Planning Lessons and Courses

Designing sequences of work for the language classroom

Tessa Woodward

Cambridge Handbooks for Language Teachers

Series Editor
Scott Thornbury

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Consultant and editor: Penny Ur

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To Pat and Robin, all their offspring and to Grandma Lil

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Map of the book

A = Activity

Introduction

What do I mean by planning?

The title of this book is *Planning Lessons and Courses* so I'd like to define right away what I mean by it. By 'planning', I mean what most working teachers do when they *say* they're planning their lessons and courses. Thus I take planning to include the following: considering the students, thinking of the content, materials and activities that could go into a course or lesson, jotting these down, having a quiet ponder, cutting things out of magazines and anything else that you feel will help you to teach well and the students to learn a lot, i.e. to ensure our lessons and courses are good. I do NOT mean the writing of pages of notes with headings such as 'Aims' and 'Anticipated problems' to be given in to an observer before they watch you teach.

I also take it as given that plans are just plans. They're not legally binding. We don't have to stick to them come hell or high water. They are to help us shape the space, time and learning we share with students. We can depart from them or stick to them as we, the students and the circumstances seem to need.

What do I mean by a 'good' lesson or course?

I've said above that planning is something we do to ensure our lessons and courses are good ones. But what is 'good'?

When busy and tired, we often regard the variables of our classes (such as the type of class, the prescribed syllabus, the schedule) as constraints blocking the achievement of a 'good' lesson or course. 'If only …,' we think. 'If only my class were smaller or I had more resources or I had more time to plan. Then I could teach really well.'

We have perhaps too a view of other people's classes, small ones or big ones or homogeneous ones, as being 'normal' and our own as being exceptional or inferior in some way. We might hear laughter through a classroom wall or watch a teacher preparing bits of paper for an interesting activity and we may feel, 'Gosh! I wish I could do that!' We may assume that 'good' lies outside our own work, outside ourselves.

If we have the definition above, of a 'good' lesson or course being one that other people experience or that goes exactly to plan or one that is exactly what we've been told is good or one that's only achievable if we have hours of planning time available, then we are setting ourselves up for failure every time a class is bigger or smaller or worse resourced than it's 'supposed' to be, every time students act like real people and do something unpredictable. We can look at the variables of the classroom differently though, regarding them instead as part of the description of our situation. 'I have a largish class,' we can think, 'with not many resources. So some things are not possible and other things are possible. I'll have to create what I can, given my situation. This is my setting and my design problem and this is how I'm going to set about solving it. I'm going to do the best I can and THAT is what I'm going to call "good"!'

We need to have robust, personal criteria for what we consider good work. Granted, we will inevitably have absorbed notions of what 'good' is from outside ourselves, perhaps from our training, from our favourite teachers from school, or from colleagues, authors or conference presenters that we happen to like. But we need to ponder our own definitions of 'good' to make sure they're realistic and set us up for success.

I'll state my own criteria for a good language course or lesson now. A good lesson or course, to me, is one where there's *plenty of language learning going on* and where the students and I:

- feel comfortable physically, socially and psychologically
- know a little about each other, why we are together and what we want to get out of the experience. (We also know these things may keep shifting slightly as we go through the course.)
- are aware of some of what there is to learn
- are aware of some of the things we have learned
- have a notion about how we learn best
- accept that language is a mixture of things (part instinct, motor skill, system, cultural artefact, music, part vehicle for content and part content itself), that it changes all the time and thus that we need to teach and learn it in a variety of ways
- know why we're doing the activities we're doing
- do things in class that would be worth doing and learn things that are worth learning for their own sake outside the language classroom
- become more capable of taking the initiative, making decisions and judging what is good and useful
- start useful habits which will continue after we have left each other
- follow our course and lesson plans or depart from them when necessary in order to bring about the criteria above.

These are some of the things that are necessary for me to consider a course or lesson good, for me to consider my work good!

What are teachers' concerns about lesson and course planning?

