

# Designing and Implementing Chinese Language Programs: Preparing Students for the Real World

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## CITATION

Chao, D., Hakam, D.K., & Lin, Y. (2016). Designing and implementing Chinese language programs: Preparing students for the real world. In S.C. Wang & J.K. Peyton (Eds.), *CELIN Briefs Series*. New York, NY: Asia Society.

CELIN Briefs are developed by the Chinese Early Language and Immersion Network, under the China Learning Initiatives at Asia Society.

## Introduction

In this interconnected world, language skills are personal and societal assets and a critical component of intercultural competence. Foreign language education has made a clear transition from treating language study as a body of knowledge about language to the teaching of intercultural communicative competency that students need to function effectively in real life situations.

The importance of knowing Chinese language and culture is widely recognized, as China's roles and influence on the global stage have increased. The demand for professionals in all fields (e.g., commerce, education, law, tourism, medicine, science, technology, government, and international affairs) who are proficient in Mandarin, among Chinese dialects, and competent to interact successfully in Chinese cultures is on the rise. Schools with Chinese programs are working hard to meet this demand, seeking to close the opportunity gap for students and positioning themselves at the forefront of developing students with global competency for advanced study and work.

As Chinese is taught in more K-12 schools, many schools face challenges with designing and implementing a program that leads students to attain advanced levels of oral proficiency and literacy in Chinese. Programs should include essential elements that prepare globally competent students for college and careers. Students need to not only be able

to communicate in Chinese with speakers of the language but also possess 21<sup>st</sup> century skills in problem solving, critical thinking, collaborative engagement, and a strong sense of global citizenship. Such programs will have in place a curriculum with clearly defined language goals that are aligned with proficiency standards, instructional practices that foster learner-centered instruction, and highly qualified and effective teachers and administrators. These Chinese language programs

- Have the goal of ensuring that students develop global competency for the real world
- Set clear language learning expectations aligned with recognized proficiency scales and career demands
- Are student-centered and experiential in orientation
- Are standards-based and integrate language, subject matters, and culture
- Employ best practices in instruction
- Assess student learning outcomes through performances via multiple measures
- Provide opportunities and support for Chinese language teachers to engage in reflective practice and continuous professional development

This Brief describes each of these features and illustrates ways that programs can strive to develop them.

## Developing Students' Global Competency for the Real World

As the world experiences unprecedented change, lives of individuals in all aspects of society have become intertwined with what is happening locally, nationally, and globally. The future that students face is qualitatively different from what could have been imagined in the industrial age in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In *Educating for Global Competence: Preparing Our Youth to Engage the World*, co-published by the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and Asia Society (Boix Mansilla & Jackson, 2011), the committee points out that, in addition to problem solving skills, students need a substantive understanding of the world, which is the foundation of global competence. Through awareness and curiosity about how the world works, informed by disciplinary and interdisciplinary insights, students demonstrate their global competency by

- Investigating the world beyond their immediate environment, framing significant problems, and conducting well-crafted and age-appropriate research
- Recognizing multiple perspectives, including others' and their own, and articulating and explaining such perspectives thoughtfully and respectfully
- Communicating ideas effectively with diverse audiences and bridging geographic, linguistic, ideological, and cultural barriers
- Viewing themselves as players in the world, taking action to improve conditions, and participating reflectively (p. 11)

Language study is an ideal vehicle for leading students to high levels of global competency, because it gives them opportunities to explore their own world and larger worlds, understand diverse cultures and perspectives, develop the linguistic ability to communicate, and take actions to improve their lives locally and globally.

## Aligning Clear Language Learning Expectations With Proficiency Scales and Career Demands

The notion of developing students' global competency

works hand in hand with the notion that all students have opportunities to learn a world language, although not all are expected to achieve a level that is required of a language specialist. In the white paper *Languages for All?*, national and international language experts advocate for a more nuanced and differentiated approach to language learning. In their framework, all students in the U.S. education system should have opportunities to develop a basic level of linguistic and cultural competency in a world language other than English, at a minimum in the Novice range on the ACTFL proficiency levels (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, 2012a, 2012b, 2012c), because language learning improves cognitive development, problem solving skills, higher order thinking, educational achievement, and empathy for people of diverse backgrounds and serves as a communicative tool to engage others in an interrelated multilingual world (Abbott, et al., 2014). This vision is shown in Figure 1.

