AAUSC Issues in Language Program Direction

Language Program Articulation: Developing a Theoretical Foundation

Catherine M. Barrette
Kate Paesani
Editors

THOMSON HEINLE

Australia • Canada • Mexico • Singapore • Spain
United Kingdom • United States

THOMSON HEINLE

Publisher: Janet Dracksdorf
Senior Assistant Editor: Heather Bradley
Assistant Editor: Arlinda Shtuni
Executive Marketing Manager: Lindsey Richardson
Associate Marketing Manager: Rachel Bairstow

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Printed in the United States of America

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 09 08 07 06 05 04

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Library of Congress Control Number: 2004112856

ISBN 1-4130-0380-X

Advertising Project Manager: Stacey Purviance
Editorial Production Manager: Michael Burggren
Manufacturing Manager: Marcia Locke
Production Service/Compositor: GEX Publishing Services
Cover/Text Printer: Malloy

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Chapter 4

The Role of Special Focus Sections in the Articulation of Language and Literature Courses

Jean Marie Schultz

Abstract

In this chapter the author explores the multiple issues involved in the vertical and interdisciplinary articulation of language programs, particularly from intermediate-level language courses to the advanced-level reading and composition course. After tracing some of the impediments to effective articulation, including the definition of articulation itself, textbook issues, and practical constraints, the author proposes a multi-dimensional model for achieving smooth vertical and interdisciplinary articulation. Finally, a sample intermediate-level French focus section serves to illustrate the model.

Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose. The more things change, the more they stay the same. I open this chapter on language program articulation issues with this French proverb to make a point about the subject in question. The quote is not intended to diminish the importance of the topic. On the contrary, articulation is an issue so crucial to the effective teaching of foreign language (FL) that lack thereof can negatively affect the number of students choosing to continue their study of the language, its literature, and its culture on more advanced levels (Barnett 1991; Harlow and Muyskens 1994; Siskin 1998). I begin with the proverb rather to emphasize the sheer length of time that curricular articulation has figured so prominently among the concerns of language program directors (LPDs), particularly in regard to intermediate curricula, and without any entirely satisfactory answer having been found. At least as early as the 1970s the college intermediate-level[1] curriculum figured as a distinct area of concern, with Disick calling it "a perplexing disarray of aptitudes, interests, and competencies" (1972, p. 417). During the 1980s and particularly the 1990s, discussion of articulation issues extended to advanced-level curricula, often focusing on the language-literature split that continues to exist in many FL departments today. Work by Barnett (1991), Byrnes (1998), Lange (1997), Shanahan (1997), Swaffar, Arens, and Byrnes (1991), and others focused on issues of preparedness in reading, writing, and speaking, and the contexts in which learning takes place. Despite extensive discussion and research, the issues surrounding articulation have hardly been settled. As the recent publication of Lally's (2001) volume, and indeed, as this current volume reflects, the debates are ongoing. Thus, in spite of all the work done on the subject and many different attempts to create well-articulated curricula, the problem

persists. *Plus ça change* … The purpose of this chapter is then twofold: to examine some of the practical reasons that intermediate- to advanced-level articulation can perhaps never be completely laid to rest and to reframe the need for persistent attention to curricular articulation at these levels to foster the development of constantly creative curricular solutions.

Impediments to Articulation

From the outset one of the significant impediments to articulation efforts is the problematic definition of the term itself. Lally cites Byrnes' 1990 definition that articulation is the "well motivated and well designed sequencing and coordination of instruction toward certain goals" (2001, p. 18), and she uses it as the theoretical basis for her edited volume. Lally points out, however, that within the language education community, which often operates under constraints of quantifiable accountability, the definition of articulation has often been significantly narrowed to focus primarily on goals, taken to mean specific skills that can be tested. Although testing can be a well-intentioned and important tool, the testing of skills alone is insufficient to guarantee effective articulation. Much of this insufficiency has to do with the complex and context-sensitive way in which language skills manifest themselves.

In order to grapple with the practical implementation of articulation, the term has now come to be defined along the tripartite lines of horizontal, vertical, and interdisciplinary articulation (Lange 1982; Byrnes 1990a). **Horizontal articulation** refers to the coordination of instruction among multi-sectioned courses at the same level. That is, there are agreed-upon goals and approaches among all instructors teaching the same course within the same term, with the curriculum in each section also being the same. **Vertical articulation** refers to the coordination of the language program from one level to the next. At the college level, this is generally understood as the move from introductory through advanced levels and beyond. Vertical articulation is more complex than it might appear at first blush, however, for the goals thereof radiate out into each of the four skills, the development of content knowledge, and the types of critical thinking skills required to deal with the material effectively. Issues of content knowledge and discipline-specific critical thinking skills then lead into the domain of **interdisciplinary articulation**, wherein the richness of the language learning experience should intersect in a palpable fashion with multiple disciplines.

