

# Course Planning

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## **1. Profile of learners**

There are sixteen learners in the class I have chosen. They are attending Language Learning International, a private English language school in Dun Laoghaire, Co Dublin, Ireland. On this course there is continuous enrolment and the learners enrol for six, nine or twelve months. They are all Chinese students and the age range is 21-33. Lessons are 90 minutes long and take place Monday to Friday from 1330 - 1500 and 1515 - 1645. This is an upper-intermediate class which was formed four months ago when three classes were merged into two as a result of falling numbers. All of these learners have part-time jobs. Some of them work both mornings and evenings. As a result, many of them can be quite tired in class. They are required by law to attend a minimum of 85% of their classes. Most of them hope to go to college in Ireland and are highly motivated to attain a level of English to allow this. They have been in Ireland for between two and four years.

## **2. Principles behind course planning**

### **2.1 Needs analysis**

The first step is to find out as much as possible about the needs of the learners. The course planner should establish details about the learning context as well as personal information about the learners. Methods of acquiring needs analysis information include questionnaires, class discussions, learner diaries, one-to-one tutorials, tests and classroom observation (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). It is recommended that more than one means be used so that there is a balance between objective and subjective information. There is the possibility that the perceived needs of the learner may contradict the teacher's observation. Learners in a group may also have widely differing needs. Any questionnaire has to be designed so that it gives objective information and avoids unnecessary jargon. Although needs analysis was originally more closely associated with ESP than General English, Seedhouse (1995) demonstrates that course and materials design can be based directly on needs analysis in the General English classroom by discovering motivation, and psychological and social needs, rather than communicative or linguistic needs. In my own teaching context, I have been able to exploit the fact that the class has been in existence for a number of months. These learners are more likely to be able to express their needs.

## **2.2 Institutional constraints**

The course planner must take into account the limitations which are presented in the learning context. These include class size, length of the course, frequency of lessons, imposition (or not) of a syllabus or course book, availability of materials and resources, imposition (or not) of targets and tests. Among other variables are the learners' attitude to learning English and their views regarding teaching style, course book, homework and use of class time.

Because I am owner/manager of the school where I teach, there are relatively few constraints to my course planning for this group. Although there is a modular syllabus in place, I am free to stray from it.

## **2.3 Goals and objectives**

Goals refer to the overall general purpose of a language course. Objectives specify in more detail how these goals are to be achieved. Nunan (1988, p61) distinguishes between product objectives, which describe what the learner will be able to do as a result of instruction, and process objectives, which describe activities designed to develop the skills needed to carry out the product objectives. He argues that "any comprehensive syllabus needs to specify both process and product objectives" (Nunan 1988, p71) and that the form the objectives take will reveal the attitude of the syllabus designer towards the nature of language learning. There are different ways of expressing objectives.

Richards (1990, pp3-8) cites four types: behavioural, skills-based, content-based and proficiency-based while Graves (1996, pp18-19) identifies nine categories: knowledge, skill, performance, attitude & awareness, coverage, activity, involvement, mastery and critical thinking.

I propose a mixture of task-based, skills and specific language objectives based on the results of the needs analysis

## **2.4 Syllabus type, course content and methodology**

A syllabus is essentially a comprehensive list of ordered content or process items (Ur 1995 p176). In a product-oriented synthetic syllabus, content is divided into discrete lists of items, while in a process-oriented analytic syllabus learners are exposed to chunks of natural i.e. authentic language (Nunan 1998, pp158, 159). Task-based, procedural and content syllabuses are examples of the latter approach. A balance should be struck between synthetic and analytical syllabi, as some learners will respond better to one or the other because of their previous learning experience or learning styles.

Chinese students in our school were accustomed to a very structured product-oriented syllabus type in China. However, thanks to their experience here which includes ongoing learner training, my group has become used to a more task-oriented approach, which falls under the process syllabus heading.

