

Determinant Factors in Effective Teaching and Learning of Dari and Pashto languages: An Action Research Paper

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Abstract

The field of foreign language teaching is increasingly informed by research on the determinant factors in second language acquisition (SLA) (Shrum & Glisan, 2010). Understanding how languages are learned or acquired is the foundation for pedagogic recommendations and assists teachers in developing their lesson plans accordingly (Ellis, 1990). Some studies have demonstrated that there is a discrepancy between teachers' practices and effective teaching methods proposed by researchers. In other words, it appears that academic research has little effect on teachers' behavior inside their classrooms (Freeman, 1989).

To resolve the discord between academic research and teachers' practices, Farrel (2012) advocates reflective language teaching. He encourages teachers to be self-reflective, identify problems, develop action research projects, and use the results of their action projects to make informed instructional decisions.

The purpose of this mixed method study was to reveal the elements of an action research project that affected Dari and Pashto language acquisition in six-eight week intensive courses at a Language Resource Center (LRC) at a public university in Southern California. Students entered the program with no prior knowledge of Dari and Pashto and completed the program with a Novice High or above level of proficiency.

The researcher collected data over a period of three months. He reviewed students' responses to an online survey, gathered their test scores and class works, and interviewed seven of them. He further interviewed four teachers and conducted four formal classroom observation and frequent 3-minute walkthrough classroom observations. The data was analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively. The findings were triangulated to validate what the teachers and program supervisor believed were the determinate factors of instructional improvement at the LRC.

This paper will provide insight on the elements that affect teaching and learning of Dari and Pashto in an intensive program and encourage teachers to be self-reflective, conduct action research projects, and make informed decisions about their methods of teaching.

Introduction

Since the late 1970s researchers have tried to understand how languages are acquired, what are the best practices and determinant factors in second language learning and acquisition (Shrum & Glisan, 2010). During the last two-three decades, foreign language based instruction has gone through tremendous changes. Language learning and acquisition approaches have been influenced by research in the areas of linguistic, psychology, and second language acquisition (Shrum & Glisan, 2010).

Understanding how languages are learned or acquired is the foundation for researchers to form pedagogic recommendations and informs teachers how to develop their lesson plans accordingly (Ellis, 1990). Teaching has shifted from emphasizing reading and writing skills to more interactive purposes such as using language in real-life situations (Shrum & Glisan, 2010). According to Ellis (1990), informal second language learning occurs with observation and direct participation in conversations (p. 2).

To understand what actually happens inside the classrooms that affect second language acquisition (SLA), it is important to gather and analyze data. Discovering the root problems enable educators to develop and implement intervention plans for better instruction and student outcomes (Frey & Fisher, 2006).

This research has been organized in the following manner: first, the researcher states the problems; second, he reviews the literature on SLA; third, he explains the research methodology; fourth, he presents his findings; and fifth, he explains the process of the action research project and its implementation and reveals some data to support the effectiveness of the intervention.

I. Problem Statement

In order to be able to carry out their mission in Afghanistan successfully, the US government requires service men and women to develop language and cultural competency of the local community in Afghanistan where they will be deployed. Prior to their deployment, students are placed in Dari and Pashto language courses offered by Language Resource Centers (LRC). Intensive courses, eight weeks (320 hours) for Pashto (category IV language) and six weeks (240 hours) for Dari (category III), are designed to help students acquire an intermediate level of language proficiency. Category III languages have different linguistic and cultural aspects than English and take about 1100 hours of instruction for students to develop a superior level of proficiency, being able to converse formally and informally using extended discourse (ACTFL, 2012). Category IV languages have significant linguistic and cultural differences with English and requires learners about 2200 instructional hours to develop a superior level of proficiency (AWL, 2014). "Proficiency level" has been defined based on the criteria set by the American Council of the Teaching of Foreign Language (ACTFL). For instance, ACTFL considers an intermediate level speaker (Level 1/Level 1+) based on how he or she is able to create with language and produce sentence level discourse.

Novice High or Intermediate Low level of proficiency was the goal of the Dari and Pashto program. The researcher, who was a Dari and Pashto teacher and the director of the Program, as part of his responsibilities, frequently collected data to assess the effectiveness of the program and implement intervention plans, when necessary.

The data, collected between August-October 2012, revealed to him that the majority of students in the Dari and Pashto programs were not able to retain vocabulary and converse in the target language using short and simple sentences, by the end of program. The researcher found the teachers were not using communicative teaching approaches. To provide some context, the Dari and Pashto teachers had mostly received their formal education in Afghanistan and taught in their home country for some time where traditional teaching (grammar based) dominated the educational system.

Although, the LRC required its instructors to complete a series of teacher and professional development workshops before teaching, some teachers maintained their traditional ways of teaching and asking students to complete mundane drills. The majority of the students exited the program with novice (Level 0+) of language proficiency. In addition, there was no standard curriculum and each instructor used his or her own teaching materials in class.

The program continuously collected data, but had not taken any solid steps to analyze and use the findings for better achievement of student outcomes. If the method of instruction does not change, the program will not be able to achieve its goal – improving the level of students' language proficiency. Consequently the students will be unable to learn and acquire the language; the program may lose its stakeholders' support and, eventually the funding for the project would cease.

In the following sections, the researcher first clearly states the objectives for this research action plan and moves on to the purpose statement and research question:

II. Objectives

1. Publically Validated:

The student proficiency level of 90% for the 320-hour (Pashto) and 240-hour (Dari) course will increase from novice mid (Level 0+) to at least intermediate low (Level 1) based on the ACTFL/ILR proficiency criteria. They will be able to create with language, ask and answer basic questions and become engaged in short conversations.

2. Outcome through students' monitoring process

- a. 90% of the students' weekly quiz scores will improve to at least an "A-"
- b. 90% of students will complete their homework on a daily basis.