It is perhaps the complex nature of articulation that prompts Byrnes (1998) to revisit her definition. She begins by examining the very notion of a curriculum, which she defines as "the attempt to devise a sequence of educational opportunities for learners that builds on internal interrelations and continuities among the major units of instruction … to enhance learning" (p. 265). The revised definition is noteworthy in that rather than mentioning *goals*, which can lead to a narrow interpretation of articulation, Byrnes now emphasizes *opportunities* for learners. There is thus a noted shift from the design aspect of articulated curricula to creative context construction to enhance learning. Moreover, in providing opportunities for learning,

the focus shifts to the language learner who must maximize these opportunities, or not. An additional key principle to this definition is that the units of a curriculum, that is the individual courses, should be logically sequenced building not only on the skills of the preceding course but also on its contexts, content, and opportunities for language learning. According to Byrnes, one of the shortcomings of a modern college education is that there is all too often no particular coordination of courses in general. Education is rather the sum total of discrete, self-contained courses, leaving the students themselves to make sense of what their education means (1998, p. 267). For Byrnes, the problem is particularly pernicious in the foreign languages, where the persistent dichotomy between language courses and literature or advanced culture courses continues to undermine the very notion of well-articulated curricula. Thus despite years of research on and discussion about the importance of content-based language curricula that ideally would blur or even erase the line of demarcation between the still distinct domains of language and literature, that very line remains as indelible as ever. *Plus ça change* …

The obvious question that this discussion raises and that the French proverb suggests is why this should be. Articulation is a highly complex process, taking place across three major axes, involving content and at least four specific language skills, few of which evolve along a smooth and predictable trajectory, and requiring sometimes very different critical thinking skills from course to course. A well-articulated program can thus be represented visually as a virtual spiderweb of intersecting pedagogical threads. For example, a horizontally articulated program presents numerous organizational challenges that must be addressed by the LPD or a teaching team. The creation of a well-articulated program along vertical and interdisciplinary axes involves fundamentally the creation of individualized language courses that take into account the skills and contexts of instruction at both previous and future levels and that have a vision toward potential connections with other disciplines. Moreover, the curriculum and approach to it must also factor in relevant applied linguistic and second language acquisition (SLA) research. As Byrnes says, "articulation should refer to the best knowledge we have about the nature of instructed second language learning and the programmatic contexts needed to facilitate that process and its resultant progression toward advanced abilities in the language" (2001, p. 158).

In the best of all worlds, where endless resources would be provided, the dream of well-articulated language programs that respond to new research and emerging student and faculty needs could be realized. Given the current realities of language departments, many of which must pay increasingly careful attention to their budgets, coupled with the demands made on LPDs, who must manage multi-sectioned courses at various levels of instruction, the creation of individually articulated programs becomes problematic at best. The development of a language curriculum thus almost inevitably comes to focus on textbooks, which occupy a prominent position within the language teaching program. As such, textbooks can play a problematic role in articulation efforts (Byrnes 1998; Lange 1994).

The Difficulty of Textbook Choice

The prominence of the discussion of textbook choice among LPDs is driven largely by the desire to constantly improve curricula and therefore belies an implicit dissatisfaction with the textbook currently being employed. The textbook becomes the focus of discussion because it conveniently answers a number of programmatic needs. It states curricular goals, lays out material to be taught, and suggests ways of teaching it (Byrnes 1998, p. 271).

For the first year of language study, there may very well be good reasons for paying attention to the textbook. At this level a certain amount of core grammar and vocabulary needs to be taught. All four skills need to be developed in as systematic a way as possible. In addition, the presentation of cultural content is crucial not only to engage students' interest in the language learning process but also to lay the foundation for work at the next level. Although the various introductory-level textbooks currently on the market attempt to meet these needs through various approaches, the basic grammar and vocabulary material covered is remarkably consistent. Given this, it becomes a question of selecting a textbook whose approach is compatible with the orientation of the student body, corps of instructors, and departmental philosophy.

The intermediate curriculum is a more delicate subject than the introductory curriculum for a number of reasons. The first of these has to do with a degree of uncertainty as to what to do at all. Recognizing that students have been exposed to the basic FL grammar in their introductory courses but that they have not yet internalized it, virtually every intermediate program includes a certain amount of review so that students can solidify their knowledge (Rava 2000). Beyond this, however, the real controversy surrounding the intermediate program begins.

It has long been recognized that simply reviewing grammar and vocabulary in a void is far less effective than studying it in a meaningful context (Omaggio Hadley 2001). Determining that context initiates the debate about curricular articulation. Should the teaching of language components be couched in a practically oriented contemporary cultural context? Should language elements be taught through a focus on "high" culture? Should the program take a language-through-literature approach? Should the focus be on the culture, literature, and language of one particular country or of many countries where the language is spoken? These are just some of the questions to which curricular articulation efforts require answers; and the answers themselves are often embedded within firm viewpoints about what is considered appropriate to ask intermediate-level students to do, what ideally they should be able to do, and what they want to do.

