AAUSC 2016 Volume—Issues in Language Program Direction

The Interconnected Language Curriculum: Critical Transitions and Interfaces in Articulated K-16 Contexts

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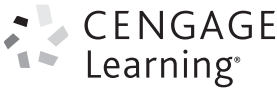

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Library of Congress Control Number: 2016953602

ISBN: 978-1-337-27645-0

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Printed in the United States of America
Print Number: 01 Print Year: 2016

Chapter 6

A Proficiency-Based Articulation Project Between Postsecondary Institutions

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Introduction

Articulation agreements among community colleges and universities are common practice. The aim of such agreements is to simplify student transfer among institutions by making it clear which courses are considered to be equivalent. Institutions within the same state system often agree on course numberings, and sometimes course titles, in an effort to make the transfer process easier. In the case of language instruction, articulation agreements produce standard course numbers for lower-level language courses (e.g., Arabic 101 and Russian 102) and the assurance for students that, for example, having successfully completed 101 at one institution, they may move to 102 at another. However, articulation and transfer decisions in language programs that are based on assumptions about course equivalencies ignore the critical role that the achievement of specific learning outcomes (and, in the case of language courses, language proficiency) will play in determining the success of a student's transfer. The difficulty of determining cross-institutional course equivalencies, particularly in an area in which there is little consensus regarding acceptable measures of learning, explains why transfer and articulation between language programs at different institutions has been a recurring challenge for our profession.

In this chapter, we examine language program articulation between a major state university and the community college from which it receives the highest number of transfer students through the lens of second-semester courses in Chinese, Portuguese, and Russian. We use syllabi, course materials, and data on students' language background and language proficiency to assess the effectiveness of current placement and transfer policies at the two institutions and outline plans to implement proficiency targets, provide curricular and pedagogical infrastructure to support these targets, and develop procedures to institutionalize proficiency testing.

The project described in this chapter will be of great interest to language program directors (LPDs) for a number of reasons. Typically, LPDs are responsible for setting goals and making curricular decisions for beginning- and intermediate-level courses—normally, a sequence of courses taken over two years. This is also the focus of our articulation project. Often, LPDs struggle with placement challenges, due in part to a lack of adequate placement instruments but also because of inefficient policies at the institutional level. Additionally, although articulation within the home program has always been a main focus of LPDs, articulation with other institutions to facilitate student transfer is not often within their purview and therefore often neglected. This chapter describes a project that highlights many of these issues and proposes possible ways to address them.

Background

A key characteristic of the American university system—perhaps the one that distinguishes it the most from other national models—is its flexibility. Rather than being forced into lockstep programs of study with few opportunities to adapt those programs to their personal needs or interests, students are given considerable latitude when it comes to their curriculum: specifically, what courses to take and when to take them. Students can, and often do, earn college-level credit while still in high school and can even receive credit for practical nonacademic experiences. Additionally, the American educational system is characterized by a lack of centralized, uniform academic curricula, which means that the same academic degree at two institutions may be the result of significantly different courses of study. One consequence of this curricular flexibility and institutional autonomy is the significant challenge posed by evaluating transfer credits.

Transfer between institutions is a growing phenomenon among undergraduates enrolled in American colleges and universities, with many public institutions reporting more than a third of their enrolled students to be transfer students from another institution. A recent project by the National Center for Education Statistics gathered data from a cohort of 17,000 students enrolled as freshman in postsecondary institutions during the academic year 2003–2004 and followed their registration patterns for six years. The results of the study, reported in Simone (2014), indicate that more than one-third of these students transferred or co-enrolled at least once during the duration of the study. A second study (Shapiro, Dundar, Wakhungu, Yuan, & Harrell, 2015) confirmed these results and found that, of the 3.6 million students that registered at American institutions for the first time in 2008, more than 37% transferred to another institution within six years. Furthermore, the study corroborated the crucial role that community colleges play in student mobility: about a quarter of the students who start at

a two-year college transfer to a four-year institution within six years. More surprising, perhaps, is the role that community colleges play not only as a *source* of transfer students but also as the *destination* of "reverse transfer" students. More than half of the students who transfer from four-year public institutions go to two-year institutions. As a result of this new reality, most colleges and universities have set transfer and articulation policies that spell out procedures to regulate the transfer of academic credit from other regionally accredited institutions.

Language Program Articulation

The issue of transfer and its associated challenges is particularly problematic for language learners. Language acquisition occurs following predictable developmental sequences that are, at least theoretically, reflected in course sequences. Ideally, transfer policies and practices are informed by the need for both horizontal articulation (similarity across courses at the same level) and vertical articulation (instruction that builds on previous levels). However, given that articulation itself has been a perennial challenge, it is perhaps not surprising that transfer policies and practices remain so as well.

According to the most recent MLA data on foreign language enrollments in the United States (Furman, Goldberg, & Lusin, 2010), about one quarter of all undergraduate enrollments in foreign languages are at two-year institutions. Language enrollment in community colleges was found to have nearly doubled over the two decades prior to the release of the report, while the concomitant increase in enrollment at four-year institutions was less than 25%. Despite these numbers, lack of attention to what happens at the community-college level is evident, and the effects of this neglect on articulation and transfer policies between two- and four-year institutions are particularly negative. Fechter (2010) criticizes two recent reports[1] on the state of our field for failing to acknowledge the role that community colleges play as an essential link in the teaching of world languages in the K-20 educational system. She stresses that the strength of the language major "must be built on a foundation that rests on the first two years of undergraduate education" (p. 76) and that two-year institutions play a crucial part in that process.

