

Hi. This is a follow-up to my earlier presentation, “Nine Assumptions about Language and Culture Learning.” This presentation will cover some topics that get more into the nuts and bolts of planning your learning program. This is a narrated slide presentation, which means that whenever you click the button to move on to the next slide, I'll speak about the content on the slide. You can go through these slides at your own pace. If you're in a group, I hope that you'll pause to discuss the material as well. If you don't want the narration, you can of course mute your computer speakers.

First I'm going to talk about proficiency orientation. That will be a new term to most people, but it's one of the most important concepts in language learning. I'm then going to talk about four types of communicative competence—that is, four kinds of skills that we need to be good speakers of a language. I'll then cover a simple procedure for planning your lessons. And then finally, I'll introduce the Four Strands, which is a way to help you make sure that your lesson time is appropriately balanced. Sometimes the discussion will be theoretical, but the practical applications should be clear throughout. I like the saying, “There's nothing so practical as a good theory.” But more basically, we need to learn to speak more precisely about language learning. If you're coming to this with a desire like, “I want to be able to speak Dari better,” really that's so vague a goal that it's useless. So we'll learn some language to help us to think more clearly about these things.

Lorna Dickerson, the researcher to whom I referred in the previous slides, says that the two keys to an effective learning plan are self-direction, and proficiency-orientation. I talked previously about self-direction, so that leaves proficiency-orientation. Whatever it means, it must be pretty important! Let's take a look on the next slide.

Here's a definition of proficiency...

So proficiency includes our ability to do things in the language, and our ability to do things *well*. Afghans are incredibly gifted at working around our language limitations, but our goal is not just to get things done, but to use accurate and fluent language in doing them.

Now I don't want you to be put off by how obvious this is. I know that none of us is learning a language just for the sake of having learned it: we all want to be able to *do stuff* with the language. But we often overlook that in our lessons. For instance, we consider finishing the Long Course to be a goal. It's a milepost, certainly, but if you think about it it's a rather strange goal to have. We also set goals like studying for three hours every week. Well, you can meet that goal, but I'm not going to guarantee any progress in language learning simply because you've put in three hours. And as I said before, we say we want to get better at a language, without putting that in relation to any real-world goals.

Instead, I want you to think about language learning goals in terms of real-world goals. Then you structure your lessons to reflect those goals. Let's look at some examples. Studying the past progressive because it's the next grammatical topic in a list is not a proficiency-oriented activity. But if you're practicing telling stories—for which you'll certainly need the past progressive—then that *is* proficiency-oriented. Finishing the Long Course is not a proficiency goal. (We don't make any guarantees about what you can do in real life when you've finished the Long Course!) But being able to chat with your colleagues about everyday matters *is* a proficiency goal; that's real-world activity.

Now again, the idea of proficiency-orientation seems so obvious that we can neglect it. I've had conversations where things like this come up. Someone told me that she was going to spend a few months learning more about the subjunctive. Someone else wanted to be able to read and write... without any particular idea of why that was important. And most frequently, people just need something to do in their three hours. None of those things is wrong or evil, they're just not

proficiency-oriented. And we always want to be working toward a goal, which is our ability to perform a real-world task.

So what do you want to do in real life? Whether it's doing daily tasks in an office, speaking about your life, watching movies, or reading books, take the time to articulate some real-world proficiency goals. And this should inform your learning plan. If you want to be able to give a professional presentation, it will be more efficient to practice giving presentations, for instance, than to study grammar and vocabulary at random, hoping that something will be relevant.

Now I'm going to talk about different kinds of proficiency. All of language use can be broken down into these five kinds of activities. Interpersonal communication is simply talking to people. That's most of what we do. It's what we're best at, not just because we have so much practice, but because when we speak to people, they accommodate us by using familiar words, we get feedback immediately if something isn't clear, and we tend to stick to familiar topics. But it's just one skill of five! There's also presentational speaking, which would be like giving a speech, where you have to put your thoughts together and speak without receiving immediate feedback. Or presentational writing would be the same, but in the written medium. Interpretive listening means listening to a speech, or to media. This is much harder than interpersonal communication because the speech is not directed to our level, and it doesn't pause to explain if we don't understand something. And interpretative reading similarly is simply reading something, which may or may not have been originally written for us.

Now one immediate application of this knowledge is in evaluation. LCP is working on being able to provide assessments of Interpersonal Communication in an interview format. More immediately, there is a self-evaluation that you can do to get an idea of where you are in each of the five domains. I've provided the link here. You're supposed to have an annual evaluation, and that might be the most pain-free option!

But I also want you to think about these proficiency domains for planning your lessons. I think that most people who have learned to read have found that it involves a pretty distinct skill set from having conversations. Many people who are strong in interpersonal communication can't read at all. And learning to read is actually not a great way to learn to write. They're related, of course, but the one skill does not transfer directly to the other. So in planning your lessons, make sure that you're working in the domain that you want to be working in.

I'm going to speak now about communicative competence. Competence is a matter of having skills and knowledge. Communicative competence is your ability to communicate competently, and of course we break that into more specific competences; I'm going to talk about those in the next slides. This part of the presentation is to help you think about your strengths and weaknesses as a speaker of a second language. It's not a checklist of activities, or anything like that. But it might suggest some parts of your own competence that need to be shored up.

First we have formal linguistic competence, which...

Now when I say that your mind might jump to studying grammar, but it really doesn't matter if you study grammar or are even aware of grammar, so long as you speak correctly! And this also refers to the breadth of your vocabulary: and if you're speaking Dari, we all know that until you've learned three or four different words for every concept, you've still got a long way to go! And it covers pronunciation as well. Now you might wonder what speaking *correctly* has to do with getting things done, that is, with language-proficiency. But remember that part of language proficiency is

being able to do real world tasks well. That means speaking grammatically, speaking clearly, using appropriate vocabulary, and so forth. Proficiency is not opposed to formal linguistic competence; it includes formal linguistic competence.

