

Achieving

“TRUE” ARTICULATION

in Foreign Language Learning

EDITOR'S NOTE: For this special feature in *The Language Educator*, we asked several noted experts in the foreign language community to describe how they see articulation in foreign language learning. Here they share their perspectives on achieving this key goal we all share.

What Is Articulation, What Makes It So Hard To Do, and What Can We Do About It?

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What is articulation? Articulation is the work teachers do to enable students to make seamless progress through their language learning experiences. It is the consensus that teachers need to attain within language departments at the school level, and across levels of schooling. Notably, articulation is hardly an issue when learners acquire language in informal settings. In these settings, language growth evolves as learners glean from their experiences those aspects of language that contribute to their development. Because learners' experiences may or may not result in effective or efficient use of their time, and because instructed settings have the capacity to maximize learner time on task, articulation is something teachers must work diligently to address.

At present, many of us bemoan the fact that a significant number of students study foreign languages for fewer than three years. What often goes unrecognized is the number of students who study for four years (or more), but all of it at level I!

Why is articulation hard to achieve? There are institutional barriers to articulation. Frequently, teachers instruct students from a variety of prior learning experiences—they may come from different schools, different teachers, or even have learned some language through non-school experiences. Teachers have few opportunities to discuss articulation during their very limited time together. Schools assume that the local curriculum or standards are sufficient to define what constitutes satisfactory progress from level to level. Beyond these institutional barriers, there are other challenges to articulation. As language teachers, we don't often have clearly defined, shared agreements about what learning looks like when students achieve it.

That's why some teachers will complain that students aren't coming prepared to work at the level they teach. Some teachers look for mastery of material covered instead of defining language learning as progress from no control through emerging control to eventual full control.

What can we do to improve articulation? As teams of teachers at the school level, and across schools, as well as throughout the profession, we need to develop clearer operational definitions of what learning is, what evidence we will accept of learning, and how we will know learning when we see it. The most effective way in which we can do that is to develop instruments such as common final performance assessments. At the school level, these serve as final exams; they are developed and scored collaboratively by teachers. Across schools both within a district and from K-12 through to post-secondary, these performance assessments serve to clarify expectations for learning outcomes that we all agree prepare students to be successful at the next school or institution. We need to acknowledge that assessing performance must be supported by well-developed scoring rubrics. Nonetheless, performance will always be far more subjective to assess than the right/wrong nature of measuring grammar and vocabulary knowledge. We also need to be clear that evidence of grammar or vocabulary knowledge may not be evidence of the ability to integrate knowledge into performance.

Improved articulation is critical to the long term success of current initiatives to expand and extend language learning in our schools. We cannot afford to create a generation of enthusiastic language learners who leave our schools at the end of their academic careers thinking that we have failed them.

Are We on the Same Page?

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Are we on the same page? We as language educators may want to know if we are keeping up with our colleagues teaching the same course, but we know deep down that being on the same page in a textbook is not an appropriate nor satisfying target. How can we change from a literal concept to the philosophical idea of being on the same page? It may be as simple as putting into practice our shared belief that we are preparing students to use their new language in real-world applications. Articulation is about having a broad conversation around what really counts in language learning.

Research helps us better understand the second language learning process. As published in *Foreign Language Annals* or on ACTFL's website (www.actfl.org; click on "Publications" and then on "Resources"), research emphasizes the academic, cognitive, and attitudinal benefits to learning languages, especially when instruction begins in elementary grades. Instruction producing these results is not focused on teaching grammatical structures and vocabulary words; rather it uses structures and vocabulary as means toward the larger goal of building proficiency in using language in an interpersonal, interpretive, or presentational mode. Trying to improve articulation by dictating a grammatical sequence or set of vocabulary words fails to take into consideration how students really learn. This approach leads to the frustration of students continually re-starting their language learning—in middle school, high school, and again at postsecondary institutions. We need to understand what students can do in the target language when they arrive at the next level, rather than confronting them with a list of what they can't do, a list usually based on how students have learned at an older age. Articulation is recognizing the steps a student has taken toward proficiency through prior instruction.