Lack of articulation in general has been a recurrent theme in the literature on language curricula (Barrette & Paesani, 2004; Lafayette, 1980; Lange, 1982, 1988, 1997; Phillips, 1995). As Phillips (1995) notes, "[h]istorically, articulation has tended to be defined more by its absence than by its presence" (p. 37), and the emphasis in the field has been on describing the problem, or specific approaches

[1] The reports are The Modern Language Association's (MLA's) "Foreign Languages and Higher Education: New Structures for a Changed World," published in 2007 and the "Report to the Teagle Foundation on the Undergraduate Major in Language and Literature," published in 2009.

to solving it, rather than on identifying the cause. Lange (1982) provided the first systematic analysis of the problem by proposing three levels of articulation that need to be considered: horizontal, vertical, and interdisciplinary. *Horizontal articulation* takes place when different instances of the same course try to accomplish the same objectives. *Vertical articulation* requires logical sequencing between different levels of the same program. Finally, *interdisciplinary articulation* refers to the ability of a language program to connect with other disciplines taught on campus. In a later essay on the topic, Lange (1988) suggests that the problem of articulation has been approached by trying to achieve uniformity of (a) methods, (b) texts, or (c) testing (p. 3), all of which Lange considers to be ineffective in solving the articulation problem.

Barrette and Paesani (2004) review the literature on articulation over the previous two decades and enumerate a list of 11 factors that affect language program articulation. Factors identified include communication among stakeholders, the development of proficiency skills versus content knowledge, and the role played by LPDs. They propose a systematic and generalizable model for language program articulation that addresses the three levels of articulation identified by Lange. In this model, each of the 11 factors interacts along three axes of articulation: curriculum, instruction, and learner. The authors predict that "specific interactions among factors and axes will create pathways or barriers to successful articulation in a particular programmatic context" (p. 5). To test their hypothesis, Barrette and Paesani distributed a questionnaire to postsecondary language faculty that sought to understand the relative contribution of each of the 11 factors to effective program articulation. An interesting implication of their findings is that certain factors interact most directly with certain others, so that a change in one factor is very likely to have an effect on those other factors that are considered most proximate. As a consequence, their model "moves from a more descriptive approach to articulation toward a theoretical model that is able to predict the effect of changes implemented to increase articulation" (p. 16). According to their findings, development of language proficiency is closely related to most of the factors that they identify as crucial in facilitating program articulation.

Barrette and Paesani's research corroborates the centrality of the notion of proficiency in facilitating articulation. It is no surprise, then, that a systematic approach to assessment has frequently been seen as a possible solution to the language program articulation problem. Almost three decades ago, Byrnes (1998) concerned about the "lack of foreign language abilities in American society" (p. 35), identified *lack of articulation* as one of the likely factors preventing language programs from achieving their intended outcomes, and pointed to proficiency assessment as one way to move in the right direction. Byrnes claimed that, as a consequence of the growth that the proficiency movement was experiencing at that time—and with adequate assessment of student proficiency—"it seems appropriate to own up to what foreign language programs can achieve and not to

blissfully promise the unattainable and subsequently feel guilty when the impossible goals have not been reached" (pp. 35–36).

In 1995, the challenge of lack of articulation in language programs (and the perceived disinterest in this problem on the part of higher education institutions) was considered relevant enough to merit a special issue of the ADFL Bulletin. The contributors to this issue warned the profession about the potential consequences of inaction, noting that, at a time when the increasing control of governing bodies over the academic mission of public (and even private) institutions of higher education was seen as a threat, a lack of clear articulation policies and assessment practices seemed an invitation to increased external oversight. While the contrasting views of several of the contributors to the issue illustrate the difficulty in finding common ground, Phillips (1995) suggests that programmatic coherence and transparency of proficiency goals may be the keys to facilitating students' progress through a curriculum:

> The curricular sequence should obviously present the learner with a logical series of experiences that build linguistic competence while providing important knowledge through that new language. Assessments should be transparent to the learner; he or she should be able to see clearly the abilities and capacities acquired to be able to make continuous progress toward individual goals. (p. 40)

More recently, Bernhardt, Rivera, and Kamil (2004) describe the multiple practical and curricular benefits that systematic, web-based proficiency assessment offers to large postsecondary language programs in terms of facilitating program articulation. The authors describe a pretest-posttest study designed to analyze the reliability and validity—including predictive validity—of Stanford's web-based placement test, which freshmen students take the summer before they enroll in a language course for the first time. Pretest scores for the study were gleaned from these initial summertime placement tests, while posttest scores were collected by administering the same placement test to students completing their third quarter of language study at Stanford. In addition to confirming the validity and reliability of the placement test, the study concludes that one of the consequences of appropriate placement based on proficiency testing is that students are assigned to courses that provided the optimal challenge (neither too easy, nor too difficult)—a policy that results in larger proficiency gains than those achieved by students who did not take a placement test.

Sung-Ock and Sang-Keun (2007) illustrate the added challenge of appropriate placement in the case of heritage learners. In their study of university-level Korean learners, the authors report that writing proficiency and cognitive academic language ability are the most accurate predictors of appropriate placement for heritage learners. Conversely, oral interviews with students (a system that is commonly used for placement in less commonly taught languages) result in

placement at levels too advanced for the students' literacy skills. As we will discuss later, adequate placement of students with already high levels of proficiency—acquired either through heritage exposure or extended stays abroad—has also proven to be a challenge in our own articulation project.

As the previous discussion indicates, proficiency assessment plays a crucial role in the internal articulation of many four-year language programs. The same centrality of proficiency assessment is evident at the community-college level. Fechter (2010) suggests that community colleges are already ahead of the curve when it comes to the institutionalization of proficiency outcomes and adds that "[t]he call for steady progress toward advanced proficiency in the language is a goal that should be embraced by both two- and four-year college faculty members, and the measurement of that progress should be standardized" (p. 77).

In practice, over the past 30 years, several institutional and statewide initiatives have called for the use of assessment and proficiency outcomes to inform language program articulation. A number of states have embarked on articulation efforts with a strong emphasis on proficiency indicators, although these state-level efforts are typically designed to address the transition from secondary to postsecondary education. Some examples included in Lally (2001) are the South Carolina project for Improved Articulation (Dernoshek, 2001), which started in 1985; the Ohio Collaborative Articulation and Assessment Project (Robinson, 2001), which started in 1992; several initiatives carried out in the state of New York in the '80s and '90s (Vogely, 2001); and the Minnesota Articulation Project (Tedick & Alcaya, 2001). Another successful example is the Southern Oregon Foreign Language Association's articulation project; this project, supported by a number of federal grants, allows students enrolled in advanced high school language courses to receive up to 20 college credits, depending on the level of proficiency that they demonstrate on an American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) Oral Proficiency Interview and a writing test.