At the top of the *Languages for All?* pyramid (in line with the ACTFL proficiency levels; see also the CELIN Brief, *Mapping Chinese Language Learning Outcomes in Grades K-12*) is the Distinguished level, in which individuals qualify to work as language professionals such as researchers, interpreters and translators, or language professors. Below this level are Superior and Advanced. Individuals who aspire to work in global professional settings will need to reach these levels of proficiency. Given opportunities supported by a robust learning system and a sense of motivation and rewards, most students can develop functional language skills in the Intermediate or Advanced Levels, which will enable them to travel or work in the service, criminal justice, or health care industries. Members of heritage language communities are encouraged to maintain and further develop their heritage language and culture as resources for individual and societal human, cultural, and social capital and for maintaining intergenerational connections as well as for developing occupational skills (Abbott, et al., 2014; Wang, 2012).

The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL, 2015a) has developed this concept further, with clearly articulated oral proficiency levels needed (from Novice Low to Distinguished) to function effectively in specific jobs and roles in the workplace. The

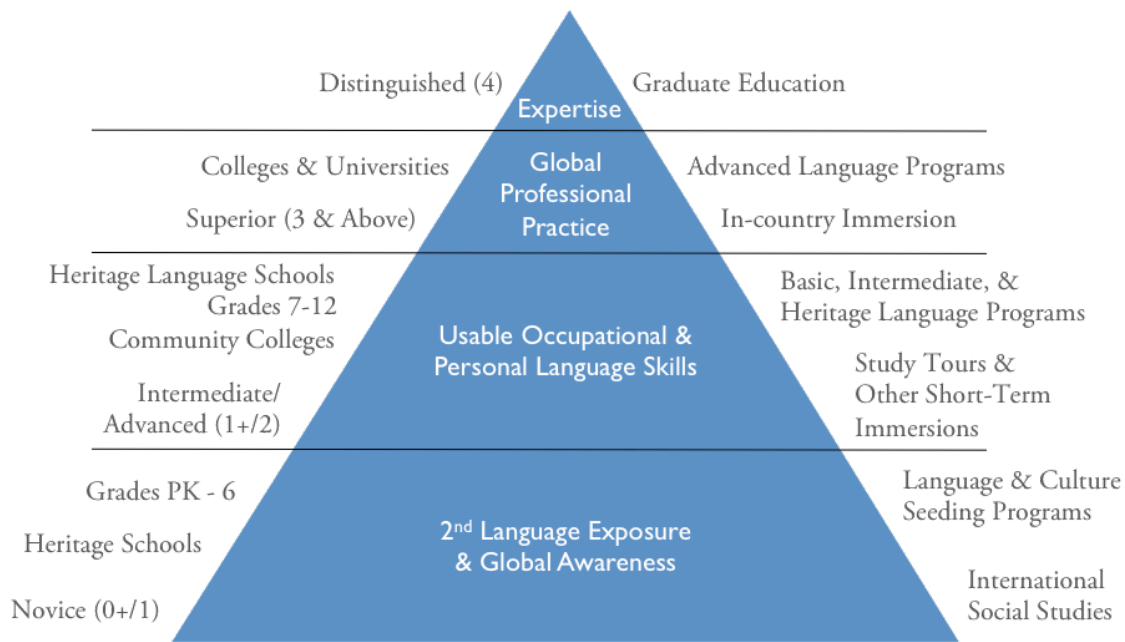


Figure 1. Adapted from *Languages for All? Pyramid*

ACTFL Chinese Standards (2012a) describe specifically what these levels look like in the learning of Chinese.

