Spoken as a first language by more than 400 million people worldwide and as a second language by an estimated 120 million more, Hindi may one day be coming to a school near you. According to the South Asia Center at the University of Pennsylvania, Hindi is the official language of multilingual India and it is the most widely spoken and understood language throughout the country. Hindi is written in the Devanagari script, which is also used for Sanskrit, Marathi, and Nepali. It has the same grammar and shares basic conversational vocabulary and expressions with Urdu, so on many college campuses in the United States, the two are taught under the title Hindi–Urdu. However, the South Asia Center notes, the two languages use different scripts and have different preferences when it comes to borrowing new formal and literary vocabulary.

Although programs have existed for a while at the university level, for a number of years, Hindi was taught at only one high school in the United States. That has changed in the past few years, and several new programs have been established to teach about the Hindi language and the culture of India.

A Pioneering Program in Texas

Hindi may be considered a “critical-need” language, but Arun Prakash, who teaches Hindi at Bellaire High School in Houston, TX, found that there was no high school textbook for the language—so he wrote one. Prakash’s book, *Namaste Jii*, which means ‘greetings,’ covers the first two years of high school Hindi. He is now working on the second edition of his book, and an Intermediate-level book for Hindi is another of Prakash’s works in progress.

Prakash came to Bellaire more than 20 years ago to teach one hour-long Hindi class of eight students, but the program has since served more than 1,000 Houston-area students and is the oldest high school Hindi program in the nation. Today, there are approximately 90 students enrolled in the five levels of Hindi taught at the school that range from Level One to Intermediate to the International Baccalaureate (IB) Advanced level.
“More than 50% of the students learning Hindi at Bellaire are of non-Indian origins,” reports Prakash. “They are African Americans, Caucasians, Hispanics, and other Asians such as Chinese and Vietnamese. And most of the students who are of Indian heritage were born here and don’t speak Hindi at home.”

A Flagship for Hindi and Urdu

The Hindi Urdu Flagship (HUF)—which has partnered with Bellaire High School—was made possible when, in October 2006, the National Security Education Program awarded the University of Texas (UT)-Austin’s South Asia Institute more than $700,000 to establish the first National Flagship Language Program in Hindi and Urdu in the United States. The innovative new undergraduate program began in the fall of 2007.

In announcing the new Flagship, the university noted, “Among the most widely spoken languages in the world, Hindi and Urdu are considered critical to national security and in the global market. The HUF Program will train students in advanced language proficiency and professional development across a range of disciplines, including business, communications, and public policy. Students from the program will become candidates for employment with the federal government or hold a vital place in the worlds of business, technology, or academia.”

In November 2007, Dr. Herman Van Olphen, director of the UT-Austin HUF Program, visited the Bellaire Hindi Department to discuss the program, explaining that only 15 students would be enrolled and that Bellaire’s Hindi students would be given priority if interested. Selected students would also be eligible for a fully funded study abroad program.

The HUF Program partners with existing K–12 programs to provide support such as teacher training and curriculum consultancy, and in addition to Bellaire High School, these schools include New Jersey’s Edison and J P Stevens High Schools, Fremont Unified School District in Fremont, CA, Hurst-Euless-Bedford Independent School District in Bedford, TX, and Woodstock School, a Christian international school in Mussoorie, India. The HUF also seeks to establish partnerships with schools that would like to develop a Hindi or Urdu program.

Students in the four-year undergraduate HUF Program take language and content classes alongside coursework in their majors, which include business, government, economics, biology, communications, and engineering. The content classes are regular UT courses modified to include Hindi or Urdu materials with essays written in those languages. In the third year, students have the opportunity to study abroad at one of India’s prestigious universities.

STARTALK Hindi

In Appleton, WI, this past summer, 28 young students from the Belanno private language school attended the “Next World Ambassadors Hindi Camp” and were treated to a two-week adventure in learning about the culture and language of India. The children, ages 5 to 10, developed their Hindi language skills through games, art, dance, music, and craft projects as part of the STARTALK program.

