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Catherine Ingold

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Taking the “L” out of LCTLs: The STARTALK Experience

Catherine Ingold
Mary Elizabeth Hart

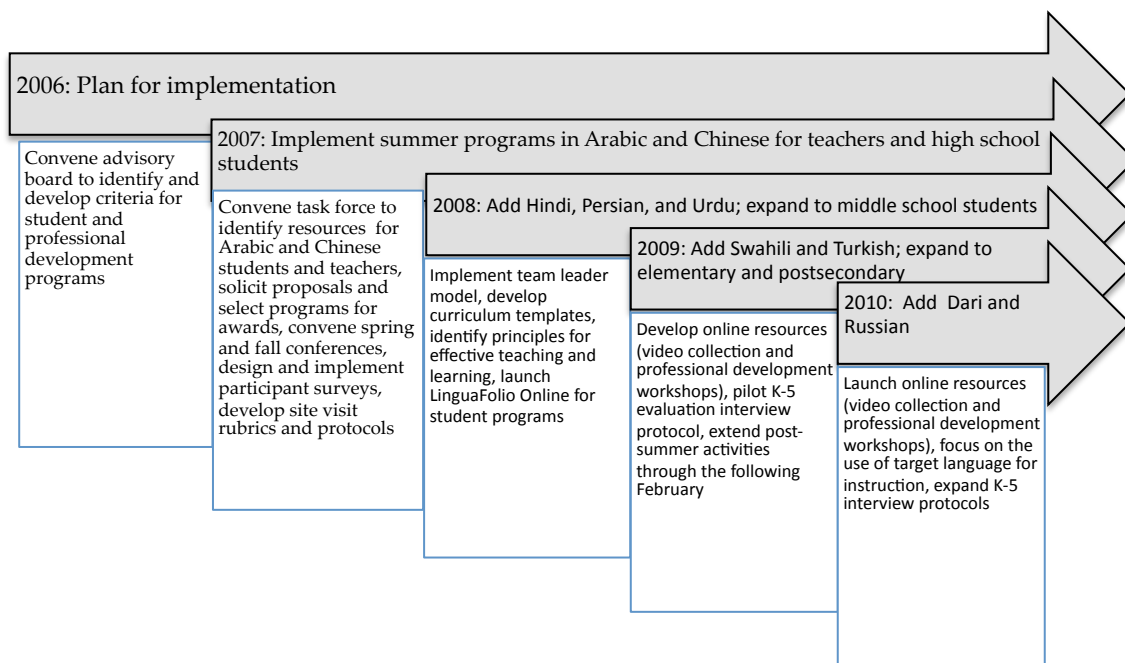
Introduction

The less commonly taught languages in the United States are often those most critical to national security. How, then, can the number of students learning these languages be increased, and how can high-quality instructors be produced to teach these languages? Having determined that foreign language skills are essential to diplomacy, economic competitiveness, and the security interests of the U.S., the Secretaries of State, Education, and Defense, and the Director of National Intelligence coordinated their efforts to expand language education beginning in kindergarten and continuing through elementary, secondary, and postsecondary education and into the workforce (United States Department of Education, 2008). STARTALK is the U.S. government’s most recent effort to address these issues. Sponsored by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, STARTALK is one outcome of the National Security Language Initiative (NSLI), a presidential initiative begun in January 2006 to increase the number of Americans learning critical need foreign languages. The National Foreign Language Center (NFLC) has been the sole contractor for implementation of this project since its inception.

