

# THE CALIFORNIA STUDY ON FOREIGN LANGUAGE ARTICULATION

IN 1979 F. André Paquette, deploring the lack of incentives in foreign language study and the general ineffectiveness of the response to a national crisis in foreign language education, asked, among other things, why institutions of higher education have "failed to solve the major articulation problem of foreign language education: effective . . . placement at the college level" (14).

The California State Liaison Committee on Foreign Language, an affiliate of the Articulation Council of

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California, shared Paquette's concern over articulation and placement problems of students moving from secondary school to college and university foreign language programs in California. Viewing the issue as more than one of finding adequate instruments to measure the target language proficiency of entering college students—although, to be sure, this must be done—the Liaison Committee addressed the problem of what I shall characterize as "curriculum parallax," or the discrepancy in the perception of what constitutes a normal year of language study in the secondary and postsecondary viewpoints. A survey of secondary school language teachers completed by the Liaison Committee in 1982 turned up a strong feeling that an imbalance of class size at the secondary level was detrimental to the effectiveness of foreign language instruction and a significant negative articulation factor. Another survey begun in 1983 and completed in spring 1984 proposed to investigate student perceptions of articulation factors in the three languages most commonly taught in California high schools and to correlate these perceptions with data on college entry placement levels furnished by the same students. The results of this "Survey on Student Perceptions of Articulation Effectiveness" are presented here.<sup>1</sup>

Table 1 lists the participating colleges and universities and the number of valid responses by language.

Table 1. Survey Responses by Language

	French	German	Spanish
<b>Private Colleges and Universities</b>			
Chapman	7	0	5
La Verne	1	3	8
Mills*	0	0	1
Mount Saint Mary's	15	0	20
Pacific	23	4	20
Redlands	7	8	10
Scripps and Pitzer	1	1	18
Stanford	0	0	9
Total	54	16	91
<b>University of California</b>			
Irvine	11	8	15
Riverside	10	0	0
Santa Cruz	21	7	22
Total	42	15	37
<b>California State University</b>			
Fresno	11	13	12
Long Beach	0	2	0
Los Angeles	16	0	12
Northridge	8	10	16
San Diego	20	12	0
San Jose	0	5	14
Total	55	42	54
<b>Community Colleges</b>			
Cabrillo	5	9	4
Los Angeles	1	2	6
Merritt	0	0	21
Pasadena	12	4	28
Saddleback	9	9	19
Santa Rosa	4	3	5
Total	31	27	83

\*Reported by a Cabrillo College transfer student. Zeroes in this table resulted either from nonparticipation or from no response from eligible students.

### Start-Overs

One of the most startling facts emerging from the survey was that almost half of all student respondents, who had an average of over two years of high school language study, elected or were advised to begin study of the language all over again in college. (Many students, too embarrassed to avow the truth, did not respond.) The

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percentages starting over (table 2) show some significant differences by language and by educational segment. The overall French and Spanish figures (37% and 41%) do not seem too significantly divergent. The higher German figure (54%) is consistent with a substantially greater number of German students indicating dissatisfaction with the teaching of German in high school (see tables 8 and 9 and accompanying text).

Table 2. Start-Overs

	Numbers surveyed	Start-Overs	Percent
	547	230	42
By language			
French	182	67	37
German	100	54	54
Spanish	265	109	41
By segment			
Private	161	56	35
UC	94	19	20
CSU	152	78	51
CC	141	77	55

Another interesting difference is the higher percentage of German students citing as an articulation problem the swifter pace of college German classes (French 35.7%, German 49%, Spanish 34%). Are college German instructors unrealistic in their expectations of student performance?

When the start-over figures are viewed by segment, the pattern of divergence is even more striking, with only 20% of the UC segment starting over as contrasted with 51% and 55% for the CSU and community college segments respectively. It appears that the more lax placement practices in the last two segments encourage students to seek academically "safer" placement.

While a higher percentage of German students started over, the Spanish group tended to have a somewhat higher average in number of years of precollege study when starting over (table 3). This finding may merely reflect the greater opportunity in California secondary schools to begin Spanish study earlier than study of the other languages.

