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Why ESL Articulation Is a Burning Issue

With this special theme issue on articulation, *The CATESOL Journal* focuses on a topic which is rapidly becoming critical in the education of English language learners in California. Traditionally, *articulation* has referred to the formal intersegmental agreements developed between institutions at various levels in higher education (community colleges and 4-year colleges or universities) in which courses at the respective colleges or universities were judged to be equivalent or to meet certain standards of rigor or content. In most cases, it was the higher level institution which required the meeting of certain standards by the lower level institutions.

Although articulation in this formal, bureaucratic sense has long been a feature of movement across our educational segments, this volume brings into focus the essential role of grass roots practitioners in achieving its goals. Taken together, these articles suggest that the kind of intersegmental articulation which dictates solely in a top down fashion can no longer be viewed as adequate. As a result, the concept of articulation can be expanded considerably beyond the traditional definition to include a broader range of intersegmental agreements, negotiations of standards, and collaboration among ESL teaching professionals across the segments. But why focus on articulation now?

Recent Initiatives

The need for second language (L2) educators to communicate across segments and levels is evidenced in a number of developments which coincide with publication of this theme issue. The most closely related of these is the intersegmental document *California Pathways*, (ESL Intersegmental Project, 1996; see Browning, this issue) which has now been endorsed by

the academic senates of all three segments of higher education, the California Community Colleges (CCC), the California State University (CSU), and the University of California (UC). *California Pathways* consolidates a wide range of information about the immigrant and second language student population in California, the second language acquisition process, and policies and practices in the four segments (secondary, CCC, CSU, and UC) that affect second language students. The document also includes proficiency level descriptors for the four skill areas, providing California educators across the segments with a common language with which to talk about the skills of their students. As an intersegmental effort, *California Pathways* represents an important model of cooperation between institution and practitioner since it was commissioned by the Intersegmental Council of Academic Senates (ICAS),¹ but was written by 10 ESL practitioners from throughout the state.

During the last few years while *California Pathways* (ESL Intersegmental Project, 1996) was being developed, TESOL, as an international professional organization of ESL practitioners, was also bringing together professionals from across the elementary and secondary segments to undertake the development of ESL standards for Pre-K-12 ESL instruction. A version of these standards was released at the 1996 TESOL Conference in Chicago,² and efforts to revise and fine-tune them continue. In addition to these standards, TESOL is also preparing ESL assessment guidelines and curriculum development documents which are intended to provide a framework for infusing the standards into district- and state-level ESL curricula and assessment procedures, provide teachers with ideas for translating the standards into classroom practice, and aid in teacher training efforts.

In Canada, similar efforts over recent years have resulted in the development of the first phase of a document known as the "Canadian Language Benchmarks." The effort began in 1990 when the Canadian federal governments' Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) office undertook to develop a set of language benchmarks, "a description of a person's ability to use the English language to accomplish a set of tasks" (National Working Group on Language Benchmarks, 1996a, p. I) in order to help "the adult newcomer to Canada who needs language skills to achieve integration into Canadian society" (p. I). In addition to the basic Benchmarks documents, another related document is in the process of being developed—the Canadian Language Benchmarks Assessment.³

In California, an important development which heightened the urgency of intersegmental articulation and cooperation occurred in the Fall of 1995, when the CSU trustees proposed to end remediation in the CSU

system. In the initial proposal, many ESL courses were included within the general category of remediation (see Murray; and Ching, McKee & Ford, this volume). An outpouring of opposition to this proposal and a rather thorough airing of the issues involved in ESL instruction at the university level resulted in a final proposal that explicitly recognized ESL courses as developmental rather than remedial and that included ESL students among the categories of students to be exempted from a general cut-back in remediation. At the same time, the CSU trustees called for increased articulation among the segments, recognizing the need for each segment to better understand the needs and expectations of other segments. They affirmed the belief that such understanding would result in better preparation of students.

