

## A. The big picture

A language lesson is the product of a complex synthesis of factors that extend way beyond the immediate lesson itself. These include the curriculum, its materials and methodology, the learners' needs and their learning goals, and the teacher's own preferred practices that are themselves an effect of their personal beliefs and values. Lesson design requires that these big picture factors be taken into account.

- 
- 1 Curriculum, syllabus and lesson
  - 2 Teacher thinking
  - 3 Methods
  - 4 Cultures of learning
  - 5 Needs analysis
  - 6 Syllabus design
  - 7 Types of syllabus
  - 8 Competencies and the CEFR
  - 9 Coursebooks
  - 10 Learner autonomy and out-of-class learning
-

## 1 Curriculum, syllabus and lesson

To understand the bigger picture behind lesson design, we need to consider how lessons are related to syllabuses and to the broader curriculum.

A teacher, Ana, is scheduled to teach an elementary EFL class at 11 am next Tuesday. In planning the lesson, this is not the sum total of the knowledge she brings to bear. The lesson presumably is part of a sequence of lessons (or scheme of work, see 59) that is one way of realizing the requirements of a syllabus. The syllabus may be tagged to, or even the product of, a specific coursebook. The syllabus and coursebook will, in turn, realize the overall goals of the curriculum.

The terms *curriculum* and *syllabus* are often used interchangeably, but it is important to differentiate them. Here are some definitions:

1. A curriculum contains a broad description of general goals by indicating an overall educational-cultural philosophy which applies across subjects together with a theoretical orientation to language and language learning with respect to the subject matter at hand. A curriculum is often reflective of national and political trends as well.
2. A syllabus is a more detailed and operational statement of teaching and learning elements which translates the philosophy of the curriculum into a series of planned steps leading towards more narrowly defined objectives (Dubin and Olshtain, 1986, pp. 34–35).

Important words associated with *curriculum* to note in these definitions are: *broad, general, philosophy, theoretical*. For *syllabus*, however, these words stand out: *detailed, operational, planned steps*. The curriculum is, therefore, both larger than the syllabus and more general. It is concerned with beliefs, values and theory. The syllabus represents the way these beliefs, values and theories are realized in terms of a step-by-step instructional programme. One curriculum may generate

different syllabuses: in fact, this will always be the case in educational organizations that cater for different levels, different age groups, and different subjects. In a state secondary school in a particular country, the elementary English syllabus will be quite different from the advanced German syllabus. Yet both syllabuses are likely to reflect the educational philosophy of the school.

A curriculum incorporates decisions about:

- the objectives or goals of the programme;
- the content – from these decisions the syllabus and choice of materials will be derived;
- the method of instruction;
- the means and standards of assessment, and
- the way the programme will be evaluated.

For example, a language school might set as an objective ‘to prepare students for the IELTS examination’. The content of the programme will therefore include materials designed to achieve this objective, selected and organized into a syllabus. The method of instruction will include provision of practice opportunities in the kinds of tasks required in the examination. The success of the programme will be evaluated, at least in part, by the number of students who pass the exam. A completely different curriculum might start with the objective ‘to develop learner autonomy in language learning’. The content, methods and evaluation procedures will obviously be very different from those of the more narrowly focused examination-driven curriculum.

Sometimes there is a built-in contradiction, as when an institution advertises itself as following a communicative approach, but sets examinations which are largely accuracy-focused. Or a curriculum claims to promote multilingualism and cultural pluralism but adheres to a purely ‘English-only’ classroom methodology. Since teachers have to bear the brunt of these contradictions, it may be worth their while (tactfully!) exposing them.

Meanwhile, we will let Ana get on with her planning.

---

Dubin, F. and Olshtain, E. (1986) *Course Design*. Cambridge University Press.

## 2 Teacher thinking

**Irrespective of the philosophy that underpins their curriculum, teachers have their own theories of how instruction should be planned and implemented. Research into teacher thinking suggests these theories can powerfully affect planning decisions.**

Teachers have beliefs about teaching and learning, and of language learning specifically, even if these beliefs are not explicit. Their beliefs will partly determine the choices they make when it comes to planning lessons. If, for example, they believe that languages are best learned through real communication, they will try to include opportunities for such communication in their lessons. Conversely, if they believe that the learning of the rules of grammar is a prerequisite for fluency, they will likely incorporate a strong focus on grammar.

Where do these beliefs come from, and what form do they take? Most, if not all, teachers have been learners at some point, and the way they learned (or simply picked up) second languages will influence their implicit theories – either positively or negatively – about how languages should be taught. For example, the conspicuous lack of success that I experienced learning French at high school, using very dull textbooks that subscribed to a grammar-translation approach, inclined me towards alternative approaches, such as the watered-down audiolingualism that I encountered on my initial training: I was easily (if uncritically) converted!

As my story suggests, theory development is also nurtured through teacher education: effective teacher training courses are those that not only include a hands-on, practical component, but also encourage trainee teachers to articulate their beliefs about language education, and to put these beliefs to the test in their practice lessons. The cycle of action and reflection, leading to theorizing and planning for future action, is known as *the reflective cycle* (see 66).