In order to achieve this vision, we must broaden the base of this pyramid by attracting many more learners into the system and ensuring that a sufficient number of learners stay for the extended sequence of language learning required by these high levels of ability. It is also critical to remind learners and teachers of the connections among language learning, language proficiency levels, and career demands. Chinese language programs must also strive to recruit more students to study the language and culture. While spoken Chinese is not more difficult to learn than commonly taught languages such as French, German, or Spanish, learning to develop initial literacy in its character-based orthographic system and later to read and write in Chinese does take a longer time and requires a more strategic and systematic approach to learning. (For discussion, see the CELIN Brief, *Developing Initial Literacy in Chinese*.) Not only should Chinese language programs identify meaningful and realistic learning outcomes, but they should also design and implement curriculum that helps students develop

communicative competence to meet the demands of their academic and career goals.

### Student-Centered and Experiential Learning

An ideal Chinese language program is inclusive of students of diverse linguistic, cultural, and socio-economic backgrounds; physiological and cognitive abilities; and interests and motivations to master knowledge and skills in a wide variety of academic content areas, vocations, and professions. While this may be a lofty goal at times, and local constraints may create challenges, it is clear that a student-centered approach to learning must be employed. That is, curriculum and instruction must be aligned with the needs and realities of the students, and their impact must be measured by the progress that students make. Traditional textbook-based, teacher-driven, and one-size-fits-all approaches to language learning do not serve students well. Learning must be personally meaningful, and expected outcomes cannot be divorced from what students need and can produce in real life. An experiential learning program provides rich opportunities for students to improve their language skills, increases their motivation, and prepares them for the future. Experiential learning emphasizes

learning by doing. Research shows that students who have the opportunity to be immersed in Chinese language, culture, and society both in and out of the classroom, typically have significantly better short- and long-term proficiency outcomes and a more positive appreciation for the target language and culture (Xu, Padilla, Silva, & Masuda, 2013). Equally important, they gain critical skills to become successful, independent learners.

In an effective Chinese language program, classroom instruction and language tasks reflect real-world language use. Using real-world tasks brings the classroom alive, enriching the learning process for students, and more importantly, preparing them for using the language in actual situations. Real-world tasks include shopping (and bargaining), asking for and giving directions, writing an email to a pen-pal, discussing the weather while planning for an upcoming trip, making a phone call to a travel agency, and discussing or debating relevant social or environmental issues. In a real-world language learning program, students learn to use Chinese to build friendships; gain cross-cultural understanding; and learn about the cultural, economic, and linguistic diversity within China and in the Chinese-speaking world, including Chinese-heritage communities in the United States.

## Standards-Based Curriculum With Integration of Language, Subject Matters, and Culture

A real world Chinese language curriculum reflects a standards-based program with clear proficiency outcomes. The *World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages* (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, 2015c, based on ACTFL's National Standards for Foreign Language Learning, 1996) might be the basis for the curriculum. In the World-Readiness Standards, the goals for what students should learn and be able to do are clearly outlined. The five major language-learning goals are *Communication, Culture, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities*:

- The Communication goal refers to students with:
  - 1) two-way interpersonal communication ability in a listening-speaking conversational setting or in a reading-writing context, such as reading and responding to an email; 2) interpretive communication ability to comprehend and interpret informational input from an auditory source, printed material, or a media/digital source; and 3) presentational communication ability to express and present opinions and information through speaking and writing.

### An Example of Experiential Learning: Hosford (OR) Middle School Student Exchange Project

At Hosford Middle School, Portland Public Schools, experiential learning is an integral component of the Chinese immersion program. In addition to hosting a student from their sister school in China, students take part in an exchange program designed to maximize their language use and cross-cultural interactions.

