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Languages for Specific Purposes: Best Practices in Teaching and Learning South Asian and Middle Eastern Languages to Military Personnel

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Abstract

Language for Specific Purposes is concerned with the practical use of the target language (Robinson, 1989), such as Arabic for business or English for academic study. Typically, language training programs focus on the development of 1) skills acquisition for general communication, 2) reading skills, and 3) knowledge about cultural differences (Hudson & Brown, 2015). While these skills are essential for meeting the goals of language programs, they fail to prepare learners for practical purposes, especially when it comes to job-specific language needs (McGinn, 2014; USGAO, 2010 & 2002).

This article details the process of designing and developing effective language and culture courses. It centers on data collected from an institution of higher education in Southern California that offers courses on Middle Eastern and South Asian languages, including Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), Arabic-Iraqi, Arabic-Levantine, Arabic-Yamani, Dari, Pashto, and Persian-Farsi to military personnel who enroll in order to satisfy a job requirement.

Introduction

Language for Specific Purposes (LSP) is a branch of applied linguistics that emphasizes teaching and learning a language for practical use (Robinson, 1989). Typically, language programs center on developing skills for general communication, exposing learners to the target language culture, and enabling students to understand and appreciate cultural differences. While mastering those competencies have great value, it has become apparent that programs need to narrow their focus to using language appropriately in real-life (Norris, 2006; Sacco, 2014). Teaching and learning languages for a specific purpose becomes even more critical when programs face learners with explicit and immediate language needs. LSP thrives in environments where there are limited resources, shortages of qualified teachers, and accelerated course timelines as it prioritizes the essentials of education and stresses the needs and interests of learners (Bojovic, 2006).

Drawing from literature and experience, this article first introduces an established intensive language program at an institution of higher education in Southern California and then describes the core steps, adapted from Brown (1995), in designing and developing effective LSP programs for military personnel.

Institutional Background

The demand for intensive and focused courses in critical languages (i.e., different dialects of Arabic, Dari, Pashto, and Persian-Farsi) increased following the 9/11 attack on U.S. soil. U.S. military personnel needed to develop and enhance their language and culture skills in order to carry out their mission successfully. Many institutions of higher education started offering intensive language and culture courses funded through DoD-sponsored Language Training Centers (LTC). The LTC program was established in 2011 to provide language and culture training for U.S. military personnel through eight universities across the country (LTC, 2021).

A particularly effective Pashto language program emerged from an institution of higher education in Southern California. This program provided intensive language and culture training courses to military personnel who enrolled in the classes as part of a job requirement. Learners entered the program with novice low/ILR 0 (ACTFL, 2017; ILR, 2021) proficiency and left with novice-high/ILR 0+ or higher proficiency after eight weeks. Learners received seven hours of instructional contact and one to two hours of independent work per day. In total, there were approximately 320 hours of instruction delivered throughout the entire program. The structure and protocol of this program served as a template for other Middle Eastern and South Asian language and culture courses offered by the institution.

Through task-based teaching and learning approaches, learners were immersed in the target language and culture. Proficiency gained was assessed through the implementation of a weekly Integrated Performance Assessment (IPA), which required students to:

1. Search for information through interpretive modes of communication.
2. Exchange information through interpersonal interactions.
3. Synthesize and present information through written and oral presentations.

The program director consistently collected and analyzed data and made necessary adjustments to meet learners' specific needs and interests.

Core Steps in Designing a Pashto for Specific Purposes Course

In general, designing a Pashto LSP course is like creating any other language course. However, there are certain challenges that program directors and educators may face when designing an LSP course to teach a language like Pashto. Pashto is a less-commonly taught language in the United States and there are few resources to support courses with a specific purpose.