Next up is sociolinguistic competence....

Now the key word here is "appropriate." It's possible to speak grammatically, but inappropriately. For instance IAM has always stressed [ʌmijʌnə] language, but that is not appropriate for every situation we work in. If you're addressing an educated audience with that kind of speech, it's going to be somewhere on the continuum of being weird, inappropriate, embarrassing, or offensive. So the key is to use grammar and vocabulary *appropriate* to your context. And that means being able to control more than one speech variety. And this also gets into cultural topics such as, what to say when someone is sick, or when there's been a death in the family. We certainly don't want to be inappropriate in that context.

And now discourse competence...

This is your ability to speak in paragraphs. It's your ability to tell a story with an introduction, transitions, and conclusions. And it's your ability, for instance, to give a speech in an appropriate way, observing all of the conventions of a good Afghan speech. We're all aware that non-native speakers of a language can speak grammatically, but in a totally incomprehensible manner. In fact this can happen in our native languages as well.

Next strategic competence...

There are two part to this. First, we need to be able to work around little misunderstandings, just as we occasionally have to do in our own languages. But it's also our ability to work around our own limitations. Every day we all have to work around our limited language. I was recently trying to buy aluminum foil, and I kept saying to shopkeepers, "it's like paper, but it's made of metal." Or any of us can eventually convey sympathy and compassion, even with limited language. But an advanced speaker can work around his limitations so smoothly that it's not obvious that he is working around his limitations. The people he's speaking with don't even realize he's doing it.

So I just present these ideas to give you some things to think about. Perhaps you've never thought about how to tell a story, or how to speak more formally. If those are things that important to your situation, then by all means think about goals you can set, and ways to move forward with them.

My third topic this presentation is planning. I'm not covering this because I think it's difficult to understand, but because I think that most people are not planning their lessons and evaluating their plans. I would even venture to say that most people watching this presentation are wasting time in their lessons doing things that don't help their language.

Here are the seven steps of planning. I'll discuss them on the next slide.

With all the talk about proficiency orientation, you won't be surprised to see that the first step is to identify your goals. I would think about your goals for the next few months. I can't overstate the importance of this step. We always want to be moving toward a goal. Next, you assemble your resources and make a plan for how to use them. If you need help choosing resources or finding resources, please feel free to get in touch with me. Then you implement your plan. And then you evaluate how your plan is going. I would give it two or three weeks before you evaluate. But at that point you should evaluate your plan ruthlessly. The definition of insanity, after all, is repeating the same mistakes over and over, and expecting different results! So you want to stop doing things that

are not working. Again it's obvious advice, but easily neglected. I was in a situation recently where a certain learning activity was just not working for me. I wasn't learning anything, it was boring, and it was getting to the point where I was dreading my language lessons. Still I continued that way for more than a week. It was a failure to evaluate and take action.

My final topic is The Four Strands. This is a tool to help you allocate your language learning time between different kinds of activities. It's based on the common sense idea that you should be doing various kinds of activities. A sports player doesn't train by just doing a single type of activity. Similarly, your language lessons should be composed of four strands, just as a rope is stronger when it has more strands.

Here's the chart. I'll talk about each of these in the following slides. It's divided up according to the focus of your language-learning time. The recommendation is that each kind of activity be represented equally in your schedule. So you're looking to balance all these things. As I talk about these things, I want you to think about what you're currently doing in your language lessons, and whether one of these isn't over-represented or under-represented.

First we have meaning-focused input...

We do a lot of this in the Long Course, and it's a great way to build vocabulary. The idea is that you're trying to understand the meaning of what's going on—whether it's a conversation, an audio recording, a written text, a television show, or whatever. You're not trying to speak during this time. You're working on listening and understanding.

Speaking comes in meaning-focused output...

Now you're the one speaking (or writing), and you're trying to convey your message. I have a challenge for this slide, which is to work inefficiently. What do I mean by that? I mean that, rather than giving a local person the task of writing something in Dari, or of giving a presentation, you should take the time to do that yourself. Recently I put together a presentation for our LCP teachers. I put together the slide show, and wrote out what I wanted to say. I gave it twice in person, and recorded it for a presentation in this format. That took a long time, and I probably could have had an Afghan give that presentation for me. But I took the time to do it myself—checking my work with a teacher, and so forth. So not only did the task get done, but I grew a lot in the process. And of course, I know exactly what was said, and so I don't have to worry about things getting lost in translation. In the long run, of course, this isn't being inefficient; it's making a wise investment in my own capacity.

Next is language-focused learning...

Now various language-learning approaches will say that the best way to learn a language is to just use the language, without ever thinking about how it works. In fact there's plenty of research to indicate that studying the language is a helpful thing to do. And note that this included not just grammar, but also vocabulary, pronunciation, writing, and so forth. And it also includes learning about learning strategies, which is what we're doing right now.

And then finally fluency...

The emphasis here is on *speed*—both in speaking and in listening. It's not enough for a piano player to know what all the notes are; she has to be able to read and produce them in real-time. Similarly, we need to listen and speak in real time. Now it might be counter-intuitive to *practice* this. But that's just what you need to do. And the key is that you work with familiar topics and texts. Tell old stories where you know the vocabulary. Listen to old recordings that you understand perfectly. You just need to practice in real time.

And that's it for this presentation. There's been a lot of new information. I know that can be discouraging, since it seems like there are so many things to think about. Maybe a better way is to think about the variety of options you have as you move forward with lessons. As a concrete step, I would suggest that you work on developing specific, proficiency-oriented goals, and then put together a plan to meet those goals. Thank you.