

Effective Intensive Language Programs: The Case study of a Kiswahili STARTALK Program Model

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Abstract

The article presents a case study of a non-residential Kiswahili language and culture STARTALK program conducted in the summer of 2019 at the University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas. The study participants comprised 22-novice low non-heritage learners recruited from middle and high schools. They were enrolled in a four-week intensive Kiswahili program of 120 contact hours. Using qualitative approaches, the case study highlights evident aspects of program effectiveness. At the end of the program, students' performance ranged from novice mid to Novice High in the

three modes of communication after having novice low proficiency at the start of the program. They also demonstrated increased awareness and the acquisition of the cultural knowledge of the Swahili culture that was adequate for elementary-level language learning. In this article, we present a detailed program description, instructional goals, and assessment approaches utilized in the program. We also discuss the lessons learned from the designing and implementation process and the relevant pedagogical implications for various stakeholders interested in designing and implementing effective intensive language programs.

Keywords: ntensive programs, language learning, proficiency gains, Kiswahili assessment, intercultural competence, Less Commonly Taught Languages.

Introduction

Over the years, globalization has led to increased contact among individuals from different nationalities and diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds in communities and has promoted multilingualism rather than monolingualism (Schenker, 2018). In the United States, various educational initiatives both at the – federal and state levels that include critical language scholarships, student and teacher programs, infrastructure development, and intensive domestic and study abroad programs have been implemented in K – 16 settings to increase the number of American citizens who can speak other languages fluently. These initiatives enhance intercultural competence, workforce development, harmonious co-existence among various communities, and national security needs. Foreign language programs are administered in different formats, such as regular, intensive, immersion, study abroad and domestic programs. Intensive language programs have been established as one way of growing a population of speakers of less commonly taught

languages with high competencies in oral and written language skills and deep cultural knowledge of communities where the language is spoken (Geisler, 2007). Moreover, intensive language programs are crucial in increasing student's competencies in the five goal areas of the World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages, namely— communication, comparisons, cultures, connections, and communities —, which emphasize the application of learned language skills beyond the instructional settings as well as enhancing students' intercultural competence (The National Standards Collaborative Board, 2015).

The typical models of successful intensive foreign or second language programs are described and validated mainly for English as a second language in K-16 contexts in North America; that prepare students for academic study, business, and work in English-speaking contexts (Clark et al., 2021; Fox et al., 2014). There is limited evidence on effective models of intensive language programs for less commonly taught languages, specifically African languages. Empirical evidence

on the features of an effective intensive program will provide insights that can be utilized by various practitioners, program administrators, funders, and other stakeholders to guide these programs' planning and implementation frameworks. This study contributes to the currently limited literature on effective models of intensive language programs for less commonly taught languages by examining a case study of the Kiswahili STARTALK program conducted at the University of Kansas in 2019.

Background

History of Kiswahili STARTALK Programs

STARTALK is a federal grant program established by the National Security Language Initiative (NSLI) legislation in 2006. The program is administered by the National Foreign Language Center (NFLC) at the University of Maryland and supports critical languages of interest to U.S. national security. The main goals of the STARTALK program are first to increase the number of students enrolled in the study of critical languages. Second, increasing the number of highly

effective critical language teachers in the U.S. Third, increasing the number of highly effective materials and curricula available for teachers and students of critical need languages and enhancing workforce development in the federal government to meet national security needs through studying critical languages. In alignment with the program's key goals, STARTALK implements three levels of programs, student programs, teacher professional development programs, and infrastructure development.

The summer programs are typically free or low-cost for participants, and they emphasize oral language proficiency and the building of cultural awareness in an immersive environment. The K-14 student programs provide a linkage between K-12 and higher education institutions by offering college credit to high school students enrolled in the program. In general, STARTALK intensive summer programs ranging from two to four weeks have positively influenced student language learning (Ingold & Hart, 2010; Sacco 2014; Malone et al., 2010). Effective STARTALK

programs exhibit characteristics such as high quality, effective instruction, use of native speakers as instructors thus; these programs are attractive to parents and students (Ingold & Hart, 2010). STARTALK principles of effective teaching which are aligned with the goals of World-Readiness Standards for learning languages guide curriculum design and delivery of high-quality instruction in all STARTALK language programs^[1]. The STARTALK principles emphasize the development of students' linguistic and intercultural competence through instructional activities; that encourage meaningful, real-world learning experiences. Students are equipped with skillsets to use the target language beyond the classroom settings to express themselves, solve problems, and negotiate for meaning.

Kiswahili STARTALK language programs were funded over several years from 2013 through 2019. Compared to other languages, a small number of middle and high school students participated in this program 30 (2.3%) in

2013, 26 (2.2%) in 2014, and **10 (1.2 %) in 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, and 2019**. Funding for Kiswahili STARTALK programs was discontinued in 2020. Despite the discontinuation of funding for Kiswahili language programs, there is need to document effective successful models that can guide administrators who are currently implementing intensive language programs or plan to implement new ones.

Features of Effective Intensive Language Programs

Effective intensive language programs exhibit several unique features, such as the adoption of the co-teaching instructional model, teaching in the target language at least 90%, and the use of task-based and communicative instructional approaches that target the world readiness standards for learning languages (Serrano et al., 2016; Xu et al., 2013, 2015). Teaching encompasses using authentic instructional materials and utilizing technological support to connect to the target culture. Moreover, students are exposed to diverse and rich cultural activities through co-curricular activities such as field trips, internship opportunities and immersive cultural

activities such as homestay visits, cooking demonstrations, conversation practice, music and dance, film and movie screenings (Serrano et al., 2016; Xu et al., 2013, 2015). These features enable the creation of an engaging learning environment that is immersive and provides multiple opportunities for increased student participation. Evidence suggests that the program duration does not matter; however, intensive exposure to a foreign language in immersive learning contexts using effective pedagogical practices leads to significant improvements in oral and written proficiency (Serrano et al., 2016; Xu et al., 2015). Creating an immersive learning context facilitates the positive transfer of what was learned in the classroom to authentic cultural settings. Learners exhibit an increased knowledge of the language community while engaging in constant comparison.

Another critical aspect in an effective intensive program is language program evaluation, as it provides feedback on adjustments needed to enhance effective

instruction. Moreover, the co-teaching model creates an engaging environment for learning due to the reduced teacher-student ratio. With more teachers, the reduced teacher-student ratio provides a skilled teacher with opportunities to differentiate instruction, engage learners in collaborative class activities, and address the learning needs of individual students; in small class sizes, students get more opportunities to practice the language components and to get feedback from the teacher and their peers. However, in order to acquire meaningful changes in these programs, it is important to align the assessment procedures to the day-to-day classroom activities and to utilize the progress monitoring and assessment data to inform instruction (Martel & Bailey, 2016).

