

## Book Review: Designing Language and Teaching Curriculum: Based on Nation and Macalister's (2010)

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### **Abstract**

In recent years, specialists have tried to organize and boost the quality of classrooms. The first step to reach this goal is to design an appropriate curriculum which is relevant and based on up to date knowledge of teaching and learning. This paper aims at introducing the essential topic of curriculum designing based on Nation and Macalister's (2010) view, its basic components, models and finally comparing a model provided here with two other prominent ones.

**Keywords:** curriculum, curriculum design

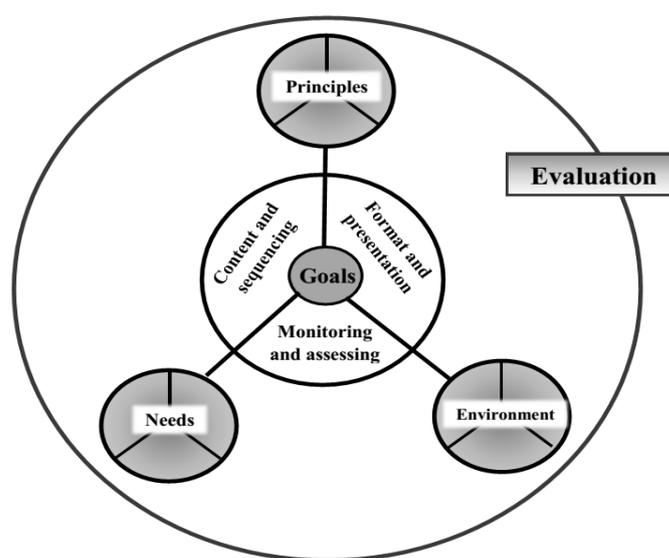
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## I. INTRODUCTION

First it would be appropriate to begin with terminological comments and clarify the definitions of the terms 'syllabus' and 'curriculum' since there are several conflicting views on what it is that distinguishes syllabus design from development (Nunan, 1993: 5). Regarding this difference, Nunan argues that it is possible to distinguish a broad and a narrow approach to syllabus design. According to Candlin (1984: 31) curriculum is concerned with making general statements about language learning, learning purpose, experience, evaluation, and the role and relationships of teachers and learners. Syllabuses, on the other hand, are more localized and are based on accounts and records of what actually happens at the classroom level as teachers and learners apply a given curriculum to their own situation (narrower definition). Nunan (1993: 8) also agrees with Candlin and proposes that :

*'Curriculum' is concerned with planning, implementation, evaluation, management, and administration of education programs. 'Syllabus', on the other hand, focuses more narrowly on the selection and grading of content (Nunan, 1993:8).*

Nation and Macalister (2010) believe that 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. Also, they have introduced the curriculum design model (see figure 1), which consists of three outside circles and a subdivided inner circle. The outer circles in the curriculum design process are environment analysis, needs analysis and the application of principles. In the view of distinguishing curriculum from syllabus, both the outer circles and the inner circle make up the curriculum in the mentioned model by Nation and Macalister (2010). Additionally, the inner circle represents the syllabus that includes goals as its center, content and sequencing, format and presentation, and also monitoring and assessment. Finally, the large outer circle represents evaluation, which is aimed to judge if the course is adequate and where it needs improvement. The considerable merit of this model is the ease of remembering the connection between inner and outer circles in designing curriculum. The main focus of designing curriculum is both making connection between the research and theory of language learning and the practice of designing lessons and courses and making a course with useful goals to satisfy the users. 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. (Nation & Macalister, 2010)



**Figure 1: A model of the parts of the curriculum design process**

The main purpose of the paper is to familiarize material developers and syllabus designers more with the theoretical and practical issues Nation and Macalister's (2010) views and model on designing language curriculum. Then the other models by Grave (2000) and Murdoch (1989), which draws strongly on the experience of teachers, regarding Designing Language Courses will be presented.