III. Purpose Statement and Research Questions

The purpose of this paper was to investigate the elements that affect acquisition of Dari and Pashto in a short-term intensive course. Specifically, the researcher was interested to know why (root causes) some students were not able to retain vocabulary and engage in short conversations with native speakers of the target language by the end of the program. The following research questions guide this research:

Research Questions

1. What are the main factors that affect learning and acquisition of Dari and Pashto in an intensive six – eight weeks program?
2. How do the implementation of action plans affect student outcomes?

IV. Literature Review

Some practitioners, such as behaviorists, believe that language learning occurs the same way that other types of learning occur in the classroom (Skinner, 1992). However, Chomsky (1965) claims that language learning is different in many aspects from the general theory of learning and engages a separate mental faculty. According to him, language learning more naturally takes place through social interventions with speakers of the target language (Ellis, 1990, p .3).

Behaviorists believe that habit formation plays a crucial role in language learning, especially when it comes to "error correction." However, according to Chomsky (1967), errors could be tolerated as long as it does not hinder comprehension. Krashen (1987) also agrees that "error correction" has little or no effect on language acquisition. Krashen (1987) cites Burt and Kiparsky (1972) and explains that teachers should correct errors that: (a) interfere with communication; (b) are most stigmatized; and (c) occur most frequently (p. 119).

Krashen (1987) further refers to "meaning" as the most important element in language acquisition. He claims that language acquisition occurs when learners understand the meaning of a message not when they produce grammatically correct forms. For instance, even babies, acquire vocabulary if they are given the opportunity to make connections between words and their meanings such as "this is your milk." (Shrum & Glisan, 2010).

Krashen (1987) downplays the role of grammar as the major factor in language acquisition. He claims that grammar-translation classes are mostly conducted in the learner's first language and involve explanation of rules with examples and exercises. They are designed in a way to provide conscious practice of the grammar and vocabulary of the lesson (p. 127). Krashen introduces the five most influential hypotheses in language acquisition:

1) The acquisition-learning hypothesis in which Krashen refers to "acquisition" and "learning" as two different ways that adults learn a second language. He believes that adults acquire second languages unconsciously the same way that children pick up their first language (Altakhaineh, 2012). Krashen (1987) argues that generally learners are not consciously aware of the grammatical rules of the language. Learners usually acquire competence unconsciously and feel for correctness or wrongness of grammatical sentences. Krashen argues that "language acquisition" is more powerful and effective than "language learning" (p.10). On the other hand, adults learn a language consciously by understanding the forms and rule of the language (Lightbown & Spada, 2000). Krashen believes that only unconscious learning of a language will lead to fluency, whereas, those who learn the rules and forms of a language, may not be able to speak that language fluently (Lightbown & Spada, 2000).

2) The monitor hypothesis: Krashen argues that the learned system of a learner acts as an editor or 'monitor.' According to this hypothesis, learners focus on being correct rather than on what they have to say. Krashen claims that the monitor helps learners to do better in writing when they have more time to search for words and proper vocabulary. However, over application of the monitor slows learners' speaking ability in a conversation (Lightbown & Spada, 2000). Krashen (1987) claims that monitoring occurs under at least three conditions in order for students to apply conscious grammar rules to their utterances such as; time, focus on form, and knowing the rule. According to Krashen, second language learners need time to think about applying rules when speaking. He claims that a normal conversation does not allow sufficient time for this condition (p. 16). Dulay and Burt (1978) argue that in order to use the monitor effectively, performers must also focus on the form and think about correctness. Nevertheless, Krashen explains that heavy use of the monitor disturbs the natural order (p. 18).

3) The natural order hypothesis: Based on this hypothesis, second language is acquired in predictable sequences (Lightbown & Spada, 2000). Krashen (1987) argues that certain grammatical structures are acquired in early stages. For instance, Brown (1973) reported that English language learners learn the "ing" form of the verb and plural form of nouns "adding 's'" sooner compared to verb-form for the third person, adding 's' (he works) and the ('s) as showing ownership "John's hat" (p. 12).

Krashen (1987) claims that based on natural order hypothesis, instructors primarily provide input for acquisition and teachers encourage use of the target language in a low-affective filter environment. Students will not be required to speak until they are ready to do so (p. 139).

4) The input hypothesis: By introducing this hypothesis, Krashen (1987) tries to cast light on the question of "how languages are acquired." He explains that learners learn languages only by exposure to input that is just beyond the learner's current level of competence ($i + 1$), where i is the current level of language knowledge and 1 will be the amount beyond learners' understanding (Lightbown & Spada, 2000).

In addition, Krashen encourages activities that are designed to develop listening skills. He claims that learners, especially children, build up competence in the SL by first listening to the language, which will ultimately lead to speaking ability; once sufficient listening in the form of comprehensible input is developed. According to Krashen (1987), learners need time to process and comprehend the message before beginning to produce (silent period). He claims that in a formal classroom, where languages are learned instead of acquired, learners are not given sufficient time to process and are not allowed to go through the silent period. Teachers who are not familiar with the concept of the "silent period" often ask their students to produce in the early stage of learning.

Krashen (1987) cites Newmark (1966) and argues that, in this situation, language learners usually refer to the rules of their first language for production in the second language (p. 27). Krashen claims that using L1 rules has some short-term advantages, whereas its disadvantages will be quite serious. Krashen refers to “positive transfer” when learners apply some identical rules of L1 to L2 (the contrastive analysis hypothesis). Positive transfer may help learners temporarily enhance production, but the progress will not be real. On the other hand, if there is fall back to rules of L1 to produce L2 and rules are not similar “negative transfer,” students may become frustrated.

