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Dialog on Language Instruction

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Action Research

Beyond the “Vocabulary Cult”: A Six-Step Approach to L2 Listening

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This paper explores the challenges of listening comprehension for Persian language learners at the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center (DLIFLC), where an overemphasis on the role of vocabulary can overshadow the development of other crucial skills, particularly listening. I call this a “vocabulary cult.” Drawing on research highlighting the importance of syntactic knowledge and real-time processing for successful listening, this paper details a six-step pedagogical approach implemented at the Persian Farsi School (UPF), with students drawn from multiple departments, to address these challenges. The intervention focuses on progressively developing learners’ ability to parse spoken language, starting with identifying subject-verb units in short sentences and advancing to comprehending complex and compound sentences containing embedded modal verbs, prepositional phrases, and low-frequency vocabulary. The approach incorporates strategies such as chunking, syntactic mapping, identifying dependent and independent clauses as well as verb mood. Defense Language Proficiency Test (DLPT) results indicate that explicit instruction in sentence structure and real-time processing strategies can contribute to student improvement in listening comprehension, even for students who initially struggled with severe listening difficulties. These findings demonstrate the efficacy of a structured, progressive approach to second language (L2) listening instruction. Although this paper will focus on examples from Persian Farsi, many of these techniques can be applied to other languages as well, shifting content to the specific needs of the language being taught.

Keywords: *Listening Comprehension, Listening Strategy, Syntactic Parsing, Syntactic Mapping, Real-time Processing*

BACKGROUND

Within the rigorous language training environment of DLIFLC, achieving proficiency in listening comprehension is paramount yet challenging. As Vandergrift (2004) aptly points out, “Listening is probably the least explicit of the four language skills, making it the most difficult skill to learn” (p. 4), not only because of the physiological and cognitive processes involved, but also the attention learners have to pay to “contextual and ‘socially coded acoustic clues’” (Swaffar & Bacon, 1993, as cited in Vandergrift, 2004, p. 4). The multifaceted nature of listening requires learners to process auditory input while integrating it with their linguistic and cultural knowledge. Acquiring listening skills in a non-native environment, such as the DLIFLC where exposure is primarily classroom-based, presents a considerable obstacle due to limited authentic, real-world input.

Furthermore, the listening process itself is inherently complex, involving factors such as rapid speech, accent variations, reduced forms, unfamiliar vocabulary and idioms, and complex syntax. Learners must simultaneously employ bottom-up and top-down processing, which can be difficult with limited prior knowledge. Beyond these general challenges, each language presents unique obstacles. This paper focuses on Persian, which has a predominantly Subject-Object-Verb (SOV) word order, unlike the Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) structure of English, thereby requiring learners to process information differently, often delaying full comprehension until the verb appears at the sentence’s end. This verb-final structure increases cognitive load as listeners must hold information in their working memory.

Informal observations at the DLIFLC Persian Farsi School indicate that even students proficient in reading may struggle to identify verbs in longer sentences (around 30 words) and maintain focus, suggesting that unfamiliar, non-essential words can disrupt processing. Furthermore, learners often rely on isolated keywords in order to create meaning, leading to inaccurate interpretations based on lexical-semantic information rather than syntactic structure (Clahsen & Felser, 2006).

The strong emphasis on vocabulary acquisition at UPF—evidenced by the substantial amount of instructional time devoted to vocabulary review, the prevalence of vocabulary review clinics, and students’ over-reliance on decontextualized vocabulary practice apps and tools—what I personally refer to as a “vocabulary cult,” may inadvertently overshadow the development of crucial listening skills. Some research (Stæhr, 2008) suggests that vocabulary size has a weaker correlation with listening comprehension compared to reading and writing. In addition to students having sufficient vocabulary, other information such as syntactic knowledge, the ability to chunk discourse (Richards, 1983; Vafaei & Suzuki, 2020), and efficient real-time processing (Rost, 2011) are vital in listening. A strong foundation in morphology, understanding word formation and function (Hasan & Nomnian, 2021), further supports listening comprehension.

To address these multifaceted challenges hindering students’ listening comprehension, I designed and implemented a structured, step-by-step intervention to explore options to assist students in developing this skill. This plan involved a progression from identifying core sentence

elements (subject and verb) in simple sentences to tackling more complex structures. Subsequent steps included introducing prepositional phrases at the sentence's beginning; the identification of subject, direct object, and verb; the ability to filter out non-essential unfamiliar vocabulary; the analysis of sentences containing dependent and independent clauses; and finally, the comprehension of compound sentences with coordinated clauses and various modifiers. Throughout this process, explicit instruction on Persian grammatical features such as compound verbs and the genitive construction—alongside strategies such as chunking, anticipating sentence structure, and focusing on verb tense and prepositions—were integrated as potential avenues for enhancing students' ability to accurately process and interpret spoken Persian. This paper aims to investigate the effectiveness of this multi-stage intervention in mitigating the identified listening comprehension difficulties for Basic course students, who need to achieve an Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) Level 2 in listening in order to graduate.

This paper addresses the following question:

RQ: To what degree do targeted interventions that develop specific listening sub-skills and address Persian's unique features seem to help mitigate these challenges?

ACTION PLAN

This action research project was conducted to address the persistent challenges in listening comprehension faced by Persian language learners at DLIFLC. The primary focus was on improving students' ability to process sentence structure in real-time, identify essential grammatical elements, and move beyond reliance on isolated keywords. The intervention involved a structured, step-by-step approach using materials developed by the researcher, ensuring no prior student exposure.

Context

The participants in this action research project were 30 UPF students encountered across various class sections within the Persian Farsi School over a period of three years. These students progressed through the foundational stages of the curriculum and demonstrated good reading proficiency. However, ongoing observation and analysis of their performance on unit and proficiency tests revealed a consistent struggle with listening comprehension, particularly when dealing with sentences exhibiting non-standard word order and increased grammatical complexity. This difficulty impacted their ability to extract key information and achieve higher levels of listening proficiency required for their professional goals. The standard curriculum provided a base in grammar and vocabulary, but this project aimed to supplement it with explicit strategies and focused practice to enhance real-time processing of spoken Persian.

Actions Taken

To address the identified listening comprehension challenges, a six-step intervention was designed and implemented (see Table 1). Each step focused on a specific aspect of sentence

processing, building progressively in complexity. The intervention was conducted exclusively in one-on-one instructional sessions between the researcher and individual students. The materials used for the listening exercises in each step were developed by the researcher and were authentic or semi-authentic in nature, ensuring that students had not encountered them previously. The core methodology involved playing audio recordings of Persian sentences and asking students to report their understanding, with a consistent emphasis on identifying the essential grammatical elements: verb, subject, and object. When students encountered difficulties, the researcher provided guidance through targeted prompts rather than direct answers, such as indicating the potential location of the subject (beginning or elsewhere), directing attention to prepositions, or reminding them of the object marker. Guidance also included pointing out relevant morphology, verb tense, and mood to aid comprehension as needed. A key feature of this work was the deliberate use of high-frequency words for subjects, objects, and verbs in the exercises, recognizing that the intervention's effectiveness would be limited if students did not understand the basic vocabulary.

Step One: Identifying the Subject and Verb in Short Sentences

This step focused on identifying the subject and verb in short sentences (up to 15 words). In this initial step, the subject was always placed at the beginning of the sentence, and the verb was consistently at the end. Students listened to the audios played without pause, and the primary prompt was to identify these two core elements. If a student struggled, I provided guidance. This included reminding them of the typical SOV order in Persian and that in these introductory sentences, the subject would be at the beginning and the verb at the end. I played the audio as many times as necessary until the student could pick out the correct elements, stopping only if signs of frustration appeared.

A small percentage of students exhibited delayed auditory processing, appearing to tune in to the sentence mid-way. These students often missed the initial portion of the sentence, including the subject, and therefore struggled to grasp the overall meaning. To address this challenge, students were encouraged to proactively anticipate the sentence structure before listening. They were prompted to ask themselves questions such as: *How would the sentence likely begin? Does it start with a name, an adverb of time (e.g., tomorrow, yesterday), a preposition (e.g., in, at), or another grammatical element?* This pre-listening strategy proved to be beneficial in improving students' ability to identify and process subject units within spoken sentences.

This initial step was generally completed within one 50-minute session, allowing students to build a foundational understanding of subject-verb identification in simpler sentences. However, some students exhibited occasional lapses in subsequent sessions, necessitating a brief review of these foundational strategies before proceeding with more advanced listening exercises.

Step Two: Identifying the Subject and Verb with Sentence-Initial Phrases

After successful completion of step one, I progressed to sentences where the subject was not in the initial position, often beginning with a prepositional phrase (still under 15 words). The focus

remained on identifying the subject and verb. This seemingly small shift in sentence structure required students to execute a more sophisticated grammatical maneuver. They needed to employ a chunking strategy to effectively parse the sentence. For successful chunking, the students were instructed to “follow the *Ezafeh*.” The *Ezafeh* is an “e” sound that, like the genitive case, serves to express a relationship between two or more words (nouns, adjectives, or even in some cases, prepositions). It is a very helpful tool for breaking down a sentence into chunks and identifying the essential elements since it usually marks the beginning and the end of a sentence element. It can also be a challenging element to recognize in spoken Persian due to the shortness of the sound, particularly for students who are struggling to notice the subject and verb.

Recognizing that some students faced significant listening comprehension challenges, a differentiated approach was implemented. For these students, explicit guidance was provided, detailing the precise location and composition of each sentence element, known as syntactic mapping. This step typically took one 50-minute session to implement, although the need for more individual guidance and syntactic mapping extended the time for some learners.

Step Three: Identifying the Subject, Direct Object, and Verb in Single Sentences

Step three focused on identifying the subject, direct object, and verb in single sentences. Students were explicitly asked to identify these three elements after listening. This task proved considerably more demanding, with some students reporting mental fatigue after only a few minutes. It required sustained attention throughout the entire sentence, necessitating the ability to filter out unfamiliar or unprocessed words while simultaneously pinpointing the three essential elements. To manage the difficulty, sentence length was dynamically adjusted based on individual student performance. Guidance included reminding them of the function and placement of the direct object marker “*raa*.” Students who attempted real-time translation were encouraged to instead try visualizing the content of what they heard, turning the sentences into mental pictures, like a movie or animation, a technique that can accelerate processing and improve retention. This step also benefited students, as it illustrated to them the importance of sustained attention in listening and that this attention and memory development is a skill that can be practiced and improved. This step usually required one to two 50-minute sessions to allow for sufficient practice and address mental fatigue.

Step Four: Filtering out Non-Essential Words and Focusing on Key Grammatical Elements

In this step, students were exposed to sentences that included high-frequency subjects, objects, and verbs but with additional low-frequency, unfamiliar vocabulary as distractors. The goal was to train students to filter out non-essential words and focus on the core grammatical structure and meaning. Students were prompted to identify the subject, verb, and object, and guidance involved reassuring them that understanding every word, particularly the unessential words, was not necessary to grasp the core message. However, it became apparent that many students required considerable guidance at this stage. To support them, I sometimes had to provide a “map” of the sentence, explicitly stating the expected order of each grammatical element or indicating the number of words each element consisted of; for example, I would explain that the

sentence begins with the subject, followed by an adverb of time, then the object, an additional adverbial element, a place, and finally the verb. The duration of this step, focused on filtering unfamiliar vocabulary, varied among students, with some grasping the strategy within a single 50-minute session while others required additional practice over several sessions.

Step Five: Identifying Key Elements in Sentences with Independent and Dependent Clauses

In this step, I introduced sentences containing both dependent and independent clauses, with some instances including modal verbs. Students were tasked with identifying the essential elements in both sentences. Guidance involved directing their attention to conjunctions that link clauses and explaining how modal verbs indicate possibility or necessity. Students were encouraged to pay attention to how verbs in initial independent clauses, such as reporting verbs like *told* or *announced*, often signal the introduction of key information or the main message in a following dependent clause. This understanding was intended to help them prioritize their focus when processing longer sentences. The complexity of analyzing sentences with dependent and independent clauses meant that the time required for this step varied, typically ranging from one to several 50-minute sessions depending on individual student processing abilities.

Step Six: Identifying Key Elements and Relationship between Them in Longer Sentences

In this step, I exposed students to compound sentences, which consisted of two or more independent clauses joined by conjunctions, and also included modal verbs, adverbs of time, and adverbs of place. Students were first asked to identify the main elements in each clause and the relationship between them, and later, after they successfully completed that, they were asked to find temporal or spatial adverbs. Guidance focused on sentence mapping, chunking, and analyzing the function of conjunctions and the information provided by adverbs. The final step, addressing compound sentences, demonstrated the most significant individual variation in duration, with some students achieving proficiency within approximately five 50-minute sessions, while others required up to ten sessions to solidify their understanding and processing skills.

These steps are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1
Summary of the Six-Step Listening Strategy

Step	Focus / Goal	Key Strategies/ Guidance	Challenges & Differentiation	Duration
Step One	Identify subject and verb in short sentences (≤ 15 words) with SOV order	Play audio multiple times; remind students of SOV order; prompt pre-listening anticipation questions	Some students exhibit delayed auditory processing; occasional lapses in later sessions	1 \times 50-min session
Step Two	Identify subject and verb in sentences (≤ 15 words) starting with prepositional phrases	Chunking strategy using <i>Ezafeh</i> ; syntactic mapping for students needing extra guidance	More complex sentence structure; students needing detailed guidance for comprehension	1 \times 50-min session (longer for some)
Step Three	Identify subject, direct object, and verb in single sentences (length may be adjusted based on student performance)	Remind placement of direct object marker <i>raa</i> ; visualize sentence as mental picture instead of translating	High cognitive load; mental fatigue; sentence length adjusted individually	1–2 \times 50-min sessions
Step Four	Filter out low-frequency/unfamiliar vocabulary to focus on core grammatical elements (length varies per student)	Reassure students not every word needs to be understood; provide sentence “maps” showing expected element order or word counts	Significant guidance often needed; individual pace varies	1–several \times 50-min sessions
Step Five	Identify elements in sentences with dependent and independent clauses, including modal verbs (variable length depending on clauses)	Highlight conjunctions linking clauses; teach function of modal verbs; focus on main message cues from initial verbs	Complexity varies widely; some students require multiple sessions	1–several \times 50-min sessions
Step Six	Identify elements in compound sentences with multiple clauses, modal verbs, and adverbs (variable length depending on number of clauses and added adverbs)	Sentence mapping, chunking, analyzing conjunctions; identify temporal and spatial adverbs after mastering core elements	Greatest individual variation in duration	5–10 \times 50-min sessions

DATA COLLECTED

The effectiveness of this action research project was evaluated through several data collection methods:

1. Immediate Comprehension Reports: After each audio segment, students reported their understanding by explaining in their own words, with a particular focus on whether they could identify the verb, subject, and object. The researcher noted the accuracy of their reports and the specific elements they struggled with, providing immediate formative feedback and guiding questions.

2. Student Feedback: Following each hourly session, students provided verbal feedback on the difficulty of the exercises, the usefulness of the guidance, and their perceived progress in comprehension. This immediate feedback loop allowed for timely adjustments to the pace and focus of the intervention.

At the end of the sessions, students also gave online feedback. Ten students participated: six reported that the strategies taught were “very helpful,” while four described them as “somewhat helpful.” Overall, the responses indicate that although all strategies were perceived as valuable, the most immediate and widely appreciated benefits came from core syntactic recognition (identifying subject, object, and verb) and grammatical marker identification, which provided a strong framework for real-time sentence processing. In contrast, syntactic mapping was the least favored strategy among students. However, it could be that students had internalized syntactic mapping to such a degree that they were no longer aware of using this strategy. Regardless, it is clear to me as the researcher that this skill played a critical role in building competence, even if students no longer consciously recognized its importance once the skill had become more automatic. Here is the breakdown of students’ responses:

- **Finding the subject, object, and verb** – All 10 students highlighted this as the most helpful strategy. Focusing on the subject, object, and verb reduces cognitive load by allowing the learner to concentrate on the essential elements of a sentence while ignoring less important details. This approach is a minimalistic, bottom-up strategy for listening—efficiently targeting only the core components and avoiding unnecessary details—which streamlines comprehension and makes it much easier to grasp the main meaning.
- **Identifying prepositions and object markers** – Selected by 8 students. Prepositions and object markers act as signposts in a sentence, helping learners locate its elements. This makes it easier to map the overall sentence structure and avoid misinterpreting the roles of words. Many students with weaker listening skills reported getting stuck on unfamiliar words. Encouraging them to focus on prepositions or object markers allowed them to move forward and follow the speech to the end.

- **Filtering out unfamiliar words** – Noted by 6 students. This skill is particularly challenging for language learners, especially analytic learners. To support them, I exposed students to sentences in which low-frequency (unfamiliar) words were attached to familiar words in the genitive case, and encouraged them to focus on the familiar words while ignoring the unfamiliar ones. By doing so, they were able to keep up with the flow of speech and reconstruct meaning from context. This strategy was also reinforced by the first two strategies: (1) focusing on the subject, object, and verb, and (2) trying to identify prepositions and object markers.
- **Chunking and hearing the *Ezafeh*** – Chosen by 4 students. Chunking helps learners group words into meaningful units and map the sentence structure. Recognizing the *Ezafeh* facilitates chunking in Farsi. This strategy also allows students to avoid getting stuck on a single word. However, it requires substantial practice and mental stamina, placing considerable pressure on the brain, making it a skill that warrants consistent practice inside the classroom and for homework practice.
- **Anticipating sentence structure** – Mentioned by 3 students. This predictive listening strategy enabled learners to guess what would come next in a sentence, giving them an advantage in real-time comprehension. It was observed that many students missed the very first milliseconds of each sentence or passage. To address this, they were encouraged to mentally ask themselves while listening: *How would this sentence start? Would it start with a preposition, a subject, a time expression, a place, or something else?* Prepositions and object markers were particularly helpful cues, as they signaled which element would follow—or, in the case of object markers, which element preceded. This approach was especially effective with familiar structures, such as news reports, but was harder to apply in unpredictable contexts.
- **Syntactic mapping (knowing where to find specific elements in the sentence)** – Selected by only 1 student. This low number is likely because syntactic mapping was used primarily in the early stages of the sessions, when the instructor was responsible for pointing out the position of each sentence element. As students progressed, they became capable of doing this mapping themselves without external guidance. By the time they reached later stages, they no longer needed explicit instruction in this skill, and therefore did not recall it as a distinct strategy they relied on, even though it had been foundational in their earlier success.

3. Unit Tests, Proficiency Tests, and DLPT Results: The primary measure of the intervention’s success was the comparison of students’ performance on unit tests, proficiency tests, and the DLPT. The researcher tracked individual student scores and overall class performance to identify any significant improvements in listening comprehension following the implementation of the structured, step-by-step activities.

The combination of real-time comprehension checks, immediate student feedback, and the analysis of formal assessment scores provided a comprehensive picture of the impact of this

action research project on the listening comprehension skills of the Persian language learners. The data collected aimed to determine if the focused attention on grammatical elements and the progressive increase in sentence complexity led to measurable improvements in their ability to understand spoken Persian. It is also important to note the usefulness of allowing students to practice different strategies as they improve their listening, as different students will respond best to different strategies.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

As Vandergrift (2004) asserts, listening is often considered the most challenging language skill due to its multifaceted nature. This is particularly true for learners of Farsi at DLIFLC, where the SOV word order, coupled with the fact that students are learning in a non-native environment without consistent exposure to authentic spoken Farsi outside the classroom, and the demands of intensive training create significant cognitive load. To address these challenges, this action research implemented a six-step intervention focused on progressively developing students' ability to process Persian sentence structure. This involved a gradual progression from identifying core sentence elements in simple sentences to comprehending complex and compound sentences through explicit instruction and targeted listening exercises.