As the previous examples indicate, most of the work done on language program articulation has focused on the transition between high school and postsecondary education, while very little attention has been paid to transfer *among* institutions of higher education. Perhaps the best exception to this general emphasis may be Ohio's Articulation and Transfer Network, which is currently engaged in a large project to develop articulation and transfer policies for language courses within the state (Ohio Department of Higher Education, n.d.). In this case, the basis for determining course alignment, and therefore transfer and articulation, is the assessment of a set of very detailed and well-designed learning outcomes (including proficiency targets) that must be met for a course to gain equivalency through a statewide process.

In this chapter, we contribute to the literature on postsecondary language program articulation by describing an effort to open a conversation about interinstitutional articulation, placement, and transfer practices between a large research

university and the community college from which most of its transfer students originate. We examine existing policies, curricula, and, in particular, the results of proficiency assessments of speaking, reading, and listening of university and community college students at the end of first-year courses in three languages, and discuss the implications that those results may have for transfer.

Articulation Case Study

Institutional Context

The University of Utah (U of U) is the lead research university in the state of Utah with approximately 24,000 undergraduate and 7,500 graduate students. Salt Lake Community College (SLCC) is the state's largest community college, currently serving over 60,000 students on 10 campuses and through online offerings. SLCC is the U of U's main source of transfer students. For example, of the close to 10,000 students who transferred to the U of U between 2010 and 2014, almost 50% transferred from SLCC. In Fall 2014 alone, 741 (56%) of the U of U's 1,316 newly admitted transfer students came from SLCC. The main SLCC campus, which houses the Department of Language and Culture, is 12 miles from the U of U campus.

The Utah State Transfer Articulation Committee works with the Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education and the state's institutions of higher education to develop transfer policies. Although these policies state that academic departments at institutions of higher education are responsible for determining which courses taken at another school are comparable or equivalent to their own courses, the reality is that, at least in the case of language courses, equivalency is simply based on similar course numbers and titles. Per state articulation agreements, first-year language courses all carry the same course numbers, 1010 (first semester) and 1020 (second semester), and titles, for example, *Beginning Russian I*.

In academic year 2014–2015, the U of U implemented large-scale proficiency testing for students of Arabic, Chinese, Korean, Portuguese, and Russian under the auspices of a federally funded grant. The aim of the grant was to normalize and institutionalize sustainable proficiency assessment practices at the U of U and to use proficiency measures to improve articulation between the U of U and SLCC. During AY 2014–2015, both the U of U and SLCC offered complete first-year sequences in Chinese, Portuguese, and Russian. These courses are the focus of this case study. The study's immediate concern is cross-institutional articulation—that is, the extent to which courses at the two institutions provide equivalent learning experiences. Vertical articulation is naturally also implicated in this study, in the sense that existing transfer agreements stipulate that students who successfully complete a 1020 course at either institution can enroll in (and are adequately prepared for) the next level of course at any other state institution.

Curriculum and Pedagogy

Before presenting and discussing the results of proficiency testing, we compare structural and curricular aspects of the courses at the two institutions. The most evident difference between the two course designs is in credit hours per course. Despite the state articulation agreement, lower-level language courses carry different numbers of credits at the two institutions. At the U of U, all first- and second-year language courses are four credit hours, while at SLCC they are five credit hours. There are also differences in scheduling that probably reflect assumptions about the different student populations. In the Spring 2015 semester during which proficiency testing was conducted, all SLCC language classes were scheduled in longer, twice-weekly blocks in the late afternoon/evening. At the U of U, there was a mix of scheduling. Russian and two of the three sections of Chinese met for four 50-minute sessions per week in the morning, while Portuguese and the third section of Chinese were scheduled twice a week for two-hour blocks later in the day. Table 6.1 shows spring semester schedules and enrollments in 1020 courses at each institution.

Table 6.1. 1020 Schedules and Enrollments

	University of Utah	Salt Lake Community College
Chinese 1020		
M–Th 9:40–10:30	13	
M/W 4:35–6:35	9	
M–Th 10:45–11:35	15	
T/Th 5:30–7:50		15
Portuguese 1020		
M/W 6:00–8:00	4	
M/W 5:30–7:50		9
Russian 1020		
M–Th 9:40–10:30	14	
M/W 7:00–8:50		6

In addition to structural similarities and naming and numbering conventions, curricular alignment (through the use of the same materials) is another common vehicle for promoting articulation, as Lange (1988) suggested almost three decades ago. While there are no cross-institutional agreements between the U of U and SLCC about materials, there is overlap. Chinese and Portuguese courses at the two institutions used the same textbooks in Spring 2015 (*Chinese Link P2*, Pearson, and *Ponto de Encontro: Portuguese as a World Language*, Prentice Hall), while the Russian courses did not. The U of U course used *Golosa* Book 1 (and associated workbook, audio materials, and videos on the companion site), whereas SLCC used *Nachalo* Book 2 (and associated workbook and

audio materials). The Chinese and Portuguese classes at both institutions also used MyChineseLab and MyPortugueseLab. SLCC recommended two additional reference works for the Chinese course: *Character Text for Beginning Chinese* and *Chinese Today*, Book 1. At the U of U, the Portuguese course suggested two additional dictionaries.

Chinese and Portuguese courses at both institutions covered the same material. Students in Chinese 1020 completed all lessons in the assigned textbook and Portuguese 1020 students completed lessons 1 through 7 in their textbook. The Russian courses, in contrast, did not cover similar amounts of material from *Nachalo* and *Golosa*. Both books are commonly used texts for introductory college Russian classes, and both comprise two volumes designed for a first-year program that delivers a comprehensive introduction to the language. However, this pace is realistic only at institutions with five-credit language classes and, possibly, one to two additional hours a week of lab. At the U of U, *Golosa Book One* is covered in first year and *Golosa Book Two* in second year. At SLCC, on the other hand, students completed 12 of the 14 chapters in the *Nachalo* program in first-year Russian. This discrepancy yields a significant difference in the content covered at the end of 1020 between the two programs.

