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# ***Increasing Foreign Language Proficiency through Well-Articulated Study***

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## **Abstract**

With a renewed interest in promoting foreign language proficiency among Americans, the federal government has recently enacted programs such as the National Security Language Initiative and the American Competitiveness Initiative. These programs contain elements aimed at establishing early learning programs in foreign languages, well-articulated programs throughout the American educational system, and incentives for students to continue their foreign language study to an advanced level. To that end, this article offers some options to assist students in extending their foreign language study on a seamless continuum rather than be forced to repeat information and skill development. Such articulation would lead to the development of higher proficiency levels of foreign language students. Considerations for articulation, particularly from the high school to college level, include offering advanced programs in high school, more transparent placement testing at the college level, better communication between high school and college faculty, the use of portfolios as evidence of language proficiency, and articulation and guaranteed admission agreements between community colleges and four-year institutions.

## **Introduction**

Recent political, commercial, and social developments have magnified the need for multilingual individuals in the United States. In 2005, Malone, Rifkin, Christian, and Johnson summarized an acute need in the United States for individuals who can speak and understand languages other than English, from business and social services to national security and diplomacy. Of the relatively small number of individuals in the United States who learn languages other than English, an even smaller number achieve a high level of proficiency in the language(s) they study. The authors proposed a number of possible approaches that could be taken to help language learners develop a higher level of proficiency. Among their strategies was to start language learning early to build a strong basis for learning a second, third, and even fourth language. The authors maintain that “we must expand the number of Americans studying foreign languages, especially the less commonly taught languages (i.e., languages other than French, German, Italian, and Spanish), and offer the types of classroom and out-of-classroom experiences that will help individual learners develop high levels of proficiency.” Inherent in this strategy is the understanding that language learning is a spiraling process that takes students from where they are and builds upon existing skills to develop higher skills. Rather than repeating information learned, each level of language study advances skills and knowledge. Without tightly articulated programs, students are destined to repeat information and activities as they move from one

level to the next or from one teacher to another. Such duplicated effort results in boredom on the part of students as well as stagnation in learning — they could produce so much more if their skills built on one another rather than repeating the same information from year to year.

Generally, there are not clear-cut expectations for students to progress from one level of foreign language study to the next, either in elementary, middle and high schools or from the K-12 programs to those at the postsecondary level. Under the best of circumstances, there are state foreign language standards that provide guidance for K-12 foreign language teachers. However, unless there is an accountability system in place at the K-12 level, the teachers have a certain amount of latitude in determining how closely to adhere to the standards. Furthermore, it is likely that the K-12 standards have been developed with only limited (if any) input from the postsecondary institutions within the state. Conversely, college-level placement tests and their cut-scores again have likely been developed in isolation from the K-12 world. Thus, students who have completed several years of foreign language study in middle and high school may be placed in a beginning-level language class as they begin their postsecondary studies. Yes, it is an easy A — but it is a waste of time and it stifles the progress a student might make in developing greater proficiency in his or her foreign language skills. The circumstances are even more challenging in states that do not have a centralized university system, i.e., each individual public and private institution sets its own proficiency entrance and placement requirements. So students who apply to several colleges or universities really do not know until they enroll at an institution exactly if or how their foreign language course work will count toward college degree requirements.

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## **Foreign Language Articulation in Other Countries**

The foreign language skills of students in the United States are often compared negatively to those of students in other countries. Generally, the United States is viewed as a country of monolinguals, with little interest in learning other languages. Furthermore, students who do study other languages generally do not obtain a high degree of proficiency in those languages.

Noting that students in other countries often have much better foreign language proficiency than young (or older, for that matter) Americans, in 2001, Pufahl, Rhodes, and Christian collected information from 22 educators in 19 countries about foreign language instruction in their elementary and secondary schools. Participants in the study responded to the key question: “What do you think are three of the most successful aspects of foreign language education in your country?” From this study, the authors identified eight characteristics of foreign language study in the other countries surveyed:

- Early language study
- A well-articulated framework

- Rigorous teacher education
- Comprehensive use of technology
- Effective teaching strategies
- Strong policies that promote foreign language study
- Assessment of foreign language learning
- Maintenance of heritage, regional, and indigenous languages.

For the purposes of this article, we will focus on the concept of articulation, where several respondents noted the importance of a well-articulated curriculum framework that motivates and guides the development of an effective system of foreign language education.