STARTALK provides summer language learning experiences for students and professional development opportunities for teachers of critical languages in grades K-16. The broad goals of the project are to encourage further study of these languages among students, and also to increase the number and effectiveness of teachers of these languages, thus, consequently improve the quality of the programs in which they teach (“National Security Language Initiative,” n. d.). The ten languages currently taught in STARTALK are Arabic, Chinese, Dari, Hindi, Persian, Portuguese (as of 2011), Russian, Swahili, Turkish, and Urdu. Through 2010, the project has provided professional development opportunities to more than 4,000 teachers and learning opportunities to over 13,000 students of critical languages across the United States, reaching participants from every state and sponsoring programs in all but two states. The planning, implementation, and oversight of the programs have engaged not only

language professionals working in the ten current STARTALK languages, but also many education professionals working in more commonly taught languages, who have shared their expertise in language program planning, curriculum design, instruction, assessment, and teacher development with their colleagues in emerging language fields in which such expertise and resources remain scarce. It seems appropriate in this volume honoring the career of Dr. Richard Brecht, the NFLC’s third director and subsequently the founding director of the Center for Advanced Study of Language, to place the achievements and findings from the STARTALK project within the context of the NFLC’s original and ongoing mission to develop U.S. capacity in languages other than English. In particular, STARTALK addresses the dimension of the NFLC’s mission that focuses on increasing the percentage of Americans who have personally and professionally useful biliteracy in English and another language.

Figure 1. STARTALK Timeline



The STARTALK Experience: Planning for Implementation

The STARTALK contract issued to the NFLC beginning in 2006 mandates the general activities that the NFLC carries out in support of the project, but it has allowed significant latitude in how those activities are carried out. To begin the

planning process in 2006, the NFLC convened an advisory board to review the project's mission and goals, and to solicit advice and support in executing the project. To ensure maximum inclusion of and support from the field, the NFLC invited leaders in world language teaching and learning, second language acquisition, and less commonly languages to participate in the planning phase. During this meeting, short- and long-term strategies for implementing STARTALK were discussed for both the student and teacher professional development programs. Selection criteria for programs and program sites were identified. The group came to consensus on reasonable expectations for accomplishments in summer programs for high school students.

The initial mandate for summer 2007 was to implement high school programs for 400 students in Arabic and Chinese, and professional development opportunities for 400 current and prospective teachers of these languages in at least five states. The challenges facing STARTALK in its first year appeared daunting. In the *No Child Left Behind* environment, world languages had been de-emphasized in the curriculum and there were no obvious indicators of demand for summer programs in Arabic and Chinese. Although the NFLC was confident that the student programs would reach the enrollment target, there was no evidence that current or prospective Arabic or Chinese teachers would enroll in an unknown summer professional development program. Most Arabic and Chinese teaching in the U.S. was occurring at the postsecondary level, but the 2007 STARTALK contract mandated high school-level programs. In November 2006, the NFLC issued a request for proposals for STARTALK student and teacher programs to be implemented in summer 2007. The solicitation was announced via language listservs, through language association newsletters, and directly to Arabic and Chinese language programs across the U.S. In response to the first RFP issued, the NFLC received 59 proposals and selected 34 for funding.

Implementing the First Summer Programs

In February 2007, the NFLC convened a four-day meeting of a task force of language, curriculum, assessment, and program evaluation specialists—to the extent possible, with experience in K-12 education—to design sample curricula for high school student programs and to identify topics for teacher development programs. The NFLC assembled the STARTALK 2007 program directors and their lead instructors in Washington, D.C. in late March 2007 to introduce them to STARTALK and the materials produced by the task force, as well as provide guidance from those who had experience in running successful summer programs, such as Concordia Language Villages. These program directors then began to develop curricula, recruit participants, gather and develop materials,

and implement their programs with far less guidance than STARTALK would provide in subsequent summers.

In collaboration with the staff from the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL), STARTALK’s core staff (STARTALK Central) developed surveys to determine the demographic and educational background of both students and teachers; ascertain the teachers’ experience; and gather attitudinal and evaluative data. CAL was issued a subcontract to gather, analyze, and report on STARTALK survey data. The NFLC was required to monitor the implementation of summer programs, and this mandate included on-site visits. Observation rubrics and protocols for both student and teacher programs were developed by members of the task force who had experience in K-12 program evaluation. Curriculum and language experts were recruited and trained to conduct the site visits. A site visit report template was developed and used, so that observations could be compared and analyzed.