The implementation of this six-step intervention yielded notable improvements in students' ability to accurately parse sentences, progressing from identifying verbs to comprehending complex and compound structures. Encouragingly, students' performance on subsequent unit tests showed marked improvement, and all students with good reading skills (rated B- or above) successfully passed the listening portion of the DLPT after engaging with the intervention. A systematic, step-by-step approach, starting with basic sentence structures and gradually increasing complexity, offers a way to build a strong foundation and mitigate this overload. Explicit instruction on verb identification and processing is crucial given the verb's pivotal role in Persian sentence comprehension.

The findings of this study are consistent with previous research on the importance of syntactic knowledge and real-time processing in listening comprehension. For example, Richards (1983) and Vafae and Suzuki (2020) both emphasize the role of syntactic knowledge in facilitating comprehension. This enhanced ability to focus aligns with Rost's (2011) assertion that effective listening requires the ability to group speech into manageable constituents that can be processed within short-term memory.

However, it is important to acknowledge a nuanced finding: five of the 30 students continued to struggle with listening comprehension despite the intervention. These students exhibited considerable vocabulary deficiencies, which hindered their ability to process and understand spoken sentences. This suggests that while syntactic knowledge and real-time processing strategies are crucial, a certain level of vocabulary proficiency is also necessary for successful listening comprehension. This finding is consistent with the work of Clahsen and Felser (2006), who found that second language learners often prioritize lexical-semantic and pragmatic

information over syntactic information when processing sentences. This implies that future interventions might benefit from an earlier focus on addressing vocabulary issues, or potentially building a stronger foundation in reading skills, before or in conjunction with targeted syntactic parsing instruction.

The findings of this study hold considerable implications for the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center, where the demanding and fast-paced nature of language courses presents unique hurdles for L2 listening comprehension development. Learning in a non-native environment, coupled with the inherent complexities of languages like Farsi – a verb-final language demanding non-linear processing – can severely impede the acquisition of effective listening skills. These pronounced challenges contribute to student attrition, making the identification and implementation of effective solutions and strategies critically important for supporting more students in successfully completing their language training and ultimately reaching the DLIFLC's graduation requirement of ILR Level 2 on the listening component of the DLPT. Currently, some schools within DLIFLC, including the Persian Farsi School, are facing challenges in supporting students to achieve that score. Applying the step-by-step syntactic parsing strategy demonstrated in this action research could provide a valuable tool to improve listening comprehension and thereby help these programs achieve the institute's proficiency goals. Instead of an overemphasis on vocabulary acquisition, language learning at DLIFLC, and particularly in programs like the Persian Farsi School, must be supplemented with explicit instruction in syntactic parsing and the identification of essential sentence elements to foster robust listening comprehension skills.

To enhance the learning environment, instructors can be trained to recognize the critical importance of syntactic knowledge in listening comprehension and how to explicitly teach parsing strategies to students. This training should equip instructors to guide students in identifying essential sentence elements, understanding grammatical relationships, and applying techniques like chunking and anticipating sentence structure. Furthermore, instructors can learn how to train students to filter out non-essential vocabulary and focus on the core grammatical framework of the target language to improve comprehension. The variability in student progress highlights the need for individualized instruction and targeted interventions that adapt the pace and complexity of listening tasks to meet individual learning needs, potentially revisiting earlier steps or providing additional scaffolding as required.

The success of the six-step approach at DLIFLC has several implications for future practice. At the UPF level, the next steps include systematically recording one-on-one instructional sessions for the purpose of demonstrating the approach to other instructors and developing targeted training workshops to support faculty adoption of these listening-focused strategies. Other language programs can adopt a similar structured, progressive approach to listening comprehension, incorporating syntactic mapping, chunking, and real-time processing strategies while focusing on the elements that pose the greatest challenges in that language. Additionally, the findings suggest that a balanced approach that integrates vocabulary acquisition with syntactic knowledge and listening strategies is essential for successful language learning.

CONCLUSION

This study has detailed a six-step pedagogical approach designed to address the multifaceted challenges of listening comprehension for Persian language learners at the Defense Language Institute. By systematically targeting specific linguistic features, from the identification of subject-verb units to the processing of complex and compound sentences, this intervention aimed to equip learners with the necessary tools for effective real-time language processing. The findings underscore the crucial role of explicit instruction in syntactic knowledge and the development of targeted listening strategies. As demonstrated by the progress of even those students who initially struggled with severe listening difficulties, a structured, progressive approach, coupled with individualized support, can significantly enhance listening comprehension skills. While vocabulary acquisition remains essential, this action research highlights the importance of moving beyond a “vocabulary cult” to address the underlying cognitive processes involved in listening. By focusing on sentence-level processing, including the identification of verbs, the parsing of clauses, and the understanding of modal verbs and sentence structure, learners can develop a more robust foundation for comprehending spoken language. The results presented here offer valuable insights for educators seeking to improve listening instruction for Persian and potentially other languages. The success of this approach suggests that targeted interventions focusing on specific grammatical features and processing strategies can empower learners to overcome listening challenges and achieve greater proficiency in the target language. However, this action research project involved only 30 students, which limits the generalizability of the findings, and further research with larger samples is necessary to confirm and expand upon these results.

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Action Research

Implementing Bottom-Up Listening Activities in a Basic French Course

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Listening skills are among the hardest to develop. Implementing Bottom-Up Listening (BUL) strategies I learned during a May 2025 DLIFLC workshop into the Basic French course, I collected students' evaluation of the lessons' usefulness. Into two lessons I incorporated three different BUL activities combined with a production task. Ultimately, this modest action research project found that students viewed these lessons positively. This report describes the context of the two lessons into which BUL activities were incorporated, the BUL activities themselves, and the introductory and production activities sandwiching them. Results of the action research are shared and discussed, highlighting potential factors that may have contributed to students' high scoring of the lessons. Insights for replication of BUL activities by other instructors are shared. Ultimately, BUL activities may prove a powerful tool to sharpen students' listening competencies, but may need supplementing with additional activities targeting comprehension, of which fellow instructors should take heed.

Keywords: *Listening, Bottom-Up Listening Skills, French, Higher Order Thinking*

INTRODUCTION

For DLIFLC, “listening has consistently been recognized as one of the most difficult skills to develop” (Yuasa, 2024, p. 12). Within the scholarship, listening has been called, “neglected and forgotten in the classroom” (Elin, 1972) and “the ignored skill” (Ulum, 2015), leaving some scholars to overtly ask, “Is listening instruction neglected intentionally or incidentally?” (Çakır, 2018, p. 154).

Few articles within the past five years within *Dialog on Language Instruction* have focused on developing students' listening skills. Of them, three should become fundamental reading for DLIFLC faculty, for different reasons. First, Yuasa (2024) outlines the difficulties in acquiring

listening skills. Their study found that implementing a paused transcription activity, combined with an error analysis, was effective in raising students' self-awareness.

Secondly, Santizo (2019) offered insights on selecting listening materials. They contrasted the skills of reading and listening, demonstrating the mistake made when approaching both skills in the singular way. Thirdly, Khaled (2019) detailed the processes involved in listening. They suggest an approach using a structured preview phase followed by a selective strategic listening phase to refocus attention on the process of listening, rather than only on its products.

Furthermore, three dissertation abstracts printed in *Dialog on Language Instruction* examined listening instruction. Like Khaled's (2019) article, Li's (2019) study concluded that listening should focus less on outcomes, and more on the process, and that instruction must incorporate listening-strategies. This will require a change in teachers' approaches. In another study, Lee (2023) found lexical knowledge to have a robust correlation with listening proficiency. In other words, the larger the learner's vocabulary, the better at listening they are (and the smaller, the worse). Seo (2023) examined the metacognitive strategies of higher- versus lower-performing students, finding that higher performers relied less on translation but on holistic views of texts (audios), and relied more on contextual and discourse clues. They were also better able to handle losing attention during periods of incomprehension. Similarly, Al-Thawahrih's (2022) action research project found that students viewed as beneficial listening strategies taught during SA 7th hour. The four strategies taught were 1) pair sharing of background knowledge on the topic, 2) pre-lessons on effective notetaking, 3) thinking-aloud following listening, and 4) meta-awareness/asking meta-level questions (p. 31). While scholarship has documented the effect of these types of strategies, scholarship has not documented the effect of BULs on student learning nor on students' perceptions of BULs.

Spring 2025 saw the offering of institute-wide workshops on Bottom-Up Listening (BUL) strategies and skills. Morley (2023) explained BUL skills as, "the ability to separate the stream of speech into individual words becomes more important." BULs are distinct from top-down listening, which takes into account the context and background knowledge, etc. This shifting in focus aligns with Khaled's (2019) findings, that most DLIFLC textbooks focused only on students' comprehension or word recognition, offering little to actually improve their listening skills. In May 2025, I attended a BUL workshop. In early June, I experimented with such strategies in my teaching within the Basic French course. This article outlines steps I took as well as students' perceptions of the activities.

ACTION PLAN

Problem Statement & Research Questions

Students' difficulties in listening is a chronic, widespread issue across the Institute. Extant DLIFLC scholarship has not explored the impacts of implementing BUL interventions. To fill this gap in

the literature, I undertook the following simple action research project. Action research offers a limited but insightful glimpse into one classroom. This project was approved by my supervisor.

Two questions guided this project:

1. How useful to their learning did students find these activities to be, and
2. How interesting did students find these lessons.

Context & Participants

During weeks 27 and 28 (of the 36-week Basic French program), I designed and implemented the two, fifty-minute lessons detailed in what follows. Each class had seven students, 5 of whom were young American students whose first language (L1) was English, one whose L1 was Spanish, and another whose L1 was Haitian Creole.

According to the schedule, the lessons were to 1) target listening skills, 2) using materials selected “by the professor’s choice,” 3) on the respective topics of “air pollution” and “cooking with charcoal.” Students had not previously studied these topics or related lexicon.

ACTIONS TAKEN

On both occasions, I implemented the lessons with the same section of seven students. I designed both lessons to be completed by the students autonomously using a DOCX file in which I had included images, links, and tasks to be done using four separate audio files I had posted to TEAMS. I instructed students to use their personal headphones so they could listen, individually, as many times as needed.

Lesson 1

On the DOCX provided, students were instructed to work in partners and use their personal headphones for repeated listening (as they saw fit).

Warm-up Activities

Using four images of cities with unhealthy air quality, they first had to guess the cities photographed. Two of the four images were of American cities and were split-shots of before-and-after major environmental legislation and changes (Pittsburgh and Los Angeles). The visible change of these cities’ air quality became important later in the lesson. As students progressed through the DOCX, the answer were provided.

In the second activity, students had to match an image (5) with the corresponding French word (e.g., an image of lungs with “*les poumons*”).

BUL Listening Activity

The third activity required students to listen to the audio provided. The audio file was taken from a general YouTube video on air pollutants, their points of origin, and their impacts on the human body. The audio file lasted 80 seconds, included 217 words when transcribed, and was identified as ILR 2+ by Auto-ILR.

First, students were shown an image taken from a French website that reports the price of fuel types (unleaded gas, diesel gas, ethanol, etc.). Students were asked to listen for which fuel type was mentioned in the text. Both the image and the YouTube video were made for and by French-speakers, meaning they constitute authentic material/realia.

The fourth activity included four paragraphs of transcription in a mixed-up order. Two of the paragraphs had had their spacing removed. In the instructions, I blamed this disorder on Artificial Intelligence to add an element of realism, however flimsy. Both removing all the spacing between words (by the instructor) and putting them back in (by the students) was time consuming. Adding spaces reflected BUL activity #10 Parsing per the handout provided. Once parsed, the two paragraphs, along with the two unjumbled, were ordered properly, providing students with a full transcript of the audio that they had worked to create (edit) through multiple listenings.

An answer key was provided as was a link to the video that they could watch and verify their answers (while seeing the accompanying images).

Production Task

A final production task included a screenshot of a news headline that identified a city in Francophone Africa (N'Djamena, Chad) as the most polluted in the world. It included the image of dusty, polluted air hovering above the city. Students were to write a message to a military leader of that country's governing junta outlining the dangers of air pollution and suggestions for remedying their problem. As an extra tip, I reminded students of the remarkable change that were visible in Pittsburgh and Los Angeles, which they saw earlier in the lesson. They were to post their written work to TEAMS for my review.

All students completed the listening portions, but not all completed the production task, due to time constraints.

Lesson 2

Introducing the Topic

Lesson two was implemented the following week. Addressing the topic of, "cooking with charcoal," I created a DOCX in which I introduced the topic through images, taken from commercial websites, of a grill and a bag of charcoal whose packaging was in French. This is a form of e-realialia. Students completed this lesson individually, per my instruction.

Following the introductory images, I provided students a diagram with a few components of a grill labeled in French, constituting vocabulary they had never formally encountered previously, which would be critical for understanding the audios.

BUL Activities

The audio I selected was from a YouTube video from a man explaining various methods to control the temperature when grilling using charcoal. I converted the video into four separate MP3 audio files, each lasting between 30-50 seconds. Each Audio file with which I provided students (A-B-C-D) features one different method of temperature control. The total transcription of all four audios totaled 374 words.

The next activity asked students to listen to Audio A, for which I had prepared a “Gapped Sentences with Multiple Choice” (BUL Activity #9). Students were to complete each blank by choosing the correct word spoken from one of four written choices. Students completed the same type of activity for Audio B. Because this type of activity was less cognitively taxing than the next activity, I designed the lesson to begin with the easier and progress to more challenging tasks.

For Audios C and D, students completed a “Spot the Intruder” (BUL Activity #8) activity. Students had the full transcript of each audio file, into which I had inserted additional one word/ phrase per line. The task was for students to listen to the audio, spot the unnecessary, inserted word/s, and cross them out.

Possessing now corrected, complete transcripts for all four audios, students finally had to match the name of the method for cooking with charcoal (“create heat pockets,” “use a controller,” etc.) method with the text/ audio (Audio/ Text A-B-C-D).

An answer key was provided, as was a link to the YouTube video to watch the man demonstrating his grilling methods.

Production Task

Using paper I provided, students were directed to make a drawing of each method described in the video, labeling the important components of the grill in French. Although not military in nature, the task required students’ higher order thinking skills, according to Bloom’s taxonomy (application and creation).

Knowing my students enjoy competition, I collected their drawings and displayed them while quickly verifying their overall correctness. For each drawing, I asked them to score it orally out of five stars. Three drawings emerged as the best, so in a second round of voting-by-hand-raising, two of the final three ended with a tied score (counting my one vote). The atmosphere as enjoyable but also productive linguistically.

All students completed all components; however not all drawings (and labeling) were completed.

DATA COLLECTION & ANALYSIS

After both lessons, I asked for students’ anonymous feedback. On a quarter sheet of paper, I asked students to rate the lesson out of a possible five stars according to their perceptions of usefulness for their learning (first) and interest (second). I indicated that comments were welcomed, too. Instructions were given orally and written into the DOCX files. I then collected students’ feedback forms, faced down and shuffled the pile. I analyzed data by first averaging their scoring. I organized comments by the score given, and present them verbatim below. I then analyzed all comments by deducing the major themes to which comments pointed. One student’s comments could be recognized as containing multiple themes. These themes are also presented in a separate table.

FINDINGS

On both occasions, all students provided one overall score, rather than two separate scores for usefulness and interest. I had not envisioned them doing so. Given how tired they seemed at this point in the program, I decided not to burden them by asking them to redo their scoring.

Findings: Lesson 1

Results averaged 4.3/5.0, excluding one unscored response (n=6). See Table 1 for all comments.

Table 1

Comments Made about Lesson 1 by Score

Score	Comment 1	Comment 2	Comment 3
5	“very real and useful”	“Good activity! Could use more questions on understanding.”	“I really appreciate things related to BBQ’s”
4	“I learned a lot. I liked listening with subtitles.”	NA	NA
3	“I don’t feel like I learned much from this lesson. I like the subject but I think that presentation could have been improved. Maybe there is too much vocabulary that I still cannot understand.”	NA	NA
2	NA	NA	NA
1	NA	NA	NA
unscored	“good activity” (smiley face)	NA	NA

Findings: Lesson 2

Results were an average of 4.5, again excluding one unscored response (n=6). See Table 2.

Table 2
Comments Made about Lesson 2 by Score

Score	Comment 1	Comment 2	Comment 3
5	(no comment left)	(no comment left)	(no comment left)
4	"I like the lesson thanks to my team. I don't really like the subject."	"good material and good exercises. I also think a sprinkle of multiple choice is always good too."	"I thought that this exercise was fun, but it felt a little rushed. I like how there were some parts with partners and some parts of individual work. The subject was interesting and it was good to be exposed to new vocabulary. Maybe having the vocabulary broken down in less of a jumble would help."
3	NA	NA	NA
2	NA	NA	NA
1	NA	NA	NA
unscored	"I like the topic. I learned a lot, especially good vocab"	NA	NA

Findings: Emerging Themes

From both lessons combined, eight themes emerged from the comments. They are presented in descending order of frequency in Table 3. Most commonly, students perceived these lessons and their topics positively.

Table 3
Themes Emerging from Written Comments

Theme: The lesson...	number of comments
...was generally good / fun.	4
...’s topic was appreciated.	4
...was useful/ realistic.	2
...could have been strengthened with the addition of comprehension questions.	2
...’s vocabulary was appreciated.	2
...’s topic was not appreciated.	1
...’s format of blending individual work and partner work was appreciated.	1
... could have been strengthened with explicit vocabulary instruction.	1

DISCUSSION

Based on the results from this project, students appreciated the BUL activities. BUL activities go against the “orthodox way of teaching listening” in which students merely listen and answer comprehension questions (Khaled, 2024). BUL activities address students’ difficulties in recognizing the blurred boundaries between words and gaining familiarity with elisions and variations that occur when words, learned in isolation, are strung together in longer discourse (Yuasa, 2024). Two students expressed a desire for comprehension questions. This underscores that BUL activities focus exclusively on decoding words, which constitutes only half of the listening comprehension process: the other being meaning building (Khalid, 2019).

If only comparing students’ scoring of the two lessons, students preferred Activities 8 and 9 (Spot the Intruder, Gapped Sentences) rather than 10 (Parsing). This suggests that there is value in offering a combination of BUL activities, rather than just one. In the future then, I would continue to utilize two rather than one BUL activity but also experiment with coupling them with an explicit check of their comprehension before initiating a production task. Ideally, the production task should involve a military-context that require students’ higher-order thinking.

Finally, I suspect that the students enjoyed these BUL activities and lessons partly due to their novelty, merely introducing new types of activities into the classroom. Specifically, these lessons decentered the instructor and permitted students to work at their own pace and autonomously. Research with DLIFLC learners found them to perceive “learner autonomy as a process of empowering learners to take control of learning, which was helpful in the language classroom” (Rana, 2019, p. 87). Adding variety to a long language course seems under-appreciated in the scholarship.