To better address the specific needs of learners, the institution adapted the following model introduced by Brown (1995) to design the courses:

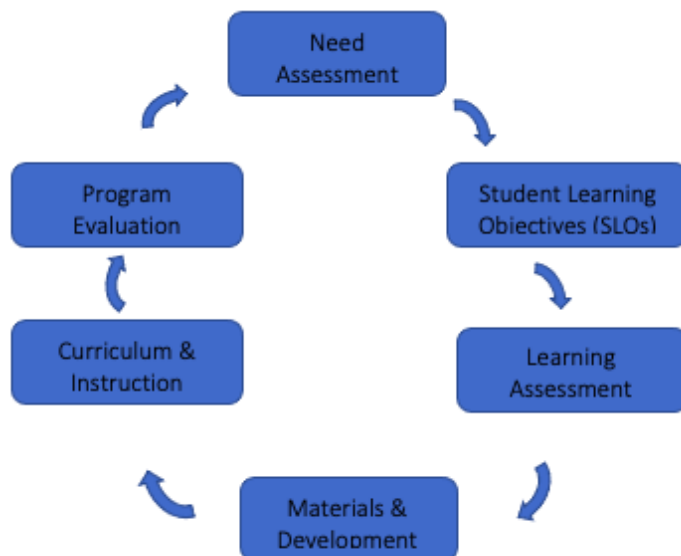


Figure 1: Core Steps in Designing Pashto for Specific Purposes Course

The steps in the model are implemented based on backward design principles (Tighe & Wiggins 2012). These steps are nonlinear and must be repeated as many times as needed to achieve the desired outcomes.

A) Needs Assessment

As with every LSP course, the Pashto course for military personnel started with identifying learners' needs and interests. The needs assessment was performed in multiple steps. At least one month before the start of the course, the requesting military unit communicated essential information to the Pashto program in a report. The report included learners' current and desired end-of-the-course level of oral and reading proficiency. The unit also provided learners' Defense Language Proficiency Test (DLPT) and the Defense Language Aptitude Battery (DLAB) scores, if available. Additionally, the unit identified language teaching and learning essentials. They let the Pashto program know what topics and language functions to focus on.

Needs assessment was also performed on the first day of the course through one-on-one conversations and informal oral proficiency tests (OPIs) with the purpose of assessing learners' proficiency and cultural background knowledge of the target language. Learners were further asked about their prior exposure to Pashto or similar languages and cultures such as Arabic, Dari, Persian-Faris, and Urdu. Furthermore, the instructional staff identified learners' interests and learning styles via the administration of a questionnaire.

Needs assessment is imperative, especially in an LSP course. LSP curriculum and instruction reflect learners' needs and interests and motivate them to play an active role in the learning process. Needs assessment also helps educators to accurately align priorities and determine learning essentials (Bojovic, 2006).

A) Student Learning Objectives (SLOs)

The Student Learning Objectives (SLOs) were derived from the World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages (NCSSFL-ACTFL Can-Do Statements) for the novice level (ACTFL, 2012 & 2017):

Communication

Learners

- Can identify the general topic and some basic information in very familiar and everyday contexts by recognizing practiced or memorized words, phrases, and simple sentences in spoken and written texts.
- Can communicate in spontaneous spoken and written conversations on very familiar and everyday topics, using a variety of practiced or memorized words, phrases, simple sentences, and questions.
- Can present information on both very familiar and everyday topics using a variety of practiced or memorized words, phrases, and simple sentences.

Intercultural Communication

Learners

- Can identify products and practices to help them understand perspectives.
- Can interact at a survival level in some familiar everyday contexts.

B) Students Learning Assessment

Since the course was intended to increase learners' proficiency to novice high/ILR 0+, accuracy was not critical as long as errors did not impede the meaning of messages. The emphasis of the course was comprehension. Learners should be able to get their point across by creating with the language using learned and rehearsed words and phrases. They should also be able to exercise appropriate etiquette when interacting with native speakers (Sacco, & Senne, 2014).

Formative assessment provided the actual means of assessing students learning throughout the program. Formative assessment was performed through knowledge checks, observing group discussions, evaluating interaction with peers and native speakers, reviewing homework assignments, and conducting one-on-one conversations with teachers.

Students also demonstrated knowledge of culture and linguistic proficiency by completing multiple Integrated Performance Assessments (IPA). The IPA provided a means of assessing students through formative and summative performance assessments. In addition, students, individually or in groups of two, presented on a topic of interest in Pashto at the end of the program. Teachers and other instructional staff used assessment rubrics to assess performance and provide feedback. Students also took OPI and DLPT tests at the end

of the program. These tests were administered by an external entity.

