

Articulation in New York State: Toward a Model for a National Foreign Language Curriculum

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TWO recent statewide conferences have moved New York closer to a framework for instruction and testing that would be shared by the state's secondary schools and postsecondary institutions. In a move that echoes proposals for the development of a national curriculum, high school teachers and college faculty members considered uniform criteria for language placement and a commonly shared curriculum. These events were precipitated by the convergence of three factors: (1) the implementation of the Regents Action Plan, which imposed a minimum language requirement for all college-bound high school students in New York; (2) the growing concern among language instructors of the state university system for more effective transitions into college language courses; and (3) the evolution of a common vocabulary for communication, that of proficiency-based instruction.

In 1985, the Board of Regents of the State of New York mandated a two-year language requirement for all public school students and a three-year requirement and examination for students seeking a regents diploma. At the same time, the state Bureau of Foreign Languages developed a syllabus, *Modern Languages for Communication*, that described the outcomes of the minimum requirement (checkpoint A) and the regents requirement (checkpoint B) plus an advanced level (checkpoint C) that would correspond to an optional five-year program. (The learning outcomes for each of the checkpoints appear in appendix A). Checkpoint B reviews and expands the content of checkpoint A, and checkpoint C builds on A and B in a similar, spiraling fashion. Two corresponding examinations were developed by the state: the optional proficiency test for checkpoint A and the required regents examination for checkpoint B. While giving free rein to local districts and teachers in designing the curriculum and choosing teaching materials, both the syllabus and the tests had the effect of standardizing to a certain degree curricular objectives and methodology. The first graduates of the fully implemented state curriculum will enter college in fall of 1992. The majority will

enter the State University of New York (SUNY), which comprises sixteen colleges and universities.

Working closely with the State Education Department, the New York State Association of Foreign Language Teachers (NYS AFLT) undertook numerous projects to promote the state's initiatives and to assist teachers in effecting the changes required. In view of the overlap of instruction, particularly at checkpoint C, and the implications for teacher preparation programs, collaboration with postsecondary institutions was necessary if the Regents Action Plan was to succeed. Given the focus of the syllabus on learning outcomes and the growing interest at the postsecondary level in the ACTFL proficiency guidelines, the time seemed right to strive for a better fit between secondary and postsecondary language instruction. What follows is a summary of the work of NYSAFLT toward that end.

In 1985 the NYSAFLT Articulation Committee was formed to undertake whatever seemed appropriate and feasible to promote three basic goals: (1) raise awareness among teachers at all levels of the principles of proficiency-oriented instruction, particularly as reflected in the New York State syllabus; (2) disseminate information regarding state and national programs of research affecting articulation; (3) serve as a clearinghouse through which teachers might communicate with others who are wrestling with the same issues.

It should be stated at the outset of our discussion of NYSAFLT's articulation efforts that we understand

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articulation in its widest sense, including such aspects as methodology, curricular objectives, motivation, content, teacher competency, administrative necessities, and—last but not least—governance.¹ Notwithstanding the many aspects of articulation, the initiatives of the Regents Action Plan have made it most logical for the NYS AFLT Articulation Committee to focus its efforts on the secondary-postsecondary connection. Over the last five years numerous mailings and conference presentations were aimed at informing postsecondary language educators of the ongoing implementation of the syllabus. Two special information sessions for college language faculty attracted a small but intensely interested audience. In 1987 a survey mailed to foreign language faculty members of all public and private colleges and universities in New York State resulted in some interesting information. Not surprisingly, sixty-four percent of the respondents did not know about the important events occurring in the high school language curriculum two years after they had been initiated.² Respondents to the questionnaire became part of a network that received copies of the syllabus and announcements of relevant events around the state. It was our participation in the articulation strand of the 1989 ACTFL Priorities Conference, discussed below, that encouraged the Articulation Committee to try a bolder approach. In September 1990, at SUNY, Binghamton, the committee brought together administrators of foreign language programs within the SUNY system and a select number of high school teachers who regularly deal with these colleges.³ The timeliness of the Binghamton symposium drew top-level administrators from SUNY schools in addition to high school and college language teachers and representatives of the State Education Department. Objectives of the symposium were to (1) engage policy makers of SUNY language programs in a discussion of the implications of the Regents Action Plan for colleges and universities; (2) examine the college and university placement process; and (3) explore avenues for greater cooperation among teachers at all levels. In small-group sessions these teachers and administrators discussed in depth the three focus topics. To get beyond the typical litany of frustrations, the Articulation Committee had carefully prepared a list of guiding questions for these focus sessions that would lend themselves to constructive dialogue.⁴ Group facilitators were specifically instructed not to permit extensive lapses into complaining and finger pointing. The resulting exchange was positive and productive. Issues were examined objectively and without the animosity that too often characterizes meetings between high school and college teachers.

