

Language Curriculum Design

I.S.P. Nation • John Macalister



ESL & Applied Linguistics Professional Series

Language Curriculum Design

Crystal-clear and comprehensive yet concise, this text describes the steps involved in the curriculum design process, elaborates and justifies these steps and provides opportunities for practising and applying them. The description of the steps is done at a general level so that they can be applied in a wide range of particular circumstances. The process comes to life through plentiful examples of actual applications of the steps. Each chapter includes:

- Descriptions of examples from the authors' experience and from published research
- Tasks that encourage readers to relate the steps to their own experience
- Case studies and suggestions for further reading that put readers in touch with others' experience

Curriculum, or course, design is largely a “how-to-do-it” activity that involves the integration of knowledge from many of the areas in the field of Applied Linguistics, such as language acquisition research, teaching methodology, assessment, language description and materials production. Combining sound research/theory with state-of-the-art practice, *Language Curriculum Design* is widely applicable for ESL/EFL language education courses around the world.

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I.S.P. Nation and John Macalister

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Preface

There is nothing more difficult to plan, more doubtful of success, nor more dangerous to manage than the creation of a new system. For the initiator has the enmity of all who would profit by the preservation of the old system and merely lukewarm defenders in those who would gain from the new one.

(Machiavelli (1513) *The Prince*)

Curriculum, or course, design is largely a “how-to-do-it” activity and so a large part of this book involves description of the steps involved in the curriculum design process and the elaboration and justification of these steps. The book also provides opportunities for practising and applying the steps.

Chapter 1 provides an overview of Chapters 2 to 8 which are the major steps in the curriculum design process. Chapter 9 describes several ways in which these steps can be covered. Chapters 10 to 14 take up important issues in curriculum design, namely involving learners in curriculum design, choosing and modifying course books, innovation theory, retraining teachers and helping teachers and learners make use of a course.

Although curriculum design is a “how-to-do-it” activity, the description of the steps needs to be done at a general level in order that they can be applied in a wide range of particular circumstances. Such a description will only come to life if there are plenty of examples of actual applications of the steps. In this book this is done in the following ways in each chapter.

- 1 Examples from the writers’ experience and from published research are described.
- 2 Tasks are provided which encourage the users of the book to relate the steps to their own experience.
- 3 Case studies are described and further reading is suggested that will put the users of this book in touch with others’ experience.

Curriculum design involves the integration of knowledge from many of the areas in the field of Applied Linguistics, such as language acquisition research,

teaching methodology, assessment, language description and materials production. In many ways, the study of curriculum design is central to the study of Applied Linguistics. Combining sound research/theory with state-of-the-art practice, *Language Curriculum Design* is widely applicable for ESL/EFL language education courses around the world.

Language Curriculum Design

An Overview

Parts of the Curriculum Design Process

Curriculum design can be seen as a kind of writing activity and as such it can usefully be studied as a process. The typical sub-processes of the writing process (gathering ideas, ordering ideas, ideas to text, reviewing, editing) can be applied to curriculum design, but it makes it easier to draw on current curriculum design theory and practice if a different set of parts is used. The curriculum design model in Figure 1.1 consists of three outside circles and a subdivided inner circle. The outer circles (principles, environment, needs) involve practical and theoretical considerations that will have a major effect in guiding the actual process of course production. There is a wide range of factors to consider when designing a course. These include the learners' present knowledge and lacks, the resources available including time, the skill of the teachers, the curriculum designer's strengths and limitations, and principles of teaching and learning. If factors such as these are not considered then the course may be unsuited to the situation and learners for which it is used, and may be ineffective and inefficient as a means of encouraging learning. In the curriculum design process these factors are considered in three sub-processes, environment analysis, needs analysis and the application of principles. The result of environment analysis is a ranked list of factors and a consideration of the effects of these factors on the design. The result of needs analysis is a realistic list of language, ideas or skill items, as a result of considering the present proficiency, future needs and wants of the learners. The application of principles involves first of all deciding on the most important principles to apply and monitoring their application through the whole design process. The result of applying principles is a course where learning is given the greatest support.

Some curriculum designers distinguish curriculum from syllabus. In the model, both the outer circles and the inner circle make up the curriculum. The inner circle represents the syllabus.