Our concerns about preparing lessons and courses tend to differ according to the amount of experience we have.

A beginner teacher's concern: 'Planning takes too long'

'It just doesn't seem right! I stay up till one in the morning preparing for a 45 minute lesson the next day! I can't see how I can keep this up. What happens when I start a real job and have to teach six hours a day? I mean ... does it get any better?'

This is what a beginner teacher asked me recently. I remembered when I started my first teaching job. I used to spend all evening planning lessons for the next day. Why does lesson preparation take inexperienced teachers so long?

I think it's partly because there are so many variables for a starter teacher to consider as they think about the time they will spend with a class. Starter teachers may think:

- What do I know about the students?
- What will be possible in that physical space with those chairs and that table? How long have I got?
- What shall I teach? Culture, a topic, study skills, listening, vocabulary? Or the next page of the textbook?
- How shall I teach it? How do I interest students and get them working together well and doing something worthwhile?
- How will I know whether things are going well or not?
- What materials shall I use? I hate this page of the textbook. I want a picture of a thirsty woman but I can't find one.
- How will I write my decisions down? My trainer has given me a model plan. I have to write in the timing but I have no idea how long things will take.
- How do I plan a whole series of interesting lessons? On my training course I only did one or two separate ones.
- Will the plan happen? Do I really have the control to make these things happen? Is it OK to change my mind in class and do something I didn't plan? Will the students change things?
- Am I really a teacher? Do I want to be one? Or does it mean being like my old, hated, maths teacher?

- I read the other day that languages are learned and not taught, so am I out of a job anyway?

It's no wonder that beginner teachers wander round their homes making endless cups of tea, staring at books sightlessly, and tearing up sheets of paper. There are a lot of things to consider and to try to get right, *all at the same time*!

An experienced teacher's concern: 'It's getting boring!'

'Oh, that was so boring! Well, actually I don't think THEY were incredibly bored. I mean they were working all right but I bored MYSELF rigid! I've done that lesson too many times.'

Remarks like these, which I've heard in staffrooms or said myself, point to the dilemma of experienced teachers. Planning and teaching have got easier. They don't take up much mental space any more. Experienced teachers can switch onto 'auto-pilot', do things they have done many times before and use their energies in other parts of their lives such as bringing up children, learning fencing or falling in love again.

Auto-pilot is really useful. It can get you through times of fatigue, personal happiness or distress, but it can be boring for the pilot. It's good to be able to cut corners and have more time for yourself but it's not so good to succumb to the temptation of using old ideas and materials again and again.

Ways of getting better at planning

As I said above, I can remember how it felt to spend all evening preparing for one lesson, to stare at paragraphs of explanation in grammar books wondering what anomalous finites were and whether it would be useful for students to learn about them. Here I am 20 years later and sometimes I still feel a bit the same! Now I'm reading about the grammar of speech and wondering if it would help me or my students to learn about it. But one thing IS different now. I can choose how long to take over my planning. I can plan a lot of the next lesson by the time I've finished the present one. I can plan a lesson in about ten minutes, jotting down a few notes on a piece of paper and things still seem to go all right. I can have an outline in my head that is designed to hand most things over to the students. I can spend a long time planning a course or lesson and actually enjoy it!

I'm not alone in this. One experienced colleague writes nothing down but says he does a lot of thinking in the bath in the morning. Another plans out loud to herself on the 45 minute car journey to work.

Personally, I'm not one of those people who can 'go in with absolutely nothing and think on my feet'. But then I have met very few such people. Even a colleague of mine who positively rants about the insanity of deciding on Friday night what will happen on Monday morning still admits that he doesn't like going in with absolutely nothing. 'Having a few ideas in your mind is like having banisters at the side of the stairs,' he says. 'When you're running downstairs, you don't necessarily hold on to them but it's nice to know they are there!'

Whatever our ideological position on lesson planning, we have to admit that most students come to class expecting something to happen and most experienced teachers put some thought into how to structure time spent with students. Most experienced teachers can do that thinking a lot more easily than when they started their jobs. What's more they can do it before, during or after lessons. We may not know how we got to be able to do this but most of us, looking back, can sense that a distance has been travelled.