An important aspect of the symposium was the concluding session, entitled *Where Do We Go from Here?* in which participants came to a consensus about broad concerns. A number of specific solutions were sug-

gested, such as the standardization of the SUNY placement process and high school-college collaboration on a checkpoint C curriculum. Although not all participants supported those suggestions, everyone agreed on the need for a follow-up of the symposium within six to twelve months.

It would be impossible to represent here the many specific suggestions that arose from this symposium. In general, participants acknowledged the value of such a meeting precisely because of the diversity of options presented. They agreed that articulation is basically a regional matter because each community has a unique set of conditions. At the same time, participants recognized that SUNY and the Regents Action Plan represent two megastructures within which some broad-based model for articulation may be possible. We therefore decided to share the outcome of this symposium with our colleagues in our communities and to initiate and support local dialogue between high school and college faculty members. The NYS AFLT Articulation Committee would promote an expanded symposium to include the present network of SUNY and high school faculty members and administrators plus others who are identified as responsible for curriculum development and student placement at both levels. The follow-up, which took place in the spring of 1991, featured presentations of the University of Minnesota, University of Wisconsin, and Brigham Young University models of high school to college articulation. Participants explored options for replacing antiquated placement examinations with instruments that more accurately reflect proficiency-oriented instruction. The planning of this seminar was the direct result of regional and national networking efforts.

As an important part of its mission, the Articulation Committee has maintained a continuous search for related projects in other states. A logical starting point was the report in the *ADFL Bulletin* by Patricia W. Cummins, "School-College Articulation and Proficiency Standards: A Status Report." Working on articulation issues in Arizona, Cummins (now located in New York State), with the aid of a critical-languages grant from the United States Department of Education, received responses from forty-four states to her questionnaire on setting ACTFL-ETS proficiency goals at the secondary and postsecondary levels and on articulation efforts between levels. Out of these forty-four responses, sixteen mentioned articulation efforts. To the best of our knowledge, this report remains the only source of information on articulation across the fifty states. There is a great need for a follow-up survey on progress achieved and possibly for the planning of a national conference.

In addition to surveying the current professional literature, we made presentations about articulation efforts in New York State at the ACTFL annual meetings in

1987 and 1990 and at the Northeast Conference in 1989. The purpose of these presentations was to inform others of developments here as well as to obtain information on other states' articulation activities. Through these networking efforts we became aware of statewide articulation efforts in Arizona, Florida, South Carolina, Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Texas. We discovered that in these states initiative for action usually rested with universities, whereas in New York State it was the professional organization, NYS AFLT, that spearheaded the articulation movement.

We established contacts with the National Foreign Language Center in Washington and with the headquarters of Academic Alliances, a professional organization fostering dialogue between foreign language professionals at all levels.

We were intimately involved in the planning and execution of the 1989 ACTFL National Priorities Conference, articulation strand. Not surprisingly, that committee was made up of members from Wisconsin, New York, Arizona, and South Carolina. Heidi Byrnes, of Georgetown University, who is well versed in articulation issues, wrote the position paper. The latter, which suggested national guidelines for articulation, received response papers and was discussed thoroughly by the Priorities Committee at the Boston conference in November 1989. Out of these discussions came a summary paper that was published, together with the summary papers of the other twelve strands selected for the priorities conference, in the *ACTFL Newsletter*. This is the most far-reaching effort in articulation the nation has seen to date. The full position paper and response papers appeared in the September 1990 issue of *Foreign Language Annals*. The summary is reprinted with permission as appendix C.