For instructors eager to experiment in the classroom, BUL activities take time and preparation. Particularly, parsing activities take time to design, and, from the students' side, to complete. Notwithstanding, the effort was clearly appreciated by students according to the positive feedback. Busy instructors must be mindful of the time required in creating such material and strive to create lessons that can be utilized more than one time or by various instructors whenever possible.

BUL activities could be a potent addition if combined with recognized strategies of previewing and sharing background knowledge, pre-lesson tips on notetaking, think-alouds, and meta-awareness raising (Al-Thawahrih, 2022, p. 31). Even stronger, it could be coupled with explicit vocabulary instruction, given the causal relationship between proficient listening and vocabulary size (Lee, 2023).

Action research offers insights about one group of participants, the findings which cannot necessarily be extrapolated to all students. Findings do however suggest the need for additional investigations within and across languages.

Some next steps would be to replicate this type of project across DLIFLC, with larger samples and with greater precision. Findings would provide a clearer picture of students' perception of BUL strategies. More meticulously planned investigations would be needed to explore empirically the impact of BUL activities on students' listening performance. Nonetheless, it is paramount that we value students' perceptions of their learning since as they possess the most agency within their learning.

CONCLUSION

Developing learners' listening skills in a target language remains among the most challenging of tasks for DLIFLC faculty. This modest action research project, conducted with intermediate-level learners of French in the Basic program, demonstrated that "Bottom-Up Listening Strategies" were viewed positively by students. While this modest project cannot pinpoint causation, it did suggest that students appreciated this type of activity, as well as the change that it offered from "orthodox" listening lessons. Notwithstanding, one student reminded us that correctly parsing an audio's words on one hand and then comprehending those words on the other remain related by distinct skills. This suggests that combining BUL with a comprehension check, followed by a higher-order-thinking production activity, would make for an effective lesson. Overall, this report demonstrates that BUL activities are useful in our context: they encourage learners to approach listening from different angles and can enlarge the instructor's pedagogical toolkit.

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Faculty Forum

Leverage Professional Learning to Build Trust and Enhance Teacher Engagement

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This article describes a structured seven-step professional development (PD) model that was initiated and implemented at the Persian Farsi School (UPF) of the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center (DLIFLC). The program intended to improve collaboration, trust, teacher engagement, and instructional effectiveness, and to enhance student learning outcomes. Recognizing the challenge of effectively translating professional learning into classroom practice, this professional development model adopts a systematic approach to meeting faculty needs. It incorporates data-driven needs assessments, targeted training workshops, reflective post-workshop discussions, classroom mentorship, trend analysis and systematic follow-up, best practice sharing, and centralized resources for ongoing learning. Of particular importance to UPF have been the steps related to classroom implementation, mentorship, class observation, and feedback as well as trend analysis and systematic follow-up. Faculty members who participated in this cyclical PD process reported increased engagement, better integration of various teaching methodologies, and improved responsiveness to student feedback. This approach shows potential for replication across DLIFLC programs, directly contributing to the mission of developing combat-ready linguists.

Keywords: *Cyclical Professional Development, Teacher Engagement, Collaboration*

INTRODUCTION

At the heart of DLIFLC’s mission to produce combat-ready linguists is a commitment to effective teaching—one that begins with empowering educators, as their professional development is essential to training proficient linguists. While DLIFLC provides a variety of faculty development opportunities, one persistent challenge remains: How to translate professional development opportunities into individual faculty learning that leads to long-lasting instructional change. At the Persian Farsi School (UPF), this challenge has been identified. Despite faculty participation in workshops and training events, implementation into classroom practice has often been inconsistent. This inconsistency has led UPF leadership to review the professional development model, placing a larger emphasis on helping teachers reflect on their current teaching practices in order to develop new strategies to “provide exquisite, regional and culturally based foreign language education,” in addition to building trust between faculty and leadership and the institution.

Recognizing these challenges, UPF embarked on a transformative journey to build not only a professional development program, but also a culture of collaboration, trust, and accountability. Then, UPF developed a structured professional development model that extends beyond traditional workshops. This model aims to improve teaching practices and enhance student learning outcomes. In addition, it emphasizes the importance of building relationships, providing responsive support, and sharing responsibility for growth. The ultimate goal of this model is to cultivate a culture of trust that empowers faculty to grow, collaborate, and take ownership of their professional development, leading to improvements in student learning. Hargreaves and O’Connor (2018) emphasize that without trust, professional learning remains superficial or compliance-driven, whereas high-trust environments enable educators to take risks, engage in candid dialogue, and assume collective responsibility for improvement. As trust deepens, faculty will start to see positive changes in student engagement, and professional conversations evolve—moving from compliance to curiosity and from resistance to reflection (Hargreaves & O’Connor, 2018). This progression reflects a movement toward collaborative professionalism, where trust functions as the engine that transforms professional development into sustained instructional growth and improved student learning outcomes. Accordingly, this cultural transformation is not a secondary outcome but a central and intentional objective of the UPF PD Model.

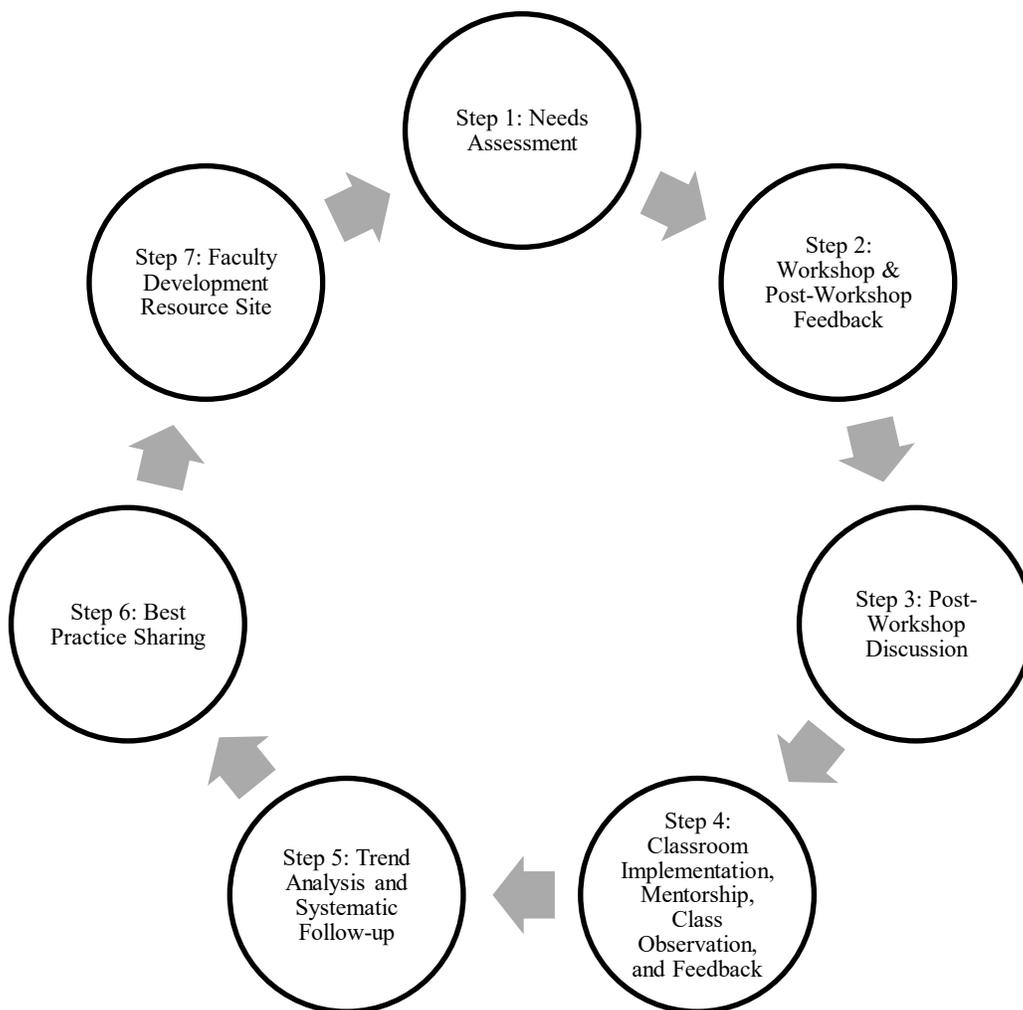
The UPF Professional Development Model consists of seven structured steps designed to enhance the effectiveness of PD workshops and strengthen faculty engagement. This model was initiated by the UPF Academic Specialist overseeing the faculty development function at UPF, approved by the UPF Dean, implemented by the UPF Faculty Development (FD) team, and monitored and followed up by the Academic Specialist to ensure continuous improvement. The following sections outline each step of this model and emphasize how UPF is intentionally connecting professional development with trust-building, instructional effectiveness, and results aligned with its mission.

PERSIAN FARSI SCHOOL SEVEN-STEP PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT MODEL

The model is cyclical and follows seven steps as shown in Figure 1. The cycle includes: (1) needs assessment; (2) workshop and post-workshop feedback; (3) post-workshop discussion; (4) classroom implementation, mentorship, class observation, and feedback; (5) trend analysis and systematic follow-up; (6) best practice sharing; and (7) a faculty development resource site.

Figure 1

Persian Farsi School Seven-Step Professional Development Model



Step 1: Faculty Development Needs Assessment

A systematic and data-driven approach to faculty development begins with a comprehensive needs assessment and a deliberate process for organizing and analyzing the data collected. UPF gathers faculty development data through multiple formal and informal sources. Specifically,

data are first classified by source and level of formality, including: (1) formal faculty-identified needs, collected through faculty surveys focusing on professional development priorities, challenges, and areas for growth; (2) informal and formative feedback, gathered through workshop evaluations, end of course feedback meetings, and faculty mentoring sessions conducted by the UPF FD team; (3) leadership and supervisory feedback, solicited by the Academic Specialist and FD team from Department Chairs, Team Leaders, and the UPF Office of the Dean; (4) student performance data, such as Very Lower Range (VLR) DLPT results, unit test grades, and proficiency test outcomes; and (5) cross-school perspectives from other Undergraduate Education (UGE) schools to ensure institutional alignment.

Once collected, data from these sources are organized into thematic domains (e.g., instructional strategies, assessment practices, student engagement, language proficiency development, and faculty support needs). The UPF team then conducts a gap analysis by comparing faculty-identified needs with observed instructional practices and student performance trends to identify areas of convergence and discrepancy. Findings from this process are used to define faculty development objectives, prioritize professional learning topics, and determine appropriate delivery formats (e.g., workshops, mentoring, or best practice sharing). This structured approach ensures that professional development decisions are transparent, evidence-informed, faculty-driven, and aligned with institutional goals, with the goal of ultimately strengthening instructional effectiveness and student learning outcomes.

Step 2: Workshop and Post-Workshop Feedback Collection

Following the needs assessment, the Academic Specialist and Faculty Development team analyze the data to design upcoming faculty development workshops. Workshop development is guided by principles of adult learning, collaborative professionalism, and contextualized instruction, emphasizing relevance, faculty voice, and immediate classroom applicability. Each workshop is intentionally designed to integrate relevant educational theories with target-language-specific classroom examples, instructional demonstrations, and hands-on activities drawn from UPF instructional contexts. Most workshops are two to three hours in length. To ensure continuous improvement, after each workshop, faculty participants receive a post-workshop survey, allowing them to evaluate the effectiveness of the session and suggest improvements. Additionally, for some workshops, the UPF FD team reaches out to attendees proposing a date and time for an in-person post-workshop feedback session, typically scheduled for the following week. The agenda of these sessions and notes taken serve as a good alternative to survey forms. The agenda includes three areas: (1) key takeaways from the workshop; (2) participants' plans for applying and disseminating the knowledge gained; (3) suggestions for improving future workshops. The collected data through surveys, alongside observational notes taken from the in-person post-workshop feedback sessions, are then shared with the UPF Dean and Academic Specialist to refine future professional development initiatives.

Step 3: Post-Workshop Discussion

The post-workshop discussions help faculty engage with the high-priority workshop content, reflect on how they can apply the content, and collaborate on creating materials and lessons. Facilitated by the UPF FD team and Academic Specialist, these discussions encourage participants to share insights, articulate plans for classroom integration, express willingness to be observed during implementation, and identify best practices that can be scaled school and institution wide. The insights that emerge from these discussions are reflective and compare current practices with what is being proposed. Some typical questions are: Is the practice manageable in the given time? Will this practice add value? Will it appeal to students at different levels of proficiency? In these sessions, facilitators document feedback, track emerging themes, and identify areas requiring follow-up support. By maintaining records of these discussions, the FD team ensures that faculty development initiatives remain responsive to evolving instructional needs and contribute to a culture of continuous learning. These discussions not only enhance individual teaching practices but also create an opportunity for faculty sharing.

Step 4: Classroom Implementation, Mentorship, Class Observation, and Feedback

The most effective professional development includes structured classroom support, such as mentorship, class observations, and tailored feedback to help faculty implement workshop learning and turn insights from Steps 1-3 into actionable practices. There are two options for faculty engagement in Step 4: (1) having peer observations and follow-up sessions with the FD team or (2) giving mini-presentations to their colleagues. While observation is the preferred option, peer presentations still support the goals of reflection, implementation, and knowledge sharing. These presentations also provide FD Specialists with opportunities to collaborate with teachers and guide them in identifying instructional practices that may benefit their peers. Moreover, this process helps build trust between the FD team and instructors, as faculty recognize that the FD team's intent is to support professional growth and instructional effectiveness.

For the observation option, once the teacher selects an activity for the class, the FD team arranges a pre-observation meeting where they review the lesson plan to ensure proposed activities meet the objectives. Next, the class is observed by the FD Specialists, and the teacher gathers feedback from the students. Then, a post-observation meeting is held in which the FD Specialists give feedback and the students' feedback is reviewed to identify pros and cons. This provides ample data for the teacher to improve for the next iteration. For example, one teacher introduced a rubric in class to evaluate peer work and the students suggested that it be simplified. In another class, a teacher led students to create cultural narration and memes using pictures, which they reported to find meaningful. Teachers continue to prefer participating in classroom observations and follow-up discussions with the FD team over giving presentations, and the number of observations is steadily increasing.

Step 5: Trend Analysis and Systematic Follow-up

To evaluate the effectiveness of professional development offered at UPF, the Academic Specialist developed a structured assessment and follow up plan. This plan incorporated classroom observations, post-observation feedback sessions, trend analysis, and systematic follow-up to ensure the implementation of workshop strategies. For instance, in July and August 2025, after a schoolwide training on bottom-up listening strategies, the Academic Specialist tasked the FD Specialists to use the UGE Class Observation Form to observe listening classes and identify best practices for implementing bottom-up listening strategies in the classroom. As a result of the trust built between the teachers and the FD team, 22 teachers volunteered for classroom observations. Consistent with Step 4, after each observation, the FD Specialists met individually with teachers to discuss their strengths, areas for improvement, and specific development suggestions.

Related to Step 5, the Academic Specialist guided the FD Specialists to conduct a trend analysis based on their classroom observations and notes. The trend analysis showed that among the 22 teachers observed, seven teachers consistently implemented bottom-up strategies. In contrast, many other teachers showed partial adoption or significant gaps in their approach. The trend analysis also revealed recurring instructional challenges, including the need for more learner-centered practices, greater integration of peer learning, and more effective use of transcripts. The Academic Specialist then shared the findings with the UPF Department Chairs and the Dean to facilitate follow-up classroom observations and provide feedback to teachers for improvement.

To support instructors in their ongoing professional development and to ensure the effective implementation of teaching strategies, the Academic Specialist directed the FD Specialists to conduct follow-up observations with teachers who needed improvement. This was the first step towards accountability. The purpose of this process was to help integrate the strategies learned in workshops into classroom practices. Additionally, the Dean tasked the Department Chairs with conducting their own classroom observations and providing individualized feedback to their respective teachers, further promoting accountability. The Dean also holds biweekly one-on-one meetings with the Chairs to ensure they consistently conduct class observations and monitor the implementation of strategies in the classrooms. This structured system, which includes data-driven trend analysis, systematic follow-up, leadership oversight, and iterative feedback, promotes a culture of accountability. Its ultimate goal is to enhance instructional practices and improve student proficiency outcomes.

Step 6: Best Practice Sharing

Teachers learn valuable lessons from implementing new approaches. These lessons merit wider dissemination across DLIFLC as a community of learning. To amplify the impact of faculty development, the UPF team supports faculty to share their implementation experiences and instructional innovations with peers by identifying best practices and encouraging faculty to share them, helping faculty prepare to share, and leading discussions on the benefits of sharing.

Firstly, the Dean, Academic Specialist, and FD Specialists identify best practices and encourage faculty to present their practices at UPF, and then the Academic Specialist or FD Specialists arrange meetings to discuss possible sharing formats and topics. Primarily, there are two options: a discussion forum or an individual presentation. A discussion forum is organized if more teachers have undergone the same process. If only one teacher has undergone the experience, then a Best Practices presentation will be organized, followed by a Q&A session. Once the presentation topics are confirmed, the UPF team proceeds to the second part of Best Practice Sharing: supporting teachers in preparing for their sharing sessions. This includes reviewing and discussing the abstract and presentation slides, and providing constructive feedback to ensure alignment with the goals of best practice sharing. Participating teachers then present their key insights and instructional practices during the forum, followed by a facilitated discussion. During these presentations, presenters typically begin by connecting their classroom instructions to the UPF workshops they attended, outlining the strategies and theoretical frameworks they implemented. They then share concrete classroom application examples, including student cases, learning outcomes, and feedback from students and colleagues, as well as their own reflections and future plans.

At the conclusion of the presentation or after the presentation, the UPF team facilitates a discussion with the audience and presenters to reflect on the benefits of sharing. For instance, when a best practice presentation is rooted in the implementation of strategies or knowledge gained from a previous workshop, the reflection emphasizes that the session is not a repetition of the original training. Instead, it highlights how the learning was applied in meaningful ways to enhance student outcomes. These discussions also underscore that teachers often derive diverse insights from the same professional development experience. Through these exchanges, faculty members gain exposure to multiple perspectives, broadening their pedagogical toolkit and reinforcing a culture of continuous learning.

The sharing of implementation experiences seeks to enhance instructional quality by encouraging teachers to adopt effective strategies that have been successfully used by their peers. Faculty members reported increased openness and confidence in experimenting with new approaches and tailoring them to better meet student needs. For example, one teacher demonstrated strong openness and actively incorporated strategies introduced in the *Making Special Assistance (SA) Hour Effective* workshop into their SA Hour sessions. This instructor also shared their best practices with colleagues across UPF and UGE. Notably, several at-risk students from this teacher's class—who had previously undergone Academic Assistance Review Board (AARB) intervention—successfully passed the Defense Language Proficiency Test (DLPT) and reported that the instructor's support played a key role in meeting their learning needs.

However, convincing teachers to present at the school or institute level remains a significant challenge, as participation has been inconsistent. For example, in May 2024, four teachers attended an iteration of a workshop, and two co-presented at the school level after much encouragement. In contrast, in June 2024, fifteen teachers participated in two iterations of the same workshop, yet only one chose to present the lessons learned. Overall, only some teachers

opt to present at the school or institution level. The majority prefer presenting to smaller, department-level audiences, where peer review is not required. To support this preference while still fostering professional dialogue, UPF actively encourages departmental-level presentations. These smaller-scale interactions seek to generate a ripple effect of shared practices and insights, with the goal of ultimately contributing to a broader community of learning.

