Chinese Language Learning in Montana

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By Otto Koester, Associate Director of the Maureen and Mike Mansfield Center

What do you call someone who speaks three languages? Multilingual.

What do you call someone who speaks two languages? Bilingual.

What do you call someone who speaks one language? American.

A trend has been underway across the U.S. in the last decade to address the punch line of the above joke, which is heard often in European and Chinese high schools: more K-12 students and their parents are telling school administrators and teachers they want more foreign language instruction. This is largely because learning a foreign language is now seen as necessary for becoming part of a growing global workforce. At the same time, surveys report that the percentage of students actually taking foreign languages before high school graduation has remained constant for the past thirty years. Interestingly, high school students are enrolling less in German and French courses and more in Spanish, Arabic, and Chinese.

These trends are also evident in Montana. In 2009, with many school districts facing budget cuts, the Maureen and Mike Mansfield Center at The University of Montana (UM) introduced instruction in Mandarin Chinese into the state’s public schools. Before then, no public school in the state offered Chinese. Because there are no certified teachers of Chinese in Montana, the decision was made to establish a Confucius Institute in collaboration with China’s Southwest University of Politics and Law and the Chinese Ministry of Education. This arrangement resulted in the arrival of two teachers from China.
to develop new Mandarin courses for use at the high school level. During the first year, approximately 150 Montana students enrolled in first-year Mandarin, about one third of them for dual high school-university credit. Instruction for students in Billings, Bozeman, and Helena was online, but instruction was face-to-face in Missoula where UM is located.

The first year pilot program was successful enough that second-year Mandarin instruction was added beginning in August 2010 by bringing two additional teachers from China to the Mansfield Center. By partnering with the newly created Montana Digital Academy, it was possible to offer online instruction in both first and second-year Chinese not only to students in Billings, Bozeman, and Helena, but also in every other school district in the state. In addition, the courses were made available to all home-school students free of charge. Face-to-face instruction continues to be offered in the Missoula high schools for level-one classes, with level two classes available on-line.

Funded by the Montana legislature, the Montana Digital Academy is helping to meet the state’s challenge of providing sufficient educational opportunities to students and families living in rural areas. A high-tech, Internet-based learning management system funded by the State of Montana, it allows students and teachers of Chinese to logon twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week from any location. And the Digital Academy’s state-of-the-art technology facility includes a wealth of resources to enrich students’ language learning experience. Simultaneous student/teacher interactions, simulations, flash animation, videos, podcasts, and audio not only provide an array of learning approaches but direct instructional feedback. As the technology also provides visual tools for pronouncing Chinese words and their unique intonations as students also learn how to write Chinese characters.
In addition to Chinese language courses, the Mansfield Center also organizes professional development workshops for teachers, Chinese language and cultural activities for elementary school children, and musical events for the general public. Over the past year and a half, teacher development workshops held in numerous Montana cities focused on Chinese history, geography, culture, family, youth, education, and contemporary economic and political issues. In summer 2010, children and parents alike participated in folk craft workshops in Chinese calligraphy and learned how to make traditional stuffed tigers, Tibetan wrapped ornaments, and other traditional crafts objects. The CI plans to expand all these activities as it moves ahead.

Without question, China is becoming an ever more influential economic, political, and cultural force in its interactions with the U.S. and the rest of the world. By some estimates, Mandarin Chinese will become the second most important international language within thirty years, with English first and Spanish third.

It is important that our children have every opportunity to learn the languages and communication skills they will need to live and thrive in a world that includes China as a major player. Mike Mansfield, a former professor of East Asian history before he became a senator, would agree.

Thank you for listening.

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