The inner circle has goals as its centre. This is meant to reflect the importance of having clear general goals for a course. The content and sequencing

part of the inner circle represents the items to learn in a course, and the order in which they occur, plus the ideas content if this is used as a vehicle for the items and not as a goal in itself. Language courses must give consideration to the language content of a course even if this is not presented in the course as a discrete item. Consideration of content makes sure that there is something useful for the learners to learn to advance their control of the language, that they are getting the best return for learning effort in terms of the usefulness of what they will meet in the course, and that they are covering all the things they need to cover for a balanced knowledge of the language.

The format and presentation part of the inner circle represents the format of the lessons or units of the course, including the techniques and types of activities that will be used to help learning. This is the part of the course that the learners are most aware of. It is important that it is guided by the best available principles of teaching and learning.

The monitoring and assessment part of the inner circle represents the need to give attention to observing learning, testing the results of learning, and providing feedback to the learners about their progress. It is often not a part of commercially designed courses. It provides information that can lead to changes at most of the other parts of the curriculum design process.

It is possible to imagine a large circle drawn completely around the whole model. This large outer circle represents evaluation. Evaluation can involve looking at every aspect of a course to judge if the course is adequate and where it needs improvement. It is generally a neglected aspect of curriculum design.

Chapters 2 to 8 of this book examine each of the parts of the curriculum design process in detail, drawing on relevant theory and research. It is possible to design courses without drawing on relevant research, theory and experience. In all but a few fortunate cases this results in common faults in curriculum design being made yet again.

The shape of the model in Figure 1.1 is designed to make it easy to remember. The three-part shape that occurs in each of the outer circles (the “Mercedes” symbol) also occurs in the large inner circle, and also occurs in the way the three outer circles connect to the inner circle.

In this first chapter of this book, we will look briefly at an overview of the parts of the curriculum design process that will be looked at in more detail in the following chapters of the book, with each of the early chapters focusing on a different part of the model.

Considering the Environment

Environment analysis involves considering the factors of the situation in which the course will be used and determining how the course should take account of them. One way of approaching environment analysis is to work from a list of questions which focus on the nature of the learners, the teachers and the teaching situation (see Chapter 2).

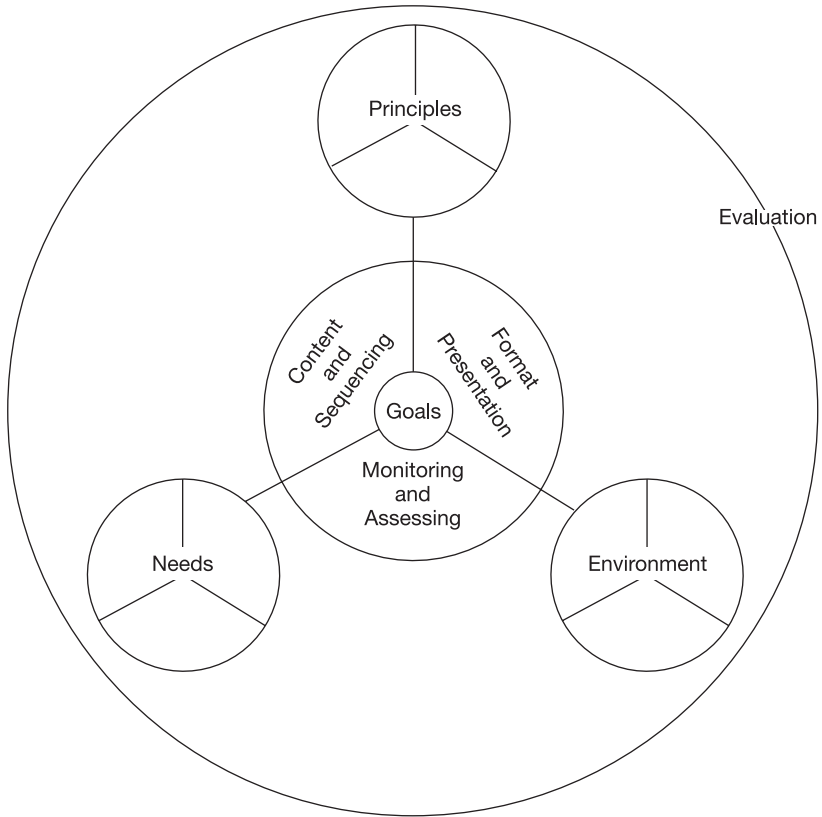


Figure 1.1 A model of the parts of the curriculum design process.

There is value in spending some time on these questions particularly if the answers are ranked according to something like the following instructions and criterion.

Choose three factors which will have the strongest effect on the design of your course. Rank these three from the factor which will most determine what you should do to the one which has the least influence of the three.

To show the value of doing this, here are some of the top factors decided on by several teachers designing different courses for different learners.

- 1 One teacher decided that the learners' lack of interest in learning English should be the major factor influencing curriculum design. The learners were obliged to do an English course as part of their degree but

- received no credit for it. This meant that the teacher's goal of making the course as interesting and motivating as possible guided the design of the course, particularly the format and presentation of lessons.
- 2 One teacher decided that the learners' plan to move on to academic study in university or technical institute courses should have the greatest effect on design of the English course. This had a far-reaching effect on the language items and the language skills focused on, and the type of learning activity.
 - 3 One teacher decided that the externally designed and administered test at the end of the course should be the major factor. This meant that the course book always had to make it obvious to the learners that the work they were doing was directly related to the test.

Here is a short list of some of the other factors that teachers considered most important.

- The small amount of time available for the course
- The large size of the classes
- The wide range of proficiency in the class
- The immediate survival needs of the learners
- The lack of appropriate reading materials
- The teachers' lack of experience and training
- The learners' use of the first language in the classroom
- The need for the learners to be more autonomous

There are many examples of unsuccessful curriculum design where the background questions were not considered. Here are some examples.

- 1 The communicatively based course which was deserted by its Vietnamese learners because they were not getting the grammar teaching that they expected. They set up their own grammar-based course.
- 2 The course for Agricultural students which had a simplified version of *The Moonstone* by Wilkie Collins as its main reading text. Some of the learners produced their own translation of it which they copied and sold to other learners. They saw no value in coming to grips with its content through English.
- 3 The adult conversation course which began with the game "Simon Says". Half the students stopped attending after the first lesson. There is no conversation in "Simon Says".

Each important factor needs to be accompanied by one or more effects. For example, the factor "the large size of the class" could have the following effects on the curriculum design.

- 1 A large amount of group work.
- 2 Use of special large class techniques like oral reproduction, blackboard reproduction, the pyramid procedure involving the individual–pair–group–class sequence (Nation and Newton, 2009).
- 3 Independent work or individualised tasks.

The importance of environment analysis is that it makes sure that the course will really be suitable, practical and realistic.

Discovering Needs

Hutchinson and Waters (1987) make a useful division of learners' needs into necessities (what the learner has to know to function effectively), lacks (what the learner knows and does not know already) and wants (what the learners think they need). These are discovered by a variety of means: by testing, by questioning and interviewing, by recalling previous performance, by consulting employers, teachers and others involved, by collecting data such as textbooks and manuals that the learners will have to read and analysing them, and by investigating the situations where the learners will need to use the language. Ways of doing needs analysis can be evaluated by the same general criteria used to evaluate tests – reliability, validity and practicality.

Necessities, lacks and wants may all involve some kind of comparison or reference to lists of items which can act as the learning goals of the course. An exception to this is to base the course on what the learners request. In this case the lists are created by the learners. This is effective if the learners have very clear purposes for learning English which they are aware of. For example, a course for immigrants who have been in the country a few months could very effectively be based on a list of things that they suggest they want to be able to do in English. We will look more closely at this in the chapter on negotiated syllabuses.

Following Principles

Research on language teaching and learning should be used to guide decisions on curriculum design. There is considerable research on the nature of language and language acquisition which can guide the choice of what to teach and how to sequence it. There is also a lot of research on how to encourage learning in general and language learning in particular which can be used to guide the presentation of items to be learned. The principles derived from this research include principles on the importance of repetition and thoughtful processing of material, on the importance of taking account of individual differences and learning style, and on learner attitudes and motivation.

It is very important that curriculum design makes the connection between the research and theory of language learning and the practice of designing

lessons and courses. There is a tendency for this connection not to be made, with the result that curriculum design and therefore learners do not benefit from developments in knowledge gained from research. A striking example of this is the failure of courses to take account of the findings regarding the interference that occurs when semantically and formally related items, such as opposites, near synonyms and lexical sets, are presented together (Higa, 1963; Tinkham, 1993). In spite of the clear findings of this research, which is supported by a large body of research less firmly in the area of language learning, course books continue to present names of the parts of the body, items in the kitchen, opposites such as *hot–cold*, *long–short*, *old–new*, numbers, days of the week and articles of clothing in the same lesson. As Tinkham (1993) and Higa (1963) show, this will have the effect of making learning more difficult than it should be.

