

Developing a Learner-Centered Pashto Curriculum for Specific Purposes: A Case Study

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Abstract

Writers will present a Pashto curriculum developed by Naval Special Warfare for Navy SEALs. The development process of this language for special purposes (LSP) curriculum, and the conceptual framework behind it, will be outlined. Aspects central to this curriculum will be examined including learner-centeredness, criterion-referenced objectives, as well as formative, summative, authentic and transparent assessment. Writers' objective is to provide a model for Pashto instructors and curriculum developers which will assist them in focusing their curricula and instruction on students' goals and learning needs.

Keywords: learner-centered, formative assessment, instructional design

Background

Recently, the Department of Defense (DOD) redefined its use of language for Special Operations Forces (SOF) in the 21st century. To that end, Naval Special Warfare Command was tasked to develop and administer programs capable of preparing Naval Special Warfare (NSW) Operators to maintain a basic level of linguistic competence appropriate for a globally-employed force. The desired outcome of these programs is improved counterpart relations and decreased dependence on interpretation/translation by non-SOF linguists or interpreters. Also inherent in the language training mission is an increased level of cultural sensitivity and knowledge that contributes significantly to situational awareness, safety, and security.

At the onset of this initiative in 2009, the curricula available focused on a generic, global, language proficiency which was primarily thematically based (e.g., numbers, greetings, hobbies, family, etc.). It was apparent that a gap existed between available curricula and our needs. Logistically, this required an in-depth needs assessment, development of standardized courses of instruction, course objectives, course schedules, assessment systems, course data management systems, and a course evaluation system. However, with an immediate requirement to start training Operators, the decision was made to combine the existent curricula with best practices teaching methods (Brown, 1994; Brown, 1993; Wilkerson & Irby, 1998) and an integrated system of instructor, student, and course evaluation (Evans, 2013; Sadler, 2010). To ensure that these practices were adhered to, the teaching standards were clearly outlined during the instructors' pre-service training in an internal Quality Assurance Surveillance Process (QASP) (Federe, 2008) which included eight basic tenants (Figure 1). These eight tenants formed the cornerstone of our conceptual framework.

Although the existing curricula did not meet the requisite needs due to their focus on general proficiency, students were able to learn enough to score well on the Defense Language Proficiency Test (DLPT) which tests listening and reading proficiency and the Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) which tests a student's speaking ability. Both tests assess global proficiency as measured by the Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) proficiency scale, which measures a student's proficiency level on a scale of 0 to 5. However, these tests do not measure the attainment of the goals outlined by NSW leadership and the curricula did not cover the skills needed to meet leadership's goals. With a limited amount of time to train, in our case 12 weeks were allotted by the command for initial acquisition training (IAT), and very specific goals, it became essential that precise language objectives, curricula, assessments, and evaluations to meet these needs be defined (Brown, 2010; Tyler, 2013).

Quality Assurance Surveillance Process (QASP) Teaching Criteria

- Provide a positive, supportive learning environment, which encourages all students to participate actively in class.
 - Ensure teaching is learner-centered.
 - Be flexible and adaptive to students' learning styles and learning needs.
 - Engage students in authentic, contextualized, high-interest, relevant tasks which are focused on valid operational language objectives.
- Make students active agents in their own learning process.
- Maintain a balance between fluency and form, and between grammatical, discourse, sociolinguistic, and strategic competencies.
- Provide frequent, constructive feedback and assessment as to how students are progressing, encouraging/training students to self-assess and thus become active in their own learning process.
- Ensure lessons have clearly articulated goals, objectives, and outcomes.
- Focus on use of language for real-life, contextualized communication tasks.
- Maximize target language comprehensible input, output, and interaction.
- Encourage critical analysis and synthesis.

Figure 1 QASP Criteria

Framing the Problem

Leadership had specified the need to use language in order to communicate directly with indigenous peoples, improve counterpart relations, enhance operational capability, decrease dependence on interpreters/translators and for an increased level of cultural sensitivity and knowledge that contributes to situational awareness, safety, and security. While there was a clear vision of what leadership wanted and we had the basic cornerstone for the conceptual framework, a gap existed between the curricula and assessments in use and the ones needed to accomplish these goals (Messick, 1990). The decision was made that it would be less expensive to develop and implement a curriculum that fit the Operators' needs precisely than to teach from a general-proficiency, generic curriculum that students might score well on in standardized tests, but did not meet mission-specific needs.