Step 7: Establish Faculty Development SharePoint to Centralize Resources

Creating a centralized resource site takes time and planning. Ongoing challenges have included maintaining accurate records and materials (e.g., presentation abstracts and slide submissions), securing faculty buy-in, and obtaining consent to record the presentations. To address these challenges, UPF launched the Faculty Sharing Pre-Presentation Submission process in early 2023. As part of the process, faculty share all their materials prior to the presentation and give permission to be recorded, and the UPF team uploads their video (with minor edits if needed) to the UPF FD SharePoint site. By adopting this structured approach, both the numbers of faculty presentations and attendance have increased. By the end of 2024, UPF had successfully conducted 84 in-person sessions, with a notable 15.2% rise in participation between 2023 and 2024. The availability of recorded sessions (65 in total at the time of writing) has further expanded the initiative's impact. Between June 2024 and September 2025, the recordings were viewed 40 times.

The Next Step: Linking Faculty Development to Student Success: A Data-Driven Approach

Moving forward, UPF will monitor and continually refine its assessment and accountability system to evaluate the effectiveness of professional learning initiatives and their alignment with student learning outcomes. As part of this system, UPF will consistently identify the specific needs of each teaching team and department by analyzing students' academic performance, course grades, and faculty input. Based on these findings, UPF will continue to follow the model by providing tailored professional development training, one-on-one mentorship, class observations, and targeted feedback meetings to address instructional challenges and assess changes implemented. For example, after identifying Diagnostic Teaching as a priority area through ongoing needs assessments, UPF provided training for all faculty members and received unanimous positive feedback from 23 participants, all of whom rated the workshop as highly effective in supporting both faculty and student learning. The Office of the Dean determined that all the Chairs are required to include certain predetermined elements in their regular class observations, as of January 2026. These elements will be based on the faculty development workshop topics. This level of accountability in classroom observations by Chairs is new for UPF. For teachers who are identified as needing further support after the Chair observation, the regular 7-step model will be followed.

To ensure meaningful evaluation, UPF will also collect data through student and faculty surveys and conduct focused group discussions to measure the perceived impact and relevance of the professional development events. Student feedback will be gathered at end-of-course feedback sessions alongside faculty reflections to assess the outcomes of training and identify

opportunities for continuous improvement. Additionally, students' final DLPT results will be categorized into above- and below-ILR 2 on the DLPT for listening and reading. The Academic Support Team will then identify the PD sessions their teachers attended and review if their attendance potentially had an impact on students' DLPT scores. Also, during end-of-course feedback sessions, the Academic Support Team will ask students if their teachers engaged in the activities they were trained on. This data-driven, cyclical approach seeks to promote instructional excellence and faculty engagement as well as strengthen the direct link between faculty learning and student success. The goal is to create a culture of continuous reflection, accountability, and instructional improvement aligned with UPF's mission and DLIFLC's goal of developing combat-ready linguists.

CONCLUSION

The Persian Farsi School's seven-step professional development model is a framework designed to identify teaching challenges and establish a process that meets teachers where they are, guiding them to where they need to be. This model aims to build trust, enhance faculty engagement, promote faculty growth, and ultimately improve student learning outcomes. Of particular importance to UPF have been Steps 4 and 5: "Step 4: Classroom Implementation, Mentorship, Class Observation, and Feedback" and "Step 5: Trend Analysis and Systematic Follow-up." By systematically assessing faculty needs, delivering targeted workshops, supporting classroom implementation, fostering mentorship, using class observation analysis to enhance accountability, and promoting best practice sharing, this model fosters learning transfer into teaching practices. The model underscores the importance of analyzing professional development training and its application in classrooms. By implementing this model, UPF experienced an increased interest among the faculty in adopting new ideas and sharing their experiences with peers at UPF and across DLIFLC. However, this rise in professional development and collaboration does not necessarily indicate a direct improvement in student learning outcomes. Additionally, UPF has embraced the model as a tool for fostering a culture of trust, recognizing that impactful professional development is deeply rooted in relationship-building and mutual respect. Through alignment of training efforts with collaborative reflection, shared goals, and transparent communication, the model supports both instructional improvement and trust-building within teams. This dual emphasis not only enhances faculty engagement and morale but also strengthens instructional consistency and student support. With its structured and scalable design, the model holds strong potential for replication across other DLIFLC programs, thereby directly supporting the Institute's mission of developing combat-ready linguists.

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Faculty Forum

Leveraging AI-Driven ChatGPT for Pedagogical Personalization

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This article explores how AI-powered tools like generative AI chatbots, including ChatGPT, can transform tailored instruction during the Special Assistance hour (7th-hour) at the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center. I share how I have used ChatGPT to create interactive, relevant materials, including grammar and vocabulary exercises and comprehension activities tailored to individual learning needs. By providing strategies for crafting precise and pedagogically sound prompts, the article highlights how instructors can optimize Generative AI (GenAI) tools to create customized interventions that enhance engagement and student success.

Keywords: *Generative AI Tools, ChatGPT, Pedagogical Personalization, Tailored Instruction, Learner Success, Educational Technology*

INTRODUCTION

While AI cannot replace the role of the instructor, it can provide materials, tasks, and activities tailored to individual student needs in key skill areas addressed during 7th-hour remediation. For example, it can generate *leveled reading passages* with comprehension questions to strengthen reading skills, *context-based vocabulary quizzes* to reinforce retention, and *listening comprehension activities* to improve auditory processing. By producing these targeted resources in minutes, AI streamlines the creation of instructional materials, allowing educators to focus more time on quality instruction and individualized support.

When I first began teaching Persian at the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center (DLIFLC), developing such tailored materials for individualized sessions often required several hours each day. Today, with the integration of Generative AI (GenAI), the same work can be accomplished much more efficiently, without compromising quality. These outputs supplement, rather than replace, existing textbooks and lesson plans, making instruction more responsive and adaptable to diverse learner needs.

The effectiveness of GenAI depends on the precision of its application. Well-crafted prompts can transform generic outputs into targeted, pedagogically valuable resources. For instance, instead of requesting “a vocabulary quiz,” a more effective prompt might be: *Create a multiple-choice quiz with five questions testing intermediate Persian learners on military-related vocabulary in context, using authentic sentence examples.* This level of specificity ensures that AI-generated materials align closely with instructional goals.

Among the various GenAI tools available, I focus primarily on ChatGPT, as it is effective for producing near-authentic materials, such as leveled reading passages, and it can produce grammar tutorials and vocabulary exercises that address individual learning gaps. It can also find authentic materials that meet user-specified criteria. Many GenAI tools are now available, and users are encouraged to try different ones and compare results. All applicable Department of Defense (DoD) and DLIFLC policies regarding the use of Generative AI by faculty, staff, and students were strictly followed. Students used DLIFLC-issued laptops, and, in compliance with cybersecurity policy, no browser extensions were installed.

In this article, I offer examples of how GenAI can be used for material and activity development for 7th-hour instruction in order to save time and also maximize opportunities to tailor instruction. By applying GenAI strategically, 7th-hour sessions can shift from repetitive review to personalized, high-impact practice that keeps students engaged and addresses their unique learning gaps.

ENHANCING LANGUAGE TEACHING THROUGH GENERATIVE AI

In order to enhance language teaching and create high-quality instructional materials with generative AI for language classes, it is essential to provide AI with well-designed prompts. The quality of the output directly depends on the clarity, specificity, and structure of the input. When instructors craft precise prompts that clearly define the purpose, audience, and desired format, AI is more likely to generate accurate, relevant, and pedagogically useful content. Therefore, prompt design becomes a key skill for teachers seeking to effectively integrate AI into language teaching and ensure that the materials produced truly enhance learning outcomes.

When I create a prompt for AI, I treat it almost like lesson design itself: it requires forethought, precision, and clarity. One of the first things I consider is the prompt formula, that is, breaking down what I want into its key components so that the AI can follow the same logic a human colleague would need if I were delegating the task. A good formula often includes the purpose, the task, the audience level, the context, the format, and any constraints. For example, if I want an activity sheet, I specify not just “make a reading activity,” but rather “create a 30–45 minute interactive reading activity for ILR 2 learners that practices fluency and scanning skills using an authentic passage, with pre-reading, during-reading, and post-reading tasks.” This formula ensures that the AI has enough information to produce something useful and aligned with my teaching goals.

Another key principle I keep in mind is that AI is only useful if I am clear about what I want. Ambiguous prompts will lead to vague or generic results, and I have to take responsibility for that. If I cannot clearly articulate the learning outcome or the structure I envision, then I cannot expect AI to guess my intent. The more precise I am, about level, time frame, task type, or even word count, the more targeted the AI's output will be. This requires me to think carefully before I type: What exactly do I want the students to do? What skill am I targeting? What constraints matter most (time, word length, complexity, context)? That level of planning is as important for prompting as it is for lesson design.

At the same time, I know that AI doesn't always provide clarification questions. Unlike a colleague who might ask, "Do you want this activity for pair work or individual work?" AI tools often assume and fill in gaps. That is why review and revision are critical. My process involves looking at the first draft, asking myself whether it aligns with my instructional objectives, and then either editing it myself or revising the prompt to request adjustments. This iterative process mirrors what I do with lesson plans more generally: draft, evaluate, refine.

There are also things I look for carefully in the AI tool's output. I check whether the activities are pedagogically sound, does the sequence build skills step by step? Are the tasks realistic in terms of time and difficulty? I also check language accuracy because AI occasionally makes errors in Persian verb forms, politeness markers, or idiomatic usage. I pay attention to cultural appropriateness as well, since AI sometimes generates examples that might not fit Persian norms. In short, I view AI as a capable assistant, but not as a flawless expert; it can save me time generating drafts, but I must still bring my expertise to evaluate and refine.

Finally, I try to be cautious about a few things. In addition to avoiding overly broad prompts like "make a grammar lesson," I am careful not to overburden AI with conflicting instructions; too many tasks or constraints in one request can lead to confusion. Instead, I break complex projects into smaller prompts. Also, I remind myself not to accept AI's first draft uncritically. It is tempting to think of it as a finished product, but the best results always come after I review, revise, and sometimes combine multiple outputs.

In essence, creating a good prompt is an act of communication and instructional design. The clearer and more structured I am in telling AI what I need, the better the result. If I think of AI as a new kind of teaching assistant, capable, fast, but dependent on precise instructions, I can use it effectively. The process is not about replacing the teacher's judgment, but about saving time on first drafts so that the teacher can invest energy where it matters most: ensuring accuracy, cultural fit, and pedagogical quality. That being said, AI can be employed as a pedagogical tool to enhance language instruction through the development of materials that support the acquisition of vocabulary, grammar, listening comprehension, reading comprehension, and speaking skills.

Over time, I have developed some tips for effective prompting to maximize these benefits.

- First, I make sure to anchor the prompt in a real context. This keeps the lesson grounded and realistic.

- Second, I try to sequence tasks clearly in the prompt so that the AI organizes the activities in a logical progression.
- Third, I always include learner level because what works for ILR 1 students will not work for ILR 2. It is also important to check that the passage produced by the tool is actually at the right level.
- Finally, I request variety in activity types (recognition, controlled practice, free production) so that the AI does not produce only comprehension questions or only speaking prompts.

The following section provides illustrative examples of how AI can be integrated into instructional practice to achieve these objectives.

Facilitating Vocabulary Acquisition through Generative AI

Vocabulary is essential for language learning, as it underpins reading comprehension, listening, and grammar. Students may have varying levels of vocabulary knowledge even at the same proficiency level, leading to gaps that must be addressed. This inconsistency requires teachers to focus on specific vocabulary relevant to each student's needs or proficiency level, making vocabulary instruction complex and time-consuming. AI-driven tools like ChatGPT can help instructors tailor to this need.

Below is a ChatGPT prompt for teaching vocabulary in context, appropriate for the 2nd semester (week 30 out of 48). I designed this prompt for the 7th-hour tailored instruction, focusing on a set of vocabulary that my student has been struggling with. The vocabulary relates to tourism and is intended for intermediate Persian learners (ILR Level 2) in a one-on-one setting. This activity supports my instructional goals for students to: 1) recognize and recall challenging and frequently-appearing domain-specific vocabulary; 2) practice applying these words productively and reinforcing both meaning and spelling; and 3) engage with the vocabulary in an interactive way, encouraging active recall, retention, and communicative use.

Prompt: "The purpose is to help an intermediate Persian learner practice and actively recall challenging vocabulary related to tourism. The audience level is intermediate Persian learners (ILR Level 2), and the context is a one-on-one classroom or tailored instruction session. Task 1: Create a vocabulary list with English translations with the vocabulary I provided. Task 2: Then create a fill in the blank activity. For each vocabulary word, write a sentence in Persian and replace the target word with a blank. Ask the student to fill in the blank with the correct vocabulary word. The goal of this activity is to help students practice using new vocabulary in context while reinforcing meaning and spelling. Task 3: Design a matching game using the same vocabulary list. Prepare two columns: Column A with the Persian vocabulary words and Column B with simple Persian definitions. The student's task is to match each vocabulary word to its correct definition. Constraints: Keep instructions clear and suitable for one student, focus on vocabulary recognition, recall, and production in context."

Figure 1 shows a vocabulary list that ChatGPT generated based on the provided vocabulary. While this list was created for use in a 7th hour tailored instruction session, similar lists can be very helpful for any language classroom. The choice of vocabulary, along with the translations provided, can be adapted depending on the student's proficiency level and the themes already introduced in class.

Figure 1

Example of a Vocabulary List Prepared by ChatGPT on Tourist Attractions

 **Task 1 – Vocabulary List**

- صنایع دستی – Handicrafts
 - معماری – Architecture
 - بنای تاریخی – Historic monument
 - مجموعه – Complex
 - گنجینه – Treasure
 - میراث فرهنگی – Cultural heritage
 - جاذبه‌های گردشگری – Tourist attractions
 - عمارت – Mansion
-

Figure 2 presents a fill-in-the-blank activity designed by ChatGPT using the same set of vocabulary. Although created for one-on-one practice during 7th hour, this type of exercise is widely applicable in group instruction as well. The format reinforces both comprehension and recall, but the difficulty of sentences and choice of words should be aligned with the students' prior exposure and learning objectives.

Figure 2

Example of a Fill-in-the-Blank Activity Using Persian Vocabulary on Tourist Attractions Prepared by ChatGPT

Task 2 — Fill in the Blank Activity

Fill in the blanks with the correct vocabulary word from the list above.

1. میدان نقش جهان یک _____ بزرگ از آثار تاریخی و فرهنگی اصفهان است.
(Naqsh-e Jahan Square is a big _____ of Isfahan's historical and cultural works.)
 2. مسجد امام نمونه‌ای برجسته از _____ ایرانی و اسلامی است.
(Imam Mosque is a prominent example of Iranian and Islamic _____.)
 3. بسیاری از گردشگران برای دیدن _____ اصفهان به این شهر سفر می‌کنند.
(Many tourists travel to this city to see Isfahan's _____.)
 4. بازار قیصریه یکی از مهم‌ترین مراکز فروش _____ در ایران است.
(Qeysarieh Bazaar is one of the most important places to buy _____ in Iran.)
 5. تخت جمشید یک _____ مهم و معروف در ایران است.
(Persepolis is an important and famous _____ in Iran.)
 6. موزه ملی ایران یک _____ ارزشمند از تاریخ ایران را در خود جای داده است.
(National Museum of Iran holds a valuable _____ of Iran's history.)
 7. مسئولان به حفظ و ترویج _____ کشور اهمیت زیادی می‌دهند.
(Authorities attach great importance to preserving and promoting the country's _____.)
 8. عمارت عالی قاپو یک _____ تاریخی در میدان نقش جهان است.
(Ali Qapu Mansion is a historical _____ in Naqsh-e Jahan Square.)
-

Figure 3 shows a Matching Game activity that ChatGPT designed to reinforce comprehension and active recall of the target vocabulary. While the game is intended for tailored instruction, it can also be adapted as a flexible classroom tool to make vocabulary practice more interactive and engaging. Most DLIFLC students find that matching games help them connect words with meanings more effectively. The design of the sample columns can be adjusted according to the student's proficiency level, the chosen vocabulary set, and the specific learning objectives. The words and definitions the student sees in the same row are not meant to match each other. The student is supposed to draw the correct connections themselves.

Figure 3

Example of a Matching Game Activity Designed by ChatGPT to Practice the Vocabulary

 **Task 3 – Matching Game**

Instructions: Match the Persian vocabulary in Column A with the correct Persian definition in Column B. Write the correct letter next to each vocabulary word.

Column A (Vocabulary)	Column B (Persian Definition)	Column C (English Translation)
گنجینه (Treasure)	آثار ساخته شده به دست انسان با مهارت‌های سنتی	Handmade works created with traditional skills
عمارت (Mansion)	مکان‌ها یا بناهایی که برای گردشگران جذابیت دارند	Places or buildings attractive to tourists
صنایع دستی (Handicrafts)	میراث، آثار و سنت‌های فرهنگی یک ملت 	The heritage, artifacts, and traditions of a nation
مجموعه (Complex)	مجموعه‌ای ارزشمند از آثار فرهنگی و تاریخی	A valuable collection of cultural and historical works
بنای تاریخی (Historic monument)	مجموعه‌ای از بناها یا فضاهای مرتبط با یک هدف مشترک	A set of buildings or spaces connected by a purpose
معماری (Architecture)	ساختمانی با اهمیت تاریخی و فرهنگی	A building of historical and cultural significance
جاذبه‌های گردشگری (Tourist attractions)	طراحی و ساخت ساختمان‌ها و سازه‌ها	The design and construction of buildings
میراث فرهنگی (Cultural heritage)	ساختمانی بزرگ و مجلل 	A large and luxurious building

After completing the three vocabulary activities, students will have established a solid foundation for understanding and using the target words. These preparatory exercises engage students actively with the vocabulary, enhance retention, and build confidence. With these skills in place, students are now ready to read a short authentic passage that incorporates all the target words. I used ChatGPT to locate an authentic text containing the vocabulary list I designed activities around. Reading this passage allows students to encounter the vocabulary in context, reinforcing their understanding and application.

Below is a ChatGPT prompt for finding an authentic text that contains the vocabulary that my student was struggling with.

Prompt: “Find a text on the internet that contains the following vocabulary words: صنایع (Handicrafts), معماری (Architecture), بنای تاریخی (Historic monument), مجموعه (Complex), گنجینه (Treasure), میراث فرهنگی (Cultural heritage), گردشگرهای جذاب (Tourist attractions), عمارت (Mansion). The text should be in Persian language, ILR level 2 and the total word count should be around 150 words or more.”

I chose these key vocabulary words for the prompt based on my students' needs. ChatGPT provided me with several articles and links containing the list of vocabulary words I provided, and I chose this article from IRNA News (<https://www.irna.ir/news/85066283/>-مقصد-جهان-نقش-میدان-نقش-جهان-مقصد) as the source to work with.

Here is the Persian text:

میدان نقش جهان، مقصد نخست گردشگری مسافران نوروزی در اصفهان

به گزارش ایرنا، میدان تاریخی نقش جهان اصفهان، نماد شکوه و معماری ایرانی و اسلامی، شامل بناهای مهمی چون بازار قیصریه، مسجد امام، عمارت عالی قاپو و مسجد شیخ لطف‌الله است. این مجموعه زیبا گنجینه‌ای از تاریخ و هنر اصفهان بوده و مهم‌ترین جاذبه گردشگری ایران به شمار می‌آید که چشم هر بیننده‌ای را خیره می‌کند. کمتر گردشگری است که تاکنون از این مکان بازدید نکرده باشد.