Research conducted by Alshumaimeri (2013) established that a feature of intensive programs that distinguished them from traditional language programs included the use of the target language exclusively along with

a variety of co-curricular activities hence was a source of motivation for language learning. Moreover, the intensity of teaching, the teacher's character, teaching techniques, student's mindset, and language learning goals, availability of teaching and learning materials, and teachers' abilities to motivate learners were some factors that increased learning motivation. Additionally, using effective evidence-based pedagogical practices administered by teachers (80%) who were native speakers of the target language increased the efficiency of the programs. A distinctive characteristic of students who enroll in intensive language programs is a high intrinsic motivation to gain oral and written proficiency in the target language. Therefore, this growth mindset enables students to be persistent and to endure the rigorous nature and structure of intensive programs. Research evidence indicates that students in intensive language programs acknowledged that the rigorous nature of the programs contributed to positive changes in their individual learning outcomes. Additionally, extensive interactions in the target

language supported the acquisition of syntactically complex linguistic elements (Isabelli-Garcia & Lacorte, 2016). Immersive learning contexts enroll small classes that use student-centered instructional practices hence fostering close interaction between instructors and students, thus increasing their willingness to communicate and participate which consequently increases their linguistic knowledge, oral fluency, and intercultural competence (Fukuda, 2014; Miano et al., 2016). Furthermore, (Miano et al., 2016) contend that short-term intensive programs offer a valuable learning space for significant learning improvement in learners' language abilities, as they are proficiency-based and content-focused.

Effects of Intensive Programs on Language Proficiency

Converging evidence in studies conducted in more commonly taught languages (i.e., English, French, and Spanish) indicated that intensive programs promoted the development of second/foreign language skills compared to regular non-intensive instruction (Llanes & Serrano, 2011; White & Turner, 2005). The studies reported mixed findings about the

impact of intensive language programs on student language skills. Some studies reported a significant and positive effect of intensive programs on students' vocabulary size, reading, and writing abilities (Abouzeid, 2018; Dewey, 2004; Serrano et al., 2011). Freed et al., (2004) compared language learning in formal language learning classrooms, study abroad programs, and immersion contexts and found that students from the immersion classrooms registered significant improvements in oral performance because of the fluidity of the measures used. The learners were exposed to the target language frequently as compared to the other two groups (study abroad students and students in regular formal language learning classrooms). A similar study indicated positive outcomes of the intensive language programs as the learners were exposed to more contact hours during the intensive language program than during a typical school year (Mukundan et al., 2012).

Time distribution also demonstrated a positive effect on the concentration of time of L2 instruction as it was positively correlated with children's L2 proficiency compared to regular language programs (White & Turner, 2005). For this case, students in the intensive program significantly outperformed their peers in oral production. Similarly, Llanes and Serrano (2011) reported that Spanish L1 adult students enrolled in a one-month intensive English course outperformed their peers after receiving the same contact hours of instruction over a duration of one year. The programs utilized co-curricular activities such as field trips, music, dance, and film screening in addition to classroom instruction, which exposed students to the target culture and fostered learner engagement. Overall, through intensive programs, learners demonstrated a great improvement in various language skills and cultural knowledge (Serrano et al., 2016).

Present Study

Given the dearth of evidence on effective design and implementation of an intensive African language program, the present study seeks to describe a case study of a Kiswahili Language and Culture STARTALK program for middle and high school students. In this case study, we evaluate the effectiveness of this intensive program by examining the program overview, program goals, curriculum, co-curricular activities, professional development training, assessment, instruction, student reflections on their learning experiences, teachers' reflections of their instructional practices, students' learning outcomes by answering the following questions. a) How do you design and implement a successful intensive language program for a less commonly taught language program? b) What are the effects of intensive language programs on students' language proficiency? c) What are the challenges of designing and implementing intensive language programs?

Methods

Context and Participants

This study took place at the University of Kansas, a large research-intensive university in the mid-western region of the United States. Participants were twenty-two middle and high school students selected from a pool of sixty-six applicants from local districts in the state. The selection criteria were students with a non-heritage background, novice low proficiency in Kiswahili, good academic standing, interest in studying an African language, high motivation, and commitment to participate in an intensive program. The students' demographics are presented in Table 1. Three highly trained and experienced teachers who were native speakers of Kiswahili were the instructors of record, assisted by three classroom assistants. The high-school students in the program earned college credit (five credits) for elementary Kiswahili I upon successfully completing the program.

Table 1. Background information of Participants

Gender	Male = 31.81%, Female = 68.18(%)
Race	Caucasian = 50%, Black/African American = 22.7%, Hispanic/Latino = 18.8%, Asian = 4.55% , Native American = 4.55%
First Languages	English = 18 Farsi = 1, Kikuyu = 2 , Russian = 1
Previous formal Kiswahili training	No = 22 , Yes = 0
Grade levels	6 – 7 graders = 7, 9 - 12 graders = 15
Proficiency level at the beginning of the study	Novice low
Instructors	Main instructors = 3, classroom assistants = 3

Program Overview

The intensive non-residential intensive student program was implemented over a duration of four weeks. Program activities took place 5 days a week and students were exposed to learning for six contact hours per day (9:00 a.m. to 3:00

p.m.). Participants were grouped into three classrooms of seven students each. Each class had a main instructor supported by a classroom assistant. Thus, the teacher-to-student ratio was 2:7 or 2:8. The main role of the teacher was to direct and facilitate the learning process as the expert, and the classroom assistant provided support to students during the small group activities and outside the classroom during co-curricular activities.

Program Goals

The program had two main goals, first to advance Kiswahili learners language proficiency to at least novice high proficiency levels, according to the NCSSFL-ACTFL Global Can-Do Benchmarks (See a snapshot of the Can Do Benchmarks for interpersonal communication from the curriculum in figure 1). Secondly, to allow students to demonstrate successfully presentational, interpersonal, and communicative language skills as well as their intercultural competence of East Africa through the Pulsar Assessment

portfolio—the electronic language portfolio installed as a mobile application.

Curriculum

The theme of the Kiswahili STARTALK curriculum was “*Going on an East African Safari*”. In order to meet the program goals, the curriculum was designed based on the STARTALK Student Curriculum Template structured using the Backward Curriculum Design (Wiggins & McTighe, 1998). The curriculum design simulated an immersive context of preparations for travel abroad on an Eastern African Safari, where students learned about the culture and people who live in Kenya, Tanzania, and the wildlife of the Serengeti and Maasai Mara. The curriculum comprised of several thematic units with specific indicators of students learning goals and measurable outcomes. Units were centered around real-life meaningful scenarios that students would encounter when they travel to East Africa on a Safari trip. For instance, self-introductions, meeting the host family, family, daily activities, foods and hospitality, clothing and accessories,

shopping at a local market, asking for directions, weather conditions, travel and tourism, a tourist attraction, and planning a safari trip itinerary. The curriculum was structured to provide students with multiple opportunities to practice the target language through real-life situations using authentic materials. The program comprised of six can-do statements, which targeted the presentational and interpersonal modes of communication. They were structured for the novice mid and novice high proficiency. Stage 2 outlined the performance assessment task used in the program for learners to demonstrate what they could do with what they knew. Stage 3 outlined the lesson can-do statements as well as the resources that guided the development of learning plans for each mode of communication.

