

TUTORIAL
4.20

Practical Communication 1

In this and the next tutorial, we will look at how people grow in their ability to communicate and what that growth actually looks like in real life and in practical terms. We will look at both *ability* and *activities* at each stage a learner goes through on their way to proficiency.

Introduction

As we have already discussed, cross-cultural learning is about much more than just language learning, it involves your whole person, and can even be described as a process of *becoming a different person* - becoming someone who can communicate with proficiency in a new context.

We looked at what our overall goals should be and why we would have those particular goals for learning, and as a result, our definition of proficiency might read something like this:

“Proficiency is the progressive acquisition of culture and language, such that, as a result of the acquisition process, the learner earns the perspective, privileges, and communicative ability of a people group insider: namely, that the learner shares, with that particular people group, the intimate trust and understanding based on the specific, uniquely held people group worldview - that which is distinguished by an integrated set of values, beliefs, and behaviours, both cultural and linguistic.”

So, in practical terms what does it actually *look* like to move toward, and eventually reach, that kind of proficiency?

In these two tutorials we are going to ‘paint a picture’ as much as possible, of what it looks like to move from being a new person in a context, and knowing very little, to being able to communicate fluently as a member of your new community. We are going to take a ‘snapshot’ of what communication and learning looks like at four different stages in the learning process. We will see, for a learner at each stage, what *abilities* they might have at that stage and what *activities* they might be involved in at that stage.

Basic... Progressing... Capable... Proficient...

As people progress through culture and language learning, we are able to assess when they reach certain levels of proficiency. This assessment is based on how they actually *function* and are able to *communicate* in real life situations - not just on the amount of language they know. The four levels of proficiency that people move through are; Basic, Progressing, Capable and Proficient.

For any language/culture learning situation, each level has recognisable characteristics - at certain levels people are able to do certain things with the language and in the culture - so we can assess when a learner has reached a particular level, or has moved beyond one level and on to the next.

The levels of proficiency are not dependent on how much time someone has been learning or what program they have been following to learn - the time it takes to reach a certain level of proficiency will vary, depending on the individual learner, on the difficulty of the language, or on other factors. Proficiency is based simply on their actual functional ability to communicate.

Learning is a gradual process that looks different for every person and situation, and some aspects can't be neatly divided into sections and measured in some kind of scientific way. Even though this is true, there *are* some similarities that have been identified in the way all people grow in their ability to communicate cross-culturally. For example, there are clearly identifiable steps or stages in the way people learn to use another *language*:

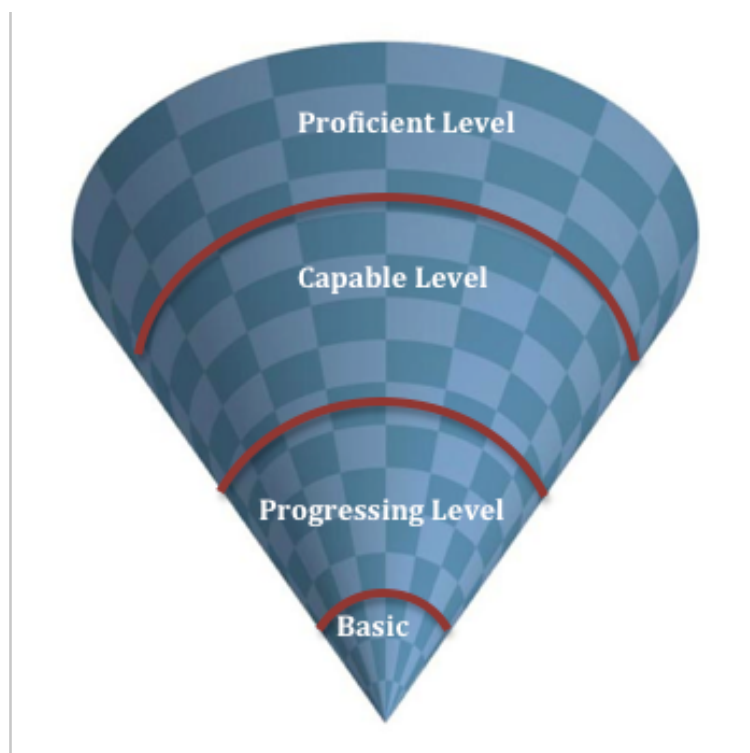
- they begin with simple words and phrases,
- then they begin to use those words and phrases to make sentences,
- then they start to learn to join those sentences into paragraphs,
- and finally they are able to speak using extended discourse by linking the paragraphs together.

These identifiable characteristics of learners at different levels are evident in other areas as well - in cultural understanding, social interaction and cultural adaptation, to name a few.

We could represent this growth in proficiency as an upside-down cone (see diagram below), with the pointed end at the most basic level, and gradually opening out toward the top where people are described as proficient communicators.

Beginning at the bottom of the cone, learners are 'brand new' in the situation and have little ability to communicate or participate. As they learn, they will grow in proficiency - increasing and broadening in their ability - toward the top

of the pyramid where they will be proficient communicators and participators in their new community.



Proficiency includes areas such as language ability, pronunciation, naturalness, appropriateness, social proficiency, relating and socialisation, and the learner's adjustment and adaptation.

Now and in the next tutorial, we will look at each of these four progressive levels of ability in more detail. As you read the descriptions of each level, imagine the lines on the cone, gradually climbing upward and moving outward in all areas of proficiency.

Basic Level

At the beginning of Basic level, a learner will be able to respond to or speak a few isolated words – those borrowed from English, or commonly used, like *gracias*, *ciao*, etc. A learner at Basic level might describe themselves like this:

I can say "hello" and "goodbye."

