
Puddlejumping: The Articulation Problem

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Abstract

Articulation has been a perennial challenge within the field of foreign language teaching. The present article seeks to clearly frame this challenge by positing three main perspectives, or, metaphorically-speaking, puddles, from which language educators teach, putting the onus on students to jump from one of these puddles to another without being provided the necessary boots. The solution, then, is for language educators to learn how to effectively integrate all three puddles in their teaching.

Introduction

It is the beginning of the year; a high school Spanish teacher complains to her colleague that the students who had just arrived from the middle school had studied Spanish for two years and really do not know anything. In fact, she would rather they had had no previous language instruction because then she could teach them what they needed to know.

This true anecdote captures the essence of the challenges of articulation. In the field of foreign languages, articulation most commonly refers to curricular coherence between levels of instruction. Coherence often exists within contexts. For example, a high school will have a coherent language program. It is when students move from one context to another that articulation becomes problematic, for example from middle to high school. It is then that we ask students to jump from one puddle to another without providing the metaphorical boots that they need. What follows is a brief introduction that outlines the articulation problem by framing it in terms of three puddles from which language educators teach. Then I go into a more in-depth discussion of the nature and challenges of the three puddles, ending with a suggestion that all language educators must learn to teach from all of the puddles in level-appropriate ways.

As early as 1955, in the Northeast Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages' (NECTFL) report on "Foreign Language Instruction in Secondary Schools," Mead (1955) raised the issue of articulation and suggested a bottom-up approach to dealing with it (this sentiment is reiterated in 2004 by Curtain and Dahlberg). It is now fifty years later and we still ask students to, what I call, puddle-jump, as they move from course to course and/or context to context. As far as I can see, there are three principal puddles: the grammar puddle, the communicative pud-

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dle (informed by the proficiency movement), and the content puddle (informed by Foreign Language in the Elementary School (FLES) programs, the national standards (1999), literature programs, and, for me, conceptual teaching). These three puddles have always been in existence. However, we, as a profession, have never explicitly formulated our relationship to them.

The underlying assumption behind the premise that students are asked to puddlejump is that every language classroom functions as a puddle. That is, language educators and/or language programs create a curriculum that primarily integrates the practices and approaches of only one of the puddles. For example, Gilzow (2002) highlights model elementary-age foreign language programs that have all incorporated the five national standards into the curriculum and “use content-based or content-enriched curricula that are closely tied to the general elementary school curriculum” (p. 2). Simultaneously, he points to the potential for “disconnect when students move to the higher grades, where there is more emphasis on grammar, writing, and formal assessment” (Gilzow, 2002, p. 3). Lambert (2001), however, puts forth the standards as the framework for integrating K-16 language instruction, but also warns that “the different degrees of adoption of the ACTFL Standards in secondary schools versus colleges and universities threaten to introduce a new discontinuity between educational levels” (p. 349). James (1998) argues that the college curriculum has to change as a result of the bottom-up impact of the standards on college-level instruction. For all of these thinkers, the standards provide the primary basis for the foreign language curriculum and, as a result, the framework for articulating instruction.

At the same time, other voices emphasize proficiency as the lens for articulating foreign language instruction. Connor-Linton (1996) suggests that programs need to be “more coherent in organization and more communicative and proficiency oriented in approach” (p. 139). The Minnesota Articulation Project aims to develop a proficiency-based cohesive framework for curriculum by using assessment as the means to foster articulation (Chalhoub-Deville, 1997).

Lange (1997) and Sandrock (1996) offer a different perspective on articulation by stating that we need to focus on the learner. Lange defines articulation in curricular terms, but goes further by stating that “it also focuses on the progress of the individual learner within an educational-development framework” (p. 30). Sandrock is more specific when he says, “Our focus needs to be on student learning, the process of becoming more proficient in using another language” (p. 545).

A silent but omnipresent and omniscient voice in this discussion is the grammar voice that is most loudly heard in many textbooks and classroom practices. Given the important role of the textbook, one would think that it is an ideal document that illustrates and models best teaching practices. Yet there has been very little change in textbooks over the past century. They tend to be grammar-based and have not responded to more recent findings regarding effective second language acquisition.