At the end of the summer, survey results indicated that most participants had a positive experience. Of the 346 students responding to the survey, 324 (94 percent) reported that learning a language during the summer was a good experience. Of the 268 teachers who responded to the survey, 252 (94 percent) felt that the goals of the program had been achieved (Sugarman & Malone, 2007b).

While these affective indicators were encouraging, STARTALK Central was stymied in its efforts to gather data on student language learning. The duration of the programs was generally too short to achieve gains measurable in proficiency terms, and the heterogeneity of program content thwarted the use of standardized instruments. Additional significant findings were that (1) the demand for STARTALK programs, both teacher and student, far exceeded expectations; and (2) STARTALK had provided increased opportunities for national networking among teachers, particularly for sharing materials and experiences.

Documenting Learning Outcomes

The major challenges facing STARTALK at the end of the first year were to (1) help programs to specify observable learning objectives so that outcomes could be assessed, possibly by providing a curriculum planning tool; and (2) identify or develop instruments for assessing outcomes of short, intensive language programs. It became apparent that some standardization of STARTALK programs would be necessary to address the first challenge, particularly by requiring more systematic planning of curriculum and instruction. STARTALK Central decided to develop a curriculum-focused planning template that would

impose the use of national standards (ACTFL, 2006) and promote effective instructional strategies identified in programs deemed successful by all participants. This step was taken in recognition of many program directors' relatively limited experience and expertise in language program planning and in language pedagogy, and also of the need to support the rapid program planning required in the short interval between the notification of funding and the programs' start dates. In the first year, many program directors complained about the mandated use of the template, but by the following year, its utility was widely recognized.

There was no immediate solution to the lack of assessment tools for short programs, but several efforts began that would lead to significant progress. STARTALK began working more closely with the National Council of State Supervisors of Foreign Language and the University of Oregon to enhance LinguaFolio Online as a means of gathering evidence of student learning. Experiments with the STAMP test in 2007 proved frustrating because so much of the test content had not been covered in the brief STARTALK programs. As a result, CAL undertook, at the request of STARTALK Central, an analysis of curriculum content of the student programs to identify the most commonly occurring topic areas and learning objectives (Sugarman & Malone, 2008c).

The findings from this study have served to define topic areas for an experimental assessment tool, the ACTFL Assessment of Performance toward Proficiency in Languages (AAPPL), developed by ACTFL under a STARTALK subcontract. This computer-based test of speaking proficiency at the ACTFL Novice level was developed in 2009 for Chinese, and piloted in 2010 in a number of the STARTALK Chinese programs. A similar test for Arabic is under development and will be pilot tested in summer 2011 programs.

In addition, the STARTALK project identified a need to add features to LinguaFolio Online to enable teachers to customize can-do statements related to the learning objectives of their programs and to allow students to upload evidence of their learning. These features were implemented in 2009. Subsequent studies by Ross *et al.* (2010) compared the results of an objective assessment of listening, speaking, reading, and writing via the Computerized Assessment of Proficiency (CAP) against two other data sources: teacher retrospective checklists and student self-reports in LinguaFolio. The first-year findings suggested that students can self-assess with relative accuracy, typically self-rating in can-do statements slightly below their performance on relevant test items. Individual teachers' ratings of student performance varied quite widely when compared with the objective measure. This preliminary evidence underlines the need for accessible, reliable, and affordable assessment tools for STARTALK languages, as