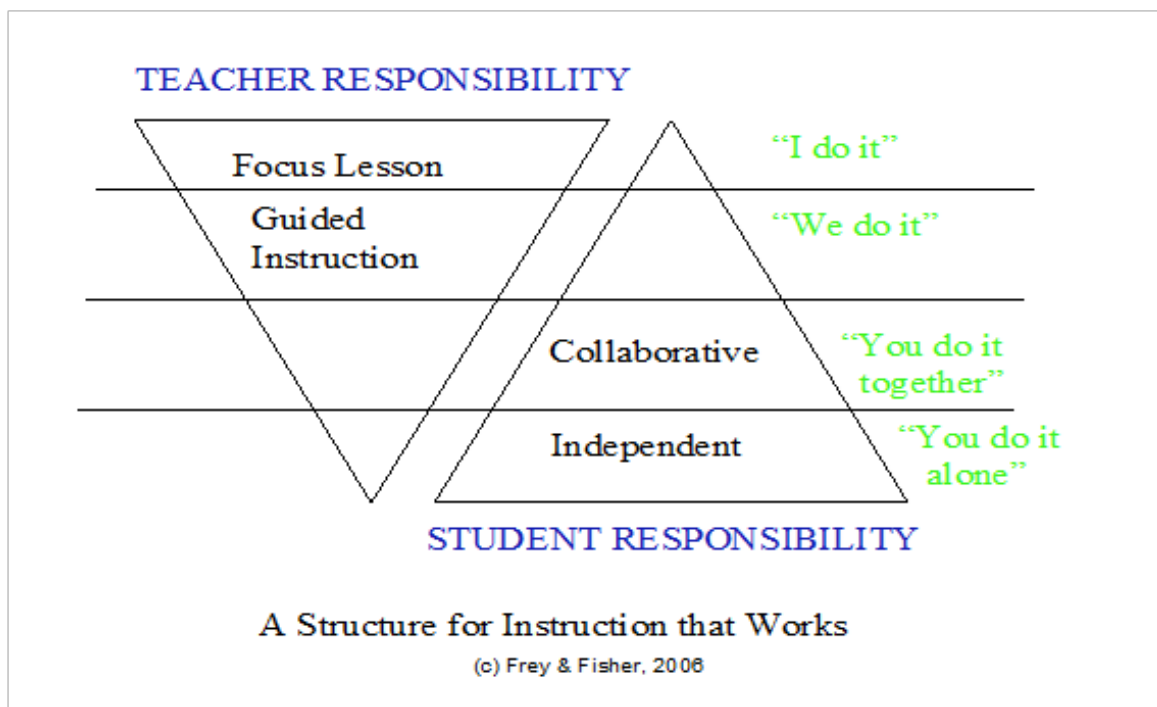
Krashen refers to “reading” as a great source of comprehensible input, however he warns that usually readings are hard to be comprehended by students. In addition, the irrelevancy of some readings to students’ interests makes the reading an ineffective means of comprehension (Lightbown & Spada, 2000). According to Krashen (1987), readings are designed to reinforce forms of the lesson and purposely sequenced grammatically. This situation violates every theory of the Input Hypothesis including “natural order,” (p. 129). Krashen (1987) claims that slower rates and clearer articulation, more use of high frequency vocabulary, fewer slang words or idioms, and shorter sentences greatly aid in the acquisition of second language (p. 55). In addition, discussing topics familiar to students will also aid in comprehension, as topics that are unknown to students will make the topic difficult to understand, and students may lose their interest (p. 67). Krashen further refers to “negotiating of meaning” as another source of comprehensible input. Some other researchers refer to this concept as “negotiating of meaning” in which explanation is given to students in a different and modified way. Krashen (1987) believes that modified and simplified language will assist learners in understanding the SLA. He refers to “modified language” as foreigner-talk and teacher talk. Krashen (1987) sees input hypothesis as necessary and sufficient for second language acquisition and ignores the role of output. He claims that learners acquire fluency not by speaking but by listening, reading, and understanding input (p. 61). Swain (1985, 1995), on the other hand, supports the output hypotheses and claims that production assists learners to observe their progress and realize the gap between “what they want to say” and “what they can actually say,” (Shrum & Glisan, 2010, Menees, 2012). Swain refers to this concept as “noticing” and argues that noticing has a significant role in SLA (Menees, 2012). Nevertheless, Krashen claims that forcing students to speak before they are ready to do so, will create anxiety and reduce language acquisition. He argues that “participation in conversation” helps language acquisition (Krashen, 2012).

5) The affective filter hypothesis: Krashen (1987) refers to the “affective filter” as an imaginary barrier that prevents SLA. These affects include motives, needs, attitudes, self-confidence, and emotional states (p. 30). According to this hypothesis, languages will not be acquired if the learning environment is tense and stressful (Lightbown & Spada, 2000). The concept of the Affective Filter was first introduced by Dulay and Burt (1977) as the most directly related concept to second language achievement (Krashen, 1987, p. 31). Stevick (1976), supporting the hypothesis of the Affective Filter, adds that classrooms with low affective filters provide students with better learning environments and keep students “off the defensive.”

Another factor that is considered important in SLA is “acculturation.” Krashen (1987) believes that acculturation lowers the filter and makes input more comprehensible (p. 45). Krashen (1987) cites Schumann and argues that with social integration and interaction with native speakers of the target language, learners become physiologically open to the target language and acquire it easier.

Lev Vygotsky, a Russian psychologist, acknowledges the significance of “acculturation” and adds that all cognitive development including language development occurs as a result of social interactions between people (Lightbown & Spada, 2000). Vygotsky wrote: “the source of learning and development is found in social interaction rather than solely in the mind of an individual,” (Swain, Kinnear & Steinman, 2011, p. x). To him, a learner can better learn a language if he or she interacts with adults/or with other learners. He refers to this concept as Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). According to Vygotsky (1986), ZPD is the difference between what students can achieve alone and what they can achieve with some help of adults or more experienced peers. Based on this concept, learners learn better if they receive support from interaction with more advanced inter-

Figure 1: Scaffolding



locutors (repetition, simplification, and modeling). Another similar concept is Scaffolding. Wood et al. (1976), cited by Swain, Kinnear and Steinman (2011), defined scaffolding as “a kind of process that enables a child or novice to solve a problem, carry out a task, or achieve a goal which would be beyond his unassisted efforts,” (p. 26). Frey and Fisher (2006) explain the concept of scaffolding with the diagram in Figure 1.