Table 3. Years Studied Language in High School When Started Over

	Number of Start-Overs	Total Years	Average Years
	230	489	2.1
By language			
French	67	125	1.9
German	54	103	1.9
Spanish	109	261	2.4

Overall Drop-Back Patterns

Curiously, while start-over statistics show a large difference between German and the other two languages, the difference almost disappears in total drop-back figures. Table 4 combines the total number of college semesters of advanced placement lost by start-overs with the number lost by non-start-overs who entered college programs at a lower-than-expected placement level.<sup>2</sup> The definition of "expected placement level" as given in note 2 is arbitrary at best and is used here only as a necessary reference point for standardizing the survey data. Colleges and universities on the quarter system that count a year of precollege study as equivalent to only a college quarter can be expected to produce a lower placement standard. Figures in tables 5 and 6 show drop-back numbers in terms of both the higher and lower standards.<sup>3</sup>

Table 4. Overall Drop-Back Numbers in Semesters

	Number of students	Semesters dropped	Average
	535*	821	1.5
Nonnative only†	517	819	1.6
By language			
French	174	248	1.4
German	100	144.5	1.4
German nonnative	92	135.5	1.5
Spanish	261	428.5	1.6
Spanish nonnative	251	435.5	1.7

\*Of the 547 answer forms, 12 contained inadequate entry data.

†A student was counted as a native speaker if the language was used out of class at least half the time.

Table 5. Drop-Back Numbers by Persons

	Number of students	Number of Drop-Backs
	535	450—84%
Nonnative only	517	445—86%
By language		
French	174	153—88%
German	100	84—84%
German nonnative	92	81—88%
Spanish	261	213—82%
Spanish nonnative	251	211—84%

Table 6. Drop-Back Numbers by Persons Using Quarter Standard\*

	Number of students	Number of Drop-Backs
	535	380—71%
Nonnative only	517	376—73%
By language		
French	174	120—69%
German	100	76—76%
German nonnative	92	74—80%
Spanish	261	184—70%
Spanish nonnative	251	182—72.5%

\*See note 3.

## Articulation Problems

For a complete picture of student perceptions of articulation problems, it was necessary to include non-drop-back students who indicated a decline in academic performance in their college language study. Table 7 provides the number of these students by language.<sup>4</sup> The combined figure of 87.5% of students who either started over, dropped back, or experienced a decline in their grades at the college level (over 75% of those using the quarter standard) indicates serious articulation problems, particularly when we consider that the many students who gave up on language study after high school, who preferred to switch to another language, or who declined to respond to the questionnaire were not included in this study.

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Table 7. Grade Decline in College Language Study

	Drop-Backs	Non-Drop-Backs <sup>5</sup>
French	27	5
German	11	5
Spanish	37	9
Totals	75	19

Thus the total number of students who either started over, dropped back, or suffered grade decline was 469 of 536 or 87.5%.

What were the principal articulation problems cited by students who encountered difficulties or who dropped back? Tables 8 and 9 provide the figures for the fifteen problems listed in the questionnaire (items 13-27). Students in all three languages chose items 14 (faster pace

Table 8. Articulation Problems by Language

### French (182 students)

Items ranked by percent citing them as problems:

35.71%	14.	Faster pace in college
34.06	18.	Not enough hearing, speaking language in high school
29.67	25.	Too many outside obligations
26.37	26.	Not enough challenge in high school
23.07	16.	Poorer teaching in high school
19.23	20.	Not enough grammar in high school
18.68	13.	Harder grading in college
17.03	27.	I had poor study habits in high school
13.73	24.	Class too large in high school
9.89	17.	Not enough hearing and speaking in college
7.14	21.	Too much grammar in college
7.14	19.	Not enough grammar in college
5.49	23.	Class too large in college
4.94	22.	Too much grammar in high school
4.39	15.	Poorer teaching in college

Item selection by college categories:

