

Course syllabus - Focus your planning on outcomes

Business people want to see results. They may be far more focused on results than, for example, participants with more general needs in a language school. Your business participants may already be in employment and it is very likely that their future will, to some degree, depend upon their English language skills. If they are not currently employed, they will see their Business English course as a way of helping them to acquire a new job. How will this affect their view of the classes that they attend? Generally speaking they will want:

- to be assessed at the start
- to see results in terms of their language skills
- to see results fairly quickly
- to have very clear outcomes for each session
- to have their needs reflected in the session activities
- to have clearly focused practice activities that are firmly grounded in their own working environment as far as possible
- to have language notes and other materials that they can take away for future reference
- to be given homework practice activities
- and finally, perhaps, to be assessed at the end of the course.

In other words, they are very likely to view your lessons in precisely the same way that they view many other elements of business, with clear inputs and precisely defined outcomes. Of course, there will be some differences between the participants and their approaches to the classes but the fundamental point is that the person or body funding the course (whether the participants themselves or their company) will want to see clearly defined, quantifiable results.

With this in mind, you may find it very useful to approach your planning with language *functions* at the forefront of your mind. What language functions would be appropriate for people in business? Here are just a few possibilities with regard to the language skill of speaking:

- welcoming a visitor
- exchanging polite greetings with a colleague
- asking for information
- making, postponing or cancelling an appointment or meeting
- making a suggestion / proposal
- seeking clarification / providing clarification
- responding to a colleague's suggestions positively
- responding to a colleague's suggestions politely but negatively
- apologising
- making an arrangement
- changing an arrangement
- making a presentation
- giving a report

Activity 3

Make a list of 10 listening tasks that you think you could include in a programme for Chinese employees of a motor manufacturing company.

These functions can be fed very directly into the specific course objectives. You will often find that it is valuable to specify these in a course syllabus after you have completed your needs analysis. The participants will gain confidence in you and the programme if they can see a specific list of objectives which they can discuss as a class, and accept or modify at the very start of the course. This opportunity to agree on the main objectives is very helpful for all involved. Some trainers ask the participants to decide on the objectives themselves and this can sometimes work well with groups on relatively long courses or a one-to-one course. However, you could find yourself getting bogged down in semantics and end up spending too much class time preparing a complex syllabus so this might not be good use of precious training sessions. You will find that a better approach is to give them objectives that you have already worked out (based on the needs analysis forms and interviews) and then let them discuss and modify them as necessary.

Any list of objectives within the course syllabus should be as clear as possible for the learners and should not include technical terms or too many generalities. For example, an objective like this one (following) would be too general.

Objective: To give the participants an enhanced awareness of the language of meetings.

Alternatively, one like this (following) would be too technical.

Objective: To raise the participants' awareness of communicative strategies within an authentic commercial environment requiring an interchange of views.

A better approach would be to use language that everyone can understand.

Objective: To prepare participants to fully engage in business meetings.

The syllabus will show what precisely you are going to cover, and in what order. In general terms, it will move from the known to the unknown; from the simpler levels to the more complex; from familiar situations to unfamiliar situations; from what the participants already have, to what they need. This need not be a document that needs to be followed slavishly as all sorts of interesting ideas may come up during the course, but it will be a framework within which to work and it will demonstrate that you have carefully thought through an appropriate programme for the participants. It is a document that will take you some time to prepare because it will interweave a whole range of different elements including:

- language functions
- cultural sensitivity
- general vocabulary (including idioms, metaphor and colloquial language)
- business-specific vocabulary (especially where common words are used in specific ways in business contexts)
- grammar
- themes (the environment, time management, public relations)
- topics (emailing customers, telephone language)
- language skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing)
- role play (irate customer)
- simulations (managing an account)

- tasks (how would you advertise this product?)
- individual work, pair work, group work
- presentations
- assignments.

How you choose to lay out your syllabus will depend completely on your own experience and inclination. You may choose to prepare it in chart form with very brief notes; alternatively, you may choose to express your syllabus in a more descriptive style. The central point here is that you need to lay out the syllabus in a way that is crystal clear to all of the participants. It should reflect their needs, wants and expectations and should also present an interesting and challenging programme.

One note of caution! Don't be unrealistic in your planning, either in what can be covered in the available time or what the participants can achieve. You will, of course, be optimistic about what can be achieved in the available time, but you should be cautious about promising too much and then being perceived as having failed to deliver. Make sure your course aims are a challenge for the participants, but not a step further than they can manage.