Many European countries have adapted their foreign language teaching at the national level to the frameworks and standards articulated by the Council of Europe's language policy and activities. *Modern Languages: A Common European Framework of Reference. Learning, Teaching, Assessment* (Council of Europe, 1996) was developed through a process of scientific research and wide consultation and provides a practical tool for setting clear standards to be attained at successive stages of learning and for evaluating outcomes in an internationally comparable manner.

An outgrowth of the common framework is the European Language Portfolio.<sup>1</sup> The European Language Portfolio (ELP) is a document in which those who are learning or have learned a language — whether at school or outside school — can record and reflect on their language learning and cultural experiences.

## Portfolios as Evidence of Language Proficiency

The National Council for State Supervisors for Languages (NCSSFL) has developed a modified version of the ELP for use in the United States. *LinguaFolio*,<sup>2</sup> is a student portfolio comprising three components: (1) a language biography, which includes information about a student's language background and intercultural activities; (2) a language passport, where formal assessments and a student's self assessments are recorded; and (3) a language dossier, providing samples of a student's work over time. It is a tool that can accompany language learning throughout life and is suitable for documenting language abilities for various uses. Among its intended goals is the facilitation of articulation among language programs (e.g., high school to university, transfer of students within school districts) based on a clear and commonly accepted

description of language proficiency. *LinguaFolio* is currently being piloted in Virginia, Kentucky, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia. In collaboration with the Virginia Department of Education, Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) has developed a summer language immersion program for teachers of French, German, and Spanish with instruction in the target languages both inside and outside the classroom. VCU offers up to 6 graduate credits, combining teacher and student classroom use of *LinguaFolio* with courses in technology and

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current civilization. Perhaps as teachers introduce the use of *LinguaFolio* more and more with their students, it will become another means of certifying the language proficiency that students have gained in any number of venues, including high school and college classrooms, study and travel abroad, and native language proficiency.

## **Placements Tests**

For students whose only exposure to a foreign language is the middle or high school classroom, there is often a tendency to blame their school programs for failing to prepare them adequately for readiness to enter a foreign language classroom at the college level. Clearly, foreign language standards are a start — and are even stronger if they are accompanied by performance-based assessments. Externally validated assessments such as those provided by the SAT II, Advanced Placement (AP), and International Baccalaureate (IB) programs offer a universal metric that is more readily acceptable at multiple institutions than local assessments or even dual enrollment courses. Furthermore, assessments used with the K-12 domain and at the college and university level are valuable in gauging the language progress of students.

But high school teachers find it difficult, if not impossible, to know the proficiency expectations of all of the postsecondary institutions their students will attend. An Internet search of several of Virginia's four-year colleges and universities indicated a wide range of foreign language entrance requirements, and beyond mention of SAT II or Advanced Placement scores, did not specify which internal placement tests were used and/or which scores warranted placement at which levels. Furthermore, the requirements that were mentioned for each had a heavy focus on reading and writing proficiency, with little or no reference made to oral language proficiency.

The Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL) maintains extensive foreign language testing databases. The K-12 searchable database contains information on language assessments that are currently being used in K-12 language programs around the country as well as annotated bibliographies of published and Internet resources on assessment. A second foreign language assessment database contains information on tests in over 70 languages. Each test record includes information on test level, skill area, format, scoring method, materials, cost, and availability, as well as test author and contact information. A start in working toward transparency, rather than secrecy, in foreign language articulation and placement would be for colleges and universities to list their placement tests with the CAL database, and then reference that listing on their Web sites and in information provided to students who are entering their programs.

## **Trading Places**

In addition to reliance on assessments, there is a need for faculty at the K-12, community college, and four-year college/university levels to have a better understanding of the students, curriculum, and expectations found at all levels. Lee (1999) describes a successful collaborative program that paired college faculty with area middle and high school teachers to team teach introductory French and Spanish courses at the State University of New York at Plattsburgh. In this case, high school teachers helped team teach the university's introductory foreign language courses. The program had three major goals: (1) to facilitate pedagogical cooperation between college foreign

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language and literature faculty and local middle school and high school teachers; (2) to improve articulation between secondary and postsecondary foreign language curricula; and (3) to develop the communicative skills of students, particularly speaking and listening, despite increased class sizes. Perhaps not surprisingly, the areas of greatest discrepancy were related to instructional approach, course pace, correction, grading, and classroom management. The secondary school teachers became

more aware of the material that needed to be covered in high school, which skills students needed to acquire, and what pace had to be maintained for students to continue successfully in the college program. Lee’s study offered only this observation about benefits to the college faculty: “Senior college faculty who had not taught first year classes for a while enjoyed the program and received high marks on student evaluations.” While it is typical of the “receiving” faculty, be they middle school, high school, or higher education faculty, to pass judgment on the quality of student they receive, it is also beneficial for them to walk in the shoes of the “sending” faculty to understand the variety of students, schedules, parental involvement, and other challenges they face on a daily basis. An interesting follow-up study would be asking the senior college faculty to team teach with the middle and high school teachers for a semester!

