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The importance of differentiation — balancing individual learner needs with an external syllabus



This article came about after a period of personal reflection on what underpins what we do on a daily basis in the classroom. During secondary training such as the Delta or Trinity diploma, teachers start to question the validity of the syllabus through analysis. What is the justification for *those* items in *that* order? What underpins the logic of the syllabus? Should we even use course books? Surely regular needs analysis and regular appropriate testing would reveal the direction each course should be taking. By following an externally-imposed syllabus, are we truly meeting our learners' needs?

This questioning is based upon a greater awareness of the theories and values upon which our teaching is based: the various teaching methodologies we might choose to employ in the classroom, theoretical ideas about how people learn, and the wider linguistic features of the language that might need to be taught to achieve fluency. By the end of this process, it is not uncommon to feel invigorated about our profession and full of ideas about how to improve our practise in the real world at school. Then we go back to the classroom and get the wind knocked out of our sails. We are given a course book and told which units we must teach that week. Students join and leave the course on a regular basis and the time we gave over to detailed Needs Analysis during our course cannot be replicated. We may even start to question the point of our training.

Unfortunately, the reality of any course in an institution is that there needs to be regulation. Teachers cannot just go off willy nilly using the material when and how they would prefer. Firstly, some individuals would lazily produce substandard lessons. And secondly, because if there is more than one course running at the same level then they all need to work at the same pace and cover the same areas. On a practical level, if a student moves between classes for whatever reason, it is important that they do not miss or repeat areas of study. Additionally, in adult education at least, students come and go in a process of rolling enrolment. Therefore, it is common to have learners

in the room who are at widely different stages within a level. In addition, state-regulation of educational establishments is widely extending into the language sector. The consequence of all this is that the individual learner is not the only concern when selecting material and planning courses.

Other factors that reality demands we take into consideration during planning include thinking about what consists of reasonable planning time. Here in the UK, while mainstream educators bemoan the fact they have long working days, they have non-contact time timetabled in and paid for; but within the language school industry, there is no time given within the school's timetable for lesson preparation or marking. Additionally, EFL teachers are poorly paid for the level of qualification achieved and even experienced staff can be on hourly rates with no job security. As a result, they rely on running out of the door when the bell goes to take private lessons and supplement their income. Therefore, there is often resentment whenever extra effort is mentioned in the staffroom, especially from the more experienced and dare I say, jaded, members of the profession.

When you put these factors together, it is easy to see how the course book and its easy-to-use units that are designed to fit a certain number of hours of teaching has become the fall back position when it comes to planning. "Last week was unit 3, therefore this week we are studying unit 4." Often planning goes no further than breaking that down into which pages will be 'covered' on a particular day. But is this the best that we can do? Framing that question within the current best practise of Demand High the answer is clearly no.

Historically, course books have been based around the development of the learner's knowledge, and hopefully use, of a range of grammatical items on the basis that this is what is needed to produce communication. However, the selection of these items has varied from book to book and publisher to publisher, and there is a growing emphasis on the value of lexis and other features of language for the development of competency.

First proposed in 1991, the CEFR developed by The Council of Europe recognised that unifying the content of courses according to something wider than each writer's personal philosophy was something that needed to happen. It provides strong face validity as well as hopefully content validity regardless of the prevailing methodological fashion. The Council's research resulted in the production of a set of descriptors, which have been adopted as the basis for courses and examinations across the world. Clearly moving away from the purely grammatical progression of old, they incorporate many other aspects of the language, which it is felt learners should develop their competencies in at each level. These include the register of different language items, receptive and productive skills, interactive competencies as well as the different domains in which language is used amongst other things. Look at http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/education/elp/elp-reg/cefr_EN.asp for more information.

In essence, the result of the CEFR level descriptors is that teachers at the coalface of the job have a useful benchmark to base their course on, which has been well-researched and grounded in the needs of learners at that level. Even better, they mean there is now a universal basis upon which course books and curriculum can be structured, unifying and crystallising the set of language and competencies each student is expected to be able to understand and produce at each level from A1 to C2. As course creators adopt these descriptors to ever more series, the teacher can be confident that even though they may make the decision to choose one course book over another for its methodological principals or topics, the language explored will be the same. The value of this cannot be underestimated.

