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Review: Exploring the US Language Flagship Program: Professional Competence in a Second Language by Graduations; Poetry Reader for Russian Learners

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Concepts of the Prague Linguistic Circle on the American Continent and the Theory of Emotive Language,” discusses the structuralist ideas of the PLC in her publications on the semiotics of language and literary analysis. Steven Franks and Catherine Rudin’s contribution, “Invariant -to in Bulgarian,” investigates the connection of invariant -to, found in relative clauses and wh-constructions, to inflectional -to, found in the neuter definite article. They use syntactic theory as well as comparative Macedonian data to examine the issue. Finally, Donald Reindl, “The Fate of German (Post)Velars in Slovenian Loanwords,” tries to impose some order on a seemingly chaotic situation. German words were borrowed into Slovenian at various times, from various German source dialects, and into a complicated array of Slovenian dialects. In the article, Reindl classifies German velars in three broad groups of correspondences, those explained by historical source language phonology, those explained by Slovenian sound changes, and those with no clear explanation. This contribution adds significant clarity to the sound correspondences between German and Slovenian as well as adding information to several etymologies.

*Studies in Accentology and Slavic Linguistics in Honor of Ronald F. Feldstein* represents an eclectic but valuable and interesting contribution to the field of Slavic linguistics.

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This volume is a well-thought-out product that at once provides a rationale, history, and description of the now eleven-year-old US Language Flagship program, accompanied by individual vignettes of various aspects of the program across the nine Flagship languages: Arabic with 5 host institutions, Chinese (14 hosts), Hindu/Urdu (3 hosts),
Korean (2 hosts), Persian (1 domestic host), Portuguese (2 hosts), Russian (5 hosts), Swahili (1 domestic host), Turkish (2 hosts; all numbers except as noted include at least one foreign host.

For those whose contact with the Flagship program has been peripheral, here’s the basic formula: undergraduate students enrolled in most Flagship schools take 700 contact hours of second language (L2) over the course of four years, with the fourth year dedicated to coursework in broader interdisciplinary content. (A typical Russian major elsewhere takes 450–500 contact hours, including literature courses in the original) That study is then followed by an academic year in country. Students from outside Flagship center schools can “drop in” to the program almost at any point throughout their summer coursework at the centers or by applying directly to the in-country program if they have reached the qualifying 2-level entry point. Garza’s chapter at the end of the book presents models for “hybrid” programs that might help students reach Flagship eligibility.

The Flagship “needs” case, presented by Nugent and Slater in chapter 1 and Murphy, Evans-Romaine, et al. in chapter 2, covers some familiar depressing history, some of it quite recent, in somewhat understated fashion. While federal funding dollars poured into some foreign language programs starting in the late 1950s, academic practices centered on scholastic approaches with no eye on measurable language proficiency. The most intensive early undergraduate-level efforts were of little use—or, as summed by a colleague (with a bit more pith and severity), “We don’t need a bunch of one-plusses running around the country pretending they can speak Russian.”

The rest of the Flagship story does not (and should not) offer many surprises. Nugent and Slater tell us of the early need for a community of innovators who build on evidence and best practices. In fact, the program is made up of a series of common-sense components that demonstrate a basic truism: the road to a “Superior” rating requires quite a bit of long-term weightlifting based on these well-established principles:

1. The more you know when you go, the more you have when you’re back. Flagship requires an “Advanced” rating in speaking before sending learners abroad for the Great Leap Forward.
2. Achieving “Advanced” within an undergraduate timeframe requires intensive intervention stateside that goes beyond the coursework usually available in a typical college four-year program. Flagship stateside programs expand the FL curriculum beyond the traditional literature track, as called for by the 2007 MLA Report. The undergraduate curriculum therefore is modified to match the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) inverted pyramid—providing more undergraduate time on task as learners cross through the long swamp of “Intermediate Mid” (a milepost reached usually sometime during a third year of non-intensive college study) to “Intermediate High” and then “Advanced.” No teaching device or medium is spared: traditional classrooms, one-on-one tutoring, peer tutoring, telecommunication, in-country internships, and additional cultural background provided both in L1 and L2 are all provided.

3. Ascent to “Superior” requires autonomous learning, that is, a weaning away from teacher-supplied crutches (e.g., advance organizers for reception or spoon-fed topic vocabulary for production).