## **Transfer, Articulation, and Guaranteed Admission Agreements**

In addition to third-party validators such as AP, IB, SAT II, and individual college placement assessments, consideration might also be given to foreign language articulation agreements between high school programs and postsecondary programs. Such agreements already exist within the world of career and technical education, and are readily applicable to performance-based content areas. I will cite a model within my home state of Virginia as an example that might be considered for replication in the world of foreign language instruction.

Working in close collaboration, the Department of Education (K-12) and the Virginia Community College System have created a statewide articulation agreement template to be used by local K-12 school divisions and community colleges in developing a closely articulated program of performance-based career and technical studies in specific areas.<sup>3</sup> Using this template, the first program-specific agreement to be created enables students who complete specified business and information technology courses at the high school level and who earn industry certifications in this area to earn from three to twelve college degree credits (rather than general education credits) toward an associate’s degree in science or applied science without having to complete the comparable courses at the community college.<sup>4</sup> The purpose of this statewide articulation agreement is to provide a consistent procedure for high school graduates who were Business and Information Technology career and technical education (CTE) students to move easily into community college degree programs in Information Technology without duplication of instruction or testing.

This means that students *build* upon their high school course work rather than repeat information and courses at the community college, thus accelerating their studies to become more proficient in information technology at a faster pace. Since Virginia's 23 community colleges are part of a centralized community college system, the articulation agreement for this information technology program is universally available to students within all of Virginia's high school programs.

The high school students validate their learning both by taking courses and demonstrating proficiency with an industry certification. To transfer this concept to the area of foreign languages, consideration must be given to a proficiency-based external validator of a student's foreign language skills. Possible external validators include the Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI), Modified Oral Proficiency Interview (MOPI), Simulated Oral Proficiency Interview (SOPI), Visual Oral Communication Instrument (VOCI), or Computerized Oral Proficiency Interview (COPI). Crucial elements of an articulation agreement for foreign language programs would be the establishment of test examiner training and credentials, scoring methodology, and cut-scores required to award college degree credit.<sup>5</sup>

A separate challenge exists for high school students who wish to enter a four-year college in Virginia. Virginia's four-year college programs are not administered by a central system office. All four-year institutions, both public and private, operate independently, so creating any kind of universal agreement is very challenging. However, the State Council for Higher Education in Virginia (SCHEV) was instrumental in creating the Commonwealth College Course Collaborative (CCCC), a common set of subjects that give Virginia students the chance to earn a semester's worth of college *degree* credit while in high school rather than counting them as general education credits. The CCCC is comprised of 13 credit hours that are accepted at all of the participating institutions for degree credit. At some institutions, students also may have the option to earn as many as 20 additional degree credit hours. In some cases, a high school student could earn more than 30 credits through CCCC. That means less time needed to earn a college degree — and more savings for students and their families.

These courses can be taken through dual enrollment, Advanced Placement (including virtual and online AP courses), and/or International Baccalaureate programs. Every public college in Virginia (except Virginia Military Institute) participates, as do the 24 undergraduate private institutions that make up the Council of Independent Colleges in Virginia. Some colleges evaluate and accept dual enrollment courses on a limited, case-by-case basis. Currently, courses that meet these criteria are offered in the areas of biology, United State history, psychology, English, economics, music appreciation,

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general physics, mathematics, and art history. A review of additional courses is ongoing, with a significant amount of discussion and agreement required to enable more than 50 separate institutions to agree to accept these credits toward satisfying degree requirements rather than as general education and/or elective requirements.<sup>6</sup>

The fact that Virginia's four-year colleges operate outside of a central university system also presents challenges related to how college-level coursework completed in high school is counted toward completion of college degree requirements. As is often true in other states, even externally validated course offerings such as AP and IB courses do not receive the same recognition at all institutions. To help high school and transfer students make informed decisions about how their coursework will transfer, SCHEV has also created a Transfer Tool that allows high school students and transfer students to evaluate more clearly how their college-level coursework will be accepted at colleges in which they are interested.<sup>7</sup>

The 2005 Virginia General Assembly passed the Higher Education Restructuring Act.<sup>8</sup> Provisions within the Act laid the foundation for smoother and more consistent articulation between community colleges and four-year institutions. In the Act, all of Virginia's colleges promised to

1. Provide access to higher education for all Virginians, including under-represented and under-served populations in accordance with anticipated demand.
2. Keep higher education affordable with tuition/fee levels and financial aid funding so that qualified Virginians are not prevented from attending college.
3. Offer a broad curriculum with high academic standards.
4. Target critically needed professions with academic program offerings.
5. Ensure students progress at an appropriate pace and graduate on time.
6. Accept associate degree graduates from community colleges with full academic credit.
7. Participate in regional economic development efforts.
8. Help improve K-12 schools in their areas.
9. Ensure maximum operational efficiency.