Another concern was the effect that high-stakes tests had, and would have, on instruction and learning. Namely, the knowledge of the final tests could affect what the students were learning in the classroom, and could have a counter-productive washback (Messick, 1996) on learning. In particular, if the students need to be able to speak with counterparts, a general-proficiency test which focuses on academic listening and reading would only send a confusing message to the students and wouldn't support our specific learning needs and objectives. To be effective and efficient, it would be necessary to develop a curriculum, assessment, and policy system which were in alignment. In fact, the requirements necessitated the development of such a curriculum in seven languages: Pashto (PU), Farsi (PF), Arabic (AD), Tagalog (TA), French (FR), Spanish (QB), and Swahili (SW).

Solving the Problem

To address the gap, it became essential that the NSW-specific needs be defined in detail. In order to detail our requirements and develop the necessary curricula, Brown’s (1995) model for systematic curriculum design was utilized and adapted. This model included a defined needs analysis, objectives, testing, materials, teaching, and evaluation, with the flow between these items going both ways (Figure 2). The Brown framework was then adapted (Figure 3) in accordance with previous projects (Federe, 2005) including the addition of vision, goals, and conceptual framework as there was a need to keep leadership and stakeholders’ ultimate vision central to the process, a shift from “testing” to “assessment” to reflect our view of assessment as information-rich feedback embedded throughout the curriculum and teaching methodology, and the addition of policies and procedures as this would be necessary in order to ensure continual alignment of vision and curriculum and to capitalize on student motivation (Bandura, 1993).

The overall goal for this project was to develop a 12-week (360-hour) course which produced the capabilities required for NSW mission sets, was learner-relevant (Hutchinson, 1987), had explicit and transparent course and learning objectives (Brown, 1995), was efficient (Tumposky, 1984), flexible, adaptable, updatable, and allowed for monitoring and accountability for students, instructors, and the program as a whole (Valette, 1980).

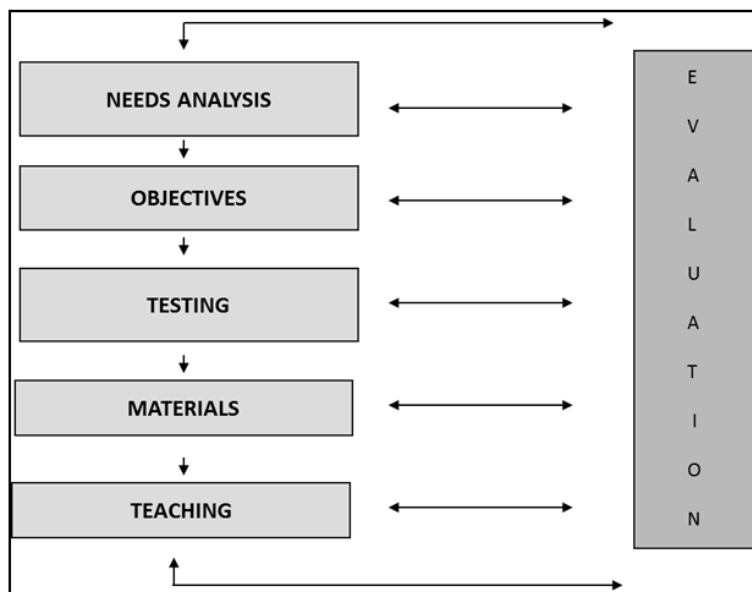


Figure 2 Brown Model

Development Process

The development process included eight basic components. The needs assessment came first, followed by a refinement of our conceptual framework and detailed definition of the target objectives and outcomes. The next four components (assessment, methods, materials, and policy/procedures) were intertwined, but always referred back to the objectives, outcomes, and conceptual framework. While iterative evaluations (represented by the horizontal two-way arrows in Figure 3) were part of the development process, the final step of the curriculum project was the development of a formal evaluation process to continue monitoring and updating the curriculum as SEAL mission sets adapt and evolve.