So what *does* happen in between the time when planning takes all night and makes you miserable and the time when you can do it easily and enjoyably while washing or driving or teaching? I'll suggest a number of ways this apparent magic might happen.

The first way: Considering our past learning experiences

Anybody who's attended primary and secondary school, driving lessons, sports training and other learning events has put in thousands of hours in the classroom and consciously or unconsciously will have absorbed a lot of information about what's possible in a lesson or course and what good teaching and learning are. Knowledge of types of group, content, activity, sequences, materials and routines will all have been picked up from the student/observer's angle. Thus any beginner teacher rising to their feet in front of a class for the first time may find past teacher 'ghosts' inhabiting their body (Weintraub 1989). You may hear yourself saying things your teachers said and you may instinctively use activities and routines that your teachers used. A likely pattern here is the initiation, response, feedback (IRF) routine. Here's an example:

T: What's the time now? (= I)
S: It's ten o'clock. (= R)
T: Good! (= F)

When you find yourself saying this for the first time, it can make you chuckle. 'Why is it a good thing that it's ten o'clock?' you might ask yourself. But in fact this routine acknowledges that students and teachers are working on at least two levels at once: the level concerned with

comment on target language proficiency and another, the level of personal communication. The IRF routine only becomes pernicious when it's used mechanically and without an additional communicative response such as, 'Gosh! That time already!' Many of the routines we've unwittingly picked up during our hours on the other side of the desk are helpful.

The second way: Using coursebooks

Another way of getting better at preparing is by using coursebooks. A beginner teacher using a coursebook will absorb routines from it, especially if there is a helpful teacher's book to go with it. The tendency to pick up activities, lesson types and course models from coursebooks will be reinforced if the same books are taught several times with different classes and especially if a part of every unit is the same.

The third way: Learning as we teach

There are many other ways that we gradually get more effective at our course and lesson planning as we teach. We do so by:

- Writing plans for different classes and then teaching the plans.
- Teaching lesson plans written for us by more experienced teachers.
- Writing plans for a more experienced teacher and then hearing what they did with them in their class.
- Observing teachers or videos and then writing lesson notes for what we've seen.
- Listening to colleagues talking about their lessons and courses.
- Reading transcripts of recorded lessons.
- Team-teaching, reading training manuals, using resource books that have been written around a particular theme such as creative grammar practice or songs or vocabulary, and finding out what students like and then following their directions on how to teach them that way.

As we do these, we'll start to understand that lessons are composed of lots of different elements that affect each other, all of which can be used as starting points. We'll gain the experience of personal examples of individual students, types of classes, and timings of activities. We'll then be able to call up these examples for comparison in future. We'll also get a repertoire of exercises, sequences of exercises and whole stock lessons and courses. I'll call these learned repertoires 'Chunks' and will say more about them below. Thus by thinking, using coursebooks, planning lessons and then teaching them, and by working with others, we soon start to get a repertoire of chunks.

Using 'Chunks'

What are 'Chunks' ?

Let's step outside our own field for a moment. When learning to type we learn where individual letters are before practising high frequency combinations like, 'tion' and 'the'. When learning to drive, we learn how to depress the clutch, put the gear in neutral, then push the gear into first and slowly let the clutch off before combining all this, plus mirror watching, indicating, playing with the handbrake, keeping time with the accelerator pedal, and sweating, into something called 'moving off into traffic'. The chunk, in both the typing and the driving, is the running together into a smooth sequence all the little steps that we have previously learned. The individual steps need to be learned first. Then we need to learn how to chunk.

A chunk usually has a name of its own. Thus the separate steps, in a primary school class, of 'down, around and fly the flag' soon become a chunk called 'writing the number 5'.

