

# Evaluation: Principles and Approaches

Evaluation is a critical component of an entry orientation program and of a support system to encourage continuing improvement in communication effectiveness. Evaluation is often a weak area in a language and culture orientation program. Evaluation supports progress and provides reward. But to plan and implement a good evaluation is a complex task.

## Focus and Range

During initial language and culture learning, the focus should be on the specific things covered in entry orientation experience. Tests over materials covered, history or culture topics read or lectures attended, social situations mastered in the language, etc. Evaluations should be often, like every 5 to 10 days. The focus here is on **progress** in meeting basic requirements. These evaluations determine how well the learner has mastered specific language and culture component covered.

*Proficiency evaluations* have a different focus and range. Proficiency in language-culture entails how much of the **full mother-tongue cultural range** the learner has mastered. From this viewpoint, to be fair, all learners *must* be evaluated on the *whole scope* of the target language. In this way every learner is judged by the *same standard* not as a *student* of specific materials, but as a *speaker* of the language and "*liver*" in the culture. Evaluation ideally shows how far along that "whole scope" scale each person has progressed.

## Progress in Effective Communication

Evaluation approaches may vary. The end goal, to support the progress of each cross-cultural communicator, may be implemented in many ways!

What about those who have trouble or who have inadequate opportunities? A long term in "language study" can have a counter-productive effect. Most will likely make better progress if they can be "released" earlier and be able to use the more **natural work context** to continue learning. But it is hard to decide on matters like this. There are several dynamics in local situations that ultimately have to be decided by those responsible for planning and evaluating the language-culture learning program.

## Relationships and Culture

What about English language assignments — like schools or community centres? One major rationale for competence in the local language is to enhance the relationship to the community at

large, not just in an institutional assignment or specific job activities. Our foundational model of mission and Christian witness is not just task oriented but *incarnational* — **sharing of self** in a *full-life setting*.

In Africa, for instance, nationals of most countries are experiencing these same problems, with the multiplicity of languages and commonality of English or French in some few areas, and Portuguese in others). The Africans themselves are having trouble with this dynamic. The Africans, though, have the advantage of a cultural foundation in one of the local languages, from which to launch into the broader African community. It is a critical need for foreigners trying to break in from the outside. So the primary resource remains a coherent language-culture community.

It is not always easy to arrange this. So we simulate, from the best resources we can, combinations of various options which may build **an overall experience** which may be adequate. Virtually **every mission** is experiencing similar problems, with the growth of urbanization.

### **The Learner's Responsibility**

In an entry orientation program (a program of language and culture learning), expectations for the learners should be stated clearly. A prospectus, curriculum and/or checklist is helpful for stating expectations and fulfilling them. The learner is then responsible for fulfilling the activities or reports, utilizing the opportunities available. Reporting on such activities is one form of progress evaluation.

American learners as a group seem to have difficulty in utilizing their "unstructured" learning times well. The Entry Orientation Coordinator (learning facilitator for language and culture acquisition) should initially arrange a few good contacts for learners. The guidelines and interview or activity formats for the cultural sessions in the manual *Getting Acquainted With Your African Home* will be helpful. The pattern of the [Individual Learning Assignments](#) (ILAs) included in this resource set provide a format for learners to use in their contact times in the community.

*Getting Acquainted* and the ILAs have been productive in many programs. *Getting Acquainted* was developed by a work group in a training workshop for Entry Orientation Coordinators and agency administrators in Africa 1984, for which Dr. Donald Larson and I were resource persons. I was asked to edit the original draft of the manual. This resource is based on an earlier manual for the Caribbean areas.

Learners have a personal responsibility for initiative to complete assignments. The checklist format I suggest in this resource set helps them to be accountable. But a suggested time schedule has helped some to organize their time. Many Americans, it seems, have never had to plan their own activity schedule! They may have worked in jobs where everything was directed. They expect learning to follow the limited model of a teacher running a class! This can become a game rather than a life-engaging process like that a child experiences in learning language at home.

Personal initiative must be a basic principle of effective learning in cross-cultural communication. A basic goal of entry orientation is to gain experience in handling encounters in the new culture independently. This is learned only by experience. Thus it is critical to learn to learn independently.