Lange (1988) originally identified—but also criticized—uniformity of teaching and testing methods as possible ways to achieve articulation. In the absence of extensive classroom observations, which we did not conduct, we can only make observations about pedagogical approaches based on departmental mission statements and syllabi for the courses. Both institutions address language learning on their websites, but neither institution specifies explicit proficiency targets for language courses. SLCC's departmental mission statement references proficiency: ". . . students develop functional ability, acquire proficiency in the target language in social and survival situations, and learn strategies that will enable them to continue the process of language learning." At the U of U, the departmental welcome statement asserts that the department aims to "help students develop an analytic understanding of the structure of language and communicative competence in a wide range of languages."

Placement practices also differ between the two institutions. The reality is that neither institution has a well-developed system for placing incoming students. SLCC does not use standardized placement tests. Instead, if students have previous language-learning experience, they are encouraged by the department to have an interview with a faculty member who will determine their proper placement. The department also offers various options, for example, taking a language proficiency test, for students to obtain credit for experiential learning outside the classroom and for previous academic experiences. However, more advanced students looking for an easy A can technically enroll in a first-semester class despite their qualifications, if they choose not to follow any of the recommendations. The U of U has a placement test available in Chinese only but, even in this case, taking

the placement test is not required before registering for a class. The other language divisions at the U of U encourage students to consult with a faculty member to determine placement prior to enrolling in a class, but in practice, students are free to enroll as they see fit. Instructors then troubleshoot placement issues during the first days of class.

Course syllabi vary in how they frame language-learning objectives; some articulate a global aim followed by a series of more explicit objectives, while others proceed directly to a list of specific objectives. Overall, there are no substantive differences between the objectives identified by the two institutions, but there are differences in terms of how course goals are framed for students. For example, at SLCC, the Russian syllabus reproduces the departmental mission statement, and the Chinese syllabus states that the course goal is "to develop functional language ability in survival and social situations. Emphasis is on proficiency." At the U of U, the Portuguese syllabus states that, upon completion of the course, students will be able to "interact in real life situations." With the exception of the U of U Portuguese syllabus, all syllabi provide lists of specific things students will be able to do, for example, "Describe and compare objects, people, and actions" (SLCC Portuguese syllabus) or "Order and specify your food preferences in a Chinese restaurant" (U of U Chinese syllabus). The way these objectives are articulated varies with some syllabi reflecting an approach more grounded in proficiency-based instruction (e.g., "Can participate in short conversations, ask and answer questions using simple declarative sentences, and handle simple survival situations"; SLCC Chinese syllabus) and others presenting a more traditional grammatical competency-based breakdown ("Use regular and irregular verbs in the present, past perfect and imperfect, and preterit tenses"; U of U Portuguese syllabus). Generally speaking, however, the pedagogical approaches adopted in these courses as stated in their syllabi do not differ significantly between the two institutions.

Obviously, this comparison of the structural and pedagogical characteristics of the three courses at the two institutions does not indicate the proficiency levels achieved by students at the end of their first year of language study. Prior to implementing the grant-funded testing described in this chapter, the Department of Languages and Literature at the U of U did not define proficiency outcomes or test levels of proficiency upon completion of a course sequence. During the 2010–2011 academic year, SLCC conducted a large-scale project to test students' oral proficiency at the end of each course. However, the results of that assessment initiative yielded only general awareness of the degree of proficiency that can be expected at each level of instruction. In practice, neither institution has articulated explicit proficiency outcomes or a system to check achievement and to revise curricular practices should those outcomes not be met.

Therefore, our goal with this study was to gather the necessary evidence to determine the actual levels of proficiency in Chinese, Portuguese, and Russian

achieved by students at each institution at the end of their first year of study. Ultimately, the results of this study will be used to frame and facilitate conversations with the goal of improving inter- and intra-institutional articulation and transfer policies.

Before discussing the outcomes of this proficiency assessment project, let us put them into perspective by reviewing what previous research tells us about reasonable expectations. In a study of 501 graduating majors in Chinese, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Russian, and Spanish reported in Swender (2003), students were given oral proficiency interviews (OPIs), which were double-rated and certified by the ACTFL testing office. The results indicated that a little more than half of the students, 55.8%, graduated with a proficiency level of Intermediate High/Advanced Low in speaking. Even more relevant for our project, Rifkin (2003) reviews a number of studies that report levels of oral proficiency of students after one or two years of instruction. In general, languages that are typologically closer to English (French and German) report average proficiency levels of Intermediate Low after one year of instruction and Intermediate Mid after two years. Slightly lower levels are reported in the case of Russian.

The U.S. Department of State Foreign Service Institute (FSI) classifies languages into four categories according to their presumed level of difficulty for English-speaking learners. Category 1 languages are those that require the least amount of time to learn, while Category 4 are the hardest to learn. Our expectation upon commencing this study was that the results of the oral proficiency tests we conducted in Portuguese (a Category 1 language) would be similar to those reported in previous studies for languages in the same category, such as French. The rest of our languages are Category 3 (Russian) and Category 4 (Arabic and Chinese), which we predicted to result in lower levels of speaking proficiency than Portuguese. We are not aware of any published research documenting the expected levels of reading and listening proficiency for language graduates, but based on Tschirner and Swender (2016), it is reasonable to assume that reading proficiency levels will be similar to speaking proficiency levels, while listening proficiency levels will be slightly lower.

Student Background Data and Proficiency Testing

A background questionnaire, completed by all students prior to testing, probed a range of topics, including students' prior language-learning experiences, motivation for language study, contact with native speakers, and so forth. Since we were interested in placement issues in particular, information about prior language experience was especially relevant, as will be seen next.

To prepare for the proficiency assessments, instructors at both institutions were invited to participate in informational sessions about the testing initiative, beginning in the fall semester. The first of these sessions was a general meeting

for all the U of U and SLCC instructors teaching Arabic, Chinese, Portuguese, and Russian language courses, which introduced the grant-funded assessment project, explained what testing the grant would fund, described the testing instruments and the schedule for testing, and addressed faculty questions and concerns. After the initial meeting, an ACTFL trainer conducted a half-day Proficiency Familiarization Workshop at the U of U. The workshop offered a basic orientation to the ACTFL proficiency guidelines and an introduction to methods for teaching to proficiency. The majority, though not all, of the targeted instructors participated in these events.