There has been a dramatic change in the appearance of the textbook, but not in the content. Bragger & Rice (2000) comment on the static nature of the textbook, even in the face of recent technological advances:

Today's foreign language programs reveal a surprising absence of fundamental changes or transformations.... Moreover, the same way that the new components of programs are "ancillary" to the textbook, many of the activities and features that make up the "new" content remain "ancillary" to the grammatical core of the content. (p. 110-111)

With the textbook as the primary instructional tool for teachers, the principal focus on grammar is bound to influence classroom practice.

As should be clear, there is no one commonly agreed on framework for designing and assessing foreign language instruction within the field. It is my contention that we, as language educators, teach from a specific perspective, which I will call a puddle; this perspective dominates our classroom practices while other perspectives might or might not be present in our teaching. Therefore, it is students who are required to move from one perspective to another, without the requisite knowledge base and experience to make that move. Herein lies the challenge of articulation. What follows is a description of the three puddles followed by a proposal for addressing the challenge that articulation has posed over the last 50 years.

The Grammar Puddle

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The teaching of grammar has a long history. As Fotos (2005) states, "By the first century BC the grammatical framework was developed that has remained the foundation of grammar pedagogy to the present" (p. 655). The initial framework was generated from literature, not colloquial speech, and therefore emphasized "correct" grammar usage. Grammar translation evolved from that base, dominated foreign language instruction from the mid nineteenth to twentieth centuries, and is still used today (Fotos, 2005).

After World War II, the US's foreign language needs shifted toward people who were able to speak the languages they studied. However, the grammatical basis was not abandoned. Instead, it provided the structure through which people learned to communicate, in what was called the Audio Lingual Method (ALM). Elements of language structures were replaced as learners engaged in repeated practice of these structures. For example, "I went to the store, I went to the library, I went to the bank," etc. ALM dominated foreign language instruction through the

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1970s (I can actually remember some of the dialogues between Paco and Anita that I learned in my language classes during that time).

The role of grammar in the classroom, however, has evolved over time, while vestiges of each of these approaches exist in current practices to varying degrees. In the 1980s, the proficiency movement came to the fore and helped form the proficiency puzzle. In the 1990s, the standards helped form the content puzzle. These two events put into question what the role of grammar instruction should be in the classroom. Meanwhile, the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) blossomed and provided empirical evidence for helping the field understand the nature of language acquisition (it must be said, however, that while we have a broad empirical data base, understandings of best practices based on research findings do not always make it into classroom teaching).

Ellis (2006), an SLA researcher, quells any doubt that grammar should be taught when he claims, “In short, there is now convincing indirect and direct evidence to support the teaching of grammar” (p. 86). In fact, neglecting grammatical instruction was found to be problematic; students must pay attention to form if they are to learn a language (Nassaji & Fotos, 2004). Moreover, “Current research indicates that learners need opportunities to both encounter and produce structures which have been introduced either explicitly, through a grammar lesson, or implicitly through frequent exposure” (Nassaji & Fotos, 2004, p. 130).

The question, then, becomes how and when it should be taught. Ellis (2006) contends that “Instruction needs to ensure that learners are able to connect grammatical forms to the meanings they realise in communication” (p. 101). At the heart of Lee and VanPatten’s (2003) work is this form/meaning connection. They argue that students need comprehensible input that has a message to which learners attend that includes a process of negotiating meaning in order for form-meaning connections to happen. Despite these understandings, many challenges remain when thinking about teaching grammar.

As Byrd (2005) points out, a grammatically based syllabus connects form and meaning, but is lacking in appropriate contexts. That is, students learn definitions, but do not learn to use them effectively. An additional layer of complexity lies within the current tensions that language teachers must navigate as they make instructional decisions. These tensions include the focus on accuracy versus fluency, form (which entails prerequisite engagement in meaning) versus forms (which does not entail prerequisite engagement in meaning), explicit versus implicit grammar learning and teaching (Byrd, 2005). Moreover, many of us have experienced the “apprenticeship of observation” (Lortie, 1975) in grammar-based classrooms and, unless we make con-

certed efforts not to, we will teach in the ways we were taught (in my high-school languages classes I remember spending hours going over the verb forms in the Amsco workbook). Moreover, I wonder if our initial attraction to learning a language was the comfort we felt at being easily able to break down language forms and get accurate answers, because of our tendency to think analytically. This comfort we felt as students may translate into our focusing on those same activities as teachers.

While it should be clear that grammar instruction is an integral part of learning a language, the specific shape of the grammar puzzle is amorphous, due to its inherent complexities. Historical influences, current research findings, inherent tensions, and, perhaps most importantly, our own histories as learners, all contribute to the role this puzzle plays in our teaching. To complicate the situation further, we must understand the two other puzzles — proficiency and content — if we are going to be successful in addressing the articulation problem.