1. How can learners exchange information and ideas in conversations?	
[NH] I can request and provide information by asking and answering practiced and some original questions on familiar and everyday topics, using simple sentences most of the time.	1. I can interact with others in everyday situations such as ordering food, bargaining at the market for food and clothing.
[NM] I can request and provide information by asking and answering a few simple questions on very familiar and everyday topics, using a mixture of practiced or memorized words, phrases, and simple sentences.	2. I can ask and talk about someone's name, nationality, age, birthday, and phone number.
2. How can learners meet their needs or address situations in conversations?	
Not a focus of the program	
3. How can learners express, react to, and support preferences and opinions in conversations?	
[NH] I can express, ask about, and react to preferences, feelings, or opinions on familiar topics, using simple sentences most of the time and asking questions to keep the conversation on topic.	3. I can talk with someone about hobbies, likes and dislikes with regard to foods, drinks and leisure activities.
[NM] I can express my own preferences or feelings and react to those of others, using a mixture of practiced or memorized words, phrases, and questions.	4. I can talk with someone to compare my travel preferences with their travel preferences

Figure 1. A snapshot of Can Do Statements for Interpersonal Communication in Kiswahili

Co- curricular activities

The curriculum comprised of a wide range of supplemental co-curricular activities that sought to expose students to the target language and culture. The co-curricular activities included; Mondays and Wednesdays– conversation hours, whereby a small group of 2 – 3 students met with a Kiswahili

native speaker for information conversation practice that was guided by role-play scenario prompt and relevant topical issues. Students had a one-hour computer lab session on Tuesdays. During the lab session, they completed online interactive activities that included recording role-play scenarios, guided online language practice activities with support from teaching assistants and instructors, and recorded assessments to be uploaded to Pulsar. On Thursdays, guest lectures were scheduled where East African native speakers from the community gave lectures on cultural topics of interest to students. Lastly, on Fridays, several cultural activities were carried out including a trip to a local museum that had African art, Swahili cuisine cooking lesson demonstration to introduce students to authentic East African cuisine, Swahili movie screening and music and dance. The main goal of the cultural activities was to expose students to language and culture in real life meaningful contexts.

Professional Development Training

Prior to the start of the Kiswahili STARTALK program, the program director and one instructor attended a two-week intensive workshop at the National African Language Resource Center (NALRC), the other instructors had attended the same NARLC training in previous years. The training focused on the backward curriculum design, standards-based instruction, use of the target language, strategies for providing comprehensible input, and performance-based assessment. The program director, the lead instructor and two highly competent foreign language educators facilitated a five-day professional development training for the STARTALK teachers at the University of Kansas prior to the beginning of the program. The workshop comprised of an introduction and a thorough review of the STARTALK principles for effective teaching and learning. Participants were trained on how to implement the backward curriculum design, the use of the target language for instruction, facilitating a learner-centered classroom, use of

culturally appropriate and authentic materials, teaching culture, grammar, and vocabulary in context, and how to provide comprehensible input. The training also covered effective classroom management practices and using the Pulsar language portfolio to document students' communicative abilities in the target language. The instructors and classroom assistants practiced designing learning plans following the STARTALK learning plan templates. The facilitators taught model lessons targeting interpersonal and presentational communication. The instructors engaged in a microteaching practice session to link theory and practice – writing learning plans and teaching lessons. Each microteaching session was followed by a guided self-reflection of the lesson by the instructor, and they received feedback from the trainers and other participants. The professional development training sessions continued throughout the four-week instructional period through informal meetings daily to develop learning plans, learning activities, and assessments. The lead instructor conducted

classroom observations, shared the evaluation reports with the instructors, and conducted individual debriefing sessions with each instructor to highlight areas of strength and point out areas of weaknesses and adjustments based on student's needs and learning outcomes.

Assessment

Various assessment tools were used throughout the program to evaluate students' language skills holistically. Summative assessment tasks were embedded throughout the learning materials in the form of role-play scenarios that targeted all five-goal areas of the world readiness standards. Throughout the program, learners documented evidence of individual language learning using Pulsar – STARTALK's language learning electronic portfolio. Students and teachers downloaded the Pulsar Application on to their mobile devices and created student and teacher accounts respectively. Students logged in to Pulsar at the end of each day to upload their evidence of learning for the three modes of

communication – interpersonal, presentational, and interpretive. The main goal of using Pulsar was to document a learner’s language learning journey, thus facilitated goal setting, articulation, self-evaluation, and meaningful reflection. Learners created a repository of content for them to review. Teachers reviewed the evidence to guide instruction and to provide students with feedback. Through this practice, students understood language use in practice in meaningful situations/contexts. Moreover, the practice promoted learner autonomy, as they understood what they should accomplish and were required to provide supporting evidence demonstrating their capability.

Instruction

Students were assigned three classes and were grouped based on their grade and age range. There was one class for grades 6 – 7 (7 students) and two classes for grades 9 – 12 (7 and 8 students per class). Each classroom had an instructor and a teaching assistant who worked collaboratively and had seven to eight students per class. Daily learning activities targeted

the various modes of the five world readiness standards of foreign language learning; communication (interpersonal, presentational, and interpretive tasks), culture, comparison, connections, and community. Instruction followed the backward curriculum design framework, identifying and stating the desired learning outcomes. This was followed by determining the assessment tasks of the learning outcomes and outlining the instructional activities to attain the learning outcomes. Instructors utilized the STARTALK learning plan template to develop the learning plans for the program. The instructors worked collaboratively and ensured that all core components were included in the lessons. The learning plans were uploaded to an online cloud accessible to all instructors and teaching assistants. The lead instructor reviewed them each week periodically, checked their alignment with the STARTALK learning plan checklist, and provided feedback to instructors accordingly. Learning activities included small group/ pair work, in which students were presented with role-play scenarios that mirrored how Swahili speakers use

language in real-life settings. Following the student-centered approach, students were encouraged to explore and talk about topics of interest to them (for example, the types of leisure activities to engage in while on safari, food preferences, and choice of host families. Students also had multiple opportunities to compare and contrast the similarities and differences between their own cultures versus the target cultures. The instructors used various techniques for students to have meaningful interactions in the target language by providing comprehensible input through visual images, songs, mnemonics, and regalia to make input comprehensible. Instruction followed the gradual release of responsibility teaching approach and constantly checked for learning to ensure students were at par and provided necessary scaffolding for students who did not understand. In the first step [I do], the teacher provided a contextualized model as students listened and watched. In the second step [We do it together] the instructor and the classroom assistant worked with the students on the model. In the third step,

[You do it together], students worked collaboratively in small groups or in pairs with partners with minimal assistance from the teacher. Lastly, in the [You do It Alone], students worked independently i.e., as individuals on the assigned tasks. The instructors also utilized culturally appropriate and authentic materials such as YouTube videos, newspaper articles, songs, and poetry.

