

Creating Priorities for East Asian Languages: Continuing Dominance of the Big Three

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Overview: The e-LCTL Initiative

The e-LCTL Initiative began in 1999 through the initiative of Michigan State University's area studies centers with funding from the U.S. Department of Education to assess the current state of "less commonly taught languages" or LCTLs, in the United States at the post-secondary level. The initiative built on previous reports by the Modern Language Institute and statistics describing Defense Language Institute (DLI) and U.S. Foreign Service Institute (FSI) programs. Although these earlier studies provided part of the LCTL picture, they left out much and needed updating. The project planners of the current e-LCTL Initiative, recognizing that gathering an accurate image of the state of the field was essential to maintaining existing language programs and planning for new demands, proceeded to gather the latest information available through a variety of approaches.

What might be called the passive part of the project required collecting available data on where LCTLs are taught, who is teaching them, and who is studying them in the U.S. This U.S.-focused gathering of information went forward in tandem with the creation of a statistical assessment of actually used throughout the world. The global profile is important for clarifying key factors used in establishing priorities in LCTL teaching (see "World Overview" at: <http://langinnovate.msu.edu/summaries/world/>). Access to successful proposals submitted to the Department of Education Title VI program for the 2003-2005 funding cycle helped create a profile that detailed which East Asian languages were actually being taught at leading academic institutions throughout the U.S.

The active part of the project brought together project leaders with counterparts at other U.S. Department of Education Title VI National Resource Centers (NRC area studies centers), Language Resource Centers (LRC), and Centers for International Business Education and Research (CIBER) to learn about LCTL programs from people who directly design and administer them. Open meetings also enabled individual area studies scholars as well as DLI and FSI officials to contribute to discussions aimed at assaying the current state of LCTL education and finding innovative ways to coordinate and share language resources. The project aimed at creating a basic profile that can be regularly updated to assure its continuing usefulness in planning needed LCTL programs.

Project leaders have also recognized that new technologies may contribute to filling future needs. Thus, the “e” in “e-LCTL” represents “electronic resources” or virtual distance learning methods that may be used to bridge gaps or augment “human resources” in developing and teaching LCTLs.

The issue of creating language teaching priorities is directly linked to the question of how best to use resources. Project leaders opted to leave the setting of priorities to scholars and other experts directly engaged in area studies and language education. Meetings were organized with these representatives, who were grouped regionally according to the broad geographic categories used in the Title VI program (e.g., “Africa,” “East Asia,” and “Caribbean and Latin America”).

Setting Priorities for East Asian Languages: The Process, 1999-2004

Setting priorities for East Asian languages has been an active part of the e-LCTL project, one carried out through a series of open discussions among scholars, and area studies and language teachers. The first meeting for the East Asia region was held at the national “Distance Learning of the Less Commonly Taught Languages Conference,” from February 1 to 3, 2002 in Arlington, Virginia. Among the many sessions devoted to LCTL teaching and distance education, a special two-part meeting was convened to discuss the state of East Asian language teaching in the U.S. and to take the first steps toward setting priorities for East Asian LCTLs. Thirty people attended each of these first two gatherings, which were conducted as open forums moderated by the e-LCTL project leader for East Asia. Participants ranged from on-line teachers of Japanese language at colleges in rural Wisconsin to officers from the Defense Language Institute in Washington, D.C. Although a variety of views emerged, this first meeting also brought forward common issues and shared concerns that would be echoed in subsequent discussions.

These issues and concerns, which will be discussed in detail below, became the focus of an open session during the annual meeting of the Association for Asian Studies, New York, 2003. They were raised again at gatherings of the Title VI National Resource Center Directors, Washington DC, September 2003; the National Council of Less Commonly Taught Languages, UCLA, Spring 2003; and at the e-LCTL Initiative Meeting, Santa Fe, NM, February 2004. In addition to meetings, the East Asian e-LCTL Project Coordinator polled in writing the Directors of all East Asian Title VI National Resource and FLAS Centers (circa 1999-2003) to determine the state of East Asian language instruction at their institutions, and to solicit their views on LCTL teaching priorities, present and future.

Ranking Priorities: General Criteria versus Specific Realities in the East Asian Language Field

P.I. David Wiley, Director of the Michigan State University's African Studies Center, and other e-LCTL Project Coordinators have suggested six basic questions to consider in ranking LCTL priorities. These are:

- 1.) How many people speak the language?
- 2.) Is the language a national language, the official language, or the *lingua franca* for a nation?
3. Is the language used widely in teaching, the press, and contemporary written and oral literatures?
4. Is the language important for scholarly research? Is it the language of important archival resources for certain scholars and users?
5. Is the language important because of its political, cultural, and social usage, regardless of the number of people who speak it?
6. Is the language important for U.S. national interests, including scholarly research, business, media, diplomacy, and other government programs?