The Proficiency Puzzle

“Language development...needs to be seen as the mastery of linguistic functions...Learning a language is learning how to mean.” (Halliday, 1973, p. 16)

The underlying premise of proficiency is that language is social in nature. Halliday (1973) posits that there are three main purposes for language: (1) representational (the expression of ideational content, present in all its uses), (2) interpersonal (the expression of social and personal relations), and (3) textual (providing texture to meaning in specific contexts). These purposes provide language teachers with the means for constructing the social situations within which language would be practiced and assessed within the classroom. Two powerful tools that have had a significant impact on the assessment of proficiency, and in turn, in language teaching, are the proficiency guidelines and the Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI).

In the early 1980s, the oral proficiency guidelines were published and, since that time, have had a tremendous impact on language instruction. In fact, “The proficiency guidelines remain at this time the only nationally recognized set of criteria for assessing oral communication skills across languages in the United States” (Rifkin, 2003, p. 582). The proficiency guidelines provide a rubric for assessing global functional speaking ability in real-life situations in 48 languages. It was the first common assessment tool ever produced within the language field.

While the proficiency guidelines have been criticized (see Liskin-Gasparro, 2003 for a synthesis of those critiques), they have had a profound impact on language instruction. As Liskin-Gasparro (2003) suggests, “The so-called proficiency movement and the ACTFL Guidelines and the OPI that served as its emblems, sparked significant change in the foreign language field that resonated even at the local classroom level” (p. 486). The proficiency movement does not promote a specific methodology; rather, it focuses on specific knowledge and skills that speakers should acquire. This is both its strength and its weakness.

By focusing on knowledge and skills, not methodology, the proficiency movement allows teachers to employ their own approaches in the classroom. This freedom may be problematic, however, because of the lack of models for teachers who might want

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to adopt a proficiency orientation but do not know how. Lastly, while there is a claim that the proficiency movement does not dictate a specific methodology (Liskin-Gasparro, 2003), the Oral Proficiency Interview with the corresponding guidelines function as a much-used assessment tool. It would be naïve to think that assessment practices do not impact instruction and methodology: in fact, they have a profound effect. A common mantra in teaching is that we “teach for the test.”

As with the grammar puzzle, the proficiency puzzle has its own complexities. First, there is a need for empirical evidence to support anecdotal assertions about its influence on language instruction (Chalhoub-Deville & Fulcher, 2003). Second, Norris and Pfeiffer (2003), while acknowledging the positive changes the ACTFL Guidelines have had on language programs, wonder if the OPI misses other valued learning outcomes. As they say, “it remains to be seen whether this use of proficiency standards and assessments helps foreign language programs achieve the kinds and range of educational goals they actually value” (Norris & Pfeiffer, p. 574).

It should be clear that teaching students to communicate in meaningful ways in social contexts is an important and valuable goal for language educators. Like the grammar puzzle, the waters of the proficiency puzzle are muddied with complexities. These include a lack of models for implementing proficiency-oriented instruction, the need for empirical evidence to shore up our anecdotal understandings of the implementation of the proficiency guidelines, and the need for a close examination of the coherence between the values of language educators and the educational goals achieved when employing the proficiency guidelines as the basis for curriculum development. Here again, these complexities contribute to the role this puzzle plays in our teaching. What remains is to understand the content puzzle before we are able to consider a solution to the articulation problem.

The Content Puzzle

Language teaching as a profession always struggles under the burden of not having a natural content. (Byrd, 2005, p. 553).

Content-based instruction (CBI) is an attempt to address the lack of content in language instruction. It is:

distinguished first of all by the *concurrent learning* of a specific content and related language use skills in a “*content driven*” curriculum ... In content-based language teaching, the claim in a sense is that students get “two for one” — both *content knowledge* and *increased language proficiency*. (Brinton, 2005).

In this conceptualization, language and content are seen as interdependent to the extent that language is embedded in specific content, thereby having students learn language through the content.

Stryker and Leaver (1997) state that while there is no one formula for CBI, it must have three essential features which include a subject matter core, the use of authentic materials and language, and a curriculum that is appropriate to the needs of the specific learners. In fact, it is CBI's focus on content and use of authentic materials that distinguishes it from the communicative approach to teaching languages (Stoller, 2002).