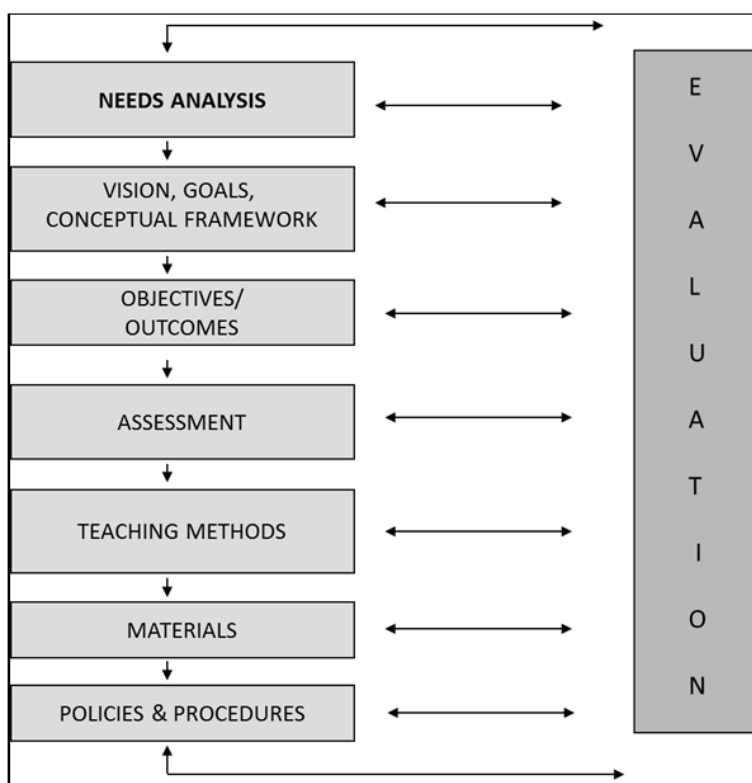


Figure 3 Federe Adaptation

Needs Assessment

With a limited amount of time to train, it was essential that we identified our students' exact linguistic needs. Our goal at the onset was to identify situations in which the students needed to use the target language, break those situations down into tasks, and then analyze the tasks in order to identify the associated language functions. In other words, "(l)anguage varies from one situation of use to another, it should be possible to determine the features of specific situations and then make the features the basis of the learners' course." (Hutchinson, 1987)

Our aim was to join best practices from second language acquisition theory with best practices from industrial organizational psychology (Klimoski & Zukin, 2003; Münsterberg, 1913; Surface, 2012) to complete a thorough language-focused task analysis. Industrial organizational psychologists conduct KSA (knowledge, skills, and abilities) analysis on job tasks on a regular basis. Our aim was to apply that methodology through the lens of second language acquisition.

Four Navy doctrinal manuals which detail the tasks a SEAL must be able to perform were utilized. The cumulative list contained 834 items. Then, focus groups of qualified SEALs were formed. In order to qualify for the focus group, an Operator had to have a minimum number of deployments, number of years of service, specified ranks, and had to have deployed to at least 2 of our target language regions on a regular basis.

These focus groups were then asked to complete detailed surveys, which included all 834 tasks. In these surveys, the tasks were presented one at a time and the Operators were asked whether they had ever done the task, how frequently, how important the task was to their mission, whether or not it required language or culture, at what level of engagement (tactical, operational, or strategic) the target language/culture was used, whether they used the target language to do the task themselves, or to train others to do the task, and whether or not it required an interpreter. The results of these surveys were tallied, and we derived 613 mission-based tasks that required use of the target language and/or culture to some degree. All data were then put into a comprehensive database.

Next, a second focus group was formed. This focus group had to meet the qualification criteria of the first group, and also had to have a record of using the target language operationally. This group of Operators was matched up with a group of language subject matter experts (SMEs) from the American Council of Teachers of Foreign Languages (ACTFL). The Operators then were able to group the tasks into three main categories. This grouping made it easier to evaluate the 613 tasks. Then, the language SMEs interviewed the Operators asking them to describe how they would use language and/or culture in each of the tasks. As the Operators explained the process, the language SMEs distinguished the language functions associated with each of those tasks. All of this information was put into the database so that in the end it contained all of the tasks which require language and/or culture with their associated linguistic functions, level of conflict, whether done by oneself or involved training others to do, frequency and importance, levels of socio-cultural knowledge required, communicative modalities required, and a target proficiency and performance level required to complete the task successfully.

Conceptual Framework

While a working copy of our conceptual framework was developed before the needs assessment process was conducted, after the needs assessment, we reviewed, updated and elaborated on it so that curriculum developers could clearly understand our intent. Central to our framework is the concept of learner-centeredness since our goal is to equip students with a mission-focused language capability. "The learner-centered view tends to view language acquisition as a process of acquiring skills rather than a body of knowledge." (Nunan, 1996).

Likewise, the focus of this course and curriculum was on developing a skill that would be applied, or in other words, our focus was the development of a capability.