I can count to ten.

I can use courtesy words such as "Thank you" and "Excuse me."

I know a handful of words.

I am eager to begin learning my target language.

I have set some goals for my language learning.

Still in Basic level, but a little further along in learning - perhaps after a month or so - they will be able to recognise and express very simple needs in polite

language. They will mostly use memorised words and phrases and be able to say short phrases if given time to think about what they want to say. They might be able to recite a nursery rhyme or sing a simple song. They will recognise that they speak in a heavy accent with many errors and confuse sounds that are similar, and that their speech is difficult to understand, even to teachers used to working with beginning language students. They might describe themselves like this:

I can respond to simple commands such as "Stand up" and "Come here."

I can greet people and take my leave correctly, such as "How are you?" and "I must go."

I can ask basic questions, using who, what, when, and where.

I can make simple statements and commands such as "It's hot" and "Turn on the light."

I can make simple requests and appropriate thank yous.

I can use at least fifty words in appropriate contexts.

I can sing one verse of a folk song or popular sing-along tune.

I have to work hard to make many of the new sounds, and I often have to pause to find words that express my thoughts.

I frequently use circumlocution, that is, I choose words close to my intended meaning because I don't know the correct word I want. For example, I say "my father's brother's daughter" instead of "cousin."

I find it difficult to catch even words I know, when they are mixed with normal speech by my instructors.

People often ask me to repeat myself; some don't seem to realise I am speaking their language.

Toward the end of Basic level, after a few more months of learning, they will be able to ask questions and make simple statements based on memorised sentences, and understand conversation fragments and simple commands. They will be able to deal with simple topics of daily need though they speak mostly in short, direct sentences. They can say some longer phrases and sentences if given time to think about them first. Though they still make frequent errors in pronunciation and word use, and frequently ask speakers to slow down or repeat, they can communicate with close acquaintances (e.g., host family or co-workers) and behave considerately in dealing with host country people. They are able to correctly understand some non-verbal cues. They might describe their ability like this:

I can initiate and close conversations appropriately.

I understand and can make simple statements or ask simple questions about family, age, address, weather, daily activities, time, date, and day of the week.

I understand some words when the context helps explain them, e.g., in a cafe, the marketplace.

My vocabulary includes names of basic concepts: days, months, numbers to 1-100, articles of clothing, body parts, and family relationships.

I can use at least one hundred nouns and verbs in appropriate contexts.

I still find it difficult to understand native speakers (in spite of my growing vocabulary).

I often have to repeat myself, particularly when I'm with new acquaintances or strangers.

I am beginning to know what's expected of me in simple social situations.

I am motivated to build relationships, communicate and act in culturally appropriate way, and have a genuine interest in getting to know people.

Progressing Level

Perhaps six months to a year after starting to learn - depending on the complexity of the language and cultural context - a learner will be moving from Basic to Progressing level. At the beginning of Progressing level, a learner will be able to speak about familiar topics, ask and answer simple questions, initiate and respond to simple statements, and carry on face-to-face discussions. They will be able to discuss topics beyond basic survival, such as personal history and leisure time activities. Though they often speak incorrectly, by repeating, generally they are able to be understood by native speakers who regularly deal with foreigners. They are now frequently able to understand native speakers if they repeat or speak more slowly, and are able to pick out the main idea in a simple conversation. They might describe themselves like this:

I can handle more complex questions about myself, including marital status, nationality, occupation, and place of birth.

I can read a menu, discuss food items with fellow diners, ask the waitperson about some of the dishes, and order a meal from a restaurant menu.

I can discuss simple topics with friends and feel comfortable that I can understand and be understood.

I am beginning to get the gist of some conversations and feel comfortable.

After a little more time, their ability will have grown further - they will be able to participate in more complicated exchanges. They will be showing improvement in using correct basic grammar constructions. And they will be showing more understanding of some common cultural traditions and taboos. At this stage they might describe their ability like this:

I can travel by public transportation, asking simple directions or help as needed.

I can respond to simple directions from customs officials, policemen, or other officials.

I can handle simple business at the post office, a bank, and the chemist.

I'm beginning to speak more correctly; my subjects and verbs generally agree.

I am starting to understand and usually can behave appropriately in interactions that involve men and women, children and adults, and employers and employees.

Toward the end of Progressing Level, a learner will be able to participate in conversations about most survival needs, limited social conventions, and other topics. They can get the gist of most conversations on familiar topics. Though they speak mostly in short, separate sentences, they show occasional bursts of spontaneity. They can use most question forms, basic tenses, pronouns, and verb inflections, though they still speak with many errors. They can be understood by native speakers used to speaking with foreigners. By repeating things, they can frequently be understood by the general public. In dealing with local people, they are able to get along in familiar survival situations and with native speakers accustomed to foreigners. They might describe themselves like this:

I can introduce myself or someone else in some detail.

I can buy my basic foodstuffs, rent a hotel room, and bargain when appropriate.

I can talk about favourite pastimes or sports.

I can give and understand directions on how to get to places like the post office, a restaurant, or a local tourist attraction.

I can deal with and explain unexpected problems, such as losing my traveller's checks or expiration of my visa.

I can carry on more complicated conversations with native speakers who are used to dealing with foreigners.

I find myself thinking some words and sentences in my new language and offering them spontaneously.



DISCUSSION POINTS

Practical Communication 1

1. What do you think will be some of the major motivations for you to keep going each day as you face the challenge of culture and language learning?

-
2. What do you think are some of the challenges you might face as you begin cross-cultural learning?