The 1989 summary statement was intended to be a national guideline for this decade and may indeed provide the theoretical framework on which to build a national curriculum. Since then, the debate over national curricula and national tests has intensified, as documented in articles in *American Educator*, the *New York Times*, and the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Whereas formerly the very concept of national curricula and tests was "un-American" and was discussed only in reference to educational systems of other nations, it is now on the agenda of many professional, educational, political, and public policy group meetings. While it is much too early for a consensus to have been reached, "the stride toward consensus is nonetheless considerable and the results striking" ("1989 ACTFL" 1). There is now talk about "national frameworks," the setting up of which could and probably would be beneficial as guidelines for state curricula and the measuring of outcomes. While local autonomy would be curtailed to some extent, the "national frameworks" are not envisioned as

seriously impeding variety and initiative for teachers or hindering democratic control of education. Thus Paul LeClerc, president of Hunter College of the City University of New York and keynote speaker at the September 1990 NYS AFLT articulation symposium, expressed the zeitgeist prophetically when he said:

I have to admit that whenever I think about the problem of curricular integration I often long for, with all their admitted flaws, the national curricula of a highly centralized country like France. The diversity of American approaches to education, with important variations within school districts, states, and geographic regions, is nonetheless a fundamental if at times frustrating part of our own variety of democracy. The national debate over educational reforms, beginning a few years ago with elementary and secondary schools as their targets and now moving on to the post-secondary sector, will have some effect on the autonomous approach to curriculum and articulation. Just what that effect is and how durable it is, remains to be seen. We in New York State have achieved some breakthroughs, at the level of public policy if not yet of full implementation, with the new standards for high school degrees and Regents degrees. (1)

New York State foreign language educators who have participated actively in the changes brought about by the regents plan will recognize how it parallels what we have been reading concerning a national curriculum: the New York State regents plan may be considered in microformat what educational planners and public policy makers envision now as a desirable macroformat at the national level, and the activist role taken by NYS AFLT in the implementation of the plan illustrates the key contributions to be made by professional organizations in realizing a national curriculum. Marshall Smith, Jennifer O'Day, and David Cohen explain why this should be so:

Ten years ago, professional curriculum groups . . . and the broader professional organizations . . . had little influence on educational policy. This is no longer the case. Concerned about the quality of the school curriculum, about the inherent conservatism of textbook publishers, and about educational governance in most states, professional educators and disciplinary scholars have taken it upon themselves to set forth their collective visions about what students should study. . . . Moreover, in some cases these groups have actively begun to promote their ideas throughout the nation.

Much work remains to be done. As Thomas H. Kean, former governor of New Jersey and now president of Drew University, said recently, "Setting goals is easy, compared to the next step" (A24). The march toward consensus is composed of many little steps, as we are finding out in New York. But while this trek is often frustrating, there are encouraging road signs along the way.

If there was ever a time for states to take action in striving for the apparently elusive goal of an extended continuum of language learning for more young Americans, it is now. Readers, especially department chairs, are encouraged to network horizontally across states and vertically to the national level to establish the framework that would make an effectively articulated curriculum possible.

Notes

¹That articulation is intimately tied to educational politics and real (i.e., fiscal) politics has been discussed in detail by Jeffries in "Articulation and Proficiency: A Political View."

²Full results of the survey are reported by Jeffries in "Articulation in New York State" (19).

³Private postsecondary institutions were intentionally not included in this symposium in order to limit its focus. It is expected that subsequent meetings will be open to all colleges and universities in the state.

⁴For a full report of this conference, see Jeffries, "NYS AFLT/SUNY Symposium." Questions addressed in the focus sessions are reprinted here as appendix B.

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Appendix A

Learning Outcomes from the New York State Syllabus, *Modern Languages for Communication*

PROFICIENCIES

LISTENING

Checkpoint A

Can comprehend simple statements and questions. Usually comprehends the main idea of extended but simple messages and conversations. Often requires repetition for comprehension even when listening to persons who are used to speaking with non-natives.

Checkpoint B

Can comprehend short conversations on simple topics in everyday situations. Limited vocabulary range necessitates repetitions and/or circumlocutions for understanding. Can understand frequently used tense forms and word-order patterns in simple sentences. Has both general and detailed understanding of short, discrete expressions but has only general understanding of longer conversations and messages within familiar communicative situations. Can sustain comprehension through contextual inferences in short communications on familiar topics with native speakers who are aware of the non-native status of the listener.