*The China Research Residency (CRR) is a year-long course that eventually immerses 8<sup>th</sup> grade Mandarin immersion students in the historical surroundings of Suzhou, China, for a two-week intensive language and culture experience. By focusing on academic, linguistic, and personal development, the CRR offers students the extraordinary opportunity to carry out field research first-hand, live with a Chinese family, and practice Mandarin every day in various authentic cultural environments. Each student also conducts field research for an individual inquiry project and produces a mini-documentary film in Mandarin, culminating in a capstone presentation in late May upon return from China. Much of the preparation for the inquiry project is conducted in classes prior to departure, which includes focusing on a relevant question about contemporary Chinese culture and comparing and contrasting American and Chinese society. In addition, students engage in student-led, small-group (4-5 students) field studies, which involve leading a chaperone on several different excursions and exposing them to the incredible contrasts and contradictions of a fast-changing China, including ancient towns, modern metropolises, and historical attractions near or in Suzhou. Students are expected to buy their own tickets, ask directions, navigate transportation, and interact with locals in order to learn about the history and culture of each field study site and complete the handouts for each field study. The home stay with a Chinese family is also a vital component of the program. Typically, students spend a full week with their hosts, learning first-hand about the cultural nuances and day-to-day rituals of a modern Chinese family. Students are compelled to negotiate Chinese culture and society independently using learned language and culture skills, and they may develop life-long friendships in the process.*



- The Culture goal refers to students' understanding of the relationships among Chinese cultural products, perspectives, and practices.
- The Connections goal provides students with opportunities to connect their learning of Chinese with other subject matters, such as social studies, science, math, and the arts. Such integration ensures that students learn Chinese language and culture while also reinforcing their learning in a wide variety of content areas.
- The Comparisons goal requires students to make linguistic and cultural comparisons between their own language and culture and those of Chinese speakers.
- The Communities goal expands the settings in which students use Chinese. In today's world, it is natural to use Chinese both inside and beyond their school community. It is also not unusual to interact with native and non-native speakers of Chinese around the globe.

In addition, in designing curriculum, a school or district can reference the Common Core State Standards (CCSS, 2015) and the Partnership for 21st Century Skills (2008). In the CCSS, benchmarks for literacy (reading and writing skills) are described in detail from kindergarten to grade 12. Although it is meant to be a document for native speakers of English in English Language Arts and other subjects, it provides a useful reference for designing a solid language arts curriculum for Chinese as a world language. In the 21st Century Skills, "Life and Career Skills," "Learning and Innovation Skills," and "Technology Skills" are delineated to prepare future generations to engage successfully in the global community. These standards documents expand and strengthen curriculum frameworks for Chinese programs.

In order to enrich the environmental, linguistic, and cultural input for students from the beginning of their learning, a good Chinese language program provides constant and frequent exposure to the language and culture through a variety of authentic materials, including those that have been created by Chinese speakers for Chinese speakers. These materials may include print and non-print visual materials; text-based

and illustration-based materials; auditory materials such as music, songs, radio broadcasts, and public announcements; and media/digital materials such as online video and movies. Authentic materials help bridge the linguistic and cultural gaps between Chinese language learners and the Chinese speaking-world, which are easily accessible today to people of all ages. However, teachers must exercise caution and use criteria when selecting materials to ensure that they are appropriate based on the purposes for their use and students' age, interests, and linguistic ability.

## Best Practices in Instruction

A real-world language program promotes best instructional practices. Research evidence from the most successful Chinese language programs in the country (e.g., Asia Society, 2006, 2010, 2012) has shown that in order to make Chinese language instruction effective, classroom instruction should adopt the following best practices:

- a. Set the end goals first, determine acceptable evidence of learning, and plan instructional activities (backward design)
- b. Organize instructional content in thematic units
- c. Promote student-centered classroom instruction
- d. Ensure that language input and output are comprehensible
- e. Aim for 90% or higher target language use in classroom instruction
- f. Maximize target language use inside and outside the classroom

### a. Set the end goals first, determine acceptable evidence of learning, and plan instructional activities (backward design)

Students learn best when they know what to expect in class and how well they have performed at the end of each class (Wiggins & McTighe, 1998, 2005). The CELIN Brief, *Mapping Chinese Language Learning Outcomes in Grades K-12*, can help teachers set reasonable proficiency targets. This information should be shared with students, parents, and program supervisors. After proficiency goals are set, teachers should design instructional activities for each unit and lessons that will help students to reach these goals.