به گفته مدیرکل میراث فرهنگی، گردشگری و صنایع دستی اصفهان، تا روز گذشته بیش از ۱۵۰ هزار نفر از گردشگران نوروزی از میدان نقش جهان دیدن کرده‌اند. علیرضا ایزدی افزود با پایان دور اول سفرهای نوروزی و آغاز دور دوم، حضور گردشگران در بناهای تاریخی استان همچنان رو به افزایش است. وی همچنین گفت روز گذشته و با گرم شدن دوباره هوا، گردشگران زیادی از محوطه عظیم میدان نقش جهان با وسعت بیش از ۸۵ هزار مترمربع بازدید کردند.

Here's the English translation:

Naqsh-e Jahan Square: Top Destination for Nowruz Travelers in Isfahan

According to IRNA, historic Naqsh-e Jahan Square in Isfahan—a symbol of the grandeur of Iranian and Islamic architecture—includes landmarks such as Qeysarieh Bazaar, Imam Mosque, Ali Qapu Palace, and Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque. This magnificent complex is a treasure of Isfahan's history and art, and Iran's most important tourist attraction, captivating every visitor. Few domestic or international travelers visit Isfahan without experiencing it.

The Director General of Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts of Isfahan reported that over 150,000 Nowruz travelers have visited Naqsh-e Jahan Square as of yesterday. Alireza Izadi noted that with the end of the first phase of Nowruz travels and the start of the second, tourist presence at Isfahan's historical sites continues to grow. Yesterday, with warmer weather, a large number of visitors explored the vast 85,000-square-meter complex.

After the student reads this passage, the teacher can discuss main ideas, gauge comprehension, review any vocabulary or grammar structures, or discuss the topic in general for further review.

Facilitating Grammar Learning through Generative AI

Grammar instruction and practice is crucial in any language class. Generative AI can assist teachers by offering personalized, on-demand grammar explanations and practice, effectively addressing individual needs and maximizing limited instruction time. Using grammar activities like this during Tailored Instruction (7th hour) at DLIFLC is highly beneficial because many students struggle with applying correct grammar, particularly for speaking tasks. One of the recurring challenges we face in the classroom is that students often receive extensive exposure to reading and listening, but they do not get enough structured opportunities to actively apply grammar in speaking. This gap becomes most evident in high-stakes assessments such as the Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI), where students are required to perform practical speaking tasks, such as giving directions. In Persian, the imperative tense plays a central role in giving clear instructions or guiding someone from one location to another. However, because the imperative forms in Persian differ from English in construction, learners find it difficult to use in spontaneous speech. When confronted with a navigation prompt in an OPI, they often hesitate, rely on circumlocution, or use incomplete or inaccurate forms. This not only lowers their confidence but also prevents them from demonstrating the full range of their communicative ability. I chose to focus on this in depth because it directly addresses what students need most, confidence in spontaneous communication and grammatical accuracy.

The reason I turn to ChatGPT for designing such a lesson is that it saves a significant amount of preparation time. By using ChatGPT, I can generate a first draft of a lesson plan that already includes structured tasks, authentic dialogues, and scaffolded activities. The teacher's role then becomes one of reviewing, adjusting, and ensuring accuracy and cultural appropriateness. This collaboration between AI-generated content and teacher expertise ensures both efficiency and quality. To address this issue, I designed a specific prompt for ChatGPT to generate a 30–45 minute interactive Persian lesson that focuses on the imperative tense in real-world navigation contexts. In crafting the prompt, I made sure to structure the lesson so that it would move from recognition of the form to controlled practice, and finally to independent production in a realistic scenario. This gradual progression helps learners internalize the imperative forms and gives them repeated opportunities to practice in both collaborative and individual modes of speaking.

The process of creating the prompt itself is a deliberate one. I first identified the specific grammatical area where learners struggle, in this case, the imperative tense in Persian. I then chose a context that was meaningful, realistic, and immediately relevant to learners' daily environment: giving directions between real-world locations in Monterey, such as from Bolio Gate to the Monterey Bay Aquarium. By grounding the activity in familiar landmarks, I ensured that students would focus on practicing the target grammar rather than being distracted by unfamiliar content. After that, I broke the lesson into sequenced tasks. I asked for an authentic dialogue of 120–150 words (see Figure 4) that would naturally model imperatives, and I requested that the imperative forms be highlighted so that students could clearly see how they are used in context.

Here's a prompt for Grammar Activity.

Prompt: "Create a 30–45 minute interactive Persian lesson for intermediate learners (ILR 2) to practice the imperative tense in real-world navigation contexts. Include: (1) a 120–150 word dialogue in Persian giving directions between two real locations (e.g., Bolio Gate to Monterey Bay Aquarium), with key imperative verbs highlighted; (2) an identification task for the imperatives; (3) a collaborative speaking role-play where students give and follow directions using at least 3 imperatives per turn; and (4) a mini OPI-style individual speaking task with politeness markers. Use simple, everyday vocabulary and realistic city landmarks."

Figure 4 shows an example of a dialogue that the students can see as an example to learn how to give directions from one location to another location. Note: the requested highlights of verbs are not shown here.

Figure 4

Example of Short Dialogue Prepared by ChatGPT

Short Dialogue (Persian):

Scenario: Asking for directions from Bolio Gate to Monterey Bay Aquarium

- سلام! می‌خواهم به آکواریوم مانتری بروم (Tourist): الف
- از در بولیو به سمت شرق برو و به خیابان کیت کارسون برس (Local): ب
- الف: بعدش چه کار کنم؟
- ب: به سمت راست بپیچ و وارد خیابان لایت‌هاوس شو
- الف: و بعد؟
- ب: مستقیم در خیابان تیلر ادامه بده و سپس از لاین دوم کمی به چپ بپیچ تا دوباره به خیابان لایت‌هاوس برسی
- الف: فهمیدم، سپس چه کار کنم؟
- ب: مستقیم در خیابان فوم ادامه بده و وارد کنیری رو شو، آکواریوم مانتری در شماره ۸۸۶ قرار دارد
- الف: ممنونم!



Key Vocabulary:

- برو — go
- بپیچ — turn
- وارد شو — enter / go into
- مستقیم ادامه بده — continue straight

Short Dialogue (English):

Scenario: Asking for directions from Bolio Gate to Monterey Bay Aquarium

- **A (Tourist):** Hello! I want to go to the Monterey Bay Aquarium.
- **B (Local):** Head east on Bolio Gate toward Kit Carson Road.
- **A:** What next?
- **B:** Turn right onto Lighthouse Avenue.
- **A:** And then?
- **B:** Continue straight on Tyler Street, then slightly turn left onto Lighthouse Avenue.
- **A:** Got it. What after that?
- **B:** Continue straight on Foam Street and enter Cannery Row. The Aquarium is at 886 Cannery Row.
- **A:** Thank you!



Figure 5 is an identification task. The reason for including this step is that learners need to first recognize the imperative forms before they can confidently produce them. By scanning the dialogue and underlining or circling imperatives, they develop an awareness of the forms in a natural context.

Figure 5

Example of Explanation of Identification Task Prepared by ChatGPT

Identification Task

Instructions:

- Read the dialogue carefully.
 - **Task 1:** Underline all imperative verbs.
 - **Task 2:** Answer the following questions:
 1. Which verbs give instructions? (کدام افعال به شخص مخاطب دستور می‌دهند؟)
 2. What is the first action I should do? (اولین کاری که باید انجام دهم چیست؟)
 3. What should I do after reaching the bridge? (بعد از رسیدن به پل چه کار کنم؟)
- **Optional Discussion:** Why do Persian speakers often use **لطفاً** (please)? How does it change the tone?



This awareness then serves as the foundation for the next step, which is collaborative speaking practice.

Figure 6 shows directions for a role-play, where students are required to give each other directions using at least three imperatives per turn. This requirement ensures that students cannot fall back on minimal language use; instead, they must stretch themselves and practice the form multiple times in one exchange. It is a controlled but interactive way to practice fluency.

Figure 6

Example of Collaborative Speaking Activity (Role-Play) Prepared by ChatGPT

Collaborative Speaking Activity

Role-play:

- Students work in pairs:
 - o **Student A:** Tourist asking for directions to a familiar place (e.g., library, café, classroom).
 - o **Student B:** Local giving directions using imperative verbs.
- Encourage complete instructions using **at least 3 imperative verbs per turn**.
- Rotate roles so each student practices both asking and giving directions.

Extension: Students can add extra details, such as landmarks ("از کنار مجسمه رد شو" – pass the statue) to make instructions more realistic.

Figure 7 is the final task that mirrors OPI conditions more directly. It is a mini-individual speaking task where the student is asked to give directions, this time including politeness markers such as "lotfan" (please), which are essential in Persian communication. This final step serves two purposes: it familiarizes students with the assessment format they will face, and it integrates the

cultural dimension of politeness, which is just as important as grammatical accuracy in real communication.

Figure 7

Example of Mini OPI Speaking Practice Prepared by ChatGPT

OPI Speaking Practice

Task: Students individually give directions from one location to another using imperatives.

- Encourage **politeness markers** (لطفاً / please) and **3–4 imperative verbs** per description.
 - Instructor provides **feedback** on clarity and correctness.
-

Together, these activities demonstrate the power of scaffolding with ChatGPT.

Enhancing Reading Instruction with Generative AI: Text Generation

Selecting a reading passage that matches the appropriate ILR level is crucial for effective language development, as it should align with students' proficiency, needs, and interests while providing manageable challenges and key language exposure. At DLIFLC, time constraints complicate this task. Generative AI can assist by quickly generating tailored reading passages and follow-up activities based on ILR levels and relevant topics. In addition, these AI-generated activities allow students to practice essential reading skills that are often missing from textbook comprehension check questions, such as finding the main idea, skimming, and scanning. This focused practice better prepares students for the DLPT test and strengthens their overall reading proficiency.

Here's a prompt prepared by ChatGPT for creating a reading passage for ILR Level 2+ along with tailored activities, which is appropriate for the 2nd semester (week 31 out of 48):

Prompt: "Create a reading passage in Persian for ILR Level 2+ on the topic of the influence of social media on society. Create a comprehensive reading activity sheet for the passage. The activity sheet should be designed to enhance reading skills including fluency, automaticity, and include challenging exercises that also develop skimming and scanning abilities. Include pre-reading, during-reading, and post-reading activities, such as prediction tasks, vocabulary exercises. Ensure the sheet is structured, engaging, and suitable for intermediate to advanced Persian language learners, and allows for both individual and group use."

It is important to check the reading passage before giving it to students, to ensure that the level is correct and key vocabulary are included.

Figure 8 shows the ChatGPT output with the English translation provided for context.

Figure 8

Example of a Reading Text with Activities Prepared by ChatGPT

متن خواندن – Reading Passage

Persian: تأثیر رسانه‌های اجتماعی بر جامعه

در سال‌های اخیر، رسانه‌های اجتماعی به بخشی جدایی‌ناپذیر از زندگی مردم تبدیل شده‌اند. مردم از طریق برنامه‌هایی مانند اینستاگرام، تلگرام و توییتر با یکدیگر ارتباط برقرار می‌کنند، اخبار را دنبال می‌کنند و افکار و نظرات خود را به اشتراک می‌گذارند. رسانه‌های اجتماعی باعث افزایش آگاهی عمومی شده‌اند و به مردم این امکان را داده‌اند که درباره‌ی مسائل مهم جامعه، مانند محیط زیست و حقوق بشر، بیشتر بدانند. اما در عین حال، برخی کارشناسان نگران تأثیرات منفی این پدیده هستند. به‌طور مثال، گسترش اطلاعات نادرست و شایعات می‌تواند باعث سردرگمی مردم شود. از سوی دیگر، استفاده‌ی بیش از حد از رسانه‌های اجتماعی ممکن است بر روابط خانوادگی و اجتماعی تأثیر منفی بگذارد. برخی افراد وقت زیادی را در فضای مجازی می‌گذرانند و از ارتباط واقعی با اطرافیان خود غافل می‌شوند. با وجود این چالش‌ها، بسیاری معتقدند که اگر از رسانه‌های اجتماعی به‌درستی استفاده شود، می‌توانند ابزاری قدرتمند برای آموزش، آگاهی‌بخشی و پیشرفت جامعه باشند.

 Reading Passage – English

The Influence of Social Media on Society

In recent years, social media has become an inseparable part of people's lives. People connect with each other through apps like Instagram, Telegram, and Twitter, follow the news, and share their thoughts and opinions. Social media has increased public awareness and allowed people to learn more about important societal issues such as the environment and human rights. However, some experts are concerned about the negative effects of this phenomenon. For example, the spread of misinformation and rumors can lead to confusion among people. On the other hand, excessive use of social media may negatively affect family and social relationships. Some people spend too much time in virtual space and neglect real-life connections with those around them. Despite these challenges, many believe that if used correctly, social media can be a powerful tool for education, awareness, and the progress of society.

This ready-to-use Reading Activity Sheet is designed to develop fluency, automaticity, skimming, scanning, and reading speed. The activities gradually increase in difficulty to engage learners effectively, with the objective of improving reading fluency, automaticity, skimming, scanning, and overall comprehension through focused, progressive tasks.

Figure 9 shows a pre-reading activity designed by ChatGPT to activate background knowledge before reading a passage. I included this figure because it helps students connect prior knowledge to new content, which is especially important for Persian learners who may struggle with comprehension of authentic texts. By predicting topics and listing familiar social media platforms, students engage in meaningful, contextualized thinking, preparing them for better understanding. This task also encourages spontaneous writing in Persian, confirms the student's

level, and provides a low-stakes opportunity to practice forming sentences before tackling more challenging reading exercises.

Figure 9

Example of a Pre-Reading Activity Designed by ChatGPT to Activate Background Knowledge

Pre-Reading – Activate Background Knowledge

- 1 Look at the title. Predict what topics you might read about in the passage. Write 2–3 sentences in **Persian**.
 - 2 List **3 social media platforms** that you use or know. Write **one sentence for each** about how people use them.
-

Figure 10 shows a main idea activity designed by ChatGPT to help students identify the central idea of a passage efficiently. I included this activity because recognizing the main idea is a critical reading skill that allows intermediate Persian Farsi learners to focus on the overall meaning without getting distracted by details, and the questions created by ChatGPT about the text are not obvious ones. Students must read and understand the passage. This task encourages students to process text strategically, supports comprehension, and builds confidence in distinguishing essential information. It also provides a structured opportunity for critical thinking in English, allowing learners to justify their choices and prepare for more complex reading and discussion tasks.

Figure 10

Example of a Skimming Activity Designed by ChatGPT to Identify the Main Idea

Find the Main Idea

Instructions: Read the passage quickly (1–2 minutes). Don't worry about details. **Circle the main idea** of the text.

Question: What is the main idea of this passage?

Multiple-Choice Options:

- A) Social media has a complex impact, shaping both awareness and behavior in society.
- B) Social media can influence society in multiple ways, both positively and negatively.
- C) Social media primarily misleads people and causes confusion.
- D) Social media is an essential educational tool and should replace traditional learning.

Extra Task: After choosing the main idea, underline two sentences or phrases in the passage that helped you determine your answer.

✔ **Answer:** B) Social media can influence society in multiple ways, both positively and negatively.

Supporting Details:

1. "Social media has increased public awareness and allowed people to learn more about important societal issues such as the environment and human rights." → positive influence
2. "The spread of misinformation and rumors can lead to confusion among people." → negative influence
3. "Excessive use of social media may negatively affect family and social relationships." → negative influence



Figure 11 shows a scanning activity designed by ChatGPT to help students locate specific information within a passage efficiently. I included this figure because scanning is an essential reading skill for Persian learners that complements skimming by focusing on keywords and details. This activity trains students to find precise answers quickly, reinforces comprehension, and encourages active engagement with the text. By answering questions about apps, societal issues, and effects of social media, learners practice connecting vocabulary and context, building both recognition and productive skills necessary for authentic communication and higher-level reading tasks. The key with scanning activities is that teachers must ensure that students don't carefully read the passage or just use their memory—they need to move their eyes quickly across the text and find the words they are looking for. Teacher support here is crucial.

Figure 11

Example of a Scanning Activity Designed by ChatGPT to Locate Specific Information

 **Scanning – Locate Specific Information**

Instructions: Read the passage again quickly and answer the questions by scanning for keywords.

- 1 Name three apps mentioned in the passage.
 - 2 What societal issues are mentioned that social media helps raise awareness about?
 - 3 What are two negative effects of social media mentioned by experts?
 - 4 According to the text, how can social media be used positively?
-

Figure 12 shows a vocabulary and automaticity activity designed by ChatGPT to help students practice and internalize target words from the passage. I included this activity because completing fill-in-the-blank exercises strengthens both recognition and productive use of vocabulary, which is critical for Persian learners. This activity reinforces meaning, spelling, and contextual usage while promoting active recall. By working with words in sentences directly

related to the reading passage, students build automaticity, gain confidence in using new terms spontaneously, and develop the ability to integrate vocabulary into speaking and writing tasks effectively.

Figure 12

Example of a Vocabulary and Automaticity Activity Designed by ChatGPT for Targeted Persian Words

Vocabulary and Automaticity

Instructions: Fill in the blanks using words from the passage:

1. مردم از طریق برنامه‌هایی مانند _____، تلگرام و توییتر با یکدیگر ارتباط برقرار می‌کنند.
People communicate with each other through applications such as _____, Telegram, and Twitter.
2. رسانه‌های اجتماعی باعث افزایش _____ عمومی شده‌اند.
Social media has led to an increase in public _____.
3. گسترش اطلاعات نادرست و شایعات می‌تواند باعث _____ مردم شود.
The spread of misinformation and rumors can cause people to _____.
4. استفاده‌ی بیش از حد از رسانه‌های اجتماعی ممکن است بر روابط _____ و اجتماعی تأثیر منفی بگذارد.
Excessive use of social media may negatively affect _____ and social relationships.
5. اگر از رسانه‌های اجتماعی به‌درستی استفاده شود، می‌توانند ابزاری قدرتمند برای _____ باشند.
If used properly, social media can be a _____ erful tool for _____.

This example of how I have used ChatGPT as a type of teaching assistant also showcases how well the tool can help build activities that are tailored and scaffolded for student learning.

LIMITATIONS OF GENAI TOOLS

While generative AI offers promising opportunities for language educators, teachers must understand the limitations of ChatGPT while using it in their classrooms (Zhang & Hyland, 2021). Generative AI tools like ChatGPT excel at providing information and generating language-based responses but struggle with nuanced qualitative judgments and may replicate the biases and stereotypes from the data it was trained with (Smith, 2025). These tools have difficulty assessing subjective aspects, such as whether the content it generates is offensive or appropriate (e.g., it may contain gender stereotypes). There have been instances when ChatGPT has created culturally inappropriate passages based on my prompts. For instance, in Persian culture, especially in formal or educational contexts, the tone of conversation is often more respectful. The phrase “تو چه می‌کنی؟” (What are you doing?) is very informal and might be perceived as too direct or impolite, especially if addressed to someone older or in a more formal setting. A more culturally sensitive and respectful phrase could be: “چطور هستید؟ برنامه‌ای برای امروز دارید؟” (How are you? Do you have any plans for today?). The key takeaway is that in Persian culture, the use of

language tends to be more formal and respectful, especially in educational and social contexts. GenAI tools can also create information that is not factually accurate (termed “hallucinations”). For this reason, I always read the AI generated texts before presenting them to class. I can then either revise the passage or ask ChatGPT to revise it before I use it. As other scholars have noted (Slamet, 2024), we can’t blindly put our confidence in ChatGPT.