Checkpoint C

Can understand standard speech delivered with some repetition and rewording by a native speaker not used to dealing with foreigners. Can understand the essential points of discussions or presentations on familiar topics. Tension, pressure, emotional stress, and unfavorable listening conditions as well as vocabulary and complex utterances may hinder comprehension. Can sometimes detect emotional overtones and understand inferences.

SPEAKING

Checkpoint A

Can initiate and respond to simple statements and engage in simple face-to-face conversation within the vocabulary, structure, and phonology appropriate to the communicative situations and functions of this level. Can be understood, with some repetitions and circumlocutions, by native speakers used to foreigners attempting to speak their language.

Checkpoint B

Can initiate and sustain a conversation, but limited vocabulary range necessitates hesitation and circumlocution. Can use the more common verb tense forms, but still makes many errors in formation and selection. Can use word order accurately in simple sentences, but still makes errors in more complex patterns. Can sustain coherent structures in short and familiar communicative situations. Can employ selectively basic cohesive features such as pronouns and verb inflections. Extended communication is largely a series of short, discrete utterances. Can articulate comprehensibly but has difficulty in producing certain sounds in certain positions or combinations. Speech is usually labored. Has to repeat to be understood by the general public.

Checkpoint C

Can handle most communicative situations with confidence but may need help with any complication or difficulty. Vocabulary, with some circumlocutions, is sufficient to communicate. Can handle elementary constructions accurately. Limited control of more complex structures may interfere with communication.

READING**Checkpoint A**

Can understand simple material for informative or social purposes. Can understand the essential content of short, general, public statements and standardized messages. Can comprehend the main ideas of materials containing simple structure and syntax when relying on visual cues and prior familiarity with the topic. Understanding is limited to simple language containing only the highest frequency grammatical patterns and vocabulary items. Can sometimes guess at cognates and highly contextualized unfamiliar vocabulary. May have to read the material several times in order to achieve understanding.

Checkpoint B

Can understand simple narrative and descriptive authentic materials and edited texts within a familiar context. Has specific comprehension of selected passages in familiar sentence patterns. Can follow essential points and some details of expository writing when dealing with areas of special interest and is able to guess meaning from context.

Checkpoint C

Can understand most factual information in nontechnical prose as well as some expository texts on topics related to areas of special interest. Can read excerpts from literature for pleasure. Is able to separate main ideas from lesser ones and thus begins to analyze materials written for the general public. Is able to use linguistic context and prior knowledge to increase comprehension. Can detect the overall tone or intent of the text.

WRITING**Checkpoint A**

Can express basic personal needs and compose short messages on very familiar topics based on personal experience. Writing consists mostly of mastered vocabulary and structures in simple sentences and phrases. Although errors in spelling and grammar are frequent, writing can be understood by native speakers used to dealing with foreigners.

Checkpoint B

Can write simple notes, letters, and short reports using elementary vocabulary and commonly encountered structures. Can express present, future, and past ideas comprehensibly. Major errors still occur when expressing more complex thoughts. Begins to develop sequential relationships. Writing is comprehensible to native speakers used to dealing with foreigners.

Checkpoint C

Can compose unified and organized texts on everyday topics with sufficient vocabulary to express oneself simply with some circumlocution. Is able to show good control of the morphology of the language and of the most frequently used syntactic structures, but

errors may still occur. Can express complex ideas sequentially with simple language. Writing is comprehensible to a native speaker not used to reading the writing of foreigners.

CULTURE**Checkpoint A**

Has knowledge of some aspects of the target language culture and is aware of the existence of cultures other than his/her own. Is able to function in authentic, common, everyday situations but makes frequent cultural errors that impede communication even with native speakers accustomed to dealing with foreigners.

Checkpoint B

Shows understanding of cultures as systems of values that evolve with time and is able to show how certain values are associated with certain behavior patterns in his/her own culture as well as in the target language culture. On the basis of previous experience with the target language culture, is able to distinguish some culturally authentic patterns of behavior from idiosyncratic behaviors. Still shows misunderstandings in applying this knowledge, and miscommunicates frequently with native speakers not accustomed to foreigners.