### b. Organize instructional content in thematic units

Students learn best if instructional content is delivered in a

context that is thematically organized and meaningful to them. Before and during teaching a course, teachers should conduct needs analyses periodically to find out what students already know and are interested in learning in order to choose and refine themes that are appropriate to their linguistic level, age, and interests.

### c. Conduct a student-centered class

Students learn best when they are engaged in contextualized activities and tasks that are meaningful and purposeful and are relevant to their age, interests, abilities, and proficiency levels. Much of class time should be devoted to dynamic interactions in Chinese through discussions, conversations, and meaning negotiation activities. Students need ample opportunities for guided practice until they can perform the tasks independently.

### d. Ensure that language input and output are comprehensible

Students learn best through abundant practice with speaking, listening, reading, and writing Chinese. Students should be asked to perform real-life language tasks at a proficiency level slightly higher than the tasks that they can do or feel comfortable doing. To meet this linguistic challenge, students should take part in collaborative learning in groups through carefully designed, scaffolded activities and negotiate meanings to comprehend language input (listening and reading materials) that contain some words or structures that are new to them. Teachers should continue to push students to produce language (language output, in speaking and writing) with better quantity and quality each time.

### e. Aim for 90% or higher of target language use in classroom instruction

Students learn best if they are immersed in a rich language and culture environment. Teachers should aim for 90% of language use in the classroom to be in Chinese. Students should be given opportunities to speak on various topics, and they should be taught rephrasing, paraphrasing, and other communicative skills (including use of body language), so that they can express their meaning even if they do not yet have all of the vocabulary that they need to do this.

### f. Maximize language use inside and outside of the classroom

The best Chinese language programs help students become

autonomous learners who actively seek opportunities to acquire Chinese language and culture in and outside of class. This includes face-to-face interactions with native Chinese speakers in the local community or virtual interactions through safe, teacher-recommended, supervised social media. Interactions with Chinese culture and society to maximize students' use of Chinese can be achieved domestically, abroad, virtually, or through field trips or visits with host families.

## Performance-Based Assessment With Multiple Measures

Successful Chinese programs have aligned their language learning goals with the ACTFL proficiency guidelines. When language goals are clearly defined, both teachers and students have a better sense of where they are, where they are going, and how get to where they are going. Thus, teachers will be better equipped to design and implement curricula that promote effective and efficient language learning. (For information about how to map students' language learning outcomes and useful external assessment instruments, see the CELIN Brief, *Mapping Chinese Language Learning Outcomes in Grades K-12*.)

Chinese language learning outcomes can be assessed in an ongoing manner through multiple performance-based assessments, using various scoring rubrics for each task that students perform. When designing performance-based assessments, teachers can make use of the document developed by the National Council of State Supervisors of Foreign Languages (NCSSFL) and ACTFL to select appropriate Can-Do statements that match students' levels and create tasks for students to demonstrate their ability to use the language (NCSSFL-ACTFL *Global Can-Do Benchmarks*, n.d.; NCSSFL-ACTFL *Global Can-Do Statements*, n.d.). Since the assessment is no longer a paper-and-pencil test, teachers need to construct scoring rubrics that accurately reflect students' performance on various dimensions. Teachers should also provide ongoing feedback to students to inform them about and support their progress.

## Creating and Sustaining a Teacher Supply and Support System

Finally, a real-world language program must cultivate highly qualified, professionally trained teachers. Teachers are at the forefront of language instruction. They are designers, facilitators, and cheerleaders of language learning. Teachers must ensure that students stay interested and motivated as they move toward becoming advanced speakers and readers of Chinese. Teachers need thorough knowledge of Chinese language and culture and of second language teaching skills and a deep understanding of the U.S. education system and culture (Wang, 2009).