The question of context leads directly to the third reason that articulation can prove so challenging, namely through what types and levels of skills the mastery of the language should manifest itself. The oral proficiency movement and communicative approaches shifted the emphasis in the language classroom from passive reading and listening skills to spoken skills at both the introductory and intermediate levels

(ACTFL 1986; Harklau 2002; Shanahan 1997). Interestingly, however, in the discussion of the vertical articulation from intermediate- to advanced-level courses, writing skills surface more often than do oral and aural skills, with the ability to read and discuss complex texts critically not far behind (Barnett 1991; Byrnes 1998; Schultz 1991a). As the use of terms such as "critical" and "complex" indicates, the desired language skills for the advanced-level course take a cognitive leap from lower- to higher-order thinking (Schultz 1991a).

The above discussion serves to highlight the challenges that textbook writers at the intermediate level face in their endeavors. They must first examine what was done at the introductory level, then grapple with the complex and at times contradictory issues regarding subject matter and methodology at the intermediate level, both of which can be heavily influenced by pedagogical trends.[2] At the same time they must hold the goals of advanced-level curricula in their sights. Authors must determine what subject matter students should be able to discuss for their level, what methods should be employed to help them express themselves, what students should be able to write about, and how developed their skills in this area should be. In addition, appropriate reading material must be selected. The choice of materials is crucial in that each genre involves its own set of discourse elements and interpretive skills that inform the language learning process (Larsen-Freeman 1980; Swales 1990). Thus despite the existence of guidelines that have been developed to address these issues, notably the *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines* (ACTFL 1986) and more recently the *Standards for Foreign Language Learning* (ACTFL 1994), there is an array of possibilities, not to mention ongoing controversies surrounding them (e.g., Tucker 2000; Valdman 1988) that influence curricular design, student learning, and articulation.

Much of the difficulty of intermediate- to advanced-level articulation has to do with the amorphous characteristics of advanced-level programs themselves. Whereas intermediate-level textbook authors have a concrete textbook (i.e., introductory textbooks) from which to proceed, advanced-level curricula rarely use a specific textbook. In many language departments, the post-intermediate course curriculum, often designated as an advanced reading and composition course, is designed by the upper-division literature faculty. The curriculum may consist of a reader of texts selected around a key theme with overriding pedagogical goals of helping students to produce academic prose in the FL and to discuss texts analytically and interpretatively. A stand-alone grammar book may be selected for review, but rarely is it used systematically. As such, the advanced-level course is often a better reflection of the departmental orientation than is the textbook-based intermediate program. Given that each department may have very different curricular and student needs, the intermediate-level textbook designed for wide marketability cannot help but preclude articulation with the individually designed advanced-level course. A given textbook may be heavily weighted in contemporary popular culture, in sociological issues, or in literature, but it will inevitably be missing crucial pieces in terms of its articulation with the advanced-level course precisely because each department has its own particular demographics and orientation. The inevitable gap between the intermediate textbook and the advanced-level course content contributes thus to the very political nature of the language-literature divide, with the intermediate program bearing the brunt of

any dissatisfaction. Because upper division faculty rarely teach students coming directly from the introductory language program, it is essentially buffered from the kind of criticism of student outcomes to which the intermediate program is subject. Intermediate programs on the other hand fall directly under the scrutiny of literature and advanced culture faculty when students from those programs do not meet expectations or when enrollments drop.

Toward a Theory of Vertical and Interdisciplinary Articulation

The most obvious and logical response to the intermediate- to advanced-level articulation problem would seem to be to de-emphasize or even eliminate the textbook and to design an individual curriculum encompassing all four skills and within the appropriate context. This is indeed a proposal that Byrnes has made and worked to realize in the German Department at Georgetown University (Byrnes and Maxim 2003). To create a well-articulated curriculum, however, two very obvious issues need to be addressed from the outset. First, the teaching approach, grammar, vocabulary, reading materials, and writing activities of the introductory course must be taken into account. Second, it is essential to analyze the texts, themes, and expectations for discussion and writing skills in the advanced-level course. Once these questions have been answered, the intermediate-level course can be designed.

There are multiple underlying principles at the foundation of effective vertical articulation for the intermediate-to-advanced curriculum. The first, and perhaps most crucial of these, involves the determination of the specific content area to be covered in the intermediate- and advanced-level courses, which can then be further broken down into the selection of specific themes. For example, if the goal of the advanced-level course is to target FL reading and writing skills through the teaching of literature, then intermediate-level courses must include literary texts (e.g., Schofer 2002; Schultz 2002; Thomas 1998). If film, history, art history, or global studies is to be part of the advanced course curriculum, then students need to have some exposure to what it means to discuss and write about the specific field in the FL. On the most basic level this boils down to exposing students to some of the vocabulary and written and spoken discourse features of the field. From the cognitive perspective, it means asking students some of the fundamental questions common to the discipline and encouraging them to grapple intellectually with potential answers. By articulating intermediate and advanced levels along disciplinary lines, students can be provided the tools they need to begin to build the linguistic and cognitive knowledge bases that will help them meet the challenges of future courses effectively (Schultz 2002).

Thematic articulation derives from interdisciplinary articulation and essentially breaks down the field into manageable pedagogical units that increase students' familiarity with the advanced-level topics. Thematic articulation thus fundamentally involves incorporating into the intermediate-level curriculum some of the topics that students will discuss in the advanced-level course.