A new development in the standards arena is the release by the California Education Round Table (1997) of a document, *Standards in English and Mathematics for California High School Graduates*.⁴ Responding directly to the concerns of the CSU trustees, it is designed to "make clear what is expected of them [high school students] by the time they complete their high school careers" (California Round Table, p. iii). The standards it sets are laudable as goals; however, many L2 students entering the K-12 system at various points and with varying degrees of L1 literacy will be unable to demonstrate mastery of these standards by the time of graduation. For example, according to the *Standards*, "the student appropriately uses the conventions of standard English in oral presentations, including:

- 2.1 vocabulary for specific audiences and settings;
- 2.2 grammar of standard spoken English;
- 2.3 conventional sentence structure for spoken English;
- 2.4 intonation appropriate for questions and statements;
- 2.5 conventional word stress patterns for spoken English (p. 58).

In other words, L2 students should be proficient in standard spoken English by the time they graduate from high school. Similarly, they should write without an "accent" in a variety of genres as well as perform other complex, language-based tasks. Although recognizing that language learning is developmental, the document asserts, "the English content standards establish expectations for *all* students" (California Education Round Table, 1997, p. 46).

Commonly agreed upon standards (similar to those of this document) that reach across the segments can be of great benefit to L2 students as well as others. However, standards that are unrealistic and that fail to take into adequate account the nature of second language acquisition may have adverse and unforeseen effects.

Emerging Themes

Across the collection of articles in this volume, a number of the same themes recur. Among the most consistent to emerge is the recognition that the goals and assumptions of the California Master Plan for higher education (Commission for the Review of the Master Plan for Higher Education, 1987) are often unrealistic. The California Master Plan assumes that students at each level of postsecondary education in California will receive equivalent preparation and that the general education that students receive in each of the three postsecondary segments will equally and adequately prepare them for upper division university study in the disciplines. The Master Plan, however, provides no mechanism for how this will be achieved. Differences in class size, teacher training, and institutional support affect the ability of the different levels to accomplish the same task. Furthermore, second language students enter the system at different points yet are expected to achieve equal levels of proficiency by the time they exit, and as the articles included in the volume illustrate, policies and practices seldom take into account the time required to acquire academic proficiency in a second language. These realities have all contributed to the difficulties students encounter as they move across segments. In many instances they are viewed as underprepared by the receiving segment, and they are often reclassified as ESL in spite of having exited an ESL program at the previous level.

A related issue discussed by a number of the authors is the variation and inconsistency within each segment. Virtually every segment from K-12 to the University of California is characterized by wide variation in terms of L2 practices. For some segments, this situation exists because few if any systemwide guidelines concerning ESL students are in place. In others, the guidelines and policies are not sufficiently specific, resulting in a broad range of actual practices. The message of the volume thus becomes even more complex as we learn that articulation across segments must be accompanied by a move toward more consistency and communication within them as well.

On a more positive note, another recurring theme is that the most effective articulation comes from ESL practitioners working together. For example, in "Is Remediation an Articulation Issue?" Murray argues that "change only occurs when faculty from across segments collaborate as equal partners." It requires looking at the realities of student experiences and the forces motivating them or holding them back from moving from one level to the next (see, for example, Seymour, Scholnick, & Gibson; and Loken, this volume). Repeatedly, the authors document how a new kind of articulation emerges from the exchange of knowledge about each other, our stu-

dents, and our institutions, and from the sense of trust that develops over time as we work together. As Flachman and Pluta report, "Building Bridges" is an appropriate metaphor for articulation because through it we begin "to build bridges of communication, understanding, and respect."

