

# Proficiency, Competence, & Planning

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# Scope of presentation

- Introduce some ideas about language learning
  - Proficiency orientation
  - Communicative competence
  - Learning cycle
  - The Four Strands
- It will begin theoretically and move toward practical application
- We need to be able to speak more precisely than, “I don’t speak Dari very well,” or, ”I want to be able to speak Dari better”

# Two keys to an effective learning plan

- Two keys to an effective learning plan (Lorna Dickerson)
  - Self-direction
  - Proficiency-orientation
- We talked about the importance of self-direction in the previous presentation
- Whatever proficiency-orientation is, it must be pretty important!

# Proficiency defined

## Proficiency

Ability to use the language to accomplish real life purposes; a focus on (1) what an individual can do in the language and (2) how well he or she can do it (e.g, order a meal in a restaurant, explain a child's illness, or teach a class).

- This is the most obvious thing in the world...
  - We're learning Dari because we want to do things!
- ...and the most easily overlooked:
  - We consider finishing the Long Course to be a goal
  - We try to think of things to do to fill our three hours
  - We say ridiculously imprecise things like, "I want to get better at Dari"

# Proficiency applied

- Having a proficiency orientation means:
  - You set goals in terms of being able to do *real-life* activities
  - You structure lessons to achieve those goals
- Examples:
  - If you're studying the past progressive because that's the next chapter of the grammar book, that is *not* proficiency-oriented
  - If you are practicing telling stories, and learn the past progressive along the way, that *is* proficiency-oriented
  - Finishing the long course is *not* a proficiency goal
  - Being able to chat with your colleagues about everyday matters *is* a proficiency goal

# The cart before the horse

- A surprising number of people take lessons without any real-world goal in mind:
  - “I want to be better at the subjunctive”
  - “I’d like to be able to read and write”
  - (and of course) “I need something to do in my lessons”
- These are not bad things; they’re just not proficiency-oriented
- We want to work toward a goal
- We want the goal to be an ability to do a real-world task

# Set a goal!

- What do you want to be able to do in real life?
  - Work in an office?
  - Talk to patients?
  - Share about your life?
  - Watch and discuss movies?
  - Read and discuss books?
  - Give professional presentations?
  - Read newspaper articles?
  - Listen to the radio?
- It's *almost* too obvious to say: practicing what we want to do is more efficient than studying the language generally

# Domains of proficiency

- Proficiency Domains
  - Interpersonal Communication (conversation)
  - Presentational Speaking (giving a speech)
  - Presentational Writing (writing something)
  - Interpretive Listening (listening to a speech, or to media)
  - Interpretive Reading (reading something)
- Every single one of us is strongest in interpersonal communication
  - People accommodate us
  - We get instant feedback
  - We talk about familiar topics
- But it's just one skill of five!



# Evaluation

- LCP is currently working towards being able to evaluate people in the domain of Interpersonal Communication
- (As a matter of policy, you have an annual evaluation!)
- We have a self-assessment that covers the other domains as well

<http://www.iam-afghanistan.org/lcp/Evaluation/>

# Proficiency orientation

- Thinking about different proficiency domains, or kinds of activities, gives us more insight into our own ability
- Consider also that your lessons should reflect your proficiency goals
  - Conversation (interpersonal communication) is a poor way to learn to read
  - Learning to read is a poor way to learn to write
- Practice doing what you want to do

# Varieties of communicative competence

- Proficiency is your ability to do things in the real world; competence refers to the skills and knowledge that you need to do it
- This is not a checklist; they're things to think about
- Communicative competence
  - Formal Linguistic Competence
  - Sociolinguistic Competence
  - Discourse Competence
  - Strategic Competence

# Formal Linguistic Competence

- Formal linguistic competence is your ability to produce and understand well-formed sentences (grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation)
- This doesn't mean you can explain grammar
  - You don't need to be able to tell the difference between an imperfect, a past continuous, and a past progressive
- It's your ability to produce good sentences
  
- Even though this is not a proficiency goal, being able to speak grammatically is part of proficiency

# Sociolinguistic Competence

- Sociolinguistic competence is your ability to produce *appropriate* language
- It's possible to speak grammatically without speaking appropriately
  - IAM has historically pressed for [ΛmijΛna] language
  - Great for talking villagers; in other contexts, it could be considered disrespectful
- We should be able to work in all varieties (or “registers”) that are appropriate for our needs
- This also gets into cultural awareness, e.g., the kinds of things to say when someone is sick or when there's been a death

# Discourse Competence

- Discourse competence is your ability to speak in units longer than one sentence
  - How are stories told?
  - How are speeches given?
  - (introductions, transitions, conclusions, etc.)
- It's possible to speak in a grammatical, incomprehensible manner!