Two key tenants of learner-centered instruction (Blumberg, 2009; Weimer, 2013) in the second language classroom are adult learning theory (Knowles, 1983; Knowles, 1980; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999; Mezirow, 1997; Mezirow, 1981) and communicative language teaching (Brown, 1994; Nunan, 1996; Nunan, 1987). According to adult learning theory, adult learners have needs that are fundamentally different than K-12 learners, which changes how learning activities should be developed and used. Characteristics common to adult learners (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005) include: needing to know the reason(s) behind their learning, maintaining an element of control in the decision-making process, having previous experience(s) recognized, having an eagerness to learn things that will help them succeed in real-life situations, and that they are more often motivated by internal (ability to perform well on their jobs) rather than external (pay, promotions) motivators.

Communicative language teaching is based on the development of communicative competence for real-life application as opposed to mere memorization of discrete knowledge (Cody, 1997) or rules in isolation of context (Krashen, 1982; Mahn, 2013). Simply being able to create grammatically correct structures in a language does not necessarily enable a learner to use language to carry out various real-life tasks (Widdowson, 1978). It is also believed that there are strong and weak versions of communicative language teaching (Howatt, 1984), which is still seen today, more than thirty years later. Almost all language instructors will claim that they use communicative language teaching methods and yet many use what Howatt describes as the “weak version”. In particular, “(t)he weak version which has become more or less standard practice in the last ten years, stresses the importance of providing learners with opportunities to use their English for communicative purposes and, characteristically, attempts to integrate such activities into a wider programme of language teaching.” (p. 279) Howatt goes on to say “(t)he strong version of communicative language teaching, however, sees language ability as being developed through activities which actually simulate target performance. In other words, class time should be spent not on language drills and controlled practice leading towards communicative language use, but in activities which require learners to do in class what they will do outside.” (ibid.)

Blumberg (2009) details five dimensions of learner-centered teaching. These include: the function of content which should give the student the ability to apply content and understand why they are learning it, the role of the instructor as a facilitator of learning, the responsibility for learning which should be that of the students with proactive support and expert guidance from the instructor, the purpose of assessment which should be to provide constructive feedback and information to the learner about where they are and where they need to be, and the balance of power shifts to give students and instructors input as to what is to be covered and how.

These concepts of adult learning theory, communicative language teaching, and learner-centered instruction in general, form the foundation of our teaching criteria as outlined earlier through our Quality Assurance Surveillance Process, and form the conceptual framework which undergirds this curriculum. It is vital to provide a positive, supportive learning environment, ensure teaching is learner-centered, maintain a balance between fluency and form, provide constructive feedback and assessment, ensure lessons have clearly articulated objectives, focus on use of language for real-life, contextualized tasks, maximize target language comprehensible input, output, and interaction, and encourage critical analysis and synthesis.

Objectives and Outcomes

From the extensive data collected from the needs assessment, the learning objectives were generated. Specific instructional objectives have three essential characteristics: (Mager, 1984) performance (what tasks the Operator needs to be able to perform), condition (important conditions under which the performance is expected to occur), and criterion (the quality or level of performance that will be considered acceptable). Our learning objectives were stated in terms of outcomes and all included the following elements: mission content domain and task, purpose (do self or train others), level of conflict (tactical, operational, or strategic), frequency and

importance, linguistic function needed for this task, level of socio-cultural knowledge needed for this task, communicative modalities used in this task, and a target proficiency and performance level. In our case we defined these targeted proficiency levels in terms of the ILR scale; namely, we mapped our tasks, conditions, and standards to the ILR proficiency scale (i.e., what level of proficiency did the Operator need to be able to accomplish the specified task). Every identified task was coded according to these criteria. The tasks were then ordered by linguistic function, so that they came together into a scope and sequence ordered by linguistic function with simpler functions building to more complex functions. Developers then had a number of contextualized tasks to choose from for each linguistic function, and were directed to choose those marked as most important first. Thus, requisite linguistic functions were contextualized.

Assessments, Methods, Materials, Policy and Procedures

The four aspects (assessments, methods, materials, policy and procedures) were closely intertwined and developed together once the other foundational items had been established. Some of the methods central to this approach are: spiraling, and scaffolding, a focus on objectives, feedback, student reflection and responsibility, and performing a task only up to a pre-determined level.