### **Proficiency Level Expectations**

Expectations should be clear from the start. Proficiency levels for language and cultural competence should be assigned to every job description. Appropriate entry orientation is to be provided for personnel to attain the expected proficiency level. Remember that proficiency includes cultural awareness and social relationship skills as well as technical language skills. This might involve two or more languages depending on the situation.

Entry Orientation should address the access language necessary for living in the region, then the local mother tongue of the community the workers will be relating to. In some cases, an interim regional language may be needed. For instance, in East Africa, for someone whose mother tongue is Spanish, they would need to learn English as the official access language of the society, then Swahili as the general inter-language of common communication between various language groups. Finally they would need to learn the local language of the people, such as Kikuyu, Turkana, Orma, etc.

### **Language and Languages**

In South Africa, another example would be for someone working in Free State. After English as the national access and official language, Afrikaans is needed just to live in the state. The common language of society in Free State is Afrikaans, and few of the Africans speak English. After a basic mastery of Afrikaans, the final language would be Sotho to enter the local cultural society.

Basic level competence would be sufficient in the official access language and the regional language. The primary emphasis and the highest level of expectation would be in the language of the local social or ethnic community. Evaluation should address each level as appropriate.

The specific language and the balance of language and cultural skills in a multilingual setting must be addressed. Some basic expectations and opportunities will be common to all. There may be a different program design and proficiency expectations for those whose work assignment is primarily in a local language or in English respectively.

### **Levels**

Following the definitions of the Foreign Service Institute (see “Proficiency as Progress” and “Proficiency Evaluation Checklist”), the minimum expectation for any career personnel in Cross-Cultural Communication Competence is Level 2. Our basic assumption is that everyone goes through their *initial* entry orientation **in the target language** to a minimum of Level 2.

The primary reason for this is that the cultural backgrounds are so intertwined with the language (any local language). Another practical reason is the initial attainment of only level one usually means *greater loss* and *more difficulty* maintaining any language. In later stages, *maintenance* could be defined with further emphasis on culture.

For a multiple-language situation, the access language is usually learned first, to provide facility in the broad host culture and social-governmental setting. For instance, Afrikaans, then Sotho; Portuguese, then Shangaan; Hindi, then Tamil; Swahili, then Turkana.

The Kenya and Botswana programs I designed are examples of quite productive programs that seem to involve extensive cultural foundations, while allowing for varying levels of achievement in language skill, as necessary or possible. A Level 2 competence in language, not just culture, is achievable in 6 months in most settings, 9-12 months in more complex situations, like Arabic or Chinese. After demonstration of proficiency in Level 2 range, focus could shift to a greater emphasis on culture.

Put another way, the basic learning in language should be *the same* for all career personnel engaging the community, or those involved in decision-making levels of the community, like lifestyle changes, health concepts, religious commitments. The difference, as I see it, is in the maintenance. This is covered in the current policies and guidelines for our area.

## **Social Competence**

The Proficiency Level Checklist in this resource set is intended to define the handling of each level situations and topics *in the target language*. One should keep in mind the relationship is between the *language skill* to master these social situations and topics and the basic *cultural competence* required. I suggest the learning assignments in *Getting Acquainted with Your African Home* be completed. Mastery of these should be satisfactory for a Level 2 cultural competence.

In certain cases pressing needs may cause an adjustment in program time periods. But there are always pressing needs, and newcomers should not be cheated of their opportunities. I worked for many years as a language-culture learning consultant for Christian mission agencies in Africa. Missions across the area had come to realize that *no one wins* in the long run when we allow immediate needs to shortchange our personnel in their CCCC preparation.

Personnel deserve the best preparation possible, even if they cannot realize its value until they get into the situation later. Too many have had to express regrets *after it was too late*. The basic principle is to give priority to their preparation, then put them fully on the job. The whole community, especially the church community in the area, is the context of their life-ministry, not just the job.

## **Time Frame and Expectations**

Learning expectations and effectiveness expectations for should be appropriate to their expected length of service. How do we determine the amount of time provided for learners? General expectations should be stated for each category of service and for each job assignment. Then the appropriate time is determined for the learner to fulfill the initial expectations and opportunities for continual improvement over the long term.