Looking to our student standards will help us design connected programs that make an impact, programs focused on really learning to use a new language. Our standards can help us recognize different evidence, assessing what the student can do in the language rather than relying on substitute measures like translation or grammar exercises. Several Wisconsin districts have created articulation by developing specific performance targets for each unit of instruction or for each course (targeting the end of each semester or the end of each year). With clear interpersonal, interpretive, and presentational goals along the course continuum, teachers focus on the characteristics of the student performance desired. Rather than discussing better ways to teach a grammatical structure, they share strategies that help students achieve these goals.

Capturing this assessment evidence is a final component of articulation. Instead of only relying on students' grades from the previous year's course to identify what students know, portfolios of performance assessments or ratings on agreed-upon rubrics provide a richer picture of what students can do. Changing the evidence to profiles of students' proficiency dramatically changes the perception that the teacher must cover a given list of topics, structures, or vocabulary. We know that students don't progress at exactly the same rate, so we may as well track instead their progress along the same paths to increasingly sophisticated language proficiency. Articulation is not successful when we focus on teaching about communication. Language learning becomes articulated in a much richer experience when focused on learning for communication and through communication.

Articulation based on authentic and accurate measurements of real student progress in using language, not on artificial measures of one's knowledge about language, is our hope for transforming world language education. We all want to be on this same page.

Communication is Vital to Articulation

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The first and most important item in any listing of what "true" articulation would look like is communication among all stakeholders. Once communication is established and continued on a regular basis, all articulation challenges can be solved. In order for articulation to happen in a meaningful way, the following must be present:

- Regular communication among staff among all levels.
- Agreement among staff members regarding how languages should be taught.
- A document that clearly states proficiency outcomes with benchmarks established at various stages.
- Program models, especially at the elementary school level, that allow sufficient time to achieve meaningful proficiency outcomes. Early start programs should strive to meet a minimum of 90 minutes per week, distributed in three 30-minute sessions if at all possible.
- Allowing for various entry points into a long-sequence program
- Allowing for articulation options for immersion programs and programs for heritage speakers.
- Regular assessment to track student performance. This can be standardized local assessments and/or it can be nationally based assessments such as the ELLOPA, SOPA, COPE, NOELLA, STAMP, or OPI.

- Use of a system to track student progress from level to level and school to school. *LinguaFolio* is an outstanding example of such an instrument.
- Use of varied teaching methods across all levels, so that a broad array of skills is taught.

One of the major obstacles to achieving quality articulation is the fact that teachers from different levels rarely have opportunities to spend time together to communicate with each other and to learn from each other. This situation exacerbates the disconnect that too often exists between the high school level and pre-high school levels. A similar obstacle is that programs are often planned in isolation from the rest of the language sequence. This is frequently the case when elementary schools plan early to start programs without communicating sufficiently with the middle and high school staff.

Another obstacle is that many schools and districts do not have a curriculum framework in place. Language educators must insist that curriculum be based not on a textbook series but be based instead on standards and benchmarks. Such a curriculum will enable them to describe student learning in terms of proficiency outcomes rather than textbook chapters covered.

Language educators should not accept a situation in which there is very little or no communication among levels. They should vigorously advocate for time with their colleagues—time that will result in improved student learning. Administrators must recognize the need for coordination among the various levels in the language sequence and must provide for this coordination by allocating time for staffs to meet to develop a well-articulated program. Administrators must also identify a staff member who will be responsible for making sure that each part of the articulation plan is carried out.

Our profession is well underway to greatly improving articulation. Our greatest assets are our ongoing attention to performance-based assessment and the fact that we have proficiency descriptions to which we can tie our assessments. The assessment information we gather is a major component in planning meaningfully articulated programs. Once we have a clear idea of what our students are able to do, we must be accountable to them to help them to take the next step up the proficiency ladder.