Teachers must become reflective practitioners, who build professionalism in teaching Chinese by examining their own teaching practices and searching for ways to improve. Conducting classroom-based action research is a good way to find out the impact of new developments in teaching on students' learning and to make positive contributions to the field of Chinese language instruction.

Likewise, programs need to create and maintain a teacher support system. This system in successful Chinese programs provides teachers 1) the necessary means to carry out their lessons and 2) professional development opportunities to gain the necessary skills and knowledge in both Chinese language structures and second language pedagogy, so that they can better help English-speaking students overcome the challenges of learning a non-alphabetic, tonal language. (See the CELIN Brief, *Developing Initial Literacy in Chinese*.)

Recruiting and retaining qualified and effective Chinese language teachers has remained a challenge in sustaining and expanding the Chinese language field (Stewart & Wang, 2005). Over the past ten years, the use of guest teachers from China and other Chinese-speaking regions has proven to be a creative short-term strategy to resolve teacher shortage. However, there is a set of challenges associated with bringing guest teachers into U.S. classrooms (Wang, 2009). It will take all stakeholders in the teacher support system to make a concerted effort in the areas of teacher preparation, certification, recruitment,

placement, retention, and ongoing professional development and mentoring to ensure that the supply of teachers meets the demand in schools. Two important resources for achieving these goals are *Meeting the Challenge: Preparing Chinese Language Teachers for American Schools* (Asia Society, 2010) and *The Teachers We Need: Transforming World Language Education in the United States* (Ingold & Wang, 2010).

## Conclusion

This Brief provides a blueprint for building a successful Chinese language program that prepares students for the real world. The points made are based on essential characteristics of effective Chinese language programs across the country in public, private, and charter schools. Program examples are listed at the end of this Brief. (Interested readers can also find profiles, photos, and videos of these and other programs on the CELIN webpage: <http://asiasociety.org/china-learning-initiatives/program-profiles>.)

These Chinese programs employ a standards-based curriculum and learner-centered instruction. They focus on the acquisition of language skills to enable students to become proficient users of Chinese. They encourage collaboration among administrators, instructors, and parents; and build a learning environment that is safe, fun, supportive, and conducive to language acquisition for all students. Students learn by doing, which includes practical interaction with their peers and personal engagement with speakers of the language to complete meaningful, real-world tasks. They understand that learning Chinese opens doors and opportunities for them in the global workplace and empowers them to become leaders of future endeavors. Finally, a common thread weaving through these programs is their commitment to and success in cultivating a teaching force with strong language skills and cross-cultural competence.

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## Examples of Chinese Language Programs Preparing Students for the Real World

**Barnard Asian Pacific Language Academy**, in San Diego, California, is the only public school in the San Diego Unified School District that offers Mandarin immersion. Barnard's mission is that students will develop the ability to successfully use their knowledge of diverse cultures and languages to think and act globally and become thoughtful, responsible, and successful global citizens.

<http://asiasociety.org/china-learning-initiatives/barnard-asian-pacific-language-academy>

**The Caesar Rodney School District**, in Delaware, is home to Delaware's first Chinese immersion program, with 50/50 immersion classes and instruction in Mandarin in math, science, and social studies. The district prides itself on providing students with a variety of opportunities related to the four A's (Academics, Arts, Athletics, and Atmosphere).

<http://asiasociety.org/china-learning-initiatives/caesar-rodney-school-district>

**Chinese American International School (CAIS)** is an independent Pre-K through grade 8 Chinese/English dual language immersion school. Students spend a half day studying the core subjects, such as language arts, social studies, and math, in Chinese with Chinese-speaking teachers and a half day in English, with English-speaking teachers.

<http://asiasociety.org/china-learning-initiatives/chinese-american-international-school-cais-san-francisco-california>

**HudsonWay Immersion School**, in the New York City/New Jersey metropolitan area, offers instruction in Mandarin and English in academic subjects including language arts, math, science, and social studies. The school's approach to learning fosters children's individual growth, development, and creativity, transforming them into engaged global citizens.