Whenever students move from one level to the next in any field, they commonly experience a certain amount of anxiety about their abilities to handle the new material. Familiarizing students with topics related to the ones they will encounter in the advanced-level course is an effective tool for putting them immediately at ease, particularly if the targeted topic is presented in the early days of the advanced-level course. For instance, if at the beginning of the advanced-level course one of the topics explored is French perceptions of Americans, it can be helpful if students have discussed an analogous subject in the intermediate program—stereotypes that Americans have of the French and the validity thereof. Thematic articulation does not imply that the exact same themes need to be treated from one level to the next, however. This could prove both redundant and potentially boring. Nevertheless, work on related topics goes far toward establishing students' receptivity to specific issues—laying down their personal schema—and therefore building a solid foundation for advanced work in reading, discussion, and writing (e.g., Rumelhart 1981).

The reading component of a well-articulated curriculum can often be derived from the thematic organization of the advanced-level course and essentially follows the same principle for effective articulation. In intermediate courses students typically read a variety of texts of three basic types: cultural commentary, short newspaper and magazine articles on contemporary topics, and short literary texts. Pedagogical materials accompany the vast majority of texts, including glossed vocabulary and comprehension check exercises, designed to facilitate reading comprehension. In advanced-level courses this is rarely the case. Students are often asked to read unglossed texts and are provided no pre-reading materials. Thus, because students must often make a reading-level jump from the intermediate to the advanced course, the inclusion of texts written by some of the same authors in both levels can prove helpful to articulation efforts. As with thematic articulation, this does not mean that students should read exactly the same texts in each course. However, at the beginning of the advanced-level course, it is helpful to provide students with at least one text written by one of the authors that they have encountered in the previous level. For the same reasons that thematic articulation can prove fruitful, this strategy, too, contributes significantly to students' perceptions of preparedness in terms of course material and expectations. Moreover, their familiarity with an author early on helps foster discussion because students immediately feel that they have something to say.

The effective teaching of reading is far more complex than simply sharing authors, however. Because critical reading skills are at the heart of advanced work in FL, it is important to design a well-sequenced approach for the teaching of texts to intermediate students. Because many students may not be accustomed to working with the texts in the targeted discipline, an approach that begins with the personal and moves progressively toward the analytical helps to foster the development of critical reading and interpretative skills (e.g., Kern 2000; Schultz 2002; Swaffar, Arens, and Byrnes 1991). Moreover, a carefully designed approach to reading can feed directly into efforts to articulate the modes of discussion characteristic of intermediate and advanced levels. According to the *ACTFL Proficiency*

Guidelines (ACTFL 1986), discussion topics at the intermediate level should be oriented toward the practical and concrete. In terms of the discussion of texts, this generally means reconstituting the text and checking for basic comprehension—the *what* of the text. At the advanced level, however, it is understood that students are able to put into their own words what the text says. They are asked to go beyond surface meaning to interpret and support opinion. In other words, students are asked to operate in a different and more complex mode of discourse that requires higher-level cognitive processing. Without proper advance preparation, students can thus experience significant linguistic breakdown, feeling tongue-tied and ill-prepared, when asked to discuss material at a higher level than was the case in their intermediate courses (Schofer 2002; Schultz 1991a, 1991b).

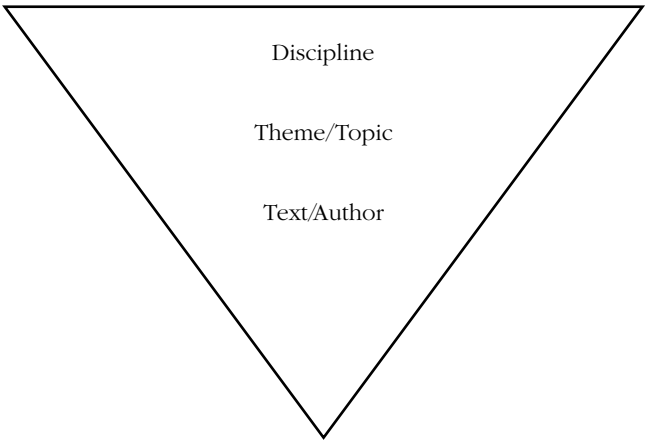
The creation of well-conceived discussion exercises can go far in bridging the gap between intermediate and advanced levels, as well as fostering critical reading skills. Because it is easier to discuss from a personal point of view, in the intermediate language class a text can often initially be approached from this perspective. However, students must be encouraged to develop their interpretive and critical reading skills. Close reading in which students can concentrate both on the elements of language and how they work together to create meaning can bolster the development of just these higher-level skills. For the intermediate curriculum, small group work during which students tackle specific discussion questions can prove less intimidating than general class discussion. Small groups have the added advantage of allowing students more time to express themselves and practice their language skills. Discussion exercises at the intermediate level should begin with a few *what* questions, but they should then quickly move to questions regarding the *how* and *why* of textual issues. This sequencing is pivotal for moving students from the narrative, plot summary, knowledge-telling mode that is characteristic of many intermediate-level activities to the interpretative, knowledge-generating mode required in the advanced course and beyond (ACTFL 1986; Bereiter and Scardamalia 1987; Schofer 2002). In terms of implementation, students should be given time to work on the exercises in class in small groups. At the end of the allotted time they can be asked to provide a summary of the significance of what they have found to the whole class. This presentation then leads to more theoretical general class discussion of the topic and the issues raised. Thus, the design of special discussion exercises can help students develop their oral skills within the appropriate discourse mode and express their ideas about the topics covered in class (Schultz 2002; see Appendix for an example).