What are reasonable expectations, for instance, for short-term personnel, of two-three years? Let's say three months full-time learning. Learners are not given three months to learn the language. They are given three months to learn *what they can* of the language. We need to be clear about expectations and possibilities. From this viewpoint, an evaluation evaluates *what they were able* to learn, using the stated criteria. Level One criteria are a reasonable expectation for a three-month period. The Checklist provided here is a good guide for this level.

## **Skills Evaluation**

How do you give proficiency evaluations? The Communication Skills instruments presented here are actually less accurate for shorter periods of contact with the language. They are designed to evaluate *accumulated* skills, in reference to the language as a whole, rather than mastery of specific subject matter studied. The Communication Skills evaluation instruments appear to be fairly accurate after nine or more months learning and experience in language.

It should be understood that the cultural skills are developed and evaluated over a period of years. Low marks, like 1 or 2 are a good achievement for three months. After a year of learning, reading and experience, maybe a 3 or 4. After 6 or 8 years, maybe 6 to 8 out of 10.

### **Higher Marks?**

Have you found that national evaluators give higher marks than warranted for social and cultural areas for three months? Part of the problem is the unique character of our learning situation. Cultural tendencies affect the way national evaluators view and implement the process. Evaluators tend to evaluate work done, effort put forth, good attitude, rather than competence achieved in comparison to how a native speaker performs in that society.

Expectations are often based on mastery of what was studied, perhaps in the basic course, or a refresher course the evaluator assisted with. We might think at first that this is proper. However, this evaluates material rather than communication competence.

This is actually a common problem, and it involves

- (1) the difference between **studying** (in the traditional Western school concept) and **learning** (based on progress and achievement); and also
- (2) the technical differences between learning language and culture (which are *experimental* and thus require time for sufficient experience) and learning academic courses in school using a language *already learned*.

### **The Communication Community**

What is required for communication competence is not determined by an academic course of arbitrary and limited contents. Rather what is required is determined by the community of native speakers in their normal social habitat! This requires continual reminders and "training" of evaluators. Of course when the evaluator already is a specialist in one aspect of language, she may think she already knows. *C'est la vie!* (That is French for "You do the best you can!")

In some countries we have had very good luck with "real people" who tend to catch on "real fast" to what we are aiming for. They seem to really think about how the people expect you to sound! And of course that is the ideal goal.

More accurate evaluations tend to come from those who **have not taught** the learner, and who have **no vested interest** in the result. The perspective of the teacher, on the other hand, can provide insights into overall skill beyond just what happens in that hour. Using more people tends to even out inequities or variations.

### **Multiple Settings**

I have also conducted successful multiple evaluations in various settings. For instance, a colleague may fill out his form based on the work setting, planning meetings, classes he has observed taught by the learner, etc. A friend may fill out a form based on visits in the home, informal situations observed, etc. Evaluations in the field, particularly after some consolidated experience, will have value and more realistically reflect actual life-experience skill.

*Later evaluations are more important than initial ones.* If there is low score in early evaluations, there is tendency to think the owner should spend more time in "study" before being allowed to go into work responsibilities. In reality, a real-life setting may be more productive, because of the motivational aspects. The learner may be discouraged and feel "punished" by having to stay longer in "school." The terminology becomes important in conveying options and decisions.

### **Follow-up**

There is a final step in the employing or sponsoring agency's responsibility for evaluation. The evaluation given by the evaluators is **important, but not final**. It falls to the Entry Orientation Coordinator and/or other administrator to evaluate the results of the evaluation! At this point you weigh the value of the formal evaluation results with your own broader view of performance, effort, attitude, etc., and recommend appropriately. You may find, for instance, that there are erroneous facts, or unusual circumstances involved.

You also weigh the adequacy of the **opportunity** the company or agency was able to provide against how adequately the learner **utilized** that opportunity. So response is the next step. Here again, the early evaluations are not as critical as the later ones, because **progress is the primary factor**: "continual improvement in communication effectiveness."

### **Considerations for Administering Proficiency Evaluations**

1. We need to remember that we are using a Western cultural format of progress evaluation, suitable for western learners. This format is based on a worldview different from that of the national personnel we work with. Thus we are involved in a cross-cultural communication task even in administering the instruments. This is true of every alternative I have seen.

