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## Americans taking to Hindi in a big way

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Americans are taking to learning Hindi in a big way. Nearly 80-90 per cent of enrollments at graduate level language programme in US universities are Americans.

"In first and second-year Hindi the percentage of white American students is 10-20 per cent but at the advanced levels the percentage is 80-90 per cent, mostly graduate students," Herman Van Olphen, Professor, Asian Studies, University of Texas, Austin, told PTI in an email interview.

"The heritage (Indian background) student percentage is higher at the lower levels because most of them take Hindi on the side while majoring in pre-med (biology) or other fields," he said.

We have trained thousands of students in Hindi in the last 45 years, although there have been many levels of training; some students study Hindi for only two years while others study for much longer periods," said Professor Olphen.

In States such as Texas, California, New York, and New Jersey, where large numbers of Indian immigrant live, Hindi classes have enrolled more and more heritage students. Now

they make up 80-90 per cent of the students studying Hindi. At the same time, the profile of advanced students at the graduate level has not changed that much, he said.

There are now some heritage students also who are making a career out of the study of India and study Hindi with the goal of using their language in research, but they are still a minority at this level, said Professor Olphen.

However, he said there is also increasing interest in other Indian languages and "we offer courses in Bengali, Tamil, and Malayalam and will resume the teaching of Telugu next year. Still, about 90 per cent of our Indian language students are enrolled in Hindi and Urdu."

"In the past half century certain events have awakened interest in foreign languages in the US as evidenced by increased enrollments in non-European languages and increased government support for these languages. The first event was the Soviet launching of Sputnik in 1957, which led to the National Defence Education Act in 1958 with support for several South Asia Centers at universities such as Texas," he said.

"It was with this support that programs in Hindi and other South Asian languages were started. Interest in Hindi was steady until the mid-80's when the children of Indian immigrants began to form a large presence on campuses. As a result, the enrolment in existing Hindi programs increased greatly and many universities began new Hindi programs.

Then came 9/11 and renewed government support to create language expertise in Arabic and many other languages, including Hindi and Urdu. The Flagship programs are part of an initiative to produce more language expertise among undergraduate students: the first Flagships were created for Arabic and Chinese and now the University of Texas is the first home of the Hindi/Urdu flagship.

The University of Texas at Austin has been recently awarded more than \$ 700,000 to establish Hindi and Urdu teaching programmes as part of the US Government's initiative to teach languages whose knowledge is considered critical to national security.

However, he said Hindi is considered more difficult than European languages because of the lack of cognate vocabulary and the distinctive writing system; however, it is considered easier than other non-European languages, such as Arabic with its difficult grammar or Chinese and Japanese with their intricate writing systems.

"Most students have a connection to India through family and friends and want to learn Hindi to enhance their communications with relatives in India, improve their appreciation of Indian culture, and appreciate Hindi media such as films and TV to a greater extent.

At the graduate level, most students studying Hindi intend to use the language in their research," according to Professor Olphen.

He said teaching materials in Hindi have been created for the last 45 years and the three administrators of our flagship have all written texts for Hindi and Urdu. "We will continue to design our own course material but also use materials produced elsewhere."

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