

Facilitated Language Teaching (FLT): Affordable and Effective Use of Local Language Resources

1. Introduction

The value of multilingualism in today's world cannot be overstated. And especially so for Oman, whose economic future depends strongly on good trade relations with a wide range of countries. For this, Omani college students need solid language skills, and the opportunity to develop them.

For the larger languages of the world, student demand and academic supply make it easy to find, for example, qualified teachers of English, French, German, and so forth. But for many other languages, it is not so easy: the demand from students may be substantial, but not enough to justify hiring a full professor, and so a major chance to improve the language base of Omani college graduates is lost. In other cases, it may be possible to find a native speaker of a language, but not a native speaker qualified to teach that language.

In the past and even now, it has often been assumed that being a native speaker is qualification enough to be a teacher of that language. The results of this assumption are predictably dismal: often disorganized classrooms and ad hoc teaching, with very poor outcomes for the students.

In the face of the expense of hiring (and often just the difficulty of finding) fully-qualified language teachers, however, what can we do?

This project seeks to find a middle-ground solution, by creating a means to provide affordable language teaching precisely in those cases where significant demand exists, but is insufficient to justify the expense of a full-time, professionally-trained hire, and/or when there is no such person available.

Instead, we offer a means through which to provide high-quality language classes when only an untrained native speaker is available, through what we call Facilitated Language Teaching (FLT). In this approach, a native speaker (NS) is paired up with a language facilitator (LF), namely, a trained foreign language teacher. The NS provides the full and complete knowledge of the language; the LF provides the expertise necessary to structure the course's presentation of the language, and ensure that the teaching and assessment proceed at an efficient, effective, and professional-grade level.

This collaborative language teaching program offers a number of specific benefits to the current Omani educational system and to its graduates. First, it makes available a much wider set of languages than previously would be feasible to offer in current Omani university settings. In particular, this method offers us a chance to take unique advantage of the rich set of languages spoken among Oman's foreign national population: any native speaker of any language is now a potential part of a full-fledged language course that can be offered in Oman.

Second, this approach provides additional employment opportunities for students already trained in the core principles of foreign language teaching, e.g. the University of Nizwa's student majors in English and Education, among others. With just a small amount of additional training in the principles and tools of the FLT program, such students can easily develop and act as LFs for a nearly unlimited

range of possible courses in other languages.

The remainder of this paper is concerned with laying out exactly how to implement such a course. We operate from the assumption that the NS has little to no professional training in the teaching of their language to foreign learners, and so the bulk of this program focuses on preparing the LF to work effectively with the NS to maximize what the NS has to offer the course in terms of native language expertise.

The outline of topics covered from here on is as follows:

2. Key issues in working with NSs
 - 2.1 Personality
 - 2.2 Cultural differences in professionalism and participation
 - 2.3 Different expectations about teaching
 - 2.4 Intimidation factor of the classroom setting
 - 2.5 Staying on topic
 - 2.6 Too much information
 - 2.7 Assessing a potential candidate's language skills
 - 2.8 Group teaching
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3. Teaching principles and approaches
 - 3.1 Overview: key principles of language teaching
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2. Key issues in working with NSs

2.1 Personality

It may seem odd to focus first on a feature like personality, but very often, this is what makes or breaks a course. Some NSs are shy, full of uncertainty and self-doubt about their language skills---and some are overbearing or even overconfident. These differences in personality can seriously affect the students' experience of the class, and particularly the effectiveness with which they learn.

It is therefore the responsibility of the LF to recognize early on what features of the NS's personality may adversely affect the class, whether these be shyness or the extreme opposite. Correspondingly, LFs should also take note of potentially advantageous personality traits in the NS, i.e. ones that may enhance the class, such as gregariousness and sense of humor. As the designer of the course, the LF should seek to minimize the impact of (class-wise) negative personality traits and maximize the benefit of positive ones.

It also behooves the LF to carefully determine whether salient personality traits are cultural rather than

individual (and/or an interaction between the two): this is not only again useful for the effective teaching of the course, but also important for conveying to students, who will need explicit explanation of these cultural and culture-related differences---not only for the immediate purposes of the course, but also for the development of their long-term goals of pragmatic competence in the target language and its interaction with the culture(s) of its speakers.

LFs should of course also be aware of their own personality and its potential impacts on working with both the NS and the students.