Long (1983) suggests that an interaction must be modified (e.g. elaboration, slower speech rate, gesture, etc.) in order for an input to become comprehensible (Long, 1983; Lightbown & Spada, 2000). He further explains that linguistic form must be consistently modified until learners demonstrate signs of understanding (Lightbown & Spada, 2000).

Frey and Fisher (2006) claim that improving instruction is a shared responsibility and all stakeholder including leaders, staff, teachers, students, and the community must contribute to the cause. They refer to the Action Research theory in language teaching as the remedy for improving instruction and student learning outcomes.

Theoretical Framework

1. Theory of Action:

This theory is based on: 1) standard-based curriculum (national); 2) building professional learning communities (PLC); and 3) professional development and capacity building of educational staff. Curriculum formed by national standards focuses on student-centered class – meaning more students participate and collaborate. Some may argue that a standard-based curriculum takes away teacher autonomy in the classroom. However, standard-based curriculum unifies programs and teachers, and promotes teacher collaboration and professional development. Ultimately, standards-based curriculum translates to schools and programs success (Darling-Hammond, Aness & Ort, 2002) cited by Frey and Fisher (2006).

2. Curriculum Theories and Practice and their Implications

This theory explains that learning is planned and guided. It tries to answer “what is taught?” and “how it is taught?” In this paper the researcher reviews the curriculum from the perspective of Catherine Cornbleth (1990, p. 5) who explains: curriculum is what actually happens in classrooms e.g. “an ongoing social process comprised of the interactions of students, teachers, knowledge and milieu.” With this lens the study gathers information about the type of the curriculum implemented by the program.

V. Method

1. Participants

a) Students:

Data was collected in the form of work samples and classroom observations between August and October 2012 from 43 students (13 Dari students and 20 Pashto students). However, eight students dropped from the study as they left the program early.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics

Measure	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Age	35	19.00	42.00	28.49	5.97
Highest level of Education	35	1.00	4.00	2.60	1.08
No. of Foreign Lang	35	0.00	3.00	0.71	0.86
Living Exp. abroad	35	1.00	2.00	1.30	0.46
Living Exp. Afghan.	35	1.00	2.00	1.70	0.48

Education level: 1 = High School, 4 = Master

The participants were all adults who were admitted into the language program as a job requirement. These participants entered the program with no prior knowledge of the language. Their formal education ranged from high school to graduate level degrees, and their ages ranged between 18 and 50. Some had experience living in a foreign country and knew at least one foreign language.

b) Teachers:

Also, four Dari/Pashto teachers who were native speakers of Dari and Pashto took part in the study. Three of them received their formal education in Afghanistan and only one completed her undergraduate level education in the United States. These teachers completed professional development and teacher training workshops offered by STARTALK (a federally funded educational program) and California World Language Project (CWLP). Their ages ranged from 26-45.

Data Collection

Data was collected in the form of surveys, interviews, class observations, and student work sample coupled with test scores.

a) Student's survey

Students were surveyed at the beginning of the course using an instrument that is attached as Appendix.

b) Students - Interviews

Seven students were randomly selected and interviewed from the Dari and Pashto courses. Students were asked to define "best practices" in second language acquisition and talk about their learning experience in the program (Appendix 2). Each interview lasted for about 30 minutes. All seven students knew at least one more foreign language and had lived outside of the United States. They were highly motivated and enjoyed learning languages. The interview offered an opportunity for students to express themselves and talk openly about their experience in the program. The interview (soft data) helped the researcher to better understand the significance of some factors such as one-on-one mentoring in SLA. The researcher agrees with Frey and Fisher (2006) who claim that soft data answers the question of "why" and puts a human face on the numbers.

c) Teachers – Interviews

Four teachers were interviewed and asked to talk about their experience in the program. Each interview lasted between 20-25 minutes. The teachers were specifically asked to reflect on their challenges. A semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix 3) was used to keep the interview organized.

d) Classroom observations

• Three-minutes classroom walk-through:

Based on the principals offered by Downey, Steffy, English, Frase, and Poston (2004), the researcher conducted many short and informal classroom observations during the reported period and collected evidence of instruction delivery and students' interaction.

• Formal classroom observation

During the reported period, the researcher observed four classes taught by different instructors. The purpose of the observation was to gather evidence of variation in types of instruction and class delivery. Specifically, he was interested to see teachers' instructional pedagogies and practices. He also observed student interactions and participation during class. He used an altered rubric from the STARTALK program to keep his observations organized. A copy of the rubric is attached as Appendix 4.

• Weekly progress report

Soft data such as homework, attendance, student's behavior and performance also collected from student weekly progress reports (Appendix 5) were entered into SPSS (quantitative research software) for analysis.

e) External OPI scores

At the end of the course some students were also required to take an official OPI administered by Language Testing International LTI, a branch of ACTFL. The test score was also used to further validate the finding of this study. However, as mentioned earlier, not all students took this test.

f) Exam score

Students final exam scores were entered into the SPSS to be analyzed, to find out if a correlation existed between variables and student progress.

2. Variables

Variables such as age, ethnicity, education, information about foreign language, perception of Afghan culture, prior exposure to the languages, amount of tutoring, grades, OPI score, attendance, student weekly progress report, and class participation were collected over a period of three months (August – October 2012). The data was entered into SPSS and analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively.

External OPI scores were also collected to match with internal data to further establish validity and reliability of the research outcome. However, this data was not available for all students.

VI. Findings

1. Data from SPSS

Two OPIs were conducted internally by those teachers who were ACTFL certified Dari/Pashto testers. It is important to mention that the teachers were not testing their own students. The 1st OPI was conducted mid-program and the 2nd OPI was conducted at the end of the program. The 2nd OPI scores (internally conducted) were matched with other variables to determine if there was any relationship or correlation among them.