Another crucial element of effective vertical articulation involves the writing component of the intermediate curriculum. Because composition is so complex a topic, a full discussion of the pedagogy of FL writing is not within the purview of this chapter. However, one of the essential features of the composition component of a well-articulated curriculum is that it targets the mode of writing required in the advanced-level course and provides a well-sequenced plan for helping students meet desired levels of achievement in the desired mode (e.g., Maxim, this volume; Schultz 1991a, 1991b, 1994, 1995). Students also need guidance in developing their interpretative abilities to generate a compelling thesis for their eventual

papers. In this regard, the discussion of texts as described above plays a crucial role and essentially merges speaking and writing skills, thus mutually bolstering each one. In addition, because academic prose, and indeed each discipline, has its own genre conventions (Swales 1990), it is important that students be familiar with these. One of the great shortcomings of many language programs is that students may never have seen an example of the type of essay they are being asked to write. FL models of the targeted genre can thus play an important role in helping students internalize the conventions of the writing task (Schultz 1995, 1996). With the larger elements of writing in mind, the actual mechanics of writing (vocabulary, grammar, syntax) can be addressed. Finally, because writing is an ongoing and recursive activity (Gass and Magnan 1993), students need consistent guidance and practice to acquire a solid base at the intermediate level.

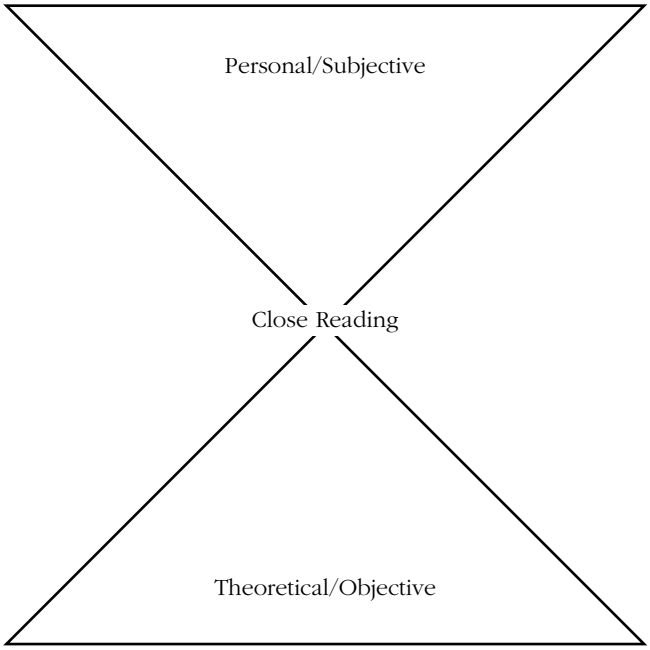
The creation of an effective intermediate-level course articulated along vertical and interdisciplinary lines requires, then, a multifaceted approach to language teaching that begins from an expansive overview of the language context or eventual discipline. It narrows down to focus on its possible themes and topics and subsequently on specific texts through which the individual skills can be developed on both macro and micro levels. If we visualize the articulation of skills and disciplines as geometric constructs, they can be construed as a series of triangles. As the disciplinary triangle in Figure 1 indicates, the first step to effective articulation is to determine the specific discipline or disciplines to be addressed in the content-rich language curriculum. One of the goals of this determination is to demonstrate to students the extent to which their study of language intersects with other fields. From this, specific themes or topics within a chosen field can be selected for attention or inclusion, after which appropriate texts and authors can be selected. With the disciplinary parameters in place, the approaches to reading, oral, and writing skills—represented by the skills triangles in Figures 2 and 3—can be configured.

Figure 1
Discipline Triangle



In terms of reading and discussion skills, for the intermediate student an approach that begins from how students relate to texts or authors based on their personal experiences most readily fosters initial classroom discussion of new material. However, a purely experiential approach without attention to objective analysis can hamper the development of higher-level skills. Discussion must therefore become more focused and narrow, as the reading and oral skills triangle (Figure 2) indicates, to encourage students to develop their critical reading and interpretative skills through a concentrated examination of the text itself. In focusing on the grammar and vocabulary of a given text students thus not only enhance their language skills but also begin to understand how the specific elements of language directly inform the content. Close reading techniques serve to establish the interpretative foundation from which discussion can then again expand to encompass more theoretical issues.