The major benefit of a well-articulated program is an increase in student learning because gaps and overlaps can be eliminated. Each teacher will have a clear and concise idea of what the learner who is new to the class is able to do in terms of an agreed upon clearly spelled-out sequence. Learners will excel because they will know what is expected of them from level to level. As we get better and better at articulation we can expect even greater student learning results.

Planning and Assessment: The Keys to True Articulation

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While the standards define what students should know and be able to do in broad terms, they give little guidance on specific themes or about "how well" students should perform to meet expectations. Planning thematically with colleagues, determining performance outcomes, and administering common assessments can help alleviate complaints, such as "All they ever do down there is play games," or "Didn't you already learn this with your teacher last year?"

To set the course for smoother articulation, world language educators first must become familiar with the ACTFL Performance Guidelines for K-12 Learners (1998) or the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines (1986, 1999) for older learners. These tools enable us to make judgments about what is achievable for learners engaged in the learning process. Through spiraling and recycling, we should expect students to function with more sophisticated language as they move through the language sequence.

Second, teachers across grades and levels should participate in curriculum mapping. A map reminds me of a college course syllabus. Minimally, a map should contain content, skills, and assessments. More detailed maps may include unit themes or topics; essential/guiding questions; learning activities; vocabulary and structures; and materials and resources.

With agreed-upon assessments and projects, and clearly defined rubrics or checklists, teachers can learn to rate learner performance similarly. Transparency also ensures that learners understand what is expected of them.

Calibration of scores based on student samples is one of the best activities for arriving at department, district, or state-level consensus on just what "counts." (You'll need to negotiate how much emphasis will be placed on accuracy—grammar, and how you will rate content, understanding, and the like.)

We must think in terms of criteria and descriptions rather than scores or percentages. If we all can look at a writing sample and say, "That's novice high. The student can write in sentences at least half the time and uses memorized chunks and formulaic expressions with ease," then we will be able to build on what students bring as they move through the program sequence.

If all level I teachers plan and assess the curriculum in the same manner, there is a greater likelihood that horizontal articulation will ensue. If all teachers at all levels engage in similar activities, vertical articulation will result.

As a department, then, you will want to take the following steps to ensure both horizontal and vertical articulation:

- Familiarize yourselves with the national standards (1996) and your own state standards.

- Discuss the K–12 performance guidelines or the proficiency guidelines so that you all get a feel for appropriate targets as learners move through the language sequence.
- Use a process like curriculum mapping to chart what is currently taught and to arrive at consensus about what should be taught across the program sequence.
- Look at the content (standards, themes, culture, vocabulary and structures, performance outcomes) for each unit across the year for each grade or level. This is best accomplished with same-language peers.
- Determine gaps and redundancies and renegotiate the content.
- Decide on real-life tasks and proficiency-based assessments for each grade or level that every teacher will use. (These should assess your performance outcomes.)
- Develop or find scoring guidelines for these common assessments.
- Collect student samples and engage in calibration sessions together with same grade/level teachers.
- Once you have a good sense of how to rate consistently, share the guidelines and student samples with students so that they, too, understand the target. (This should make communication with home easier too!)
- Meet regularly as a department to discuss modifications to your maps and expectations.
- Enjoy the sense of community that develops among your colleagues and smile as you engage in meaningful dialog about your program.
- Watch your students move smoothly for one level to the next!

Resources

The Collaborative Articulation and Assessment Project:
www.caap.osu.edu

Jacobs, Heidi Hayes (1997). *Mapping the big picture: Integrating curriculum and assessment K–12*. Alexandria, VA: Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Sample curriculum maps for world languages:
www.curriculumdesigners.com

PowerPoint and handouts on curriculum mapping:
imsdev.ode.state.oh.us/ode/ims/sbe/sbetookit_foreignlanguage.asp

institution to institution without the deadening duplication of coursework, and the drain on motivation that it often implies. But how do we coordinate between levels and institutions when so many of us are struggling to achieve transparency and create common goals within a single department or section? Among the assorted efforts designed to remedy this seemingly perennial problem are various calls to collaboration, statewide initiatives, and countless placement examinations. However, despite a great deal of conversation, attention, and effort, fluid articulation continues to remain just beyond our grasp.