As a National Security Language Initiative project, STARTALK’s mission is to increase the number of Americans learning, speaking, and teaching critical-need foreign languages. The nationwide
program offers K–16 students and teachers of these languages “creative and engaging summer experiences that strive to exemplify best practices in language education and in language teacher development, forming an extensive community of practice that seeks continuous improvement in such criteria as outcomes-driven program design, standards-based curriculum planning, learner-centered approaches, excellence in selection and development of materials, and meaningful assessment of outcomes.”

During the summer of 2009, in addition to the camp in Appleton, STARTALK programs included a Hindi Immersion Camp in the West Windsor-Plainsboro Regional School District of New Jersey; Hindi for Heritage Speakers at the UCLA Center for World Languages; the Penn STARTALK Intensive Hindi Student Program at the University of Pennsylvania; the STARTALK Summer Concentrated Hindi Program for High School Students in Jamaica, NY; Passport to India in Bell, CA; the Regents STARTALK Foreign Language Academy in Kent, OH; the STARTALK Summer Intensive Program for Hindi and Urdu in Bloomington, IN; the STARTALK Gateway to Asia in Euless, TX; the STARTALK Intensive Critical Language Learning Experience for Howard County Students in Maryland; and the HindiUSA STARTALK Summer Program in Somerset, NJ.

There were also workshops for teachers, including the Center for Applied Linguistics STARTALK Proficiency Assessment Training Program, The New York University STARTALK Intensive Teacher Training Program, the University of Pennsylvania STARTALK Teacher Training Institute, and the UCLA Heritage Language Teacher Workshop.

Opening the Gateway in Middle School

The STARTALK Gateway to Asia held in the summer of 2009 was a three-week language academy open to rising seventh graders in the Hurst-Euless-Bedford Independent School District (HEB ISD) of Texas. Students enrolled in either Hindi or Mandarin Chinese to explore those languages and cultures. The program was limited to 50 students for each of the two languages, and featured daily conversational exercises and some field trips to museums and other centers of learning. The students’ portfolios included self-assessments, completed work and projects, and summative assessments.

The first STARTALK program for teachers of Hindi at HEB ISD was held in June 2008. For these teachers, the program provided an introduction to the Standards for Foreign Language Learning and the ACTFL Proficiency and Performance Guidelines, the “backward design” curriculum model, assessing writing and speaking using rubrics, developing rubrics based on the ACTFL Performance Guidelines, and vocabulary acquisition methodologies. Greta Lundgaard and Carrie Harrington served as co-directors of the training.

Recognizing the growing importance of both Hindi and Chinese as critical languages to sustain U.S. diplomacy, national security, and economic competitiveness, HEB ISD became the first school district in the nation to implement the International Business Initiative (IBI) with Hindi language instruction beginning in seventh grade. It is also one of only a few in the state to offer Mandarin beginning in seventh grade. The IBI program supports the integration of critical world languages with economic and political education and develops community and international partnerships.

The first year of Hindi classes began in HEB ISD in 2007, with both Hindi and Mandarin Chinese as options for seventh and eighth grade students at Central Junior High School. Students from outside the district can also apply to transfer to the district in order to attend the program. Students may combine pre-International Baccalaureate (IB) classes with an Asian language from the IBI program to meet the required IB foreign language component. The district even refers to the program as “The Edge” because beginning
in junior high, the students are learning languages that are critical to compete in the global marketplace they will enter upon graduation from high school or postsecondary education.

“In 2006, the Board and Trustees of the school district completed a study of Thomas Friedman’s book, The World Is Flat, and realized that preparing these students to compete on a global stage takes a concerted effort,” explains the district’s IBI coordinator, Bhavani Parpia. “The combination of our diverse student population and high district expectations makes for a rich environment that provides students the opportunity to interact on a global level in the comfort of a school setting.” She reports that the response from parents and the community has been very supportive, and parents from other school districts have begun contacting her to ask what they can do to get their districts to start such a program.

The Flagship’s Van Olphen says of the HEB ISD program: “What differentiates this program from other language programs in the country is that it is not primarily driven by a large immigrant population in the community. As the name of the program indicates, the purpose of the program is to enhance the opportunities of students in the district to compete in the global economy. Such students will be outstanding candidates for our Flagship program and will go a long way to easing the shortage of graduates with professional competence in these critical languages.”