DLIFLC policy guidance emphasizes that faculty must ensure that their use of these tools complies with professional and ethical responsibilities, including meeting learning objectives and fulfilling mission requirements. This policy emphasizes a responsible integration of GenAI while safeguarding the Institute’s educational standards and ethical commitments.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Generative AI tools offer a valuable partnership for language educators at DLIFLC, where innovative instructional methods are essential due to the program’s fast-paced nature. These tools can assist in creating tailored instructional materials and enhancing the effectiveness of the 7th hour by providing quick content generation, adaptive learning activities, and multiple instructional pathways. This collaboration between AI and educators allows for more efficient use of time and resources, improving learning outcomes and student success. However, Generative AI should complement, not replace, the human elements of teaching, such as building relationships and providing mentorship. Educators should remain mindful of AI’s limitations while leveraging its strengths to enhance teaching and support students’ success effectively.

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APPENDIX A

Tokens by Lesson

Lesson 1	
horse	lin
mountain lion	náshdóitsoh
condor	jeeshóó'
tree	t'iis
river	tooh
Lesson 2	
I need ...	yinízin
shut up	nizghéé'
come here	hágo
wait	át'ah
maybe	daats'í
Lesson 3	
I don't believe it	dooda sha'shin
I hate you.	nijooshtaah
good morning	yá'át'ééh abíní
I forgot	Beisénah
I love you	yóó'áníinísh'ní
Lesson 4	
stop!	ni'níftáád
thank you	ahéhee'
bon appétit! (have a good meal)	Nizhónígo adíiyíjt
please	ąą' ha'íi baa naniná
good day!	Nizhónígo ch'aanidíinaat
Lesson 5	
how are you?	ąą' ha'íi baa naniná
hello	yá'át'ééh
what's your name?	dóo haash yinilyé?
where is the toilet?	ańda'aldáhíshą'?
I don't know	doo shít bééhózin da

Faculty Forum

Perennial, Thorny Issues: Addressing Learners' Unfamiliarity with Concepts

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“What is a subsidy?” “What’s an internship?” “A tariff, what is that?” As an instructor of French for American military students studying at the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center (DLIFLC), I have been asked these questions by the youngest learners in my class. These types of questions demonstrate that instruction cannot only focus on second language acquisition but must include knowledge of concepts as well. Defining terms or concepts that may be laden with socio-cultural or political value can put an instructor in a difficult position. Responding effectively requires intentionality, self-reflection, and some forethought. Instructors’ responses can lead to an increased openness among students or to students’ sealing off their vulnerabilities. True, lasting learning can only grow when learners recognize gaps in their knowledge, are willing to expose them, and are provided accurate content with which to fill these gaps. This instructor reflection highlights one such interaction that occurred in my classroom. I reflect on my decision to use English to explain one particularly thorny concept. From this interaction, I deduced several beliefs and principles when facing gaps in learners’ knowledge. The reflection closes by underscoring that creating trusting relationships in the classroom is foundational for deep, lasting learning. Such learning exceeds the use of an additional language. To develop such relationships, instructors must dispassionately recognize students’ knowledge gaps, but also identify their “funds of knowledge,” and leverage them for student learning.

Keywords: *Socio-Cultural Value Terms, Political Terms, Target Language Use*

INTRODUCTION

During a recent lesson in my French class, we discussed an African film festival. I displayed a screenshot of some of the film’s sponsors, whose logos provided additional input and realia for students to examine. This prompted one student to state with some hesitation that, despite being in week 31 of a 36-week program, he did not have a clear understanding of the differences

between the United Nations, the European Union, and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. All three are international bodies with very different goals, which he had never previously untangled. Looking around the room, it was clear that his confusion was shared by others. I asked if it would be worth discussing for a few minutes, despite being only tangentially related to the lesson's topic on African cinema.

In three minutes, I explained each using maps I pulled up on the internet; I remained in the target language. Afterwards, two students thanked me, aloud and in French, for having made this detour. We returned to African cinema.

This learning event was, from my perspective, rather simple to address, but it is not always the case. This reflection highlights the complexities of first uncovering gaps in learners' knowledge and then filling them in ways that support DLIFLC's mission, while remaining respectful of students' diverse opinions.

UNCOVERING KNOWLEDGE GAPS

As mentioned above, I credit the learners who signal their unfamiliarity: doing so takes bravery. Such admissions may not occur in a classroom that learners perceive as unwelcoming of such admissions—either on the part of their instructor or their peers. However, the term “safe space,” although trite, has merit. If learners do not feel “safe,” able to admit their unfamiliarity without negative repercussions or mockery, their knowledge gap will persist in both English and the target language. Creating an atmosphere conducive to students' admissions requires a serious amount of observation, self-reflection, and trial-and-error on the part of instructors.

Once this knowledge gap has been laid bare in the classroom, the way that the instructor responds is of critical importance. The following example, a learning episode from my French class teaching intermediate students, illustrates the complexities inherent in addressing learners' unfamiliarity with concepts whose definitions may prove polemical.

DURING ONE LESSON...

The following is a gist of an exchange that unfolded between me and two students in French and then in English. It occurred while reading an authentic text, when I perceived that some students were unclear about the meaning of a passage.

Teacher : *“Est-ce que vous savez ce que c'est qu'un syndicat? (Do you know what a labor union is?)”*

18-year old learner: *“Est-ce que c'est comme un “crime syndicate”?” (Is it like a crime syndicate?)”*

32-year-old learner: *“Oui, c'est essentiellement la même chose. (Yeah, it's pretty much the same thing.)”*

Teacher: “It means ‘a labor union’.”

18-year-old: “Umm...what’s that?”

Teacher: “A labor union is like our teachers’ union here at the DLI...”

(explanation continued...)

From this exchange, several important points surfaced. Before highlighting them, I want to explicate my perceptions of each student’s speech. First, I understood the 18-year old to be sincere in asking the question, having presumably been exposed to this inexact cognate (*syndicat/ syndicate*) in English via crime television shows or contemporary political discourse. Secondly, I understood the 32-year old’s statement to be overtly political in nature, according to some comments made previously in class. That said, I affirm that holding and expressing political opinions is the birthright of every American. As three Americans, both learners and I have the right to view and define any term however we like. No learner is required to hold my definition of this or any other concept.

ADDRESSING THIS GAP IN THIS STUDENT’S CONCEPTUAL KNOWLEDGE

Understanding the French word “*syndicat*” is critical to understanding contemporary Francophone culture. It is my job to prepare students for communication with and in Francophone societies. Allowing such a valuable learning event to pass by without seizing it would be, in my view, a dereliction of my responsibility.

For an English learner to understand “*syndicat*” pre-supposes knowledge of a “labor union” as an entity. My student’s unfamiliarity with the word was a mask for his unfamiliarity with the entity, or the concept of a labor union. This demonstrates students’ need for knowledge of concepts as a necessary component of their second language acquisition.

Different scholars would likely view such a learning event through different lenses. Some may understand it as an example of the development of my student’s Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). By CALP, I mean the use of “advanced and complex language necessary for success in academic endeavors... (which) might be compounded by the fact that (they) may not have learned these concepts in their first language” (Iris Center, 2025, n.p.).

Through this lens, learners can develop their CALP in the second language (L2) simultaneously with developing it in their first language (L1), despite difficulties. The instructor’s role, therefore, is not limited to facilitating students’ L2 but also their L1. Yet it goes without saying that differences between L2 and L1 acquisition are manifest (Ipek, 2009).

Through a different lens, this learning event illustrates a student gaining knowledge of a concept rather than merely learning a term. Indeed, a discussion of what construes “knowing” and

“learning” risks plunging this conversation into Derrida and Wittgenstein’s philosophies of language, or even into metaphysics. To avoid this, it suffices to differentiate between knowledge of a word’s meaning and knowledge of the word’s *référant*, the thing that the word signifies.

Instructors are already comfortable with such precision, accepting that linguistic competence (knowledge of a language) and linguistic performance (ability to utilize a language) are distinct skills (Elaves, 2023). In the same way, knowledge of words and knowledge of concepts are also distinct. According to one group of translation scholars, “Concepts provide the necessary background for broad understanding, while terminologies ensure precision in discussions” (Hassabo et al., 2024, p. 117).

Upon sustained reflection on this learning episode, I believe that my student lacked conceptual knowledge rather than linguistic knowledge. An interpretation of his need as being one of mere academic language in his L1 learning is not reflective of the depth of the learning needed.

While this learning event seemed uniquely political, my students inquired with some regularity about socio-cultural concepts. I appreciate that students feel comfortable raising them. Such inquiries included questions about the “patriarchy,” “internship,” and “subsidy,” among others.

MY (ENGLISH) RESPONSE

Recognizing “labor union” to be fraught, I chose to give my own explanation and to do so in English. My decision aligns with DLIFLC Command Policy, which permits the judicious use of English. It also remained compliant with the professional standard, put forward by ACTFL, that urges instructors to remain in the L2 for 90% of class time (ACTFL, 2025). Researchers of input-processing within cognitive linguistics concluded that when “input is largely incomprehensible, a learner is less likely to infer the meaning of a new word as compared to input that is completely comprehensible” (Barcroft, 2024, p. 24–25). Consequently, vocabulary instruction should be done both explicitly (providing English equivalents) and incidentally (without English, when learners deduce meaning) (Barcroft, 2012).

Within DLIFLC, Bikowski and Zhu (2024) posited that, “All would agree that no amount of target language input will help students learn if it is not comprehensible to them” (p. 14). Here, what was incomprehensible was the concept, rather than the language. I could have explained the concept in the L2 but did not. Guidance issued for New York classrooms asks instructors considering using the L1 to first ask themselves, “Will learning (the L2) and content matter be better supported by using the L1 with the L2 for a given task?” (Billings & Walqui, 2021, n.p.). I believed, and continue to believe, that providing students with an unambiguous explanation of this (demonstrably) polemical concept justified the use of L1 in the L2 classroom. Teachers often feel guilty for using L1 in the L2 classroom (Billings & Walqui, 2021), but in the case of this particular learning event, I do not.

There was an infinite number of ways that, as the instructor, I could have responded. Each possibility meanders through a unique set of landmines. Any response an instructor issues will be perceived as meaningful, but will be interpreted in disparate, unpredictable ways. Finally, I acknowledge that, as a sentient human being, my subjectivities inform my reaction, as do my perceptions of what is important within Francophone societies. If I viewed the unfamiliar term as not critical to Francophone people, nor to my values, I would have reacted differently. Ultimately, my response did not stray from the DLIFLC's primary mission or command policies.

WHAT I SUCCESSFULLY AVOIDED

Language, the grammar and lexicon that speakers choose to use—or not use—is loaded with meaning. Unbiased definitions may not exist. A decade ago, I remember being shocked at the intense debates over the language that journalists use when reporting the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: even the word “action” was deemed partisan (McKenzie, 2013). All words carry residue of other words, from previous usages or concurrent collocations.

Using English, my own L1, I circumvented strong feelings evoked by this concept. Instructors know that no learning event is ever perfect, yet I am not dissatisfied with how this conversation unfolded. At the time of this writing, both students continue to be engaged in their learning in my classroom, and the younger continues to ask concept questions regularly. This suggests that I navigated this event reasonably well, in my view.

In taking control of this learning event, in English, I successfully avoided the worst possible outcomes. Among them are an open-class discussion in which students offered their various perspectives and interpretations of the unfamiliar concept. When filling a gap in students' knowledge (like the one aforementioned), such discussions are problematic for multiple reasons. They inevitably consume precious class time and detract from the lesson's goals. They present the instructor with the challenge of selecting which student(s) get to speak and which opinion(s) are prioritized. They risk losing the learner in a maze of opinion, providing an ambiguous understanding of the concept. Worse, such discussions would center on American perspectives of the concept, rather than target-culture perspectives. And in worst-case scenarios, political divides become apparent in the classroom, harming the cohesiveness of the class and potentially undermining learners' trust in their instructor.

Remembering that the mission of the DLIFLC is language and cultural acquisition of the target culture, solicitations of DLIFLC (American) students' perspectives on phenomena within American culture seem off-mission. In this example, it is irrelevant how students perceive U.S. labor unions when learning about labor unions in Francophone Africa. Nor are the instructor's perspectives of U.S. labor unions at all relevant. Instead, I believe that when knowledge gaps surface, it is my role to ensure that students possess a solid, neutral (as possible) understanding (i.e., denotation) of the unfamiliar concept. This work should not be relegated to students, particularly when dealing with fraught or sensitive concepts.

REFLECTIONS ON THE THORNINESS OF TEACHING

Upon reflecting on such learning events, I identified several beliefs and principles embedded in my teaching approach when encountering gaps in learners' knowledge of concepts.

1: Learners who lack an extensive conceptual repertoire of concepts are neither unintelligent nor merit blame.

Quite the contrary! Studying intensively and for an extended time period at DLIFLC requires an array of skills and competencies. Yet as a 40-year-old, I have lived twice as long as my one 19-year-old learner, who lovingly pointed this out. Consequently, it is inevitable that my knowledge base is exponentially broader, just as my former 61-year-old learner (yes, at DLIFLC) possessed magnitudes more life experience than I— as a father, warfighter, husband, and missionary. These are realities we must accept, with humility (emphasis added).

What's more, education is the result of individual learners' efforts. Yet education is equally a reflection of learners' communities (city, state, country) valuation and prioritization. Across the 50 states and five U.S. territories, education varies drastically. Funding, facilities, and curriculum are not homogeneous or equitable. Instructors must be aware of such disparities to understand their learners.

2: No one is entirely free from ideologies.

By ideology, I mean "the body of doctrine, myth, belief, etc., that guides an individual, social movement, institution, class, or large group" (Dictionary.com, 2025). This includes linguistic ideologies, which are implicitly or explicitly held beliefs on, "not only how language is, but how it ought to be" (Woolard, 2020, n.p.). Cognizant of this, the prudent instructor who is focused on the mission of language education would avoid imparting their own ideologies onto their students. Pragmatically, they would recognize the quagmires that certain concepts may pose to a group of contemporary Americans. To effectively navigate them, instructors should consult external resources when elucidating concepts (e.g., "unions"), when learners lack denotations. The path around quagmires is far more perilous when students lack a term's connotation.

3: Admittedly, politics touches our lives and our jobs.

It does so intimately in the lives of federal workers. As such, avoiding discussing it proves challenging. There is a real risk that allowing discussion of (U.S.) politics in the classroom may derail the lesson, lead to perceptions of bias/partisanship, and irreparably change learners' perceptions of instructors and instruction. Discussing global affairs, even historical ones, can be tricky. Given the U.S.'s global footprint, it seems almost impossible to read foreign news sources that do not reference decisions being made in the U.S. Inviting discussions of U.S. actions abroad into the language classroom is the proverbial camel poking its nose into the tent—very soon the rest of the camel will be inside.

CONCLUSION

Teaching is a complex, human activity. I am reminded of this fact when encountering gaps in learners' knowledge of concepts, which occur with some regularity. I am also reminded of this when navigating comments made in the classroom. Teaching within the U.S. is even more complex given our culture and laws that respect all Americans' First Amendment rights. Maintaining alignment between the mission (particularly enhancing students' understanding of the operational environment), learning outcomes, and a balanced perspective is key.

It may be frustrating that some students do not know concepts that we expect. If instructors in fact, "meet learners where they are," they must identify their learners' strengths and knowledge gaps, and expertly find ways to bridge the two. Following the DLIFLC policy and professional standards, the prudent use of English to scaffold within lessons should not be dismissed *a priori*. Regarding strategic L1 use, "the key for teachers is to consider those instructional moments in which action or communication is essential" (Billings & Walqui, 2021, n.p.). When doing so, they should remain mindful of their students' progress through the program.

Instructors must remember the primary mission of the Institute: second language acquisition and cultural capabilities. Any conversation that diverts from this goal is no longer supporting the mission. As such, teachers must at times steer students away from egregious detours. At the same time, students possess a treasure-trove of cultural knowledge—about their own culture(s) through their own lives and experiences. Instructors must recognize learners' assets, knowledge, interests, and various life experiences, known in the scholarship as "funds of knowledge" (Moll et al., 1992). Excellent instructors will create pathways from them leading into the L2 culture(s).

Teaching, like all complicated human activities, should involve assessment, reflection, recalibration, and re-application. Ultimately, faculty have an opportunity to shape students' lives, far beyond teaching them a language. This is particularly true of our youngest learners. Faculty must remain aware of this, even if it can easily elude us.

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Faculty Forum

Maximizing the Effectiveness of Special Assistance: Insights from Student Perspectives and Classroom Practice

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The Special Assistance (SA) program serves as a critical intervention at the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center (DLIFLC), as it provides targeted academic support for at-risk students. While the program can provide many benefits, it can also be challenging to manage at a school level and hard to know what students expect and appreciate. This Faculty Forum article reports on students' perceptions of what they consider to be effective SA sessions. Student survey responses, sensing session feedback, and qualitative reflections reveal that students perceive SA hours as most valuable when instruction is tailored, strategy-rich, and delivered within a supportive environment. Conversely, SA sessions are perceived as least effective when they replicate classroom tasks or are framed as a punitive measure. The article concludes with recommendations for maximizing the impact of the SA program within the Undergraduate Russian School (URU) and DLIFLC. By aligning SA practices with both theory and student experience, faculty can increase learners' confidence, reduce attrition, and improve outcomes on high-stakes assessments such as the Defense Language Proficiency Test (DLPT). Additionally, implications are discussed with an emphasis on practical strategies instructors can readily apply.

Keywords: *Special Assistance, Differentiated Instruction, Learner Autonomy, Strategy Training, Growth Mindset, Student-Centered Learning, Motivation, Faculty Development*

INTRODUCTION

The Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center (DLIFLC) represents one of the most demanding language-learning environments. In the Russian Basic Program, learners are expected to progress from little or no proficiency to Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) level 2 (i.e., "limited working proficiency") or higher in listening and reading within 48 weeks. Such intensity

creates both opportunities and challenges: while many students thrive, others struggle with pace, cognitive load, and performance pressure.

Students placed in required SA hours receive targeted academic support for their specific needs. Unlike optional tutoring, participation in SA sessions is typically assigned based on academic performance indicators, Early Intervention Board (EIB) findings, or instructor recommendations. Despite its central role, SA is sometimes perceived by faculty and students as a remedial add-on rather than an integrated instructional opportunity. This perception raises an important pedagogical consideration: how can SA sessions be structured in ways that promote learner agency, engagement, and ownership – core elements of student-centered learning?

BACKGROUND

Special Assistance (SA) has been periodically discussed within DLIFLC professional forums and internal conferences. These institutional discussions have explored persistent questions regarding the purpose and framing of SA within intensive language programs. In particular, contributors have examined tensions between remediation-oriented and enrichment-oriented models of SA.

A remediation-oriented approach typically conceptualizes SA as corrective support designed to address academic deficiencies or reteach missed material. While such support may be necessary in certain contexts, institutional reflections suggest that when SA is framed primarily as remediation, students may associate participation with deficit labeling, stigma, or punishment. In contrast, an enrichment-oriented model positions SA as targeted performance enhancement—focusing on strategy refinement, skill sharpening, and confidence building. Prior DLIFLC discussions have suggested that enrichment framing is more likely to promote learner engagement, ownership, and reduced anxiety.

Building on these institutional conversations, three well-established principles in language teaching and learning directly align with the goals of the SA program and the likely needs of students in high-intensity environments:

1. differentiated instruction and tailored support;
2. student-centered learning and strategy training; and
3. psychologically safe learning environments.

Differentiated Instruction and Tailored Support

Differentiated instruction is defined as adapting content, process, and product to meet learners' diverse needs (Tomlinson, 2014). Research confirms that targeted interventions improve retention and engagement in high-intensity programs (Hall, Strangman, & Meyer, 2019).

At the same time, differentiated instruction presents practical challenges. Instructors must balance personalization with pacing guides, standardized curricula, and high-stakes assessment

preparation. Planning differentiated tasks can increase preparation time and require substantial pedagogical expertise (Tomlinson, 2014). Moreover, some learners may initially perceive differentiation as singling them out or reinforcing a deficit identity if instructional framing is not handled carefully (Ryan & Deci, 2020; Wentzel, 2012). These tensions are particularly relevant in SA contexts, where students are often assigned participation based on performance indicators.

Student-Centered Learning and Strategy Training

Student-centered approaches place learners at the core of decision-making. Weimer (2013) argues that student-centered instruction promotes deeper engagement and independence, critical factors in sustaining learning beyond the classroom. One common pedagogical approach within student-centered learning is strategy training, which helps students develop tools for learning and test-taking. Research in applied linguistics emphasizes that strategy instruction improves performance on high-stakes assessments (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 2017). Zimmerman (2002) identifies strategy use as central to self-regulated learning, particularly in environments where learners must process large volumes of information under time pressure. Goal-setting further supports this process by helping students identify specific problem areas and actionable steps for improvement.

However, strategy training also presents challenges. Learners may apply strategies mechanically without reflection, resist unfamiliar approaches, or struggle to transfer strategies across tasks (Oxford, 2017). Instructors must decide which strategies to prioritize and how to integrate them without displacing essential content coverage. Nevertheless, research consistently suggests that students value strategy instruction when its relevance to performance is transparent and when opportunities for guided practice and reflection are embedded (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021; Hattie & Clarke, 2019).

Safe Learning Environments and Affective Filters

Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis remains highly relevant in intensive language-learning contexts, emphasizing that emotional variables — including anxiety, self-confidence, and motivation — influence learners' ability to process and retain language input. When students experience elevated stress or fear of failure, cognitive resources may be diverted away from comprehension, strategy use, and long-term retention.

Contemporary research further supports this relationship between affect and learning. Studies in educational psychology and second language acquisition highlight that psychological safety, perceived instructor support, and growth-oriented feedback significantly influence learner engagement, persistence, and performance (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021; Ryan & Deci, 2020). In high-stakes academic environments, supportive instructional climates are associated with improved self-efficacy, reduced avoidance behaviors, and greater willingness to take learning risks. Students' feelings of belonging and support for their learning autonomy, as well as their perceptions of high-quality feedback, are key for sustaining motivation (Wentzel, 2012; Hattie & Clarke, 2019).

While institutional discussions provide conceptual grounding, direct student perspectives offer important insight into how SA program functions in practice. The following section reports on qualities that students at DLIFLC value when they attend SA hours.

STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF CONSTRUCTIVE SA HOURS

Upon DLIFLC Human Research Protections Program's approval in February 2025, the URU Office of the Dean (OD) conducted a school-wide instructional inquiry for the period of June 2024-March 2025 to better understand how students perceive the effectiveness of SA hours. The author of this article designed the feedback tools and coordinated data collection.

Data were drawn from two sources. The first was students' responses to an anonymous and voluntary online feedback form. Students were informed that responses would be used for instructional improvement and would not affect their grades. The online form consisted of three open-ended questions: (1) instructional practices perceived as helpful or less helpful, (2) instructor behaviors that supported learning, and (3) recommendations for improving SA sessions. The other data collected were the notes from student feedback discussions conducted across semesters 1–3 by the school's academic leadership team. These sessions were facilitated by academic leadership and trained faculty moderators not directly responsible for student evaluation. Discussions encouraged students to describe learning challenges, comment on instructional strategies, and reflect on the perceived value of SA support.

While both tools relied on self-reported perceptions and are therefore inherently subjective, the use of multiple data sources allowed for identification of recurring instructional themes rather than isolated opinions. Data analysis, conducted by the author, involved thematic coding and synthesis to identify recurring instructional patterns across responses. The combined dataset included responses from 31 students and sensing session observations drawn from 20 classes across 10 departments; feedback was drawn across the entire course. Identified themes are summarized in Table 1 and Figure 1.

Characteristics of SA Hours that Students Valued

A thematic review of student feedback across both sources revealed four consistent patterns in what students valued during SA hours: tailored instruction, strategy training, opportunities for student voice and choice, and supportive learning environments (see Table 1). Note that some student quotes overlap between categories, but their perceptions and pedagogical implications are clear.

Table 1
Student Voices and Pedagogical Implications

Theme	Student Voices (Representative Quotes)	Pedagogical Implications
Tailored Instruction	<p><i>“When my instructor slowed down and explained one step at a time, I finally felt like I understood how to approach listening tasks.”</i></p> <p><i>“We don’t always have time in class for one-on-one help.”</i></p> <p><i>“When my instructor helped me break down listening passages into manageable steps, it felt like the session was really about me, not just another assignment.”</i></p> <p><i>“This feedback illustrates the importance of differentiation, particularly in contexts where learners vary widely in skill mastery.”</i></p>	<p>Teachers can:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explicitly teach steps on how to tackle challenging issues, such as answering test items or approaching listening. • Differentiate SA from classroom tasks by targeting specific weaknesses and using diagnostics to inform instruction.
Strategy Training	<p><i>“When I learned how to eliminate wrong answers quickly, I started passing quizzes I used to fail.”</i></p> <p><i>“Previewing the questions before listening completely changed how I approached exams.”</i></p> <p><i>“Before SA, I didn’t know I could preview questions to guide my listening. That one trick changed everything.”</i></p> <p><i>“Instead of reading a full article, my instructor had me focus just on the headline and first paragraph. That gave me confidence to keep going.”</i></p> <p><i>“Breaking things down made it less overwhelming as it showed me I can succeed step by step.”</i></p>	<p>Teachers can:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teach students to chunk difficult tasks into stages. • Integrate explicit strategy training in every SA session. • Model, practice, and reflect on transferable listening, reading comprehension and test-taking strategies, in general. • Scaffold tasks into manageable stages to build confidence and reduce cognitive overload.
Student Voice and Choice	<p><i>“When my teacher asked me what I wanted to work on, I felt in control of my learning.”</i></p> <p><i>“I asked to focus on speaking practice for my oral exam, and that flexibility really helped.”</i></p>	<p>Teachers can:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incorporate student choice into session planning to promote autonomy and ownership.
Supportive Atmosphere	<p><i>“I wasn’t afraid to make mistakes there.”</i></p> <p><i>“The teacher encouraged me every time I got closer to the right answer—it built my confidence.”</i></p> <p><i>“It’s a place where I can practice without embarrassment.”</i></p> <p><i>“SA made me feel seen.”</i></p>	<p>Teachers can:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide emotional safety and build trust. • Establish an environment where errors are reframed as growth opportunities • Encourage students to take risks and that they can do it.

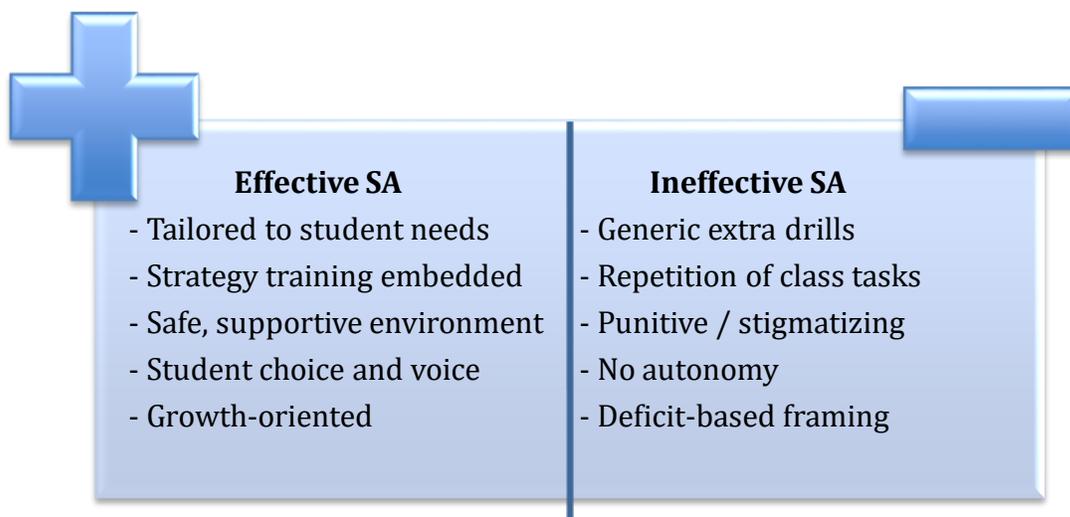
Collectively, these voices confirm that students perceive SA as most effective when it offers personalization, builds confidence, and equips students with tools for independent success. These themes suggest that effective SA is defined by both the instructional content and by the interaction of personalization, strategy development, and affective support.

Characteristics of SA Hours that Students Did Not Value

In addition to pointing out what they valued about SA hours, data analysis also identified instructional practices that students perceived as less valuable. These fell into two main categories: lack of usefulness and perceptions of punishment. For usefulness, students did not value activities that were not related to a clear purpose. As one student noted: “We just went through another grammar drill, and it felt like a waste of time.” Several students reported that SA sometimes resembled “extra homework” rather than targeted support. In the category of punishment, students commented on a feeling of stigma or negative connotation from being required to go to SA, such as this student: “Being sent to SA feels like being marked as a failure” or “Sometimes it feels like punishment.” These perceptions highlight the need to refine both the instructional content and the institutional framing of SA, avoiding deficit framing and duplication of classroom drills while reframing SA as enrichment and growth.

Taken together, the findings indicate that students differentiate between helpful and unhelpful SA primarily through perceptions of instructional relevance, structure, and affective framing. Individualized and supportive SA sessions were associated with positive learning experiences, whereas repetitive or poorly structured sessions were more likely to be perceived negatively. The qualities of effective and ineffective SA hours can be seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1
Students’ Perceptions of Effective vs. Ineffective SA



RECOMMENDATIONS TO DLIFLC FACULTY MEMBERS FOR TEACHING SA HOURS

Building on these findings, the following recommendations provide a framework for maximizing the impact of SA:

1. Tailor Content and Instruction to the Student(s)' Needs

- Use diagnostic data (exam breakdowns, ICPT scores, DLPT practice) to design individualized tasks.
- When possible, group students by instructional need or differentiate tasks within SA sessions. For example, one student could be given tasks to reinforce their phonological decoding for listening, while another student might be given tasks that build discourse-level comprehension.
- Replace generic drills with authentic, targeted practice tied to student needs.

2. Adopt a Student-Centered Approach

- Begin each SA with a brief check-in: “What would you like to cover today?”
- Co-create session goals with students to promote engagement and ownership.

3. Embed Strategy Training

- Dedicate time in every session for at least one explicit strategy. Options include how to preview questions prior to a listening activity/assessment, eliminate possible multiple choice answers, take notes, recognize grammatical cues such as case endings to identify syntactic relationships, attend to verb aspect to interpret temporal meaning, and register reduced speech in authentic listening passages.
- Incorporate reflection: ask students how the strategy worked and how they might apply it outside of SA hours.

4. Reframe SA Positively

Because SA participation is often assigned based on academic difficulty, learners may initially interpret placement through a deficit lens, associating sessions with stigma, remediation, or evaluative pressure. Without careful instructional framing, these perceptions can inadvertently elevate anxiety and diminish motivation.

- Avoid labels like “remedial” or “second chance.” Instead, present SA as “focused skill sharpening.”
- Highlight growth by recognizing even small gains from SA participation.

5. Foster Safe Learning Environments

- Use language that normalizes mistakes as part of learning: “*Every error is data.*”
- Provide encouragement that emphasizes effort and strategy use, not just outcomes.
- Encourage students to prioritize their own learning over just getting the answer right, ensuring that they know why the answer was correct or not correct.

6. Monitor and Evaluate Continuously

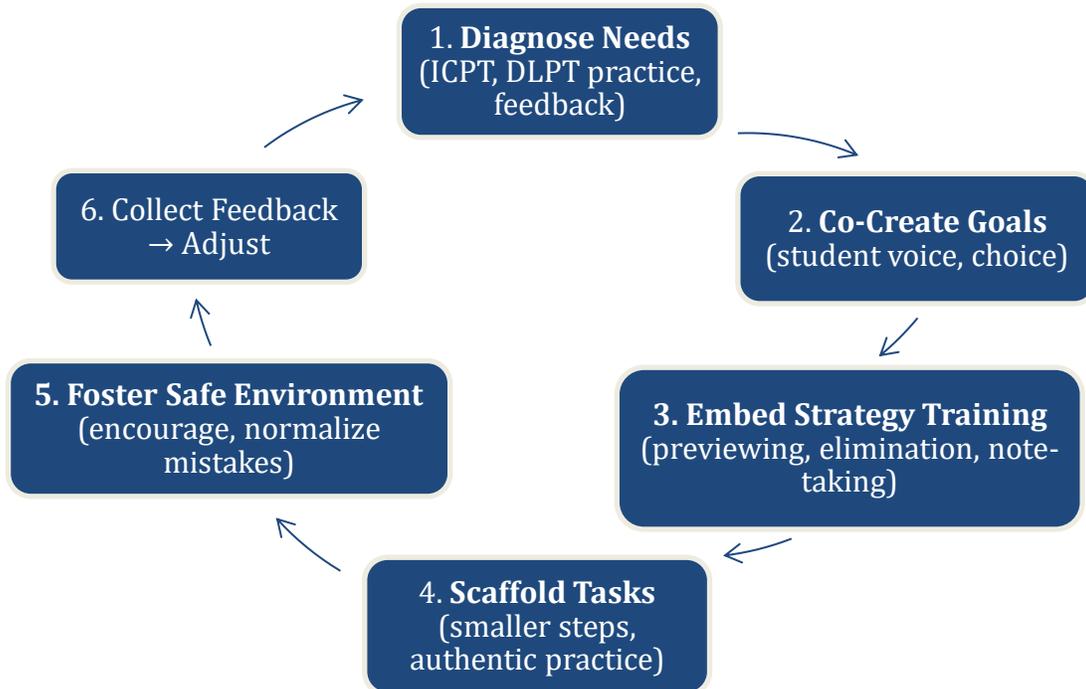
- Collect short student feedback after sessions to adapt approaches quickly.
- Use cycles of action research to refine SA practices, ensuring alignment with evolving learner needs.

While many of these recommendations reflect principles of effective teaching applicable to all instructional contexts, SA hours provide a uniquely flexible environment for intensified personalization. Unlike regular classroom instruction—which must balance whole-class pacing, curriculum coverage, and group dynamics—SA sessions allow instructors to concentrate on individual learner gaps, strategy coaching, and targeted skill refinement. In this sense, SA functions not as a separate instructional model, but as an opportunity to amplify high-impact practices.

Figure 2 presents a suggested instructional sequence for conducting SA sessions based on student perceptions gathered by the URU OD. The process assumes that learners are typically assigned to SA based on prior performance indicators (e.g., test results, instructor observations). Within the SA session itself, diagnosis functions as a refinement stage rather than an initial placement decision. Instructors may draw on both objective performance data and student self-reports when identifying focal areas. While occasional discrepancies may arise between student-perceived needs and instructor-identified priorities, these differences can serve as productive entry points for dialogue, goal clarification, and strategy alignment.

The sequence then moves toward co-creating goals with learners, embedding explicit strategy training, and scaffolding tasks into manageable steps. Throughout the session, instructors foster a psychologically safe and supportive learning environment. The final stage includes collecting brief student feedback and making adjustments, reinforcing a cycle of continuous instructional improvement.

Figure 2
Recommended SA Session Flow



Conducting these steps for each SA student will require a certain amount of time; however, individualized SA **does not** necessarily imply extensive preparation. Instructors can employ efficient, low-prep techniques such as brief diagnostic conversations, targeted error analysis using recent quizzes or homework, focused strategy modeling, and micro-practice activities derived directly from classroom materials to target key difficulties. Reusing authentic listening excerpts, repurposing curriculum-based material for strategy practice, and conducting rapid feedback cycles can significantly reduce preparation demands.

Teachers can further streamline effort through resource-sharing across teaching teams or departments. Centralized repositories of SA activities, strategy exercises, listening passages, and scaffolded practice tasks can support instructional consistency while minimizing individual workload. Collaborative development of adaptable SA materials may enhance both efficiency and pedagogical alignment.

Some elements of effective SA (e.g., fostering a psychologically safe environment) require primarily an instructional mindset rather than additional preparation time. Other components, such as goal setting, may initially require greater instructor guidance, as students often articulate overly general objectives. Instructor expertise plays a critical role in helping learners refine goals toward specific, actionable skill targets.

CONCLUSION

These findings at URU suggest that students perceive Special Assistance as most effective when sessions are grounded in differentiated instruction, student-centered approaches that promote learner autonomy, explicit strategy training, supportive atmospheres, and growth-oriented framing. Aligning SA practices with evidence-based pedagogy and student perspectives can enhance learner confidence, strengthen DLPT performance, and contribute to attrition reduction.

Beyond instructional design, the results point to important institutional considerations. Because SA is frequently associated with remediation or academic difficulty, how SA is communicated and framed at the program level may influence learner motivation and engagement. Clear, consistent messaging that positions SA as a proactive performance-enhancement resource rather than a punitive measure may help mitigate stigma and increase student buy-in. Similarly, policy guidance that emphasizes personalization, strategy development, and affective support could further align SA implementation with its intended developmental purpose. Listening to student voices not only informs classroom practice but also provides valuable direction for refining SA structures, expectations, and communication strategies across DLIFLC.

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Book Review

***Indigenous America in the Spanish Language Classroom*, by A. Fountain, 2023**

Georgetown University Press. 260 pp.

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In military and government language programs, linguistic proficiency without historical and cultural literacy constitutes a strategic vulnerability. Anne Fountain's *Indigenous America in the Spanish Language Classroom* offers a timely, practice-oriented framework for embedding Indigenous histories, epistemologies, and contemporary voices into Spanish instruction. Our central appraisal is that Fountain operationalizes decolonial and content-based pedagogy for secondary and postsecondary contexts with remarkable clarity, ensuring direct applicability to Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center (DLIFLC) courses and Foreign Area Officer (FAO) training. The book's most significant contribution lies not in presenting superficial "cultural add-ons," but in reframing Spanish as a pluricentric language whose lexicon, pragmatics, and textual traditions are inseparable from Indigenous presence and influence.