Moving back into foreign language teaching, the individual steps, 'I'll write three questions on the board, then I'll ask students to read them, then I'll explain to students they'll be able to answer them once they have read the text', once practised a couple of times, become the smooth chunk 'setting a pre-reading task'. Later, with a bit more experience, the chunks get bigger or longer, and pretty soon the teacher can say, 'I'll do some pre- and in-reading tasks and then work on language and content.' The individual steps of the larger chunk could be stated in great detail but the experienced teacher no longer needs to do this except when asked to for an advanced exam. The individual steps have been thought about and experienced often enough for them to have become integrated into a bigger, smoother unit.

When are chunks good or bad?

Teachers have to think about individual small units of content, steps, activities and material before being able to work at a broader level. But I believe that as soon as possible we need to start thinking about putting steps together, subsuming them into larger units and thinking about shaping lessons and sets of lessons. This enables us to piece whole lessons and courses together without using up whole evenings and weekends!

I believe that it is also partly this ability to call up practised sequences or 'chunks' that makes lesson planning easy for the experienced teacher. If inexperienced teachers could be helped to acquire these, how much easier their lives would be.

On the darker side, however, it's also partly these same chunks that make trying something new difficult for the experienced teacher. The sight of a text, for example, suggests an almost automatic set of activities that can be applied to it and away the experienced teacher goes, down a useful but rather well-worn path. Useful chunks have been learnt by the experienced teacher over the years and they can now lead to a rather stultifying, routine way of working. If experienced teachers could be helped to wander off these paths, how much more interesting our work might be.

Of course, inexperienced teachers can use well-worn routines in class too. These can have been inherited from past teachers or over-learned on training courses. Wherever they've come from, these sets of routines often need breaking down and rethinking.

If you're a starter teacher, you could probably do with picking up a repertoire of new teaching chunks so that you can piece together lessons and sets of lessons swiftly and effectively. If you're a teacher who's settled into your career, you may be looking for new repertoires to help you make the experiments you want to make. If you're a very experienced teacher, you may need to put some of your well-worn routines to one side and try out new ones in order to keep awake personally and professionally. I hope very much that this book will help you, wherever you are in your career cycle, for it's full of chunks and repertoires of different kinds.

Beliefs, perceptions and assumptions

In this book I'll share ideas that have helped me to solve puzzles set by my own classes and situation. While writing this book, I've had the luxury of a two-year conversation with a fellow professional, Penny Ur, my editor. Through these conversations, I've come to understand more about my own assumptions and beliefs. I've had to think hard about why I have wanted one chapter to come before another, or why I want some things in the book and not other things.

Whether you're reading this book on your own or have the chance, as I've had, for conversations with a critical friend, I offer below an activity that helps you explore your beliefs about people, learning, language and teaching. It's our beliefs about these things that ultimately govern everything about our planning from our choice of content, activity, instructional sequence and course model to our personal style. We need to communicate these beliefs or reasons to our participants too.

The activity is called '*The four-column analysis*' and has been a very popular activity with the teachers and trainers I've worked with over the

years. It is a way of getting from classroom tactics to talk of beliefs and values. The activity can be done after you have personally experienced a lesson (whether as a teacher, learner or trainer) or by going through a video, lesson transcript or taped lesson carefully or after listening to someone's verbatim account of their own lesson.

A The four-column analysis

1 Draw four columns. Put the following words at the top of the columns: Steps, Chunks, Assumptions (or Beliefs), Archaeology. Thus:

STEPS	CHUNKS	ASSUMPTIONS / BELIEFS	ARCHAEOLOGY

THE FOUR COLUMNS

2 *Filling in the Steps column*
Try to remember the individual steps of the lesson without looking directly at your source material, e.g. the lesson plan or video. Note them down in the Steps column in shorthand like this:

STEPS	CHUNKS	ASSUMPTIONS / BELIEFS	ARCHAEOLOGY
• Music as S/S arrive • T writes own first name on B/B and invites S/S to join their names to T's as in a crossword or scrabble game • S/S come up and do it • T asks S/S to turn to p. 10 in textbook and mask top half • etc.			

