

# Critical Languages Articulation Project Summary

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## Background Information

Funded in late 1994 by the U.S. Department of Education's Critical Language and Area Studies Program, the Critical Languages Articulation Project worked for the past four years to support the articulation of instruction in two critical languages in the Minneapolis Public Schools. The project was a collaborative effort between the Minneapolis Public Schools and the Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition (CARLA) at the University of Minnesota, which administered the grant.

The proposed goal of the project, entitled "Articulating Instruction in Critical Languages at the Elementary and Secondary Levels," was to increase the effectiveness of language teaching and the persistence of language learners pursuing instruction in critical languages by developing and refining a replicable model for articulating language instruction in these languages (Lange et al., 1993). The proposal went on to state the main method for achieving this goal would be to develop and refine a replicable model wherein Minnesota teachers of the critical languages selected would:

- 1) establish a set of common principles of language learning and adopt common standards of student performance,
- 2) create common strategies for implementing those principles, develop students' capacity to meet those standards of performance, and adopt common methods of measuring students' performance in the target languages, and
- 3) collaborate in the assessment of students' performance.

In order to accomplish this goal, project director Diane J. Tedick engaged teams of language teachers in the process of developing models of articulating language instruction. The two critical languages chosen to participate in this project were Japanese and Russian. In the initial stages of the grant, the group of teachers and the project consultants worked together to develop a common set of beliefs about language acquisition. Once these were established, the two language-specific groups worked separately to develop a set of performance standards, curriculum frameworks, and proficiency-oriented assessments to align with the standards.

The products created as a result of the support of this grant and the dedicated efforts of the language teachers include two curriculum frameworks that have been published by the CARLA working papers series and have been disseminated to key educators throughout the country. *Tools for the Articulation of Japanese Language Instruction: Standards, A Curricular Framework, Benchmarks, and Sample*

*Assessments* was written by Ann McCarthy, Kimberly Scott, Kazuko Shiba, and Patricia Thornton and *Tools for the Articulation of Russian Language Instruction: Standards, A Curricular Framework, Benchmarks, and Sample Assessments* was written by Marina Posse and Rita Shifman, with support from Gabriela Sweet, a Program Associate at CARLA.

### **Need for the Project**

According to second language educators, articulation involves the interrelationship and continuity of content, curriculum, instruction, and assessment within programs that focus on the progress of the student in developing communicative competence in a second language (Lange et al., 1993). It has been commonly understood since the 1950's that there has been a pervasive lack of coordination of second language learning at all levels of instruction in our nation's schools. It may be argued that such a lack of articulation has been even more apparent in programs emphasizing the instruction of critical languages because there are simply fewer of them, and because of a general lack of instructional materials in these languages. Second language programs that are not articulated lead not only to ineffective teaching and unnecessary frustrations for students at all levels, but also to high attrition rates among students who might otherwise continue to study a second language at more advanced levels. Research has demonstrated that the number of students continuing to pursue second language study beyond the first year of instruction is reduced by approximately half for each successive year of the language. The national phenomenon—which is even more pronounced in the critical languages—results in a significant waste of resources, as our nation's elementary and secondary schools tend to produce students who have only an introduction to a second language and little or no demonstrable proficiency in that language. Given the pressing national need to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of second language instruction, to increase the meaningful involvement of students in the fields of business, government, and education (in which second language proficiency is necessary), and to develop our nation's capacity to develop students' proficiency in the critical languages, the proposed project was deemed timely (Lange et al., 1993).

### **Addressing the Need: An Outline of the Project Activities**

Originally conceived as a project that would focus on developing models for articulating Chinese, French, Japanese, and Russian programs, the project narrowed its focus to just two languages —Japanese and Russian—due to changes in program and staff availability in the other two languages within the Minneapolis Public School system. To this end, two teams of teachers were created. The Japanese team initially consisted of three teachers who focused on Japanese instruction from grades 7 – 12; a fourth joined the team in the second year. The Russian team initially consisted of three teachers who represented programs from the K-12 level; the high school teacher on the team, however, chose to leave the project in the second year. In the end, the team focused their efforts on a K – 8 Russian program.

Throughout the past four years the two teams of teachers worked together during the summers and at points throughout each academic year to develop, pilot, and refine the set of standards and curricular frameworks that follow this general introduction. The following components comprised the project:

- Student and teacher participation in study abroad experiences;
- Agreement on a common set of beliefs or principles that should guide language instruction;
- Establishment of a set of performance standards;
- Creation of detailed curricular frameworks;
- Development of proficiency-oriented assessments that would be aligned to the curricular frameworks and the set of performance standards;

During the course of the project, each team had the opportunity to take a group of students abroad and reported anecdotally that these experiences led to increased motivation on the part of students. The opportunity to use Japanese or Russian for real, authentic communicative purposes, and the need to understand cultural aspects to be able to navigate in the target culture made language learning a meaningful endeavor. On these trips, the teachers in the project were able to gather authentic materials from the target culture that would later contribute to the development of their curriculum frameworks.

The teams of teachers, together with faculty consultants from the University of Minnesota, Carlton College and St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota, and staff from the Center for Advanced Research on Language Acquisition at the University of Minnesota and from the Minneapolis Public Schools, explored issues related to language education throughout the four years of the project. Over time, the teams developed standards, curricular frameworks, and assessment tools based on a common set of principles to guide their practice.