Condition 6 (Accept associate degree graduates from community colleges with full academic credit) is a major consideration in facilitating the seamless process of education for students. Section 23-38.88 of the *Code of Virginia* states:

B. The Board of Visitors of a public institution of higher education shall commit to the Governor and the General Assembly by August 1, 2005, through formal resolution adopted according to its own bylaws, to meeting the state goals specified below, and shall be responsible for ensuring that such goals are met, in addition to such other responsibilities as may be prescribed by law. Each such institution shall commit to the Governor and the General Assembly to:

[...]

6. Consistent with its institutional mission, develop articulation agreements that have uniform application to all Virginia community colleges and meet appropriate general education and program requirements at the four-year institution, provide additional opportunities for associate degree graduates to be admitted and enrolled, and offer dual enrollment programs in cooperation with high schools;

In addition to accepting students who have earned associate degrees from Virginia's community colleges at the junior level, many public and private four-year institutions of higher education have established guaranteed admission programs for community college students. In many cases, these guaranteed admission agreements are between the four-year institution and the community college system office, meaning they apply to students who receive an associate degree from any of the 23 Virginia community colleges. A list of the current articulation and guaranteed admission agreements is located at: <http://www.vccs.edu/vccsasr/agreements.htm> (September 16, 2006).

Community colleges and four-year colleges and universities are now working to finalize their agreements and publicize the details to their stakeholders, including prospective and current students, community members, guidance counselors, and parents. An example of the range of opportunities available to students at one community college, Blue Ridge Community College, near James Madison University in Harrisonburg, Virginia, includes guaranteed admission agreements with 16 public and private colleges and universities operating in Virginia.<sup>9</sup>

Because of the independence of the four-year institutions, and even further autonomy afforded the different departments within each institution, the establishment of mutually acceptable conditions for transfer, articulation, and guaranteed admission is largely dependent on a genuine commitment of the faculty to offer such flexibility and opportunity to student transfers and the ability and understanding of the community college faculty to ensure that their students have the skills and experiences necessary to continue their studies at the next level, if they so desire. One thing that becomes increasingly clear is the need for strong communication across all levels of education.

## **National Initiatives to Promote Foreign Language Proficiency**

As we think more about articulation of foreign language programs, it is important to acknowledge the gathering momentum toward increasing accessibility and affordability of educational options for all students. Several influential organizations and entities such as the U.S. Department of Education, the Council of Chief State School Officers, the Education Commission of the States, the National Governors Association, and the Southern Regional Education Board have promoted major high school reform initiatives in recent years.<sup>10</sup> A key component of these initiatives is the opportunity for high school students to accelerate their learning so that a certain amount of college-level work may be completed at the high school level, thus enabling students to study at a higher level or complete their postsecondary studies earlier. Currently, the major focus is on accelerating learning in English, mathematics, and science, but the national momentum offers a prime time for the foreign language community to jump on the bandwagon and benefit from the increased focus on rigorous, performance-based learning.

For the first time in quite a while, the federal government has again taken an interest in promoting language learning for American students. In January 2006, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings co-hosted

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the U.S. University Presidents Summit on International Education in Washington, DC.<sup>11</sup> The Secretaries engaged leaders of U.S. higher education in a renewed partnership to strengthen international education, emphasizing its importance to the national interest. The summit focused on how to attract foreign students and scholars to study in the United States, as well as how to encourage more American students to receive part of their education abroad. It also drew attention to the key investments required to strengthen international higher education for Americans, including increasing access to study abroad, encouraging non-traditional study abroad locations, and strengthening non-traditional language acquisition. During the Presidents Summit, the National Security Language Initiative (NSLI) was announced.<sup>12</sup> At the direction of the President of the

United States, the Secretaries of Education, State, and Defense, and the Director of National Intelligence (DNI) have developed a comprehensive national plan to expand U.S. foreign language education beginning in early childhood (kindergarten) and continuing throughout formal schooling and into the workforce with new programs and resources. Additionally, on February 8, 2006, President Bush signed into law two new student grant programs: the Academic Competitiveness (AC) Grants and National Science and Mathematics Access to Retain Talent (SMART) Grants, which were created by the Higher Education Reconciliation Act of 2005.<sup>13</sup> The grants encourage students to take more challenging courses in high school and to pursue college majors in high demand in the global economy, such as science, mathematics, technology, engineering and critical foreign languages.