2.2 Cultural differences in professionalism and participation

A common source of friction or difficulty between NS and LF participants in an FLT program is cultural differences in what constitutes professionalism, or put more loosely, what constitutes good-faith participation in the program.

Especially for NSs coming from socioeconomically marginalized areas, NSs may well come from a slower-paced culture, where punctuality is not particularly valued or imbued with social significance of politeness/respect/engagement. This may not only affect timeliness in joining class meetings, but also the pace at which the NS is willing and able to participate. Similarly, consistency in showing up at all may also be an issue.

It is up to the LF to work out what constitutes the need to replace an NS completely, and what is a reasonable accommodation to such differences, particularly since this program is generally to be applied precisely when few to no native-speaker participants form the only available pool of replacements: NS participation may in many cases may be affected not just by these cultural factors, but also personal and cultural obligations to family and friends, as well as to other employment. This awareness needs to be conveyed to the students as well, since otherwise they may too form negative judgements of the NS.

2.3 Different expectations about teaching

One of the most common problems of untrained NS teachers is that they set about teaching their language the same way they were taught it in school. Not realizing that of course, how we teach a language to students who are already fluent speakers is radically different from how we teach non-native speaker learners. In particular, such NSs tend to focus on the formal version of the language---which may be equally radically different from what is actually normally spoken---and often focus on literacy, on written forms, even as the students receive insufficient instruction in the oral and aural foundations of the language.

The opposite problems can occur when the language in question is one that has little to no institutional support, e.g. it is perhaps not an official language taught in schools in any country, even though it may be an important spoken language. In this case, NSs may either have no idea how to teach the language, or worse, they may try to teach the language according to the structures and principles of whatever

language they may have had formal, school-based teaching in.

LFs must be solidly prepared to handle these kinds of tendencies, smoothly and tactfully. Asking for how one would speak to children, or tell a joke, for example, can be a doorway into more relaxed, informal usage. A strong focus on real-life situational usage (already recommended in any case), rather than metalinguistic teaching of paradigmatic forms, is also more likely to reach a more realistic presentation of the language.

2.4 Intimidation factor of the classroom setting

For many people, the classroom is not a safe place. Highly academically trained people (a common type of LF) are usually unaware of this, because they themselves tend to be those who (for whatever reason) have done well in such settings. But for many people, the classroom is a place associated with fear and uncertainty, or even humiliation and abuse.

This naturally can affect how NSs will behave in a classroom setting: they may feel that they are being tested, put on the spot, merely by being present in the classroom.

It is also worth considering that some cultures with high values of a communal ethos and de-emphasis of the prominence of the individual may also give rise to participants who are very shy about being the center of attention in general, and even more so in playing the role of a teacher in a classroom. In this particular case, the fact that the FLT approach is fundamentally a team-teaching approach means that LFs can personally take some of this kind of pressure off; but it may still be necessary to help manage this anxiety when the spotlight necessarily shifts over to the NS.

This issue can also be minimized through the simple remedy of taking the class out of the classroom wherever and whenever possible. This is already a good idea on a simple pedagogical level anyway, since it typically provides a much more realistic language experience, rather than the always somewhat abstracted and artificial one found in the classroom environment. Assuming class size and other relevant factors permit (and by their nature, such classes are often smallish), classes can visit homes, cook together, have picnics, go on walks/hikes, participate in social activities of the target language community---the list is endless. Best of course is to prepare extensively in advance of such excursions, not only logistically but most of all linguistically. Though there is also always something to be said for the vividness of learning a feature of language for the first time directly from real life, with no preparation beforehand. The discretion/judgement of the LF is key here for determining what balance of approaches will work best for students.

While we need not go into this in detail (again, there is plenty of literature in this domain), LFs should of course also consider the effect of the classroom setting on the student participants as well.

2.5 Staying on topic

A frequent problem in courses with untrained NS teachers is a wandering from topic to topic. This

occurs typically because of not framing out beforehand a clear breakdown of the presentation of the language in a form that is manageable and accessible to learners. The fundamental richness and complexity of any language makes it possible to veer off into rich and immediately interesting detail about pretty much anything---so the LF must always be on guard and ready to help tactfully ensure that the class activities and discussion maintain enough of a topical continuity that students can in fact understand, retain, and use all that has been brought up in the class. Of course, an LF should not be so rigid as to shut down what might turn out to be a tangential but otherwise helpful excursion.