Data Collection and Analysis

This study utilized a summative evaluation and heuristic inquiry to evaluate the impact of the STARTALK program on students' language fluency and proficiency in Kiswahili. The heuristic inquiry draws from the co-researchers experiences and intense interest in teaching in Kiswahili language and culture programs (Ozertugrul, 2017; Patton, 2002). The desired outcomes of the study were to contribute to the judgments and generalizations about effective intensive language programs and provide insights for program funders and pedagogical implications for classroom practitioners. The unit of analysis in this case study was the group of students

and teachers who participated in the intensive summer program. The cases were selected using the intensity sampling technique. This technique was utilized as students and instructors were committed participants in providing rich information about their experiences during the program implementation. The research team completed the ethical approval to collect data from participants through the STARTALK program. The minor's parents consented to have their children photographed and video recorded during the study. The students who were over 18 years old completed the statement of consent. To ensure the credibility and validity of the findings, we employed data triangulation by drawing data from multiple sources. These included semi-structured interviews of students and teachers, classroom observations, document analysis of curriculum, learning plans, evaluation reports, and students' written and oral assessment records in Pulsar. We selected the program curriculum as it stipulated the targeted outcomes of the program and outlined content to be covered, the learning

plans were aligned with the classroom observations, and the students oral and written assessments in Pulsar were used to demonstrate the proficiency outcomes of students. The semi-structured interviews included themes that examined program effectiveness: immersion in the target language and culture, the use of the student-centered teaching method, the use of authentic materials, the utilization of performance-based assessments, and the use of a co-teaching approach.

Data analysis

Data analysis involved multiple steps: the first coding cycle involved reading and re-reading the interview transcripts, curriculum documents, learning plans, observation notes, and program evaluation reports and then assigning codes to data chunks. In this exploratory analysis phase, we utilized holistic coding - initial single codes were assigned to large data chunks to capture the possible categories that may develop. We used open codes to establish the common patterns in the

various data sources. The various patterns were clustered into themes. For the second coding cycle, we used axial coding to generate patterns from the initial codes from multiple data sources. We also conducted member checking where the findings from the second cycles of coding were presented to the participants for them to evaluate the accuracy of the results. Data reliability was enhanced through interviewing several students and teachers and the recording of oral interviews and transcribing them.

Results

An examination of the themes from the various data sources, including the curriculum, oral interviews, and classroom observations, indicated that the following aspects of the program enhanced students' cultural knowledge and fluency in Kiswahili: immersion in the target language and culture, the use of student centered-teaching method, the use of authentic materials, the utilization of performance-based assessments and the use of a co-teaching approach.

Immersion in the target language and culture

The curriculum design that followed the ACTFL standards manifested in the 5 Cs (Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities) delivered through task-based instruction gave students a total immersion during in-class and extra-curricular, which enhanced students' oral and written language skills and the intercultural competence. For example, the program can-do statements in table 2 were operationalized as follows. In *Communication*: students engaged in role-play scenarios ordering food at a local restaurant in East Africa, and bargaining with the sellers at a local market. Most importantly, the aggregate reports on the presentational and interpersonal communication skills indicate that the program goals were met (see figures 5, 6, 7, and 8). The figures indicated that the students' performance in the three modes of communication ranged from novice mid to novice high. Affirming this, Student 4, observed,

My goal was to speak Kiswahili and by the end of the program, I could hold a conversation with somebody. I can input on the conversation and that was my goal to speak and to be able to hold a conversation in Kiswahili without struggle.

In *Culture*: students learnt how to make East African food during the cooking demonstration, and they wore culturally appropriate clothing while going to an East African Market.

In *Comparisons*: students compared shopping practices in East Africa versus their own culture. In *Connections*: students were required to understand East African market traditions and values. In *Communities*: students interacted with Kiswahili speaking native speakers during language festival, conversation hours, and guest lecturers or visited East African restaurants in their communities. Curriculum implementation was strengthened through immersion in the target language. The personnel who worked with the students, teachers, classroom assistants, and conversation partners stayed in the target language more than 90 % of the

time. Total immersion challenged students to engage in the learning activities and kept them motivated to stay on their learning tasks and to be active agents in the learning process. For example, they had to figure out the meaning of information presented to them using contextual clues and then to immediately apply the language skills that they learned to perform their assigned role-play scenarios. In addition to this, teachers utilized multiple strategies to provide comprehensible input. Student 3 noted, “We were immediately immersed in the target language from the day we started and my teacher allowed us to apply the skills we learned in the classroom right away”.

Table 2. Sample program Can-Do statements

Program Can-Do Statement	Performance Assessment Task
1. I can interact with others in everyday situations such as ordering food, bargaining at the market for food and clothing.	1. While visiting a local market in Kenya/Tanzania, learners interact with a seller (fruits, vegetables, and clothing) in the market. While presented with a prompt, students ask the cost of the items, the quantity they would like to buy and state the number of items they would like to purchase and negotiate the price of the items with the seller.
Lesson Can Do Statements	
1. I can identify the price of food and clothing or souvenirs from speaking with the sellers, or menu. (Interpretive)	
2. I can order food at an East African restaurant. (Interpersonal)	
3. I can ask and answer questions about the cost and quantity of food items at the market. (Interpersonal)	
4. I can ask and answer questions about the cost and quantity of clothing and souvenir items at the market. (Interpretive)	
5. I can negotiate for price of food, clothing, or souvenir items at the market. (Interpersonal)	

When asked about strategies that helped improve their fluency in Kiswahili, Student 1 noted,

We were constantly encouraged to talk and answer questions in Kiswahili and ask questions in Kiswahili. I have never been part of an immersive context. Everything was just entirely in Kiswahili, entirely immersive, and kept you on your toes, and I appreciated that.

Besides delivering instruction through an immersive context, the teachers used a variety of strategies to support the comprehension of the content. They utilized multiple comprehensible input strategies, including embedding visual images in the content and modeling using real objects, mnemonics, and videos to illustrate the teaching content. Additionally, they made explicit connections between current content with students prior learning experiences. Repetition also helped to enhance students' pronunciation and to build up their vocabulary repertoire. The use of comprehensible input strategies (repetition, use of visuals) helped the students

to figure out the meaning of the given contexts. When asked about the instructional strategies that enhanced students' fluency in Kiswahili,

Student 5 elaborated, "She (instructor) just spoke in Kiswahili, and we had to figure out the meaning, I had to create my own meaning of words from context".