Checkpoint C

Shows understanding of most culturally determined behaviors of the target language speakers and begins to demonstrate a general appreciation for their culture. Is generally able to avoid major misunderstandings in common everyday situations with native speakers not accustomed to foreigners. Is able to use the context to guess at the meaning of some unfamiliar cultural behaviors. Shows some initiative and ease in using culturally appropriate behaviors acquired by observation of authentic models.

Appendix B

Guiding Questions—Symposium on High School to College Articulation, September 1990

Session 1. Implications of the New York State Regents Requirement for Colleges and Universities

1. Does the new three-year requirement mean that most students enter college programs at a different point than most did two or three years ago (i.e., second and third semester, rather than first)? If there is a difference, what is it? What are the concerns that this generates? What are the solutions?
2. Many high school students complete the regents exam in tenth grade and then do not study the language until college. Why must this happen? Should it be changed? How?
3. Do students completing checkpoint B (Regents) in high school address the skills, concepts, and vocabulary that are considered equivalent to three semesters of college? If not, what is most lacking? Can this be changed? Can the college be expected to change its curriculum?
4. Does the regents plan relate at all to the SUNY notion of core education? Should we coordinate SUNY goals with the regents mandate? How can or should this be done?

Session 2. College-University Placement Examinations

1. Do current placement exams reflect the approach taught at the high school level? How do they compare with the regents exam?
2. Can the regents exam score be used instead of a placement exam? Should the regents exam be used as a placement test?
3. Are four-skill placement exams necessary?
4. What effect does improper placement have on the college curriculum?
5. What do high school seniors (or guidance counselors) know about college-level language requirements and placement exams?
6. Too many students avoid taking a placement test or purposely fail. Why? How can this be remedied? at the college level? at the high school level?
7. New requirements for elementary education majors include one year of college foreign language study or equivalent. What are some equivalencies proposed?

Session 3. High School-College Collaboration

1. Do high school teachers serve on college faculties, and vice versa? could they? should they?
2. Do college and high school language students exchange visits? could they? should they?
3. Are regional workshops available to language teachers at both levels? Who sponsors them? Who attends? How helpful are they?
4. Do your faculty members regularly attend state and national conferences? Are these helpful for purposes of articulation?
5. What support do high school teachers most want from colleges?
6. What support do college teachers most want from the schools?
7. Can colleges be more involved in the development of regents exams and the implementation of the syllabus—especially checkpoint C?

Appendix C

1989 ACTFL National Priorities Conference Summary of Proceedings

Articulation

Introduction: Articulation is not a field or domain but rather a perspective on optimal progression from one level of foreign language learning to the next.

Rationale: With the rapid expansion of requirements and foreign language programs, the need for coordinated continuity goes beyond the traditional dilemma of an imperfect transition between high school and college. But this rapid expansion also has the potential of pointing to a solution, since, for the first time in three decades, we can take the long view on educational and L2 development. As language sequences are extended, they will encompass levels of language ability that have heretofore not been within the reach of American public education.

The younger our learners are at the beginning of instruction, the more holistic, semantically based their language learning is likely to be. However, the full benefits of early instructional contact for ultimate attainment in a foreign language depend crucially on a careful balancing between vastly increased input and expanded opportunities for output of a broader range than we have previously targeted.

The call for articulation has particular urgency now and into the immediate future because our instructional efforts must meet, within a relatively short adjustment time, the needs of a significantly enlarged group of learners. The development of an extended sequence of language learning for an enlarged group of learners should be guided by what we know about L2 acquisition as well as the affective and cognitive development of learners.

Priority

Establish a national framework for an extended sequence of language learning that will provide the opportunity for more students to achieve an advanced level of competency. Such a sequence should:

1. Begin at the elementary level;
2. Provide for the continuity of learners' experience and progressive advancement of skill development;
3. Provide a continuous and uninterrupted sequence of L2 instruction accessible to all students regardless of the age at which the sequence is begun;
4. Define instruction in terms of instructional hours rather than years or semesters;
5. Provide a range of models for successful linkages between and across institutions;
6. In these models, account for both vertical and horizontal articulation (i.e., multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary concerns);
7. Disseminate information about this articulation framework to educational administrators and policy makers.