

Nine Assumptions about Language and Culture Learning

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Scope of presentation

- Introduce nine assumptions about language and culture learning
 - Dickerson, Lorna J. 2011. “Basic Assumptions for Language and Culture Learners.” Institute for Cross-Cultural Training. Wheaton, IL.
- Discuss their relevance to the Afghan context
- Think about how we can change our thinking and behavior accordingly

Nine assumptions

- 1 You have the innate capacity to learn another language and culture.
- 2 Language learning and culture learning should be tightly integrated.
- 3 Language and culture learning should be a lifelong pursuit.

Nine assumptions (cont.)

- 4 Language and culture learners should make use of the widest possible range of available learning resources.
- 5 Your learning program should accommodate as many of your unique learning characteristics as possible.
- 6 Your learning program should accommodate as many of your unique situational variables as possible.

Nine assumptions (cont.)

- 7 Effective language learning requires self-direction.
- 8 No formal language-learning curriculum (language school or tutoring arrangement) can meet all of your individual needs.
- 9 Learner training promotes more successful learning.

Assumption 1

Assumption 1

You have the innate capacity to learn another language and culture.

- “This does not mean that every language learner can become almost like a native speaker or even highly proficient in a second language, but it does mean that very few people have a valid excuse for giving up on language learning.”
- “Your language learning aptitude has to do with how quickly you learn language,” not the level of proficiency you eventually reach.

Assumption 2

Assumption 2

Language learning and culture learning should be tightly integrated.

- Probably not controversial in itself
- But what would our language learning time look like if we took that seriously?

Assumption 2

- How can we get out of the classroom and into learning situations in the community?
- How do we do ethnographic interviews?
 - i.e., beyond the typical descriptions of weddings, births, deaths, and Nauroz!
- What would you do if I sent you off for three hours to learn something about Afghan culture?

Assumption 3

Assumption 3

Language and culture learning should be a lifelong pursuit.

- Again, probably no one will disagree
- But two challenging questions:
 - Are we taking our weekly three hours of language learning?
 - Are those three hours of language learning making a difference?
- Taking language and culture learning seriously as a lifelong pursuit means that we don't plateau in our language ability

Assumption 3

- This doesn't mean that we're always progressing at the same rate. Phase 1 is a special time!

“[C]onsider that for proficiency to make any noticeable gain at all, the typical person needs at least 100 hours of additional language exposure and practice to make noticeable gains at lower levels of proficiency and at least 300 hours at higher levels.” (Leaver, quoted in Thompson)

- A *long-term* orientation also implies that we will *plan* to manage our motivation and emotional energy.

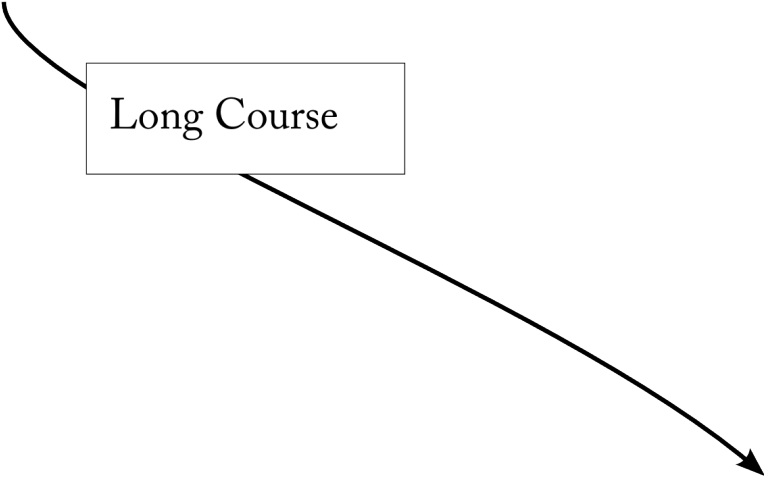
Assumption 4

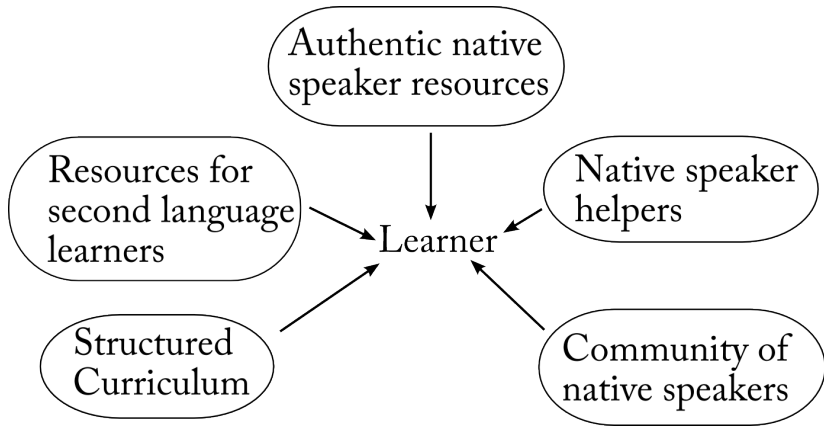
Assumption 4

Language and culture learners should make use of the widest possible range of available learning resources.

- In practice, this is where we're weakest as an organization.
- The general assumption is that LCP will provide the resources.
- Let's take a look at some pictures...