Chapter 4 of this book describes a list of 20 principles that can be used to guide curriculum design. It is not an exhaustive list and is based to some degree on the personal prejudices of the writers. Curriculum designers may wish to create their own lists (see Brown, 1993; Ellis, 2005 and Jones, 1993 for examples of other short lists; see also Richards, 2001 and Tomlinson, 2003 for discussion of the application of principles in materials development). What is important is that curriculum design is treated as a normal part of the field of applied linguistics and thus draws on available knowledge to guide it.

Goals

The curriculum design model in Figure 1.1 has goals as its centre. This is because it is essential to decide why a course is being taught and what the learners need to get from it.

Goals can be expressed in general terms and be given more detail when considering the content of the course. Here are some examples of goals that have been set for language courses.

- 1 The aim of communicative teaching is to encourage students to exploit all the elements of the language that they know in order to make their meanings clear. Students cannot be expected to master every aspect of the language before they are allowed to use it for communicative purposes.

(Orbit, Harrison and Menzies, 1986)
- 2 *Trio* aims to
 - (a) encourage students to communicate in a wide range of everyday situations.
 - (b) sustain interest and motivation . . .
 - (c) help students understand and formulate the grammatical rules of English.

- (d) develop students' receptive skills beyond those of their productive skills.
- (e) give students insights into daily life in Britain.
- (f) develop specific skills, including skills required for examination purposes.
- (g) contribute to the students' personal, social and educational development.

(*Trio*, Radley and Sharley, 1987)

3 *Passages* extends students' communicative competence by developing their ability to:

- expand the range of topics they can discuss and comprehend in English
- speak English fluently (express a wide range of ideas without unnecessary pauses or breakdowns in communication)
- speak English accurately (use an acceptable standard of pronunciation and grammar when communicating).

(*Passages*, Richards and Sandy, 1998)

4 Students continue to develop speaking and listening skills necessary for participating in classroom discussions with an introduction to oral presentation and critical listening skills.

(*College Oral Communication*, Roemer, 2006)

Having a clear statement of goals is important for determining the content of the course, for deciding on the focus in presentation, and in guiding assessment.

Content and Sequencing

The content of language courses consists of the language items, ideas, skills and strategies that meet the goals of the course. The viewpoint taken in this book is that even though the units of progression in a course might be tasks, topics or themes, it is important for the curriculum designer to keep some check on vocabulary, grammar and discourse to make sure that important items are being covered and repeated. If there is no check being made, it may happen that learners are not meeting items that are important for their later use of the language. It may also happen that items are not being met often enough to establish them.

One way to provide a systematic and well-researched basis for a course is to make use of frequency lists and other lists of language items or skills. These lists should be chosen and adapted as a result of the needs analysis in order to set the language learning content of the course. A list may be used as a way of checking or determining the content of a course, but this does not mean that the lessons have to consist of item by item teaching. A conversation course

for example could be carefully planned to cover the important high-frequency vocabulary and structures, and still consist of a series of very free task-based conversation activities (Joe, Nation and Newton, 1996). Working from lists makes sure that what should be covered is covered and is not left to chance.

Typical lists include:

- 1 Frequency-based vocabulary lists. These consist of lists of words with indicators of their frequency of occurrence. Perhaps the best known is Michael West's (1953) *General Service List of English Words* which contains 2,000 high-frequency word families. This is a good source for courses at the beginner and intermediate level. Other lists include *The Cambridge English Lexicon* (Hindmarsh, 1980) and the First 1,000, Second 1,000, and Third 1,000 lists produced by the English Language Institute (Nation, 1984). The COBUILD dictionary (1995) indicates the frequency levels of higher-frequency vocabulary. At a more specialised and advanced level, the academic word list (Coxhead, 2000) contains 570 word families useful for study in the upper levels of English-medium secondary schools and at university.
- 2 Frequency lists of verb forms and verb groups. These contain items such as simple past, present continuous, verb + *to* + stem (where the stem is dominant) *going to* + stem, and *can* + stem (ability) along with information about their frequency of occurrence, mainly in written text. The most striking feature of these lists is the very high frequency of a small number of items, such as simple past, verb + *to* + stem, and the very low frequency of most of the items studied (many of which are given unjustified prominence in many course books and grading schemes for simplified readers). These lists can be found in George 1963a, 1963b, and 1972; see also Appendix 1 of this book. The more recent Biber *et al.* (1999) grammar contains frequency information. Comparison of beginners' books of published courses with these lists shows that the course books contain a mixture of high-frequency and low-frequency items and could be considerably improved with more informed selection.
- 3 Lists of functions and topics. These lists are not frequency-based and as a result selection of items must be based on perceived need which is less reliable than frequency evidence. The most useful of the available lists is Van Ek and Alexander (1980).
- 4 Lists of subskills and strategies. These include the subskills of listening, speaking, reading and writing, and language coping and learning strategies.
- 5 There are lists of tasks, topics and themes that curriculum designers can refer to (Munby, 1978; Van Ek and Alexander, 1980; Prabhu, 1987), but it is better for curriculum designers to develop their own lists

taking account of the background factors of their learners and their needs.

One important aspect of using lists is that they not only check or determine the items that should be in the course, but they can be used to exclude those that should not be there, that is, those that are not in the list. The result of analyses based on lists of language items is a set of items that represent sensible and achievable language goals for the course.

Needs analysis can play a major role in determining the content of courses, particularly for language items. As well as using needs analysis to set language goals, it is useful to decide the basis for the ideas content of the course.

An important decision at this stage involves choosing the form the syllabus will take. Dubin and Olshtain (1986) describe several syllabus forms including linear, modular, cyclical and matrix. Whatever form is chosen will have a marked effect on the opportunity for repetition of items to be learned.

Finding a Format and Presenting Material

The material in a course needs to be presented to learners in a form that will help learning. This presentation will involve the use of suitable teaching techniques and procedures, and these need to be put together in lessons. Some lessons might consist of an unpredictable series of activities, while others might be based on a set format, where the same sequence of activities occurs in all or most of the lessons.

There are several advantages to having a set format for lessons. Firstly, the lessons are easier to make because each one does not have to be planned separately. It also makes the course easier to monitor, to check if all that should be included is there and that accepted principles are being followed. Finally, it makes the lessons easier to learn from because the learners can predict what will occur and are soon familiar with the learning procedures required by different parts of the lesson.

The sources of the material used as a basis for the lessons will have decisive effects on the ease of making the lessons and of the possibility of future distribution or publication of the course. A shortcut here is simply to take suitable material from other courses, adapting it as required.

There is a substantial set of principles that need to be applied at this stage (see Chapter 4). These concern not only presentation but also selection aspects, such as sequencing and the amount of time given to fluency work.

The lesson format needs to be checked against the environment analysis of the course to make sure that the major environmental factors are being considered.

Because curriculum design is not a linear process, it may be necessary to alter the content or sequencing to suit the lesson format and to reorder the

list of environmental factors. The lessons may still require adjustment as a result of consideration of other stages of the curriculum design. Perhaps the most difficult task at this stage is making sure that the learning goals of the course are met. That is, that the wanted language items are well-represented and well-presented in the course.

It can be argued that the first presentation of an item is not as important as the later repetitions of that item. This is often neglected in courses, but it is crucial to learning. It is through repeated meetings that items are enriched and established.

Monitoring and Assessing

The aims of curriculum design are to make a course that has useful goals, that achieves its goals, that satisfies its users, and that does all this in an efficient way. An important recurring part of the design process is to assess how well these aims are achieved.

Assessing generally involves the use of tests. An important distinction in testing is between proficiency tests which measure what a learner knows of the language, and achievement tests which measure what has been learned from a particular course. Proficiency tests may be used to measure a learner's level of language knowledge before entering a course and after a course is completed and has been assessed. Achievement tests are closely related to a course and the items in the tests are based on the content of the course and the learning goals of the course. Short-term achievement tests are tests that occur at the end of each lesson or at the end of a group of lessons. They provide the teacher and learners with information about how much has been learned. They can have a strong effect on motivation, on the speed of movement through the lessons, and on adapting and supplementing the course. Well-designed courses should include short-term achievement tests in the curriculum design.

Larger achievement tests can occur at the end of a course and perhaps halfway through the course. The information gained from such tests can be useful in evaluating the course.