We also developed informational flyers that instructors could share on their course websites and with students directly. Beginning in January 2015, we communicated regularly with all instructors teaching classes targeted for testing, encouraging them to explain the testing initiative to students and to schedule testing during class time where possible. We also asked instructors to consider offering incentives to students for completing the assessments (e.g., extra credit). In order to familiarize instructors with the tests, we arranged for all instructors to take an Oral Proficiency Interview by Computer (OPIc) if they wished and made sample reading and listening test items available to them.

Speaking, reading, and listening proficiency tests were scheduled for all students enrolled in the 1020 courses. To assess speaking proficiency, we used the ACTFL OPIc. This test is delivered via the Internet and follows the structure of a live OPI, but with questions delivered through a virtual avatar. The OPIc is available in five different forms, each targeting a different range of proficiency levels. For the purposes of the present study, we selected form 2, which targets proficiency levels Novice High through Intermediate Mid, although it can assign ratings from Novice Low through Advanced. On average, students took under 30 minutes to complete the OPIc. Reading and listening proficiency were assessed using tests created for the Language Flagship by American Councils. These tests measure proficiency on the Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) scale and are available in two forms: a *Low* form, which tests levels ranging from 0+ (Novice High in the ACTFL scale) to 2+ (Advanced High), and a *High* form, which covers levels 1+ (Intermediate High) to 3+ (Superior). The Language Flagship tests typically contain 55 items per skill; the tests are timed with a maximum allotted time of 110 minutes per skill. The registration procedure for OPIc tests generates a login and password for each student that can be used at any time over a period of several weeks. The Flagship tests are delivered on specific testing days rather than by individual registration.

Table 6.2 details the number of students that completed tests in each language at each institution. Total course enrollment numbers are given in parentheses.

Table 6.2. Tests Completed at Each Institution

	Speaking	Reading	Listening
Chinese			
University of Utah (37)	34	28	15
Salt Lake Community College (15)	10	7	6
Portuguese			
University of Utah (4)	1	0	0
Salt Lake Community College (9)	6	7	6
Russian			
University of Utah (14)	11	7	8
Salt Lake Community College (6)	3	1	2

As is evident from Table 6.2, the overall sample size was not large and participation varied for the different tests (and overall at the two institutions). Indeed, scheduling tests proved challenging, and this affected participation rates. The length of time required for each of the reading and listening tests made it impossible for them to be scheduled during class times shorter than two hours. SLCC, with its lengthier time blocks, was able to schedule testing during regular class meeting times and was thus more successful at getting students to complete all three assessments. At the U of U, instructors mainly opted to schedule the speaking assessment during class time and then encouraged students to go on their own to the lab on the designated testing days and take the reading and listening tests. The higher participation rates seen for the speaking test are thus attributable to its relatively short duration and the fact that it was frequently scheduled during class time. It is also possible that students were most interested in an assessment of speaking proficiency, which they may have seen as most useful. Instructors themselves varied in their engagement with the testing regimen, as evidenced by whether or not they participated in the information meeting and workshop and how aggressively they promoted testing among their students. Posttesting debriefing with instructors showed that some offered their students extra credit for participating in assessment, while others simply announced the availability of the tests.

Results of each test by institution are presented next. While the numbers are not sufficient to conduct an interinstitutional comparison, we think it is helpful for readers to have access to differentiated data, especially in light of the placement issues suggested by the results. Student results are reported on the ILR scale; in each figure, the number of students scoring at a particular level is indicated within (or just adjacent to) the relevant bar. Figures 1 through 6 show speaking, reading, and listening scores for the U of U and for SLCC. Figures 7 through 9 report median scores by test, language, and institution. Chinese speaking scores ranged from 0+ to 2+ (M = 0+) at the U of U and 0+ to 2 (M = 0+) at SLCC. Portuguese speaking scores at SLCC ranged from 0+ to 2+ (M = 1/1+); at the U of U, the single student tested scored a 1. In Russian,

speaking scores at the U of U ranged from 0+ to 1+ (*M* = 0+), while at SLCC the range was 0+ to 2 (*M* = 1+).

Reading score distributions by language were as follows. At the U of U, Chinese scores ranged from 0+ to 2 (*M* = 0+/1) and in Russian from 0+ to 1+ (*M* = 0+). At SLCC, Chinese reading scores ranged from 0+ to 1 (*M* = 0+) and in Portuguese from 0+ to 2+ (*M* = 1+). The single student tested at SLCC in Russian scored 0+.