These sound criteria have been used, with slight variations, in several of the regional studies that appeared as part of the e-LCTL Project (see, for example, the draft report on "Setting Priorities for South Asian Languages" by David Gilmartin and his colleagues at North Carolina State University). Participants in deliberations to establish East Asian LCTL priorities, however, have resisted applying these general criteria to specific circumstances within the East Asian language teaching field.

The reasons for this resistance, repeated in each group meeting and also evident in written comments from individual NRC Directors and non-Title VI Center linguists, are many, but revolve around the fundamental question of the need to establish a priority beyond the *de facto* ranking—namely Chinese, Japanese, and Korean—that presently exists. In fact, participants in e-LCTL meetings focused on East Asian languages, see the East Asian situation as being substantially different from those for Southeast Asian or South Asia regions.

One of the basic issues creating priorities problematic was the very notion of "Less Commonly Taught Language" as it applied to the reality of East Asian languages presently taught, or those that might be taught in the future. Concerning Chinese and Japanese language, and increasingly Korean, the LCTL designation might be changed for the sake of accuracy, to MCTL, or "More Commonly Taught Languages."

When Spanish instruction, which dwarfs all other foreign language programs in terms of enrollments and courses offered, is omitted from the sample, undergraduate and graduate student enrollments at Title VI Centers for East Asian Languages and Western European languages, are roughly proportional (see Table 1 and 2). Furthermore, and perhaps of greater significance, student enrollments, numbers of courses offered, and other macro indicators show that Chinese, Japanese, and Korean programs are more commonly taught and in higher demand than other programs for most other regions (see links to data assembled for each regional area at the e-LCTL website:

<<http://www.elctl.msu.edu/prioritizing.php>

East Asian Languages: Undergraduate and Graduate Enrollments by Course Level (1-4), 2001-02

Language	Undergraduate Enrollments					Total:	Graduate Enrollments				Total:
	1-Ele	2-Int	3-Adv	4-Spec. Adv			1-Ele	2-Int	3-Adv	4-Spec. Adv	
1- Japanese	5,222	2,758	1,369	814		10,163	380	215	200	163	958
2- Chinese (Mandarin)	4,263	1,954	1,110	971		8,298	451	220	240	180	1,091
3- Korean	1,152	574	508	244		2,478	107	61	55	58	281
4- Cantonese	110	41	0	0		151	19	2	0	1	22
5- Taiwanese	76	14	0	10		100	22	2	0	0	24
6- Tibetan	55	10	0	0		65	16	9	23	3	51
7- Vietnamese**	11	5	0	0		16	2	1	2	0	5
8- Tagalog**	10	8	0	0		18	0	0	0	0	0
9- Thai**	6	11	0	0		17	1	0	0	0	1
10- Mongolian	1	0	0	0		1	3	3	0	0	6
11- Manchu	0	0	0	0		0	0	2	0	0	2
Total:	10,906	5,375	2,987	2,039		21,307	1,001	515	520	405	2,441
Total: (w/o Languages #1-3)	269	89	0	10		368	63	19	25	4	111

* Level 4 - "Specialized Advanced" refers to courses focusing on reading, writing, literature, conversation, culture, or other specialized niches (such as business, law, etc.) **Some of the East Asian NRCs reported Vietnamese, Tagalog, and Thai in their Title VI proposal course listings for 2001-2002.

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Western European Languages: Undergraduate and Graduate Enrollments by Course Level (1-4), 2001-02

Language	Undergraduate Enrollments					Graduate Enrollments					
	1-Ele	2-Int	3-Adv	4-Spec.	Adv	Total:	1-Ele	2-Int	3-Adv	4-Spec.	Total:
1- Spanish	16,731	16,692	4,153	4,562		42,138	365	122	58	217	762
2- French	6,813	6,111	1,525	2,375		16,824	336	107	55	171	669
3- Italian	6,986	2,389	385	845		10,605	164	34	11	62	271
4- German	4,246	2,220	344	2,076		8,886	618	172	11	344	1,145
5- Portuguese	1,533	466	1,003	166		3,168	130	24	132	9	295
6- Latin	1,386	108	1	24		1,519	3	0	0	10	13
7- Swedish	376	108	22	185		691	21	5	0	0	26
8- Dutch	395	41	0	60		496	78	9	0	16	103
9- Yiddish	296	0	0	0		296	72	0	0	0	72
10-Norwegian	224	79	7	0		310	9	5	0	0	14
11-Greek (Modern)	180	87	15	0		282	21	3	0	0	24

* Level 4 - "Specialized Advanced" refers to courses focusing on reading, writing, literature, conversation, culture, or other specialized niches (such as business, law, etc.)