Although achieving true language program articulation is a goal that is as intricate and multifaceted as it is noble, I believe that it is on the cusp of becoming both realistic and attainable. This optimism is not necessarily due to new thought on the articulation problem itself, but instead to a shift in the profession's consideration of assessment from that of a static final product, to one of an ongoing, evolving process. Now that we are beginning to look at assessment as a continuum, and also as a process that feeds and informs the language learning endeavor, rather than a summative measure whose sole purpose is to provide a final grade, I believe that we are more properly poised to apply this notion of evolution and continuous development to extended programs of language study. In fact, we are already witnessing cases where the notions of continuous assessment and fluid articulation have fused and taken the shape of language learning portfolios. Take, for example, the European Language Portfolio and *LinguaFolio* projects.

Comprised of a Language Passport (an overview of a student's experience and achievements), a Language Biography (a record of a student's self-assessments, identification of strategies, and reflections on goals), and a Language Dossier (a collection of language samples and products selected by the student in order to illustrate skills, experiences, and achievements), these reflective assessment tools evolve with the student to whom they belong. This type of systematic, longitudinal collection of student work and student beliefs for assessment and documentation purposes, however, just happens to produce what many grappling with articulation have only dreamt of: a personalized and responsive portfolio of vital information that each student can take from class to class and level to level of language study. In other words, it is an evolving representation of student attitudes, experiences, and accomplishments that grows along with each individual learner.

Although far from being an easy solution to a very complex problem—many educators have yet to discover portfolios of this nature; surely there are others who will reject the notion entirely, and; funding, training, and technical support must be made available by government and administrative leadership—I see this type of electronic portfolio and the recursive, cyclical, evolving visions of language learning that give it life as a positive and encouraging step toward achieving "true" articulation for language students.

Portfolio Assessment as an Articulation Prototype

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Achieving fluid and effective language program articulation is an unrealized dream for many language educators. Indeed, we all want our students to transition from class to class, grade to grade, and

Square Pegs in Round Holes: Finding the Appropriate "Fit" for K-12 Learners of World Languages

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With the changing global experiences of younger children in our schools such as traveling abroad, learning a heritage language from a parent, or participating in elementary school world language programs, we must, as world language educators, be prepared to meet their needs and place them in classes based on what they know and are able to do in the target language rather than the next "numbered" class that comes in the class listing directory. Successful articulation from elementary to secondary programs has many facets which require continuous and open communication with teachers at all levels.

My experience over the past 15 years of watching a K-12 program in Spanish, German, and Japanese articulate from kindergarten through Grade 12 has given me some unique insights into the process of articulating a K-8 world language program into an already existing high school world language program. As I watched my colleagues in more commonly taught languages, such as Spanish, struggle with previously "prescribed" levels of Spanish instruction try to "fit" the learners who had K-8 experience in learning Spanish (square pegs) into their high school Spanish program (round holes), our students of Japanese sailed into the next class that was designed to fit their needs. In Japanese classes, students moved between levels of language learning based on a point system that was designed to give value to performance assessments at that level. The point totals are simple: The students, on each performance assessment within a series at each level, either "meet and/or exceed an expectation" for that performance assessment or they "do not meet an expectation." The sum of these points then helps the world language staff know where to place students as they look to articulate into their next level of language study.

An unexpected outcome of this point system for articulating between levels has also allowed, for example, our high school teachers to now spend their time preparing for the incoming class by looking at the point totals from a previous level, not a grade on the report card, the number of chapters covered in a textbook or hours of seat time accumulated. These point totals inform teachers more accurately what individual students know and are able to do, as well as the class as a whole, so they can move on with their language study from the first day of class in that next level.