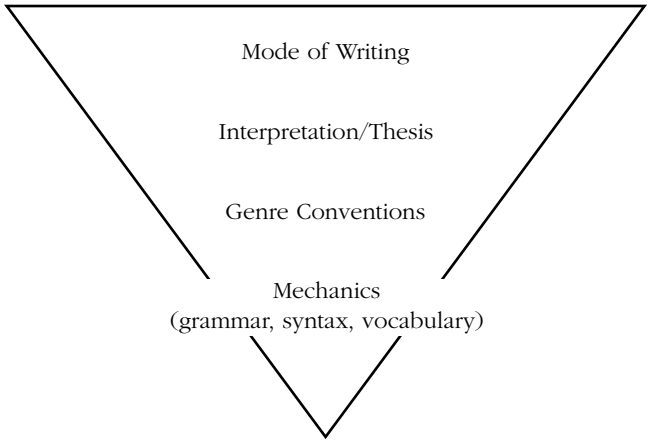
Figure 2
Reading and Oral Skills



As Figure 3 indicates, the teaching of writing skills can also be construed geometrically. The top of the inverted triangle represents the first step in the design of an effective composition component, determining the mode of writing to be targeted (Schultz 1991a). Often this is driven by the discipline itself, thus blending to a certain extent the disciplinary and writing triangles (Figures 1 and 3). Crucial to the writing of any paper, regardless of the discipline, is the interpretation itself. If

students have no interpretation, they essentially have nothing compelling to demonstrate to their readers, which is ultimately the point of academic writing. Developing an interesting and well-supported interpretation is therefore directly dependent on students' reading and discussion skills. The writing skills triangle (Figure 3) thus also intersects with the reading and oral skills triangle (Figure 2) on this dimension. The disciplinary triangle (Figure 1) also merges with the writing component in terms of genre conventions. In order to write a paper that conforms to the expectations of a given discourse community (Swales 1990), students must be familiar with those conventions. Providing students with specific guidelines and models of essays within a particular discipline can help them internalize the characteristics of the academic sub-genre they seek to master. Once these composition issues are addressed, students can concentrate on the editorial aspects of writing, targeting elements of grammar, syntax, and vocabulary to refine further their developing language skills.

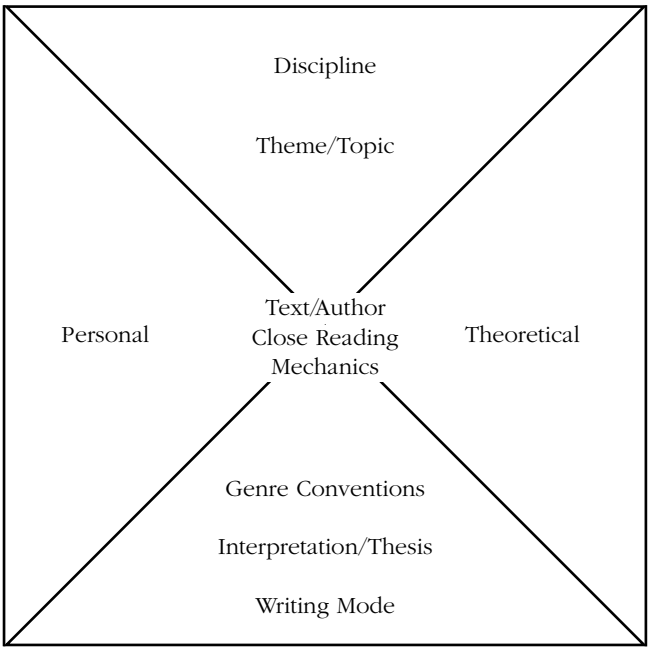
Figure 3
Writing Skills



The above discussion serves to illustrate visually the highly complex nature of designing a well-articulated curriculum. The triangles themselves demonstrate the hierarchical ordering of issues to be addressed. None is independent of the others, however. As indicated, all are mutually interdependent, merging and intersecting in various ways. Thus when the figures are superimposed upon each other, as represented by Figure 4, we obtain essentially a prismatic articulatory structure of the triangulated domains of discipline, theme, and text within which equally complex configurations of language pedagogy are embedded.

As the geometry of articulation demonstrates, it is no small task to hold in equipoise the many elements involved. Thus, for the LPD, designing an effective intermediate-level curriculum is essentially tantamount to writing a language

Figure 4
Articulation Prism



textbook that is constantly in progress. Such a task presents a number of very practical obstacles. The first constraint, as implicitly suggested, is quite simply one of time for the LPD. To produce a well-articulated program, the LPD must carefully analyze the introductory and advanced curricula and constantly keep abreast of findings in applied linguistic and SLA research for creating and enhancing teaching methodologies. In addition, the creation of the pedagogical apparatus is extremely time-intensive, requiring not only a first iteration for each of a variety of approaches but also constant assessment of the results. If an approach proves ineffective, then modification or a complete redesign is in order. Finally, a significant impediment to deciding on a finalized version of the intermediate-level language course is that curricular goals, student needs and sensibilities, and departmental orientation are in constant flux, thus de-articulating a once well-articulated program. Attention to women's studies, for example, has made it virtually impossible to omit women writers from a language syllabus, which was not particularly the case twenty years ago. Given these demands, coupled with the commitment required to administer a language program, most LPDs simply do not have the time to design an individual intermediate-level program to meet the unique needs of their department and student body, needs that shift, moreover, with some regularity.