THE STEPS COLUMN

Why? As teachers we spend a lot of our time looking forward to future lessons and much less time thinking back through a lesson we have just taught. So we are usually practised at *pre*-paration but not *post*-paration. Looking back is good memory training. It forces us to look at all that went on and not just the bits that seemed most important. It is interesting later, if you compare your notes with a colleague's, with the lesson plan or other source material, to see what you forgot and to consider why you remembered the bits you did. This prompts a more realistic and detailed discussion of a lesson or session than when just remembering the things that stand out most immediately and vividly. If you are looking at a new activity, sequence or lesson shape in someone else's work, taking these kinds of notes will help you to reproduce the same sequence again yourself later on.

3 *Filling in the Chunks column*
Look at all the steps you noted in the first column. See if you can clump some of them together into phases like this:

STEPS	CHUNKS	ASSUMPTIONS / BELIEFS	ARCHAEOLOGY
• Music as S/S arrive • T writes own first name on B/B and invites S/S to join their names to T's as in a crossword or scrabble game • S/S come up and do it • T asks S/S to turn to p. 10 in textbook and mask top half • etc.	Setting atmosphere Getting to know you / Warm-up phase Start of main work		

THE CHUNKS COLUMN

Why? If you are doing this work on your own teaching and complete the columns for several lessons, you may be interested to find that you often use similar chunks or lesson phases in a similar order. If you do this work on someone else's lessons, you might be intrigued to see that

they structure their lessons in identical or very different ways to you. Either way, this work gets us thinking about sequences of activities and chunks rather than about individual activities.

4 *Filling in the Assumptions (or Beliefs) column*
Next look at the individual steps and chunks listed in the first two columns. Try to get to the assumptions and beliefs behind them. If you are thinking about someone else's lesson, then you can only guess at the teacher's assumptions. If you are thinking about your own lesson, then it would be productive to have a friend working with you, thinking about it individually first before comparing notes. Your friend will see things differently from you. For example, I might believe that playing music relaxes students but my friend might think that it all depends on the type of music, type of student and the volume!

STEPS	CHUNKS	ASSUMPTIONS / BELIEFS	ARCHAEOLOGY
• Music as S/S arrive	Setting atmosphere	• Teacher thinks music creates good atmosphere and that atmosphere is important to learning. Maybe T relaxes too! T assumes S/S will like the music	
• T writes own first name on B/B and invites S/S to join their names to T's as in a crossword or scrabble game	Getting too know you / Warm-up phase	• First names are OK. Name-learning is important. Seeing spelling is important. The B/B belongs to everyone. People can move around. The front of the room is not an inner sanctum. Done this way T must have small group and plenty of room.	

• S/S come up and do it • T asks S/S to turn to p. 10 in textbook and mask top half • etc.	Start of main work	• Everyone has a textbook. Using a textbook is good. You don't have to use the textbook page as it is.	

THE ASSUMPTIONS COLUMN

Why? The steps and chunks or phases of your lesson or session are what you and your participants actually do. These events are practical, physical statements or expressions of self. Regardless of what you MEAN to happen and regardless of what you believe about learning and teaching, this is the reality of events in your classroom. So it is interesting and usually very instructive to see if the assumptions spotted by other people are similar to the assumptions the leader of the session actually holds.

5 *Filling in the Archaeology column*
This column could also be headed 'When, how and why did I learn this way of working?' You can only fill in this column if you either taught the lesson yourself or are able to talk to the teacher who did. The teacher tries to remember where an activity or the idea for a phase came from.

STEPS	CHUNKS	ASSUMPTIONS / BELIEFS	ARCHAEOLOGY
• Music as S/S arrive	Setting atmosphere	• Teacher thinks music creates good atmosphere and that atmosphere is important to learning. Maybe T relaxes too! T assumes S/S will like the music	• I first saw music used at the start when a participant in a session by Elayne Phillips. I liked it, thought S/S might and also thought 'Great! I can use something I love in "real life" at work too!

