

A New Model for Teaching South Asian Languages: The University of Texas Hindi-Urdu Flagship

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In Fall 2007 the Hindi-Urdu Flagship at the University of Texas at Austin will be welcoming its first group of students. Although recruitment was only started early in the calendar year, we have reached our goal of enrolling 10-15 outstanding students, who we expect will achieve the Superior (level) of language proficiency by the time they earn their undergraduate degree in four years.

1. Introduction: The Flagship Concept

The Flagship program is sponsored by the U.S. Government's National Security Education Program (NSEP). Previously, Flagships have been established for a wide variety of critical languages, including Arabic, Chinese, Russian, and Persian. The Hindi-Urdu Flagship has some unique characteristics. Thus, instead of creating a Hindi Flagship as proposed in the original invitation for proposals, Texas decided to propose a Flagship where Hindi and Urdu would receive equal billing and every student would be expected to achieve full proficiency in both.

This approach creates some unique challenges. In some ways the study of both will be natural; thus in the media, movies, and conversational situations the study of Hindi will reinforce the study of Urdu and vice-versa. However, in other contexts the study of both Hindi and Urdu will make the course of study much more ambitious. First of all, students will have to learn both the Hindi Devanagari script and the Urdu Nastaliq writing system. Although it could be argued that the total effort required to learn to use both these scripts is insignificant compared to the problems of learning thousands of characters for languages such as Chinese and Japanese, there are still extensive problems associated with switching from one system of writing to another even though much of the vocabulary, morphology and syntax remains the same. In addition, Flagship students will have to learn the very different cultures and literatures associated with Hindi and Urdu. In the first year, most of our students will be heritage students and will have one of the cultures as their point of departure, through their parents' language and/or religious affiliation; still, most of these students will not be proficient in either writing system. Thus, students will be learning both writing systems at the beginning and learn to read in both. For this purpose we will be using a large number of materials available in both scripts, such as short stories and some film scripts (including *Mughal-e Azam*). Initially the cultural context for Hindi and Urdu will be similar, but as we progress to advanced literary materials and poetry, students will have to deal with vast differences. Unlike other Flagship programs in which students will achieve proficiency similar to native speakers at the college level, Hindi-Urdu Flagship students will have a proficiency of greater range than the average native speaker, since Urdu speakers in Pakistan have no separate Hindi proficiency and Hindi speakers in India will have no separate Urdu proficiency, except for the small number of North Indian Muslims who achieve the same kind of dual proficiency.

2. Admission Criteria and Curriculum

Admission of students to the Flagship will be based on (1) aptitude for language learning (2) commitment to South Asia as an area of interest and study (3) intermediate level competence in at least two skills in Hindi or Urdu. Heritage students will most likely have intermediate level ability in the listening and speaking skills; non-heritage students with no previous knowledge of Hindi or Urdu will be required to take a summer course prior to enrollment and we expect that

they will achieve intermediate level ability in reading and one additional skill in such a course. In the first program we enrolled two non-heritage students; one had studied both Hindi and Urdu for two years and thus had intermediate level ability in all four skills in both varieties, while the other non-heritage student had studied only Hindi and had intermediate skills in reading and writing. This student however had extraordinary aptitude and learning skills and has been one of our best Flagship students.

Most Flagship students will not be expected to “major” in Hindi, Urdu, or related fields, such as Asian Studies. In fact, most will major in subjects not directly related to South Asia and South Asian languages: political science, anthropology, business, even biology and other natural sciences. Each semester there will be a daily (5 hours a week) Hindi-Urdu course, which all Flagship and only Flagship students will take. This course will be the heart of the Hindi-Urdu curriculum and will address all four of the principal language skills—reading, writing, listening, and speaking. In addition, each year students will be taking a South Asia course and in addition to the normal curriculum, there will be readings in Hindi or Urdu related to the content of the course. Native speaker teaching assistants will assist faculty members teaching these courses in selecting the readings and working with the students.

3. Study Abroad

The year of study abroad will be an indispensable part of the program. Students will spend the third year in a Flagship junior year abroad program. Since the first year abroad will be in 2009-2010, much planning is still to be done, but we expect students to take content courses taught mostly in Hindi and/or Urdu. Since students will be working in both Hindi and Urdu, we expect that the year abroad will be in at least two parts, perhaps in Lucknow for Urdu and Jaipur for Hindi. In addition, a third part of the year abroad may be used for an internship. We expect that students will be very close to the Superior (level 3) proficiency at the end of this year of immersion in the language. The fourth year of language training will consist mainly of guided projects using the language in the student’s field of study and will serve to make the students sufficiently proficient to use Hindi and Urdu in various professional functions.