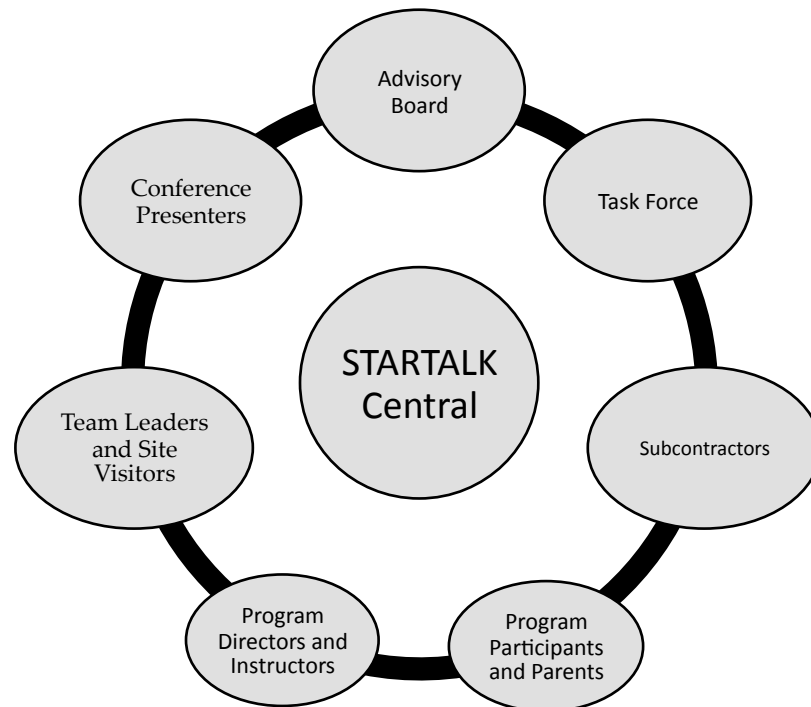
well as for enhanced teacher professional development in principles and techniques of student assessment. Meaningful assessment of student learning has emerged as one of the key challenges in providing highly effective language learning experiences, and the STARTALK project has continued to devote time and resources to this issue.

Improving Program Quality

In addition to efforts to document learning outcomes, the STARTALK project has focused more broadly on describing, assessing, and improving program quality. With data from 2007 and recommendations from the STARTALK advisory board, STARTALK staff began implementation of a continuous quality improvement process that has become a hallmark of the project and, it can be argued, one of the most important factors in the project’s success to date. This process has involved (1) systematic identification of issues that have emerged from extensive data gathering, notably program and site visitor reports and stakeholder surveys; (2) structured brainstorming with a network of experts to find solutions to issues thus identified or, for more complex challenges, to identify strategies to address them over time; (3) careful determination of how best to introduce and implement STARTALK program enhancements—new products, procedures, and/or protocols—including elicitation of feedback on each new element of the program; (4) periodic surveys of stakeholders on every aspect of the program to identify further opportunities for improvement; and (5) consistent, detailed, and timely feedback to stakeholders, including reports on survey findings.

STARTALK stakeholders (Figure 2) include (1) an advisory board whose composition varies from year to year, depending on the nature of topics on which the project leadership needs advice; (2) a task force consisting of teacher educators and expert practitioners that meets annually, examining findings from the previous year and designing training and interventions for the upcoming year; (3) STARTALK program directors; (4) instructors in student and teacher programs; (5) team leaders, who provide mentoring to a group of program directors; (6) site visitors, who accompany team leaders to observe programs; (7) participants in the student and teacher programs (and, in the case of younger students, their parents); (8) subcontractors (CAL, University of Oregon, and ACTFL); and (9) speakers, workshop providers, and invited attendees at the spring and fall STARTALK conferences. According to their experiences with STARTALK, they believe that the STARTALK structure ensures quality through rigorous protocols and extensive resources, and the detailed documentation required provides a clear understanding of all stakeholder roles.

Figure 2. STARTALK Stakeholders



Monitoring Implementation and Mentoring Teachers

In 2008, Hindi, Urdu, and Persian were added as program languages; the age range for student programs expanded to include middle school; and the number of programs increased from 34 to 81. In response to growth in the number and variety of programs, the NFLC decentralized the oversight and mentoring of funded programs. In addition to support from STARTALK Central, a team leader system was established to mentor program directors and instructional staff, and to monitor the implementation of programs in accordance with the approved proposal.