2. The scale provided with the instruments in this resource set, *How to Learn a Language and a Culture*, has been tested and evaluated in many countries, cultures and languages. These instruments, coupled with the learning guides, provide graduated skill development from one level to the next. In this sense, I think the scale is accurate. Thus the main task is in *interpreting* what the scale means. This means determining **how the learner ranks in comparison to native speakers**. Objective comparison is one of those Western analytical skills and values not common in African culture. I have not had this problem working with, for instance, French evaluators.

3. Every possibility I have considered for adjusting the "high reach" error *increases* the subjectivity. A simple approach would be to determine a factor of perceived "error," and adjust the final evaluation downwards by that much. I don't know of any standard way of doing this. This must necessarily be the facilitator or administrator's sense of the magnitude of the error, then adjust downward accordingly. You can see how this might be seen as "unfair" by some legalistic learners. This also depends on which evaluators you are using, and would vary by language and education, etc.

4. Keep in mind that the goal is to **gauge progress**. In this light, more than one evaluation, and preferably more than one type of evaluation, would be ideal. Thus the proficiency evaluation is simply a progress marker. In this light, the *specific score* is **not as critical** as

(1) *marking the end* of a stage, "finalizing" that time or component

(2) *certifying achievement* objectively (this is another reason why evaluation instruments and teaching materials should not be determined at the policy level, but at the curriculum level) and

(3) *providing guidance* for continuing progress.

No proficiency evaluation is ever final nor the end goal. Thus it is **inaccurate** to think in terms of "passing the test." No matter what the evaluation shows, it is not the final stage.

5. This means that interpretation by the learning facilitator, work supervisor or other company administrators is critical. The recommendation for follow-up is a distinct step of the evaluation

procedure. The learning facilitator or appropriate administrative committee should not feel bound by any specific "score," but see that as a focus for that stage of development in CCCC.

It is true that you generally feel you cannot treat a learner with a reported level of "4" as though it were a "1." At the same time, we all know there can be obvious anomalies. It does not seem unreasonable to plan a reevaluation, or to recommend continuing work. Any evaluation is simply one stage of a **never-ending series** of learning events. With this perspective, the weight of a specific evaluation instrument or score becomes less consequential.

6. The Communication Skills evaluation scores should be supplemented by comments on the Checklist, which may be commented by the evaluators to indicate concerns of weaknesses, suggestions or commendations. Evaluators should be encouraged to make interpretive comments on the Communication Skills sheet to **guide the learner** in future learning activities.

7. It is fully appropriate to have a discussion session with the evaluators before final scores are decided upon. This would enable evaluators to compare impressions and clarify these objectively. The evaluation facilitator could help them debrief the session in terms of the stated goals for evaluation and guidance needed for further progress. I have done this in several language groups (including languages in which I was not proficient, so I could not prejudice the specific points). Thus each evaluation is also a **training** or update session for the **evaluators**.

8. I have also provided all the evaluators with copies of the evaluation forms, as the basis of a debriefing to evaluate the scores given. This helps them objectify their scores and compare notes with each other. In languages where I am competent, I have given the evaluator a copy of his evaluation sheet and mine, for comparison, to illustrate the difference of perception.

I have also given them copies of their own evaluations for two dissimilar performances for which they gave similar evaluation scores. This is helpful where they have given comments indicating lower scores, than the higher numbers they gave. I did this periodically with the Swahili staff, who did evaluations all the time, to help them reevaluate their evaluations!

9. At least two evaluations of attained proficiency levels should be done during the first 4 years of service. This would typically be at the end of 9-12 months (the end of the full-time language-culture learning) and 36 to 40 months. Discrepancies will usually be diminished in the second evaluation. The learner could be informed that the second evaluation might not show significant

increase when the first had been usually high. The longer the evaluatee has been working in the language and the culture, the less the evaluators tend to mark high.

These perspectives may help in interpreting the proficiency evaluation using my instruments. The learners/evaluatees should also be aware of these factors. I think this approach is more fair and productive than an attempt to adjust the final "score." If the latter is done, it seems the adjustment would have to be specific to the language and the particular evaluators.

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