

# TILE

The Language Educator

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## FOCUS TOPIC

Program  
Improvement:  
Part 1 – Charting  
Your Course to  
Improvement

## UPCOMING FOCUS TOPIC

Program Improvement:  
Part 2 – Setting Benchmarks  
and Assessing Proficiency



**ON THE COVER:**  
 Singapore American School elementary students celebrate SOAR UN Day.  
 Photo by Scott Woodward, courtesy of Singapore American School.

VOLUME 16 | ISSUE 1  
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## Departments

President's Message <i>ACTFL President Jessica Haxhi</i>	7
Noteworthy News	8
BriefBits	9
Inside ACTFL	10
SIG Corner	20
Lead with Languages	22
Tech Watch	58
Legislative Look	60
Upcoming Events Calendar	62
Advertiser Index	63



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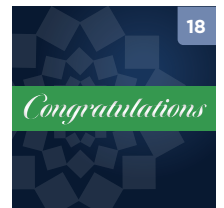
# The Language Educator

## Features

**12** Spotlight: Seal of Biliteracy Updated Implementation Guidelines  
 Focus on Equity and Expansion

**14** ACTFL 2020 Virtual Where Language Educators Connect  
*Martha Gorman*

**18** Congratulations to the 2020 ACTFL Award Winners



## FOCUS TOPIC

**24** Introduction:  
**PROGRAM IMPROVEMENT:  
 PART 1 – CHARTING YOUR  
 COURSE TO IMPROVEMENT**  
*Timothy J. Eagan and  
 Leslie M. Grahn*

**28** From Grammar-Driven to Proficiency-Based: Improving the Spanish Basic Language Curriculum in Higher Education  
*Claudia Fernández*

**32** Strengthening World Language Programs in a Large Urban District: A Journey in Retrospect  
*Fabiola Fadda-Ginski*

**36** Finding Consensus in the Face of Challenges: Partnerships and Collaboration Drive Program Improvement  
*Ryan Bosson and Michelle Hubbard*

**40** Rewriting Curriculum: Managing This Complex Change  
*Michael Travers*

**44** Moving Beyond the Sentence Level of Instruction  
*Kelly Paciaroni*

**49** Program Improvement: The Story of Human-Centered Design  
*Annie Rivera*

**53** Program Improvement in Singapore  
*Omar Rachid*



# PROGRAM IMPROVEMENT IN SINGAPORE

BY OMAR RACHID



SAS Elementary School SOAR UN Day celebration

photos: SAS Communications Office

When we get visitors in our language classrooms at Singapore American School (SAS), the first comment we hear is, “Wow, these students can speak!” From new teachers, to external consultants and everyone in between, the comments are similar. There is a sense of awe and pride that students taking a language course are not only conversant in the world language they are studying, but that they are also seeking opportunities to demonstrate their abilities and welcome opportunities to engage authentically.

The students are the source of our pride, the result of the vision, commitment, and continual growth of our educators and leaders who embarked on the journey toward proficiency nearly a decade ago.

## Is Your Language Program Delivering On Its Goals?

In the six years that I've been an educator and in my current role as Interim Director of World Languages at SAS, if there is one thing that rings true across all of our Chinese, French, and Spanish classrooms it's the strong focus on developing students' oral proficiency. When we set off on this journey toward proficiency a decade ago, the World Language Department at the time charted a course based on the following philosophy:

*Language and communication are at the heart of the human experience and individual identity. Therefore, it is imperative that all students have opportunities to become equipped both linguistically and culturally in other languages to establish and maintain relationships, and to function confidently within a global society. We believe that the primary purpose of learning another language is to develop the ability to communicate effectively in real-life contexts. We recognize that a communicative approach, that meaningfully integrates authentic resources and technology, is essential to successful language acquisition.*

Drafted in February 2011, this is evidence of the groundwork laid and a testament to the durability of the message. Are we delivering on it?

I believe that we are effectively equipping students linguistically in other languages, and that we are evolving in our understanding of what it means to equip students culturally.

That said, we're a work in progress. As a proficiency-based program, it has taken time, resources, energy, people, collaboration, and innovation to deliver on this commitment. As tends to be the case in many international and American schools abroad, we have a transient community of educators and leaders. While we benefit from a relatively steady and healthy faculty tenure of about seven years, this constant renewal of educators and leaders has actually helped infuse our program with new ideas and the energy needed to keep developing our language program.

A key takeaway from this decade-long journey is to create a common framework everyone can rally behind and then back it up with appropriate professional learning. By the end of this school year, SAS will have 63 ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) trained educators. Nineteen of these professionals have pursued full certification in Chinese, Spanish, or French, and some have dual certification. Having this many OPI-trained educators has allowed our professional learning community teams to utilize a common framework to address student learning.