<http://asiasociety.org/china-learning-initiatives/hudsonway-immersion-school>

**Minnetonka Public Schools Chinese Language Immersion Programs**, in Minnesota, offers Chinese language instruction to students from kindergarten through grade 12. Program leaders attribute its success to courageous leadership, focused program development, dedication of the students and their families, a detailed plan for continuing immersion education in high school, and understanding of the benefits of a robust K-12 immersion experience and the opportunities that language proficiency provides in postsecondary education and beyond.

<http://asiasociety.org/china-learning-initiatives/minnetonka-public-schools-chinese-language-immersion-program>

**Paint Branch Elementary School**, in Prince George's County, Maryland, has a STEM-focused (science, technology, engineering, and math) Chinese language program as part of the Maryland Department of Education's World Language Pipelines.

<http://asiasociety.org/china-learning-initiatives/paint-branch-elementary-school>

**Pioneer Valley Chinese Immersion Charter School** is a regional public charter K-12 school that prepares students for academic and cross-cultural competency through rigorous study, augmented with Chinese language and culture. The school focuses on graduating students with excellent scholarship, high proficiency in Mandarin Chinese and English, and sensitivity to multiple cultures.

<http://asiasociety.org/china-learning-initiatives/pioneer-valley-chinese-immersion-charter-school>

**The Woodstock Mandarin Immersion Program of Portland Public Schools** is part of the Oregon Chinese K-16 Flagship program. From grades K-5, the school offers a 50/50 instructional program, in which students spend half of the day learning in English and the other half learning in Mandarin. The program integrates content-based instruction, explicit language instruction, and experiential language learning activities. The goal of the program is to graduate students who are functionally proficient and culturally competent in Chinese. <http://www.pps.k12.or.us/schools/woodstock/194.htm>

**Seattle Mandarin Immersion Programs** includes programs in a number of schools, whose goal is to prepare students, in partnership with families and community, for global citizenship in an increasingly interdependent world. Seattle’s international schools model focuses on World Languages, Global Perspectives, and Cultural/Global Competency, with the goal of students reaching advanced-level proficiency at the end of high school in two languages.

<http://asiasociety.org/china-learning-initiatives/seattle-mandarin-immersion-programs>

**STARTALK Summer Programs** offer students in grades K–16 opportunities to learn “critical languages,” such as Arabic, Chinese, and Hindi, in creative and engaging summer experiences that strive to exemplify best practices in language education. STARTALK summer programs offer standards-based and thematically organized curriculum, learner-centered instruction, integration of culture and content, and a total immersion language experience.

<https://startalk.umd.edu/programs/search?sort=name&year=2015&language=Chinese>

**The Utah Chinese Dual Language Immersion Program** is in place in 12 school districts. The goal is create a K–12 language roadmap that addresses the need for language skills in business, government, and education. Students in grades K–6 spend half of their school day learning in Chinese and the other half in English. By the end of high school, will have earned nearly enough credits to have a university minor in Chinese.

<http://asiasociety.org/china-learning-initiatives/utah-chinese-dual-language-immersion-program>

**Washington Yu Ying Public Charter School**, in Washington, DC, holds the belief that fluency in more than one language develops a greater ability to communicate with and understand people in other cultures and that Chinese is a language of the future. Therefore, the school immerses students in learning in Chinese on one day and in English the next.

<http://asiasociety.org/china-learning-initiatives/washington-yu-ying-public-charter-school>

**Yinghua Academy**, in Minnesota, was the first Chinese immersion public charter school in the United States. The school’s mission is to prepare students to be engaged and productive global citizens by providing a rigorous academic program with immersion in Chinese language and culture. The goal is to develop all students as bilingual and biliterate in Mandarin Chinese and English. In 2015, Yinghua Academy was named as a national Blue Ribbon school by the U.S. Department of Education.

<http://www.yinghuaacademy.org>

See also CELIN program profiles for descriptions, photos, and videos of these programs:

<http://asiasociety.org/china-learning-initiatives/program-profiles>.