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In schools, learning Chinese isn't foreign anymore

By Charlotte Hsu *Seattle Times staff reporter*

"Wo wang ji le," says Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, 18, of Woodinville, trying to recall the name of a place he visited in China this past year.

The phrase means "I forgot," and Beauchamp-Mustafaga, a senior at the private Lakeside School, has learned to use it with ease.

But after taking Chinese for six years, he remembers much more: He knows enough of the language to read a newspaper or chat about politics.

Beauchamp-Mustafaga, who grew up speaking only English, is one of a growing number of U.S. students enrolling in Chinese instead of in languages such as French and Spanish.

As "globalization" becomes a household word, China's political and economic prowess is persuading more Americans to learn Mandarin, the most common dialect of Chinese, said Michele Anciaux Aoki, project director for the Washington State Coalition for International Education.

"It definitely reflects a shift from the assumption that learning a language was a formality," Aoki said.

"To partner with the rest of the world, to collaborate with them, as well as to negotiate and work through conflict ... we need to know about

other cultures and we need to have language experience," she said.

Though Chinese is "exploding," about 90 percent of this country's foreign-language students still choose French, German and Spanish, said Marty Abbott, director of education for the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages.

The council estimates only 30,000 to 50,000 of the millions of K-12 students studying languages today take Chinese.

But there's been enough demand for Chinese that the College Board, which oversees the Advanced Placement program, will debut an exam in Mandarin this year. Chinese and Japanese are the first non-European AP languages, said Tom Matts, director of a world-languages initiative for the College Board. In a 2003 survey, the College Board found 2,400 high schools wanted to offer AP Chinese, compared to 50 for Russian, 175 for Japanese and 240 for Italian, Matts said.

Locally, Newport and Sammamish high schools are starting AP Chinese this year. Mercer Island High School, which hired a second Mandarin teacher this fall to satisfy growing demand, plans to follow in 2007. The Chinese program that started there in 1997 with one class now includes four levels, six classes and more than 150 students, said Chinese teacher Gordon Davenport.

At Lakeside, where Beauchamp-Mustafaga and three friends hope to do an independent study in Chinese, fall 2006 marks the first time administrators split a lower-level Mandarin course into two sections to accommodate rising enrollment.

Michael Levine, executive director of education for the Asia Society, said an emerging problem is the need to train more Mandarin teachers.

A 2005 Asia Society report calls a lack of teachers the "key bottleneck" to expanding Chinese instruction in the U.S. Matts estimated that fewer than 300 of the 2,400 schools expressing interest

in AP Chinese have the teachers and resources available to offer that course this year.

Paula Leitz and Zev Handel, who oversee Chinese certification at Pacific Lutheran University and the University of Washington, respectively, said this was the first year they had applicants seeking credentials to teach Chinese.

"I came to work one day and there they were, 25 of them," Leitz said. "And two days later there were another 10."

Handel, associate professor at UW since 1998, said he doesn't remember meeting anyone who wanted a Chinese credential until he received about 10 inquiries this year.

"The importance of being able to do business in China ... is especially true for us here on the Pacific Rim," Handel said.

"We're very aware that big changes are coming, and that we're going to be part of the state's capacity for certifying the teachers," he said. "Exactly how that's going to play out is all a little unclear still."

Beauchamp-Mustafaga says he is glad he chose Mandarin.

Chinese could help him become a businessman, or a CIA agent — "every kid's dream," he said.

He plans to take the AP exam in May, and he wants to attend a university with a good Chinese program because "it's a pity just to let it go to waste," he said.

Chinese brought Beauchamp-Mustafaga to China, where he studied and traveled his junior year. Learning Chinese was hard at first, because the grammar, tones and writing are so different from English, Beauchamp-Mustafaga said.

But in many ways, Mandarin is no longer foreign to him. He uses the

language regularly, mixing Chinese words into English conversations where no English words seem to fit.

After all, he says, the English way of expressing the casual feeling of "whatever," "it doesn't matter," "I don't care," doesn't quite get the point across like the shorter, Chinese version: "sui bian."

Charlotte Hsu: chsu@seattletimes.com

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