

Extended History of the National Foreign Language Center

Early Beginnings

The National Foreign Language Center (NFLC) was founded in the mid-1980s as a direct result of an unprecedented national interest in improving foreign language and international studies education by President Carter's Commission on Language and International Studies in 1979. It was also, and more immediately, the brainchild of its founding director, Dr. Richard Lambert, a sociologist as well as foreign language and area studies expert at the University of Pennsylvania.

From the early 1970s to the late 1980s, Dr. Lambert conducted surveys and spearheaded research on our nation's foreign language teaching infrastructure and area studies programs. It was his subsequent call for the establishment of a national foreign language center, in his book *Points of Leverage* (Social Science Research Council, 1986), which eventually led to the birth of the NFLC. Dr. Lambert's paper highlighted the need for a national strategy for enhancing language capacity in the U.S. and placed unprecedented emphasis on the entire panoply of language learning environments, formal education, heritage/immigrant communities, government, and proprietary. The message struck a chord with leaders of the Ford Foundation, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the Exxon Education Foundation, and the Pew Charitable Trusts, who turned the NFLC into a reality in 1986 through a generous multimillion-dollar start-up grant.

Since inception, the NFLC has focused on formulating public policy to make our language teaching systems more responsive to national needs. To this end, it has conducted surveys to collect information on the evolving foreign language needs of the U.S. economic, diplomatic, and national security sectors. It has also organized numerous discussion forums over the years to bring together researchers and policymakers in a search for applied solutions (see, for example, a report on the findings of a 1993 NFLC-sponsored education conference in *The Annals, American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 532; March 1994). Moreover, until 2000, the NFLC maintained an Institute of Advanced Studies as well as an Adjunct Fellows Program, made possible through a grant from the Mellon Foundation. The Mellon Fellows Program enabled foreign language scholars to conduct research in fields directly related to the NFLC's mission and activities. Beginning in the mid-nineties, the NFLC fellows and staff also participated in an NFLC-initiated monthly Language Policy Forum, which regularly brought in outside experts to discuss subjects as diverse as the status of heritage language policy in the U.S., the future direction of international education policy, language choice in the nation's schools, and more effective methods of data collection. These discussions led not only to fruitful exchanges and institution building among scholars, but also to substantive projects, such as a multimillion-dollar, USED-funded project called Evaluation of Exchange, Language, and International Area Studies (EELIAS). Begun in 1997, the five-year EELIAS project led to the development of a web-based data reporting and tracking system for USED grantees still in use today. To manage this data, EELIAS also created a project database that supplies government officials as well as members of Congress with critical information on the effectiveness of foreign language and area studies projects funded under Title VI of the U.S. Higher Education Act (HEA).

Over the years, the NFLC has collaborated on other similar projects including the following:

National Council of Organizations of Less Commonly Taught Languages (NCOLCTL), a new organization which the NFLC helped to found in 1990 with support of the Ford Foundation. NCOLCTL was the fruit of a series of meetings, organized by the NFLC since the mid-1980s, focusing on the unique needs of teachers of languages such as Chinese, Arabic,

and other less commonly taught languages. It first consisted of just fewer than two dozen institutional members, including all of the major "LCT" language teaching associations that represent individual languages or geographically defined language groups in addition to individuals. NCOLCTL hosts annual meetings as well as an interactive website and publishes the Journal of National Council of Less Commonly Taught Languages.

Language Mission Project, funded by the Henry Luce Foundation, was a three-year endeavor launched in 1996 involving 15 institutions to re-evaluate the objectives and practice of language teaching and learning at the undergraduate level. The goal of the project was the development of new programmatic and curricular models to enhance language learning in postsecondary institutions; a noteworthy outcome of this project was the convening at the University of Washington in 1997 of an unprecedented national symposium on heritage languages in higher education, inaugurating a series of such conferences.

LangSource(formerly LangNet 1.0), funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) in 1999, a two-year pilot project to develop and test a model for improving knowledge of, access to, and use of the best available foreign language instructional materials and resources. The project produced a peer reviewed and carefully screened online bibliographical resource to support foreign language teaching at the university level. The first phase of the project focused on African languages, including Swahili, Yoruba, and Hausa, while the second phase added Spanish, German, and Japanese.

LangSource Expansion, a three-year project made possible by a grant from the U.S. Department of Education in 2005, to assist foreign language teachers by expanding the existing database of language learning materials to include resources that are useful, unbiased, accurate, and developmentally appropriate for teaching culture to students in grades K-12. It also assists teachers and teacher educators by identifying carefully selected resources useful for developing teacher competencies in teaching culture to their students.