## How Do We Ensure That Learners Reach Their Goals?

SAS serves more than 3,700 students in pre-K–12 programs in Chinese, Spanish, and French. One of the best ways to make sure that they continue to be well served is to strengthen our Professional Learning Community (PLC) culture and regularly seek external validation of our benchmarks and practices.

Through our principals, deputy principals, director of world languages, and PLC team leaders, we constantly seek ways to make our PLCs stronger. Significant investment in PLCs in all departments and at all grade levels is critical. We have found that by structuring our teams to be collaborative we are better able to reach all of our students. We accomplish this using the four PLC Questions:

### 1. What is it we expect our students to learn?

When thinking about curriculum and instructional design, we pay attention to everything, from our units of study to the physical learning environment, to guarantee student success. We have tried innovations in the learning environment, from creating opportunities for co-teaching intermediate level courses, to curriculum review that led to an increase in the number of language functions taught and assessed.

Our PLC teams have very specific objectives, while our vertical and divisional teams have very focused contexts, functions, and intercultural communication objectives that help streamline the student experience. This

includes a curriculum roadmap that shows the agreed upon units of progression across language levels.

This means that students in Intermediate, whether they are in Grade 3 or Grade 11, all focus on the same unit of study with the functions tied to that unit. What is tailored within each division is age-appropriate content, instruction, and assessment.

### 2. How will we know when they have learned it?

Using backward design, we embed formative tasks throughout that culminate in a final performance assessment. One of the pivots we made two years ago was to intentionally expand the functions of language that we assess. We did so both horizontally and vertically, meaning that we went beyond narration, description, and asking and answering questions, to also include the expression of feelings, hopes, emotions, dreams, opinions, and advice. We addressed each of these functions from Novice to Advanced levels.

This expansion in the functions assessed allowed us to deliberately determine the functions focused on in each thematic unit. We are now at the stage of determining the best Intercultural Communication Can-Dos for the unit functions and thematic contexts to give a culturally responsive dimension to our linguistic expectations.

Additionally, we include time to "calibrate" our assessment practices wherever possible so that we refresh and adjust our expectations at each proficiency level and sublevel. To calibrate we take sample student assessments from different grade levels, but within the same language level, and have that team of teachers score the work independently. After the independent scoring, the team comes together to share how they would have scored the same samples, and a consensus score is reached. This allows us to calibrate the way we score student work. Calibration is the hardest part of our practice to maintain because it is dependent upon the time available across divisions. We're trying to move away from sporadic calibration events to a more systematic approach.





SAS Elementary School students in Chinatown during the SOAR campaign.

### 3. How will we respond when some students do not learn?

This is by far the most difficult issue to address. As educators, we so often teach to the middle. The single most effective practice that we've instituted at our school to address this question is to level our language courses.

We have multi-year classes across languages, where students remain until they reach the exit proficiency level. For example, Novice High at the elementary school level takes one to three years to achieve depending on language difficulty (Chinese vs. Spanish) as well as each student's individual progress, and the same is true in the Intermediate realm. Students remain until their demonstrated performance clearly indicates that they are ready for the next level. Since we conduct regular assessments, students are able to move up when they demonstrate readiness; they do not have to wait until the end of the semester or school year.

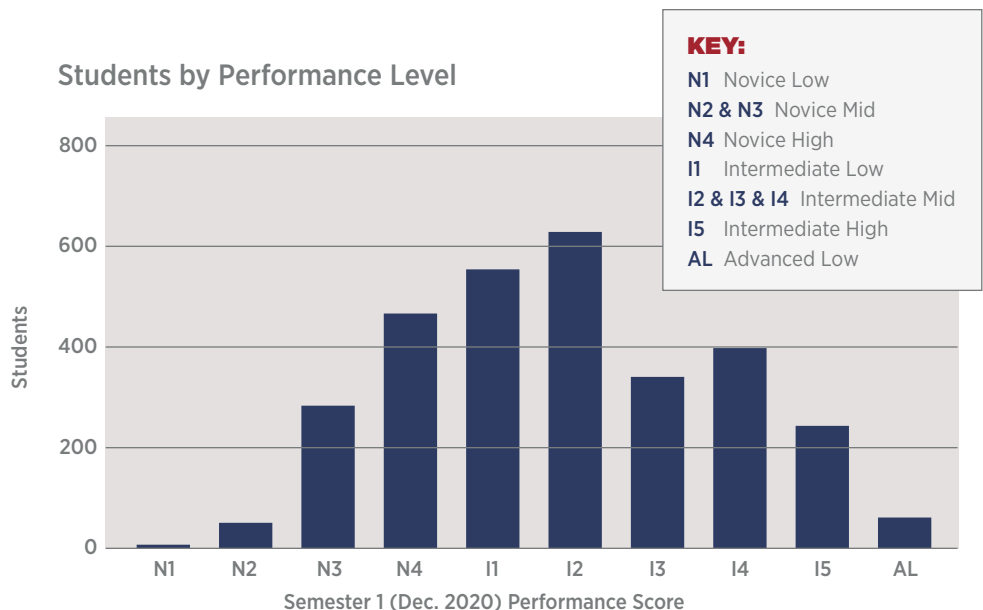
Students who are still not close to reaching the exit target by the end of their second or third year are identified and, with the help of our PLC teams, we purposefully design intervention practices that target the functions, skills, and performance that they need to reach the proficiency level benchmarks established by the *NCSSFL-ACTFL Can-Do Statements*.