Other kinds of tests include placement tests (to see if the course is suitable for a prospective learner or to see where in the course the learner should begin) and diagnostic tests (to see if learners have particular gaps in their knowledge).

But testing is only one way of gaining information about the progress of learners and the effectiveness of the course. Other ways include observing and monitoring using checklists and report forms, getting learners to keep diaries and learning logs, getting learners to collect samples of their work in folders, and getting learners to talk about their learning. Curriculum design can include planned opportunity for this kind of data gathering.

Evaluating a Course

Information gained from assessment is a useful source of data about the effectiveness of a course, but it is only one of the sources of information that can contribute to the evaluation of a course. Basically, evaluation tries to answer the question “Is this a good course?”. The range of meanings that can be attached to “good” determines the range of sources of information for carrying out an evaluation.

A “good” course could be one that:

- 1 attracts a lot of students
- 2 makes a lot of money
- 3 satisfies the learners
- 4 satisfies the teachers
- 5 satisfies the sponsors
- 6 helps learners gain high scores in an external test
- 7 results in a lot of learning
- 8 applies state-of-the-art knowledge about language teaching and learning
- 9 is held in high regard by the local or international community
- 10 follows accepted principles of curriculum design.

An evaluation of a course can have many purposes, the main ones being to continue or discontinue the course, or to bring about improvements in the course. Responsible curriculum design includes ongoing evaluation of the course.

Summary of the Steps

- 1 Examine the environment.
- 2 Assess needs.
- 3 Decide on principles.
- 4 Set goals, and choose and sequence content.
- 5 Design the lesson format.
- 6 Include assessment procedures.
- 7 Evaluate the course.

The purpose of this chapter has been to briefly describe the major parts of the curriculum design model. In the following chapters, each of the parts will be looked at in more detail. In addition, topics including evaluating course books, innovation, and designing in-service courses will be covered. Curriculum design is in essence a practical activity. Because of this the tasks which follow each chapter provide an important part of learning about curriculum design.

Tasks

Task 1 Examining a published course

Look at a published course book and see what decisions were made for each of the parts of the model in Figure 1.1. Choose one feature for each part of the curriculum design model. For example, find one example of the effects of environment analysis.

Task 2 Using the parts of the model to overview the planning of a course

Quickly decide what kind of course you wish to design. For each of the parts of the curriculum design model, write two questions you will need to answer to plan a course.

Case Studies

An important way to make use of this book on curriculum design is to examine case studies using the model introduced in this chapter. Choose a short case study of curriculum design (about three to six pages long). Look in the list of references at the back of this book for the items marked [20] and choose one of them, or choose a case study report in journals such as *English Teaching Forum*, *Guidelines*, *ELT Journal*, *System* or *English for Specific Purposes*. Analyse it to see how the parts of the curriculum design model described in Chapter 1 fit with the case study. See what is in the model and not in the case study. See what is in the case study and not covered by the model. Table 1.1 provides an example analysis based on the Nation and Crabbe (1991) article (available at I.S.P. Nation's web site).

Table 1.1 Examination of Nation and Crabbe (1991) case study

<i>Parts of the curriculum design process</i>	<i>Nation and Crabbe's procedure</i>
Environment analysis	The major constraints and their effects in ranked order were: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Limited time to invest in learning (therefore – focus on immediate needs; have very limited goals, i.e. vocabulary and only spoken use). 2 Must be useful for a wide range of people and countries (therefore – include only generally useful items).
Needs analysis	Future needs (necessities) were found by: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Interviewing people previously in the situation that the learners will soon be in. 2 Analysing the language section of guidebooks. 3 Personal experience. There was no need to look at present proficiency as it was assumed that the learners were beginners. Wants were not looked at.
Application of principles	The following principles were directly stated: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Learners should get an immediate and useful return for their learning. 2 Avoid interference. 3 Use thoughtful processing. 4 Get fluency practice.
Goals	The goal was to quickly learn a survival vocabulary.
Content and sequencing	The content included approximately 120 words and phrases classified according to topic. The learner can decide on the sequence of learning. The sections of the list are in order of usefulness. Advice is given not to learn related items together.
Format and presentation	Suggestions are provided for self-study, such as using vocabulary cards, using deep processing and practice.
Monitoring and assessment	Not dealt with.
Evaluation	The checking of the list against personal experience is one kind of evaluation.