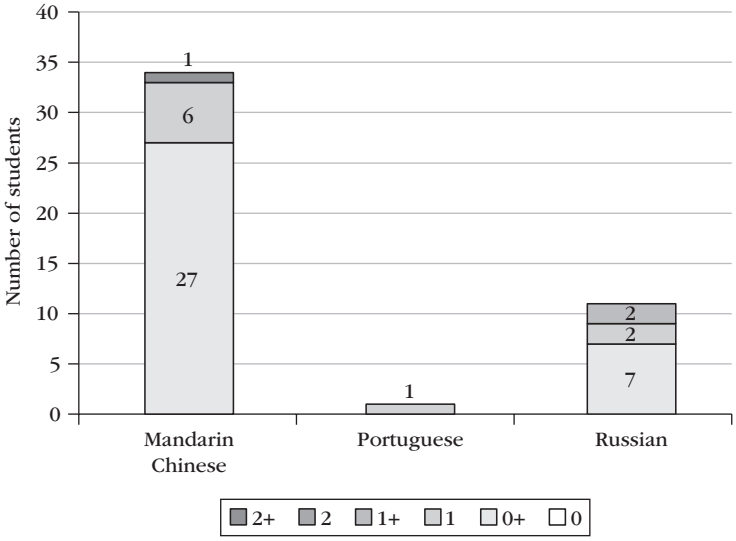

Figure 6.1. Speaking scores by language for University of Utah

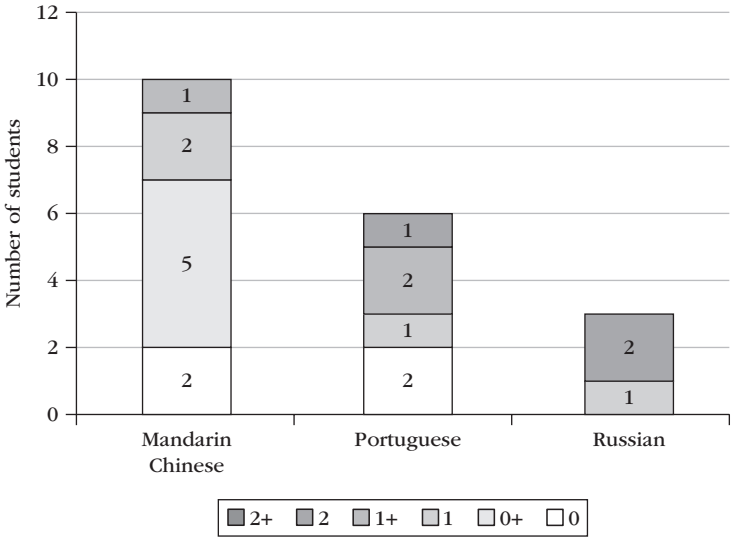

Figure 6.2. Speaking scores by language for Salt Lake Community College

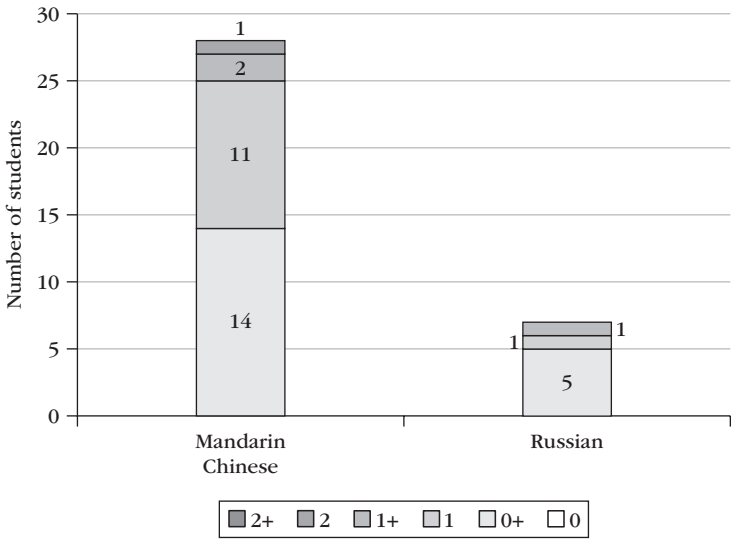

Figure 6.3. Reading scores by language for University of Utah

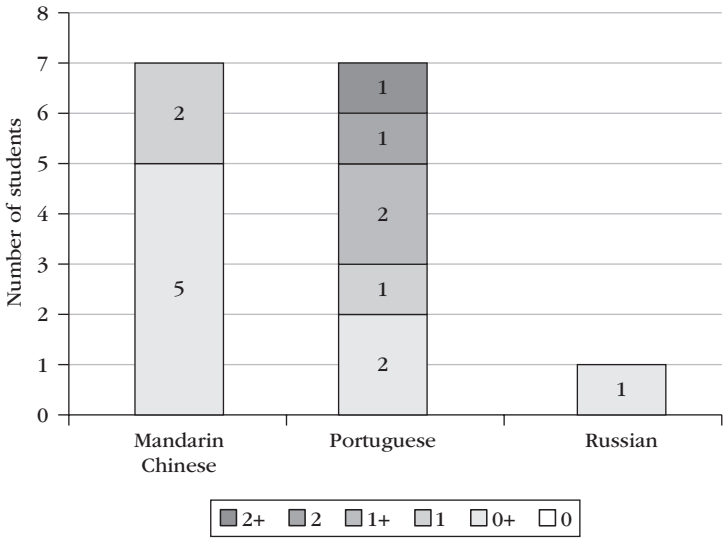

Figure 6.4. Reading scores by language at Salt Lake Community College

Listening scores at the U of U in Chinese ranged from 0+ to 2 (M = 0+) and in Russian from 0+ to 1 (M = 0+). No students in Portuguese took the listening test. At SLCC, Chinese listening scores ranged from 0+ to 1+ (M = 0+) and in Portuguese from 0+ to 2+ (M = 1+/2). The two Russian test takers both scored 0+ in listening.