Teacher education also provides a means to acquaint teachers with the ‘big-T’ theories of language education, i.e., those that are the domain of academics and researchers. To what extent are teachers influenced by such theories?

According to experts in what is called *teacher cognition*, not a lot. For a start, most teachers are not members of the academic community within which these theories are researched, debated and disseminated. More significantly, they don’t always see the relevance of these theories to their own specific contexts, or how they might be applied in practice.

What drives teacher development is not so much exposure to ‘big-T’ theories as the experientially-grounded theorizing that comes from reflecting on practice – what has been called *personal practical knowledge* (Golombek, 2009). Initially, such knowledge may take the form of ‘if ... then ...’-type statements, also known as *rules of practice*: ‘If I pre-teach the vocabulary, students will understand the text better’. Over time, these statements can strengthen into more general ‘principles of practice’, such as the way this teacher – interviewed by Rose Senior (2006, p. 153) – voices a planning principle: ‘You’ve got to have the main aim of the lesson in mind but to get to that destination there are many different routes to take.’

Rather than ‘theorizing’, Karen Johnson (1999) prefers the term ‘reasoning teaching’, which captures the way teachers make sense of, and respond to, the fluid complexity of their working lives, both inside and outside the classroom.

A lesson plan, then, is the distillation of this kind of dynamic, personal, practically-oriented, locally-situated, classroom-based reasoning. Providing a rationale for the lesson plan, as is required by many training courses (see 15), and sharing this with colleagues and supervisors, is an illuminating way of making explicit the beliefs that inform the planning, and, in so doing, bridging *the theory-practice gap*.

---

Golombek, P. (2009) ‘Personal practical knowledge in L2 Teacher education’, in Burns, A. and Richards, J. C. (Eds.) *The Cambridge Guide to Second Language Teacher Education*. Cambridge University Press.

Johnson, K. E. (1999) *Understanding Language Teaching: Reasoning in Action*. Heinle, Cengage Learning.

Senior, R. (2006) *The Experience of Language Teaching*. Cambridge University Press.

## 3

## Methods

**Teachers' planning decisions are influenced by their own experience and beliefs – their 'personal practical theories' – but they may also be influenced by the theories of others, especially when these are enshrined in a method.**

Most teachers are trained to follow a specific method, even if this method is not explicitly named. For example, when I was first trained, the prevailing method was what I call 'late-stage audiolingualism', which emphasised habit formation through repetition drills and the rote memorization of dialogues, but also allowed a degree of what was called 'freer practice'. My planning decisions were heavily influenced by this method – which is what methods do: they prescribe. As I gained experience, I found this method unnecessarily constrictive, so it was with some relief that I embraced the next method that came along, and which came to be known as Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). Later still, I started experimenting with some of the more fringe methods that had emerged after the demise of audiolingualism and which subscribed to humanistic learning principles, such as Total Physical Response (TPR) and Community Language Learning (CLL). (For a fuller description of these and other methods, see Thornbury 2017.)

For me (as for many teachers), methods offered alternative models for lesson design, and helped free me from the constraints of the method I was initially trained in. In this way, I adopted an *eclectic* methodology, picking and choosing and adapting my approach to my teaching context. Many teachers, though, don't have this luxury, largely because the method is imposed through the materials that they are obliged to use (see 9).

Nevertheless, it may be helpful to know what the principles that underpin the method are. All methods are based – at the very least – on a theory of language and on a theory of learning. Thus, audiolingualism is a method that drew on a structuralist description of language and a behaviourist theory of learning. Accordingly, syllabuses for audiolingual

courses were organized around a graded list of structures. The main classroom activity was the drilling of these structures so as to instil correct language habits, hence lesson planning consisted largely of devising suitable drill sequences. CLT, on the other hand, draws on functional descriptions of language, and on theories of learning that are more cognitively and socially oriented. Classroom activities typically involve information exchange and collaborative group work, requiring a very different set of planning strategies.

The history of language teaching methods is often portrayed as a steady progress from darkness into light, but it might better be thought of as a pendulum swing between two extremes: on the one hand, a view of learning that is formal and academic, and on the other, a view of learning that is experiential and 'nativist', that is, it attempts to replicate the way we learned our mother tongue. Within these extremes, a relatively small set of variables are periodically reconfigured. These variables include whether or not to use the learners' first language during instruction, whether to focus on accuracy or fluency, or whether to encourage memorization. It's worth emphasizing that there are no right answers to these issues: they are as much the products of the local teaching context as they are of informed research.

Nowadays, the method concept has fallen from favour, on the grounds that individual methods are too prescriptive and too insensitive to local contextual factors. It is now recognized that language learning is a more complex process than any single method can hope to address. Hence, there has been an attitude shift in favour of eclecticism and of customizing teaching approaches to suit the particular and local needs of the learners – sometimes called a *post-method pedagogy*.

Whether or not a teacher knowingly espouses a named method, their lesson plans will probably show a preference for certain sets of methodological decisions over others. Tracing the history of these preferences can be an illuminating developmental exercise – especially if you need to provide a rationale for an observed lesson.