Focus Sections as Mini-Courses[3]

One way of addressing these impediments to articulation is to break down the intermediate language curriculum into manageable chunks by creating mini-courses or special focus sections that exist within the regular language sequence. A **focus section** is defined as a short-term language curriculum designed to focus on a designated theme and to provide students the opportunity to explore in-depth a specific topic through their developing language skills. If an intermediate textbook is being used in the program, the focus section can be designed to expand upon a particular chapter theme, but with a forward look toward the goals and themes of the advanced-level course. The majority of focus sections designed and implemented at the University of California at Berkeley last between three and five weeks of a fifteen-week semester, and concentrate on an issue pertinent to French studies that responds directly to student interests. Each focus section takes into account the principles of articulation outlined above. They address a theme of the subsequent course, often implementing a text written by an author whose work will be read in the advanced-level reading and composition course. They include discussion exercises geared to the students' levels and designed to help them learn to read more critically and to express their ideas about the subject matter in increasingly complex fashion. Finally, they include a writing component. Moreover, because the intermediate language program for which the focus sections were designed does not rely on a specific textbook, and is itself designed around thematic units, the implementation of a focus section involves pulling a unit and substituting the focus section for the excised material. To date, four focus sections have been designed for the intermediate French language program at Berkeley, all in response to student interests and trends in French studies. The existing focus section topics are French women writers, Francophone literature (Schultz in press), Paris, and theater (Roberts 2002 discusses the theater focus section). The women writers section is presented here as an example of the focus section concept.

The French women writers focus section is a direct response to the general increase in attention to women's studies at Berkeley and its importance for French studies in particular. To appeal to both female and male students, texts written by women with a particular focus on feminist issues were intermingled with those without such a focus. For example, students begin the first week of the focus section by reading two short texts by Colette, "La Couseuse" (The Sewer) and "La Main" (The Hand). In both texts, the question of relationships between men and women is central, but in the first text the narrator presents her concerns about her daughter, who is sewing, and who is beginning to wonder about the dynamics of romantic relationships. In the second text, Colette brings a woman's dissatisfaction with her husband to the forefront. The first text thus serves as a neutral transition to the more controversial second text. During the second week, students read an excerpt from Nathalie Sarraute's *Enfance* (Childhood) that highlights the problematic relationship between the narrator and her mother. The excerpt thus articulates well with Colette's "La Couseuse" from the point of view of mother-daughter relationships. The theme of maternal images repeats in the third week's

text, Yourcenar's "Le Lait de la mort" (The Milk of Death). The short story opens with two engineers discussing their concepts of the perfect mother. The image one of the characters presents of his mother comes very close to the picture Sarraute paints of the narrator's mother in *Enfance*. Students thus have a solid point of departure from which to tackle the more complex issues that emerge in Yourcenar's rendition of the legend of the walled-up wife (e.g., Dundes 1996), which sets in motion a variety of marital relationship types, as well as significant discriminatory issues against women. Because the controversial topic is couched within a fascinating legend and has been prepared for during the discussion of previous texts, Yourcenar's short story provokes lively general class debate from all students about the images of motherhood presented. "Le Lait de la mort" provides a solid transition to Mariama Bâ's *Une si longue lettre* (So Long a Letter) in which the main character suffers serious negative consequences by refusing to subjugate herself to the practices of a male-dominated social structure. A selection from Simone de Beauvoir's *Le Deuxième Sexe* (The Second Sex), which is an overtly feminist text, provides a theoretical and controversial framework against which to reevaluate the Colette, Yourcenar, and Bâ texts.

The women writers focus section is itself well articulated thematically and provides students material for comparative discussion that becomes progressively more complex as their language skills develop. Moreover, in the crucial early days of the course, when students most need to feel comfortable, the texts are far less controversial than those read a bit later. Each text is accompanied by a set of discussion questions, essay topics, and a specific writing lesson (see Appendix). For the Colette text, students review the principles of composition that they have used in their previous French course, focusing particularly on the thesis statement. For the Sarraute excerpt, students concentrate on writing an introduction. For Yourcenar, they focus on paragraphing strategies. For Bâ, the focus is on conclusions. With *Le Deuxième Sexe* students work on argumentation, picking up clues from Beauvoir's own rhetorical style and argumentative strategy. Thus the course clearly articulates with the higher-level oral and writing skill objectives of the advanced-level course. Moreover, in that the advanced-level course reader used at Berkeley contains different texts by Colette, Yourcenar, and Sarraute, there is a strong thematic and topic relationship between intermediate and advanced courses. In fact, instructors teaching the advanced-level course report perceiving that their students feel better oriented and more prepared to handle the level of work expected of them than before the introduction of focus sections as an articulation effort.