4. Methodology

The methodology used in teaching language will be eclectic; thus there will be a combination of methodologies depending on the level of the students and the objectives of the various instructors. Students will be encouraged to speak Hindi/Urdu as much as possible in and out of class and class activities will be in the target language as much as possible. Students will be required to read widely in Hindi and Urdu and writing in both varieties will also be a major part of the curriculum.

Although literature and other written materials will be an important part of the language curriculum, one innovation of the Flagship is to provide exposure to a much wider variety of linguistic materials and stimuli than is found in conventional Hindi and Urdu programs. The traditional “humanities” focus on the study of literature will be complemented by the study of non-literary texts and audio-visual materials relating to political, social, commercial, governmental, religious, communal, ethnographic, environmental, developmental, medical, and scientific aspects of contemporary South Asia, leading to a determinedly “real-world” linguistic education; universal issues such as globalization, nationhood, media responsibility, security and terrorism, and peace and its opposite, would also have a natural place here. Literary texts will be studied primarily for their perspectives on these issues, such that the study of literature coheres within an integrated approach to the various social and technical functions of language. Thus even before the beginning of the first Flagship course, we prepared a large number of materials based on audio-visual materials, both commercial materials designed for native speakers and materials

recorded by our program in the U.S., India and Pakistan in the form of cultural interviews. These cultural interviews will provide extensive information about cultural and linguistic topics related to Hindi and Urdu. These materials are modeled on similar materials produced at the University of Texas for languages such as Chinese, German, and Portuguese. (see the website <http://laits.utexas.edu/orkelm/kelm.htm>).

A first-year Flagship student will find that the five weekly Flagship Language course classes provide a thorough education in advanced Hindi and Urdu on the basis of authentic contemporary materials in a variety of media. The fabric of the course will feature subject-strands, such as ecology and the environment, which will be interwoven with instruction in the technicalities of Hindi and Urdu. The weekly program will be varied in content and approach, and students will find themselves actively involved in making class presentation and guiding the course of instruction. Every effort will be made to make the course learner-oriented, not teacher-imposed.

5. Assessment

With 10-15 students enrolling in the first year and a similar or somewhat larger number enrolling in each subsequent year, from the fourth year on there will be approximately 75 Flagship students at four different levels with those in their third-year studying in India. Continuous assessment of each student will be an important part of the program in order to ensure that every student is making satisfactory progress in all skills toward reaching the Superior (level 3) rating. First of all, we will use computer exams, such as the STAMP (STAndards-based Measurement of Proficiency project: <http://casls.uoregon.edu/stamp2.php>) now being prepared for Hindi at the University of Oregon and also the ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interviews. However, many of the assessment tools will be prepared by the Flagship teachers and evaluated for consistency from year to year. For every student there will be an on-line portfolio, which will include the regular oral interviews, writings and other items produced by each student. At regular intervals the proficiency of each student will be tested and the progress made will be documented. Part of this website will be public and part will be accessed only by the student and the Flagship staff and will contain the assessment results. The public portion will include biographical information placed by the student and some examples of the student's performance in oral Hindi and Urdu.

It is essential to maximize students' exposure to Hindi and Urdu at all times; electronic, written and spoken communication with students will, as far as possible, be conducted in Hindi and Urdu. The goal is that students will feel increasingly at home in the language as they come to regard it as the means of education rather than simply as an end. All students will be encouraged to make personal connections in India and Pakistan and with the Hindi and Urdu diaspora from those countries. Joint housing arrangements for Flagship students are also under consideration.

6. The Flagship in Context

The Oregon Chinese Flagship found five issues to be critical in the start-up phase, which occurred two years ago: (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 (see Falsgraf & Spring, 2007). As in Oregon, we have found many alliances within the University with enthusiastic support from the Office of Admissions, the Office of Financial Aid, the College of Liberal Arts and the eight other colleges and schools in which the South Asia Institute's 66 faculty affiliates teach. Outside the university, we have a long-standing relationship with the only two high schools where American students learn Hindi: Bellaire High School in the Houston Independent School District, and Woodstock School in

Mussoorie, U.K. India. Our most important connection is with the American Institute of Indian Studies, which will be key to our Study Abroad program through their Hindi program in Jaipur, Rajasthan and their Urdu program in Lucknow, U.P.

7. Conclusion

A group of students who achieve Superior proficiency in both Hindi and Urdu during their undergraduate years will contribute to a new prominence for foreign language education in general and the prominence of South Asian languages in particular. The Hindi-Urdu Flagship is one approach to achieving this level of proficiency, which traditional language programs have failed to achieve. In addition, the Flagship program expects to produce materials which will be of value in all Hindi and Urdu teaching programs. The success of this program will be measured by the performance of its students, who are expected to be both proficient in Hindi and Urdu and also exhibit excellence in their major field.

Works Cited

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