The objectives are clearly detailed at the start of the course, each day, and each hour/block. All class activities are based on meeting these objectives. Periodically (start of day, during the day, at the end of the day), the students are asked to reflect on how they would use the daily objectives operationally and how confident they felt in accomplishing the tasks operationally. Students have the responsibility to actively reflect on how they would use the materials operationally. Feedback, quizzes, and end-of-week tests are all based on the ability to accomplish the tasks at the level, and under the conditions specified in the objectives.

For assessment we aimed to be formative, authentic, and transparent (Sadler, 1989). We view assessment as information-rich feedback providing students with information regarding their progress towards attainment of the objectives. Thus, assessment takes place continually in class and the teacher provides the student constant feedback. With task-based exercises in class, practical exercises in our simulated village (where students interact with role-players performing the type of tasks presented in class), as well as traditional, weekly computer, oral, and paper-based tests, students are provided with rich, constructive feedback on their overall progress. Scaffolding is embedded throughout the curriculum which requires students to do tasks over time with less and less support and more independence at higher levels of performance. This approach requires the teacher to give a lot of informative guidance and feedback so that the students clearly know where they need to be in order to perform independently without the benefit of a teacher's support.

One aspect of this curriculum that is very different for teachers is a focus on accomplishing specified tasks under specified conditions and only up to predetermined standards. Many teachers are accustomed to teaching a grammar point or a notion, from beginning to end until mastered and then moving on to the next point or topic. Because this curriculum is task-focused, it requires teachers to teach only what is needed in order to accomplish the particular task at hand. Due to the nature of this task focus, we carefully and deliberately sequenced linguistic functions, grammar, and notions such as numbers, dates, etc. All major aspects for the target proficiency level (grammatical, lexical, etc.) are presented in the curriculum. However, the students do not get them all at once; rather, they get them in context as they become needed to complete a specific task. For this reason, a lot of spiraling (revisiting tasks or functions with different applications) and scaffolding (revisiting tasks with less and less support as more responsibility is put on the student over time) is necessary. All of this was built into the underlying framework of the curriculum plan so that developers had a clear map as to what needed to be covered where and to what degree. To that end, students do develop a general proficiency, yet the curriculum is not proficiency-based. The proficiency items are interwoven within the context of the tasks and linguistic functions needed to perform the job of a Navy SEAL.

The guiding policies and procedures for this program are an integral part of keeping all of the items

aligned. Due to its intricately interwoven design, teachers, students, and administrators must follow policies and procedures closely to keep it true to its purpose.

Evaluation

The evaluation component of the approach we adopted (Federe, 2005) calls for evaluation throughout the entire development process. We opted for a systematic and multi-faceted process that involved pilot runs of Units 1 and 2 (four- and eight-week iterations), formal and informal evaluations and feedback from teachers and students, group discussions, and an open-door policy for students and teachers alike. Mirroring the recursive and spiraled design of the curriculum, we also developed an evaluation plan for the courses as a whole. This plan includes a year-by-year plan for the next five years, as well as a basic evaluation protocol to ensure currency, relevancy, and validity. In this plan, all the stakeholders are identified along with the stakes, as well as the methodology to ensure continued evaluation against those factors.

Results

Weekly quizzes, unit tests, and an end-of-course test are built into the curriculum. All of these exams are formative in order to assist the students, teachers, and administrators evaluate individual attainment of the course objectives. In addition, we administer the Defense Language Proficiency Test (DLPT) and the Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI). While the DLPT and OPI do not adequately assess our goals and objectives, they are currently the only official test of record per Navy and Department of Defense guidance. In the next phases of this project, one of our goals is to develop an assessment which more directly measures attainment of an operational capability. We are at the development stage of this next phase.

Considering our goals and objectives are not tied to the current, high-stakes DOD proficiency exams (the DLPT or OPI) in any way, comparison of the results (Figure 4) is statistically noteworthy and implications for second language curriculum design can be extrapolated.

The first set of data (Figure 4) compares the results of the general-proficiency, Pashto Initial Acquisition Training (IAT) from 2010 to present, to the results of an IAT class piloting Unit 1 (first four weeks) of the NSW-specific, Pashto curriculum. The column titled Old Curriculum shows DLPT and OPI results for students that were a product of the commercial curricula available at the time. The column titled New Curriculum shows DLPT and OPI results for a class of students that piloted Unit 1 of the new curriculum and then transitioned to the traditional texts for the remaining eight weeks. On the publish date of this case study, the data for Pashto were limited to this four-week pilot due to current operational demand, but the positive results can already be seen in terms of the students' reading scores on the DLPT. It should be noted that the curriculum was just completed in December 2013.