## **2.5 Materials and resources**

Course planning is affected by the availability of materials, including course books. Most course books, such as Cutting Edge and New Headway, present a multi-layered syllabus organised according to a sequence of grammatical items. This can have a knock-on effect by feeding back into course design. When operating outside the determining influence of available course books, syllabus type selection dictates the kind of materials required. For example, a more analytical syllabus will require authentic materials. Teachers can move beyond course book constraints by selecting and adapting in order to suit their learners' needs and their own teaching style.

In my school there is a broad selection of books and tapes to choose from. Authentic materials are readily available

## **2.6 Evaluation**

Evaluation not only involves assessment of what the students have learnt but also evaluation of the course itself (Graves 1996, p30). There are two types of course evaluation. Formative evaluation begins during course design and continues as the course is taught. Through observation, tutorials, teaching journals, learner feedback or progress tests, the teacher can assess the appropriateness of objectives, the suitability of tasks and learners' progress on an ongoing basis. Summative evaluation takes place at the end of the course. This involves testing students to see how they have progressed in relation to the objectives of the course.

I propose to evaluate the course by conducting feedback tutorials during the course and by giving the students oral and written tests at its conclusion.

## **3. Needs analysis**

I decided to find out about the learners' needs by means of a questionnaire (Appendix 1), follow-up one-to-one tutorials, and classroom observation. I chose these methods in order to have a balance between objective and subjective information about their needs.

The purpose of the questionnaire was twofold. First, it gave samples of their written work to assess. Second, it gave them the opportunity to consider and write about their motivation for learning English, their specific needs and preferred learning style. They were asked

- why they came to Ireland to study English
- what they need to do in English
- what they would like to be able to do better
- what they would like to be able to do but can't do yet.

They were asked to rank vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation and skills in terms of importance and difficulty. Finally, they were asked about their learning preferences.

I anticipated that some of their answers might be inadequate because they are not used to filling in such questionnaires and because they might be reluctant to commit responses to paper. Having built a good rapport with these learners, I was confident that I would gain a deeper insight into their learning needs and styles by interviewing them individually. I was able to identify listening, speaking and pronunciation needs in the course of my conversation with each one.

Through classroom observation, it seemed some needs were common to a number of students while other needs were particular to individual students. For example, these learners generally need to develop top-down strategies when listening. However, one student has particular pronunciation difficulties while another's reading is far weaker than the rest of the class. Finally, this group has articulated that they do not want to work with course books any more. They told me that they had 'done' all the course books from elementary to advanced.

### Conclusions about needs

- Most students intend going to college in Ireland and most of these need to achieve an **IELTS** score of between 5 and 6.5.
- The questionnaire confirmed my own observation that these learners regard **vocabulary** as important. They love acquiring new lexical items and frequently express frustration that there are so many aspects of Irish cultural life that they do not understand.
- Most students regard **speaking** as important but not difficult. They have made good progress but I perceive little improvement in recent months. They do not feel confident in engaging socially with Irish people.
- From observation, these learners do not employ top-down strategies sufficiently when **listening**. They need to develop these strategies.
- According to the questionnaire, these learners have widely differing views on **pronunciation** with some are very conscious of their need to improve and others satisfied with their level.
- Because a lot of **grammar** has been covered explicitly in class, the learners feel they have 'done it'. Problem areas I have observed need to be re-visited in an oblique way. These include phrasal verbs, reported speech and quantifiers.

#### 4. Objectives for the course

By the end of the course, the learners will have:

- Practised **IELTS** examinations with particular emphasis on **listening** and **reading** (top-down strategies), **writing** a descriptive report, **speaking** (familiar topics)
- Carried out tasks which will extend their knowledge and use of **vocabulary** which pertains to aspects of local culture such as politics, music and media. This will be

done by drawing the learners' attention to new lexis and encouraging them to use it in the repeat task phase of the task cycle.

- Carried out tasks during which they will focus on the following areas of **grammar**: modal verbs, reported speech and quantifiers
- Carried out tasks during which they will have the opportunity to identify aspects of native speaker accents and improve their own **pronunciation** and **intonation**
- Become more accurate and confident in **speaking** socially to native speakers by learning how to express interest in others and how to speak about themselves and what is important to them. This will be done through pair work and teacher and peer correction.

## 5. Description and commentary for the course plan

In the absence of institutional requirements, I have attempted to make the most of this freedom to meet the needs of the learners as closely as possible.

The course has three threads which reflect the findings of the needs analysis and objectives:

- IELTS exam preparation



- Task-based activities with focus on vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation.
- Speaking socially

The timetable takes into account that there are time-keeping issues with some of these learners. Because of their part-time jobs, some arrive late and others leave early. Therefore, the last 10 minutes each day is given to a review of work done. Two (punctual) learners will present a summary of that review at the beginning of class the following day. Due mostly to their erratic working hours, homework is a problem with this group. I have chosen not to address it during this course.

I will teach this course in January and will take advantage of this in order to invite the students to make a New Year's resolution to speak English in class.

I decided to focus daily on preparation of the IELTS exam because many learners identified this as a specific need. Although not all learners will sit the exam, these lessons will nevertheless be beneficial to the whole class. I am using *Insight into IELTS (1999 CUP)* as the basis for this and I will consult the learners during feedback in order to evaluate the material's suitability. IELTS exam practice will satisfy the learning style of those students who are more comfortable with a structured programme where it is explicitly stated that one of the four skills is addressed.

On the other hand, a task-based approach will appeal to those learners who like problem solving and working things out for themselves. This group responded well to the task-based lesson which was part of my experimental practice assignment, so I am confident that they will gain from further exposure to this method. Having researched the various syllabus types, I decided that a task-based analytic Type B approach would be the one most appropriate for addressing these learners' stated language needs. Synthetic Type A syllabuses are flawed because they assume a model of language acquisition unsupported by research findings on language learning in or out of classrooms (Long & Crookes, 1992 p30). I considered two other analytic Type B syllabi, namely procedural and process. However, they do not consider learner needs when selecting tasks. Neither do they include focus on form, which task-based language teaching does. Awareness of certain classes of linguistic items in the input is necessary for learning to occur, and drawing learners' attention to those items facilitates development (Long & Crookes, 1992 p42).

The programme reflects the stated needs of these learners by focussing on the areas of vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation which were highlighted in the questionnaire and during the tutorials. I have chosen target tasks which are relevant to their stated needs and which are likely to involve the target language forms. I will follow the Willis TBL framework of pre-task, task cycle and language focus. The learners will employ all four skills during the task, planning and reporting stages of the task cycle. Post-task language focus will be monitored by me on an ongoing basis so that it conforms to the course objectives.

This approach also addresses the issue of the motivation of these long-term learners because they are resistant to re-visit grammar in a synthetic way.

In order to help these learners become more accurate and confident in speaking to native speakers in informal situations, I chose to adapt activities from *Pair Work 3* (2002 *Penguin English*). These activities are typical of the kinds of exchanges which these learners wish to have socially with Irish people as shown by the needs analysis. As well as pair work, they will also work in threes. Here, the roles of speaker listener and observer will rotate and peer correction will be encouraged.

During the Friday feedback tutorials, I will ask the learners to evaluate the programme in terms of their stated needs and the course objectives. On the final day, I will test the students and ask them to evaluate the course as a whole.

## 6. Bibliography

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## 7. Appendices

### Appendix 1 : Course Plan

<b>Week 1 Monday</b>	<b>Tuesday</b>	<b>Wednesday</b>	<b>Thursday</b>	<b>Friday</b>
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Lesson 1: 90 minutes	Lesson 2: 90 Minutes	Lesson 3: 90 Minutes	Lesson 4: 90 Minutes	Lesson 5: 90 Minutes
<p>1. Introduction to course and timetable. New year resolutions: elicit &amp; discuss. Commit to English as language of the classroom.</p> <p>2. IELTS: Listening Orientating yourself to the text (Insight into IELTS p8)</p> <p>3. Speaking socially Similar or very different (Pair Work 3, Unit 1)</p> <p>4. Pronunciation Weak forms</p> <p>Review</p>	<p>Review</p> <p>1. IELTS: Reading Titles and sub-headings: Paragraphs (p29)</p> <p>2. Task Look at TV guide and rank soaps</p> <p>3 Writing Speaking Report on the above</p> <p>4 Cultural Vocabulary Highlight new items</p> <p>5 Grammar Quantifiers</p> <p>Review</p>	<p>Review</p> <p>1 Task: Match headings to facts about Ireland from www.cia.gov</p> <p>2. Writing Speaking Report on the above</p> <p>3 Pronunciation Focus on schwa</p> <p>4 IELTS: Writing Describing Facts and Figures p67</p> <p>Review</p>	<p>Review</p> <p>1 IELTS: Speaking The interview (p98)</p> <p>2 Task: Compare Chinese to Irish political system.</p> <p>3 Writing Speaking Report on the above</p> <p>4 Cultural Vocabulary Political lexis, including party names</p> <p>Review</p>	<p>Review</p> <p>1 Speaking socially What do you value most (Pair Work 3, Unit 17)</p> <p>2 Pronunciation Sentence stress</p> <p>3 IELTS: Listening For specific information (p 10)</p> <p>4 Feedback session</p>

Week 2 Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Lesson 6: 90 minutes	Lesson 7: 90 Minutes	Lesson 8: 90 Minutes	Lesson 9: 90 Minutes	Lesson 10: 90 Mins

Review	Review	Review	Review	Review
<p>1 IELTS: <b>Reading</b> Skimming, scanning for specific information &amp; detail (p 33)</p> <p>2 Task: Find similarities/differences between Ireland's and China's imports and exports www.fmprc.gov.cn</p> <p>3 <b>Writing</b> <b>Speaking</b> Report on the above</p> <p>4 Cultural Vocabulary Business-related</p> <p>Review</p>	<p>1 Task: Explain the rules of ma-jong</p> <p>2 <b>Writing</b> <b>Speaking</b> Report on the above</p> <p>3 Grammar Modals of possibility, advice</p> <p>4 IELTS: <b>Writing</b> Describing trends (p 69)</p> <p>Review</p>	<p>1 IELTS: <b>Speaking</b> The long turn (p 102)</p> <p>2 <b>Speaking</b> socially Asking for and giving personal information and opinions (Pair Work 3 Unit 2)</p> <p>3 <b>Pronunciation</b> Intonation</p> <p>Review</p>	<p>1 Task Look at 'What's on in Dublin' and list three things you would like to do.</p> <p>2 <b>Writing</b> <b>Speaking</b> Report on the above. Reach a consensus with the whole class</p> <p>3 Cultural Vocabulary Entertainment-related</p> <p>4 <b>Pronunciation</b> Consonant clusters</p> <p>5 IELTS: <b>Listening</b> Identifying detail (pp14/15) Identifying main ideas (pp16-18)</p> <p>Review</p>	<p>1 IELTS: <b>Reading</b> Identifying main and supporting ideas (pp38-41)</p> <p>2 <b>Speaking</b> socially Agreeing, disagreeing, discussing necessities of life (Pair work 3 Unit 16)</p> <p>3 Vocabulary Comparatives &amp; superlatives</p> <p>4 Feedback session</p>

Week 3 Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday		
Lesson 11: 90 mins	Lesson 12: 90 Mins	Lesson 13: 120 Mins		

<p>Review</p> <p>1 IELTS: Listening Beyond the surface meaning (pp19-21)</p> <p>2 Task: Match signs if the Zodiac with descriptions www.astrology-online.com In pairs, tell each other about your sign. Report back.</p> <p>3 Writing Speaking Report on the above.</p> <p>4 Grammar Reported speech</p> <p>5 Pronunciation Problems with vowels</p> <p>Review</p>	<p>Review</p> <p>1 Task: Summarise the 5 most interesting facts about Hurling, the national sport from <a href="http://www.gaa.ie">www.gaa.ie</a></p> <p>2 Writing Speaking Report on the above.</p> <p>3 Cultural Vocabulary Focus on sports-related vocabulary</p> <p>4 IELTS: Reading Use of paragraphs (pp42-45)</p> <p>Review</p>	<p>Review</p> <p>1 IELTS: Practice test Listening Reading Writing Speaking</p> <p>2 Final Feedback session</p>		
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## Appendix 2

## Needs Analysis Questionnaire

1. Your name:.....
2. What languages other than Chinese and English do you know?.....
3. What did you study or work at before you came to Ireland? .....  
.....  
.....
4. At what age did you start learning English? .....
5. When did you come to Ireland to study English? .....
6. Why did come to Ireland to study English? .....  
.....  
.....
7. What is your part-time job in Ireland? .....  
.....
8. What do you need to do in English outside school? .....  
.....  
.....
9. What would you like to be able to do better? .....  
.....  
.....
10. What would you like to be able to do, but can't do yet? .....  
.....  
.....
11. How do you find the following language areas?  
Rank them 1 - 7 (1 = most, 7 = least)
 

	Important	Difficult
A. Reading	___	___
B. Writing	___	___
C. Speaking	___	___
D. Listening	___	___
E. Vocabulary	___	___
F. Grammar	___	___
G. Pronunciation	___	___
12. How do you like learning: (1 = very much, 5 = not at all)
 

a. by memorizing things?	1	2	3	4	5
b. by solving problems?	1	2	3	4	5

c. by working it out yourself?		1	2	3	4	5
d. by listening?	1	2	3	4	5	
e. by reading?		1	2	3	4	5

### **Appendix 3**

#### **Needs Analysis Questionnaire - Results**



**Why did you come to Ireland to study English?**

To go to college x 5  
Nothing to do in China  
Ireland is a good country to learn English  
To know more about a different culture  
For a better job  
More chances to get experience in English  
My friend came  
Mom sent me  
Don't know

**What do you need to do in English outside school?**

To talk to native speakers x 3  
Listen to the news, watch TV x 3  
IELTS x 5  
Work x 2  
Social life & making friends x 2  
Everything x 2

**What would you like to be able to do better?**

Speak x 6  
Write x 3  
Listen x 2  
Have better pronunciation x 2  
Read  
Study harder  
Understand everything  
Talk to Irish people

**What would you like to be able to do, but can't do yet?**

Pass IELTS exam x 5  
Go to college  
Be an interpreter  
Speak well  
Cultural understanding  
Write  
Spell

**How do you find the following language areas?**

Rank them 1 - 7 (1 = most, 7 = least)

	Important	Difficult
H. Reading	313231317155	2412152135
I. Writing	2112441416165	3212 41115
J. Speaking	5114311711111	763616663
K. Listening	4116121514121	446327343
L. Vocabulary	1111561112141	1344115152
M. Grammar	615651245175	541552422
N. Pronunciation	1777171613133	63773772

**How do you like learning:** (1 = very much, 5 = not at all)

a. by memorizing things?	1√√√	2√√	3√√√√√	4√√	5√
b. by solving problems? 1	2√√√√√√√	3√√√√√√√	4√	5	
c. by working it out yourself?	1√√	2√√√√	3√√√√	4√	5√
d. by listening?	1√√√√	2√√	3√√√√	4√√	5
e. by reading?	1√	2√√√√	3√√√	4√√	5√√