Michigan State University will use a three-year, $1.2 million grant from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation to lead a multi-university research project to improve the teaching of less commonly taught languages (LCTLs). Faculty from MSU’s Center for Language Teaching Advancement (CeLTA), housed in the College of Arts & Letters, will direct the initiative on behalf of the Big Ten Academic Alliance (formerly the Committee on Institutional Cooperation).

“Less commonly taught languages are becoming increasingly important in a global economy,” said University Distinguished Professor Susan Gass, Co-director of CeLTA and Director of MSU’s Second Language Studies Program. “By working collaboratively with institutions in the Big Ten Academic Alliance, MSU will be in a position to use its many strengths in language teaching and learning to further the general mission of creating world-class language programs.”

The project builds upon CourseShare, developed by the Committee on Institutional Cooperation (CIC), to provide LCTL access to Big Ten Academic Alliance institutions.

Throughout the next three years, the consortium hopes to develop templates for the online teaching of LCTLs, which will be shared among Big Ten Academic Alliance institutions, so more students nationwide will achieve high proficiency in these languages.

At the universities, most funding for language instruction has gone toward more commonly taught languages, Gass said. So LCTL research and instruction have encountered difficulties, such as lack of human and financial resources. CourseShare has addressed some of those challenges, but the new partnership will more effectively coordinate offerings to reflect best practices in language teaching, she said.

“The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation grant further recognizes MSU as an international leader in language research and pedagogy,” said Christopher P. Long, Dean of the College of Arts & Letters, who is principal investigator of the grant. “The expertise the Big Ten Academic Alliance brings to the study of language acquisition is unparalleled. We at MSU are thrilled to help facilitate collaboration among such a talented group of scholars and institutions.”

The partnership will focus on both instruction research and language research. By the end of the first year, the consortium hopes all members of the working group will be familiar with best practices in assessment and curriculum development.

Collectively, Big Ten Alliance institutions offer an average of 30 LCTLs. In addition, seven of the 16 federally funded Language Resource Centers are housed at Big Ten Academic Alliance institutions. MSU offers 29 LCTLs, including Vietnamese, Persian, Sanskrit, and Bengali.

“We are excited about MSU’s leadership of this effort,” said Barbara Allen, Executive Director of the Big Ten Academic Alliance. “This grant will add a couple of new dimensions to CourseShare, including integrating various modes of instruction and teaching a number of languages in a sustainable fashion. Through these efforts by MSU, we can continue to build language programs that will be available to every campus throughout the Big Ten.”