

500  
TIPS

*for*  
TESOL

(TEACHING ENGLISH TO SPEAKERS OF OTHER LANGUAGES)

SUE WHARTON  
& PHIL RACE

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# **500 TIPS *for* TESOL**

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SUE WHARTON & PHIL RACE



LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published in 1999 by Kogan Page Limited

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This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2005.

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**British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data**

A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 0-203-01730-7 Master e-book ISBN

ISBN 0 7494 2409 5 (Print Edition)

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# Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Fiona Copland, Julian Edge, Nur Hooton, Steve Mann, Kate Marriage, Peter Roe, Ann Wharton, Shana Heslington and Jane Willis for their extremely valuable comments on earlier drafts of all or part of this book. We also thank participants on Aston University's CELT course who used and commented on draft extracts from the book. The responsibility for any errors which remain is entirely our own.

# Introduction

We have written this book for people who teach English to speakers of other languages, for people who are training to do so, and for people who work with trainee teachers. Although it is primarily intended for those nearer the beginning of their careers, it will also be of use to more experienced teachers who are moving into new areas, such as course design, self-access provision or teacher training. So, whether you are just starting your career or whether you have been teaching for a long time now, we hope you will find useful suggestions in our book.

**Chapter 1**, ‘Planning for teaching and learning’, starts by exploring the basis of successful learning processes. We look at the assessment of learners’ needs, from both a language learning and a more broadly human perspective, and then go on to look at planning a course and locating and designing suitable materials to support it.

**Chapter 2**, ‘Meeting learners’ needs’, looks in more depth at language learners as social human beings. We consider how to foster valuable learning processes in the classroom, and offer practical tips on how to handle large groups and smaller groups. We also make suggestions on how best to support mature learners, and learners away from home. We end with a discussion of ways of collecting useful feedback from the learners themselves.

**Chapter 3** is the most substantial part of this book and deals with a range of language teaching activities. We look first at techniques for teaching the various aspects of language, and end with some ideas about creative things, such as games and role plays, that can contribute to the learning of a wide range of content and skills.

**Chapter 4** is about using flexible or self-access learning in your work, or even to replace well-chosen aspects of your normal face-to-face provision. We look at the establishment of self-access facilities, their use, and the choice and design of materials to go in them.

**Chapter 5** offers suggestions on ways of making use of information and communications technologies to support ESOL learning. The use of e-mail and computer conferencing can be particularly useful to people learning a language, giving them practice in a non-threatening environment, both at reading and writing in their target language.

**Chapter 6** is about assessment, including helping learners to benefit from self-assessment and peer-assessment. The chapter includes suggestions for helping learners to prepare successfully for public examinations.

**Chapter 7** is written for you! We include various suggestions from which to choose your own personal professional development activities, and also some ‘survival’ suggestions, which we hope will prove useful to you if and when they are needed.

This is not a book to be read straight through from start to finish. We suggest that you scan the book to find out what is most directly relevant to you at any given time, and start from there. If you are an experienced teacher, we know that you may already be implementing, or exceeding, many of the suggestions we offer; but we hope that you will still find ideas that you had not considered before, and which you can adapt to your own teaching. If you are a new teacher, we realize that not all of our suggestions may be immediately relevant to you; we hope that you will take those that you need now (**Chapter 3** might be a good place to start), and come back later to some of the others. Then if you are training teachers, we hope that these sets of tips will be useful springboards to discussion in training sessions or reminders afterwards.

At the end of the book we include suggestions for further reading for all of the chapters. These books and articles will help you to look in much more detail at all of the areas which we have touched on in this book. We’ve chosen titles that we feel will be accessible to less experienced teachers, but which will also provide more experienced colleagues with food for thought.

# Chapter 1

## Planning for Teaching and Learning

- 1 Exploring learning processes
- 2 Assessing learners' language needs
- 3 Planning a course
- 4 Choosing the right coursebook
- 5 Designing your own materials

We begin the book by looking at the key processes that underpin and drive successful learning. We hope that our suggestions will help you to plan your programmes so that the learning experiences your learners derive are as productive as possible, as well as being enjoyable and stimulating.

Next, we look at your market research. The more you can find out about *why* your learners are learning English, and *what* they intend to do with their new language, the better you can plan your programme for them.

There is a lot more to planning a course than can realistically be covered in a few suggestions. We hope, however, that our ideas on this will point you in productive directions, will include at least one or two ideas which you may not otherwise have considered, and will help you to make the process of course design more worthwhile, and the resulting product more useful.

If you intend your students' learning to be supported by a particular coursebook, it is obvious that you need to select the most appropriate book, so that your learners' needs will be met well, and also that you will find it a resource with which is comfortable to work.

We end this short chapter with some general suggestions about designing your own materials. Every teacher we know, even when making extensive use of published materials, finds it necessary to make materials of their own to cover particular issues. Later in this book, we revisit materials issues in the context of choosing or designing resource materials for independent learning.

## 1

**Exploring learning processes**

One of the most important factors that predetermines success in learning of any kind is confidence. Language learning is particularly dependent upon confidence. We need to give our learners every chance to develop this confidence, and one of the best ways of us assisting them to do this is to help them to gain greater control over the processes they apply during their learning. The following ideas should help you to show your learners how they can adjust their approaches to learning to optimize their success.

- 1 **Learners need motivation.** They need to want to learn things. If they already want to learn, it is described as intrinsic motivation. Where intrinsic motivation is lacking, you can encourage learners by showing them what benefits will flow from the achievement of their intended learning outcomes. This generates extrinsic motivation. When possible, make learning fun, interesting and rewarding, so that extrinsic and intrinsic motivation can work together. Don't mistake lack of confidence for lack of motivation.
- 2 **Learning-by-doing is important.** Most learning happens when learners use language, have a go, and learn by making mistakes and finding out why. We need to ensure that learners are given early opportunities to try out and work with new language that they have encountered. Care needs to be taken to ensure that learning-by-doing is focused on *useful* language work, and not just on anything to keep learners busy!
- 3 **Feedback to learners is essential.** They need to find out how their learning is actually going. They may feel that they have understood a particular aspect of language, but cannot be certain until they get feedback on whether they are handling it successfully. Feedback from the teacher is very useful, but teachers can also facilitate learners getting feedback from each other, and from various kinds of learning resource materials. It follows, too, that feedback must be timely for it to be of use to the learner. Any significant delay in the return of an assessed piece of written work usually causes gloom and distress!
- 4 **Needing to learn something can be almost as productive as wanting to learn it.** When learners know *why* something will be useful to them, even if they find it difficult, they are more likely to maintain their efforts until they have succeeded.
- 5 **Learners need to make sense of what they are learning.** It is of limited value to learn only by rote, or to be able to do things without knowing why or how. Getting learners to think about how their learning is happening is one step towards helping them to develop a sense of ownership of their progress.
- 6 **Learning is not just a matter of storing up further knowledge.** Successful learning, especially language learning, is about being able to make creative

use of what has been learnt, not only in familiar situations, but also in new contexts. It is essential to keep in mind the need to help students to learn in both sequential and holistic ways, and to look for ways to help them to employ all of their senses to optimize their learning.

- 7 **Learners take cues about how they are expected to learn from the ways in which we teach them.** If we concentrate only on supplying them with information, they are likely to simply try to store this. If we structure our teaching so that they are practising, applying, extending, comparing, contrasting, evaluating and engaging in other higher level processes, they are likely to see these processes as central to their learning.
- 8 **Learning is driven strongly by assessment.** Learners are often quite strategic in structuring their learning to be able to do the best they can in the contexts in which their learning is to be assessed. Assessment formats and instruments can be used to help learners to structure their learning effectively, as well as to give them appropriate timescales within which to organize their learning.
- 9 **Learning is not just an independent activity.** While much can be learnt by learners working on their own, with handouts, books and learning resource materials, they can also learn a great deal by talking to each other and attempting tasks and activities jointly.
- 10 **Becoming better at learning is important.** For many people, the most important learning outcomes of an educational experience are not the syllabus-based, course-specific ones, but are the outcomes relating to being able to learn new skills and competencies better. Learning skills are among the most important of transferable life skills. The course content can be regarded as a vehicle through which these important skills are developed.

## 2

### **Assessing learners' language needs**

It seems only common sense to try to find out what our learners are learning English for and what kind of English they will need. Many will have no specific purpose in mind, but others—usually adults—are learning for clearly identified reasons: to study at an English medium university; to read the literature of their professional field; to work with English speakers. If you have a class with learning purposes in common, you can try to tailor your course to their particular language needs. The following suggestions should help you to find out, in detail, what those language needs are.

- 1 **Ask learners about their reasons for learning and their target situation.** If you ask a very general, open-ended question then learners can tell you about their needs in their own words. You will gain insight into the level of sophistication at which they can express their language needs, and the extent to which they are aware of a target language variety.

- 2 **Ask people who are already in the target situation.** These may be people who already occupy the roles your learners aspire to, or people like managers and trainers who may be evaluating the performance of your learners in their target roles. People already in the situation will have a valuable perspective on its demands; but, just like the learners, they may have limited awareness of actual language needs.
- 3 **Observe the target situation first hand.** When trying to understand your learners' aspirations there is no substitute for actually observing the kind of activities they want to carry out in English and the environment that they will be in. Sometimes, it is only seeing for yourself that enables the comments of the learners and other informants to make sense.
- 4 **Talk to learners again, in detail.** Once you have a broad picture of the target situation, you can talk to learners about those aspects of it which might particularly influence the ways they want to use language. The following tips suggest areas that you might concentrate on.
- 5 **Clarify receptive and productive needs.** Language needs are defined by what users do with language in situations, as much as by the language which they encounter. For example, your learners may need to understand the financial press, but never have to produce such language themselves. Getting this clear will help you to develop relevant and economical teaching approaches.
- 6 **Find out about the cognitive demands of situations.** For example, if your learners say they need to 'understand lectures', find out why this is: will they write summaries, undertake tasks, sit exams on the basis of what they have learnt from lectures? This information can give you ideas both on skills to practise (eg, taking notes), and on language to highlight (eg, discourse markers).
- 7 **Ask about social roles.** If your learners need to 'give presentations', is this to peers, juniors or potential clients? Social considerations are particularly important for classroom activities, such as role plays: you need to think about how social dimensions can be recreated or simulated in the classroom, so that learners might attempt to incorporate a degree of social positioning into their classroom language use.
- 8 **Research the target language yourself.** Try to get a good range of samples—written and spoken, as appropriate—and look at them in detail. You will perhaps be able to identify certain language features that you feel are particularly important, and which you want to incorporate into your course. For more ideas on collecting and analyzing language data, see 21 on natural language data, and 22–23 on exploiting written and spoken texts.
- 9 **Look at how your learners will be tested.** Sometimes, learners need to take a language test to gain access to their target role: eg, TOEFL or IELTS for university study. In this case, the nature of the test is one of the factors determining their language needs. See 42, Preparing learners for public examinations.

- 10 **Remember that language needs aren't everything.** There is a danger of getting so caught up in attempting to understand, express and itemize the language needs of students that we start to lose sight of their needs as learners and human beings. Learning needs, as distinct from language needs, are discussed from a variety of perspectives in [Chapter 2](#) of this book.

### 3

#### Planning a course

Teachers are often asked to work with a course plan that already exists. This may be an explicit document generated within the institution, or a more implicit statement such as a prescribed coursebook. But, sometimes, individual teachers or groups of colleagues need to plan a course themselves. These suggestions should help you to plan a coherent learning experience for your students.

- 1 **Know your learners.** A prerequisite for course planning is an analysis of learners' needs, in terms of both language content and skills and learning processes. Good needs analysis involves a process of research—we provide ideas on how to carry it out in 2, Assessing learners' language needs, and 6, Responding to learning needs in the classroom.
- 2 **Formulate aims and objectives.** On the basis of your research, what do you want the learners to be able to do by the end of the course? What do you want them to have read and listened to? How can these objectives be broken down into manageable steps?
- 3 **Name the strands of the learning experience.** These are the means whereby the objectives might be reached. You should consider processes (eg, the tasks learners might do), topics and text types as well as language content. Having named the strands, you can then consider each one in detail—examples are below.
- 4 **Consider the language content.** You may well be required to specify the main structures, lexis and language functions that learners will experience and work with during the course. You should link these features to the overall aims and objectives of your course. In addition to their experience of these explicitly stated language features, learners need a general variety of exposure—to give them opportunities to acquire features which are not being explicitly taught. So don't overlook the importance of language and texts that do *not* relate directly to course objectives.
- 5 **Think about topics and text types.** Do the course objectives imply a concentration on particular topics and written or spoken text types? Are some topics particularly relevant and interesting for the learners? Which text types might most easily support the language content objectives, as well as contributing to a wide exposure?
- 6 **Think about processes.** Is familiarity with certain processes—for example, negotiating in a group, or writing a summary from various source texts—part

of the course objectives? Perhaps your learners can already identify some of the activities they need to perform in English. Which processes do you think will best support your language content objectives? Which will best support the students' general language learning?

- 7 **Decide on a sequence for the course elements.** You need a rationale that will help you to determine which aspects will come first, which later, and how aspects will be recycled. You might think of immediate need, relevance, or difficulty. The concept of difficulty here is, of course, a complex one, and begs questions about what can be meant by 'mastery' of a course element.
- 8 **Get feedback on your draft course.** Especially where one person or a small group is planning a course that will also be used by others, it is essential to get feedback from those others before the course plan is finalized. Colleagues can spot problems, from gaps in course coverage to ambiguous or difficult formulations. And the process of consultation makes it more likely that all the team will understand the philosophy of the course and engage with it.
- 9 **Develop a formal, public document.** The 'finished' course document or course description can be made available not only to teachers using it, but also to other colleagues, learners, sponsors and parents. Writing for so many different audiences is a challenge, but a document that successfully addresses all stakeholders can be a powerful unifying force.
- 10 **Remain open to change.** As the course is taught, experiences of teachers and learners will no doubt start to reveal ways in which it could be improved. You need to set up a system to channel these developing insights back to you. It could well be impractical, as well as inappropriate, to radically change the course plan every year; but do remain open to feedback and modifications.

#### 4

### Choosing the right coursebook

A good coursebook makes a tremendous difference to a programme. For learners, it can give confidence and reassurance, as well as the opportunity to look ahead and see what's coming next. For teachers, it offers a framework for course planning as well as lesson-by-lesson support. Sometimes we are told which book to use; but often, individual teachers or groups of colleagues are asked to choose a main book for their programme. The following suggestions should help you to evaluate potential coursebooks and choose the best one for your learners.

- 1 **Get a clear picture of your students' language learning needs.** Then see how well the coursebook matches them. Is the emphasis on grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation etc appropriate? What about the balance of skills work? Also, consider the language used for dialogues and listening/ reading

passages: is it the kind of language your learners are aiming to understand and use?

- 2 **Examine the syllabus organization.** Contents pages usually make it clear whether the book is primarily organized according to a structural, functional, lexical or indeed a multi-syllabus. They also show how much new content there is in each unit, and the extent to which new language is recycled throughout the book. How does the book's approach fit with your own objectives for your course?
- 3 **Think about how your students want to learn.** Ask yourself whether the methodology suggested by the coursebook is in fact appropriate for them. Are the roles suggested for teachers and learners ones that your own learners will be used to? Will the activities be reasonably familiar? You will need to think about socio-cultural habits and preferences here, as well as about successful language learning.
- 4 **Examine the subject content of the book.** Language learning is part of a wider educational experience, and the thematic content of a coursebook should be considered from this perspective. A book should provide stimulation and cognitive challenge, without causing bewilderment or offence. This can be a difficult balance to strike when books are written in one cultural context and used in another.
- 5 **Think about the kind of classroom interactions you want to have.** Find out whether the book is likely to provide them. For example, how much time might your learners like to spend working individually? In pairs or groups? As a whole class? And what sort of tasks would they get most benefit from? By looking at the activities suggested in the coursebook, you will see how your learners might be relating to each other as they use it.
- 6 **Consider your own needs as a teacher.** Coursebooks are usually accompanied by teachers' guides, which vary a great deal in the level of support they provide. Ask yourself whether you can empathize with the advice given in the teachers' guide, and what you can learn from it. Will you feel comfortable adopting the roles the teachers' guide suggests for you?
- 7 **Consider the needs of your institution.** Coursebooks usually come as part of a package that includes teachers' guide, workbooks, cassettes, video...if not more. Is your institution able and willing to purchase all of these? If not, you will need to assess whether the coursebook is in fact usable without all the other elements of the package. You should also consider how long your new purchases will be expected to last!
- 8 **Work with colleagues to choose your coursebook.** Where a book is being chosen for a whole teaching team, it is important for all colleagues to be involved. That way everyone's needs can be considered, and the whole team has ownership of the final decision. But even if you are choosing a book just for your own class, discussion with colleagues is beneficial: it forces you to be explicit about your own criteria, and may provide perspectives you haven't yet considered.

- 9 **Ask your learners about their criteria for a good coursebook.** This will give you a useful picture of their priorities. The process will also be of benefit to them, because they will reflect about what helps them with their learning. You may find you get more useful feedback by asking a reasonably structured series of questions.
- 10 **Whatever evaluation techniques you use, keep your own situation firmly in mind.** There are no inherently good or inherently bad coursebooks, only coursebooks which are better or worse in particular situations. Make sure any evaluation you undertake reflects your own priorities.

## 5

**Designing your own materials**

Despite the excellent range of published materials available, and all the options that we have for flexible use of these, there are still occasions when teachers need or prefer to make their own materials. The following suggestions will help you make the most of whatever resources you have available to create materials that will enhance your students' learning experience.

- 1 **Take care over the appearance of your materials.** Not everyone has access to desktop publishing software and laser printers, but we can all make good use of layout, white space and print sizes to make our materials look attractive. By taking care over your materials, you show learners that you have a serious attitude to preparing for the class.
- 2 **Give your materials a house identity.** Heading all your materials with the name or logo of your institution, course or class gives them a more 'official' stamp and is another encouragement for learners to take them seriously. Learners are more likely to file numbered, titled handouts than odd sheets of paper!
- 3 **Have clear objectives for the materials.** If you push yourself to say explicitly what your objectives are, it is more likely that you will be able to develop materials that are relevant to your learners' needs and to the objectives of your course. As you write the materials, the objectives are a reference point to make sure your materials stay on task.
- 4 **Choose source material carefully.** Your materials will probably be designed around some sort of written or spoken source text. Make sure this is appropriate for the learners in terms of topic and level—and that it lends itself to an exploitation that is relevant to your learners' needs and the objectives of the course.
- 5 **Design appropriate tasks.** The tasks in your materials need to be appropriate to your course objectives and your learners' interests. They should also be manageable within the time frame you have available. Learners should enjoy them in their own right and/or be able to see why they are important for a future goal.

- 6 **Include clear rubrics.** Almost all materials include instructions to the learners, and those you make for your own class should not be an exception. Especially for a complex series of tasks, learners can find it reassuring to see all the steps written down in the materials.
- 7 **Make the materials personally relevant to the learners.** Designing your own materials is an ideal opportunity to build on what you know about your learners' lives and interests. For example, if you are choosing a reading text about a famous person, might it be someone your learners are particularly interested in?
- 8 **Ask a colleague to help you.** If you get into the habit of asking a colleague to look over drafts of your materials, you will get valuable ideas and suggestions. Mistakes are also far less likely to slip by two people! And if you offer to do the same for your colleague, you will get exposure to even more materials design ideas.
- 9 **Consider sharing your materials with colleagues.** The time involved in designing your own materials can really pay off when a group of colleagues are sharing materials around. Between you, you can build up a bank of materials for use with particular types of classes. These can be stored in a central area in the staff room. Knowing that others will use your materials is also an excellent incentive to make them as complete and clear as you can.
- 10 **Ask learners to contribute source texts.** Learners could be asked to search out texts which interest them on particular topics, and you could incorporate some of these into future materials. ESP (English for Special Purposes) learners especially may appreciate the chance for this sort of input—they, after all, know exactly what sort of texts they need to deal with.
- 11 **Ask learners for feedback on your materials.** They may be particularly willing to give this if they see it as an opportunity to influence the materials you and your colleagues will be designing for them in the near future. It can be very satisfying to learners to see their suggestions and views incorporated into materials.