This is not to say that individual teachers cannot have input into their courses. While a course book is a strong basis for a course of study we must reflect on the question of individual learner needs. Reference books such as Johnson's *The Second Language Curriculum* and the excellent *Planning Lessons and Courses* by Woodward are good starting points for teachers looking to balance many of the considerations I have mentioned while <http://teflpedia.com/Approach, method and strategy> has a great overview of the more theoretical side of things.

A good starting point is to recognise the point that all learners are different so anything bigger than a one-to-one needs some level of homogenisation as the starting point. Additionally, to some degree, we can trust that, while each learner is different, there will be benefit to a group of learners of a similar level in studying the same material. This is particularly pertinent when we reflect on the necessity of recycling input to retain it.

The reality of a heterogenous rather than homogenous group of learners means that we find that students vary in their ability to grasp and retain new language items and this necessitates building in follow-up lessons that recycle points and gives opportunities to practise new items of language over the remainder of the course. For example, if you were to focus on the use of present perfect to focus on the importance of an action or event in the past then out of a class of fifteen learners, one student may respond to your timeline-based presentation and grasp the concept and be able to use it correctly in a communicative activity a week later, while a number of other students will initially grasp the concept and be able to produce in very controlled written activities quite mechanically but fail to use it correctly in a truly communicative and personalised way, and yet others may need a different type of language input altogether, such as a reading text of some kind, before they can start to understand the concept. Thus, the fact that some students have met it before while it is completely new to others isn't a problem unless you are unable to differentiate how you manage the activity of those learners in the classroom.

Turn a disadvantage into an advantage

Assuming that some learners have met your language point before gives you the opportunity to use that when planning your lesson. Handing over the input stage to the learners by asking them to tell each other what they know about the structure in an example sentence allows you to monitor and see where misunderstanding or knowledge exists. With misunderstanding, this can then be fixed and checked or where knowledge exists, this can then be shared with the class. Follow up input stages by asking learners to tell each other what they have learned is a good testing stage that allows you to monitor individually and feedback individually where errors still occur. It also allows for peer correction and peer teaching to develop.

Another string in the bow of a strong teacher is the ability to exploit upcoming material in order to re-approach a concept while continuing to input new concepts alongside it. This rolling approach to input makes sense when you focus on the idea of developing each individual to their fullest potential and challenging them to demand more of themselves, but it can take a bit of thought initially to implement. Once you are familiar with it, you will find it happens more naturally. This is one way to bridge the gap between a school, state or course book-based syllabus and your learners' individual needs and it is a combination of planned differentiation based on your knowledge of the learners in your class during the initial introduction of a language point, and recycling of the language over the following weeks. In this way, we can marry the needs of the individual, the class, the level, the school and even the national curriculum. Let's look at an example.

If we take Unit 3 from "Enjoy English", early in the unit is a small section on the function of being polite in questions.

The focus of the task is ostensibly the addition of the polite phrase 'excuse me' and 'please'. However, there is an opportunity here to mine the activity for a focus on the verb patterns and even register of different question

52 Change the questions. Follow the example.

Example: Could you open the window, please? — *Excuse me*, could you open the window, please?

1. Can you tell me where the British Museum is?
2. Can you tell me where the Green School is?
3. Could you pass me the sugar?
4. Can you tell me how to get to the nearest supermarket?
5. How can I get to Westminster Abbey?
6. Would you mind closing the door?



forms, focusing on requests. As this is a culturally-sensitive language feature, it is valid to extend the lesson this way especially if you think the group's awareness is low.

Activity 1 — a focus on register

Board *'Could you pass me the sugar?'* and ask the students to write the main idea of the question in as few words as possible. Hopefully, they can produce *'Pass the sugar.'* Ask them how the listener might feel if they were asked in this way. Ask them to make it more polite so that the listener might want to help. They should imagine the listener is someone they know well. *'Can you pass the sugar?'* Now imagine they are in a restaurant at a communal table. They are sitting next to someone they don't know. How can they ask now? *'Could you pass me the sugar?'* should reappear at this point. Then ask how can we ensure we get the stranger's attention and make it even politer? *'Excuse me, could you pass me the sugar, please?'*

Of course, it's possible you will get some other question forms that those I've suggested, such as *'Would you mind passing the sugar?'*, which is in the original activity, or *'Could I bother you for the sugar?'*, which is not. This is a good thing. By asking the learners themselves to supply the forms, you are testing the existing knowledge of those who know other forms as well as extending the knowledge of those who don't. The idea is to extend each learner's understanding of when to use the different types of request they know, and extend their range of options.