The team leader system was expected to provide expert guidance for program planning and to create synergy among program staff that shared a team leader, with directors who had already run programs in 2007 providing some guidance to new programs in the areas of program administration, meeting STARTALK requirements, and sharing resources. The team leader was to offer pedagogical guidance in the completion of the curriculum template and ensure that all elements of a successful STARTALK program were present in each program's plan for summer 2008.

Data from surveys administered to program directors, site visitors, and team leaders themselves at the end of STARTALK 2008 confirmed that this model was effective and should be continued. Seventy-five percent of the program directors reported that the team leader was of assistance in developing and refining program curricula (Sugarman & Malone, 2008). In addition to providing support and guidance to programs, the team leaders gathered rich information from their interactions with program directors, including observations on what was working well, what programs found difficult to implement, and areas for improvement in the design and implementation of the STARTALK project. Based on their experiences, team leaders have continued to recommend improvements to the STARTALK project and identify professional development priorities; they are an invaluable source of qualitative data for continuous project improvement.

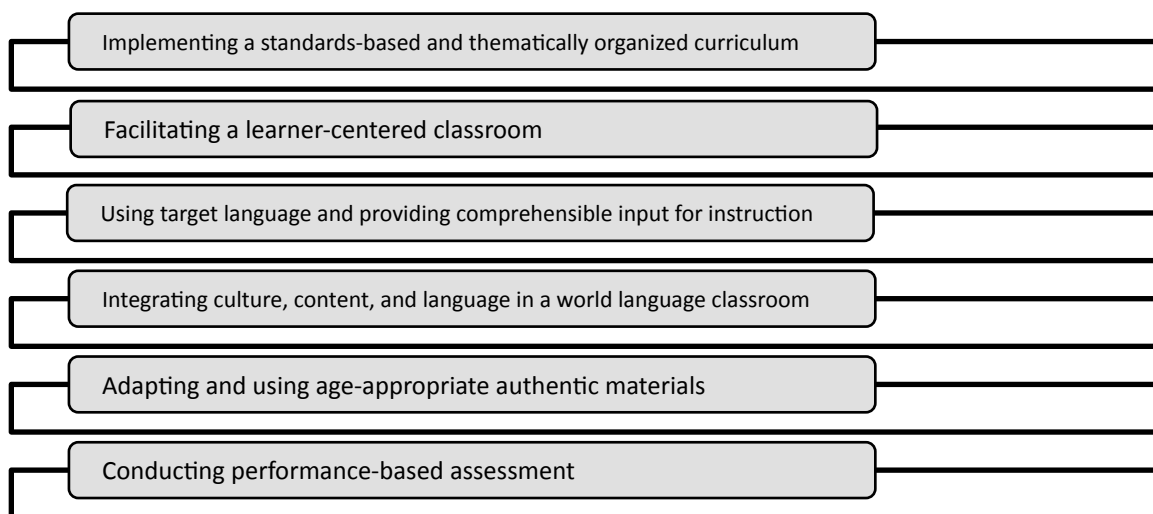
STARTALK has worked closely with a diverse group of team leaders to assure that each program receives effective guidance and that messages on effective practices are clear and consistent. A number of team leaders are curriculum experts and teacher trainers drawn from the more commonly taught languages, many with experience in mentoring LCTL programs, while an increasing number are expert teachers in the STARTALK languages. Team leaders and site visitors work from a rigorously standardized model for visits, using an observational checklist that has been revised over time. Training for consistency among team leaders and site visitors includes observation and evaluation of classroom videos using a previously developed checklist, followed by often lively discussion of how well the videotaped instructors met the criteria on the checklist. Role plays, followed by discussions, help to develop consensus around effective methods for providing formative and constructive feedback to program directors at the conclusion of site visits. These activities take place at every team leader meeting, usually held prior to the spring and fall conferences. In surveys, an overwhelming majority of team leaders report that these activities are useful in making them more reflective about their own teaching, as well as the teaching of others (Sugarman & Malone, 2008).