Student centered-teaching

Curriculum design that reflected the STARTALK Principles for Effective Teaching and Learning contributed to program effectiveness. The curriculum was centered around the theme of *Going on an East Africa Safari*. Students indicated that the use of student-centered teaching practices enhanced their learning efficiency. For example, the class environment was characterized by collaborative small group learning activities, in-class activities (role-play scenarios simulating language use in real-life situations), in-class and outside-class group projects, constant check-of learning by the instructors, and support to individual learners based on their various needs.

The instructors ensured that students' interests were factored into the instruction, and their involvement and engagement throughout the program enhanced their language skills. In response to the instructional practices used by teachers, Student 2 observed, "We had a lot of students talking time in class. We had lots of peers talking time and in-class presentations". At the end of the program, students were required to display their language skills through culturally relevant and collaborative activities (see figure 2). Students demonstrated their language skills and intercultural competence through skits, poetry, and song and dance, among others. Student 4 highlighted that "We had a lot of fun coming up with the play. We had to be creative. We all had to put our input and opinion and it was a piece of art we all created together".



Figure 2. Image of students acting out a skit of a market scene in East Africa

The safe and supportive classroom environment made students feel safe to practice their limited language skills. The approach kept students highly motivated, engaged, increased their confidence, and it encouraged them to be critical and creative. Students indicated that they thrived in their learning because the classroom environments were safe and not threatening, lowered their affective filters, therefore, they were free to make mistakes and learn from their mistakes. Student 6 remarked that,

Nobody had to feel embarrassed about being wrong and that was something that was hard for me especially because I hate being wrong. However, in language learning, you are always wrong. However, she (instructor) made a very comfortable environment to make mistakes and was very encouraging.

Students were directly involved in class activities by being encouraged to choose their class projects based on their personal interests. Students had multiple opportunities to demonstrate their learning through outputs from their research output projects and in-class presentations of role-play scenarios. Students completed a needs assessment form at the beginning of the program highlighting their personal goals for the course (language and cultural competence) and their preferred learning style. This information guided instructors in planning content for the course to align with student's interest and learning styles with a focus on practicing language use in meaningful ways.

During the class sessions, the learning goals were clearly outlined and posted on the whiteboards in the classrooms. Students would frequently refer to the desired learning outcomes through the various stages of the lesson. Commenting on this, Student 4 noted,

I liked the Kanga Project (see figure 3) and stuff like the drawings. They gave us a chance to be creative outside of the class. I am an artistic person, so that was my favorite, and I benefited a lot because you also had to do research and make sure you were doing it right, so it was very helpful for me.

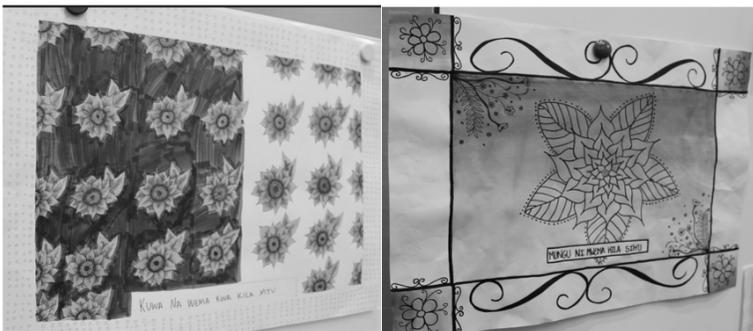


Figure 3. Sample of students Kanga projects

In this assignment, students designed a Kanga with a Kiswahili idiom/phrase. In the classroom presentation,

students displayed their artwork and shared with their classmates why they selected the particular proverb, its literal and inferential meaning, and the cultural significance of the proverb. They also talked about the art they used, i.e., names of colors, why they selected the patterns and the uses of the Kanga in the target culture. The variety of in-class and out-of-class learning activities helped to cater to the learning needs and styles of diverse learners. The learners had multiple opportunities to engage in activities that required them to produce language in meaningful contexts. Affirming this, Student 3 said,

My friend and I did a tour guide presentation on “Nagasaki: Vivutio vya watalii nchini Kenya (Tourist attractions in Kenya)”. I think that helped me to enhance my cultural knowledge. It was a tour guide in the presentation about different tourist attractions within East Africa.

Also evident in the curriculum, learning plans, and instructional implementation was the integration of language,

culture, and content to enhance the students' language and intercultural competence (see model-learning plan in figure 4). The students indicated that the curriculum, the lessons, and the co-curricular activities were culturally rich and presented opportunities for them to learn about East Africa as a region and their cultural practices and to integrate this with knowledge of academic disciplines while using the target language. In the classrooms, the teachers used authentic materials and cultural products and talked about East African cultural practices and perspectives. These included the use of simple stories about Swahili people, family, food, hobbies, travel destinations, and animals. These stories were chosen from online materials, the book *Hannah na Wanyama*, the local East Africa Kiswahili newspapers, and video clips that showed greetings, introductions, transportation, market simulation, and the safari trip to the Serengeti National park, among other topics that were taught in the program. Students were engaged throughout the program through- role-playing cultural scenarios, class presentations, art projects, guest

lectures, conversation practice, and cooking demonstrations, among others. The conversation hours were held three times a week. During this time, students met with a native speaker in small groups of two to three students and used these opportunities to practice speaking and build cultural knowledge. Speaking of the benefits of these varied opportunities for learning, Student 2 noted, “I liked how we used different ways to go about the culture by making food and having presentations. This variety helped us to master different aspects of culture and to understand them better.”

Use of authentic materials

The authentic materials used during the instructional sessions exposed students to the target culture. These opportunities provided exposure on how native speakers of Kiswahili engage in cultural practices, such as greetings, familial relations, and buying goods at an open-air market. After watching or listening to the videos or audio, students would complete follow-up activities such as a vocabulary worksheet,

write a one-minute essay to describe a scene in a movie, talk about family relations, describe a favorite character, and complete a compare and contrast, graphic organizer. These experiences increased their intercultural competence and vocabulary knowledge on various subject matters. Commenting on this, Student 2 noted, “The songs and videos helped us to know different words. I remember the counting video.”

Performance Based Assessments

The curriculum had various summative and formative performance-based assessments embedded throughout the program. The assessment tasks required students to demonstrate competence in interpersonal, presentational, and interpretive skills. The summative included the Pulsar assessments. Students could assess their own growth in fluency in the language and continue to work towards their learning goals. Here are some examples of the assessment tasks that students were given:

1. You and your colleague are living with one host family in Mwanza, Tanzania, and you are planning a 3 days Safari trip to various attractions in the country. Compare your travel plans with that of your colleague to decide the places that you will visit. (Interpersonal speaking).
2. Write an essay about a hypothetical trip to East Africa describing the places that you will go to visit, the means of transport that you will use to get there, some of the activities that you will engage in, the reasons for choosing these attractions, people that will be accompanying you on this trip, and the duration of the trip. Take a photo of the essay and upload it on the pulsar account. (Presentational writing).