The figures from table 2 indicate that there was not a statistically significant correlation between age and 2nd OPI Score ($r=.36$) and living experience abroad ($r=.48$). However, the data revealed a slight negative correlation between the 2nd OPI score and level of education and the belief about the significance of grammar in SLA, which means students who had greater education and were more concerned with accuracy (grammar) had lower oral proficiency ratings compared to their counterparts. This finding is important as it endorses the Monitor Hypothesis that Krashen (1982) has proposed.

The data further shows a slight positive correlation between the 2nd OPI score and perception toward feedback ($r=.06$) as well as with the number of foreign languages that the students knew ($r=.07$).

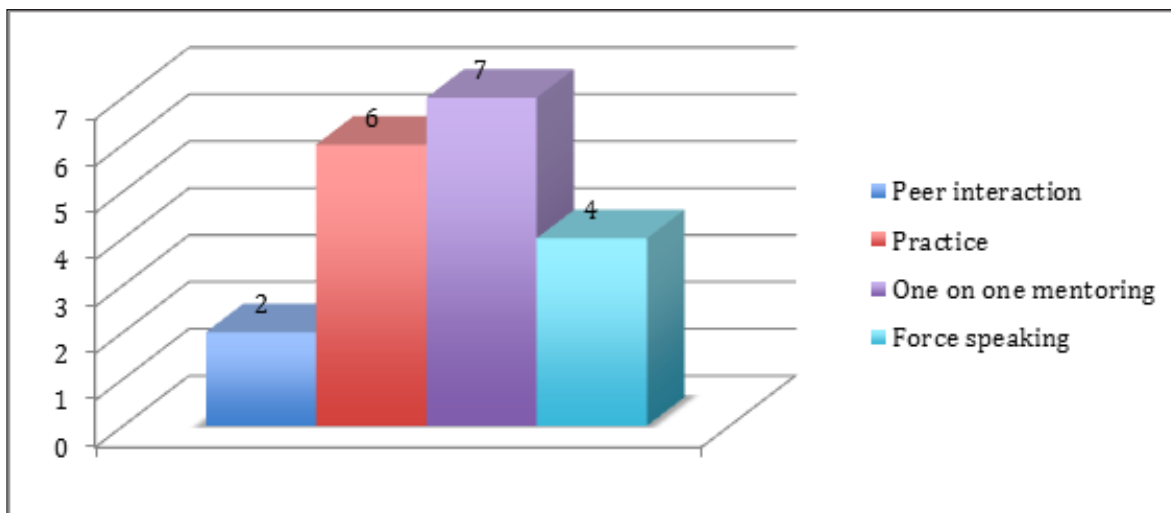
Table 2
Correlations Between 2nd OPI Score and other Measures

Measure	N	Pearson Correlation
Age	35	.36
Highest level of Education	35	-.03
Perception toward Grammar	35	-.02
Perception toward Feedback	35	.06
No. of foreign language know	35	.07
Living experience abroad	35	.48

2. Interview - Students

As the findings from the interview with the seven students indicate (Figure 2), the variables that contribute the most to language learning and acquisition are: 1) one-on-one mentoring with instructor; 2) continued opportunities for practice; 3) and forced speaking in the target language (Dari/Pashto). However, fewer students believed that peer interaction assists in learning a second language. They believed that peers might not be in a position to correct each other and provide feedback for improvement. “Peer interaction” was rated the least important factor in learning a foreign language.

Figure 2. Students’ beliefs about effective teaching strategies



Students were also in favor of a complete immersion program where Dari/Pashto language is used in the class more than 95 percent of the time. One of the students referred to the immersion program as a “sink or swim environment.”

3. Classroom Observation

Four classrooms were observed formally, meaning that, the researcher spent more than 30 minutes collecting evidence of instruction delivery, student-teacher interaction using an observation rubric. The rubric

(Appendix 4) was modified from its original form to meet the specific goals of the program. He also observed classes informally (three-minute walk-through) every day to collect data. The purpose of the informal class observations were not necessarily to evaluate the teacher; rather they were to collect data on curriculum, instructional, and student level of engagement (Downey, 2004). In the following sections, the researcher first reveals his observations about the curriculum and then moves to student work sample, and formal classroom observations.

a. Curriculum

1) Data from Survey Monkey: The majority of students were not satisfied with the curriculum used by the program. The following are quotes from the students in response to a question in the online survey about the effectiveness of the curriculum:

- Random lessons pop up in the curriculum
- The method of instructions ok. I don't really like how we have a different teacher every hour
- It was kind of hard switching instructors every hour as well as subject
- Some of the curriculum seems disjointed
- I often found it confusing and difficult to associate the homework with the lesson plan in the book

The survey form can be found in Appendix 1.

2) Data from Teachers' Interview: Developing standardized curriculum was the area that all teachers emphasized in their interviews. All teachers agreed that at the beginning of the program, there was not a set curriculum and they had to develop their own teaching materials. A teacher indicated that he was very nervous entering the classroom as he did not have a solid lesson plan. He was always thinking what he should do for the next session. Another instructor pointed to students' complaints and feedback as a source of frustration. According to him, students were not happy with the instructors entering and exiting the classroom to teach different sessions without coordinating with each other, everything was mixed and there was no clear instructions. Another teacher complained that the curriculum was dictated by the administration to teachers "top-down." The interview protocol is attached as Appendix 3.

b. Students Work Sample

1) Homework: Student learning output demonstrates what and how the contents are taught (Frey & Fisher, 2006). The review of students' homework from the Dari and Pashto classes revealed pronunciation, rules of first language, and instructor feedback as the areas that affected student learning negatively.

i. Pronunciation: Student writing sample indicated that most of them struggled with differentiating between letters' sounds. For instance, some were not able to distinguish the sound of soft "ah" as in Yeah from "aa" as in Australia.