Historically, Krashen's (1985) concept of comprehensible input influenced the development of CBI. In its second phase, Swain's (1993) output hypothesis put the focus on the need for more linguistic accuracy and sophistication. There is no standard within the field, however, for what counts as content. For example, Curtain and Dahlberg (2004) define content as curricular concepts used in schools, Genesee (1994) deems content to be any topic that is important to learners, and Met (1991) considers content to be material that is cognitively engaging. This wide range of conceptualizations has proven problematic when implementing CBI at a programmatic level. As Stoller (2002) states, "CBI is founded on important principles, but really its success depends on the details of its implementation" (p. 3).

Here again, there is a range; there are different program models that have emerged which include theme-based language instruction, sheltered content instruction, adjunct language instruction, content-based FLES, and immersion instruction (for a description of these models please see Brinton, Snow, & Wesche, 1989 and Curtain & Dahlberg, 2004). CBI has also been proposed as a bridge between beginning-level, language-focused classes and advanced-level, literature-focused classes in university programs (Dupuy, 2000). These models provide options for integrating language instruction in a variety of ways. But, as Stoller (2002) warns, the details of implementation are important.

As with the grammar and proficiency puddles, the content puddle is not without complexities of its own. First, because language emerges from specific texts, it places a heavy burden on teachers to create materials that focus on the language structures inherent in the chosen texts. Second, because the curriculum is content-driven, language can be left to be learned implicitly (which, if you remember the above discussion about grammar, has largely proven ineffective). Third, students may lack the background information associated with the content chosen, leaving the teacher to determine how to address that lack (by assuming that students will need it and integrating it into instruction, by providing background reading in the LI, or by providing it in English in the class). Fourth, Stoller (2002) has suggested that there have been times that CBI has been used "as a shell for language teaching" (p. 1) implying that content has not been effectively integrated into instruction. Fifth, there have been "few controlled empirical studies demonstrating the effectiveness of actual CBI programs" (Grabe & Stoller, 1997, p. 14). Lastly, Eskey (1997) has expressed concerns about clearly establishing the relationship between form, function, and content during instruction and students who do not make normal progress.

Particularly in academic contexts, the need for meaningful and compelling content other than topic-

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based vocabulary targeting tourist activities should be non-negotiable. The content puddle, like the grammar and proficiency puddles, has its own complexities, which include a range of program models, a lack of agreement as to the nature of the content, the need for empirical evidence on the nature of the impact of content instruction, and the challenge of effectively implementing CBI in ways that meet the students' educational needs without placing an undue burden on the teachers' time and energy.

As I have described, within the field of language teaching there are three main puddles, all of which are imbued with their own complexities. It is my contention that teachers and/or programs teach primarily from one of the three puddles and it is up to the students to be able to jump from one puddle to the next as they move from class to class or context to context. Within these three different puddles, there is no common framework for teaching languages, hindering any efforts at creating a coherent foreign language learning experience for students.

At the same time, there have always been and, I hope, always will be differing perspectives on what it means to teach a language (Fotos, 2005). These perspectives underlie the three puddles outlined previously. For our students' sakes, however, we can no longer teach from only one puddle. We need to reconceive what it means to teach languages and develop a common framework. The starting point (and perhaps the most important point) of this reconceptualization process is the relationship between thought and language.

Galloway (1999) suggests that one reason teaching culture has been such a challenge is because language and culture have been separated. She states,

Edward Hall's message in *The Silent Language* is one foreign language teachers recite almost as a mantra: Culture is communication, communication is culture)...Yet, foreign language classrooms may be the only place in the world where the two are so unnaturally separated. (p.176)

I would adapt and amend Galloway's statement by replacing the word "culture" with "thought" (which is shaped by culture). Foreign language classes may be the only place where thought and language are unnaturally and unhelpfully separated. The most obvious example is at the university level, where students experience two years of language classes and, if they continue (which is a big if), two years of literature classes, whose focus is content. Until we learn to effectively integrate language and thought, articulation will continue to plague us as a profession.

This is not a new idea. Byrnes (2001) points to something similar when she suggests that thought and language be integrated:

...from a language-form-driven paradigm, which is constitutive of pretty much all of our professional work, to a cognitive-communicative paradigm within which we, quite understandably, have only just begun to rework everything, from curriculum to instruction, materials, assessment, and approaches to teacher education. (p. 167)

However, we need to start thinking about what this reworking might look like. What follows is a description of my learning to integrate the three puddles in my teaching and my current thinking, with the hope that it makes the ideas presented thus far concrete and even doable.