While there are many variables and obstacles to trying to fit students into prescribed levels of language, there was one that stood out in our district's journey towards a well articulated K-12 world language program in three languages. In the beginning, it seemed

to be a sort of a "disadvantage" that the Japanese classes had no particular textbook series to use when deciding on curriculum; in hindsight we see that this was to our advantage when it came to successful articulation based on student learning. Our biggest lesson learned for all our K-12 programs: Textbooks are wonderful tools to be made use of in the classroom and should be included as an integral part of the learning of world languages for our students but should not drive the curriculum nor determine levels of language learning in a well articulated K-12 world language program. It seems so simple but this is most likely the number one reason for articulation issues in world language programs still today.

As educators, we spend a lot of our time and energy to learn how our students learn; why then do we not use this knowledge to differentiate instruction for our children who are learning another language and help them move to the next level when they are ready and can feel successful at that next level? The answers lie in the readjustment of past curricula that include quality performance assessments at each level of study, not a number of chapters that need to be covered. This responsibility for readjustment rests with all involved in the world language program.

Is K-16 Language Articulation Really Possible?

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The language community paid little attention to articulation before the proficiency movement forced high schools and universities to take a closer look at students' previous language training. Now, most language educators recognize the need.

We can best explain articulation by looking at other core disciplines such as math. No one would suggest that we place beginning university or even freshman high school students into courses that assume no previous math knowledge and teach basic elementary math concepts such as $2+2=4$. Yet in some respects that is what we do in many language programs.

Languages are not universally taught as is math, but the need to avoid duplication and build on student abilities is just as important. Fe Pittman Britain even suggests that the lack of a smooth transition among levels is at least partially responsible for the failure of languages to attain a central place in American education ("The Role of the Department Chair in Foreign Language Articulation." *ADFL Bulletin*, Spring 2001).

Proficiency sparked the current interest in articulation and should form the foundation of any articulation effort. In 1998, the Modern Language Association launched the High School to College Articulation project through a workshop in Albuquerque. Three concepts emerged from that workshop which should guide all articulation efforts: proficiency, standards, and assessment. True articulation is not

seat time; it is not a mandated curriculum. It includes proficiency-based standards, with assessments demonstrating that students meet those standards. Without some means of assessing the proficiency level of students, articulation efforts are all for naught.

Assessment remains one of the biggest challenges to articulation. Very few language programs conduct systematic proficiency-based assessments. Many assessment instruments are expensive and time consuming. Without proper incentives, teachers and institutions lack the motivation to create systematic assessment, yet no articulation will work without it.

True articulation is a collaborative effort. Language educators at all levels need to come together to create articulation based on incentives rather than focusing on program inadequacies. Only when articulation benefits everyone will articulation succeed. At Southern Oregon University, we created a program which grants university language credit to high school seniors based on demonstrated proficiencies (including an ACTFL OPI). High school students earn university credits, our university avoids duplication, and high school administrators like the fact that their students receive university credit. The program helped retain advanced high school language classes when school districts faced budget cuts.

The biggest challenge to articulation may be our own success in the proficiency movement. An increasing number of high school programs produce students with intermediate mid (or higher) proficiencies on the ACTFL scale—equivalent to what most university programs hope to achieve by the end of second year. While these students have the linguistic capability to enter junior level university courses, they may lack the academic development and intellectual maturity to pursue these courses. Students can become discouraged and abandon their language studies when thrust into traditional third year university courses. Universities thus risk losing the most gifted and well-prepared language students. Program offerings need to better accommodate incoming freshmen with strong language skills.

Articulation is an ongoing process. It takes continuous, consolidated effort and training to modify programs to meet proficiency-based standards. We cannot assume that simply setting a standard will result in teachers effectively preparing their students to meet that standard. As more and more programs embrace the standards movement, proficiency levels will improve, requiring articulation efforts to evolve.

Will foreign language articulation some day be on par with math? We have far to go, but K-16 foreign language articulation is possible through a collaborative, consolidated effort.

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