Sharing Experiences and Building Best Practices

The STARTALK spring pre-program and fall post-program conferences provide an opportunity for STARTALK program directors and their instructional staff to come together for targeted professional development and to share experiences, successes, and challenges. The STARTALK 2008 spring conference enabled STARTALK program directors and their staff to meet with their team leaders to begin work on planning curricula and lessons for the summer. During the spring

conferences, new program directors and instructors receive orientation on STARTALK procedures, requirements, and resources. As programs have gained experience with STARTALK procedures, the time devoted to substantive professional development around key elements of effective language programs has been expanded. The fall conferences are devoted to topics informed by site visit findings on what instructors and programs most need to continue to improve. Results of STARTALK program participant surveys are shared, as well as surveys of program directors, instructors, site visitors, and team leaders, in order to provide an evaluation of STARTALK programs from several perspectives. Again, as the programs gain experience with STARTALK, program directors have devoted more time sharing what works well and discussing unique program features. At the 2008 fall conference, STARTALK Central introduced the STARTALK-endorsed principles for effective teaching and learning, shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3. STARTALK-Endorsed Principles for Effective Teaching and Learning



Expanding to Elementary and Postsecondary Settings

In 2009, STARTALK expanded to include elementary (K-5) and postsecondary (undergraduate) programs, and added Swahili and Turkish to the list of languages. The number of programs increased from 81 to 116. The addition of elementary students presented challenges to conducting surveys, because most students in this age group would not be able to complete an online survey. The

NFLC worked with CAL to develop an interview protocol, which was piloted in 2009 by CAL staff.

Increasing Opportunities for Teacher Professional Development

It can be argued that the most important impact of the STARTALK project as of this writing has been in teacher development, both in improving the effectiveness of thousands of teachers, and in identifying and promoting effective practices in teacher professional development in the critical languages. During the first two years of STARTALK's program implementation, a number of critical issues had surfaced related to world language teacher preparation: the variability of standards and procedures for training and licensure; the scarcity of programs serving the STARTALK languages; and, most concretely, the inability to provide prompt and accurate information to prospective teachers about how to become licensed in their state. Survey data of teacher program participants had, by that time, generated a description of prospective teachers of these languages: educated native speakers of the languages, predominantly women beyond their college years, sometimes with teaching experience in non-traditional settings such as community-based programs, with very different strengths and needs compared with the undergraduate language major for whom many world language licensure programs had been developed.

Supplemental funding enabled STARTALK to host a national conference in December 2009 to address teacher preparation. Conference participants demonstrated a surprising degree of consensus about what was needed and shared information about successful models, resources for teacher assessment, and common problems. One concrete outcome was the publication of *The Teachers We Need: Transforming World Language Education in the United States* (Ingold & Wang, 2010).

End-of-year funds were made available in 2009 to institutions hosting STARTALK programs to create a total of 12 online teacher development workshops. The institutions selected had all exhibited specialized strengths in their face-to-face programs, and were willing to develop online materials on the accelerated timeline necessary to use the federal funds before the end of the fiscal year. The NFLC hosted a planning meeting with representatives of the institutions featuring sessions on instructional design of electronic materials. The resulting collection of online workshops is publicly available at startalk.umd.edu and has been widely used, both online and in various conference presentations.

In addition, the NFLC received funds to film classes from selected STARTALK programs, creating a small video collection of teaching in STARTALK languages. For a number of these languages, no such materials had

previously been available. The development of these resources for STARTALK program staff was intended to bridge the gap between well-developed curriculum plans and the implementation of day-to-day instruction in the classroom. Site visit reports from 2009 documented the need for more professional development in executing successful instructional strategies in the student programs. A number of the instructors reported difficulties in adhering to the communicative mode of instruction prescribed in the national standards and often defaulted to a teacher-centered mode of instruction; the videos show how a student-centered mode of instruction can be successfully implemented in all languages.