A Potential Solution to the Articulation Problem

At this point in my teaching career, I have taught at almost every level. I started as a high school Spanish teacher, taught in an elementary age program (grades 1-5), had a brief two-year experience in middle school, and currently teach at the college level. In my trajectory as a teacher, I have taught from, and played in, all three of the puddles. On my first day of teaching high school, I taught the grammar sequence right from the textbook because I did not know what else to do. I spent a number of years in the grammar puddle, completely overwhelmed by the thought of teaching culture, never mind anything else that was not in the textbook.

Since then, I have grown as a teacher. My professional experiences have pushed me to learn about the other puddles and, in so doing, I have become increasingly aware of the burden we are placing on students to jump from puddle to puddle without the right kind of boots. For example, the worst day of the year for me is in September, when incoming students take the placement test after having studied languages for three years in high school and place into the college-level first-year class. Clearly, their high school language-learning experiences have not prepared them for college-level language learning. At the same time, I have developed my own beliefs and convictions about what it means to teach and learn a language, and more and more I situate myself in the content/conceptual puddle.

I faced the issue of students needing to jump from one puddle to another head-on when I taught in a middle school and saw the placement test that my students would have to take upon arriving at the high school. Before designing the curriculum for the seventh and eighth graders, I examined the high school placement test, which included verb conjugation charts, vocabulary matching items, and grammatical fill-in-the-blanks. I, on the other hand, had the idea of creating a virtual trip to Spain, where they would design and describe their experiences as they learned about different facets of the country. Two different puddles, for sure! At the same time, I felt a deep responsibility to the students not to set them up for failure. It was this feeling of responsibility that pushed me to think hard about the issue of articulation.

My solution was to design the curriculum based on ideas from the content and communicative puddles (for example, I started the first two months using only the “I” and “you” verb forms and then added another subject as needed for the experiences I had designed) while at the same time making sure that the students would have the tools necessary for passing their placement test (for example, I went through a number of first year books and most of the verbs and vocabulary). Thus, in the terms I am using today, I worked from the content and communicative puddles and, in the last month, I helped them jump into the grammar puddle. We put what they already knew in the form of verb charts and fill in the blank exercises, thereby providing them with the boots they needed to jump from one puddle to another. They all passed the place-

ment test and were able to go into and have considerable success in Spanish II.

This experience has influenced my thinking about articulation in significant ways. Based on the existent literature, the main solutions that have been proposed are more effective communication between and among different levels and languages, and the development of a common framework for teaching languages. As I have argued, these solutions have not been effective. However, inherent within them are seeds of possibility, which raise as many questions as they answer.

I do not believe it is realistic to think that all teachers will teach from the same configuration of puddles. Moreover, I am not sure it would be desirable. I think having differing *informed* perspectives is useful. Discussions such as these create a worthwhile synergy that would be too easy to avoid if we were to use a common framework. Moreover, historical forces are too strong and too well embedded. Still, I do not capitulate to the thinking that we should continue to do what we are doing because that is what we have always done.

We need to focus on the learners, and prepare them to puddlejump. That is, all students should be able to function in each of the three areas. Within the field, we must seek to understand the three puddles along with their inherent complexities and prepare students to be able to function in the grammar, communicative, and content/conceptual puddles. This ability would serve as their metaphorical boots. As teachers, we need to design courses that contain all three elements, foregrounding and backgrounding different puddles based on our informed judgments.

The process of foregrounding and backgrounding could be implemented in different ways; two possibilities from potentially many are presented here. Teachers could prepare students for the placement tests, which is a sequential model of foregrounding and backgrounding, as illustrated above. That is, students spent time exclusively in the content and communicative puddle and then, in the last month, learned about the grammatical puddle. Alternatively, the process could happen dynamically, as classes are taught over time. Either way, it would mean understanding and being able to work within each of the areas as we design the courses we teach. (It would also effectively change the role of the textbook.)

I have suggested that, as a field, our approach to articulation has not been effective. It is time to think creatively of other possibilities to address this daunting issue. In the past we have asked our students to jump from one puddle to the other without having the appropriate boots. In order to provide them with the appropriate boots, we will all have to examine, understand, and (re)consider both our approaches and the implementation of our teaching. This is a tall order. But the fact that we, as teachers, care deeply about our students and about the field, provides us with a powerful foundation from which to work.

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