the project team so that teachers and students alike could retain their focus on Mandarin study and not get distracted by any technological glitches.⁴

The CFLP’s participation in the planning for the high school curriculum not only helped ensure that the activities and materials were engaging for students, but also provided the CFLP the opportunity to support Palo Alto High School teachers’ ongoing work on curriculum development and provided opportunities for shared

Exhibit 5
Second Language Acquisition

The CFLP/PAUSD STARTALK program seeks to help participants learn strategies for Communicative Language Teaching. Unlike grammar-based approaches, Communicative Language Teaching focuses on learning to communicate through the use of the target language. There is an emphasis on using authentic input in the classroom and connecting classroom work with real world language activities. According to this approach to language acquisition, “Communication involves the integration of different language skills...[and] learning is a process of creative construction and involves trial and error.”* The ultimate goal in a communicative classroom is for the language learner to be able to communicate with a native language speaker. One implication of this is that teachers are encouraged to communicate solely in Mandarin in their instruction. This creates authentic opportunities for students to communicate and learn through the language they are acquiring.

*Xu, X., & Padilla, A. M. (2008, July). *Second language acquisition theories and principles*. Presented in STARTALK Teacher Cohort meeting.

⁴ Tollefson, A. (2009, June 30). *Stanford Teacher Program, Chinese*. STARTALK program site visit report.

reflections on practice during the summer STARTALK program. As one CFLP/PAUSD STARTALK teacher reported,

[The work with CFLP on STARTALK begins in January and goes through June... We sit together to design the thematic units and make the lesson plans. [CFLP staff] are very nice and humble and never mention that they are coaching us. They make it seem like they're meeting with us. They're kind of modeling. What's the main idea of doing the STARTALK this year? What's our focus? What are the strategies we need to use? And we also contribute our own ideas about how to do it because we know the students very well. It's more like team discussion, but ... I personally learn a lot and consider that to be equivalent to training...During STARTALK, they meet with us. We don't meet both formally and informally. We might talk over lunch to talk about class and maybe reflect on the day's lesson and talk about tomorrow's [lesson].

In this way, STARTALK also provides a venue for the CFLP to offer more advanced professional support to veteran credentialed teachers.

Expanding the pipeline

According to the U.S. Department of Education, foreign language teachers are a discipline of shortage nationwide. As an increasing number of schools begin to offer Mandarin instruction, it will become increasingly important to expand the credentialing pipeline. The CFLP/PAUSD STARTALK program offers a professional development Institute designed to help individuals interested in becoming Mandarin teachers take steps towards obtaining a teaching credential.

Native Mandarin speakers form a largely untapped talent pool for these positions given that they already have the necessary linguistic and cultural fluency. While anyone can apply to participate, the vast majority of participants (93% in 2008) were Native Mandarin speakers. The 2008 program had 29 participants, over three-quarters of whom had more than one year of teaching experience (including private school, public school, heritage school, and college) and about half had experience as tutors. About one-third (34%) had obtained certification in language teaching. The participants in the other years were comparable in terms the strength of their language and cultural knowledge and the variation in their teaching knowledge and experience.

Format of the Institute

When the CFLP/PAUSD STARTALK program began in 2007, all participants attended a one-week, 45-hour institute for participants new to STARTALK. In 2008, the CFLP offered a Level 2 institute, for those who had completed the Level 1 institute the previous year. The Level 2 institute was 55 hours and covered similar content with the expectation that participants would be able to take the work to the next level. For example, while Level 1 attendees plan and deliver a single lesson during their institute, Level 2 attendees plan an entire instructional unit on Mandarin instruction. The 2009 institute includes an additional 40 hours of in-person and on-line follow-up throughout the year.⁵

⁵ Silva, D. (in progress). *Professional development for teachers of Chinese*. Palo Alto, CA: California Foreign Language Project.

The teacher institutes were designed around an “academy” model of professional development. In this model, theory and PD instruction are paired with real-life students (those participating in the CFLP/PAUSD STARTALK high school component, described above). This provides authentic opportunities for participants to experiment with newly learned instructional strategies. For one week, teacher participants received training in a myriad of topics (see below) while using the same textbook as the STARTALK student program so that it was easier for participants to see how the theories they were studying could be implemented in a classroom. At the start of the week, participants observe the credentialed teachers’ instruction and plan a lesson. Near the end of the Institute, participants have about 30 minutes each to teach part of all of their lessons in the student program. Afterwards, participants receive feedback from their peers as well as from the Master Teachers who teach in the student program and have the opportunity to reflect on the lesson themselves. In addition to giving them an opportunity to apply what they’ve learned, the debriefing is designed to help introduce participants to notions of collective practice and ongoing reflection that are central to professional teaching.

Content of the Institute

To help the varied participants make progress towards becoming public school Mandarin teachers, the curricular goals of their component of the CFLP/PAUSD STARTALK program included:

- An introduction to key theories affecting the design and delivery of instruction (e.g., Vygotsky’s zones of proximal development)⁶
- Understandings of how to build students’ cultural and linguistic fluency
- Exposure to key principles of second language acquisition (e.g., communicative language teaching; see Figure 5).
- Opportunities to practice the key teaching skills of lesson planning and formative and summative assessment
- Practical information on U.S. schools and teacher credentialing programs that non-native participants might need to succeed as U.S. public school teachers.
- Networking with other members of the language teaching profession and researchers and leaders in the field.

