

Articulation: Challenges and solutions

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Providing students with a seamless progression of language development within the K-12 school curriculum remains a challenge for the foreign-language profession as we enter the new century.¹ As national standards are developed for foreign-language education in the K-12 continuum and school districts throughout the country consider implementing foreign-language programs earlier in the curriculum, we have an opportunity to confront that challenge with renewed vigor.

After foreign languages were added to the Goals 2000: Educate America Act of 1994, foreign-language standards had to be consistent those being developed for the other subject areas unless the school system was willing to forgo federal funding. The new mandate for parallelism meant establishing content standards and sample progress indicators for grades 4, 8, and 12.

But unlike the so-called core subjects—mathematics, languages arts, social studies, and science—foreign languages have not traditionally been represented in the K-12 curriculum. Although common sense would indicate that students who start early and sustain a long sequence of language study should develop a high level of proficiency, there are comparatively few programs to serve as models and points of reference. As educators consider the skills that students must have to be competitive in the global work force, and as school districts begin to implement extended instructional sequences to provide those skills, foreign-language educators will have to develop recommendations concerning appropriate transitions from one level of language study to the next.

Lack of clear responsibility means no coherence in the curriculum

In the American educational system, no one entity or institution is responsible for ensuring that curricula at successive levels of education are well articulated. Historically, educators at higher levels have complained that those lower in the hierarchy failed to prepare students properly. College and university personnel

now lament the proliferation of remedial programs; high school teachers criticize the “fun and games” of middle-school programs; and when Johnny can’t read or conjugate a verb, the elementary teachers take the blame. With the historical precedent of the “blame chain” focused on colleagues at lower levels, no one is assuming the responsibility for ensuring that students learn in a seamless progression.

In contrast to other subjects, foreign-language study has no standard entry point and many different exit points. As a result, foreign-language study lacks the *articulation* found in most other subjects. In math, science, and social studies, the topics and themes presented in the curriculum are related to the child’s developmental level. As the child grows, the same topics may be reintroduced in higher grades in a more sophisticated context that requires critical thinking or other emerging skills. They may even be reintroduced after several years of nonexposure. The effect is one of a spiral, with curricular elements reappearing periodically, each time in more complex form.

Consider how students learn the history of their state. Generally it begins in the upper elementary years (typically grade 4), resumes in the middle years (typically grade 8), and reappears in high school as a graduation requirement (usually in grade 11). Most teachers assume that students remember little from the last time they encountered the subject. Teachers may begin by finding out how much students recall from previous grades, but they do not hold them accountable for the earlier learning.

In foreign languages, by contrast, the articulation controversy is heightened by what appears to be the neatly sequential nature of the subject matter. If the student has not mastered material perceived to be the responsibility of the teacher at the previous level, then the teacher at the next level cannot move forward to cover the material that will be needed at succeeding levels.

As a result of this rigid approach to sequencing, foreign-language educators have created a difficult situation, one that has become quite public as parents and students become aware that students have “not learned enough” to progress to the next level. It is not uncommon for students to repeat levels or even to start over, particularly when moving from one school to the next.

This sends a message about foreign-language learning: it is difficult, and it is not for everyone.

Student accountability vs. teacher accountability

In fact the problem can be traced to the absence of a coherent, well-articulated curriculum that is accepted by educators up and down the line. For lack of reference points, foreign-language teachers frequently rely on their students for vital information on what has been presented and learned at previous levels. But it is risky to expect students to admit that they actually learned something. When the inevitable query is made—“Didn’t you have indirect object pronouns last year?”—how many students will confess the truth? Most would perceive it to be to their advantage to maintain as vehemently as possible that indirect object pronouns had never been presented and that the students therefore could not be held accountable for knowing them.

The students have a point. In a spiraling curriculum, no language learner masters the grammatical structure on the first go-around. It is only through repetition that one begins to exercise control over a particular syntactical feature. But by relying on students as articulators the “blame chain” is perpetuated—teachers criticize their students’ lack of preparation, and the responsibility for a seamless progression is abnegated once more.

Articulation is an urgent issue

As we move toward foreign-language sequences in primary and secondary education, the issue of articulation becomes even more challenging. When foreign-language professionals tell students, parents, and administrators that students did not learn enough in primary school and must, in effect, begin again in middle school, high school, or college, we are condemning ourselves and our subject matter.

To give K-12 educators a common view of the goals and outcomes of elementary programs, the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) is adapting its proficiency guidelines to include descriptors of what students can do with language when participating in early language programs.

That is an important start. But we must work diligently to further improve communication, accountability, and expectations. Suggestions include:

- Replacing top-down demands with two-way communication between levels
- For each level of instruction, setting language goals that focus on what students can *do* with the language
- Communicating those expectations to students and parents
- Determining how and when to verify if language goals have been met and who will do the verifying
- Attending to horizontal as well as vertical articulation (across classes at the same level) as well as vertical articulation (from one level to the next).
- Making it clear to administrators and policy makers that a spiraling curriculum is just as essential in language learning as in other subject areas.

Mutual collaboration in establishing goals can relieve the stress and anxiety caused by top-down demands on teachers at lower levels. Communication among and across the levels of study can provide a clear and consistent foreign-language program. Communicating expectations to parents and students can ensure that all stakeholders have a clear idea of where they are headed, of the importance of articulation in a long sequence, and of the essential nature of foreign-language study in any curriculum.

These are our challenges. It is critically important that we begin to work collaboratively to break the blame chain and provide coherent sequences for all our students.

Note

1. An earlier version of this essay appeared in Myriam Met (ed), *Critical issues in early second language learning: Building for our children's future* (Glenview, IL: Scott Foresman Addison Wesley, 1998).