The problem of straying from the main topic is particularly common when more than one NS is participating, and the two or more of them go off happily on a topic of interest to them, but not currently of great help to the class as a whole. Here it is more challenging for an LF to gently nudge two or more conversants back from their chosen topic to one more germane to the class's current needs, since socially, it is easier to ask an individual to conform to the direction of a class rather than a clearly established group such as two fluent speakers of a language. Well-chosen questions are a good way to tactfully start returning the discussion to a student-helpful range.

2.6 Too much information

A closely related concern is the tendency of untrained NS teachers to provide too much information at one time to students. Again, this is due to the inherent richness of personal linguistic knowledge: when inspiration hits, an NS can easily start giving intensive detail about usage and semantics, about words similar to those in question along any number of parameters; they can suddenly offer an unending list of lexica for the current semantic domain in question, and so on.

The primary problem here is that it's difficult for any native speaker to be aware of just how much the students do NOT know, and from that, to judge what degree and type of additional information will be overwhelming. A general rule of thumb is to not introduce more than three substantially new/difficult/complex concepts per class meeting, with detailed information being strictly limited to that which is necessary to illustrate the approximately three core concepts in question.

This can of course be bumped up in the case of a course meeting focused on the teaching and use of vocabulary, but here too, the best approach for LFs and NSs to agree upon using is to make sure that each new vocabulary item (morpheme, word, collocation/phraseology, construction, etc.) is introduced not just once in the meeting, but rather repeatedly and cyclically: new vocabulary should be looped back to, again and again. Equally important is that extensive new information of this kind be introduced together with its natural companions, as it were, namely, new vocabulary should be introduced as part of its natural domain of experience, e.g. terms for cooking should be accompanied by terms for cooking implements, terms for post-cooking cleanup, and so forth. This provides a more coherent frame for learning extensive bits of new information, i.e. a ready frame into which to slot all of these elements. And it goes without saying that individual words should be taught rarely on their own, and generally always as part of their natural collocational companions---for example, in the relevant languages, verbs and nouns should be taught not alone, but in phraseological configurations that showcase relevant adpositional or case-affixal lexical complementation forms, and same again for the individual case-forms of nouns in particular (i.e. these are best learned and retained in case-

triggering phrasal configuration), and indeed any complex inflectional patterns in general.

In short, as novel information to be learned goes up, so too should the LF's attention first to whether that information should be introduced at all at the current point, and secondly, to exactly how that information should be framed and cyclically re-introduced so as to maximize student understanding, retention, and full usability.

2.7 Assessing a potential candidate's language skills

We work from the assumption that this program is applied precisely when the pool of possible NSs is relatively small, such that we cannot afford to be too choosy about our candidates. However, inadequacy as a native speaker of the language negates the entire purpose of the program, so it is necessary to apply a filter at least at this point.

Language proficiency in major languages can be assessed using any number of freely or commercially available methods. An example of one of the currently most trusted names in the business of language assessment is TLC....

Lacking access to these kinds of resources (either due to cost or availability), however, we must conduct the assessment ourselves. This is reasonably possible even when the LF is not a speaker of the target language.

What can we do here? Assuming there are at least some reference materials available for the language, it should be possible for the LF to develop at least a minimal set of test questions. The primary issue is typically to how an NS's weakness in the target language might reflect influence from a more dominant language in their repertoire. With a reference grammar of the relevant languages, an LF can devise some simple tests in this domain. And general oral fluency of course can be tested simply by asking NS candidates to speak at length about a topic, or better yet, converse at length with another speaker, if available. Note that being able to engage in lengthy monologue is however a skill that may be independent of a speaker's real competence in a language, and may in certain situations be culturally constrained as well. And while this can be fraught with factors personal, political, and otherwise extralinguistic, where feasible, other members of the speech community may also be a useful source of assessment.

2.8 Group teaching

We canonically envision a minimal pair of NS and LF, but circumstances may permit or even require multiple NS participants (say, if an NS for some reason requires a companion to leave home), or even multiple LF participants.

Some ways to deal with potential problems and maximize the advantages of these kinds of situations are discussed below.

Groups of NSs may argue and disagree about language usage. Often they can get caught up in sociolinguistic or even mere semantic points that are deeply relevant to them as fluent speakers, but really not enlightening or helpful to students at their current level.

