“CelTA is a tremendous opportunity for all language programs to share expertise and collaborate on innovation in language teaching and learning,” says College of Arts and Letters Dean Karin A. Wurst. “CelTA is designed to develop and improve language teaching overall. And, because language proficiency is closely tied to language teaching competency, we believe that CelTA can make a critical difference to the University’s language students in providing them with a measurable career edge in the global marketplace.”

The Center for Language Teaching Advancement is engaged in many activities to provide language teaching and learning support through initiatives in assessment, curriculum, professional development, outreach, and technology.

AsSessing Learning
Current language teaching methodology focuses on teaching for proficiency. That means students in language classes aren’t just expected to learn about the language. They are expected to use it. Proficiency testing, which is being adopted by many programs, measures a student’s communicative ability. New K-12 language teachers in Michigan, for example, must demonstrate they can use the language by passing oral proficiency interviews, and CelTA’s assessment center is expanding its services to become a state center for such proficiency testing. In response to requests from other institutions, the center continues to seek an outside market for its assessment instruments. CelTA has also formed a partnership with the Center for Applied Linguistics in Washington, D.C. to improve proficiency testing for Arabic.

“CelTA brings a standardized approach to assessment at MSU by training instructors in all language departments how to evaluate students’ speaking abilities on the nationally recognized scale developed by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages…”

In addition to proficiency testing, CelTA’s services include language placement testing, consulting services and workshops for both faculty and students. While faculty should constantly strive to improve their teaching, students also need to strive to become more effective learners. Many students enter the university not understanding what language proficiency is, and this creates anxiety among those with proficiency requirements. CelTA student workshops help students understand the nature
of proficiency and proficiency testing, and train them in effective language learning strategies so they have the tools for success.

Says Reed, “Requiring proficiency as an outcome leads to a greater emphasis on teaching and learning activities that contribute to the ability to actually speak a language in useful ways. The emphasis on real communication skills in the foreign language curriculum makes it possible for all students, not just a few talented learners, to develop a useful command of another language. Obviously, students who speak only English can only interact with that subset of individuals from other language backgrounds who have chosen to learn English; learning ‘their’ language vastly expands the professional and social networks that are so vital to a healthy society. Reed notes that as teaching and learning trends change, the type of testing CeLTA utilizes must change, too.

“For many years, there was a legitimate but somewhat limited emphasis underlying language requirements on developing an appreciation of how other people such as novelists and film writers used their languages, and a focus on learning how other languages differed from our own in grammatical and semantic terms,” Reed says. “The trend for several years now has been to go beyond learning ‘about’ languages and to help students actually learn to speak other languages.”

CURRICULUM AND INNOVATION
CeLTA strives to improve language learning and teaching through innovation and adherence to best practices. Dr. Ok-Sook Park teaches Korean at MSU and wanted her students to have more personalized speaking opportunities and less anxiety when talking to native speakers of Korean.

CeLTA works to creating synergy among all MSU language instructional units while improving teaching practices across languages and levels.
She received a CeLTA fellowship to support her “In-Class Language Partner Program.” A group of native speakers of Korean from MSU’s international community now come to the Korean language class once a week to serve as in-class conversation partners, conversing in Korean on topics based on weekly lesson content.

“One of the challenging tasks that language instructors face is to create opportunities where students have lively exchanges within an authentic social context. The students interact with native speakers of Korean in order to promote positive linguistic changes such as negotiation and exposure to a wide range of functional language discourse,” Dr. Park explains. Through these interactions, she continues, students can “experiment and take risks to improve.”

The project met with astounding success. Students surveyed about their experience reported that it built their confidence in speaking by allowing them to interact with native speakers in a comfortable environment, and hear different accents from different speakers. The international students from Korea also benefitted, and one explained, “I feel our roles were reversed between a student and me. I am so accustomed to be a learner of English. However, I teach Korean as a second language to English speakers. It is different experience to me and special experience to me.”

Dr. Park shared her program on a CeLTA professional development discussion panel, and now the Arabic flagship program at MSU has decided to implement her model of in-class conversation partners.

Many curricular initiatives focus on student co-curricular activities and alternative paths to proficiency. In addition to excellent classroom instruction, reaching high proficiency levels requires opportunities for language learning outside of class. Commenting on the co-curricular opportunities provided by CeLTA, center Co-Director Dr. Susan Gass says, “A rich, co-curricular experience provides added benefits such as exposure to foreign language TV, international internships, and study abroad programs, all of which can help undergraduates increase their language proficiency as they integrate their language skills into their future careers. An important co-curricular activity includes internships abroad for our undergraduate seniors allowing them to job-shadow in schools in Germany. This model can and will be expanded to other countries and languages.”

Another initiative is the creation of a program designed to allow students from varied disciplines to reach professional levels of proficiency. “Students recognize that speaking a language that complements their field of study gives them a sharp edge when seeking employment,” Co-director Dr. David Prestel explains. “But fitting this all into four or five years of study requires some creative thinking. CeLTA is exploring how this can be done by combining classroom instruction with independent study activities, intensive instruction, study abroad, and content-based courses.”

CeLTA is also exploring a student-centered program which pairs self-study software with weekly conversations with native speakers of the language. “This combination provides students with a flexible path towards proficiency,” explains Associate Director Anne Baker. “It is ideal for motivated students who either can’t fit a traditional language class into their schedule or who just want to complement their coursework with self-study.” Preliminary studies using such methods suggest this is an effective combination for motivated learners.