Item	Private (54)	UC (42)	CSU (55)	CC (31)	Total	% of 182
13	10	6	11	7	34	18.68
14	21	9	23	12	65	35.71
15	3	2	2	1	8	4.39
16	12	5	15	10	42	23.07
17	6	2	8	2	18	9.87
18	19	7	24	12	62	34.06
19	6	2	3	2	13	7.14
20	8	4	17	6	35	19.23
21	2	1	7	3	13	7.14
22	2	3	0	4	9	4.94
23	2	2	3	3	10	5.49
24	7	3	7	8	25	13.73
25	16	6	23	9	54	29.67
26	12	5	19	12	48	26.37
27	11	2	11	7	31	17.03

### German (100 students)

Items ranked by percent citing them as problems:

49%	14.	Faster pace in college
42	18.	Not enough hearing, speaking language in high school
38	16.	Poorer teaching in high school
37	20.	Not enough grammar in high school
34	26.	Not enough challenge in high school
30	27.	I had poor study habits in high school
28	13.	Harder grading in college
25	25.	Too many outside obligations
21	24.	Class too large in high school
19	17.	Not enough hearing and speaking in college
12	19.	Not enough grammar in college
10	21.	Too much grammar in college
4	23.	Class too large in college
3	22.	Too much grammar in high school
2	15.	Poorer teaching in college

Item selection by college categories:

Item	Private (16)	UC (15)	CSU (42)	CC (27)	Total	% of 100
13	1	4	14	9	28	28
14	5	6	23	15	49	49
15	0	0	1	1	2	2
16	2	3	19	14	38	38
17	0	3	8	8	19	19
18	0	6	22	14	42	42
19	2	2	4	4	12	12
20	4	4	18	11	37	37
21	1	1	3	5	10	10
22	0	1	1	1	3	3
23	0	0	1	3	4	4
24	3	3	6	9	21	21
25	1	6	10	8	25	25
26	3	2	17	12	34	34
27	2	4	13	11	30	30

in college) and 18 (not enough hearing and speaking the language in high school) more frequently than any of the other problems listed. Items 22 (too much grammar in high school), 23 (class too large in college), and 15 (poorer teaching in college) were perceived as least troublesome (less than 6%).

Students taking French and Spanish also ranked item 25 (too many outside obligations in college) as the third major articulation problem. German students felt that the third most important factor was item 16 (poorer teaching in high school). Fully 24% of the students in all languages who encountered problems selected item 26 (not enough challenge in high school), and 21.5% felt there was not enough grammar taught in high school (item 20). Another significant factor, harder grading in college (item 13), was selected by 23.5%. The last fac-

tor cited by at least 20% was item 27 (I had poor study habits in high school): 20.65%. Item 24 (class too large in high school) ranked only ninth (17%) in the survey, though it was cited by 21% of the German students.

Of the items critical of college conditions and teaching methods (13, 14, 15, 17, 19, 21, and 23), only 13 (harder grading) and 14 (faster pace) were selected by more than 14%.

Table 9. Articulation Problems Ranked: All Languages

Item	French (182)	German (100)	Spanish (265)	Total (547)	%
14	65	49	90	204	37.29
18	62	42	74	178	32.57
25	54	25	72	151	27.60
16	42	38	56	136	24.86
26	48	34	49	131	23.94
13	34	28	67	129	23.58
20	35	37	46	118	21.57
27	31	30	52	113	20.65
24	25	21	47	93	17.00
17	18	19	36	73	13.34
21	13	10	22	45	8.22
19	13	12	14	39	7.12
23	10	4	11	25	4.57
22	9	3	13	25	4.57
15	8	2	9	19	3.47

Spanish (265 students)

Items ranked by percent citing them as problems:

34.0%	14.	Faster pace in college
27.9	18.	Not enough hearing, speaking language in high school
27.1	25.	Too many outside obligations
25.3	13.	Harder grading in college
21.1	16.	Poorer teaching in high school
19.6	27.	I had poor study habits in high school
18.5	26.	Not enough challenge in high school
17.7	24.	Class too large in high school
17.3	20.	Not enough grammar in high school
13.6	17.	Not enough hearing and speaking in college
8.3	21.	Too much grammar in college
5.3	19.	Not enough grammar in college
4.9	22.	Too much grammar in high school
4.1	23.	Class too large in college
3.4	15.	Poorer teaching in college

Item selection by college categories:

Item	Private (91)	UC (37)	CSU (54)	CC (83)	Total	% of 265
13	17	7	15	28	67	25.3
14	27	11	23	29	90	34.0
15	3	3	3	0	9	3.4
16	15	8	12	21	56	21.1
17	8	5	18	5	36	13.6
18	23	10	18	23	74	27.9
19	2	5	3	4	14	5.3
20	11	6	12	17	46	17.3
21	5	1	6	10	22	8.3
22	5	3	2	3	13	4.9
23	5	2	3	1	11	4.1
24	14	5	12	16	47	17.7
25	25	7	16	24	72	27.1
26	15	5	11	18	49	18.5
27	13	3	11	25	52	19.6

Placement Methods

A comparison of placement methods in the four segments of higher education reveals significant differences (see table 10):

1. Placement exams. These were used by 35% of private college and 50% of UC students. Less than 4% of CSU and community college students reported using this method.

2. Interview with instructor or adviser. This method was reported by 25% of the private college students but only 5% of those in the UC system. For the CSU and community colleges the percentages were 11% and 13% respectively. These data may indicate a problem of access to professors in the large public institutions.

3. Instructions in the college catalog. The percentage relying on the catalog was a substantial 24% in the community colleges. A somewhat lower percentage of CSU students (16%) used this method. Only 8.5% of UC students and 6% of private college students relied primarily on the catalog.

4. Guessing approximate level. Self-placement was used by a whopping 54% of CSU and 52% of community college students. This may reflect their age and greater experience as a class. Only 23% of the private college group and 24.5% of the UC group relied on their own judgment in this matter.

5. Other methods. Only 7 of the 547 students chose other means of placement. None of these were identified.

Table 10. Placement Methods

Method	Private	UC	CSU	CC	No. of students	% of total
Exam	(57) 35.40%	(47) 50.00%	(5) 3.31%	(5) 3.55%	114	20.84
Interview	(41) 25.47%	(5) 5.32%	(17) 11.26%	(18) 12.77%	81	14.8
Catalog	(9) 5.59%	(8) 8.51%	(24) 15.9%	(34) 24.11%	75	13.71
Guess	(37) 22.98%	(23) 24.47%	(82) 54.3%	(74) 52.48%	216	39.5
Other	(2) 1.24%	(3) 3.19%	(2) 1.32%	(0) —	7	1.28
Blank	(15) 9.32%	(8) 8.51%	(21) 13.91%	(10) 7.09%	54	9.87
Totals	(161) 100%	(94) 100%	(151) 100%	(141) 100%	547	100%

Nonresponse percentages to the question of placement were 14% for the CSU group, 9% for the private college group, 8.5% for the UC participants, and 7% for the community college group.

### Conclusion

The specific object of this survey was to furnish data on three topics: (1) drop-back patterns, (2) reasons for dropping back or articulation problems leading to a decline in performance at the postsecondary level, and (3) placement methods used in the four segments.

On the first point, the survey results show that 15% or less of students moving from a California high school language program directly into a California college language program felt or proved to be sufficiently prepared to enter at the "expected level," that is, second semester of college with one year of high school, third semester of college with two years of high school, and so on. While it is true that the start-over rate was higher among the students in the CSU and community college segments than among those in the private and UC segments and while there appears to be more placement control by the private and UC segments, overall drop-back figures remained high in all the segments. The greater placement permissiveness in the CSU and community colleges, though suggesting a more lax direction of students, may reflect a conscious recognition of the special character of the students (older students out of high school longer, poorer academic achievers, and students with heavier work and family obligations). Allowing academically less secure students to repeat study levels also reduces the risk of failure and encourages students to continue their foreign language study.