Commenting on the assessments that were provided, Student 3 noted,

We had an app that we uploaded our submissions to. I think those helped us to be accountable for our work. However, I think this program taught me that it is not so much about the grade you get in the course. It is

more about being a lifelong learner and expanding your worldview. I think the informal assessments made me acquire the language better.

STARTALK *Start Talking!* **STARTALK LEARNING PLAN**
Designing Learning Experiences

Curriculum Connection

Program Can-Do Statement & Performance Assessment Task <i>Copy the specific program can-do statements from the curriculum (stage 1) and performance assessment task (stage 2) that you are working toward in this learning plan.</i>	
Program Can-Do Statement: I can talk with someone to compare my travel preferences with their preferences.	Performance Assessment Task: In pairs, students ask questions about their preferences, including their travel location, means of transportation, preferred travel season, and what they would like to see during the trip.

Learning Episode #4		Number of minutes for this episode: 30
Lesson Can-Do Statement <i>Identify the lesson can-do statement(s) from the curriculum (stage 3) that are the goals for this learning episode.</i>	Vocabulary <i>How are culture and/ or content part of the language chunks and words that learners will use?</i>	Check for Learning <i>What formative task will learners do to provide evidence that they met the lesson can-do statement?</i>
I can talk to a travel Agent to make a reservation for a trip to my travel destination.	Huduma/services Nikusaidieje/ how can i help you Kupanga safasi/ to plan for a trip Kuhafadhi/to reserve Muda/duration	Learners will work in pairs to make a phone call to a travel Agency in East Africa and make a reservation for their trip to East Africa.
Learning Experiences <i>What sequence of activities will learners engage in before they complete the check for learning for this episode? How will learners move through a cycle of input, sharing, guiding, and applying in each episode? Consider how you might differentiate in order meet the needs of all learners.</i>		
Activity 1: The teacher will ask the learners about the different travel destinations from what they have learned. Each learner will mention at least two travel destinations they would like to visit and why they would like to visit the specific destinations. Activity 2: The teacher and the classroom assistant will model phone call conversations, one assuming the role of the travel Agent and the other the part of the person visiting. The conversation will include all the details the learners need to use when making the reservation to visit. The travel destination they selected, when they want to visit, how many people they use, what the costs are if there are any discounts, the kind of services they offer if they have any accommodation for visitors, and the cost, the means of transportation from the airport and within and the duration of stay. Activity 3: The learners will work in groups of two and practice making a phone call reservation to the travel agency they have chosen. They include all the details following the model of the teacher and the classroom assistant. The teacher and the classroom assistants move around the classroom to ensure learners use the correct sentence structures that match with the content. Activity 4: Learners will, in pairs, present their conversation in front of the class following the following scenario: Your family is accompanying you for a week's Safari trip to Zanzibar. Your mom has asked you to call the tourism agency and make a reservation for the trip. Make a phone call and talk to the Agency about your travel plans.		
Materials Needed <i>What authentic resources, supplies, and other materials will you need to successfully implement this learning episode?</i>		
Authentic pictures of the attractions in East Africa.		

Figure 4. Model Learning Plan

The instructors also pinpointed that they implemented strategies of effective foreign language teaching to increase

students' proficiency in the Kiswahili language as well as cultural competence. Instructor 1 noted,

I used the backward curriculum approach in preparing the learning plans, which were based on the program theme of going on an “*East African Safari*”. The other aspect I considered was culture and content in the lessons. We used authentic materials so that the students were exposed to the authentic culture. I used 90% of the target language during instruction and minimal use of the second language. We were providing comprehensible input I +1, where we would give some information but not all information. We would provide visual support, paired activities, and provided students support by going around the class to check for learning. I also used authentic resources such as YouTube videos for learners to observe what happens in the Swahili culture. The lessons were learner-centered, we allowed learners to pick on what they would like to present rather than us providing them with the topics.

Co-teaching

All the classrooms had a lead teacher and a classroom assistant. Therefore, the teacher-to-student ratio was 2:7 or 2:8. In these instructional settings, teachers could differentiate instruction and attend to individual learning needs. The instructors shared responsibility for planning, instruction, and administering student assessments. One classroom assistant noted that, "I was able to work with smaller groups of students so that if they had questions, they were able to get immediate answers. I mentored students during the group work."

The instructors shared responsibility and delivered their instruction through a cooperative program. There were coordinated efforts in planning and open communication between the two instructors. Each day they made co-teaching seamlessly integrated. Instructor 2 observed that,

Each morning we sat down and went over what was going to happen every learning episode that day, what materials were going to be used with it, how it connected to

can-do statements and the objectives of the STARTALK program at that point.

Students also attested on the effectiveness of the co-teaching model. Student 1 remarked, “I loved my teachers. Because of the small class sizes.... And I heard from people in other classes that they felt the same way.”

Program evaluation was an integral part of ensuring the effective implementation of the program. STARTALK central sent a team of site visitors to evaluate the holistic structure of the program at the end of the first week of implementation. The site visitors were highly qualified experts in the field. They provided feedback on what was working well and areas that needed improvement. Some of the notable areas of strength from the site visit report included: the co-teaching model with a low student-to-teacher ratio, instructors working collaboratively, opportunities to debrief on a daily basis, professional development from highly seasoned foreign language teachers, and institutional support. Effective instruction design was evident in the program as the

evaluators echoed that instructors used effective foreign language pedagogical strategies, including staying within the 90% use of the target language, lots of repetition of key vocabulary and language chunks needed to achieve the lesson can-do statements, incorporation of songs to give students “brain breaks”. Lastly, all instructors strived to follow the program’s learning plans.

Several challenges that were experienced during the designing and implementation of an effective intensive language program are worth noting. For instance, the instructors noted that it was difficult to balance instructional time and additional time spent on preparation. The duration of the program each day was six hours, and the instructors needed to debrief after each session before starting to prepare the learning plans and instructional materials for the following day’s sessions. Extensive preparation of quality learning materials was tedious and time-consuming. The teachers in the program were highly committed and gave up their personal time to meet the program’s needs.

When asked about the major challenge they experienced, Instructor 2 noted that,

The main challenge was the lack of time to prepare the learning plans. You have to think about the lesson in advance. What are the program goals? What tasks are required, what are the performance assessments required, how do you break the lesson from the first to the last episode, how do you plan the vocabulary, how do learners practice vocabulary, and how do you check for understanding?

The instructional staff on the project, along with the program director and the lead instructor, had to work an additional 5 hours after the 6-hour sessions with instructors to ensure adequate preparations for the following day were done. Due to all these efforts, students felt that the program was successful. When asked about their daily workload, Student 4 remarked that,

I thought it was a good amount of work. We would not complain that instructors were putting too much

work into you. They made it simple so that it would be easy for you to understand what you were learning.