A new Masters degree in language teaching is under development at CeLTA and, pending approval, will begin in fall 2011. It will be the first such degree in the country to target teachers of less commonly taught languages. Its unique hybrid program will offer core courses online, while a required “experiential module,” designed by the student and monitored by the MSU mentor, will occur face-to-face.

PROMOTING EXCELLENCE IN TEACHING

A good teacher never stops being a student, and seasoned faculty as well as new graduate students are encouraged to attend a range of professional development activities.
A feature lecture series given by nationally known experts in the field of second language acquisition or teaching brings together the MSU teaching community every semester. Workshops on pedagogy keep teachers current on topics such as technology and curricular innovation, and observation services for MSU language teachers provide a personalized approach to professional development.

Graduate student Daniel Walter serves as a graduate teaching assistant in the German program and is pursuing the Graduate Certificate in College Foreign Language Teaching, administered by CeLTA. His involvement as an intern for CeLTA’s Community Language Schools has given him experience in program planning and coordination. CeLTA professional development opportunities have helped him hone his language teaching through friendly classroom observations and workshops.

“CeLTA’s workshops not only provide us with great professional development that help us translate teaching pedagogy into practice, but also give us a forum for meeting other graduate students and faculty from different languages,” Walter explains. “We can share and learn from one another. We can make connections. Discussing new ideas with different people adds inspiration and creativity to teaching.”

PROMOTING LANGUAGE IN THE COMMUNITY

While the language departments at MSU have offered community-based language and culture outreach programs on campus and at area schools since 2002, programming has been expanded dramatically to include a variety of programs for K-12 students and professional development opportunities for K-16 teachers. The Community Language School (CLS), housed within CeLTA, is designed to help jumpstart K-12 students’ language learning skills. At the same time, CLS provides opportunities for MSU faculty, graduate and undergraduate students to work together in actual language classes, thus providing important links with the larger community. Faculty members oversee graduate and undergraduate students who are learning to be language teachers. They, in turn, teach and mentor the CLS students. All three groups work together to teach the classes. Our undergraduate students get much-coveted experiential learning opportunities, and are able to see their studies in a real-world context. Our graduate students learn valuable leadership skills that set them apart from their peers in more traditional programs.

CLS currently offers language and culture programs for children ages 3-18 in Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Greek, Italian, Japanese, Portuguese, Russian, and Spanish. Initiatives also include providing co-curricular language activities associated with study abroad, service learning and volunteer opportunities, and community-based language and culture programs for regional K-12 schools. Julie Bock, a graduate exchange student from Albert-Ludwigs-University Freiburg in Breisgau, Germany, volunteers with the French for Kids language and culture program. “It was a very rewarding experience! The kids get really excited and were so willing to learn. It was wonderful to see them so engaged learning another language and culture.”

“It is ideal for motivated students who either can’t fit a traditional language class into their schedule or who just want to complement their coursework with self-study.”

As CLS Director, Dr. Angelika Kraemer works with first grade through college graduate program students as well as with language teachers.

TECHNOLOGY

In today’s connected and interconnected world, language is not an isolated skill, but is essential to MSU’s commitment to be part of the world community. Through their language skills, students become members of a global conversation that begins in the classroom, and carries on throughout their lives. Technology helps students reach the level of proficiency that is necessary to communicate in a foreign language. Through language portfolios, students track their own progress, their teachers can target areas where they need help, and potential employers can see evidence of what students can do.

(Winter 2010 » 63)
CeLTA’s technology tools also facilitate language teaching. In the 21st century, the concept of “classroom” has morphed from a central location where students and teachers come together, to any time and any place that a learner is ready to learn. CeLTA is leading the way in facilitating distance learning, mobile access to materials, and online testing. An online database, Conversation Connection, encourages students to continue their learning outside of class, by providing a means by which students can connect with other speakers of the language they are learning.

MSU continues to be a leader in many aspects of using technology for language teaching and learning. As CeLTA is called upon to do more and more for language teaching on campus, technology will continue to be an important asset that helps us reach teachers and students.

GLOBAL BUSINESS NEEDS

While CeLTA was developed primarily to improve language teaching for both faculty and students at MSU, the Center also responds to the burgeoning needs of U.S. and worldwide employers for highly competent language-speaking employees.

Driven by current and future real-world demand, CeLTA directly addresses the global business, societal, and governmental need for:

• more people who can speak different languages
• more and better ways to teach those languages
• more and better approaches to language proficiency testing

• more ways to effectively use technology in language teaching
• more community-based assistance and outreach programs
• enhanced relationships with area schools and teachers

A recent report, “What Business Wants: Language Needs in the 21st Century,” commissioned by The Language Flagship, an initiative of the National Security Education Program, provides evidence that employees with foreign language skills offer their organizations distinct advantages. The report goes on to say that U.S. companies are hard-pressed to find sufficient numbers of American workers with bilingual skills. It also details some of the disadvantages experienced by U.S. enterprises that operate with a primarily monolingual workforce, not only when conducting international business but on the home front as well.

“CeLTA responds directly to this critical business need for advanced language teaching and student preparation,” says Dean Wurst. “Its innovative, one-of-a-kind approach well-positions MSU’s language teachers and graduates to lead the way in helping solve one of the world’s most challenging business problems.”

MSU hosted the Fulbright Foreign Language Teaching Assistant Orientation in August 2010, including 60 FLTAs from 28 countries, representing 17 different languages.

(Left) Outreach Specialist Dr. Wafa Hassan works to help fulfill the critical need in the U.S. for grads who know Arabic. (Right) CeLTA’s assessment component provides proficiency testing, placement testing, consulting services and workshops.