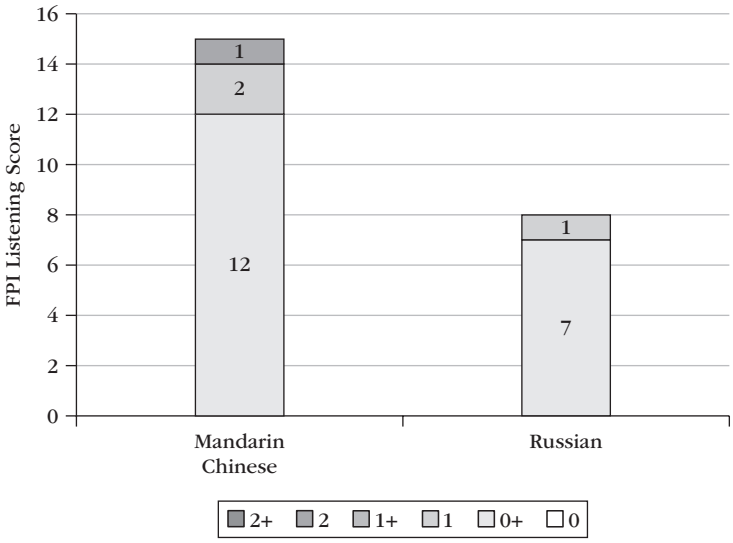

Figure 6.5. Listening scores by language at University of Utah

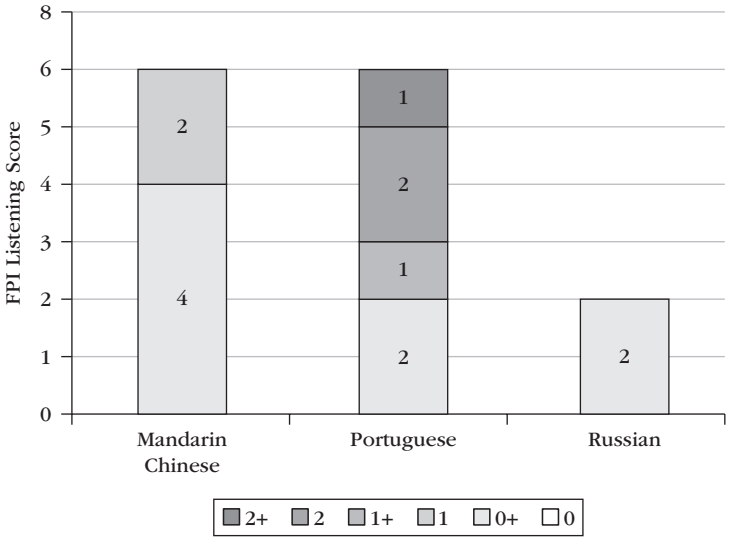

Figure 6.6. Listening scores by language at Salt Lake Community College

Median scores by language at each institution and for each of the tests are provided in Figures 6.7–6.9.

These data show a wide range of proficiency levels among students in each language in each of the three tested areas at the end of first year. In fact, in virtually all instances, the range of scores is improbable. For example, if we look at

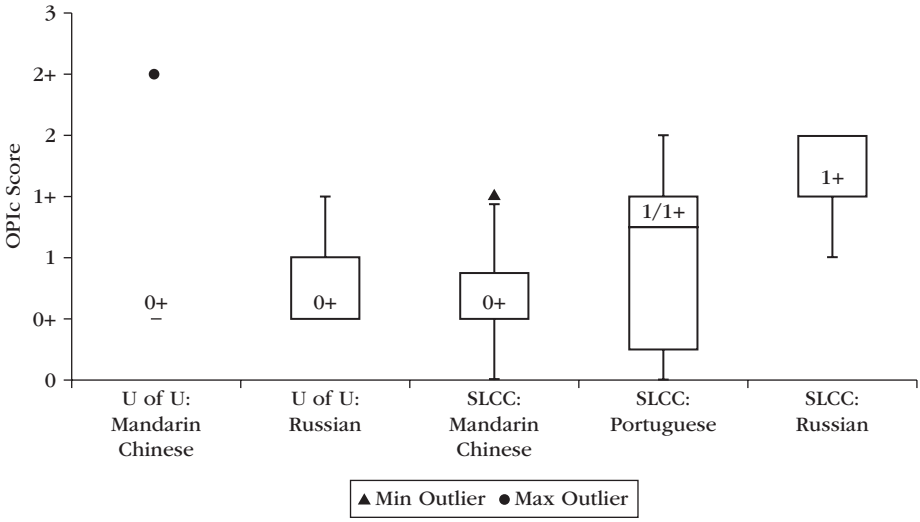

Figure 6.7. Median speaking scores at University of Utah and Salt Lake Community College

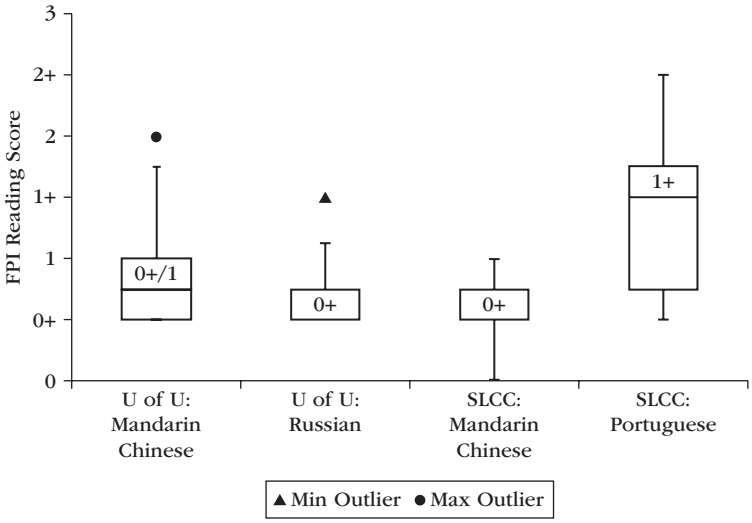

Figure 6.8. Median reading scores at University of Utah and Salt Lake Community College

the speaking scores, it seems highly unlikely that a beginning student completing a first-year Russian course should be able to score a 2 (Advanced Low/Mid) on the ACTFL scale, which two of the three SLCC students did. The 2+ (Advanced High) speaking score of one of the U of U Chinese students is similarly unlikely (see Rifkin, 2003 and, Swender, 2003 cited earlier). Reading and listening scores also

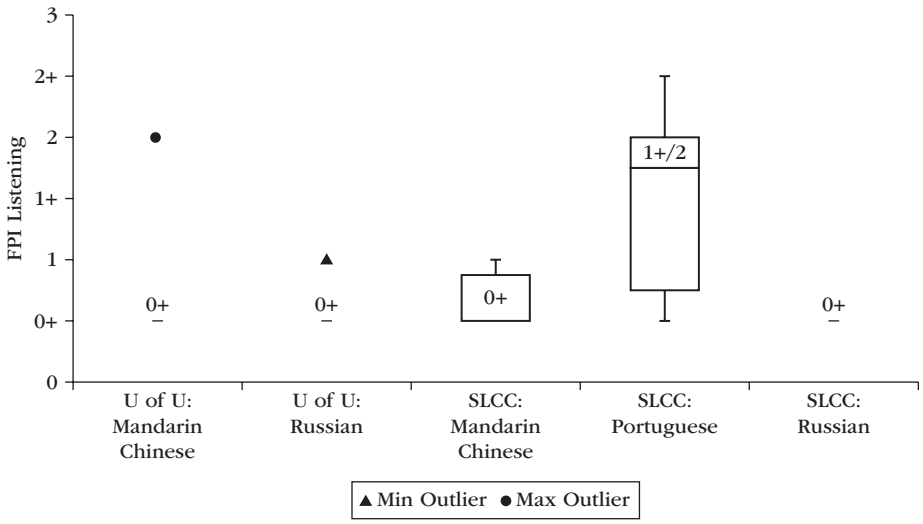

Figure 6.9. Median listening scores at University of Utah and Salt Lake Community College

evidence anomalies. At the U of U, we see one Chinese student scoring 2 in reading and listening; at SLCC, we see Portuguese students scoring in the 2 and 2+ range in reading and listening. These results suggest placement issues. Specifically, it is clear that at both institutions, there are students enrolling in first-year language courses whose scores suggest that they should be in higher-level classes. Students scoring well above the median for 1020 students in the aggregate probably did not enter these courses as true beginners. As discussed earlier, neither institution has a reliable way to place incoming students.