It should nonetheless be a cause of concern to the profession and to the public that so much high school study time is in effect lost when students start over or drop back to the extent revealed in this survey. Such reverse movement tends to diminish substantially the numbers reaching sufficiently advanced levels in college to master the language in a practical and meaningful sense.

On the second point, student perceptions of specific articulation problems, there was consistent agreement across language and segment lines regarding the problems. Over a third of all students with problems attributed them in part to the faster pace of college instruction. But students also indicated strong dissatisfaction with the quality of high school programs—strongest in German and progressively less so in French and Spanish—as indicated by the nearly one fourth who cited a lack of challenge and the nearly one third who cited insufficient hearing and speaking of the language. Another high scorer in the survey was "too many outside obligations" (90 of 292 in the CSU and community college segments [30.8%] and 61 of 255 in the private and UC segments [23.9%] for a combined percentage of 27.6). This problem of outside obligations is a fact of contemporary student life that we cannot remedy but that we must take into consideration in planning and constructing our college language courses.

The third point, placement procedures, reveals a surprisingly large number of students (39.5%) who place themselves by guessing at the appropriate level. If this figure is combined with that for students who place themselves by consulting the catalog, it is seen that the total of students who dispense with the help of an adviser or placement exam is at least 53%, not counting the 11% who gave no information on placement method. Self-placement can, of course, be a reasonable approach. A student needing an advanced class whose only section is offered at an inconvenient or impossible time solves the problem by enrolling in a lower-level class meeting at a more suitable time. This is surely a better solution to the problem than interrupting study of the language or, worse, dropping the language altogether.

In presenting its conclusions, the Survey Subcommittee emphasizes that the sampling represented here is a very small percentage of the total number of students in foreign languages who were surveyed. It is no larger because only around 7.5% of California students continue the study of the same language in college with no more than a year's interruption. One must conclude therefore that the major articulation problem is the one that this survey avoided, the length of time between high school and college study of the language.

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The California articulation study illustrates the immensity of the problem in the United States and the near meaninglessness of attempts to correlate secondary and postsecondary "years of study."<sup>6</sup> The problem of "curriculum parallax" seems to be amply borne out by the disparity between colleges' expectations regarding the readiness of continuing students at entry and students' actual entry patterns. The standardization of language proficiency exams based on clearly defined and universally accepted goals would be a rational first step toward solving the national articulation problem. Standardization of these exams would also enable colleges and universities to standardize placement procedures by requiring placement exams on admission.

Since participating in the editing of the survey report, I have rethought some of its conclusions. Were I now to rewrite its conclusion on placement, I would keep the concession to self-placement in colleges with limited course offerings but add a strong plea for a general tightening of placement procedures. The lack of rigor in placement, while undoubtedly linked to a survivalist attitude in many language departments, is directly connected to and symptomatic of the lack of seriousness with which foreign language study is regarded in American education. Thus it seems doubtful that progressive measures currently being advocated to improve articulation—measures such as establishing specific competencies for study levels, devising proficiency exams based on those competencies, and using the exams in placement—can by themselves solve our articulation woes. What is needed also is a real national commitment to a serious foreign language component in secondary and postsecondary curricula and the provision of economic incentives, in the fields of business, government, media, and education, for acquiring second or third language mastery. Without such incentives, many language students in our colleges and universities will continue to seek the least challenging class levels to "earn some units" or "fulfill a General Education requirement" and will manage to find them with or without better placement instruments.

In surveying the five years that have elapsed since the publication of the Paquette article mentioned above, one

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can only conclude that the prospect for national support for foreign language study has scarcely improved, in spite of the recommendations of many reports. But, if we believe that the neglect of foreign language study is a serious national liability, we can be hopeful that good sense will eventually prevail. Until that time, we must continue to search for the creative solutions within our means to the problem of articulation.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>The survey was limited to students who had entered California college and university language programs with no more than one year of interruption of same-language study begun in a California high school, thus eliminating the factor of excessive time lapse.