Learner





Assumption 4

- Traditionally we have put a lot of emphasis on the “structured curriculum,” i.e., the long course and the lessons teachers know how to give
 - (But in sort of a disingenuous way: everyone knows that LOP alone won't cut it...)
- How are *you* going to make effective use of other resources? What support would you need?
 - Resources for second language learners
 - Authentic native speaker resources
 - Native speaker helpers
 - Community of native speakers

Thoughts about native speaker resources

- Dictionaries
- Grown-up books
- Children's books
- Television shows (also from YouTube)
- BBC Persian
- Persian Wikipedia (fa.wikipedia.org)
- Radio shows
- Translated texts

Assumption 5

Assumption 5

Your learning program should accommodate as many of your unique learning characteristics as possible.

- “Unique learning characteristics” are “learning rate, personality and learning style, and preferred learning strategies”
 - Not everybody has to learn in the same way
 - Every person needs a customized language-learning plan
- This will require more self-knowledge on your part; more on this later.

Assumption 6

Assumption 6

Your learning program should accommodate as many of your unique situational variables as possible.

- Situational variables are “individual needs and goals, daily schedule, range of personal contacts, and other responsibilities.”
 - Male vs. female
 - Singles vs. families
 - Project-assigned spouse vs. unassigned spouse
 - Availability of social opportunities
 - Work demands

Assumption 6

- We also need to think about individual *goals*.
 - IAM policy itself is weak on this point:
 - “Each Team Member will be engaged in language learning.”
- Why do you want to learn Dari? i.e., What are you going to use your Dari to do?
 - One person speaks English to his staff at work, and Dari with his choakidar.
 - Another person speaks Dari all day long with her patients.
 - Another person works mostly in English, but conducts personal relationships in Dari.
- Think about your individual goals—bearing in mind that they have likely changed since you arrived in Afghanistan!

Assumption 7

Assumption 7

Effective language learning requires self-direction.

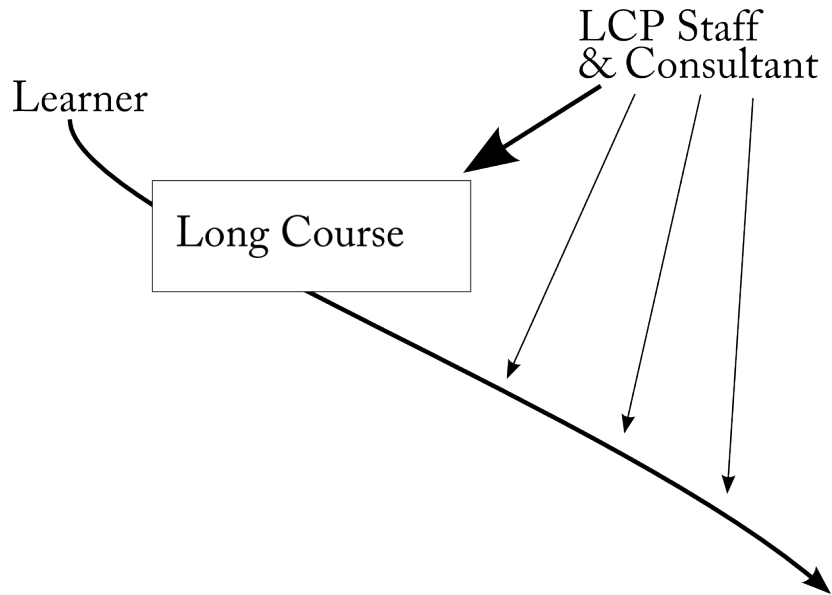
- This is not a policy decision, just a statement of fact.
- *You* need a personalized language-learning plan.
- *You* will be implementing it and evaluating it.
- Even the best guide can only climb the mountain *with* you, not climb the mountain *for* you.
- A successful outcome to this presentation would be you sitting down (maybe with a coach) and hammering out a plan.

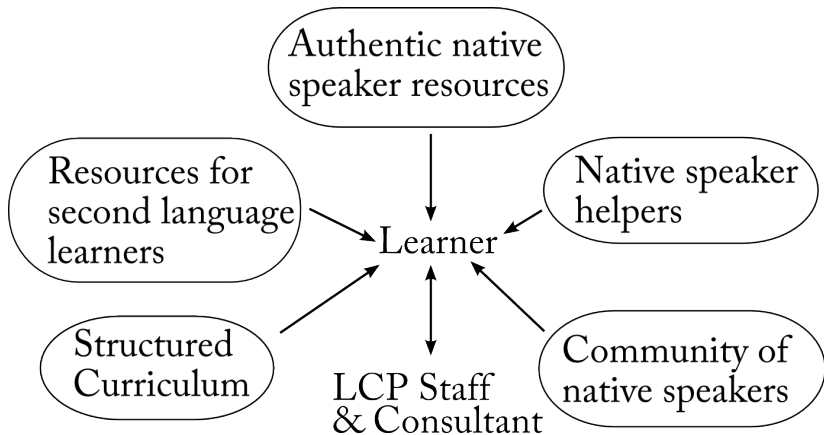
Assumption 8

Assumption 8

No formal language-learning curriculum (language school or tutoring arrangement) can meet all of your individual needs.

- This is a hard message to hear.
 - If LCP offered the best language instruction in the world, it would not be sufficient.
 - If our teachers could explain everything flawlessly, it would still be insufficient.
- Conceptually, we need to put the language school in its place: it's one of five types of resources that we have to work with.





Assumption 9

Assumption 9

Learner training promotes more successful learning.

- Note the assumption here: you can become a better language learner than you are right now.
 - You can learn to use learning strategies more effectively than you do right now
 - You can learn what is most helpful for you individually in language learning
- Two things follow from this:
 - Presentations like this can help is to think more helpfully about language learning matters
 - The best use of your time right now might be studying language-learning rather than studying Dari!

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