In 2009, awards to STARTALK institutions were extended to February 28, 2010, allowing programs the opportunity to offer follow-up activities to their summer programs. A number of teacher programs offered late winter meetings to monitor the effectiveness of their summer instruction and experiences, and allow teacher trainees to share the challenges and successes of implementing STARTALK practices in their own classrooms. Some student programs also developed and administered online opportunities for students to continue their language learning, although at a much less intensive pace than during the summer.

Recent Developments

In 2010, STARTALK added Dari and Russian for teacher trainee programs or student programs combined with a teacher program. Evaluations from 2009 recommended providing teachers an opportunity to be trained by STARTALK before implementing student programs. This recommendation allows prospective teachers and program directors the opportunity to introduce the national standards and effective instructional strategies in the student programs. In many of these teacher trainee programs, microteaching or peer-teaching experiences are provided.

During the 2010 spring conference, the professional development resources developed in 2009 were introduced to STARTALK program staff. The conference agenda was structured so that all participants had sufficient time to learn how to use the resources for teacher training purposes, or as a means of self-instruction for teachers themselves. For several of the STARTALK languages, these videos provide the first opportunity for teachers to witness instruction in the target language.

A second major focus of the spring 2010 conference was the use of target language for instruction. Although this is one of the six STARTALK-endorsed principles, an analysis of site visit reports and debriefings with team leaders after

summer 2010 revealed that instructors often reverted to English in the classroom. Several interactive sessions were conducted to provide hands-on experience to instructors and program directors in the use of the target language. Participants shared techniques for presenting common thematic lessons and classroom instructions. Subsequent site visit reports indicated that the target languages were being used for language instruction, but noted that more training was needed in checking for student comprehension during the lessons. In the spirit of continuous improvement, the spring 2011 conference provided two two-hour workshops on this strategy.

A third focus in 2010 was the expansion of the protocol used to interview K-5 students who could not complete an online survey to evaluate their learning experience. Once CAL staff had established that the protocol developed and piloted in 2009 elicited needed information, it was ready for use at more STARTALK sites. The goal of the 2010 pilot activity was to train local personnel to conduct these interviews according to the strict protocol and to report data to CAL. Both the cost and efficacy of the K-5 interview process were evaluated at the end of the 2010 pilot. Results of the analysis were favorable, and pointed to a plan for continued data collection from this age group using these methods in 2011.

Conclusion

It is difficult to prioritize the preliminary findings that have emerged from the STARTALK project. There is no way to accurately predict how STARTALK and other efforts to expand language education may positively affect U.S. language education and capabilities in the longer term. However, the STARTALK project has had an impact on thousands of students and instructors of critical languages, and the experience of STARTALK to date is suggestive of a number of preliminary conclusions:

1. Summer is a highly useful time for innovation and quality improvement in educational programs. These programs can have a local and even a national impact.
2. Students and their families are interested in and supportive of language programs, even for “difficult” languages, when the programs are of high quality. Students who participate in such programs are willing, even eager, to continue their language learning.
3. The U.S. has an abundant supply of native speakers of languages critical to national interests who are willing to be trained as teachers, and who can develop strong teaching skills over the course of several summers in well-designed, hands-on programs. However, these candidates have

- strengths and needs very different from the traditional teacher trainees for whom most world language teacher education programs are designed.
4. School districts can become interested in offering critical languages, especially when they have engaging experiences with STARTALK and the demand for these languages has been demonstrated locally.
 5. New language programs, whether for teachers or students, can improve significantly in quality over a relatively short time when provided with clear quality criteria, technical support (professional development, planning tools, and resources), and tailored, prioritized formative feedback.

