Greetings from the chair

Welcome to the inaugural issue of Polyglot, the twice-yearly newsletter of the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures. With Polyglot we hope to create a forum for exchange with our supporters and to provide information on departmental developments. In each issue you can expect to find news of the major language programs—Chinese, French, German, Japanese, Spanish and Russian—and of those in our many lesser-taught languages. We'll keep you posted on new endeavors—such as the Heritage Language Initiative in this issue. You'll read about the department’s achievements—such as the community-based learning program in Guatemala and our Fulbright teaching scholars.

The department is a wonderful and dynamic place to study and work. The breadth of our instruction—23 languages through the regular program and five languages through the Heritage Language Initiative—surpasses that of any other institution in Oregon. We’re honored by the devotion and expertise of our faculty. We’re proud of our students, and miss you, once you’ve graduated. Bring us up to date. If you know of classmates who have not received this newsletter, encourage them to let us know where they are and what they are doing.

We want to hear from them, too.

Keep in touch,

Sandra Freels Rosengrant
Chair, Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures

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Building on early language acquisition

By Linda Godson, Ph.D.
Coordinator, Heritage Language Initiative

Thu Nguyen Ho, a senior, grew up speaking Vietnamese at home, but reading and writing her first language was difficult. Raised in California, Ho wanted to reconnect with her cultural roots. “Our parents are really busy,” Ho said. “It’s not a top priority for them to teach us.”

Iris Galloza Vance learned Spanish from her Puerto Rican parents. As a child, moving with them from base to base with the U.S. Army, she lost ground.

Ho and Vance are typical heritage language learners. They learned their immigrant parents’ language at home, but did not master it before switching to English at school. Both enrolled in an innovative new program at Portland State University.

The Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures created the Heritage Language Initiative in summer 2004. In the fall of that year, the department began offering heritage courses in Arabic, Russian, Spanish, Tagalog, Urdu, and Vietnamese. Now, in 2005-2006, students also can enroll in Cantonese, Hindi, and Persian. The initiative meets the unique needs of heritage speakers—students who do not fit in the traditional foreign language teaching environment. These students frequently are more advanced in oral communication, but not as proficient at reading and writing. With instruction tailored to their needs, however, they are most likely to develop the level of language skills essential for professions requiring bilingual competence such as international trade and national security.

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This program helps Portland State respond to the needs of some of the large ethnic communities in our region, such as the Vietnamese, Pakistani (Urdu), and Filipino (Tagalog) communities, said Pat Wenzel, professor of Japanese, who spearheaded the creation of the program.

Challenges facing the new program are many. Instructors need to be both qualified and willing to take on an unfamiliar task. Textbooks—if even available—are scarce. For the first year, training and support had to be created. Some instructors were already on the faculty. Gladys Pérez, Spanish; Nila Friedberg and Gulina Kogan, Russian; Two Fulbright foreign language teaching assistants, Ali Al-Ahmad Al (Iraq) and Zafreen Jaffery (Pakistan), were signed on to teach Arabic and Urdu, respectively. The department recruited Alfonso Pozquinto, Tagalog, and Virid S. and Hung Le, Vietnamese, from the community.

Instructors attended monthly workshops to discuss topics of mutual concern.

On site in Guatemala

By Stephanie Oliver
Teaching Assistant, Spanish

It sounded like a good deal: eight upper-division credits for a three-week community involvement project in Guatemala. But what looked like a cakewalk on paper was anything but in practice.

“Those were well-earned credits,” said senior Spanish major Andrea Horna. “We did so much. Every day was packed full. We wrote papers; we read books. We needed to answer 19 very involved pedagogical field-research questions related to what was going on in the classrooms we observed. We had language classes in the afternoons and lectures in the evenings.”

Horna was among the 16 students and three teachers who earned credit for this three-year-old Community Based Learning program in rural Guatemala. Launched by Spanish instructor Marya Wubbhold, the program enrolls students with 300-level language proficiency for a culturally relevant overseas experience that combines service with learning.

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News briefs

Five international scholars with expertise in teaching critically under-represented languages received Fulbright fellowships, joining the department for the 2005-2006 academic year. They are Abdurrahman Kara, Turkey (Turkish); Anisa Maskari, Oman (Arabic); Anita Chaudhuri, India (Hindi); Musa Kuchakzarai, Iran (Persian); and Elena Sukhina, Russia (Russian).