NSs may also devalue and intimidate each other according to perceived values of status differences in their particular variants of the language. One, for example, may insist that their way of saying it is in fact the only correct way. LFs should always in their initial meetings with NSs discuss the issue of equality of language variation, and the importance of students learning to at least recognize what is considered to be “wrong” speech in order to be fully competent speakers. This may or may not be easy or even possible to convey, depending on cultural and/or linguistic impediments, but at the very least, LFs must be prepared to minimize this phenomenon’s potentially deleterious effect on the classroom.

Group teaching may also entail groups of LFs. And here again, variation---in terms of pedagogical preferences, in terms of analytical preferences, in terms of teacher personality, etc.---must also be managed accordingly. Typically an inter-LF problem can be that each get in the others’ ways, and fail to act as a cohesively directed group. Group-teaching LFs therefore should meet in advance of course meetings to work out how they can avoid getting in each others’ ways, collectively stay on topic, and parse out classroom tasks according to their individual strengths.

2.9 Preliminary schedule of NS+LF trainings and collaborative course design

First and foremost, the FLT program requires a set of training meetings and exercises for the LF, including all that is laid out in this document.

Then of course, a set of trainings for the LF and the NS together is required, at the bare minimum to develop a good familiarity and the foundation of a solid working relationship.

Thirdly, after the LF and the NS are more or less on the same page with regard to collaborative teaching practices, they should meet specifically to design the course together, insofar as this is feasible. Since course design is the responsibility chiefly of the LF, it behooves the LF to prepare much of the preliminary course material beforehand, so as to make maximally efficient use of the NS’s often much more limited available time.

3. Teaching principles and approaches

3.1 Overview: key principles of language teaching

The exact details of how to approach the classroom in terms of technique and even content depend heavily on the frequency of meetings, and on age and other relevant factors of the students, and what the NS is prepared to do for participation.

Hence for example, a full-time children's immersion class vs. a once-weekly adult learners class will of course require different approaches. For children, we recommend simple (but engaging and interesting and above all, accessible) immersion. For young up to older adults, we recommend active language learning, namely, not just presenting language use to a passive audience that runs through exercises, but rather training the adult learners to be active seekers of the language, essentially quasi-field linguists.

Needless to say, there is extensive foreign language teaching literature covering those topics: once more, our focus is specifically on what factors are most important herein with regard to NS and LF collaboration. Here again, perhaps the most important factor is just that the NS and the LF be on the same page about which approach or collection of approaches they will be using. Hence the previously discussed need for substantial pre-course meetings, wherein the LF and NS can and should work through some practice classes (and/or at least some practice components of the classes) to ensure that both are able to execute the real-life classes smoothly together.

As also mentioned previously, a primary rule of thumb is not to introduce more than three new and solidly distinct points per lesson. If more comes up, or extra detail must be added from time to time, LFs must make sure that the learners know which is the crucial part of the lesson/experience to focus on, and which is just side detail that can be properly learned later, and currently should just be observed in passing.

Another key principle is for course experience to be grounded in situational realia. If students cannot figure out the meaning of the forms from the situation alone, then the NS+LF team is not teaching effectively. This may seem strange, but consider this: while explicit explanation is not wrong, and is useful at times, if it forms the foundation of the course pedagogy, then students will have no experiential/reality-based knowledge of the language, only an abstracted "I was told about this" sense. The primary goal of a language course is, after all, to prepare students to handle the complexities of actual real-life usage, to not only understand what is said in such situations, but also draw further language learning out of them, on their own. Courses in which students are implicitly (and, we might add, also explicitly) trained in how to extract understanding from comparing situation to linguistic form, will maximally prepare---and dare we even say, empower---students to do more than just parrot memorized expressions and dumbly implement grammatical rules, but instead handle confidently and flexibly new linguistic situations, and even learn more language from them. Explicit exercises in this domain will be added in a subsequent draft of this document.

We also recommend presenting the language in its natural speed and degree of attentive enunciation, but with lots of repetition and loopback. Maintaining an artificially slowed and enunciated form of speech does no favors to students in the long run, since they must get used to normal speech rates from the start. Repetition at normal speech-rates, however, does give students extended chances to understand the forms, while reinforcing their ability to do so with truly natural speech-rates and prosody.

Slowed-down, carefully enunciated speech therefore should be kept to a minimum, used only when clarifying a specific point of pronunciation, or making clear a particularly difficult-to-follow form up to and no further than when the classroom "gets it".

