

## Helping Learners who Struggle

Why do some people thrive as language and culture learners while others struggle from day one? Why do some start well, but give up after only a few weeks or months?

This Coachnotes article is a summary of insights discussed in the plenary session by the same title at the March 2007 Asian Congress on Language Learning in Chiang Mai, Thailand. It first presents some common reasons that many people find language and culture learning to be especially challenging, and then it suggests a number of practical steps that coaches, teachers, and tutors can take to help their struggling learners become more successful in on-field language and culture acquisition.

### Why Do Learners Struggle?

Learners find language and culture learning to be especially challenging for a variety of reasons. Although there are often patterns common to learners from the same language and culture background, no two learners are exactly alike. Furthermore, a particular learner may struggle for different reasons as a beginner than he or she does after reaching a higher level of proficiency.

Before you can help your struggling learners, you first need to be familiar with some key factors that prevent people from being as successful as they could be in their on-field learning. Here are eight types of issues that are frequent contributors to difficulties:

1. Emotional and psychological factors
  - negative past experiences (especially with language/culture learning, but also other areas)
  - excessive fear, anxiety, panic, lack of confidence
  - inappropriate risk-taking (at either extreme)
  - weak or inconsistent motivation
2. Physical factors and issues with innate ability
  - daily fatigue or long-term burnout
  - slower overall rate of learning (e.g., some older learners as well as a number of others)
  - specific areas of difficulty (e.g., sound/tone discrimination)
  - learning disabilities (e.g., hearing and/or vision problems, speech problems in native language, dyslexia, ADD/ADHD, memory, visual and information processing disorders)
3. Unrealistic beliefs and expectations
  - belief in one of two extremes: learning will be easier and proceed more quickly than is normal — or, the language and culture are impossible for me to learn, so why try
  - belief that on-field language and culture learning will be similar to past classroom learning experiences
  - belief that the formal program (e.g., language school) is all that learner needs
  - belief that the language school, coach, or other individual will take primary responsibility for learner's overall approach to learning, content focus, and rate of progress

4. Inadequate understanding of what it means to know a language and culture, and lack of practical know-how for going about the learning task
  - little or no learner training (e.g., pre-field and/or on-field)
  - inadequate awareness of one's learning style and preferences
  - inadequate knowledge and/or use of effective learning strategies
  - inability to be self-directed, to take personal responsibility for learning
5. Cultural issues
  - culture shock
  - inability to accept differences
6. Difficulty of the learning task
  - difficult language (e.g., complex grammatical system, formal and informal varieties with complex rules for language use)
  - difficult learning situation (e.g., inadequate materials, less effective methodology, isolation from community of native speakers)
  - difficulty related to cultural issues (e.g., role of women)
7. Use of time
  - needs of family (e.g., small children, home schooling)
  - other responsibilities required by agency (e.g., work, ministry)
8. Lifestyle choices
  - isolation from community of native speakers (e.g., housing, activities)
  - lack of essential relationships (e.g., no close relationships with nationals)
  - use of media (e.g., English television and video programs)
  - teaching English, ministry in English

For most learners there is no single reason they struggle; usually it's a combination of factors. For example, a learner who lacks adequate pre-field preparation may experience a number of frustrations and challenges that result from missing out on a whole range of information and skills that contribute to more effective on-field learning. This, in turn, can bring on discouragement, which greatly affects the motivation to keep pushing ahead in language learning — and the end result is a learner who is struggling and wants to give up.

### How Can Coaches Help Learners Who Struggle?

1. **Learn all you can about the various reasons learners struggle** (e.g., the above list) and the ways to deal effectively with each type of difficulty. For example, if you typically work with older learners, learn about the issues they face and the steps you can take to help them become more successful learners (see Hale, 2005; Dickerson, 2005).
2. **Gather information about each of your learners.** Look for “red flags” — learner characteristics or other factors that might cause learners to struggle. Ideally, you will begin to gather this information before learners arrive on the field.
3. **Keep a profile on each learner** with a biographical sketch and information about factors such as past language and culture learning experiences, age, attitudes, emotions, motivation, learning style preferences, strengths and abilities observed, learner strategy use, and progress in on-field learning. For those with learning disabilities, document the specific difficulties, the ways your learners have dealt with these difficulties in the past, and any techniques or strategies that currently seem to be useful (see Orwig, 2007; Dickerson, 2005).