### 4. How will we respond when some students already know it?

This is the easiest question for us to address because we have spent almost a decade aligning our course names to reflect the proficiency level the cohort is working toward. For example, we have courses such as Spanish Novice, Intermediate, and Intermediate High, which are designed as multi-year courses so that students can reach the specified benchmarks. We also have Novice High in Interpersonal Listening & Speaking for our Novice cohort, Intermediate Mid Interpersonal Listening & Speaking for our Intermediate cohort, and Intermediate High across all modes for our Intermediate High cohort.

Once a student reaches a course proficiency exit target, they are promoted to the next level. This means that students always know where they are regarding a language function because we have used the *NCSSFL-ACTFL Can-Do Statements* and *AAPPL Score Descriptors* in our rubrics for each course. Throughout their language learning career at SAS, students and educators alike know what proficiency sub-level each student is at *and* what they need to achieve across different functions to advance to the next level. If they are in Intermediate Low, they know what an Intermediate Mid sounds like, looks like, and feels like in each of the functions.

Students by Performance Level





Elementary School Chinese immersion students.

Since we attach proficiency performance descriptors to the scores and comments reported at the end of the semester, we have data that shows that our educators, students, and parents speak the same *proficiency* language. For interpersonal speaking at the end of the first semester in December 2020, about 25% of our students scored either Novice Mid or Novice High, 40% scored Intermediate Low, 25% scored Intermediate Mid, and about 10% scored Intermediate High or above. Knowing this allows students to take personal agency and ownership of their learning.

Throughout this decade-long journey we have kept coming back to our philosophy, continually revising our common agreements. We went from focusing on thematic units to scaffolding functions and unpacking functions within contextual themes and intercultural communication targets to provide a framework for teachers. This sandbox allows for unfettered creativity in designing learning experiences. Coupled with external validation, we were able to analyze our data and extrapolate strengths and areas of growth in our program.

This analysis revealed that our students were speaking, and that by the end of their second year in a language classroom, most were scoring in the Intermediate Low and Intermediate Mid ranges.

About 25% of our language courses across grades K–12 are geared toward achieving an Intermediate High level or higher (Advanced Low/Mid, Advanced Placement, and Advanced Topics), evidence of the proficiency levels

reached by our students. Our commitment to a daily world language program that starts as early as preschool, as well as the vision and expertise of our 76 educators in the world languages and immersion programs, allows us to deliver an exemplary program to more than 3,700 students.



### The SAS Story

Our team continually seeks to renew skills and share practices by participating in conferences locally, regionally, and internationally. Coordination between the Director of World Languages and principals to ensure a common language with students, educators, and parents allows for clear communication and good organization. This is not a seamless experience, however, but rather one that requires constant communication and effort.

- We seek to attract, recruit, and retain the best educators and leaders. Our retention rates are among the highest among international schools, and for every job opening that we post we receive an average of more than 40 applications.
- We honor the past and walk in the footsteps and teach in the classrooms of

those who came before us. By honoring tradition and seeking ways to innovate, we honor what is both tried and true and seek to sharpen and rethink our practices. We do all this for our students, who see their teachers as learners as well. As educators and learners, we seek to learn from the best. One of the benefits this world of Zoom has afforded is that it allows us to have regular, embedded touch points with our consultants rather than day-long in-services or week-long consultations.

- We open our doors to our neighbors near and far. In the six years that I have been at this school, our world languages department has welcomed visiting groups and teachers both virtually and in person from schools here in Singapore, as well as from the United States, Japan, India, Bangladesh, United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia.
- We also celebrate and grow our internal talent. While maintaining safe distancing practices, every Tuesday for about 20 minutes one of our world language teachers shares a practice during our 'Kopi Konnections' in a virtual setting. *Kopi* is a Malay word for coffee. These informal gatherings allow us to learn from one another.

While we have many strengths to celebrate, our greatest asset is our team of world language and immersion teachers and instructional assistants. These educators are focused on learning objectives and the student experience, both vertically across divisions and horizontally across language



and grade levels. This allows us to have a common purpose with differentiated delivery.