Prior to California adopting World Language Content Standards (WLCS) (January 2009), the institute leaders introduced the participants to the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) National Standards and proficiency guidelines and

⁶ Vygotsky’s theory of Zones of Proximal Development emphasizes the need for teachers to scaffold their students’ learning. According to Vygotsky, learning occurs in the “zone of proximal development” (ZPD), a developmental phase in which the learner has partially developed a skill and can then build on it with the help of another person. The implication for second language teachers is that learners will make the most progress when responding to communications that are slightly more advanced than their current linguistic competence. Hence, teachers need to understand students’ language skills so they can target communication at the most appropriate level of linguistic difficulty.

stressed integrating them into lesson and unit planning. Since the adoption of CA's WLCS, these have become the organizing principle for planning and delivering these professional development programs. The CA WLCS focus on having participants acquire the knowledge to teach language and culture around the five main areas of the standards: Content, Communication, Cultures, Structures and Settings. The CFLP's STARTALK program focuses on how to plan instruction that sequentially addresses the different stages of the Language Learning Continuum.

The content was delivered in interactive ways that integrated information across these topic areas. For example, in order to help teachers to see how Vygotsky's theory of zones of proximal development (and other cognitive theories) affected how to implement Communicative Language Teaching strategies, the leaders modeled instruction using French and Japanese—languages with which participants were less familiar. As part of the modeling, they used visuals, only added five to seven vocabulary words, recycled language as much as possible, and did frequent comprehension checks to see if participants understood what they were teaching. This helped participants see how to conduct instruction solely in Mandarin for their own students.

Additionally, participants got to practice implementing major curriculum planning and pedagogical strategies—such as Understanding by Design⁷ for developing lessons and integrating formative assessment—into their practice lessons (or units) design and delivery. Backwards mapping played an integral role in planning at the institute. In this model, the teacher begins by planning with an end in mind and determining what their students need to demonstrate in order to ascertain that they have acquired the desired level of linguistic and cultural knowledge. Then, the goals, objectives and instructional strategies of each lesson are designed to enable students to complete tasks that meet the identified acceptable evidence for successful completion of the lesson or unit of instruction.

One of the major goals of the STARTALK program is to prepare teachers to teach in schools in the United States. Since the vast majority of the participants in the Stanford institute were schooled in Taiwan or Mainland China, they did not have the experience of going through schools in the United States themselves. They describe schools in the United States as very different from those they went to. The Chinese method of teaching is memorization whereas in the US there is a lot of hands-on teaching. Chinese schools are very teacher-centered, the classes are large, and there are no discipline problems. Thus, one of the foci of the institute is helping participants with classroom management. The leaders emphasized the importance of setting expectations, consistently enforcing the rules, and making sure there is no wasted time in the classroom.

The CFLP also recognizes that teaching in U.S. Public Schools can be an isolating experience, especially for teachers who may have few (if any) other colleagues teaching the same classes. The potential for isolation is even greater when the teachers themselves may not be fully fluent in English or fully integrated into American culture. The CFLP was intentional about trying to help participants develop a support network through their

⁷ Wiggins, G., & McTighe, J. (2005) *Understanding by design, 2nd ed.* Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

participation that could help program participants overcome isolation, if they were to experience it. Teachers formed relationships that transcended the end of the program and continue to provide each other with support, activities and job opportunities.

Finally, STARTALK invited representatives from local networks such as the Chinese Language Teachers' Association, the California Foreign Language Project and other teacher networks such as Chinese American International School (CAIS) and Chinese Language Association of Secondary-Elementary Schools (CLASS) to make presentations to the teachers so that they could better understand what these associations offered. One of the STARTALK instructors is the Teacher Education Coordinator at San José State University. The opportunities for participants to interact with these individuals provided further assistance for students to help them matriculate into credential programs.

Conclusion

The CFLP/PAUSD STARTALK program has three main components, all of which are addressing both local and national critical needs in the area of Mandarin language education. Furthermore, there is preliminary evidence that this relatively new program is attaining success in meeting such needs. PAUSD high school students are attending the STARTALK programs and are on track to take AP Mandarin in their senior year. Their teachers, who teach in the STARTALK program, report that the experience provides them with on-the-job learning opportunities. And, participants in the Institutes are moving forward towards their individual learning goals—preparing for tests necessary to enter credentialing programs, enrolling in programs, or completing them. These participants also report the strong benefits of the networking opportunities provided to them.

Perhaps the greatest compliments about the CFLP/PAUSD partnership come from the national STARTALK program. When the CFLP opened the RFP to apply for their third year of funding, they found their three-component program had become the model for the national STARTALK program. Additionally, site visit reports from national STARTALK monitors described many strengths of the program and then concluded, “In sum, this program is exemplary.”⁸

While STARTALK has many accomplishments it also faces a major challenge. The pool of teacher (and future teacher) participants in the program is varied. Some are experienced teachers, others are not; some are credentialed, others are not; some are fluent in English and others are not. While participants and monitors alike have praise for the program, all agree that there is an enormous amount of material to be covered in a relatively short amount of time. While the program offers chances for differentiation to meet participants' individual learning goals (e.g., around the lesson or unit plan and feedback from classroom teaching), participants' varied needs and the relatively short timeframe necessarily mean that some needs are unmet. The fact that some participants have returned for a second and even third year suggest both that they continue to

⁸ Liao, R., & Met, M. (2008, July 14). *Stanford Teacher Program, Chinese*. STARTALK program site visit report.

recognize their need for ongoing assistance and that they feel that the CFLP is an excellence source of knowledge and support.

The success of the CFLP/PAUSD STARTALK program can likely be attributed to the fact that the CFLP had substantial capacity that it was able to leverage to meet the emerging national and local needs. Leadership and staff at the CFLP were well-versed in the research on second language acquisition and had extensive experience providing high-quality professional development. They were able to develop the STARTALK program by adapting elements from more typical CFLP professional development programs, providing teacher (or future teacher) participants with research-based ideas, opportunities for active learning, sustained interactions, networking opportunities and ongoing follow-up.