C) Materials and Development

Once learners' needs and interests were identified, the program searched for age and level appropriate authentic and semi-authentic materials (Tighe & Wiggins 2012). Initially, the institution used a Pashto textbook designed for regular college students. However, the program soon realized that the textbook was not a practical resource for an intensive LSP course.

As mentioned earlier, Pashto is a critical language and offered on a need-basis. It is not part of a regular school or university curriculum. The only institution that provides Pashto courses to adult students is the Deference Language Institute (DLI). However, the DLI does not usually share resources with external entities.

The Pashto program decided to develop its own textbook and curriculum to address the needs and purposes of its students. Students played a significant role in the development of the textbook and curriculum. Students helped the program staff select themes relevant to their job and mission in Afghanistan (Saydee, 2014). Some themes included: Greeting and Introduction, Patrolling in Village, At a Checkpoint, Meeting with the Village Elders, and House Search. Students also shared valuable resources with the instructional team in order for materials to be developed.

The curriculum, textbook, and learning activities were designed using the backward design teaching model based on World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages. Relevant vocabulary and grammatical features of the language were presented to students in the context of scenarios based on selected themes. For instance, under the theme of *In the Battlefield*, students learned to ask and answer simple questions regarding common ailments and sickness. The vocabulary focused on medical terms and body parts. The grammar portion was centered on the use of verbs in the present and past tenses based on the context of the scenarios.

Additionally, the program shared the syllabus with the linguist department of the university for review and approval. Students who completed the program (320 hours) were eligible to receive three units of undergraduate college credit. It is worth mentioning that another Pashto program from an institution of higher education peer-reviewed the curriculum and materials and provided feedback.

D) Curriculum Delivery and Instruction

The thematic and scenario-based curriculum was designed to increase students' linguistic proficiency and cultural competence using content and task-based instruction and learner-centered approaches. Students were active participants. The use of the target language dominated the medium of instruction throughout the course. Only instructions for activities were provided in English. This approach saved instructional time and avoided confusion on the part of students. Learners received direct instruction using the Gradual Release of

Responsibility (GRR) model. They used afternoons to conduct research independently and in groups, review and practice the materials, and meet on a one-on-one basis with instructors for mentoring. Each student also had to spend four to six minutes with an instructor for an oral conversation in Pashto. Error correction was made through the method of recasting. The last 20-30 minutes of the instructional day was reserved for students to ask their specific questions in English and clarify any unclear points.

E) Program Evaluation

Using the experiential learning cycle, the program director and instructional team continuously collected, interpreted, and reflected on data (student learning evidence) to evaluate the program's effectiveness and identify areas that needed adjustment. Data was collected through different means and from multiple sources:

- While students could share their feedback regularly/daily with the program director, they had to complete a questionnaire every other week and reflect on their learning experience, curriculum, and methods of instruction. Students had to provide specific details and examples on how to improve the efficacy of the program.
- The program director collected data through formal and informal class observations, reviewed student work and assignments, and talked with them about their learning experience.
- Students had to complete a longer online questionnaire at the end of the program and share their experiences.
- Students had to share their experience in the program with their command officer(s), who would send detailed reports/feedback to the Pashto program highlighting the areas that needed to be adjusted for the next group of students.
- Often external observers and evaluators visited the program and provided written and verbal comments.
- Graduated students, who were deployed in the field, shared their feedback about the effectiveness of lessons they had learned during the program. They suggested changes to better prepare future students linguistically for their mission.

Conclusion

As students, especially military personnel, struggle to accommodate time for language learning in their already busy schedule, offering LSP courses is more effective and beneficial. In the context of this article, the Pashto LSP course motivated students to learn the language and enhance their cultural competence efficiently and effectively. Students found the materials tailored to their needs and purpose. Furthermore, including students in the development of curriculum and selection of themes and materials was another crucial component that contributed to the program's success. The Pashto language and culture training program format was then applied successfully to other Middle Eastern and South Asian languages such as Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), Arabic-Iraqi, Arabic-Levantine, Arabic-Yamani, Dari, Pashto, and Persian-Farsi offered by the institution.

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