Three of the chapters address niche parts of the program. Two chapters tell us about Brazilian Portuguese and Russian/Chinese communication. The Brazilian Portuguese (BP) study probably has less significance for Flagship Russian. Brazil’s convenient time-zone location makes direct talk a frequent possibility. Then too, BP is a category 1 language, and, as the piece makes clear, a category “0+” language for truly proficient and motivated Spanish speakers. (I can testify to this.) The Russian/Chinese project, on the other hand, is asynchronous (time zone issues and a greater degree of recursiveness in communication). The third niche chapter covers Heritage Speakers, whose fluency, it is noted, often masks a stubborn stateside one-plus-ish proficiency all-round. Moreover, Flagship attracts fewer Heritage Speakers either because the speakers themselves see little need for improvement or because of parents’ fears of sending their kids to the place from which they themselves spent no small effort trying to leave. Finally, Heritage Speakers in Russia often have more difficulty with the cultural
transition. L2 speakers expect culture shock, and the local population, fooled by fluency and accent, is likely to expect more cultural competence (Ты ведь наш!) than from “real” foreigners. In terms of language gains, there are few surprises. Breaking through to the “Superior” level requires pedagogical intervention, even in the country.

This is one edited volume whose charts and tables, mostly understood at a glance, will mesmerize viewers. For example, if the Flagship speaking success rate (attainment of 3/“Superior”) is around three-quarters, then the semester-long Advanced Russian Language and Areas Studies Program (RLASP) – the study abroad program that was for a long time American Councils’ “flagship” – will enjoy success rates of about 50 percent. If we accept the ACTFL notion for most undergraduates, “Advanced” is the glass ceiling to be broken.

One important table is missing from the book. We know how many students at each proficiency level enter the program. We know how many reach “Superior” post-program and for which skills. But we cannot tell who went from what to what. How many students with “Advanced Low” (2-) progressed to “Advanced High” (2+) only? How many progressed to 3? Did any make it to 3+ or 4? Were there any students with “Advanced Mid” who didn’t advance to “Superior”? Did the students with “Advanced High” mostly go to 3, 3+ or 4?

The other missing piece of information in the book is the discussion of the failures. In 2014, 76.5 percent of 101 Flagship participants reached “Superior.” But that means that a quarter of the participants did not. Just under 5 percent (5 of 101 participants) came back with, for all intents and purposes, nothing; their results were 1+ or 2. A college course with such a high failure rate would soon be taken off the books. Of course, college professors and students usually don’t answer to externally set standards. Perhaps Flagship success rates are best compared to first-time Bar Exam pass rates. They’re about the same. Both experiences are rigorous, even after hard preparation. But a one-quarter failure rate deserves analysis.

Finally, the volume would have been more . . . well, fun, if we could have seen a few more of the individual student profiles. (The most complete picture comes in the Portuguese telecommunication piece.) Charts are fine. But anecdotes that support the numbers leave stronger impressions on a broader audience.
Overall, the book does a thorough job of documentation. In proficiency terms, it reads more like a fancy “Advanced High” text than “Superior.” The authors do not speculate about the potentially more controversial conclusions pertaining to some of the postulates underlying the program until toward the end of the volume. After all, it is unlikely that a school with only two years of Russian aiming for an “Intermediate Low” speaking proficiency will create a two-year curriculum with the intent to prepare participants for a fourth year at “Advanced.” Most of the interesting speculations come in Al-Batal and Glakas’s view of Flagship results beyond proficiency. The authors demonstrate the reserve of professional expertise that Flagship students take from the program—a result of the emphasis on both interdisciplinary studies and the learners’ ability to participate fully in professional level communication by the end of the program.

The book is pleasantly and logically formatted. But readers will certainly need the three-page abbreviation list to follow the extensive alphabet soup of capital letters, some of which depart from the traditional and familiar acronyms (e.g., FL as “foreign language” is traditional; LOE as “languages other than English” is nontraditional).

All in all, Murphy and Evans-Romaine have brought together the essential documentation that shows how over the first ten years of the Flagship Language Program, people have gone from level two to level three. Let threedom ring!

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Poetry Reader for Russian Learners, edited by Julia Titus and published by Yale University Press, is a welcome addition to the field of foreign language pedagogy, especially for those interested in further cultivating students’ interest in Russian culture and literature. As Titus herself writes, “one of the many wonderful rewards of learning a foreign