The background questionnaire that students completed prior to testing probed a range of issues (e.g., is there a correlation between reported motivation for studying the language and proficiency scores?). In the present context, the data were employed to investigate possible explanations for anomalies in the test results. Particularly relevant to the issue of incorrect placement were questions designed to identify heritage speakers (e.g., Question 21: Do you have family members who speak the language you are studying? and Question 23: Is the language you are studying commonly spoken in the community in which you grew up?) and students who, as a result of church missionary service (a significant local demographic), had spent extended time living in a country where the language of study was spoken.

With reference to the anomalous speaking scores mentioned above, we see that, of the two Russian 1020 students at SLCC who received scores of 2, one was a heritage speaker and the other had served a religious mission in Russia. These findings indicate that both institutions experience problems with placement. Indeed, placement of heritage speakers is not a challenge unique to these

institutions; in the absence of resources to build programmatic alternatives for heritage learners, non optimal situations will persist. The presence of large numbers of students with extended in-country experience prior to college also complicates placement. At both institutions, official policy forbids these students from enrolling in lower-level language courses, but our data point to clear instances of noncompliance. At both institutions, enforcement of policy is left to the course instructor, which results in uneven application. Finally, budget pressures complicate placement. When an instructor knows that a course will be cancelled if it drops below a certain enrollment, it is understandably tempting to keep students in a course even when that course is not appropriate for their level.

Given the small sample sizes, it would be premature to attempt a comparison of the two programs. With a second round of testing conducted in Spring 2016—and plans in place to improve test participation at both institutions—it should soon be possible to see whether there are indeed differences in outcomes at the two institutions. For the time being, we have used these results as a starting point for a discussion of placement policies; our findings have also informed curricular and pedagogical adjustments at both institutions, as outlined next.

Implications

This study reveals what is undoubtedly a fairly standard state of affairs in postsecondary language program articulation. The two institutions we investigated have a substantive relationship in the form of significant numbers of students transferring from one to the other. Articulation of language programs across the two institutions is minimally formalized by standard transfer-policy language, which specifies set course numbers and titles for lower-level language courses. However, despite the large numbers of students that transfer from SLCC to the U of U and the geographic proximity of the two institutions, there has historically been virtually no formal interaction between the two language programs. The informational event facilitated by the proficiency grant in Fall 2014 was the first time most instructors from the two institutions had met each other. The proficiency workshop sponsored by the grant, also in Fall 2014, was the first time instructors had the opportunity to participate together in a formal training event. A number of grant-sponsored workshops, lectures, and meetings during the 2015–2016 academic year have allowed both institutions to gain a deeper understanding of each other's idiosyncrasies. Curricular uniformity (i.e., use of the same materials) in Chinese and Portuguese courses at the two institutions was not by design, but rather the result of selecting materials widely used in beginning-level college Chinese and Portuguese. Our limited review of curricular and pedagogical approaches at each institution, and the results of the proficiency tests, reveal a lack of consistency within and across programs that clearly impedes the creation of what Byrnes (2001) defines as *articulated programs*: "educationally sound, efficient, and effective foreign language programs for the benefit of second language learners" (p. 161).

The assessment described in this chapter is the first step in a series of interventions designed to identify and address the issues that prevent effective inter- and intra institutional articulation and transfer. We do not claim that proficiency testing will, in and of itself, solve the challenges of articulation and transfer. As Bernhardt et al. (2004) suggest, "unless the test can correctly predict where a student should be placed in a sequence of courses (for optimal learning), the test is less than useful" (p. 358).

The role of the LPD, ideally with the support of other experts, is crucial in a large-scale process of placement and articulation based on proficiency data. Efficient use of data gathered through systematic assessment requires a degree of expertise that is beyond the reach of many language faculties. Our articulation project has side-stepped this problem by involving experts in second language acquisition, language pedagogy, and proficiency assessment. This expertise has allowed us to plan a series of interventions that will serve as the first steps toward agreement on common policies and practices between institutions and also between language programs within each institution. To complement the proficiency data that will be gathered at four points in the curriculum[2] over the course of six semesters, we are conducting extensive classroom observations and focus groups with students and instructors.

All the information generated by these interventions is being used in collaboration with chairs and small groups of language instructors to modify course curricula, assignments, tasks, and assessments to align more closely with a proficiency-oriented approach—and with each program's specific proficiency targets, which will be set based on the data gathered. Our first objective has been for all programs to agree on target proficiency goals for the end of the fourth semester of instruction, which constitutes the extent of instruction at SLCC and the end of the Bachelor of Arts language requirement at the U of U. We are currently working with language faculty at both institutions to agree on pedagogical approaches and formative assessments that will facilitate the achievement of these targets. Additionally, both the U of U and SLCC have agreed to integrate sustainable proficiency assessment practices into student placement policies and facilitate transfer of credits between institutions based on agreed-upon proficiency targets. To that effect, both institutions will develop and implement a local funding model that will allow them to sustain proficiency assessment practices in their respective language programs beyond the life of the grant. Our hope is that a long-term, institutionally funded, and well-coordinated plan will facilitate the ultimate goal of this project: to use proficiency assessments as the foundation for sound transfer policy and, most importantly, for curricular reform at both institutions.

[2] Students are tested at the end of their first- and second-year course sequences at both institutions and at the end of the third-year course sequences and in the semester before graduating as language majors at the U of U.

Acknowledgments

This research was partly sponsored by the Department of Defense and Institute of Higher Education. The publication does not necessary reflect positions or policies of the sponsoring organizations and does not constitute an official government endorsement.

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