According to Parpia, the goal has always been for the students to have five years of language study. “So they will continue to take Hindi as a foreign language option in either of the two high schools at our district, and will take their Language B IB exam in Hindi,” she says.

The students themselves may be the most enthusiastic advocates of the program. For example, a Central Junior High student named Alex calls it an amazing program that gives students a chance to learn a language that otherwise they probably would not have gotten to learn, and says, “You get to learn about India and its people. It’s an opportunity like no other.” Another student, Kamden, adds, “Taking the Hindi program is very fun and brings along new experiences. You get to learn about India’s diverse culture along with the language. You get to do fun activities while learning the language, making it easier and more fun to learn.” Jacob recommends the program to rising seventh graders, explaining, “If you do agree to join the program, your life will change forever (in a good way). This is the best program in the state. I have been doing the Hindi program for six weeks, and I already know the alphabet, two very long sentences, and [have learned about] Indian culture.”

The students clearly appreciate the special opportunity they have been given, but as Parpia notes, they will learn more than just how to speak, read, and write Hindi and Mandarin. “They will learn about culture, geography, and history of these two countries. They will learn how these factors come together to impact that part of the world, as well as the United States,” she says.

**Now in New Jersey**

In 2008, a partnership between the Edison School District in New Jersey and the International Education and Resource Network (iEARN) brought a pilot program to the Edison schools with the help of a federal Foreign Language Assistance Program (FLAP) grant. The Edison program became the third district to offer Hindi as a foreign language.

With its high percentage of Indian American residents—approximately 18%—the Edison community seemed an ideal choice for the program. Taught at Edison and J.P. Stevens High Schools, the standards-based curriculum offers thematic units, each of which include a project that demonstrates the students’ linguistic and cultural proficiency. The projects also connect to working and sharing with students in India, which is something that was fully integrated into the design of the program, according to Martin Smith, supervisor of the world languages, ESL, and bilingual program at Edison Public Schools.

As Smith explains, the students use technologies to connect with their peers in other countries to both practice language skills and also to deepen their cultural understanding. He notes, “There has been a strong response, and it continues to get stronger each year; however, in the first two years there has been a lot of interest on the part of the heritage language community but not as much among the non-heritage language community. So now we are doing outreach to build that part of the program.” As for the students who have taken advantage of the opportunity, Smith notes, “They love it. They also say they are learning a lot, and the OPI [Oral Proficiency Interview] results support that.”

He hopes to see the program continue to grow and improve, and says, “Since the program’s approach is based on the use of authentic materials, the teachers are always looking for new and better materials, and the connections we have made in India are helping with that.”
For Smith, the biggest surprise has been how quickly the students were able to advance in proficiency. “For heritage language learners, being able to study in a formal academic setting really accelerated the rate of their language proficiency,” he notes. “They went from intermediate-mid to advanced-mid in one school year. I just didn’t anticipate they could grow as much as they did.”

Postsecondary Support for Hindi

A number of other postsecondary institutions in addition to the University of Texas offer Hindi programs, and among them is the University of California, Berkeley (UC Berkeley), where undergraduates majoring in South and Southeast Asian Languages and Literature take four semesters of language work in Hindi, Urdu, Bengali, Indonesian, Khmer, Punjabi, Sanskrit, Tagalog, Tamil, Thai, or Vietnamese. The UC-Berkeley graduate program offers emphases in Hindi, Urdu, Indonesian, Sanskrit, Tamil, and Khmer languages and literatures.

The South Asia Language Resource Center (SALRC) at the University of Chicago is one of the 15 Language Resource Centers established by the U.S. Department of Education at universities nationwide in response to the need for expertise and competence in foreign languages. SALRC has a number of resources for Hindi, including Listening Comprehension in Standard Hindi at Advanced and Superior Levels; Building Basic Vocabulary for Hindi Web Pages; and Volumes 1 and 2 of Rehabilitation of Hindi Video Materials. Some of these resources are the result of grants awarded by SALRC for projects at institutions such as UT, Syracuse University, the University of Oregon, New York University, the University of Illinois, Emory University, and the University of Pennsylvania.