We moved from rubrics to progressions using the *World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages* as common criteria and further fleshed them out by functions so that we communicate mastery to students by function and then globally by proficiency sub-level. We continually seek expertise and consultancy from ACTFL experts and others in the field. We are at the point now where we have established communicative benchmarks and set aside time vertically to calibrate our assessments and expectations, embedding opportunities for teacher feedback throughout each cycle in order to process the changes.

## Our Path Forward

We have a lot to learn and many ways to learn it. Our educators bring with them a breadth of experiences from different school systems, language programs, and learning environments. Our students bring with them their multilingual selves and rich family histories of multilingualism. Our multilingual host country, Singapore, which boasts four national languages, offers many lessons. And we have a lot to learn from our peers and partners who are delivering language education around the world.

Our immediate next steps will be focused on efforts to deepen our current practices in assessment design and calibration so that we are even better able to support new teachers entering our PLC teams and keep our key practices around student learning and the four PLC questions firmly in place. It really helps to come back to these questions because they ground our teams in goal and purpose.

Additionally, our interpersonal speaking results have grown quite strong as a result of instituting daily 45-minute language classes almost 10 years ago for all our students in kindergarten through Grade 12. We are very proud of this and it has also led us to explore ways to achieve similar growth and support in literacy. We have been engaging in cross-divisional work this year to try to grow just as strong in our understanding of teaching and assessing literacy as we do speaking. An embedded next step for our program design is how to incorporate the *NCSSFL-ACTFL*

*Intercultural Can-Do Statements* as part of our curriculum, instruction, and assessment across all three of the languages offered at SAS.

Every team in our program has grappled with our purpose and what this would look like for the age level and proficiency level that they teach. From our Dual Language Immersion classrooms to our Advanced Topics courses and everything in between—it all stems from innovation through collaboration. By adhering strongly to a focus on student learning and placing students at the center of every decision, we are able to bring everyone on board.

It has not been easy, but we have had visionary leaders who have sought to attract and retain educators who have a focus on proficiency, collaboration, and student learning. Our educators remain with us for an average of seven years, a longer tenure than at most international schools, and have voted SAS as the seventh best employer in Singapore (*Straits Times*).

We're a continual work in progress and it takes a team with an ongoing commitment to growth, questioning, innovating, creating, and reflecting to produce. If you are interested in pursuing program improvement, start with the learning outcomes. Consider what you want your students to be once they exit your program and then work toward designing the learning experience at each level for your context.

It has been a humbling journey to be on and we would be happy to collaborate and learn from other programs on their journey to proficiency. The common framework we developed through OPI training, the common assessment and reporting progressions we developed based on ACTFL benchmarks and AAPPL score descriptors, and the evolving and responsive curriculum we refine each year as a team have all contributed to where we are today. We have room to grow when it comes to literacy and intercultural communication, and we encourage fellow educators to reach out, because we learn best when we learn from each other.

As goes the saying, *"If we build it, they will come."* We owe a great deal of our success to the tireless dedication of our educators, their commitment to our students and to our school.

*Omar Rachid is the Interim Director of World Languages at the Singapore American School in Singapore*

## SOME THOUGHTS ABOUT SAS

*"I like it because it's a small group and it's challenging. I like that we don't have homework and that we play a lot of games."*

*"Language in SAS is one of my favorite classes."*

*"The Spanish class at SAS has taught me to read, talk and write in Spanish better than I ever have before."*

*"The new spaces in the language rooms are comfortable and learning friendly and have all the materials for success."*

*"The teachers in my language class are very good and manage to make a language class a lot of fun."*

*"My daughter has been learning Chinese since she was two, but she's never been willing to speak. In her first week of immersion, she just naturally blurted out several things in Chinese, so her confidence improved almost immediately."*

## References

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- Singapore's best employers 2020. (2020, April 21). Retrieved from <https://www.straitstimes.com/best-employers-singapore-2020>

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## ABOUT ACTFL

ACTFL is dedicated to the improvement and expansion of the teaching and learning of all languages at all levels of instruction. ACTFL is an individual membership organization of more than 13,000 language educators and administrators from elementary through graduate education, as well as government and industry.

Since its founding in 1967, ACTFL has become synonymous with innovation, quality, and reliability in meeting the changing needs of language educators and their students. From the development of Proficiency Guidelines, to its leadership role in the creation of national standards, ACTFL focuses on issues that are critical to the growth of both the profession and individual educators.

## ABOUT *THE LANGUAGE EDUCATOR*

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ACTFL is proud to offer *The Language Educator*, a publication for ACTFL members that provides educators of all languages at all levels with a single, comprehensive source of news and information. As the professional association serving this broad education community, ACTFL has the breadth of resources necessary to assure comprehensive and timely coverage of all aspects of language teaching and administration. For the newest educators as well those with years of experience, *The Language Educator* has been recognized as the most knowledgeable resource focusing on the profession. The magazine is published quarterly, every Winter, Spring, Summer, and Fall.

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