ii. Negative transfer: Transfer of rules from English (students' first language) was evident, especially in the use of preposition such as "to." For instance, students mostly translated "to school" exactly in the same order as in English, while in Pashto the order switches "school to." Another student translated "tailor sews clothes" exactly in the same order as in English, while in Dari and Pashto the formula for a simple sentence is "subject + object/complement + verb." The above sentence should have looked like: "tailor clothes sews."

iii. Instructor's feedback: Review of student homework revealed that instructors did not provide thorough and constructive feedback to the students. In some parts instructors completely ignored questions without providing any feedback, which may have led to misunderstanding on the part of students who might have thought their answers were correct. On another occasion, an instructor had completely crossed out (marked incorrect) a student's translation without offering any comments or feedback.

c. Classroom Observation

i. Class Management: The classes were taught with one lead and a teacher aide. During the 30 minute four formal classroom observations, the researcher found that the lead teacher usually started the lesson with a lesson plan and the teacher aide waited for opportunities to interject. While waiting, the teacher aide would quite often get involved in side conversations with students. Sometimes, the teachers would walk out of the classrooms to attend their phone calls. Lack of prior coordination between lead teachers and teacher aides was evident. In one instance, a lead teacher asked the teacher aide if he agreed with him to give a certain activity to students. In a couple of sessions the teacher aides joined the second half of the class and did not know what was taught earlier. When the teachers started small group activities, there was a lack of their awareness about the first half of the session which led to confusion on the part of students because the teacher aides did not use the same vocabulary that students had learned in the first half of the session. In one of the classes, a teacher aide walked into the class and provided clarification to students while the lead teacher was lecturing. The observation rubric can be found in Appendix 4.

ii. Instruction

1) **Handouts** had many typos; for instance, the transliteration was not consistent.

2) **Error correction:** Teachers corrected students' errors immediately/or moved to another student to get the right answer. In one instance, a student completely stopped producing as soon as he was asked to correct his sentence structure (subject + object + verb) when he was trying to provide an answer to a question posed by the instructor:

Teacher: How do you say, "I go to class?"

Student: "May-rawam (go) Man (I)..."

Teacher: "No, no, you have to use the verb (May-rawam -go) at the end of the sentence"

Student: Um, Um [gave up]

Ellis (1990) explains that learners build fluency if errors are to be tolerated.

3) **Use of English:** The instructors were falling back to English instead of sticking to the target language e.g. Dari/Pashto to explain the grammatical concepts to the students.

4) **Interaction:** Instructors were mostly interacting with a few students who were active participants.

5) **Vocabulary:** was introduced and practiced with students in the form of traditional drills such as "repeat after me." For instance, on one occasion a teacher was pronouncing the infinitive form of the verb and asking students to repeat after him:

Teacher: "Nashas-tan" (to sit)

Students: "Nashas-tan"

Teacher: "Nashas-tan"

Students: "Nashas-tan"

6) **Lack of comprehensible input:** to introduce vocabulary was evident. For example, no visual aid, realia, modeling, or Total Physical Response (TPR) was used to introduce and practice vocabulary.

7) **Scaffolding:** was also not evident as the lesson was mostly presented in the form of lecture where the teacher spoke the majority of the time. Students received fewer opportunities to participate in their learning.

VIII. Develop and Implement and Monitor Action Plan

Once the data has been collected, the teachers created a Professional Learning Community (PLC) team to analyze and reflect on the data to make a data-driven decision and take action. During data collection, the teachers noticed situations that needed attention and intervention. The researcher agrees with Frey and Fisher (2006) who argue that understanding the root causes of problems makes it easy for the educators to develop goals and objectives to eliminate them. After each observation, teachers were asked to meet as a PLC and discuss and address an observed problem. They were basically asked to discuss what they want their students to know and how to collect evidence of student learning (Frey & Fisher, 2006).

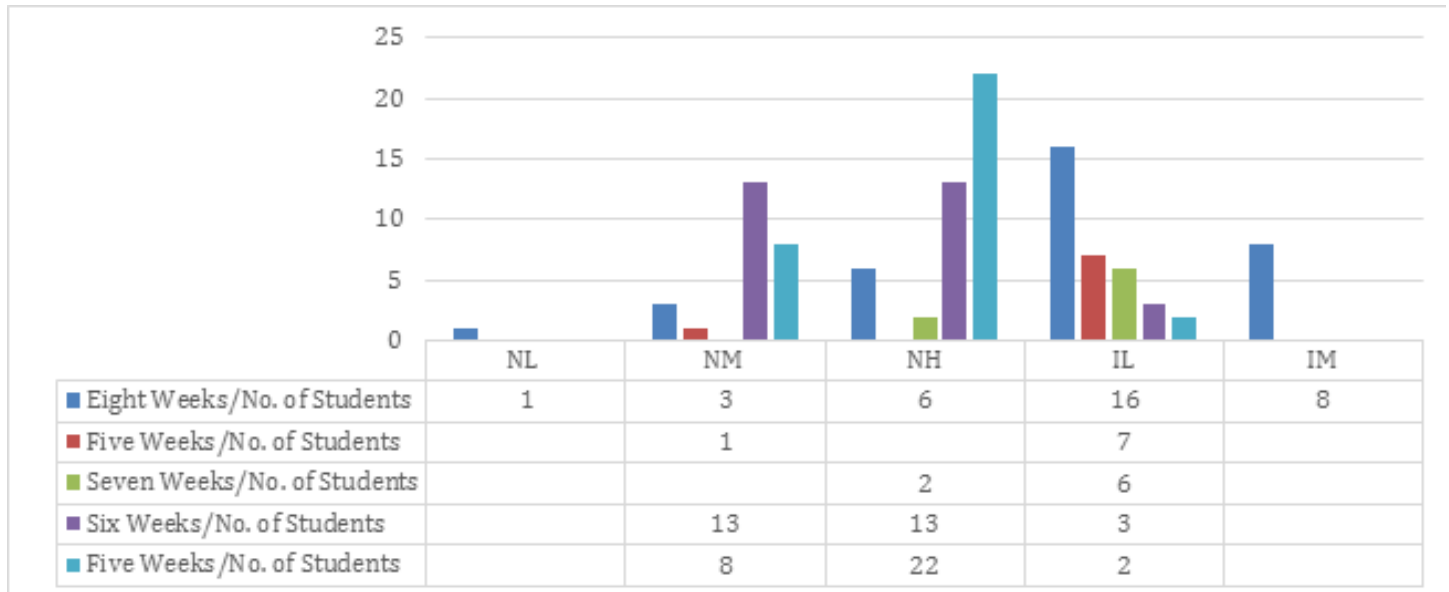
Based on the findings of this study the teachers identified non-availability of a standardized curriculum as the main factor that affected student learning outcomes negatively. Teachers decided to talk about a curriculum that pertains to the specific needs of their students. They decided to develop a curriculum that supports each individual session and prepares students for the next session(s). They also decided to involve students in the process by offering them a list of topics to choose from as major themes and sub-themes for the duration of the course. The teachers also decided to share the draft of curricula with their students for feedback. In addition, the teachers decided to match materials' appropriateness to students' level based on ACTFL proficiency guidelines (ACTFL, 2012) and include the following components in it:

- Conversation and practice
- Teaching grammar explicitly to students through homework assignments in order to save instructional time.
- Increasing use of Dari and Pashto language in class.
- Providing opportunities for students to get exposed to the language outside of the classroom.

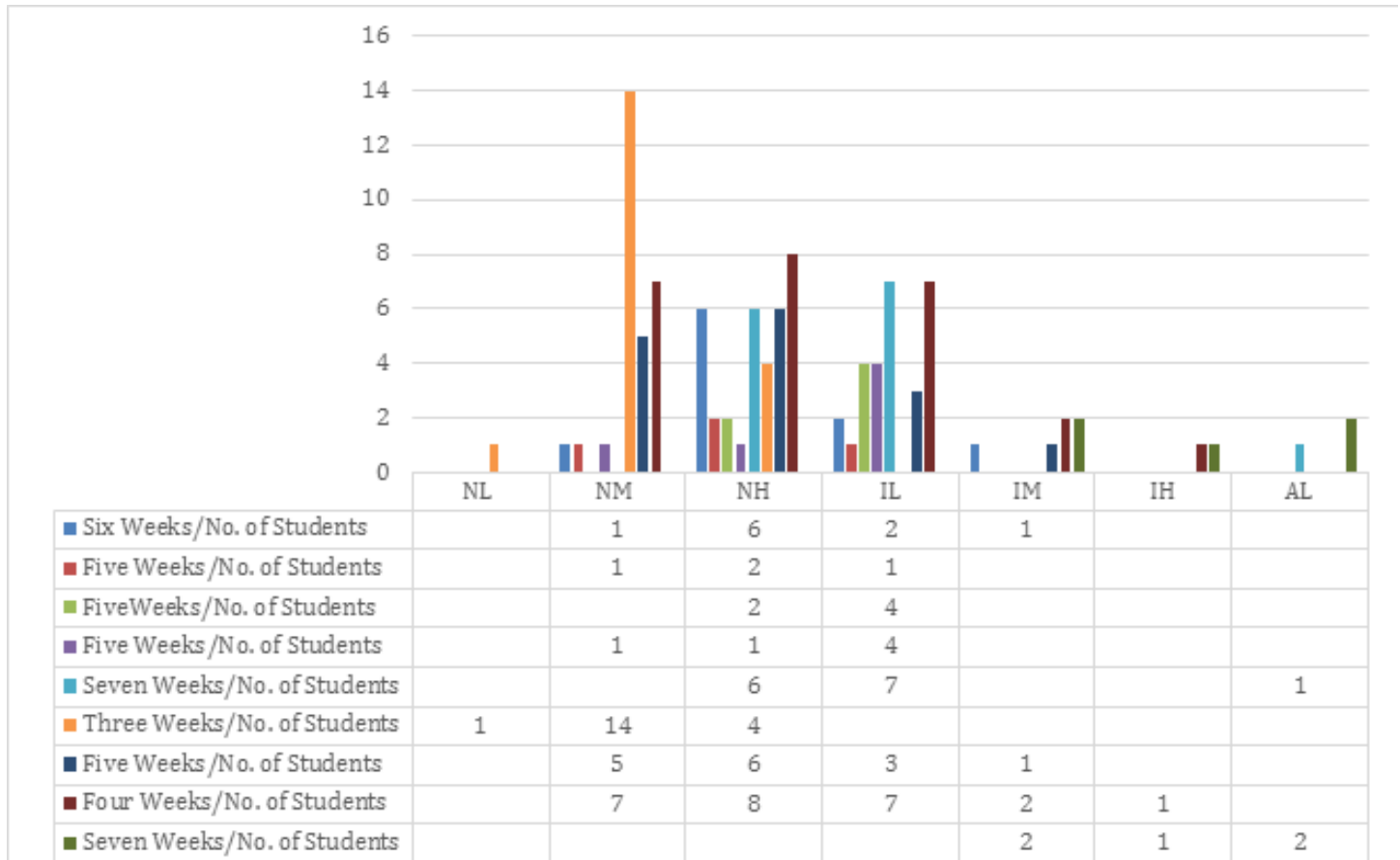
The Current Curriculum

The current curriculum has been designed and developed based on the principals of Backward Design (Eddy, 2012), California five-step lesson plan (CWLP, 2013), and ACTFL oral proficiency guidelines (ACTFL, 2012). The Lesson Plan Generator (LPG), a software developed by LRC, has been used to develop these lessons (LARC, 2014). Intensive elementary Pashto (eight weeks) now has 280 lesson plans and activities and Intensive elementary Dari (six weeks) has 218 lesson plans and activities. The lessons are thematic and begin with introduction of vocabulary in the form of a conversation, which enhances students ability to acquire the language in a short time and be able to create with the language. As the data in graph 1 and 2 demonstrate, the students' OPI scores improved tremendously after the implementation of the new curricula. The scores have been assigned by external testers of ACTFL.

