

An A.B.C. of Course Design: A Questioning Approach

Ruth Wajnryb

This article presents a schema for course design to help teachers prepare courses to meet the needs of their students. It is a step-by-step approach to course design based on asking (and answering) the right questions in the right order. The schema can be applied to any language teaching or E.S.P. course, such as for English for Communication, English for Business, English for Hotel Receptionists, English for Nurses, English for Computer Programmers, English for Pre-tertiary Students, English for Students on a Working Holiday, to mention just a few.

The sequence of course planning elements may be represented diagrammatically (see figure one, below).

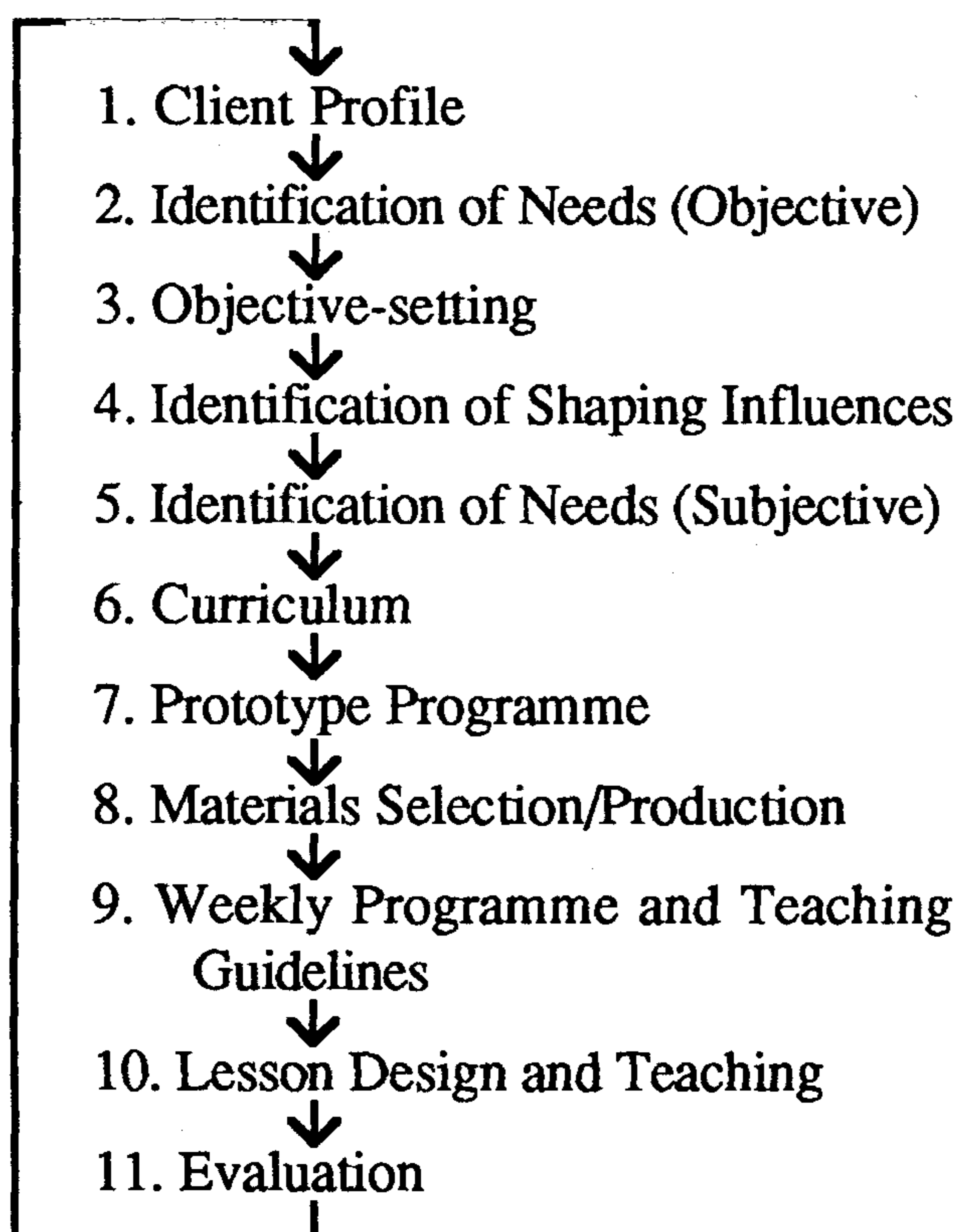


Fig. 1. Sequence of Course Planning Elements

A Step-by-Step Approach to Course Design

The first eight steps in the course planning sequence are outlined below:

Step 1. The Client Profile

The aim here is to build up a profile of the average or typical client student. It helps to "personalize" the profile by providing a name.