Anousha Sedighi, a native of Iran, who received her Ph.D. from the University of Ottawa, Ontario, joined the department in 2005 as assistant professor of Persian. Nila Friedberg, who received her Ph.D. from the University of Toronto, joined the department in 2004 as assistant professor of Russian Linguistics.

The Fulbright teacher exchange has enabled Manya Wubbold, instructor in Spanish, to teach in places with Lilliana Garcia Peralta of Sonora, Mexico. Garcia is teaching three full-term, third-year Spanish grammar classes at Portland State. Wubbold returns winter term.

The 48th German Summer School on the Pacific (Deutsche Sommerschule am Pazifik) took place June 22-July 28 at Lewis & Clark College. Fifty-four students participated in the five-week language immersion program.

Pat Wetzell served as academic director of the first Japanese Intensive Teacher Training Institute held at Portland State, June 20 to August 12. The program drew 25 graduate students who will teach beginning Japanese at colleges throughout the U.S. Suwako Watanabe was among the faculty members who conducted the classes at this eight-week program.

The editorial board and invited international guests of the "Charrette" Project, a Web-based archive, will meet at Portland State University for a three-day meeting Jan. 5. Gina Greco, associate professor of French, is co-director of the project. The archive, which includes searchable transcripts and a database of grammatical usage, is accessible at www.princeton.edu/~lancelot/.

Coming up

The Oregon Foundation for Greek Studies will sponsor a concert by renowned mezzo soprano Nadia Weingberg, 7 p.m., October 21, Room 75, Lincoln Hall. For tickets ($75): contact the PSU Box Office, 503-725-3307.

Heritage language

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Excerpt for Russian, where textbooks specifically target- ing heritage learners are available, instructors must develop their own materials. Since so little is known about how a heritage language is acquired, the instruc- tors must use students as their best guides to teaching. But student groups are not homogeneous; they often speak different dialects and have widely differing abili- ties and pre-existing (and conflicting) ideas about their native cultures. The first-year Urdu class, for example, had both Muslim and Hindu students. Jaffery, the Fulbright scholar who taught this course, searched for cultural insights and needs to provide a richer context for the students. She encouraged respectful views of views of religious differences with emphasis on con- nections to the larger culture. She also found that coop- erative learning activities were particularly successful. Often, more advanced students were paired with begin- ners, an arrangement that turned out to be a valuable experience for both. Typically, heritage students enjoy working together and form a kind of family atmosphere in the classroom.

More than half of Oregon’s heritage language speak- ers live within commuting distance of Portland State. By addressing heritage language learner needs, the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures’ Heritage Language Initiative contributes to making the university responsive to communities that might other- wise be fearful or mistrusting. It was necessary to focus strongly on making the courses successful in year one. In 2005-2006, the initiative is strengthening its ties to the community with outreach to K-12 teachers and stu- dents, cultural events both on and off campus, and service learning opportunities for heritage language stu- dents. The Heritage Language Initiative has created a database of more than 650 organizations, individuals, colleges, high schools, and media contacts for market- ing and fund-raising. A heritage language bibliography will soon appear on the Web site www.fll.pdx.edu.

Portland State University staff and faculty can check out heritage language educational materials through the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures. This program is the first of its kind in Oregon. Successful heritage language students have the potential to enter a job market that is hungry for proficient biling- uals. Opportunities exist in law enforcement, medi- cine, the court system, government, international com- merce, and public safety services.

Putting their language into practice

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It was perfect for Horra, who plans to pursue a graduate degree in elementary education. The project takes participants to three village schools, where they observe classes and work with town folk on community improvement projects.

“A lot of programs allow you to go and learn, but you don't give back,” Horra said. “We were going to help others in the process of learning.” In the three years since its start, the program has made possible refurbishing schools, building latrines and creating sports playing fields. Participants attended several meetings and conduct three fund-raising activities before departure. Each stu- dent is required to provide one empty suitcase, in addi- tion to his or her own, into which is packed a year’s worth of donated educational supplies, sports equip- ment, and children’s clothing for each village. Funds also are raised year-round through coffee sales at www.guatemala.pdx.edu. The project provides $1,000 to $2,000 per school, according to director Wubbold.

Jabel Tinamit, a Mayan-owned, Spanish language school in Panajachel, provides the afternoon Spanish classes and arranges the home stays for the participants. Teacher/student ratio for these two-hour classes is 1 to 3. “I can believe how much difference that ratio makes,” Horra said. “I learned so much Spanish.”

Putting their language into practice

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