• T writes own first name on B/B and invites S/S to join their names to T's as in a crossword or scrabble game • S/S come up and do it	Getting to know you / Warm-up phase	• First names are OK. Name-learning is important. Seeing spelling is important. The B/B belongs to everyone. People can move around. The front of the room is not an inner sanctum. Done this way T must have small group and plenty of room.	• I got name crossword or scrabble from Rick Cooper when team-teaching. I liked the way it metaphorically drew the individuals into a group.
• T asks S/S to turn to p. 10 in textbook and mask top half • etc.	Start of main work	• Everyone has a textbook. Using a textbook is good. You don't have to use the textbook page as it is.	• We had textbooks at school. My eye always wandered all over the page so when my Diploma trainer showed me how to 'mask' to get everyone's attention on one spot, I learnt to do it right away.

THE ARCHAEOLOGY COLUMN

Why? This column helps us to understand how we and other teachers learn, where we get our repertoires from and in what situations we are most likely to pick up new ways of working. We begin to dig out the history of our own improvement as teachers. From the above notes we can see that this teacher seems to learn from people. She has learned from a teacher, a colleague and a trainer. She likes the idea that she can bring things from her outside life into the classroom.

With the four-column analysis we are beginning to investigate what activities, sequences, chunks and phases we use in our lessons and sessions, why we tend to use them and if there is coherence between what

we believe, what we actually do and how others see our work. We also find out something about the circumstances in which we have learned some of the aspects of our job. We are, with the analysis, starting with classroom evidence and working backwards to beliefs and assumptions. It's easier to get this kind of conversation going, in my view, if there is something visible, audible and tangible to relate it to. I hope you have some interesting conversations as a result of the activity.

The organisation of this book

Most of the chapters in this book are organised around questions that you might ask when starting to plan a lesson or a course. Each chapter provides answers to the questions posed or implied in the chapter titles. The answers may be illustrated by practical activities signalled by A in the margin (see page 9). Illustrative anecdotes from my own or other people's experience are marked by  . Chapters usually either include or conclude with a summary based on the metaphor of a garden, indicated by a flower in the margin  . At the end of Chapters 1–8 there is a thematic mind map or other visual summary that aims to give you some light relief and also to remind you of the essence of the chapter you have just read.

In Chapter 1 *Who are the students?* there are sequences of activities that help you to get to know your students before, during and after they are in your classes. Next, Chapter 2 *How long is the lesson?* looks at chronological chunks and thus at the sorts of activities that can come at the beginning, middle and end of a lesson. Chapter 3 turns to content and the question *What can go into a lesson?* Chapter 4 is about the question *How do people learn and so how can we teach?* Chapter 5 *What can we teach with?* describes the tools of the trade and how they can spark off activity sequences of their own. In Chapter 6 the question is *How can we vary the activities we do?* I take traditional activities and show how you can turn them into something more useful for your own setting. Chapter 7 *Getting down to the preparation* takes the practical, everyday starting points and written formats that people actually use and not the ways of working we have been told on training courses that we OUGHT to use! Chapter 8 *What are our freedoms and constraints?* is about the freedoms and constraints involved in working with different types of organisation, class and personality and also about the totally unpredictable side of our work.

As a child I used to consider gardening a boring chore just for 'grown-ups' even though I did love being in gardens myself playing and walking, looking, touching and sniffing. Over the years, I've learned how to turn the noun 'garden' into the verb 'to garden'. As I've moved jobs and houses, I've temporarily taken over small town patches, suburban yards and overgrown cottage gardens. I've looked through seed catalogues and borrowed tools. I've had some successes, made loads of mistakes and am still learning a lot. Now as I look out of my window with great pleasure into the country garden below, I see the primroses that have done well and the weeds that I should do something about! I realise that I have turned into the 'grown-up' I used to watch weeding and digging. I see now that, although gardening IS a chore and involves unending problem-solving rather than perfect solutions, it's also tremendously rewarding. I feel just the same way about school classrooms. I used to be an observant participant in other people's classrooms and now I have my own. And I now see that the chore of planning and teaching is positively enjoyable and that there's always plenty to learn. I can see many other parallels between working in gardens and working in classrooms. If you'd like to join me in exploring this metaphor, watch for the flower motifs throughout the book.