Student 5 also remarked that,

I thought it was difficult at times, but I thought it was broken up and immersive enough, and the nature of the classroom was conducive to great learning. Therefore, I thought the weight level of information was good for learning the language.

The third question examined the proficiency gains students made because of the program. When an intensive language program is implemented with high fidelity, diverse students are able to attain their academic goals. When asked whether their expectations were met, students' responses indicated that their expectations were met. Student 1 remarked,

Absolutely. It rather exceeded. Because I mean, I had never learned a language like that before, I had taken high school Spanish, and I speak more Kiswahili than I do Spanish, yet I have taken Spanish for three and a half years.

Student 5 noted, “My goal was to speak Kiswahili, and by the end of the program, I could hold a conversation with somebody”.

The curriculum stated that the target proficiency – language use in real world situations –was novice mid, whereas the target performance (language use in controlled classroom interactions) was novice high. According to ACFTL Performance Descriptors for Language Learners, “performance refers to the ability to use language that has been learned and practiced in an instructional setting, i.e., in the classroom, whereas proficiency refers to the ability to use language in real-world settings in non-rehearsed spontaneous interactions in a manner that is acceptable and appropriate to native speakers” (ACTFL, 2015)

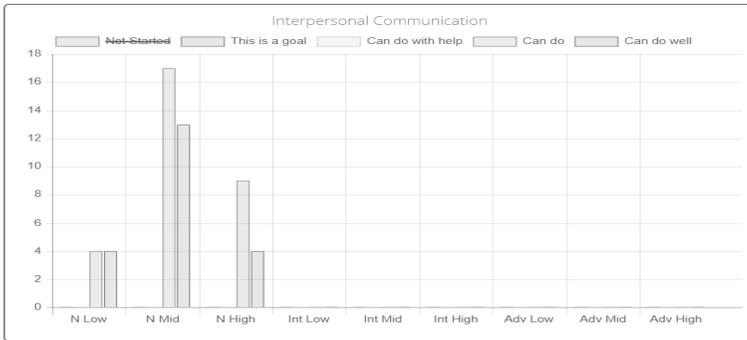


Figure 5. Classroom one Interpersonal communication aggregate report

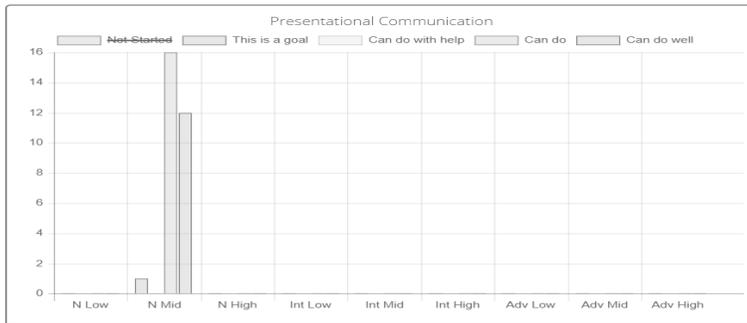


Figure 6. Classroom 1 Presentational goals aggregate report

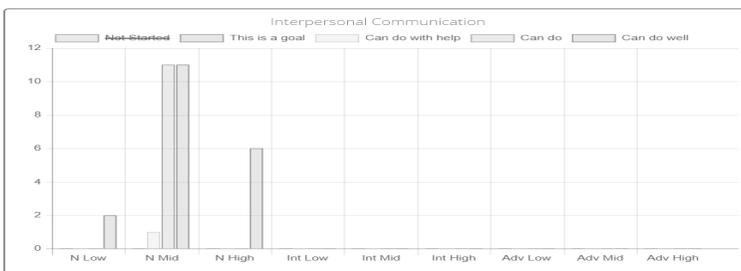


Figure 7. Classroom 2 Interpersonal speaking aggregate report

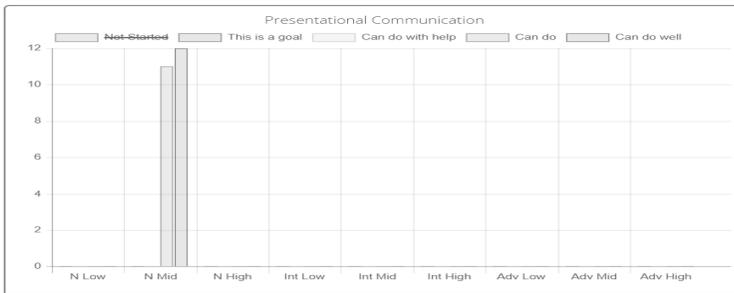


Figure 8. Classroom 2 presentational speaking aggregate report

Discussion

The present case study analysis examined how to design and implement an effective intensive foreign language program. As exhibited in the Pulsar records of the student’s assessments, artwork, and class projects, the main program objectives were attained after four weeks of intensive instruction (see figures 5, 6, 7, and 8 above). All students had novice low proficiency at the beginning of the program, and they made significant language proficiency gains in Kiswahili and intercultural competence after 120 contact hours of instruction. They performed within the range of novice mid to novice high and demonstrated awareness of the East African culture. As attested by the student’s testimonials of

their experiences in the program and proficiency skills, the findings suggest that the program was implemented effectively and thus can serve as a model for educators seeking to launch a similar program or to improve existing intensive and non-intensive programs for Less Commonly Taught Languages. The summative assessments administered at the end of the program indicated that the students achieved the desired outcomes as the quality of students' work demonstrated that they had applied the world readiness standards of learning languages (5 Cs). Consistent with other studies, the program features demonstrated elements of a high-quality intensive language program as a variety of learning activities provided learners with opportunities to use language in real-life contexts, i.e., unrehearsed situations or complications, thus building students' proficiency targets (Xu et al., 2013; Serrano et al., 2016). The highly effective intensive programs elements included extended exposure to language use, small class sizes, extra-curricular activities in the target language, staff willing to devote more time and energy

than what is required in the regular program, and the use of instructional strategies that emphasize 5Cs (Xu et al., 2013, Serrano et al., 2016). In addition to this, the non-threatening learning and teaching environment lowered the affective filters in learners and ensured optimal learning (Imel, 2002).

Considering the availability of financial resources and accountability, immersion can be built into intensive language programs through co-curricular activities such as conversation tables, cooking demonstrations, field trips, guest lectures, interactive computer laboratory sessions, and internships among others. These activities provide opportunities for students to use authentic language and expose them to their culturally appropriate usage. It is essential that extra-curricular activities be planned ahead of time with the end goal in mind. For example, when students meet with native speakers (who are not instructors) for structured or free conversations in the target language, it is important that the conversation partners be prepared to engage in these conversations. In the case of the present

study, the conversation partners attended a two-day workshop for instructions and guidance on how to conduct conversation sessions. On each day that a conversation was scheduled, the instructors briefed students on the content covered in class so that they could support them accordingly by emphasizing the essential vocabulary. Pairing students with native speakers in their communities or online platforms may give them opportunities to engage in real-world communication tasks, consequently building their targeted proficiency skills as they can talk about unrehearsed content.