While many in the current generation of language teachers benefited as students from the training our teachers received as part of the foreign language institutes offered under the auspices of the National Defense Education Act in the 1960s, most of us never had the chance to participate ourselves in foreign language training offered by the federal government. However, the old adage says “Everything old is new again.” And so it is that the American government has once again acknowledged the need for further language proficiency within our population. We, as foreign language professionals, have the opportunity to rise to the challenge, and one clear way to meet the challenge is to improve the articulation of foreign language study within the American educational system.

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- Lee, L. (1999). *Partners in pedagogy: collaboration between university and secondary school foreign language teachers*. Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics. [Available online: <http://www.cal.org/resources/digest/partners.html>, September 17, 2006.]

Malone, M., Rifkin, B., Christian, D., & Johnson, D. (2005). Attaining high levels of proficiency: challenges for foreign language education in the United States. Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics. [Available on-line: <http://www.cal.org/resources/digest/attain.html>, September 17, 2006.]

Pufahl, I., Rhodes, N., & Christian, D. (2001). What we can learn from foreign language teaching in other countries. Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics. [Available on-line: <http://www.cal.org/resources/digest/0106pufahl.html>, September 17, 2006.]

## Notes

1. More information about the European Language Portfolio (ELP) is available on-line at [http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Portfolio\\_EN.asp](http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Portfolio_EN.asp), September 17, 2006.
2. More information about LinguaFolio is available on-line at <http://www.ncssfl.org/links/index.php?linguafolio>, September 17, 2006.
3. A PDF version of the template is available for review on the Internet at: <http://leg2.state.va.us/dls/h&sdocs.nsf/4d54200d7e28716385256ec1004f3130/68b4c0c89b88ae6d85256ec500553c1e?OpenDocument>, December 29, 2005.
4. Available on-line: [http://www.vccs.edu/aboutvccs/news\\_releases/careeritweb.html](http://www.vccs.edu/aboutvccs/news_releases/careeritweb.html) and [http://vccs.edu/vccsdr/VCCS\\_VDOE\\_IT.pdf](http://vccs.edu/vccsdr/VCCS_VDOE_IT.pdf), December 29, 2005.
5. More information about the assessments listed above may be found at <http://www.nclrc.org/readings/hottopics/interviewopas.html>, <http://www.cal.org/topics/ta/flsasses.html> and <http://www.cal.org/resources/digest/0014simulated.html>, October 7, 2006.
6. More information about the Commonwealth College Course Collaborative is available at: <http://www.virginiamentor.org/planning/cccc.asp>, December 29, 2005.
7. Available online: [http://www.virginiamentor.org/ap\\_ib/ap.asp](http://www.virginiamentor.org/ap_ib/ap.asp), December 29, 2005.
8. Available on-line: <http://leg1.state.va.us/cgi-bin/legp504.exe?051+ful+CHAP0933>, September 16, 2006.
9. Available on-line: [http://www.brcc.edu/services/advising/transfer/agreement\\_types.htm](http://www.brcc.edu/services/advising/transfer/agreement_types.htm) and <http://www.brcc.edu/services/advising/transfer/GAAPolicies.pdf>, September 16, 2006.
10. More information about major high school reform initiatives may be found at the Web sites of the following groups:
  - Council of Chief State School Officers — [http://www.ccsso.org/projects/State\\_Strategies\\_to\\_Redesign\\_High\\_Schools/](http://www.ccsso.org/projects/State_Strategies_to_Redesign_High_Schools/)
  - Education Commission of the States — <http://www.ecs.org/ecsmain.asp?page=/html/issuesK12.asp>
  - National Governors Association — <http://www.nga.org>
  - Southern Regional Education Board — <http://www.sreb.org/main/highschools/highschoolsindex.asp>
  - U.S. Department of Education — <http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ovae/pi/hs/index.html>
11. More information about the U.S. University Presidents Summit on International Education is available on-line at <http://exchanges.state.gov/universitysummit/>, September 24, 2006.
12. More information about the National Security Language Initiative may be found at <http://www.ed.gov/about/inits/ed/competitiveness/nsli/index.html>, September 24, 2006.
13. More information about the SMART grants may be found at <http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ope/ac-smart.html>, September 24, 2006.