SCOPE AND ORGANIZATION

Following a rich introduction—"Why I Wanted to Write This Book"—which situates the work within its research origins, goals, and methodological scope, Fountain organizes the volume into six chapters, two appendices, and a glossary. The progression moves from historical foundations to classroom application, creating a coherent pedagogical arc. Early chapters leverage colonial-era documents to complicate students' understandings of conquest, foregrounding Indigenous agency—alliances, resistance, and negotiation—rather than rehearsing teleological narratives. Later chapters introduce authentic materials (currency, idioms, textiles, environmental symbols) and primary texts ranging from the Popol Vuh to voyage accounts. The final chapters distill ten actionable teaching principles and curate museums, archives, and digital platforms for extended study. The appendices expand the implementation toolkit, particularly for instructors adapting to hybrid and online modalities.

Chapter Highlights:

- **Chapter 1** (Conquests and Their Impact on Indigenous Languages and Cultures) establishes historical foundations by examining colonial documents that reveal Indigenous communities' active roles during European contact—alliances, cultural resistance, and negotiation—challenging reductive conquest narratives.
- **Chapter 2** (New Perspectives of the *Quincentennial* and the Twenty-First Century) interrogates Spain's internal debates on human rights during the conquest, linking these to contemporary discourses on historical justice and memory. Topics such as food history and art analysis invite cross-cultural reflection. From the rediscovery of the sixteenth-century Spanish priest Bartolomé de Las Casas' critical perspective, the years following the 1992 celebration promoted new debates and assessments of the indigenous contributions and sacrifices of many surviving indigenous cultures and language groups.
- **Chapter 3** (Ideas for Language Classes) pivots to pedagogy, introducing authentic materials—currency, idiomatic expressions, textiles—that reflect Indigenous influence on modern Spanish. Applied scenarios extend to professional domains such as healthcare, law, and interpretation, with clear transferability to military translation and liaison work.
- **Chapter 4** (Spanish American Literature with Indigenous Perspectives) emphasizes literary engagement, guiding educators in presenting Indigenous and colonial texts (e.g., *Popol Vuh*, Books of Chilam Balam, writings by Columbus, Bernal Díaz del Castillo, Bartolomé de las Casas, Rosario Castellanos, Miguel Angel Asturias, José Martí, and many others) to foster critical reading and linguistic growth. Although many were destroyed by overzealous conquerors, priests, and missionaries, some original texts have survived in early translation attempts into Spanish and can be used in today's classrooms to spark interest and generate discussion and debate.
- **Chapter 5** (Ideas for Latin American Studies) broadens the lens to Latin American studies, advocating for inclusion of Indigenous languages, film, and media. Notably, Fountain foregrounds Afro-Indigenous histories and the linguistic diversity of the Amazon region—critical for regional security and area studies programs. Though, in broad strokes, Fountain also provides long lists of language families distributed in impressive numbers over all of the Americas (numbers close to 1000 as of 2019).
- **Chapter 6** (conclusions and resources) synthesizes key ideas into ten practical takeaways and provides curated resources, including museums and digital archives. Appendices offer additional texts and flexible digital tools responsive to online learning demands.

ANALYTICAL EVALUATION: STRENGTHS

Three features merit particular recognition:

1. **Integration of Theory and Praxis:** Fountain pairs historical inquiry with concrete classroom tasks, lowering adoption barriers for instructors new to Indigenous-centered content.

2. **Multimodal Material Selection:** The inclusion of lexical items, iconography, and pragmatic conventions demonstrates how Indigenous contributions permeate everyday Spanish, supporting interpretive and presentational communication outcomes.
3. **Resource Accessibility:** Curated lists prioritize adaptability—essential for programs with heterogeneous learner profiles and mission constraints. For military educators, these features align with scenario-based learning, culture-general competencies, and regionally focused preparation.

CRITICAL ENGAGEMENT: AREAS FOR GROWTH

While robust, the text is most naturally suited to intermediate and advanced learners; novice-level instructors will require clearer scaffolds to manage cognitive load and avoid essentializing complex histories. Guidance on assessment could be strengthened: beyond material selection, sample rubrics for performance tasks (e.g., interpreting primary texts, analyzing visual artifacts, mediating cultural information) and strategies for evidencing intercultural growth (reflective journals, portfolio artifacts, structured debriefs) would enhance usability. Additionally, the promising treatment of Afro-Indigenous histories could be amplified through case studies from the Caribbean and Amazonia that center linguistic repertoires shaped by sustained Indigenous–African contact. Finally, explicit discussion of ethical sourcing and positionality—how instructors select texts, name power dynamics, and involve community knowledge-bearers without tokenism—would deepen the book’s critical rigor.

IMPLICATIONS FOR DLI/FAO CONTEXTS

For defense, diplomatic, and government settings, we propose a three-part adoption model:

1. **Foundations Module (2–3 weeks):** Introduce colonial archives and Indigenous-authored sources, guiding inquiry into authorship, audience, and purpose.
2. **Language-in-Use Module (3–4 weeks):** Analyze lexicon, pragmatics, and iconography in contemporary Spanish across regions (Andes, Mesoamerica, Amazonia), culminating in scenario-based tasks (e.g., briefing a partner force on cultural protocols).
3. **Applied Field Module (2–3 weeks):** Engage with museum collections or digital archives to produce bilingual interpretive products (exhibit captions, public-service announcements, mediation summaries).

Assessments should combine interpretive analyses, presentational products, and interpersonal role-plays simulating liaison work—aligning language performance with cultural decision-making.

PEDAGOGICAL THROUGH LINES

Fountain’s approach resonates with scholarship asserting the inseparability of language and culture and the efficacy of content-driven teaching for advanced proficiency development. Instructors adapting this text should foreground three throughlines:

- **Contextualization:** Language forms (words, idioms, discourse patterns) should be situated within historical and geopolitical frames. For example, explaining how certain terms emerged during colonial encounters helps learners grasp meaning beyond literal translation.
- **Critical Reading:** Students learn to evaluate sources and perspectives, especially when comparing Indigenous and colonial narratives. This builds analytical skills and prevents simplistic or biased interpretations.
- **Transfer:** Cultural insights should migrate into professional domains—healthcare, law, security cooperation—so learners can apply them pragmatically. For instance, understanding Indigenous protocols can inform diplomatic or humanitarian missions.

This his three-part model ensures that studying Indigenous narratives isn’t just academic; it becomes actionable knowledge for real-world tasks. Learners practice intentional listening and reading to extract cultural meaning and apply it in professional scenarios.

CONCRETE CLASSROOM EXTENSIONS

- **Primary Text Seminar:** Students annotate selections from the *Popol Vuh* and a colonial voyage narrative, then mediate contested meanings in structured debate.
- **Material Culture Lab:** Learners analyze currency, textiles, and public iconography to map Indigenous semiotics in everyday Spanish, producing an infographic brief for a hypothetical partner unit.
- **Language & Ecology Case:** Teams examine environmental terms and Indigenous stewardship concepts, crafting bilingual advisories relevant to humanitarian assistance or disaster response.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Two pragmatic constraints persist:

1. Adoption in rigid curricula will require administrative buy-in; while Fountain’s appendices offer adaptable entry points, instructors and curriculum developers may need to crosswalk activities to existing outcomes and contact hours.
2. Novice-level adaptation will benefit from spiraled tasks and explicit vocabulary supports to reduce extraneous load while preserving conceptual rigor.

Future work could develop military-specific scenarios (pre-deployment cultural briefs, area studies modules, liaison communication drills) and, most importantly, the creation of an open-source mini-corpora of Indigenous-influenced Spanish for text analysis.

CONCLUSION

Indigenous America in the Spanish Language Classroom is a significant contribution to culturally responsive Spanish pedagogy, offering implementable tools for instructors in defense and government settings. Its sustained attention to Indigenous narratives encourages learners to interrogate power, identity, and history while building communicative proficiency. For programs tasked with preparing culturally astute language professionals, Fountain's text provides both direction and depth—inviting instructors to move beyond surface-level facts toward ethically grounded, analytically rich engagement with the Spanish-speaking world.

Book Review

***Open Architecture Curricular Design in World Language Education*, by A. R. Corin, B. L. Leaver, & C. Campbell (Eds), 2025**

Georgetown University Press, 244 pp.

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Open Architecture Curricular Design in World Language Education addresses a persistent challenge in language education: how to structure educational experiences that are at a student's level(s) and tailored to their needs. Textbooks offer many benefits, particularly in terms of quality control of content, organization, and efficiencies for busy teachers. Yet they also pose considerable challenges—they can include lockstep and seemingly soulless activities, dampening student (and teacher) motivation and creativity, while simultaneously offering overly general information or mindless worksheets that fail to meet the needs of students. Open Architecture Curricular Design (OACD) was thus developed, first institutionalized at the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center (DLIFLC) in 2015 for use with high-beginner language students and above. Now, 10 years after the adoption of OACD, this book brings together the experiences of teachers and administrators who used this approach. This edited volume aims to “introduce OACD to a broad readership of language learning professionals and interested language learners,” to encourage professionals and learners alike to experiment with OACD as both teachers and students come to view “near-native proficiency in a non-native language as a realistic goal over a course of study” (Corin et al., p. ix). A summary of the book and areas of strength and opportunities, as well as applicability for teaching at DLIFLC, follows.

SCOPE AND ORGANIZATION

Part 1: The OACD Framework

Open Architecture Curricular Design in World Language Education is divided into five parts with 16 chapters. Part 1, Chapter 1 (Corin, Leaver, & Campbell), provides an overview of the approach, including its definition, the need for OACD, common principles, and its range of applicability and generalizability. Corin et al. define OACD as “a curricular design framework in which instruction proceeds independently of a textbook, either eschewing it entirely or relegating it to a supporting role” (p. 3). With OACD, language-learning topics are organized around a theme-based syllabus, placing authentic texts and tasks into modules that can move around freely as needed. This

approach is learner-centered, even allowing “on the spot” (p. 4) changes as deemed necessary by the instructor. The authors concluded the chapter, noting that more research into OACD is needed.

Part 2: OACD in US Government Language Institutes: Programs at the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center

Chapter 2 opens this section, which features examples from DLIFLC. Lee’s chapter, “OACD as an Enabler for Transformative Learning in a Korean Course,” seeks to demonstrate how OACD can be utilized for language learning, bicultural competence, and learner autonomy. OACD approaches were interwoven with flipped learning, learning by teaching, and daily reflective learning journals. Examples highlight students’ changes in perspectives about the target language and culture and about themselves, rather than language development, however.

Chapters 3 and 4 explore how to use OACD with beginners. Chapter 3, “Preparing Novice Learners for Open Architecture Learning: The Gradual Release of Responsibility Model” (Krasner), outlines how this model can be used to teach the sound representations of Cyrillic letters to Russian students, noting that even at this level, “the majority of OACD features are oriented toward meaning versus form and feedback is given to learners holistically, keeping real-life communicative goals in mind” (p. 50). Chapter 4, Part 2, “OACD-Based Immersion Events Outside the Classroom in an Intensive Chinese Mandarin Program,” by Chen, discusses how their program used the OACD approach in one- and two-day immersions at a local facility and two-week immersions at an external institution. Student feedback is included, and pre- and post-in-house language assessments are listed, but no comparison data with cohorts that attended these types of immersion events are provided. This type of comparison data would provide more persuasive evidence in support of using OACD with immersion events.

Chapters 5 and 6 demonstrate how OACD can be integrated into a curriculum or drive content decisions. In Chapter 5, “Introducing Open Architecture Curricular Design in an Egyptian Dialect Program,” Jones describes how, early in the course, they introduced authentic materials, task-based instruction, project-based instruction, flipped learning, and formative assessment into a class, via a case study with five students. Chapter 6, “The Use of Project-Based OACD Modules in an Intermediate and Advanced Chinese Mandarin Program” (Wang), describes how a data analytics tool, the Learner Data Panel, helps with learner involvement in the selection of content. Steps ranged from the teacher identifying student needs to teacher-learner meetings to identify goals and plan instruction, to learner-teacher reflections.

Part 3: OACD in US Military Service Academies: Programs at the US Military Academy (West Point)

The examples in this section highlight how OACD can be utilized in conjunction with study abroad experiences. In Chapter 7, “Emulating Proficiency-Increasing Features of the Semester Abroad Experience through Open Architecture Curricular Design,” Gregory showcases OACD’s benefits of self-sequenced modularity, learner autonomy, and an opportunity for learners in a Chinese

Media Course to engage more deeply with the language and culture and minimize language proficiency attrition after study abroad. Chapter 8, “Optimizing Flexibility in a Distance Learning Immersion Course at West Point: Three Examples of Open Architecture Curricular Design” (Maggin, Miller, Enslin, Pendergast, & Dobrunoff), showcases the benefits of OACD in how it permits teachers to tailor objectives and methods for learner needs in an online course taken by study abroad students, seeking to encourage them to reflect on their learning. The chapter includes portions of student papers intended to showcase how OACD led to transformative learning experiences, although it is not clear in the chapter the extent to which these examples were representative of all students’ experiences.

Part 4: OACD in Academe

Chapters 9 and 10 both identify the benefits of social connections and community in language learning. In Chapter 9, “Using OACD and Macrostrategies Frameworks to Enable the Practical Application of Sociocultural Theory in a College Russian Course,” Watson illustrates how OACD principles align with Sociocultural Theory, thereby enabling learner autonomy via content- and task-based learning. Students were interviewed at the end of the course, which followed a five-step process to integrate OACD, resulting in the identification of five macrostrategies and their application in a textbook-based course. Chapter 10, “Inter-Institutional Collaboration in Curriculum Development: The Design of Flexible Modules in the Less Commonly Taught Languages Partnership” (Gorp, Uebel, & Giupponi), demonstrates how OACD can be used to address budget constraints in world language courses via collaborations across institutions, starting with the creation of a community of practice for language teachers to develop the pedagogy-related skillsets they needed and acknowledging that textbooks are often not available for less commonly taught languages.

Chapters 11 and 12 featured Flagship Programs (federally sponsored programs focusing on language learning). Chapter 11, “From Reading the News to Performing the News: Using Oral Presentations as a Key of an OACD-enabled Course” (Soyan), outlines how OACD can be utilized in a Globalization course taken in conjunction with an Advanced Russian course in a Domestic Flagship Program. The chapter includes scaffolding activities that led to the culminating task of a mock news broadcast and concludes with possible adaptations into other language contexts and topics. However, the degree to which students memorized or read their presentations and the impact that had on their actual proficiency development is unclear. In Chapter 12, “Integrating Open Architecture Curricular Design in a Proficiency-Oriented, Content-Based Instruction Course in Korean,” Cheon walks readers through the sequence of classroom activities in an integrated-skills course based on film for advanced-level students, including how this course utilized social media platforms. Learners appreciated the collaborative learning and development of their critical thinking skills, though they expressed concerns related to workload.

Chapter 13, “Spiral-like Design for Teaching Inflectional Languages at Novice Level in an OACD-enabled Content-Based Instruction Course,” closes the section, with Bondarenko demonstrating how OACD can be combined with spiral-like design to help beginning-level students learn a highly-inflected language, in this case Russian. Content included authentic or adapted internet-

based resources, accompanied by discussions structured around content-based instruction with dialogs, tasks based on reasoning, writing, readings, and metacognitive discussions.

Part 5: Learning Assessment, Program Evaluation, and Program Management in an OACD Context

Chapters 14 and 15 examine how Open Architecture concepts can be applied to formative assessment and program evaluation. Chapter 14, “Open Architecture Curricular Design as an Enabler of Diagnostic Instruction” (Dababneh & Yuan), describes how OACD contributes to diagnostic instruction, a form of formative assessment that includes recall protocol, and diagnostic assessment to identify learning styles. This process involves students learning via scenarios, tailored learning plans, preparatory activities, and translation and writing activities. In Chapter 15, “An Open Architecture Approach to Program Evaluation in a Language Learning Setting,” Ashby articulates how program evaluation can be conducted in an OA course. The process involves self-analysis of a program’s syllabus, curriculum, learner performance, and instructor performance using qualitative and quantitative artifacts, resulting in a list of due-outs and a presentation with discussion to stakeholders. Chapter 16, “Implementing Open Architecture Curricular Design at the Classroom and Department Level: Lessons from a Ten-Year Experience” (Oded & Oded), outlines the process of how classroom-level OACD initiatives can contribute to department-wide curricular design, moving from a focus on compliance to continuous improvement. This transformation required the fostering of organic teaching teams, a disposition toward change, and a tolerance for failure, with the team ultimately learning that collaboration led to innovation and success.

STRENGTHS AND OPPORTUNITIES OF THE BOOK

A contribution the book makes to the field is offering options to the language teaching profession. The needs of many teachers and administrators are, in fact, not met by published textbooks, while at the same time, the challenges of a program creating their own language textbook are equally daunting. The chapters in this book offer snapshots of how educators can build authentic materials and tasks that have the potential to motivate students and meet their specific needs. The examples range from military contexts to language programs in general higher education. As noted by Gorp, Uebel, and Giupponi in Chapter 10, smaller language programs or less commonly taught languages often must develop their own materials, pointing out a definite benefit to these examples. The examples also range from novice to advanced language learners and across skill areas, and several chapters include information on preparing students to learn in this environment.

At the same time, the book would benefit from some additional information, if a new edition were to be published. As the book notes, teaching in an Open Architecture class requires that teachers be knowledgeable about pedagogy and about the specifics of the language they are teaching. Yet, none of the 16 chapters sufficiently describes the sub-skills teachers need to succeed with this approach, addresses how a program might provide any necessary professional

development, or conveys how programs can evaluate instructors or supervisors when they operate within this approach. Given the stated aims of the book, this level of detail seems within its scope, and without this information, readers may be inaccurately led to believe that they can implement an OACD program without developing the structures and training necessary. While textbooks are not perfect, one of their main advantages is that they offer a structure, language explanations (e.g., with grammar), and learning strategies (e.g., how to develop reading skills such as skimming or scanning) that are crucial for less-experienced teachers. In order for OACD to be successful, teachers must have the knowledge and ability to (1) assess students' specific language needs (beyond generic statements such as "listening"), (2) create learning objectives matching those needs, (3) choose authentic materials that match the specific, measurable learning objectives, (4) design activities to prepare students to succeed in learning from the authentic materials, and (5) write formal and/or informal assessments to measure student learning and make any changes to the learning plan moving forward. Examples of how program administrators can address these needs would be useful. Another opportunity for future editions would be to include more examples of language learning, vs. developing cultural competence or self-awareness. While these areas are fundamental in education, a language class is ultimately about language learning. Within language learning, including examples of how teachers can use OACD to help students develop bottom-up, micro-skills in the target language (vs. focus on meaning only) would also be beneficial.

CONCLUSION

The concept of using authentic materials in student-centered, engaging ways is an important one for education. Few would disagree with the importance of the overall concept, but the challenge is in the details and how teachers and programs can achieve these goals, particularly in structures that can be studied at a larger level to provide more robust evidence of the benefits of the program, besides the anecdotal examples provided in this collection.

Within DLIFLC, OACD is mentioned frequently as an option to support students, particularly at the higher levels. The examples in this book can provide guidance and structure for the use of authentic materials without a textbook, particularly Wang's chapter on using the Learner Data Panel to organize and guide instruction. Approaches that are as flexible as OACD often benefit from some type of structure, and the Learner Data Panel for data-driven learner-teacher negotiation offers an interesting way to combine organization with increased communication and student agency. Department-wide conversations about how best to prepare teachers to make the most pedagogically-sound decisions when creating OACD classes will be helpful for any teachers interested in using the ideas presented in this book.

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