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A second important consideration accounting for the reluctance to rank East Asian languages beyond a shared top priority place for the "Big Three," is the political and cultural importance of China, Japan, and Korea. Chinese, Japanese, and Korea are languages grounded in statewide educational and governance systems, despite the presence of populations speaking regional variations of the official language or even distinctly different dialects. Colonial or semi-colonial language legacies are, compared with other regions of the world, comparatively weak in these states. Likewise, border conflicts since World War II have receded in Northeast Asia, or have reached a long lasting stasis, as in the North Korea-South Korea and PRC-Taiwan divisions—that have left the historical language in place despite political disunity.

Since 1945, Japan and Korea, Taiwan, and more recently, the PRC, have also become economic powers of major importance, not only in Asia, but also on a global scale. The economic pecking order has influenced the perception that the Chinese, Japanese, and Korean languages merit more attention than Tibetan, Taiwanese, or Mongolian.

The primacy of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean languages among East Asian languages taught in the U.S. academic world is not, however, simply a consequence of the autonomous history of three key northeast Asian states or their present economic importance. The roots of the current ranking go back nearly seven decades, growing from U.S. strategic and security interests during World War Two, and the subsequent Cold War in Asia. The past for East Asian area studies bears a striking resemblance to the present for Middle Eastern and Inner Asia area studies. Then and now we see academic

interest in world regions buoyed by strategic anxieties that bring forth government funding to create new or invigorated undergraduate and graduate programs and faculty research in area studies. Although exceptions certainly exist, much of this new activity is supported for reasons that go beyond disinterested intellectual curiosity or considerations of inherent cultural importance or economic influence.

The predominance of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean as major languages for Asian Studies Programs in the U.S. (and elsewhere outside of Asia), a product of comparatively recent history, is obvious in the scant academic interest or investment in languages other than these big three. This has fed the reluctance to create detailed ranking priorities because there appears no pressing need to do so. A kind of circular justification for the present situation exists, one based on reasoning that posits: There are few programs so there are few enrollments so there are few programs... . Of course, a major flare up of international unrest, the fire next time, might see a sudden shift that recognizes language needs beyond the big three.

Although the future is always uncertain, the current reality is that both the number of programs available and the variety of languages offered maintain the predominance of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean. As indicated in the following table of enrollments in Title VI NRCs (academic year basis) and U.S. universities in general, compiled by the MLA (semester basis), undergraduate and graduate enrollments in languages other than the big three barely exist. The situation is the same for advanced language learners, as reflected in recent figures for the categories of languages supported by FLAS fellowships.

**East Asian Languages: Undergraduate and Graduate Enrollments at Title VI NRCs,
2001-02, and National Enrollments Reported by MLA, Fall 2002**

<u>Language</u>	<u>NRCs, 2001-02</u>			<u>MLA, Fall 2002**</u>		
	<u>UG</u>	<u>G</u>	<u>Total</u>	<u>UG</u>	<u>G</u>	<u>Total</u>
1-Japanese	10,193	976	11,169	51,316	941	52,257
2-Chinese (Mandarin)	8,917	1,141	10,058	33,275	952	34,227
3-Korean	2,773	281	3,054	5,100	111	5,211
4-Chinese (Cantonese)	181	22	203	175	5	180
5-Taiwanese	100	24	124	34	13	47
6-Tibetan	65	51	116	43	35	78
7-Mongolian	1	6	7	27	8	35
8-Manchu	0	2	2	0	0	0
*9- Vietnamese	16	5	21	2,188	48	2,236
*10- Tagalog/Filipino	18	0	18	691	2	693
*11- Thai	17	1	18	318	12	330
Total:	22,281	2,509	24,790	93,167	2,127	95,294
Total: (w/o Languages #1-3)	398	111	509	3,476	123	3,599

*Some of the East Asian NRCs reported Vietnamese, Tagalog, and Thai in their Title VI proposal course listings for 2001-02.

** MLA 2002 figures were taken from Elizabeth B. Welles, "Foreign Language Enrollments in United States Institutions of Higher Education, Fall 2002", *ADFL Bulletin*, Vol. 35, No. 2, Winter 2004. The MLA enrollments are for one term only, fall 2002, whereas the NRC enrollments are for the full academic year, 2001-02.