Collaboration on the part of ESL professionals is essential for articulation to be successful, but it is only half the picture. Institutional and intersegmental support is necessary for articulation to become intrinsic to ESL education in California. Yet another recurrent theme of this volume is the massive amount of time and effort required for articulation projects to take place. More often than not in the past, these projects have been volunteer efforts, carried out by participants with limited resources. Flachmann and Pluta's project included funding to pay for assigned time for the directors as well as paying presenters and participants; however, Murray's grant only paid for supplies, data analysis by a statistician, payment of essay readers, and a graduate student from SJSU to coordinate the project. Not surprisingly, the project came to a halt when funding ran out. Ediger's group had funding to pay the participants removed from its grant because articulation was regarded as part of their jobs. Other efforts had no funding at all. Without adequate and ongoing funding, articulation efforts will either be restricted to the occasional conference where a "higher" segment tells a "lower" segment what it expects, or to localized, short-term, collaborative projects that can be carried out by a few committed individuals but which leave untouched the vast majority of ESL programs and teachers in the state.

Organizational Rationale

The articles in this volume have been organized to bring intersegmental concerns into focus. Following Browning's important overview, which highlights the important articulation issues addressed in *California Pathways* (ESL Intersegmental Project, 1996), the first major section addresses issues faced by students as they move from one segment or institution to another throughout California. Hence, each of the major transitions (e.g., elementary to secondary, secondary to community college, community college to CSU or UC) is discussed and dealt with in a separate article. The second section of the volume focuses on a range of issues closely linked to articulation. These include remediation, legal and policy regulations, and second language acquisition. Collectively, these articles point to some of the factors which must be taken into account if future articulation efforts are to be more successful. The third major section provides models of articulation initiated through the efforts of practitioners and colleagues across segments and institutional contexts. A number of these models have resulted in highly successful (and institutionalized) outcomes with long-

term consequences for student movement or transfer. Others have been less successful in terms of concrete results although the intangible benefits of gaining professional understanding of other levels have been highly valued by every author. The volume closes with a collection of student stories which depict the student perspective on moving through the segments of California's educational system. These pieces, collected and brought together by Margaret Loken, illustrate the student perspective on many of the points made elsewhere in the volume.

A Call for Action

This volume is a source of ideas and inspiration for articulation, but it is also a call for action. Those who determine educational policy for California must recognize that much is amiss with how our second language learners currently move through the educational system. They must make articulation a priority at all levels and in all locations and provide the support needed to make articulation meaningful. They must recognize that articulation, although it may ultimately result in formal agreements about courses and alignment of standards, begins with the collaborative efforts of individuals that result in increased knowledge and trust.

This volume is also a call for action on the part of ESL professionals. We must continue to work to develop models for articulation in our own communities, and at the same time continue to demand that articulation be expanded from the local to the regional and statewide levels. We must take this message to administrators and others who can put it into action. We must enlist the support of our professional organizations, especially CATESOL, which itself speaks for all segments of ESL education in California, to advocate for a recognition that articulation is central to our task and essential for our students.

We must not let this volume sit on our shelves. It is our responsibility to get it into the hands of our colleagues, our administrators, and our policymakers so that articulation can move beyond the mechanical process of certifying course equivalency and become a meaningful process of communication and collaboration that will result in real bridges among the various levels of ESL education in the state of California. ■

Endnotes

1. ICAS represents the three segments of higher education: the California Community Colleges, the California State University, and the University of California.

2. Copies of the TESOL ESL Standards document may be obtained by contacting Cynthia Daniels at the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL), 118 22nd Street, NW, Washington, DC 10037. The cost is \$10, prepaid by check, money order, or purchase order.
3. Copies of the "Canadian Language Benchmarks: ESL Benchmarks for Adults" and "ESL Benchmarks for Literacy Learners" may be obtained by writing or faxing: Information Centre, Citizenship and Immigration Canada, Journal Tower South, 19th Floor, 365 Laurier Avenue West, Ottawa, ON, Canada K1A 1L1. Fax: (613) 954-2221.
4. Copies of *Standards in English and Mathematics for California High School Graduates* may be obtained by writing or faxing: Intersegmental Coordinating Committee (ICC), 560 J Street, Sacramento, CA 95814. Fax (916) 327-9172.

References

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