Conclusion

The focus section described above provides an example of the implementation of the triangulated model of articulation presented earlier. It targets specific disciplines and focuses on topics germane to the advanced-level course work. Moreover, it incorporates approaches to reading, discussion, and writing that help lay the foundation for the levels of language skills expected in courses subsequent to the intermediate level. From a practical point of view focus sections also hold a

number of positive advantages for language curriculum design and articulation efforts. First, they render such efforts more manageable than an attempt to design an entire course in that they break down the task into manageable units. They allow LPDs and their instructors to experiment with curricular design within a limited context that essentially reduces the risk of failure, should a particular text or topic prove unfruitful. The focus section concept is thus conducive to experimentation. Another obvious advantage of the focus section is its flexibility within the curriculum. The section can be used to replace a unit in the curriculum with relative ease whenever circumstances prove favorable to such substitution. Thus at Berkeley, during a given semester, one section only of a multi-sectioned intermediate course will depart from the standard curriculum for the three-to-five week period allotted to the selected focus section. The focus section will essentially replace the reading and pedagogical activities of the standard curriculum (except for the coverage of specific grammar points, which remains the same). Although the intermediate French curriculum at Berkeley does not use a textbook package, in cases where a core textbook is used, it is possible to implement a focus section, albeit on a more modest scale, that articulates with both the intermediate textbook and the advanced-level curriculum. Thus, once created, the focus section can be implemented if the subject matter and reading list of the subsequent course change, if student interest shifts, or if a particular instructor is interested in teaching the subject. At Berkeley graduate student instructors will, in fact, ask to teach a particular focus section in order to enhance their teaching experience and to reflect their interests in a particular field, be it feminist issues, Francophone studies, theater, or Paris. Enhancement of graduate students' professional experience is thus an additional benefit of the focus section concept. Finally, the focus section fosters the design of a well-articulated language program by offering a constantly creative partial solution that can always remain in process to meet the evolving needs of language students, departments, and instructors. *Plus ça change … plus ça change …*

Notes

1. Throughout this article I use the terms **introductory level**, **intermediate level**, and **advanced level** to designate first-, second-, and third-year courses. The designations are practical organizational labels and do not reflect language proficiency. I use the term "advanced level" to designate the post-intermediate FL reading and composition course that often serves as the required gateway course to the language department's upper division literature or advanced culture track. Based on this terminology, at some universities, students would be completing their introductory courses in their third semester (or second year).
2. To give just one example of how pedagogical trends can negatively affect articulation efforts, with the advent of the proficiency movement, composition skills and the use of literary texts were downplayed, thus rendering the passage from intermediate- to advanced-level courses highly problematic. Now, much research is devoted to the teaching of writing and literature in the language classroom, as the existence of publications such as *SLA and the Literature Classroom: Fostering Dialogues* (2001) and the *Journal of Foreign Language Writing* can attest.

3. I would like to thank Kate Bonin for her work in the design of the women writers focus section and Sarah Roberts for her work in the design of the Francophone focus section.

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Appendix

Discussion: Colette, "La Couseuse"

(The following is an example of the small group discussion exercises used in the focus sections. The example is for Colette's "La Couseuse" and is translated from the original French version distributed to students.)

Group I (paragraphs 1-8)

1. Why do the mother's friends think that Bel-Gazou should learn to sew?
2. Why does the first friend mentioned (paragraph 1) say that it would be better to sew than to read a romantic novel? Is the remark important for what is going to happen in the text?

3. What detail does the mother add to persuade her daughter to learn to sew? Why does she say that "this is in contempt of the truth"?
4. Describe Bel-Gazou when she sews. What are the mother's ideas when she sees her daughter sewing? Why does she say that Bel-Gazou "screams in spite of good sense"?
5. What do the friends say when they see Bel-Gazou sewing? Does the daughter seem to like to sew?

Group II (paragraphs 9-11)

1. Is the mother happy when Bel-Gazou sews?
2. What does the mother say about reading?
3. In what way is reading like a poison?
4. Why does the mother say that reading is tried and true poison?
5. Why are reading, drawing, and singing reassuring activities?
6. Why does the mother find Bel-Gazou's silence troubling?
7. What danger is there in thinking?
8. Compare Bel-Gazou to girls who used to do embroidery. Why is sewing a less dangerous activity?

Group III (paragraphs 12-end)

1. What does Bel-Gazou think about?
2. What kind of questions does she ask her mother?
3. How does the mother answer?
4. What is going on between Mrs. X and Mr. F?
5. In how many ways can the word "to depend" be translated?
6. When the mother answers: "It depends," what does she mean? How does Bel-Gazou understand these words?
7. What is the essential part of the question that Bel-Gazou asks her mother? Why does the mother find the question troubling? Why doesn't she know how to answer?
8. How do you interpret the last sentence?

Subjects for discussion/composition: Sarraute, Yourcenar, Colette

(The following composition topics for the essay in French on the Sarraute, Yourcenar, and Colette texts are translated from the original French version distributed to students.)

1. Choose two texts and compare the concepts of maternity presented in each. What would be the ideal mother, according to each author?
2. Compare the ideas of Colette and Yourcenar regarding the relationships between men and women. What are the similarities and differences? Is there one general idea about sexual relations that links these two authors?
3. In "The Milk of Death" Philip says: "My mother is very beautiful, thin, made-up, hard as the pane of a store window." In light of this quotation, analyze the mother in the excerpt from *Enfance*. In what way is the mother an example of this quotation?