The main theoretical or philosophical principles that guided the development of the materials in this project also guided the work of the Minnesota Articulation Project (MNAP), a project that took place from 1993-97 across the state of Minnesota and emphasized articulation of the more commonly taught languages, French, German and Spanish (see, for example, Tedick, 1997). The principles as they applied to the Critical Languages Articulation Project included the following:

- (1) *Contextualization* involves meaningful language use for real communicative purposes and helps students to understand how meaning is constructed by language users (be they writing, speaking, reading, or listening) depending upon context. Contextualizing language instruction

may be accomplished by organizing the content of the language curriculum according to themes or topics that lend themselves to re-entry throughout the course of study (as suggested by what is known as a spiral curriculum). The curriculum frameworks in Japanese and Russian that were developed for this project are thematic in nature so as to maximize contextualization of instruction.

- (2) *Authenticity* of text and task—any text that is purposeful, meaningful, and has a real communicative intent for a real audience can be considered to be authentic. In other words, it is authentic in the sense that it was not originally produced for language-teaching purposes but rather for the purpose of communicating meaning (Brinton et al., 1989, p. 17). Authentic tasks are those that have a real communicative purpose. Both authentic texts and tasks are integral components of the curricular frameworks that were developed by the teams of teachers in this project.
- (3) *Process*—the notion of process is integral to language acquisition (be it first, second, or third...). Language acquisition is an ongoing process that requires a great deal of time, patience, thought, effort, and encouragement. A teacher who recognizes the importance of process in language learning understands, for example, that although a student is introduced to a grammatical structure (or function or topic) early on, s/he will need time to internalize the understanding of that concept before being able to produce language in spontaneous interaction that shows an accurate representation of that concept. This notion of process is built into the curricular frameworks developed for this project, as seen in particular by the “spiral” design of the frameworks, which allows for students to revisit the same thematic areas again and again throughout their course of study with increasingly complex levels and expectations with each re-introduction of the theme.
- (4) *Interaction* is key to language acquisition. In order to acquire language, learners cannot simply listen to or read “input;” they must interact and negotiate the type of input they receive (Long, 1981). In other words, learners must *use* language in meaningful interaction in order to learn it. A teacher who understands the importance of interaction organizes the language classroom to minimize teacher talk and maximize student discourse. This involves organizing classroom activities so that students will have reasons to respond to and interact with one another as well as others outside of the classroom. In other words, it suggests a *student-centered* curriculum. The curricular frameworks and assessment tools developed for this project emphasize interaction.
- (5) *Integration*—the notion of integration refers to the integration of all four modalities in instruction as well as to the need for integration of language and culture. Practice in one modality often results in improved competence

in another modality (Tedick, 1997). Furthermore, if language is seen as social practice, then culture must become the core of language teaching (Kramsch, 1993). Language classrooms must become places where students and teachers understand themselves as cultural beings and begin to discover the complexity of the concept of culture as they view cultures both within and outside of the U.S. from a number of different perspectives (Kramsch, 1993; National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project, 1996; Tedick, 1997; Tedick et al., 1993). The curricular frameworks developed for this project indeed incorporate all four modalities and an emphasis on the integration of language and culture.

**I**n addition to following the philosophical principles described above, the teams of teachers in this project focused their efforts on creating performance-based tasks and assessments that guide the levels of proficiency outlined in their respective curricular frameworks. Both teams decided to develop curriculum frameworks defined by themes that would spiral into the curriculum at each level. Embedded throughout their curriculum frameworks is attention to cultural aspects.

**T**he Japanese team selected seven themes:

- Japanese for the Classroom;
- Self, Family, and Friends;
- Home and Community;
- Shopping;
- Japan in the World;
- Daily Activities;
- Japan Through the Seasons; and
- Leisure.

**T**hey further described the learning and knowledge, skills (or communicative functions), structures, topics and vocabulary for each of the themes in the context of two major levels: Level II and V, with Level II corresponding to the first and second years of instruction (regardless of grade level) and Level V corresponding to the third, fourth, fifth, and possibly sixth year of instruction. In addition, the Japanese team developed both benchmarks and assessment tools for selected themes in both levels and chose to use holistic scales for each of the four modalities, to be used throughout a student's course of study.

**T**he Russian team selected eight themes to guide their curriculum development:

- School and Community;
- Family and Home;
- Environment and Nature;
- Time and Numerality;
- Food;
- Clothing;
- Health; and
- Sport and Leisure.

**L**ike the Japanese team, they also determined the topics, vocabulary, structures, and communicative skills for each of the levels, from grades K-1 to grade 8. The Russian team also described recommended classroom routines and created six appendices containing materials and resources to supplement the curriculum framework.

#### **Dissemination Efforts**

**T**he Japanese curriculum framework which was printed by CARLA in December 1999 was disseminated to all Japanese language teachers in the state of Minnesota and was also sent to key members of the American Association of Teachers of Japanese who are working on issues of articulation in states across the country. In addition, the teachers from the Japanese team have been very active in presenting their framework to state and national groups of Japanese language teachers. The Russian curricular framework was finalized in May 1999 and published in July 1999 by CARLA, and was also disseminated to Russian teachers in Minnesota and around the country. It is our hope that the curricular frameworks, assessments, and additional resources and materials developed for this project will be valuable to other teachers of Japanese and Russian and will strengthen instruction in these critical languages throughout the United States.

## References

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