Overall, the STARTALK project has met its goals of expanding access to critical languages, improving the effectiveness of critical language teachers, and improving the quality of critical language programs. In 2011, 156 STARTALK programs will be offered, as shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4. STARTALK 2011 Program Offerings by Program Type and Language

	Student	Teacher
Arabic	24	21
Chinese	63	49
Dari	1	5
Hindi	14	10
Persian	4	7
Portuguese	2	5
Russian	7	10
Swahili	2	3
Turkish	2	8
Urdu	4	6

STARTALK programs will be offered in 46 states and the District of Columbia to an estimated 8,500 participants. The majority of participants would not have these language learning and teaching experiences absent the large number and wide variety of STARTALK programs.

In terms of student perspectives, the optional nature of STARTALK programs (most older students self-select for the programs) has contributed to a remarkable level of student enthusiasm and openness to language learning, even

in cases where the program itself is very much a work in progress. The percentage of students who express a desire to continue to study the language of their summer program has consistently hovered around 80 percent (Sugarman & Malone, 2010). While STARTALK Central does not track students longitudinally, an increasing number of students in other language programs (e.g., NSEP intensive college programs and NSLI-Y summer programs abroad) are reporting enrollment of former STARTALK students, and STARTALK programs also report students enrolling for second and third summers. It seems clear that students, when provided with effective and engaging language programs, are interested and willing to persist in language learning. A number of STARTALK students have enrolled in second-level language courses because of the interest developed during a STARTALK program. Anecdotal reports from their teachers note that these students often assume leadership roles and participate actively in language classes. They are able to demonstrate what they can do in the language, are more likely than other students in the class to take risks in producing language, and are confident in their ability to learn.

The impact of STARTALK programs on the availability of school-year language programs has been one of the more surprising outcomes of the project to date: 39 percent of STARTALK student programs report that school-year programs in their language had been started as a result of the STARTALK program, and an additional 29 percent reported start-up of local afterschool or heritage programs. There are a number of possible interpretations of these data. One is that the STARTALK program offered an opportunity to respond to an existing but unrealized local interest. Another is that the interest generated by the STARTALK program catalyzed a critical mass of interest and commitment. In any case, the data suggest that there is more latent interest and demand for such programs than has been thought.

Both survey and anecdotal data confirm that teachers participating in STARTALK have improved their effectiveness in the classroom: 99 percent of teacher program participants surveyed report increased confidence in their teaching. For teachers of these less commonly taught languages, the STARTALK program often offers the first opportunity for professional development targeted to their respective languages where unique features of instructing others, particularly in the communicative-oriented classroom, can be addressed. Teachers report that network building has been the most enduring effect of the STARTALK program. These teachers remain in virtual contact with each other for purposes of support, materials sharing, and online workshops. Teachers also report that after a STARTALK program, they are more willing to implement new

strategies. Several participants refer to the STARTALK experience as “transformative.”

Approximately 50 percent of teachers have reported their intention to become certified language teachers, a long and arduous process, and one that will contribute to the pool of highly qualified teachers of these languages.

It is clear from evaluation data that both STARTALK student programs and teacher programs have been able to break new ground, experiment and innovate, and improve from summer to summer by drawing the lessons learned from participant and site visitor feedback. Over 90 percent of programs have reapplied for STARTALK funding over several years. The policy of the funder and STARTALK Central is to continue programs that are reasonably successful according to program assessment data, particularly if they give evidence of progress and of learning from past experience and feedback.

With the continuation of successful programs and the growth of new programs, each year STARTALK provides innovative and exciting ways for students to learn to communicate in critical languages, thus fulfilling the project’s goal of increasing interest in and the learning of these languages. Moreover, STARTALK teacher programs have created professional communities of teachers in some of the less commonly taught languages and strengthened existing communities by providing professional development to these teachers, pathways to certification, and resources for language instruction and assessment for LCTLs.

STARTALK stakeholders, from program directors to administrators, report that the STARTALK model as implemented is supporting the vision of STARTALK to provide effective language learning experiences to students and professional development opportunities to current and future teachers.

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