# Strategic Competence

- Strategic competence is your ability to overcome difficult situations in the language
  - Getting clarification
  - Dealing with misunderstandings
  - Using gestures effectively
- It's also your ability to work around your own limitations
  - Any of us can talk around a subject until the person eventually figures out what we're aiming at
  - An advanced speaker can do this without it even being noticed

# Moving forward

- This four-fold approach is just a way to talk about different aspects of communicative competence
- You can use it to help your own thinking
  - It wouldn't surprise me if you had never thought about how to form a paragraph in Dari
  - It wouldn't surprise me if you had never realized that you could learn to speak in high Dari
- Let these ideas influence your own proficiency goals



# Planning to plan

- It might seem tedious to review a planning cycle
- I think that planning is generally weak among our learners
- It might not be a waste of time to go through the steps methodically

# Planning to plan

- 1 Determine needs
- 2 Set goals
- 3 Collect resources
- 4 Make a plan
- 5 Implement plan
- 6 Evaluate learning
- 7 Revise plan (i.e., back to step 1!)

# Planning to plan

- In the first step we determine our needs (or our vision); in the second step we set concrete goals for the next, say, couple of months
- Get the resources and make a plan
  - Perhaps this will just be a matter of getting a book or a video
  - Perhaps you need help choosing the right resources
- Evaluation and planning
  - “Insanity is repeating the same mistakes and expecting different results”
  - Coming to some sort of conclusion will (depending on the conclusion!) either encourage you, or keep you from repeating the same mistakes

# The Four Strands

- The Four Strands model helps you to think about how you spend your time
- You should be doing diverse activities
- A soccer player does not become better either by *just* playing soccer, or *just* working out in the gym, or *just* running around a track, or *just* by studying moves
- The guideline is that your language time—not necessarily your lesson time—should be divided into four roughly equal portions

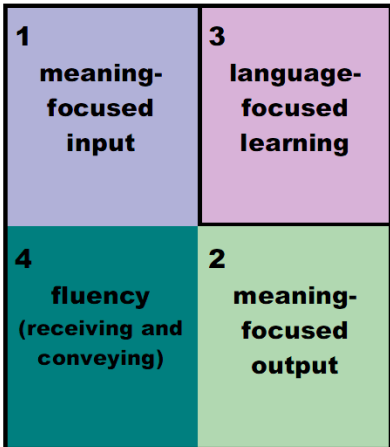
Nation, Paul. 1996. "The Four Strands of a Language Course." *TESOL in Context* 6(2): 7–12.

- *listening*
- *reading*

- focus on comprehending actual message
- mostly familiar vocabulary

- *listening*
- *speaking*
- *reading*
- *writing*

- getting good at what they already know
- processing language faster and faster



- *grammar*
- *vocabulary*
- *pronunciation*
- *writing system*
- *spelling*
- *discourse features*
- *learning strategies*

- focus on language components & skills

- *speaking*
- *writing*

- focus on conveying message
- generally familiar ideas, grammar & vocabulary

# Four Strands

## 1. Meaning-focused input

Listening & Reading. Focus on comprehending actual message; mostly familiar vocabulary.

- Something where you care about the meaning
- Something at your level
- A movie, a short story, a work thing

# Four Strands

## 2. Meaning-focused output

Speaking & Writing. Focus on conveying message; generally familiar ideas, grammar, & vocabulary.

- Something where you care about the meaning
- A presentation, an email
  
- A challenge: work inefficiently!

# Four Strands

## 3. Language-focused learning

Grammar, Vocabulary, Pronunciation, Writing System, Spelling, Discourse Features, Learning Strategies. Focus on language components & skills.

- Over the last 30 years, research has showed that focused grammatical study *is* necessary
- This is “traditional language study”—but note the diversity of topics



# Four Strands

## 4. Fluency (receiving and conveying)

Listening, Reading, Writing, Speaking. Getting good at what you already know. Processing language faster and faster.

- Might be counter-intuitive
- You need time to practice without having to learn

Thank you!