---

Thornbury, S. (2017) *30 Language Teaching Methods*. Cambridge University Press.

## 4 Cultures of learning

**Cultural factors – particularly those that reflect the local educational culture – can play an important role in shaping curricular decisions, including choice of method and, ultimately, lesson design.**

The teacher's choice of method – and the materials and techniques associated with it – is never neutral. As Mary Ashworth (1985, p. 123) points out, 'every method contains an inherent set of principles, assumptions and therefore values.' And she adds, 'methods and techniques should be fitted to the students; students should not be forced into one predetermined teaching/learning mould' (p. 124). Fitting a method to the students needs to take into account what Cortazzi and Jin (2013, p. 1) describe as their *culture of learning*: '*Cultures of learning*, as a concept, suggests that learning is cultural. Members of different cultural communities may have different preferences, experiences, interpretations, values and beliefs about how to learn or how to teach.' For this reason, 'second language teaching is not a commodity that can be exported as if it were an object – it is a process which affects people's lives' (Ashworth, 1985, p. 120).

But the fact is that second language teaching *is* exported as an object, both as a method – typically communicative language teaching (CLT) – and as the materials that mediate it. It is repeatedly argued that CLT (which was initially conceived for BANA, i.e., British, Australasian and North American, contexts) is not so easily exported into non-BANA cultures of learning.

Given the global spread of English as an International Language (EIL), BANA-generated methods would seem to be less relevant than ever. As Sandra McKay argues (2003, p. 19), 'the de-linking of English from the culture of Inner Circle [i.e., BANA] countries ... suggests that teaching methodology has to proceed in a manner that respects the local culture of learning.'



On the other hand, these stark ‘them’ and ‘us’ polarities do not necessarily reflect the cultures of learning in particular classrooms, and, worse, might serve to perpetuate stereotypes of the type ‘all Chinese learners do X’ or ‘all Arabic speakers think Y’. Classrooms are complex, diverse and evolving micro-cultures. As Sandra McKay (2002, p. 129) puts it: ‘Although it is important to recognise that what happens in a specific classroom is influenced by political, social, and cultural factors that exist in the larger community, each classroom is unique in the way the learners and teacher interact with one another in the learning of English.’

In order to manage this uniqueness, Michael Breen (2001, p. 137) advocates that teachers should become the investigators of their own classrooms: ‘The culture of the class has the potential to reveal to the teacher the language learning process as it is actually experienced. In this way, teaching language and investigating language learning may be seen to be synonymous.’

One way of investigating the learning culture is simply to observe the way, and with whom, learners interact, not just verbally, but in terms of their body language and eye-contact, while also monitoring their levels of attention and engagement, and their apparent willingness – or unwillingness – to communicate. This observational data can be informed by their own accounts (spoken or written) of how they feel at different stages of the lesson, what and who they are attending to, how the classroom processes align with their own previous learning experiences and current expectations, and how they position themselves within the evolving culture of learning.

---

Ashworth, M. (1985) *Beyond methodology: Second language teaching and the community*. Cambridge University Press.

Breen, M. P. (2001) ‘The social context for language learning: a neglected situation?’ in Candlin, C. N. and Mercer, N. (Eds.) *English Language Teaching in its Social Context: A Reader*. Routledge.

Cortazzi, M. and Jin, L. (2013) (Eds.) *Researching cultures of learning*. Palgrave-Macmillan.

McKay, S. L. (2002) *Teaching English as an International Language*. Oxford University Press.

McKay, S. L. (2003) ‘Toward an appropriate EIL pedagogy: re-examining common ELT assumptions’, *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 13(1).

## 5 Needs analysis

**A key starting point in lesson design – and in curriculum and syllabus design as well – is some assessment of the learners' present or likely needs – what is known as *needs analysis*.**

While Ana (who we met in 1) is planning her lesson, she has the syllabus and coursebook in mind, and is aware of how this lesson will fit with, and follow on from, the previous lessons she has taught with this particular class. She will also be mindful of the specific language needs of these students, as well as their interests, preferences and overall motivation. This awareness may simply be intuitive, based on her observations of the students and informed by her experience of other, similar classes – key components of her personal practical knowledge (see 2). On the other hand, she may have made a deliberate effort at the outset of the course to ascertain these needs, using some form of needs analysis instrument. Arguably, it is only by doing so that she can confidently design her lessons in a way that they satisfy the expectations of the students and other interested stakeholders, such as their parents, or their current or future employers. Anything less is likely to be guesswork.

Needs analysis came into its own with the popularization of the teaching of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) in the 1980s. It follows that if learners need to focus on a specific domain of English use, such as law or business, and/or have a predetermined purpose for learning English, such as attending a conference or flying a plane, then a detailed description of these needs should inform course design. A course in general English would likely be too unfocused and time-consuming in the case of such learners. Even on general English courses and with large and diverse classes, some form of needs analysis is recommended. Arguably, every class – not just an ESP one – is a unique entity with its own culture, interests, preferences and purposes.

So, how do you go about conducting a needs analysis? Apart from closely observing the learners, the principal ways of collecting data include questionnaires/surveys, diagnostic tests and interviews. The data to be gathered include: