

# 3 Designing a course

- Setting objectives
- Syllabus components
- Negotiating the syllabus
- Managing the logistics

## Setting objectives

Designing a business English course is a matter of making a series of decisions based on information gathered during a needs analysis. A useful place to start is to decide on the course aims and objectives: what we (and others) want out of the course. **Aims** are general statements about why the course is happening. Here are some examples:

The aim of this course is to improve email writing skills.

**Participants will learn how to write emails within the context of the needs of the marketing department.**

*The course aims to cover all types of email writing relevant to the department.*

**Objectives** are more specific, and break up the aim into smaller elements of learning so that the outcomes are better understood and are couched in more precise terms. Very often other stakeholders, such as a sponsor of a course, will want to look at these objectives too, and may even assist in writing them. A useful acronym to use when writing objectives is **SMART**. Objectives should be **specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound** (that is, limited to a certain time period). There are different ways to express objectives, depending on the context. Most business English courses use **performance (behavioural) objectives**, which typically describe what the learner is expected to *do*, under what conditions, and to what level or standard. Such objectives use words like *will learn*, *will be able to*, and *can*:

**Staff will learn how to make, confirm, and change appointments with customers by email.**

*At the end of the course the participants will be able to send and receive, without guidance or supervision, emails requesting and clarifying information about potential partners' scope of supply.*

**Level 4:** At this level, participants can express and comment on views and opinions in appropriate written form, so that these can be understood by native speakers, and within the context of internal company correspondence.

Sometimes a course might use **teaching** or **training objectives** which, unlike performance objectives, do not normally specify what the learner will be able to do at the end of the course. Instead they are designed to give the teacher useful guidelines, and they may use technical words which learners may not be familiar with. Examples are as follows:

*The modules on this course will provide a foundation for future letter-writing courses at intermediate level or higher.*

**The course is designed to increase participants' awareness of appropriacy and register in email communication.**

The training will enable participants at management level to interact more effectively by email with their peers in the US.

It can be valuable to get learners to write their own objectives, and these can then be discussed in terms of how relevant or achievable they are. For example, learners can be asked to complete the following sentence: *At the end of this course I hope to be able to ....*

In practical terms, it is often difficult to describe language or business communication skills with the desired precision, and sometimes such skills are hard to quantify and measure. In such cases a compromise may be to list typical behaviours that might be expected of the participant:

The aim of the course is to prepare participants to take part in negotiations with foreign partners. Participants will typically be able to demonstrate:

- **an increased awareness of different types of negotiation,**
- **an understanding of common strategies and tactics,**
- **the ability to listen actively to what is being said,**
- **the ability to clarify and summarize at appropriate moments.**

Such objectives might be presented in a slightly different form to the learner:

This course will help you to take part in negotiations with foreign partners. You will learn about:

- **different types of negotiations,**
- **the most common strategies and tactics,**
- **how to listen carefully to what is being said,**
- **how to clarify and summarize at appropriate moments.**

Note that these behaviours are not as precise as those discussed above (How do you measure 'increased awareness' or 'an understanding'? What does 'learn about' actually mean?). It is also important to remember that the **business objective** may be quite different. For the above negotiation training, for example, the real business objective may be to negotiate successfully, in order to maximize the company's profits in a new market (the aim). In other words, the outcome of the course can be seen not only in



terms of what has been learned (focusing on the learner), but also in terms of changes in the workplace or in business results, resulting from the training having taken place (focusing on the business). Such issues relate to course evaluation and accountability (who is responsible for the success of the course, or for ensuring best value return on expenditure?), and are becoming more common as organizations and schools try to get as much as possible out of limited budgets; they are discussed in more detail in Chapter 9.

Finally, there may be other practical constraints in the business English teaching world. One of these is that teachers might only be able to find out if objectives are achievable *after* the course starts. Another is that sometimes the people on the course turn out to have completely different objectives from those formally identified before it started. Most experienced teachers will testify to the common problem of irregular attendance; many participants do not come to classes regularly. There are many possible reasons for this; they may have too much work, or they may find that the teaching is not proving as effective as they had hoped and so start to cut lessons. Whatever the reason, in some companies managers can get annoyed with staff who agree to attend a course, and then find that they have other, more pressing priorities. This can sometimes reflect on the teacher, as staff attempt to argue that the course was not that good anyway. So, it is sometimes helpful to agree an additional objective with course sponsors, such as:

Attendance: to complete the course successfully, participants will attend 18 out of 20 classes.

*The participant will complete 15 modules from the online syllabus by June 1.*

## Syllabus components

Once we know what we want the course to achieve, we can move on to thinking about the syllabus. This is, essentially, a list of *what* is to be covered during the course, and in *what order*. One key principle is that the syllabus should focus on language needed to *perform* a particular business task, not merely to talk about it. Most business English learners need to be able to communicate within a certain **context**, so the syllabus must reflect the **discourse** that the learners will face in the workplace. For efficiency, teachers must ensure that this exposure to useful language is not random. So the course designer's job includes finding the most common language forms that will help the learner to communicate, and planning how and when the learner will encounter them. This language needs to be **learnable**, which means that it must be appropriate to the **level** of the learner. The learning must also be **achievable** in the time allowed; for example, it is unrealistic to suggest that a complete beginner will be able to take part in complex negotiations after a week's teaching. The syllabus provides a **structure** that puts the selected language into orderly, manageable chunks, with both the content and the order matched to the learners and their situation. It also provides a basis for decisions about materials.

A useful technique for designing a course is to use a grid or framework which sets out the aims and objectives, followed by all the elements that we believe are necessary for someone to be able to meet those objectives. The main components of this framework are based on the competences identified in Chapter 1 (linguistic competence, discourse competence, and intercultural competence), together with the guidelines offered by communicative language teaching, and our own understanding of what our learners need. Thus, the syllabus will take into account not only what is to be learned, but also how it is to be learned. It will normally consist of a combination of the following components (sometimes called **threads**, because they weave through the course and could be seen as holding it together):

- Grammar (e.g. tenses, word order, verb patterns, relative clauses)
- Lexis (e.g. vocabulary, idioms, expressions, collocations)
- Pronunciation (e.g. intonation, rhythm, stress, chunking)
- Functions (e.g. complaining, agreeing, persuading, explaining)
- Business skills (e.g. presenting, negotiating, telephoning, socializing)
- Topics (e.g. finance, marketing, production, management)
- Learning strategies (e.g. learning styles, recording vocabulary, preparing for a test)
- Situations (e.g. assisting visitors, checking into a hotel, running a meeting)
- Texts (e.g. examples of spoken or written discourse)
- Language skills (e.g. reading, writing, listening, speaking)
- Intercultural skills (e.g. defining culture, comparing cultures, awareness activities)
- Storyline approach (e.g. materials have a set of characters who form the basis for a storyline)
- Tasks (activities in which learners use language to do something and achieve an outcome)

### Organizing the syllabus

Determining the **order** of the syllabus can be done in different ways. A common way is to put the **simpler** things first. For example, a grammar tense which appears straightforward (e.g. present simple) may be taught before a concept that appears to be more complex (e.g. modal verbs). Standard phrases for starting a telephone conversation are taught and practised before moving on to more complicated role-plays involving their use in a real phone call. Signposting language in presentations (see Chapter 5) is taught before asking learners to put an introduction together. Further practice on introductions might be done before asking learners to give a presentation.

**Familiarity** might also be a guideline. It might make sense for learners to cover familiar situations or topics before unfamiliar ones. For example, it is probably easier for a learner to give a presentation on his or her own job than on something which might be less familiar (or perhaps conceptually more challenging), such as business ethics or politics.



Sometimes the order is based on **need**; if the course is going to take several months, it might be wise to cover areas of a higher priority first. Receptionists might benefit from telephone training before letter-writing skills, for example, because the need is perceived to be more immediate.







Another reason for organizing syllabuses in a certain way is that sometimes certain language items seem to hang naturally with specific topics or functions – so conditionals are often coupled with negotiations, or talking about the future is coupled with making arrangements. The need for variety and balance in teaching might also influence what activities are chosen.

Finally, it is useful if the syllabus can be divided into **teaching blocks** which have their own aims or objectives, and which can fit logically into the time available. Often such blocks have a standard format, and incorporate different types of activities which allow flexibility and change of pace in order to meet the needs of a particular group. In coursebooks, these blocks are often called **units**, each of which has a logical or thematic coherence, even if the unit is not necessarily to be completed in one lesson. One unit may lead on to the next, or there may be flexibility with the order in which they are used, but there is normally some continuity between units. **Modules**, in contrast, are normally independent blocks which can be put together in various ways to create a course; many schools and teachers have 'ready-to-go' modules on specific communication skills, for example. The teacher simply has to select the relevant modules for a particular group.

### Two examples of syllabuses

The example on page 37 (top) is a course outline from a commercially available coursebook (*In-company Intermediate* by Mark Powell), which is targeted at learners who sometimes have to use English at work, or who may need to do so in future. The topics and texts (spoken and written) provide ample opportunity for learners to focus on the types of discourses and communication skills they will need to know. The course also gives the learner the chance to focus on specific linguistic items, in this case grammar and lexis. Such a book could well form an excellent basis for the intermediate group of learners described in Example 3 in Chapter 2 (the Wonder Language School needs analysis), although the teacher would probably need to supplement it with authentic materials and activities reflecting more precise company needs.

By way of contrast, the next example is an extract from a syllabus produced for a group of Greek factory managers (see page 37, bottom). Their factory had recently been taken over by a US company, and dealing with the challenges imposed by the new culture (both corporate and national) was a priority. This course was specifically designed to improve the managers' impromptu presentation skills, needed at meetings, which had been identified as an area of concern. Note that the syllabus is designed to allow flexibility – the teacher is able to focus on lexis, pronunciation, and/or intercultural topics as necessary, while at the same time following a clear plan of action.

Unit and topics	Communication skills and tasks	Reading and listening texts	Grammar and Lexis links	
 <b>1 International English</b> p4 Talking points English as a global language	Completing a needs analysis Doing a quiz on languages Discussing attitudes to English using expressions for talking about language needs & learning preferences	<b>R</b> Article about English dominating world communications <b>L</b> People talking about their attitudes to learning English		
 <b>2 Making contacts</b> p6 Networking Conferences	Describing people Discussing appropriate conversation topics Keeping the conversation going Networking	<b>L</b> Extracts from a business travel programme on conference venues <b>L</b> People gossiping at a conference <b>L</b> People socialising at a conference	Present Simple Present Continuous Present Simple vs Present Continuous	Collocations relating to conferences Verb + prepositions
 <b>3 Making calls</b> p11 Desk work Using the telephone	Making telephone phrases Exchanging information on the telephone	<b>L</b> Planning a telephone call <b>L</b> Voice mail messages <b>L</b> Telephone conversations	Past Simple Time adverbs for, in, during, ago, over, before	Telephone expressions for dealing with difficulties & distractions
 <b>4 Keeping track</b> p16 Meetings Meeting skills	Checking & clarifying facts & figures Querying information	<b>L</b> Extracts from meetings <b>R</b> Texts: the Budweiser companies <b>L</b> Extracts from a meeting <b>L</b> A briefing meeting	Comparatives & superlatives Comparative & superlative expressions	Phrasal verbs with on, out, off, up, down
 <b>5 Speed of life</b> p23 Talking points Time management Pressure at work	Discussing time management strategies Discussing statements on how speed affects your working life	<b>R</b> Mini-texts: statistics about the working week <b>R</b> Extract from <i>Getting Things Done</i> by Roger Black <b>L</b> People talking about how speed affects their work <b>L</b> People talking about how they unwind after work		
 <b>6 Business travel</b> p23 Networking Travelling on business	Expressing likes & dislikes about travelling on business Making polite requests & enquiries Situational roleplays Identifying signs as British or American English Greeting visitors	<b>L</b> Extracts from business travel conversations <b>R</b> Article from <i>Newsweek</i> about people who live in two cities <b>L</b> Short exchanges in British & American English <b>L</b> Conversations at the airport	Polite question forms Indirect questions	Collocations relating to travel

From *In-company Intermediate* by Powell

**Aim:** to improve impromptu presentation skills

**Objectives:** participants will:

- A** Watch a series of recorded presentations (produced by US managers).
- B** Discuss and analyse techniques used to emphasize, soften, and persuade.
- C** Practise such techniques in a controlled environment.
- D** Practise giving impromptu presentations.
- E** Take part in feedback activities designed to focus on any weaknesses.

**Time available:** One-and-a-half days

Objective	Time	Content
A / B	09:00–11:00	Watch / discuss videos
A / B	11:15–13:15	Watch / discuss videos
C	14:30–16:30	Emphasizing, softening, persuading
C	16:45–18:45	Emphasizing, softening, persuading
D	09:00–11:00	Presentations practice
E	11:00–13:15	Feedback



## Negotiating the syllabus

With many classes, often the best way to identify what should be included on a course is for the teacher to sit down with the learners (and other stakeholders) and negotiate the syllabus. This has the major advantage that the learners are usually much more motivated because they helped design what is to be done. The syllabus can be negotiated at any time – indeed, the teacher and learners can re-negotiate as the course progresses. Sometimes there are practical issues which influence what actually happens, such as availability of video equipment, or the teacher's own expertise and experience. And sometimes it may be necessary for the teacher to guide the discussions so that the end result is achievable, or meets a sponsor's aims. Here are three activities for negotiating the syllabus on day one of a course:



**What the group wants** – the teacher gives learners the following sheet. They fill in the first two questions on their own, and then pass the sheets round so that everyone can see what their colleagues want and do not want, and can understand that different people want different things. The sheets are then used as a basis for the third question, the answer to which is, in effect, the syllabus and which will have to be some amalgam of the differing priorities that have surfaced. Generating the syllabus in this way brings home to many learners that what happens is actually a compromise. Getting them to sign at the bottom of the page is a useful way to remind them that they are part of the success of the course. These sheets can be used to review the course later:

### Course Negotiation

What I want from this course:

What I don't want from this course:

What the group wants from this course:

Name: .....

Date: .....

Signature: .....



**Negotiating priorities** – this time, the aim is to guide learners towards a possible syllabus by suggesting possible options (see page 39).

A variation on this is to give learners different options during the course: do they want to do this or that next week? Teachers might allow learners to develop their own tasks and activities. For example, if the course is covering presentation skills, the learners could make decisions about the topics of their own presentations, or the length, or the criteria for success. Such an approach emphasizes the need for consensus and compromise, which are such important elements in group work.

Look at the following list. Add three more learning activities, and then decide which is the most important for you, and which the least. Order the list from 1 (most important) to 10 (least important).

My list      Colleague's list      Group list

Learning about grammar

Using specialist vocabulary

Using general vocabulary

Reading texts

Writing letters

Speaking activities

Listening to recordings

.....

.....

.....

Now show your list to a colleague and negotiate a new list (second column). Finally, discuss the list as a group and negotiate a group list (third column).



**Refining objectives** – this is a much more focused third option, based on a needs analysis for a corporate department. Note that the list is a mixture of communication skills and specific content which is relevant only to the people concerned (context note: K27 is based in France, while K33 is a department based in the US):

The following list of course objectives is based on pre-course discussions with K27 and K33 management. Read the list. Do you agree with the contents? What would you add, remove or change?

### **Objectives:**

At the end of the course K27 staff will be able to:

- describe K27's scope of supply, roles of key persons, organization
- show awareness of cultural differences between the USA and France
- make small talk and socialize with K33 staff
- read and discuss technical reports issued by K33
- give informal presentations about project developments to K33 staff
- manage telephone conversations with K33 staff
- discuss quality issues and internal procedures
- deal with email correspondence between K27 and K33



## Managing the logistics

Course design is not only about deciding what to include in the syllabus. There are many practical considerations which can influence what happens (see Chapter 2). For most teachers in schools, such issues will probably be coordinated by administrative staff, but some teachers, particularly freelancers, will often be heavily involved in administration. Simple things like a broken monitor or shoddy materials can easily ruin a course, however well the syllabus has been thought out. Similarly, issues such as costs and budgets may have a significant influence on the course design; using an expensive 5-star hotel provides a very different learning experience to using a small classroom in the depths of a private language school or a spare conference room in company offices. Business English learners expect a high level of professionalism in the way a course is run, and such professionalism can and should be designed into the course.

One decision which needs to be made is whether the teaching is to be intensive or extensive. In practice, in the world of business English teaching, the terms seem to be used differently by different organizations. **Intensive training** can be anything from a few hours a day, for a few weeks, to ten days in a hotel, working all day. Intensive training is often used where time is short and where there are specific performance objectives to achieve. It tends to be much more focused than extensive training, and is often more efficient in its use of time (no need to warm learners up every 90 minutes, for example). For many learners, intensive training leads to noticeable improvement. Often intensive training goes under the name of **workshops** or **seminars**, which aim to focus on specific topics. The other key advantage is that attendance is not normally a problem. Once the learner is committed to the course, he or she tends to stay. **Extensive training** normally refers to regular but short sessions, such as two 90-minute sessions per week. This is typical of some in-company training, but also for pre-experienced groups such as Business studies students who are doing English as just one part of a course of study. The advantage is that such classes cater for those learners who cannot find time to take an intensive course. The disadvantage is that attendance and motivation can be a problem.

Many courses combine the two types; for example, learners may attend 90-minute extensive classes once a week throughout the year, but also have a three-day intensive session every three months. A third variation is to have part or all of the course delivered at a distance. This mixture of face-to-face (F2F) and distance learning is sometimes known as **blended learning**, particularly where one of the media used is electronic. Distance learning brings in an additional facet to the already complex business of course design, and is discussed in greater detail later in this book (see Chapter 7).

On all courses there are practical, logistical issues which need to be addressed beforehand. In some schools and organizations these are not the teacher's responsibility, but in many business English teaching contexts the teacher is the only representative of the training provider on site, be it in-company, or in a hotel, or other hired venue. Even in a school classroom, the teacher needs to be well prepared and would be wise to check practical aspects of course delivery beforehand. Business English learners can be critical and demanding customers.

A close examination of the logistics behind a hotel-based residential course will exemplify the sorts of issues involved. Once the learners have been identified and placed into the appropriate group, there are a number of things to consider:

- **Pre-course joining instructions** – these need to be issued to all learners. Good instructions serve the purpose not only of providing relevant information but also, if well designed, can help to ensure that the learner arrives motivated and ready to go. It can be an inauspicious start for both teacher and learners if participants do not know what they are supposed to do. Here is a checklist to help with this:
  - Course title (and maybe teacher or school's name)
  - Course dates
  - Address of venue
  - Start and end times
  - Payment details (are all necessary forms included?)
  - Clothing requirements (dress code on course, appropriate leisure wear)
  - Pre-course reading or other preparation
  - Information about the local area
  - Travel instructions and tips (and map?)
  - Contact name and details (in case of difficulties)
  - Facilities in hotel
  - Nearest banks, shops, places of worship, medical assistance etc.
  - Meal arrangements
  - Outline course content
  - Course materials provided
  - Things to bring (e.g. writing equipment, any pre-sent materials)
  - 'Code of conduct' (e.g. no smoking, no mobile phones on in class)

Other factors which may need to be coordinated before the course starts include the following:

- **The training room** – this is the place where teacher and learners are going to spend most of their time, so it is important that it is optimally arranged. The teacher should allow plenty of time to check the layout beforehand (are desks and chairs to be laid out in rows, or with chairs in a U-shape, or in small groups around tables?), and will also need to set up and test any equipment which is to be used (e.g. video camera, multimedia equipment, overhead projector, interactive whiteboard, pens). If the syllabus calls for lots of group work, the teacher will also need to ensure that the necessary break-out/syndicate rooms (rooms for additional activities such as preparation for a negotiation) are available, although in some cases it may be possible to use the corridor, lounge area, or hotel foyer. Other issues to think about include ventilation, heating, sunlight, and noise.
- **The venue** – although the training room is key, it is not the only place where teachers and learners will spend their time. The teacher should



therefore make sure that appropriate care is taken with planning for free time (e.g. if there is an evening start, it may be useful to start the course with a social event to help build group rapport and get everyone to feel more relaxed). It is also worth checking up on Internet availability and photocopying facilities. Finally, the teacher should not forget to find out who the key members of the hotel staff are, and where they will be in case of problems.

- **Contingency plans** – teachers should ask themselves, ‘What happens if ...?’, and be prepared to deal with the situation accordingly. Possible problems include: interruptions, distractions, materials or guest speakers that fail to arrive, venue problems (double-booked, dirty, inappropriate food), illness. Flexibility, patience, and inventiveness may be called for!

## Conclusion

In this chapter we have:

- looked at the importance of setting aims and objectives.
- noted that a syllabus involves making decisions about what is to be covered, and in what order.
- looked at components that might go into a syllabus, including grammar, lexis, pronunciation, functions, business skills, topics, learning strategies, situations, texts, language skills, intercultural skills, storyline, and tasks.
- looked at factors which might influence the choice of components, including difficulty, familiarity, and need.
- looked at some examples of a course outline.
- examined ways of negotiating a syllabus with learners.
- recognized that logistics also have a critical role to play, in that learners and teachers all need to be aware of where they need to be, what they are to do, and have access to the resources they need to do it.

## Looking ahead

We have seen that gathering information and designing a course are essential elements in business English teaching. However, once in the classroom, it is the materials which provide the teacher with the support necessary to run an effective course. This is the subject of the next chapter.