## OUTER CIRCLES OF THE CURRICULUM DESIGN PROCESS

### A. Environment Analysis

Environment analysis (Tessmer, 1990) involves looking at the factors that will have a strong effect on decisions about the goals of the course, what to include in the course, and how to teach and assess it. So, learners, teachers, and teaching and learning situation are the main sources for mentioned sources. It is also called “situation analysis” (Richards, 2001) or “constraints analysis”. A constraint can be positive in curriculum design. As Nation & Macalister (2010) states, environment analysis is an important part of curriculum design because at its most basic level it ensures that the course will be usable. Some of the major constraints are the time available, cultural background, the effect of the first language on language learning and special purposes. The steps followed include (1) examining the local environment, (2) looking at previous research, and (3) considering the effect of the constraint on the design of the course. (Nation & Macalister, 2010).

**Steps in environment analysis.** The steps in environment analysis are (a) brainstorming and considering efficient environment factors, (b) ranking important factors and expressing first preferences, (c) deciding about information to fully take account for the factor (d) considering different factors on the course design, (e) reviewing all the previous steps again.

### B. Need Analysis

Hutchinson and Waters (1987) divide needs into target needs (i.e. what the learner needs to do in the target situation) and learning needs (i.e. what the learner needs to do in order to learn).

1. *Necessities*: What is necessary in the learners’ use of language? For example, do the learners have to write answers to exam questions?
2. *Lacks*: What do the learners lack? For example, are there aspects of writing that were not practiced in their previous learning (L1, L2)?
3. *Wants*: What do the learners wish to learn? (Nation & Macalister, 2010)

In other words, major division between present knowledge and required knowledge, and objective needs and subjective needs are important issues in need analysis. Very roughly, Lacks fit into present knowledge, Necessities fit into required knowledge, and Wants fit into subjective needs. (Nation & Macalister, 2010)

In order to gather information about objective needs, there are many major and useful ways such as questionnaires, personal interviews, data collection, observation, informal consultation with teachers and learners, and tests. More importantly, many of the questions that are usually raised in an analysis of target needs (Munby, 1978; Hutchinson and Waters, 1987) are presented, they have been organized under four learning goals because needs analysis must lead to decisions about what will be learned during a course. The questions do not always match neatly with the goals and types of information (see Appendix 1). Ongoing needs analysis during the course can make use of the pyramid procedure (Jordan, 1990). That is, the learners can be given a series of items that may describe their wants. They choose and rank these individually and then in pairs or fours, and finally as a group. When they report their ranking to the teacher,

they also note the points that they individually ranked highly but could not gain group support for. In addition, a range of methods for discovering needs are introduced which is organized around necessities, lacks and wants (See Appendix 2).

**Reliability, validity and practicality of need analysis.** Based on Nation and Macalister's points of view in 2010, needs analysis is a kind of assessment and thus can be evaluated by considering its reliability, validity and practicality.

- *Reliable needs* analysis involves using well-thought-out, standardized tools that are applied systematically. Rather than just observing people performing tasks that learners will have to do after the course, it is better to systematize the observation by using a checklist, or by recording and apply standardized analysis procedures. The more pieces of observation and the more people who are studied, the more reliable the results.
- *Valid needs* analysis involves looking at what is relevant and important. Consideration of the type of need that is being looked at and the type of information that is being gathered is important. Before needs analysis begins it may be necessary to do a ranking activity to decide what type of need should get priority in the needs analysis investigation.
- *Practical needs* analysis is not expensive, does not occupy too much of the learners' and teacher's time, provides clear, easy-to-understand results and can easily be incorporated into the curriculum design process. There will always be a tension between reliable and valid needs analysis and practical needs analysis. A compromise is necessary but validity should always be given priority.

### C. Principles

Based on a pedagogical perspective, focusing on curriculum design and teacher training, principles will be described in any of three fields: second or foreign language learning, first language learning, and general educational research and theory. The best possible coverage of language use is the main purpose of language course which needs to be provided through the inclusion of items occurring frequently in the language, so that learners get the best return for their learning effort. Within the domain of content and sequencing, format and presentation, and also monitoring and assessment, following explanations are respectively presented by Nation and Macalister (2010):

#### **Content and sequencing.**

- A language course should train learners in how to learn a language, so that they can become effective and independent language learners.
- Learners should have increasingly spaced, repeated opportunity to give attention to wanted items in a variety of contexts.
- A language course should progressively cover useful language items, skills and strategies.
- The teaching of language items should take account of the most favorable sequencing of these items and should take account of when the learners are most ready to learn them.