When comparing classes from the same DOD categories of difficulty (CAT III/IV), one could extrapolate like results for Pashto as depicted in figure 5 for Farsi and Arabic had we been able to run the full, 12-week course of instruction (COI) for Pashto.

Pashto Old Curriculum Results Compared to Pashto 4-week Pilot Class Overall Pass Rate*		
Modality	Old Curriculum Pass Rate	New Curriculum Pass Rate
OPI-Speaking (S)	99.15%	100.00%
DLPT-Listening (L)	65.81%	66.67%
DLPT-Reading (R)	49.57%	66.67%
*ILR 0+ or higher on DLPT and/or OPI for CAT III/IV Languages ILR 1 or higher for CAT I/II Languages		

Figure 4 Pashto Only Results

The data in figure 5 depict the results of 12-week IATs including the six target languages chosen for the curriculum project—Tagalog (TA), French (FR), Spanish (QB), Persian-Farsi (PF), Pashto (PU), and Modern Standard Arabic (AD) from 2010 to present. The column titled Old Curriculum shows DLPT and OPI results for students that were a product of the commercial, general-proficiency curricula available at the time. The column titled New Curriculum shows DLPT and OPI results for students that completed the full 12 weeks of the new curriculum. These final scores are statistically striking for several reasons; particularly as the students did not follow a general-proficiency curriculum, which the DLPT and OPI assess, but rather a task-based, mission-focused curriculum. Their scores also exceeded those normally associated as an outcome of a general-proficiency course.

We will continue our analysis as the data set grows over time, but of particular interest will be the effect of a performance-based curriculum on the development of general proficiency. If preliminary results show that this performance-based curriculum was capable of producing not only the level of performance needed by our command, but also a higher, general proficiency, a tremendous amount of time and money could potentially be saved on language acquisition, and most importantly, the production of a student capable of doing more with the language.

TA, FR, QB, PF, PU, and AD Old Curriculum Results Compared to New Curriculum Classes Overall Pass Rate*		
Modality	Old Curriculum Pass Rate	New Curriculum Pass Rate
OPI-Speaking (S)	92.99%	100.00%
DLPT-Listening (L)	48.77%	70.83%
DLPT-Reading (R)	58.58%	79.17%
1/1/1 All Modalities (L, R, S)	58.58%	79.17%
*ILR 0+ or higher on DLPT and/or OPI for CAT III/IV Languages ILR 1 or higher for CAT I/II Languages		

Figure 5 New Curriculum vs. Old Curriculum Results

Significance

The significance of this work is threefold. In the context of strategies, one could argue this case study has significance at the Tactical (for Teachers), the Operational (for Programs), and Strategic (For Future Research) levels.

For Teachers

At the Tactical (practical) level, this study outlines a methodical approach for teachers to delineate clear objectives, present those objectives in an engaging manner, and measure those objectives in meaningful and productive ways. The recursive, and spiraled approach of both content delivery and formative assessment, builds a firm foundation for both students and teachers. It is this process of iterative reflection, application, refinement, expansion, and further reflection that allows for growth not only for the student, but also the instructor and his/her teaching.

For Programs

At the Operational (developer) level, this study demonstrates the utility of a thorough needs assessment coupled with clearly defined objectives, and a deep knowledge of learner and language learning theory. The resulting product yields rewards not only for the student, but the program as a whole. Maintaining a learner-centered approach as outlined in this paper, is instrumental to a program's success. Such an approach also allows for maximum flexibility and the opportunity to adapt and update the curriculum as needed for the students. Echoing the reflective practices outlined for the teachers and students, the program too, must undergo a process of reflection and refinement to ensure the content presented in the curriculum continues to meet the needs of the students over time.

For Future Research

At the Strategic level, there are several implications of this case study on future research. If one were to take this curriculum project to its logical conclusion, there is one piece of this whole process that remains misaligned. The objectives were based on a thorough needs assessment. The lessons were based on those clearly defined objectives and the internal assessments, and reflective exercises were designed to measure and reinforce those objectives. The formal, high-stakes assessment piece, however, remains an external construct that lacks validity (Messick, 1990; Tyler, 1949) within the context of our defined needs and learning objectives. While our students performed surprisingly well on these standardized, proficiency-based assessments, it remains to be seen if an equally recognized form of final assessment can be created based on the authentic tasks they need to perform operationally and how well they are able to perform them. Until such an assessment is created, we cannot fully measure our students' capabilities vis-à-vis a formally recognized standard.

Special Thanks

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