

TUTORIAL
4.21

Practical Communication 2

In the last tutorial and this one, we will look at how people grow in their ability to communicate - 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

In this second Practical Communication tutorial, we will continue to focus on the levels of proficiency. In the last tutorial we looked at the Basic and Progressing levels - in this one we will look at the Capable and Proficient levels. At the end the focus will be on the activities that learners at different levels will benefit from.

Capable Level

Anywhere between a year or two years from starting to learn - or perhaps longer depending on the language and context - a learner will be somewhere in Capable Level. At this level, they are able to participate freely in most casual and some work conversations. They are able to give simple directions or explanations at work, and are able to talk about past and future events. With minimal requests for repetition, they can get the gist of normal conversation by native speakers speaking at an advanced language level. Their vocabulary is good enough to speak simply with only a few circumlocutions and they can speak extemporaneously and at an advanced language level on many topics. Though their accent is clearly that of a learner, they can generally be understood. They will have an expanding network of genuine/close relationships, hopefully with love and respect shown and understood. They will show appreciation, acceptance of differences and be able to connect on an emotional level. This is how they might describe themselves:

I can describe my work in some detail and discuss with my co-workers most work-related tasks.

I can talk comfortably about topics of general interest, such as local entertainment and current events.

I can talk about things that happened in the past or might happen in the future.

I can take and give messages by telephone.

I can be understood by most native speakers, and I can follow normal conversations involving native speakers.

Many of my thoughts about daily activities are in my new language.

After some further learning, they will still be in Capable level, but will have made more progress and will be able to handle most work requirements and conversations on technical or work related topics of interest. They will be able to express facts, give instructions, describe, report, and talk about current, past, and future activities. Often they will be able to speak fluently and easily, though occasionally they will need to pause to think of a word, and will still make some grammatical errors. In dealing with native speakers, they can understand common rules of etiquette, taboos and sensitivities, and handle routine social situations when dealing with people accustomed to foreigners. They would describe their ability like this:

I can hire an employee, discuss qualifications, duties, hours, and pay.

I can instruct a co-worker on how to perform a common task.

I can give opinions and facts, and explain points of view.

I can talk with ease about my past, my current activities, and what I hope to do in the future.

I generally speak easily and fluently with only minor pauses.

I can make culturally acceptable requests, accept or refuse invitations, apologise, and offer and receive gifts.

Proficient Level

At Proficient level, learners will be able to converse on most practical, social, and professional topics. They will be able to deal with unfamiliar topics, provide explanations, resolve problems, describe in detail, offer supported opinions, and hypothesise. They can also talk about simple abstract ideas. They rarely have to grope for a word, and their control of grammar is good and errors almost never seem to bother the local person listening. They are able to participate appropriately in most social and work situations, and are able to understand most non-verbal responses; they are even beginning to understand culture-related humour. They have an expanding network of social relationships, and some of these are characterised by trust, friendship and respect, because the learner has earned the right to speak. With some people there will be friendly, relaxed, natural interaction and understanding. They might describe themselves like this:

I can carry out most work assignments in the target language.

I can handle routine social situations with ease.

I can participate effectively in most general discussions involving native speakers.

I can handle normal and extended telephone conversations.

I can listen to a radio program, oral report, or speech and take accurate notes.

I can deal with an unexpected problem or a social blunder.

I can support my opinions in a discussion or argument.

I am beginning to understand jokes and word-play.

I seldom have to ask speakers to repeat or explain.

I can speak at a normal rate of speed, without groping for words or trying to avoid complex grammatical structures.

I understand most body language and use it appropriately myself.

Learning activities change as proficiency increases

As we looked in more detail at proficiency at each level, you might have noticed something significant about it: proficiency is what you can *do*, not what you *know*.

Proficiency isn't just learning pieces of information, or acquiring knowledge, it is growing in your ability to function and operate - to communicate and interact. That is an important thing to note because it has an effect on the types of activities which will be the most profitable at each level in order for you to keep learning.

Imagine if you were doing a course where you were just acquiring knowledge and learning facts. You would start out by hearing or reading those facts and then committing them to memory, then maybe practising them in some way - perhaps by drilling or listening to them. Then you would learn more facts, and so it would go until you knew all of the pieces of information the course set out to teach you. The way you learned as you moved through the course would not really change from level to level - you would be able to keep learning and memorising facts in the same way right throughout the learning process. But, as we have seen, cross-cultural learning isn't just about knowing things, it is about doing things, and actually functioning and communicating in real life.

As your ability to do things increases and changes, you are actually able to get more out of learning by increasing the complexity and level of your learning activities. You might start out very simply by learning some words or phrases from one person in their home, but you wouldn't want to be doing that same exercise three years down the track - hopefully by then you would be learning by taking part in complex conversations with different local friends and acquaintances.

Activities for each level

As your ability to *do* things increases, so the way you learn things must change as well. Let's look at how the type of learning activities changes as proficiency grows. In Module 6 we will look in detail at a program that takes you through

these activities, but for now, just notice how the activities change as proficiency changes.

Learners at **Basic** level would benefit from activities like these:

- Relating to people in the common and familiar situations.
- Learning by listening and acting (listening comprehension).
- Learning by listening and acting with speaking - predictable speaking activities.
- Participant Observation - being in situations and observing what is going on.
- Listening to simple recorded material that they understand.

Learners at **Progressing** level would benefit from activities like these:

- Relating to people as they go through daily routine activities - making new friends and finding out about their normal activities.
- Participant Observation - being in situations, observing what is going on and speaking as they are able.
- Working with daily routines - listening to recorded material with a helper, learning new vocabulary, learning new cultural concepts and ideas.

Learners at **Capable level and higher** would benefit from activities like these:

- Relating through sharing life stories with people - talking about things that have happened to them and about their past life.
- Participant Observation - taking part in life with people, observing and speaking. Noticing what motivates people, what they think and feel.
- Sharing life stories - listening to recorded material from their conversations with people, learning new vocabulary, and new cultural concepts and ideas.
- Relating through lifeview conversations with people - talking about what people think and feel about a variety of subjects and topics.



DISCUSSION POINTS

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1. Why do you think it has increasingly become a requirement for business people working in other countries to take some kind of language course before starting their assignment? What level would you recommend a person reach before

- being able to work successfully as a manager in a factory?
Why?
2. Do you think it would be possible for a person to learn the Spanish language entirely from a software program in their home country, without having the opportunity to speak to native speakers? What kind of issues with communication do you think they would notice if they suddenly found themselves in Mexico?



ACTIVITIES

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1. Imagine that you have just arrived in a small city somewhere in Asia, and your student visa requires you to do a language course at the local university. This required course is conducted in an office building near your apartment, your fellow students are a small group of other foreigners and your tutor is a professional language teacher. Classes are for two hours a day, four days per week and focus on grammar points and dialogues with some speaking practice. How might you seek to supplement this course, and why?