Key point: Each learner in the room is likely to make progress in a different way as they will focus on a different aspect of the language: either a new question form, or the idea of register, or possibly a feature of pronunciation if supplied as part of the activity.

In order to consolidate learning, it is also important to include immediate personalised practice. One way to do this would be to make a game out of it. The classic *Who am I?* game lends itself very well to any focus on question forms. Simply write the names of famous people, or even the students in the class if you think it won't cause upset, and stick them to the learner's backs or foreheads. They mingle and ask questions to find out what 'their name' is. The only proviso is that each question must have a *yes/no* answer. It's fun and easy for the teacher to monitor everyone's use of the target language. You can input instructions on the register *'ask rudely'* or *'ask very politely'* or intonation *'ask angrily'* and *'ask timidly'*.

Activity 2 – opportunities to use new language

To retain language it must be used so it is important to find opportunities to use an item later in the course. On the next page in the course book an information exchange lends itself to a focus on register. You can insist that half the class imagines they're talking to a stranger while the other half imagines they are asking their sibling.

"Enjoy English-5", Unit 3, p. 105



55 Work in pairs. Each student should read one text. Both texts are the same but some information is missing in each text. Ask each other questions and fill in the missing details. Don't look at your partner's text.

A

Trafalgar Square is situated in But it is well-known all over the world. The square is famous for Nelson's Column. There are ... at the bottom of the column. You can see lovely fountains and historical monuments in the square. When ... , Trafalgar Square is full of tourists. They take photos, walk around the square, and enjoy the sights. In December there is ... in the centre of the square. It marks the beginning of Christmas and New Year in Great Britain. Different cultural festivals take place in the square. Everyone can take part in the events.



Activity 3 — consolidation of new language in use

The simplest way to recycle question forms is to use any feedback as a polite question loop. Simply politely ask one student to tell you the answer to a question in an activity. In this exercise, ‘*Excuse me Susan, could you tell me who the person is who writes poems?*’ When she answers, ask her to check you agree. Maybe board the basic two-part conversation.

- A** “Excuse me Susan, would you mind telling me the answer to question A?”
B “I think it’s a poet, Miss. Do you agree?”
A “Yes, I do. Thank you.”
B “Excuse me C...”

If the questioner agrees, the loop continues but now you are not involved. The students are autonomously controlling who is involved and whether or not the answers are right. If anyone disagrees, simply open the question out to the whole class to judge, and then continue.

71 Match the words to the correct definitions.

1. a singer
2. a writer
3. a sportsman
4. a poet
5. a scientist

- a) ... is a person who writes poems.
- b) ... is a person who sings songs.
- c) ... is a person who works in one of the sciences.
- d) ... is a person who writes stories and novels.
- e) ... is a person who plays sport.

“Enjoy English–5”, Unit 3, p. 107

Other benefits of course-book based syllabus

A good course-book will give an experienced teacher plenty of opportunities to recycle and demand more of their learners as described above. But they also provide enormous assistance to beginner teachers through the provision of well-connected material and a methodologically sound teacher’s book full of useful instructions. These instructions may or may not be followed but they effectively provide a teacher trainer in a range of lesson styles covering the different aspects of language learning. This is invaluable in helping beginner teachers move from hours of planning to a more manageable workload. Not only do course-books help beginners but they also help teachers with a few years experience benefit from a reduced workload once they are familiar with the books their school uses. For these teachers, planning can start to be more learner-focused. They may decide to omit exercises or adapt them based on the personalities of the learners in the room. They may begin to experiment with going off-plan and become more responsive to emergent learner needs.

My final post-script to this article is to urge you all to explore the CEFR framework and start to look for how it links to your material and courses. While CEFR is universal for all languages, Annette Capel and the English Profile Programme have been exploring the range learners should be expected to have to be considered to be B2 or C1 level in English and her article here (journals.cambridge.org/article/S2041536212000013) is very informative. I hope to be able to give you a lot more information on this exciting area of development in my next article.