Graph 1. Elementary Pashto course - OPI Scores officially assigned by ACTFL
January – September 2013



Graph 2. Elementary Dari course - OPI scores officially assigned by ACTFL
January 2013 – May 2014



N (Novice), I (Intermediate), A (Advanced), L (Low), M (Mid), H (High)

For monitoring and assessing the effects of the action plan, the team of instructors decided to establish a system of promoting the culture of PLC and reflection on instruction among teachers. This would entail audio-taping and critiquing instruction, continued classroom observations and providing feedback for improvement from more experienced peers. The teachers also decided to monitor student progress reports on a weekly bases using a rubric (Appendix 5).

Conclusion

Action research projects serve the needs of teachers because teachers themselves get involved in systematically collecting information on issues and then taking action using their data. In this research action project, the teachers identified areas that hold students back from developing competency and fluency in speaking Dari and Pashto in intensive classes. The teachers decided to develop more coherent curriculum and assess and monitor its implementation by videotaping classes, observing each other's instruction and providing feedback, and reflecting on their instruction and student learning outcomes regularly using the PLC format.

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Appendices

Appendix 1

Pre-course Survey - Students

Please select a four-digit number that can be used as an identification code for post survey : _____

1. How old are you? _____
2. What is your gender? Male / Female
3. How do you define your ethnicity? _____
4. What is the highest level of your education? _____
5. What is your native language? _____
6. How many other languages do you speak? 0 1 2 3 4/ more
7. Do you have any experience living in a foreign country? Yes / No
If yes, where and how long? _____
8. Do you have any experience living in Afghanistan? Yes / No
If yes, how long? _____
9. How do you visualize Afghans and Afghanistan? /what are your perceptions? Please be as detailed as possible: _____

-
-
10. Do you have any prior exposure to Dari/Pashto? Yes / No:
If yes, where and how long? _____
11. Do you have any outside classroom exposure to Dari/Pashto? Yes / No:
If yes, how and for how long? _____
12. Please define best practices in learning a foreign language:

13. Please define best practices in teaching a foreign language:

14. How important is it to learn *grammar* explicitly?
Very Important Important Less important Not important
15. How do you see the role of *homework* in learning the contents of the lesson?
Very Important Important Less important Not important
16. How do you see the role of *feedback* in learning the contents of the lesson?
Very Important Important Less important Not important
17. Please provide any other comments that you may have:

Appendix 2

Interview Questions - Students

1. Tell me about your background as a language learner.
2. Tell me about your experience in this course
3. How do you define “best practices” in a second language class?

Appendix 3

Interview Questions - Teachers

1. Tell me about your experience as a teacher of Dari/Pashto in this program
2. What challenges have you faced? And how did you deal with them?

Appendix 4

Class Observation Rubric

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	No opportunity to assess/ Not observed
(1) The observed class matches the written descriptions of the curriculum				
(2) The teacher had lesson plans that clearly communicate the learning goals and activities for each day.				
(3) Students clearly understand the goals of the lesson.				
(4) The environment is conducive to language learning.				
(5) The teacher to student ratio is appropriate to ensure the success of the program				
(6) The target language is used at least 90% of the time for communication and instruction. English is used only when necessary.				
(7) The input is comprehensible. Students demonstrate comprehension of the target language.				
(8) The teacher checks frequently for student understanding.				
(9) Instruction is designed to facilitate learner-centered learning.				
(10) Instruction allows for meaningful interaction in the target language.				
(11) Instruction integrates language and culture.				
(12) Students use technology when available to meet the goals.				
(13) Authentic resources are used effectively to support the class.				
(14) Learning experiences address the interpretive mode of communication.				
(15) Learning experiences address the interpersonal mode of communication.				
(16) Learning experiences address the presentational mode of communication.				
(17) Instructional experiences build toward opportunities in each lesson for meaningful, unrehearsed communication. A balance exists between meaningful guided and independent practice.				
(19) Instructional time is used effectively in each lesson.				

Appendix 5

Weekly Progress Report

Teacher's Name: _____

Date: _____

Week # _____

	(Student Name)	(Student Name)	(Student Name)	(Student Name)	(Student Name)	(Student Name)
<i>Homework</i>	M T W T F □ □ □ □ □	M T W T F □ □ □ □ □	M T W T F □ □ □ □ □	M T W T F □ □ □ □ □	M T W T F □ □ □ □ □	M T W T F □ □ □ □ □
<i>Attentiveness</i>	M T W T F □ □ □ □ □	M T W T F □ □ □ □ □	M T W T F □ □ □ □ □	M T W T F □ □ □ □ □	M T W T F □ □ □ □ □	M T W T F □ □ □ □ □
<i>Class Participation</i>	M T W T F □ □ □ □ □	M T W T F □ □ □ □ □	M T W T F □ □ □ □ □	M T W T F □ □ □ □ □	M T W T F □ □ □ □ □	M T W T F □ □ □ □ □
<i>Classroom behavior</i>	M T W T F □ □ □ □ □	M T W T F □ □ □ □ □	M T W T F □ □ □ □ □	M T W T F □ □ □ □ □	M T W T F □ □ □ □ □	M T W T F □ □ □ □ □
<i>Homework</i>						
<i>Participation</i>						
<i>Classroom behavior</i>						

General Remarks: Student will be evaluated based on the following scales:

Scales	Attentiveness	Class Participation	Classroom behavior
1 – 3	Does not listen	Does not participates	Poor behavior (busy with other stuff during the class times or disrespecting the teachers)
4 – 6	Sometimes listens	Sometimes participates	Good behavior
7 - 10	Always listens	Always participates	Always well behaved