Vijay Gambhir of the University of Pennsylvania was one of the principal investigators for the Rehabilitation of Hindi Video Materials. Gambhir, in collaboration with Rosane Rocher, directed a two-year project that resulted in the Hindi Proficiency Guidelines, based on the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines. She also worked on the recently completed new Hindi Standards for K–16 that will be part of the updated Standards for Foreign Language Learning slated for publication this fall. Gambhir provided OPI training to all the participants at the first STARTALK program for teachers of Hindi at HEB ISD, and she says of the Hindi STARTALK programs, “They have given a big boost to Hindi at K–12 levels.”

Gambhir is the language coordinator of South Asian languages offered in the university’s Department of South Asia Studies. The Hindi courses at the university encompass beginning, intermediate, advanced, and accelerated. There is also a business Hindi course taught by Gambhir that is intended to enhance bilingual and bicultural competence in Hindi to help graduates succeed in the business world of India.

She has seen a number of changes during her teaching career. “In the 1970s and early ‘80s there were no undergraduates or heritage students in Hindi classes on American college campuses. All our students were graduates, and they were learning Hindi for professional academic purposes,” she explains.

“In the mid-1980s, when a small number of undergraduate heritage students started appearing in Hindi classes, instructors did not know how to integrate them in their classes, because their learning goals, styles, and routes were different from non-heritage students. Since heritage learners brought different levels of prior knowledge of Hindi language and culture, the classes ceased to be homogeneous; they were now multi-level classrooms. The result was that existing instructional materials and strategies were not working for all the students.”

As the number of heritage learners kept growing over the years, Gambhir says, the teachers and administrators of Hindi could no longer afford to ignore the learning needs of heritage learners who made up almost 50 to 60% of the total Hindi learner population by early 1990s. “Special attention was then paid to investigate the needs of heritage learners and effective ways of teaching heritage and non-heritage learners in the same classroom,” she says.

Gambhir notes that while non-heritage students learn Hindi mostly for professional reasons, such as to conduct field work or consult authentic sources for their research, most K–12 and undergraduate heritage students learn Hindi for family and cultural reasons. “However,” she adds, “in recent years, more and more heritage
students are learning Hindi for specific purposes such as business and health. This shift is clearly tied to India’s economic growth and due to more opportunities for the use of Hindi in the United States especially in areas of law, medical practice and local businesses where people of Indian origin have a large concentration.”

Hindi in the Future

Bellaire High School’s Arun Prakash has seen the interest in Hindi grow over the years, and another high school in Houston—Fort Bend High School—started its first Hindi program this year. While that is quite encouraging, he notes that there is still only one public junior high nationally offering Hindi, which is a problem since in high school students generally want to continue studying a language they began learning in an earlier grade. There is still much greater growth in other critical languages such as Chinese, Japanese, Russian, and Arabic, and the current economic situation means that schools do not have money to invest in starting up new programs. However, Prakash makes an effective argument for why Hindi is needed.

“The corporate world is now doing more outsourcing and expanding more businesses in India, and as a result more students are taking an interest in learning Hindi. There are also many Indians living here and working in businesses such as hotels. Lawyers, tax agents, and hospital workers are seeing the need for being able to communicate in the language.”

Gambhir says there is a growing need for Americans to interact with Hindi speakers around the globe for trade, culture, journalism, and health, and to communicate on issues such as climate change and education.

“At home also, the need for Hindi is growing because of the increased interest of second- and third-generation Indian Americans in preserving their heritage languages and culture,” she adds. “This trend is clearly visible from the growing enrollments of nu-

merous heritage schools in all major cities of the United States. A noteworthy fact is that Hindi classes in heritage schools as well as on college campuses are populated with Indian heritage students irrespective of their home language, which may be Bengali, Gujarati, Punjabi, etc.”

Because of all these growing needs and interests, and with the emergence of new programs in the language at the secondary level, Gambhir says, “The future of Hindi language learning in the United States is bright.”

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