The program structure had a mechanism to spot-check and endured high fidelity of implementation through review and approval of the program curriculum prior to the program's start. Program preparation encompassed rigorous professional development training of instructors on the theoretical concepts and hands-on microteaching simulations for instructors to demonstrate competence and understanding of effective pedagogical practices. During the program implementation, an external second language expert

who provided insights and feedback on how to strengthen the program conducted a site visit. In alignment with the STARTALK principles, we implemented a standards-based and thematically organized curriculum, conducted the performance-based assessment, integrated culture, content, and language, used target language and provided comprehensible input, facilitated learner-centered classroom, adapted and used age-appropriate authentic materials (Xu et al., 2013, 2015; Chen & Jourdain, 2015). In line with corroborating evidence, the present findings indicated that using effective pedagogical practices along with intensive exposure resulted in proficiency growth as well as enhanced intercultural competence and awareness (Serrano et al., 2016; Xu et al., 2022). Using student-centered practices builds a community of practice among learners, encourages creativity and fosters critical thinking skills. Foreign language learners may exhibit anxiety but when classroom environments are situated as safe spaces for learning learners' diverse learning styles and needs are able to thrive. The co-teaching model in

the program exhibited the qualities of co-teaching models in empirical studies, including instructors being guided by publicly agreed goals, sharing a belief system, seamless engagement in dual roles (instructor and learner, expert and novice), and the use of a cooperative process to shift leadership roles (Cushman, 2004). The co-teaching model is an effective strategy that new programs can adopt as it lowers teacher-student ratio and permits instructors to use differentiated instruction more effectively (Xu et al., 2013).

Program evaluation at various levels throughout the implementation of the program is critical to ensure high fidelity of implementation. If resources allow the evaluation of external parties who can meet separately with different stakeholders in the program such as administrators, instructors, and students before the start of the program implementation could be helpful. Once the feedback is provided, mechanisms should be set such that follow-ups can be made to ensure the suggestions or feedback is implemented well. Classroom observations can be conducted

regularly to ensure effective instruction so that teachers get input on their teaching. Students can also complete an anonymous survey mid-way to indicate things that are working well and point out aspects that need immediate attention and improvement.

Implications and Recommendations

Through program implementation experiences, challenges encountered, learned lessons, feedback from students, site visit evaluators, instructors, and program staff, we discuss some implications and recommendations for future STARTALK programs and other intensive summer language programs namely:

1. *Program design and implementation.* Early and intensive preparations of the curriculum, recruiting of program personnel (instructors, classroom assistants, conversation partners, and host families), purchases and procurement of teaching and learning materials, plan for extra-curricular activities need to be undertaken before

the start of the program. This frees up time during implementation to focus on instruction and supporting the needs of students and instructors.

2. *Extracurricular activities*: It is critical to utilize extracurricular activities that challenge and motivate learners to use language and expose them to real-life situations. The participants' valued the cooking demonstrations and cultural guest lectures compared to a visit to the museum of natural history where they just saw artifacts from East Africa.

3. *Learning planning and fidelity of implementation*. It is critical for programs to have a strong alignment between curriculum goals, learning plan goals, activities, and assessments with the STARTALK principles of effective teaching and learning. This can be done through the review of learning plans and classroom instruction. The quality checks provide opportunities for the program leaders to know whether appropriate language, culture, and content is included in all lessons and knowing

whether age-appropriate activities are used during the instruction.

4. *Professional development training.* Professional development is a crucial element for effective program implementation. Professional development should be provided prior to the start of the program and be built into the program as a continuous process. This provides opportunities for instructor's needs to be addressed, check-in meetings provide opportunities for instructors to reflect on their teaching practices.

5. *Remunerations of instructors.* Given the intensity of the workload of the short intensive programs, there is a need to keep the teachers highly motivated by giving them adequate remuneration.

6. *Length of program during summer and post summer.* While the STARTALK model at the time of the study took advantage of summer sessions only, it is critical to reconsider the duration of the program during summer and post summer. The summer sessions could be

lengthened slightly to allow for a level where adequate elementary content can be covered. If time and resources permit, a more structured follow-up program can be built during the academic year to enhance students skills acquired in the summer program.

7. *STARTALK official meetings*: Planning and equipping program personnel through STARTALK meetings before the start of the program and site visits that come in the first week are crucial. However, these were one off events. A design that encompasses follow-up meetings, which could be virtual may be helpful in enhancing effective implementation practices.

Conclusion

In summary, the findings of the present study corroborate empirical evidence on the importance of intensive language programs in developing high levels of language proficiency and intercultural competence among young and adult learners. The findings further denote that several aspects contribute to the successful implementation of intensive

programs that implementers and administrators of less commonly taught languages can adopt. Financial support is critical as it enables programs to acquire teaching and learning resources and hire instructors and additional support staff. Grant support from the National Security Agency was crucial in providing learning opportunity for high school students. Institutional support to mobilize and facilitate programming aspects such as advising for student recruitment, programming, resources, and space, among others, are critical if the program has to be successful. Effective planning of program activities, including training of teaching personnel, co-curricular activities, summative and formative assessments, and utilizing best practices such as the STARTALK principles of effective teaching and learning are essential for the building of a strong program.

Acknowledgements

The authors acknowledge the support of the STARTALK project through funding from the National Security Agency through the National Foreign Language Center. We also

appreciate the support and contribution from the Kansas African Studies Center, the Lawrence School District, the Department of African and African American Studies, the instructors who taught in the program, students for their commitment and engagement throughout the study, and parents for supporting their children during the program.

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[1] *Implementing standards-based and thematically organized curriculum.* This encompasses the teachers using instructional units that incorporates the World Readiness Standards for Learning Languages through providing learners with a meaningful and purposeful context that is cognitively engaging and has relevance to learners.

Conducting performance-based assessment. The teacher shares units and lessons with learners and monitors the students learning progress to meet the performance targets and goals for each mode of communication.

Integrating culture, content and language. The teacher presents units and lessons that are culturally rich, cognitively engaging and encourages learners to utilize their language skills to learn about the target culture and the world in general.

Using the target language and providing comprehensible input. The teacher facilitates learning sessions by the target language at least 90% of the time.

Facilitating a learner-centered classroom. The teachers make instructional decisions based on learners' needs, interests, abilities, and ages and encourages collaboration between the teacher and learners during the learning process.

Adapting and using age-appropriate authentic materials. Teachers select authentic materials (texts and resources prepared by native speakers for use by native speakers) that are appropriate for the theme and the performance target of the unit (STARTALK, 2022b).