1 Who are the students?

1.1 Introduction

The students we work with are the real reason for the whole learning/teaching encounter. So the most important thing we can do before, during and after classes is, in my view, to listen to students, watch them and read their work. This will help us to get to know them as individuals and thus will give us invaluable information when choosing topics and types of material including coursebooks, and when selecting activities and shaping lessons and courses. We can also involve students in these decisions. Even if our hands are tied in many matters because, for example, we have to stick to a syllabus or teach a certain coursebook, knowing as much as possible about our students will still help us decide on error correction, testing and homework and respond to them as individuals and as a group. It's perhaps the most natural sequence of all in teaching: finding out about the students and then taking account of this information in our work.

In this chapter I'll look at the things you can find out about learners, who you can find out from, how and when, and what you might use your understanding for.

1.2 Who can you find out from?

If you have been asked to take on a new class or one-to-one student, you can get information from the sending institution (if the students are coming in from somewhere else), past and present teachers, other 'stakeholders' (see below), and the students themselves. Let's look at the institutional level first.

The institution

Students from a different institution

Sometimes students come to our institutions from a different company, school or country from our own.

If the arrangements between your own institution and the sending institution are long term, what procedures are already in place for receiving, testing and teaching?

If a government or company is sending students to you for the first time, there will usually be some anxiety on both sides about getting procedures sorted out. It's vital that the teacher notes any kinks in a programme and makes adjustments fast.

If the relationship between the institutions is relatively new or you are new to the relationship, you will want to know:

- the nature of the sending institution
- its aims for the students
- what demands are made by the institution on the students before, during and after sending them
- whether the students are tested before they come
- whether a representative of the sending institution will be coming too and, if so, what relationship they have to the students. For example, whether they will be expecting to visit classes, or help with discipline while you are teaching.

Students from inside or outside your own institution

The sorts of things we could do well to know at the organisational level, whether students come from inside or outside our institution, are:

- whether the course is described or advertised anywhere and, if so, how
- whether any reports exist on past courses and whether any examples of past student work are available
- who is paying for the students to attend and whether attendance is voluntary or compulsory
- how the students are selected
- the length and frequency of the course, the mode of contact and the prescribed syllabus and materials, since these will affect the students
- why YOU were asked to take the course rather than another teacher. If you are told you were chosen because you were the only teacher who has experience of a particular exam or the target language, this will have a different effect on your work from being told, for example, that 'they want someone very creative'.

Although we might imagine that this kind of essential information would be provided for us, it's not always the case! Sometimes institutions feel these issues are so fundamental that everybody must know them already. Other institutions feel that these are somehow not teachers' but managers' concerns and that teachers should just go ahead and teach the

course. Sometimes teachers can't be bothered with this level of enquiry or we are too shy to ask.

Since the teacher is the one who works with the students day to day, it's vital that we know whether our students are forced to be in class, are paying for themselves, have a very specific aim in mind, or, for example, have heard very positive or negative things from past generations of students about our institution or ourselves!

The obvious person to ask about these issues is the person who suggests you take the class on. Ask gently, for it may be that the person has no idea of the answers and has not even thought of asking the questions themselves. Once you have explained how useful the information will be for planning and teaching the course though, most people will see the wisdom of the request. It's a good idea to suggest ways of getting the information or even offering to get it yourself, for example, by finding old files or reports, or phoning the sending institution. This will usually prompt some action.

Past and present teachers

If you are taking over or are going to share a class, it makes sense to talk to past or present teachers about the class (or write to them if they are in another institution). If possible, ask questions, and look at any notes on past work, materials used, test results, files on attendance, behaviour, etc. and any language learner portfolios. If at all possible, watch the students while they are being taught by their present teacher. You may or may not like the teacher's style but at least you will know what the students are used to and whether they seem to like it! You're also bound to pick up some ideas from watching someone else teach. If there is a good relationship between you and the previous teacher, then methods of working, materials and grading queries can all be dovetailed smoothly.