Recursos para la Enseñanza y el Aprendizaje de las Culturas Hispanas (REACH), funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) and the Mellon Foundation, a project to build a website dedicated to providing Spanish language learning materials specifically for "heritage" speakers (home/family). REACH offers training materials and resources not only about the Spanish language, but also, about Hispanic and Latino cultures for use by teachers and their heritage Spanish-speaking students. Completed in 2002, the project benefited from the close cooperation of the American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese. The project also funded a survey of Spanish departments in U.S. institutions of higher education that documented challenges faced in teaching heritage and foreign language learners of Spanish together, and the relatively small percentage of programs able to provide differential programming for heritage students.

A Giant Leap Forward

In 1993 the NFLC published a paper entitled "National Strategic Planning in the Less Commonly Taught Languages" by Drs. Richard Brecht and Ronald Walton, both subsequently directors of the NFLC, about the need for a revolution in foreign language learning in the U.S. The paper called for a shift away from the almost exclusive focus on Western European languages in the nation's schools to a new policy emphasizing the development of substantive capacity in less commonly taught, morphologically challenging languages, such as Arabic, Chinese, and other Asian languages and African languages, among others. Less than five years after the fall of the Berlin Wall and almost a decade

before the horrific attacks of September 11th, the authors called for the construction of foreign language "architecture" in the U.S. that reflected the new, non-Eurocentric geopolitical exigencies which the U.S., the authors argued, could ill afford to ignore.

By the fall of 2001, events brought heightened urgency to the need for a new focus on the teaching of languages long neglected in the U.S., the new focus advocated by Brecht and Walton back in the early 1990s. These events had a direct impact on the trajectory of certain NFLC projects. Specifically, about this time the NFLC received a federal grant to revisit its earlier LangNet 1.0 project with the goal of providing, not just bibliographical and training materials, but also direct on-line instruction. What subsequently emerged was LangNet 2.0 (now simply dubbed "LangNet"), a massive web-based foreign language training system which provides students with increasingly sophisticated lessons, or "learning objects," based on original, foreign language materials (articles, addresses, reports, and audio clips). LangNet has since grown to include 4,500 instructional hours in some 33 languages, most of them less commonly taught (the exceptions being Spanish, French, and Italian). One of its many features is a "learning object" authoring tool that provides instructors with user-friendly templates with which to create pedagogically rigorous lessons. This cyberspace program soon grew beyond its designers' original objectives. In the relatively brief period of its existence, LangNet has become one of the U.S. government's premier resources for foreign language training.

As a result of LangNet, the NFLC staff has grown exponentially in recent years and now counts among its ranks, not only foreign language pedagogues and policy analysts, but also, instructional designers, content development managers, multimedia professionals (including video and web design experts), quality assurance editors, foreign language translators, information technology specialists, audio technicians, and an ever-expanding network of foreign language consultants, and native speakers of languages supported by LangNet and trained by the NFLC to develop LangNet learning objects. Having witnessed this growth firsthand as LangNet's Principal Investigator, Dr. Catherine Ingold, now also Director of the NFLC, decided to leverage this expertise and pool of resources for an entirely new initiative focused on the U.S. domestic arena. The NFLC consequently launched in 2004 the Language Access Initiative, a program involving projects designed to alleviate the extreme shortage of trained interpreters in the American health care field as well as in federal, state, and local government. Now well into its second year, the initiative has amassed a wealth of information which it is channeling into a series of project proposals. LangNet too has gained additional focus when the NFLC received a USED grant in 2006 to develop LangNet learning objects in Chinese for K-12 students.

In 2006, The National Foreign Language Center undertook the initial planning phase of a multi-year project entitled "STARTALK," which is one of the projects of the National Security Language Initiative (NSLI). NSLI is a multi-agency effort to expand foreign language education in under-taught critical languages by funding new and existing programs throughout students' learning careers, kindergarten through university. It also provides incentives and rewards for foreign language learning and use in the work force. Agencies that are a part of NSLI include the US Department of State, the US Department of Education, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, and the US Department of Defense. To learn more about this initiative, visit <http://www.ed.gov/about/inits/ed/competitiveness/nsli/nslibrochure.pdf>.

During the summer of 2007, NFLC implemented STARTALK programs in Arabic and Chinese language for high school students and professional development opportunities for prospective and current Arabic and Chinese teachers. STARTALK funded 34 institutions from 22 states and the District of Columbia, including both public and private universities, high

schools, and heritage schools. Over 438 teachers and 874 students participated. STARTALK continued in 2008 by funding summer programs for students and teachers in Arabic, Chinese, Urdu, Hindi, and Persian. Student programs projected enrollments of over 2600 students and 1000 teachers for 2008.

What remains to be told has yet to become "history."