Repetition should be tempered so that it does not become wholly unnatural rote chanting, as it were, but it can be leaned on heavily in general as a more naturalistic means to stretch out language forms temporally for ease of beginners.

3.2 Student course schedule

The situations requiring the use of this program may in many cases mean that the NS position does not offer full-time employment, perhaps due to limitations of funding. Alternatively, the only available NS may likely already be separately employed, and so not available for full-time course participation. Other factors such as age or infirmity may also have the same limiting effect.

In such cases, efficient use of the NS's available time is all the more crucial. Classes where the NS participates should, in general, be monolingual immersion, as this maximizes student exposure to full and complete target language use. These classes can alternate with review and explicit instruction classes from the LF alone.

Overall, course schedules can vary greatly, depending on if a full-time immersion course is supported, or a three-meetings-a-week one, or a simple once-a-week course is established. As a general rule, course meetings that are less than once a week are rarely worth the time at all, as there is simply not enough frequency of reinforcement to maintain what students have learned, let alone make substantial progress. The principle here is the same as in learning a sport or a musical instrument, i.e. any kind of performance skill: short but frequent practice is much more effective than long/intense but infrequent. Particularly in learning languages, as these need to be integrated essentially as low-level reflexes, and one cannot develop such reflexes in skills used only once a month.

3.3 Course content

This section will be greatly expanded in subsequent drafts, but for now, some preliminary notes on course content.

First, it is well to introduce grammatical information not just as an abstracted rule, but in the grounding form of a contrastive situation.

Phonological information, for example, can be introduced by setting up dialogues involving humorous misunderstandings based on close minimal-pair contrasts.

Morphosyntactic rules can be introduced via grammar-hinging real situations, i.e. dialogues where the most salient and relevant information is precisely that which is carried by a grammatical element. Tense, for example, can be readily taught this way, though it does of course showcase the need for LFs to think ahead extensively about exactly what real-life situations would informationally hinge on a tense contrast. While extremely effective, this sort of approach typically requires substantial forethought and planning, as the semantic contrasts of grammatical elements are generally abstract enough that a relevantly hinged situation cannot be thought up simply off-the-cuff.

This approach is preferable to explicit layout of grammatical patterns---though we certainly do not rule that out where necessary, and only counsel that it not be the first approach taken---because most students do not take well to starting from pure abstraction and then from that producing real-life forms. Rather, starting from real-life forms, with real and effective usage, and then gently making the pattern in them clear, seems to reach more students. (Those few that revel in the application of abstracted rules need not be left out, however: park them with a reference grammar, and you will find that you generally get good results for them as well.) This approach of situationally grounding the demonstration of grammatical patterns and contrasts works precisely because grammar really is just radically multisituational usage, i.e. a set of high-frequency usages that apply across practically all situations of language use. Same again, of course, for language-specific pragmatics---an often under-taught component of language, despite the fact that it can prevent and solve more communication problems than pure lexicogrammatical competence alone ever can. This approach also nicely reflects how differences at all levels of language are acquired naturally: from situational experience, and without extensive metalinguistic discussion.

In preparing the overall presentational flow of the course, LFs also need to determine not just what the grammar of the language is---no mean feat, if the language is under-documented---but also the priorities of the grammar. Languages generally draw from a broadly similar pool of grammatical possibilities, but one of the distinctive features of a specific language is its speech communities' particular preferences: which constructions and usages it leans on more than others. Take for example the contrast of Mandarin and English: both have topic-comment constructions, but Mandarin uses them intensely and heavily, while they are far less central in everyday English discourse. LFs must therefore take into careful consideration the frequency, functional load, and immediate communicative payoff of any given grammatical pattern in determining its place in the progression of the course presentation.

Crucial here is, of course, determining conceptual and structural dependencies between grammatical patterns. Knowing which patterns form the foundation of others is crucial not just in ensuring that nothing is taught before its systematic prerequisites are introduced, but also---perhaps even more so---in ensuring that the students' internalized model of the grammar is fundamentally simple and clearly structured. That is, if one carefully works out the system-building dependencies of grammatical components, typically the result is a simple and easy-to-learn model of the language. Very often, however, this is not how grammatical systems are presented. Instead, all the phenomena are presented as largely disconnected, seemingly arbitrary lumps of rulesiness. Working out the foundational interactions of grammatical components, then, can greatly improve the presentation and internalization of the grammatical system as a whole.