Chapter 7-National Plans

On a hot morning in the summer of 2015, you would have found me outside the oddly shaped Peruvian Ministry of Education (MINEDU) in Lima, Peru. Up close, each floor of this odd building looked slightly askew, as if children had stacked blocks with their eyes closed. From a distance, however, I could see the architect's intent: it looked like textbooks placed one on top of the other. In other words, the building was a symbol meant to remind officials of the purpose behind their office jobs. The building was in the shape of a stack of books to remind everyone that their job, ultimately, was to bring knowledge to students. Only by standing back, however, could I, or anyone, see the symbol—stacked books—clearly.

While I was contemplating this visual metaphor, an escort came out to greet me. I followed her into a boardroom, where I stood in front of a group of ministry officials dressed in grey suits. I admit I was nervous. I had been invited previously to share my views on a recent training conducted at ASU, as well as how the training might fit into the current success of the national plan. The problem was that, while I knew that the training at ASU was successful, I was certain (as were the 235 teachers) that the national plan was setting the teachers up to fail.

The national language plan, with its motto, Puertas Al Mundo (Doors to the World), was ambitious, and well-funded. This plan offered a robust multi-million dollar increase in spending for English teachers throughout Peru, as well as investments in technology and online training. Four thousand teachers were identified as potential instructors in carrying out this plan, and several university partners, including my own, were selected for training. The goal: by 2021, all graduating high school students would have high intermediate levels of English. Sounds good so far, right? More money, better training, more teachers. These are all worthy goals.

However, knowing what you know already about my five questions, see if you can spot why I was certain failure would follow. The plan demonstrated a significant investment of dollars that went primarily to increased classroom instruction, (from three to five hours). The other large investment came in the form of a materials upgrade, specifically in the purchase of a single software solution (in this case, a software program produced by a British language company). Teachers would move lockstep with the curriculum, with the two additional hours going directly to time spent in front of a computer screen working only on the software solution. No significant investment in time or money was allocated for students to communicate with each other or with language partners.

Peru had been sold a Bowflex, and I knew it.

This was not the first time I had seen large government dollars go to a well-intentioned project. Let me share two other examples. The first happened while in Iraq, where I met the director of a language library that the U.S. government built. The library was, by this director's accounting, worth millions of dollars. He described the center as state of the art, with books and videos placed neatly on rows of shelves. However, the center was not intended for student use, and teachers had to travel after school to check out the materials. It was not a place to meet, greet, or interact.

"Dust!" he exclaimed, slamming a fist on the table. "The books just gather dust. No one uses this center, and it just collects dust."

One final example. A few years later ASU was asked to bid on a project based on the national language plan for Vietnam, and again, millions of dollars were at play. Our lead proposal writer for this project, Jimmy Cervin, headed to Vietnam to see what we could coordinate. While we were able to extend our influence to a few trainings in Ho Chi Minh City, Jimmy showed frustration at the unwillingness for the government to do more. The government, he said, was afraid to spend more money, citing that half of the money on the national plan was already spent on trainings and software solutions, with no significant increase in language ability.

Experiences like these deeply influenced what I wanted to share with the ministry of education in Peru. I breathed deeply, and started by sharing good news. Our recent training with hundreds of Peruvian public school English teachers was successful. It had revolved around the language ecosystem concept, meaning that teachers and learners were taught to think outside of the classroom and outside of a single product (in fact, in a single month we taught over 50 different technologies students can use to learn a language). We were confident that the Peruvian teachers now had technologies, incentives, and ideas to get students to create and connect. I shared with the ministry how excited teachers were to get back to their students and make a difference.

I then made a plea that, instead of a single software solution and an increase of class time, a wiser investment of dollars could go to the creation of these ecosystems. I envisioned teachers creating language camps, language clubs, online communities, and many other exciting possibilities. We envisioned that a few of the trained teachers could train others throughout Peru to help students create their own ecosystems. We wanted students to explore products, videos, and music on their own, and invite students to share what they found with the rest of their classmates. We wanted to help learners learn in the same fashion as their teachers. Through community. Through exploration. Through a plan.

Ready to see what a plan might look like for you? Read the free, downloadable resource, individual language plan to help you begin getting basic ideas for your very own language ecosystem: https://language-warriors.com/ilp.pdf. Ready to learn even more? Then I invite you to meet Dr. Francois Gouin, who came to some of the same conclusions 150 years before I did, but did so in spectacular style.

Questions for group discussion:

1. Why do you think people fail to learn languages?

2. Do you know anyone who has succeeded in learning a language? How did he or she do it?

3. What excites you about learning a new language? What makes you nervous?

4. People plan difficult tasks such as building a house or running a marathon. Why do you think people fail to plan their language learning?