<sup>2</sup>Expected level is determined by counting one college semester for each year of precollege study. Universities and colleges that count only one semester for the first two years of high school language study are in actuality enforcing drop-back.

<sup>3</sup>Drop-back is defined as entering the college program on a level lower than the expected level (1 year high school for 1 college semester). This system counts quarters as fractions. The alternate or quarter standard (table 6) counts one college quarter for each year of high school study.

<sup>4</sup>Only the higher placement standard was used in counting non-drop-backs. While the combined figure would be lower using the table 6 standard, there would be a compensating increase in the number of students reporting declining grades (39% of non-start-overs), bringing the final totals up to over 75%.

<sup>5</sup>One student who did not start over and did not furnish placement data but did suffer a decline in grades was counted as a non-drop-back.

<sup>6</sup>The term "level of study," which was intended to set a more meaningful standard for measuring progress, has unfortunately not led to any more effective articulation and placement.

#### WORK CITED

- Paquette, F. André "The Mandate for a National Program for Assessment of Language Proficiencies." *ADFL Bulletin* 12.3 (1980): 12-15.

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Appendix: Foreign Language Articulation Questionnaire

In order to encourage your full cooperation, the makers of this questionnaire ask that you do *not* put your name on the answer form.

Please respond to this questionnaire only if you are continuing the study of a language that you began to study in high school *here in California*, and that you continued to study in a college or university with *no more than a year's interruption*.

On the answer form please write, in place of your name, the name of the college you are now attending and the language class you are now taking. Then mark answers to the questions that follow:

1. Language continued: a) French b) German c) Spanish
2. Were you exposed to the use of the language outside of school? a) Yes b) No
3. If you answered yes to 2, to what extent were you exposed?
  - a) Most of the time.
  - b) About half the time.
  - c) Less than half the time.
  - d) Occasionally.
 If you answered no to 2, check e)
4. How many years of the language did you study before college? For fractional numbers check the lower whole number (e.g., for 1½ years count 1).
  - a) 1 year b) 2 years c) 3 years d) 4 years e) 5 years
5. When you began college study of the language, did you start all over? a) Yes b) No
6. If you answered Yes to 5, why did you start over? Check the *one* best answer.
  - a) Not ready for higher level.
  - b) Wanted to improve grade average.
  - c) Other. Write answer in blank space on back of answer form.
- 7, 8, 9. If you did not start over, at what level did you start?
  - 7a) Leave blank.
  - 7b) 1st year, 2nd quarter or semester.
  - 7c) 1st year, 3rd quarter.
  - 8a) 2nd year, 1st quarter or semester.
  - 8b) 2nd year, 2nd quarter or semester.
  - 8c) 2nd year, 3rd quarter.
  - 9a) 3rd year, 1st quarter or semester.
  - 9b) 3rd year, 2nd quarter or semester.
  - 9c) 3rd year, 3rd quarter.
10. How were you placed?
  - a) Placement exam.
  - b) Interview with instructor or adviser.
  - c) Placement by instructions in college catalog.
  - d) Placed self by guessing approximate level.
  - e) Other. Explain in blank space on back of answer form.
11. Did you continue at that level? a) Yes b) No
12. If you answered yes to 11, did your grades go down? a) Yes b) No

Please answer questions 13-27 only if you started over, or if you dropped back to a level lower than where you were placed, or if you remained where placed but your grades have gone down.

Did the following factors *contribute to your difficulty* at the college level?

Mark a) Yes b) No for each item.

13. Harder grading in college.
14. Faster pace in college.
15. Poorer teaching in college.
16. Poorer teaching in high school.
17. Not enough hearing and speaking the language in college.
18. Not enough hearing and speaking the language in high school.
19. Not enough grammar in college.
20. Not enough grammar in high school.
21. Too much grammar in college.
22. Too much grammar in high school.
23. Class too large in college.
24. Class too large in high school.
25. Too many outside obligations in college.
26. Not enough challenge in high school.
27. I had poor study habits in high school.