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East Asian Languages: Title VI FLAS Fellowships Awarded in 2002-03

<u>Language</u>	<u>Academic Year</u>	<u>Summer</u>	<u>Total</u>
Chinese (Mandarin)	52	43	95
Japanese	49	30	79
Korean	13	9	22
Uyghur	0	2	2
Thai	1	0	1
Tibetan	0	1	1
Total:	115	85	200

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Alternative Criteria for Ranking: The Santa Fe Meeting

The East Asia Language Group at the Santa Fe Meeting of NRC Directors in February 2004, confirmed opinions voiced in previous discussion focusing on setting priorities for East Asian language teaching and resulted in qualified agreement on key issues. This agreement among area studies experts, including representatives of LRCs, is not presented here as a unified consensus based on hard statistics or a comprehensive survey of the higher education language teaching community. As the “state of the field” is a broad, ever-changing subject, a rigorous refinement of priorities will require ongoing monitoring and discussion. Yet, while the conclusions reached at Santa Fe are not presented as a last word on teaching priorities for East Asian LCTLs, they do serve as significant statement of current thinking on this issue among key figures in this branch of area studies. The meeting also yielded the most concrete ranking criteria attained since the inception of the e-LCTL Initiative.

Most participants in the East Asian Language Group at Santa Fe concurred that Chinese, Japanese, and Korean are still the main language teaching and learning priorities for the East Asian field. Upon being pressed to go beyond the big three in creating teaching priorities, the group generally resisted using the word “priorities,” because the term connotes inherent levels of importance or significance in rating one language over another. Instead of “priorities,” the discussion tended to speak of “categories of need” in the teaching of East Asian languages.

To advance the discussion the term, “categories of need,” was used to consider factors essential to ranking. In practice, these “categories” in some instances duplicated the elements noted in the general list of six “priorities.” Among the important factors that were recommended for consideration are:

- 1) The number of people who speak the language;
- 2) The historical and cultural importance of the language, recognizing that this favors the major three languages of East Asia;
- 3) The importance of the language for heritage speakers, for example, Cantonese, for Chinese-Americans;
- 4) Whether teaching the language can “rescue” a language that might disappear if learning it not cultivated; for example, varieties of Ryukyuan or Ainu languages;
- 5) The availability of resources for teaching the particular language course and presence of willing learners;
- 6) The political or strategic importance of the language.

Using these six criteria, the participants at the Santa Fe East Asian Language meeting agreed on the following general points:

- 1) Teaching of advanced level Chinese and Japanese should continue at every NRC and at major universities, and that Korean should be taught at comparable levels as soon as possible;
- 2) Other LCTLs, such as Manchu, Tibetan, Mongolian, might best be taught cooperatively, either using summer workshops or distance learning;
- 3) The creation of a language “czar” to monitor and coordinate the teaching of LCTLs of East Asia should be considered;
- 4) A new NRC organization website should be created to assist in monitoring the field and providing exchange of ideas that might be used to flexibly create new programs and better coordinate existing ones.

Concluding Observations

The participants in the East Asian languages LCTL meetings tended to view the acquisition of cultural expertise as a primary aim of language teaching, a goal whose importance far outweighed strategic consideration. In fact, security issues were not a primary or even secondary consideration in determining the need to teach East Asian languages.

This view is not in line with politicized views of governmental funding agencies, whose cultural interest is often premised on “knowing the enemy” considerations. Yet, there is also a divergence in rhetoric and reality, in that universities have historically supported the state’s priorities by participating in various subsidized programs. Examples abound: National Defense Foreign Language Program as well as in the origins of Title VI, FLAS program, and other programs.

A second observation is that the most effective language learning and development of pedagogical tools are still taking place on university campuses. In terms of regularly offered courses and opportunities to engage in tutorials and small classes in less commonly taught languages, the universities fill essential roles, beyond what is being done at government language programs.

Finally, more might be done among NRCs and LRCs to coordinate the teaching of LCTLs. Some kind of mechanism or structure is needed to do this, but finding what is needed may not be easy. In many arenas, academic institutions are competitors as well as cooperative partners. They chase the same funding dollars and feel compelled to make individual programs distinctive from others.

Nevertheless, when sharing can create niche language programs (for example, in Uyghur) needed at other centers, it will be useful to combine or coordinate efforts. Efforts to coordinate course offerings, actively encourage distance learning, and sponsor centralized summer intensive programs, have been undertaken for some East Asian languages, but might be done in a more energetic and coordinated manner to better reach learners outside of elite or well funded institutions.