Sample Questions

- Who is the learner?
- How old is he (or she)?
- How long has s/he been in (Australia)?
- What previous courses have been studied?
- What level(s) of proficiency does the learner have, according to the 4 skills?
- What is the learner's L1? Are any other languages known?
- Has English been studied before? In what way? For how long?
- Is the learner living with or separated from family?
- Will the learner be working while a student?
- What are the learner's expectations—about processes and outcomes?

Step 2: Identification of Needs (Part I)

The aim here is to identify the learners' objective language needs. This phase is product-oriented: we are trying to ascertain what terminal target-language behavior the clients need/want to acquire.

Sample Questions

- What do they need English for?
- What purpose(s) do they have for studying English?
- What do they want to do with their English?
- Where/when/in what context does their English let them down?
- Is there agreement or discrepancy among learners and between learners and teacher about what is needed and how it should be acquired?

Step 3: Objective-Setting

Here the aim is to think in terms of aimed-for performance and hoped-for target language goals. In language-learning terms, we are thinking of skills: what does the learner hope/need/strive to be able to do in/through/with English by the end of the course?

Sample Questions

- What macro-skills (speaking, listening, reading, writing) are being aimed at?
- How are these to be prioritized?
- What proportion of course time will be devoted to each skill?
- Is this likely to change during the course?
- For each macro-skill, what micro-skills can be identified as being component parts? What cumulative process can be mapped out in advance?
- Can these micro-skills be ordered in the sequence in which they may be presented/practised?

Step 4: Identification of Shaping Influences

The aim here is to identify the various shaping influences that will impact upon the successful progress and outcome of the course. These may be positive or negative

influences; where negative, they may be seen as "constraints". The aim is to create a programme of study that will be real rather than ideal; it should capitalize on facilitating factors while also taking into account the constraints or less-than-perfect conditions that may affect the learning context, at worst impeding success.

Sample Questions

- What shaping influences may be identified?
- Are these facilitative or constraining?
- Are they external or internal?
- Where constraints are identified, how might these be overcome/restrained/neutralized/harnessed/avoided/reduced etc.)

Step 5. Identification of Needs (Part II)

This is a second phase of the needs identification, begun in step two, above. It comes at a later stage in the course design process because information gleaned from the objective setting and the identification of shaping influences (sections three and four) may help to inform it. Here we are dealing with subjective rather than objective needs and are concerned more with "process" than with "product". We are also looking at the learner's transitional (rather than terminal) behavior.

Sample Questions

- What does the learner need to know in order to learn?
- What does the learner need to do in order to learn?
- How will these content/skills areas be approached?
- Is there anything that the learner needs to un-learn in order to learn?

- Does the learner need to learn how to learn? How might this be approached?
- Where a metalanguage is needed, how might this be provided?

Step 6. Curriculum

Here we are concerned with both the content (what?) and the methodology (how?) of the course.

Sample Questions

- Given the information we have collected above, what implications can be drawn for the content of the course?
- How will this content be organized? What will be the point of departure?
- How will the content be contextualized?
- How will the content be sequenced?
- How (using what methodology) will it be taught? What assumptions underpin the choice of methodology?
- Is the methodology consistent with learner expectations? If not, what provisions have been made?

Step 7: Programming: The Prototype Programme

Here we are concerned with designing a prototype programme that will serve as a model or blueprint for the weekly programmes. As the prototype programme begins to take shape, there are some check questions (see below) that may be applied to it.

Sample Questions

- Does the prototype programme reflect the course objectives?
- Does it reflect agreed-upon processes?
- Does it reflect agreed-upon priorities?
- What percentage of the lesson content is focused? What percentage unfocused?
- Is it realistic? Does it address/cope with identified constraints?

- Does it take advantage of facilitating factors in the learning environment?
- Is it well-sequenced?
- Will it allow for re-cycling?
- Is it well-integrated?
- Is it well-balanced

Step 8. Materials

This sections deals with the actual lesson level or chalkface of the course design.

Sample Questions

- Are there commercial materials available or will the materials need to be produced?
- If both, what proportions will operate?
- What need is there for authentic materials? How might these be obtained?
- Is there a possibility of using text that is learner-generated?
- What guide-lines for lesson planning will be used?

Notes

i) Provision should be allowed for curriculum changes to be made during the course. Sometimes learners' needs that were not visible or realized earlier emerge later in a course. Sometimes learning pace is slower/faster than expected.

ii) There should be provision for on-going student feedback and course-final evaluation.

About the Author

Ruth Wajnryb is a freelance trainer, language consultant, and writer residing in New South Wales, Australia.