Other stakeholders

Other people from whom you can gain interesting information about the class may be parents and teachers of the same class but in different subjects. Try to talk to them where possible.

1.3 What you can know and why

The students

Your main source of information about a class will be the students themselves. You can get to know them by phone, letter, journal, tape, e-mail or face to face. You can get information before or on first meeting that helps you to do some initial planning. Information you get as you go

along will help you to adjust your planning continually. Information gained after classes have left will help you plan for similar future courses. Below is a list of some of the things it is useful to know about students and the reasons why you might want to know.

What	*Why*
• The number of students	So you can choose a room, plan the seating and materials and know whether one-to-one, pairwork or group work will be possible. Very large (50+) and very small (1–3) classes necessitate even more careful activity planning than usual if you are not used to these numbers.
• Names	So you can get them right!
• Sex ratio	So you know whether teacher and students match, and what the balance will be in your pair and group work.
• Age range	So you can allow for different energy levels, concentration spans and choices of topics. The amount of life experience students have to invest in particular themes such as 'work' or 'pop music' will make a huge difference to how long an activity will last.
• Mother tongue	So you can work out what to do if one or two students are without a mother tongue friend. So you can figure out how to establish an English-speaking community and predict what common strengths and weaknesses in the target language there are there likely to be.
• Nationality	So you can understand more about the politics, cultural conventions, prejudices and expectations of the students. Are there any possible 'enemy' nationalities in the group? Will this affect your seating plan? Are there cultural differences between students in, for example, the time of day they like to study, or the amount of background noise they can study with?
• What other languages do they speak?	So you can know how used to language learning they are, where English comes in individual students' and the school's priorities and thus what difficulties you can predict in their workload.

What	*Why*
• Target language level	What results are there from any placement tests and outside exams?
• Student perceptions of their own competence	So you can add this information to standard test results and make decisions regarding student placement. A confident student may want to join a challenging class. A less confident student may prefer to go into a class slightly under their own level. If the students are already placed, it's still good to know who might be feeling under- or over-confident, and who you'll need to support or stretch.
• Profession and/or interests	So you can judge what content will support or expand their interests. What is each student an expert in and thus what can they teach others?
• Books and materials already used	So you can avoid duplication.
• Learners' target situation	So you can make decisions about the topics and skills you work on. Do the students need their English for jobs in, e.g. air traffic control or some other specialised use? Are they learning a little at primary level so as to get a head start at secondary level?
• Educational background	So you can judge what basic reading and writing skills they have in their own language. How cognitive and academic are they?
• Other commitments during the course	So you can judge how much time and energy they will be able to devote to classes and homework, how stressed or relaxed they will be and thus what workload and pace they can take.
• View of the course	So you can gauge how realistic their perceptions are and how well you can match their expectations.

Things that take a little longer to find out

What	*Why*
• Group dynamic and personality	So you can predict what attendance will be like and consider what to do about it if it's bad as well as considering who needs to sit next to or apart from whom. Are they often quiet, lively or motivated?
• What learner styles seem to be represented in the group? (You may take one of the frameworks available in the literature here, e.g. 'dominant sensory channel' (learning best by seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, moving), or 'type of intelligence' (musical, kinaesthetic, interpersonal, logical-mathematical, intrapersonal, spatial, naturalist, religious, etc.) or others such as self-concept, students' feelings about being in control of their own learning, or the difference in factors to which students attribute their successes and failures in learning (see Williams and Burden 1997 Ch. 5.3).	So you can choose methods and materials, and consider if your learners' ways of working fit your style and, if not, what compromises will need to be made.
• How learners perceive or mentally organise the language	So you can decide how to move students' understanding on.

These are some of the things it can be helpful to know. Some ideas follow on ways of getting the information from the students.