4. **Keep in close touch with your learners;** allow them to voice needs, concerns, fears. Provide a supportive environment, encouragement, and frequent and appropriate feedback. This can be done in person, on the phone, by e-mail, or via Skype. Touching base once a week is not too often. If you use a weekly (or bi-weekly) feedback form, be sure to ask about more than the number of hours they spent in different learning activities. Also include questions such as these: How have you used your language this week in real-life communication? What are some successes you have had? Have you had any difficult experiences? How do you feel about your learning? What do you believe you need to do next? Where do you need advice, encouragement, resources, etc.?
5. **Have a motivation plan—and use it.** It is essential that learners maintain a “can do” attitude with motivation high enough to keep them going even on the roughest of days. Every language and culture learning program should include procedures for helping learners maintain and even increase their motivation. We cannot assume learners come to us with the type and level of motivation they can sustain on their own — no matter what happens in the learning process. Rather, without active involvement — a plan — instituted by the coach (or language school, language committee, etc.), our learners’ motivation is likely to dwindle. However, with a motivation plan, we can be more successful at knowing what to do to strengthen motivation and when to do it. (See Dickerson, 2004a).
6. **Make working with struggling learners a priority,** so that they receive help as soon as possible, rather than letting them flounder and become overly discouraged before any action is taken. If possible, contact all new learners before they arrive on the field, take extra time with them upon arrival, and continue to help and encourage them throughout their learning experiences.
7. **Show faith in the learners’ capacity to learn and help them to believe in themselves.** For example, encourage learners that they really can acquire new strategies and techniques that will be beneficial and that you (or someone else) will help them. Try to keep the focus on what learners are able to accomplish, not on how far they are behind others in progress or what they are still unable to do.
8. **Provide on-going learner training.** Offer guidance as needed, especially in the areas of planning the overall program, using effective learner strategies, and staying on track.
9. **Do all you can to ensure success each step of the way,** knowing that lack of success even in small areas may be perceived as failure and a reason to give up completely.
10. **Avoid comparisons with others** who are learning more quickly, more successfully, etc. Encourage tutors and helpers to avoid comparing struggling learners with others. Check to make sure the teachers, tutors, or helpers are not using ridicule and shaming in an attempt to motivate their learners.
11. **Encourage learners to interact frequently and meaningfully with speakers of the target language.** This can address many of the more traditional language and culture learning issues — motivation, self-esteem, rate of progress, etc. But perhaps more importantly, this often leads to more genuine relationships that allow the newcomers to be real people with real needs, and the nationals are given an opportunity to minister to the struggling learners.
12. **Get outside help.** Network with other coaches, consult with the field director, and get professional help when needed. For example, if you suspect a moderate to severe learning disability, professional guidance is highly recommended. This might include diagnosis, counseling, or even medication.
13. **Consult with learners to work out learning plans that will accommodate as many of their special needs as possible.** These individual plans often involve experimentation to find procedures that work well and those that are less effective or even ineffective. For example, some learners who flounder in the classroom do far better when working individually with a tutor and helpers.
14. **Be cautious about too much self-direction too quickly.** While we want learners to become increasingly self-directed (i.e, to take responsibility for planning, implementing, and evaluating their own learning), many of our struggling learners need a great deal of help in order to do this effectively. As a coach you should think of learner self-direction as an ability that your struggling learners can develop gradually. For example, at first the learner may take responsibility for only one or two small

areas of learning, and this can gradually increase as the learner gains expertise in appropriate self-management and confidence in his or her own abilities.

15. **Evaluate your program to see if changes are needed.** As you make program changes to accommodate your special-needs learners, also consider whether some of these changes would benefit all of your learners.
16. **Take care of yourself; keep your job in perspective.** The responsibility of helping learners who struggle can be very taxing emotionally and physically, especially when you have other responsibilities to your families, your ministries, and to yourself. In some situations, you simply cannot give all the help that is needed, and only divine guidance can help you to identify what you should be doing and what you should not be doing.
17. **Keep in mind that you don't have to know all the answers.** As you are able to take even a few steps in helping your learners who struggle, you will find that it can make a significant difference in their level of encouragement and their rate of progress. Then you will be the coach who hears things like this: "My coach prayed with me about my language learning, and she believed in me when I couldn't begin to believe in myself. She was always there with encouragement and another suggestion about what to do. I'm still a learner, and I always will be, but I can now do what I once thought impossible — teach a small group in their heart language."

## References and Resources

*There are many resources available to help you grow as a coach, including workshops, conferences, articles, and books designed especially for the needs of those who work with on-field language and culture learners. Here are a few resources that deal with topics discussed in this Coachnotes article.*

- Dickerson, Lonna. (2004a). "Enhancing Learner Motivation." ICCT Coachnotes article on *Resources for Language Coaches* CD-ROM. Wheaton, IL: ICCT
- Dickerson, Lonna. (2004b). "Newcomer Orientation." ICCT Coachnotes article on *Resources for Language Coaches* CD-ROM. Wheaton, IL: ICCT
- Dickerson, Lonna. (2005). "Coaching Those With Learning Disabilities." ICCT Coachnotes article on *Resources for Language Coaches* CD-ROM. Wheaton, IL: ICCT
- Dickerson, Lonna. (2006). "Becoming an Effective Coach." ICCT Coachnotes article on *Resources for Language Coaches* CD-ROM. Wheaton, IL: ICCT
- Dickerson, Lonna. (2007). *Resources for Language Coaches* CD-ROM. Program Development, Section 6f: Learner Variables: Learning Disabilities. (A large section of articles and links to Web sites.) Wheaton, IL: ICCT.
- Ehrman, Madeline E. (1996). *Understanding Second Language Learning Difficulties*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Hale, Colleen. (2005). "Helping the Older Language Learner Succeed." ICCT Coachnotes article on *Resources for Language Coaches* CD-ROM. A version of this article for language and culture learners, "Successful Language Learning in Midlife," is on the *Resources for Second Language Learners* CD-ROM. Wheaton, IL: ICCT.
- National Center for Learning Disabilities Web site. [http://www.ld.org/LDInfoZone/InfoZone\\_FactSheetIndex.cfm](http://www.ld.org/LDInfoZone/InfoZone_FactSheetIndex.cfm)
- Orwig, Carol. (2007). "Your Personal Learner Profile." *Resources for Language Coaches* CD-ROM. Wheaton, IL: ICCT.

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