- The items in a language course should be sequenced so that items which are learned together have a positive effect on each other for learning, and so that interference effects are avoided.

#### **Format and presentation.**

- A course should include a roughly even balance of the four strands of meaning-focused input, language-focused learning, meaning-focused output and fluency activities.
- There should be substantial quantities of interesting comprehensible receptive activity in both listening and reading.
- A language course should provide activities aimed at increasing the fluency with which the learners can use the language they already know, both receptively and productively.
- The course should include language-focused learning in the sound system, vocabulary, grammar and discourse areas.
- Learners should process the items to be learned as deeply and as thoughtfully as possible.
- The course should be presented so that the learners have the most favorable attitudes to the language, users of the language, use of the language, the teacher's skill in teaching the language and their chances of success in learning the language.
- There should be opportunity for learners to work with the learning material in ways that most suit their individual learning style.

#### **Monitoring and assessment.**

- The selection, gradation, presentation and assessment of the material in a language course should be based on a careful consideration of the learners and their needs, the teaching conditions, and the time and resources available.
- Learners should receive helpful feedback which will allow them to improve the quality of their language use.

### **D. Evaluation**

Kiely and Rea-Dickens (2006: 225–271) make a useful three-way scope distinction: (1) large-scale evaluations which “tend to focus on major educational innovations with significant financial backing with an underlying agenda”, (2) teacher-led evaluations, and (3) management-led evaluations. Also, Nation and Macalister (2010) states that the first critical step is to find out who the evaluation is for and what kind of information they value, and several reasons are explained why this step is very important. Firstly, it helps determine the degree of confidentiality of the evaluation. Secondly, it helps determine what kind of information should be gathered and what kind of information should not be gathered. The formative/summative distinction is important when informing the people who are the focus of an evaluation about the purpose of the evaluation, in helping the evaluator decide what kind of information will be most useful to gather, and in using the information gathered (see Table 1.) (Nation &

Macalister, 2010). Data gathering is another important factor in evaluation process, which consists of interviews, observation and checklists, questionnaires, and self-report scales. Evaluation is an essential part of good curriculum design. It ensures that weaknesses in curriculum design are found and repaired. If evaluation is well planned, it can help teachers develop professionally and come to feel that the course is truly their own. (Nation & Macalister, 2010).

	<i>Formative</i>	<i>Summative</i>
<b>Purpose</b>	Improve the course	Judge the course
<b>Type of data</b>	More likely to look at causes, processes, individuals	More likely to look at results, standards, groups
<b>Use of data</b>	Used for counselling, mentoring, professional development, setting goals, adapting material	Used to make decisions on adequacy
<b>Presentation of findings</b>	Presented to and discussed with individuals	Presented in a report

**Table 1: Formative and summative evaluation compared**

## INNER CIRCLES OF THE CURRICULUM DESIGN PROCESS

### A. Goals, Contents and sequencing

The goals of a language lesson can focus on one or more of the following: Language, Ideas, Skills or Text (Discourse). Some curriculum designers break goals down into smaller well-specified performance objectives (Brown, 1995). Although certain units of progression may be used to select and sequence the material in a course, it is useful to check that other units are covered in the course and that other units are at an appropriate level. Harden notes (2006: 29) that there is a big difference between progress (learning) and progression (how the course moves forward) – “there seems to exist an enormous gap between the structure underlying a course and the one that individuals subjectively create for themselves.” Based on Nation and Macalister (2010), so far we have looked at designing a course as the aim for deciding on the units of progression in a course. However, units of progression can be used for a variety of purposes:

1. Units of progression can be used to set targets and paths to those targets.
2. Units of progression can be used to check the adequacy of selection and ordering in a course.
3. Units of progression can be used to monitor and report on learners’ progress and achievement in the course.

**Sequencing the content in a course.** The lessons or units of a course can fit together in a variety of ways. The two major divisions are whether the material in one lesson depends on the learning that has occurred in previous lessons (a linear development) or whether each

lesson is separate from the others so that the lessons can be done in any order and need not all be done (a modular arrangement).

***Linear approaches to sequencing.*** Most language courses involve linear development, beginning with simple frequent items that prepare for later more complex items. Such a development has the disadvantages of not easily taking account of absenteeism, learners with different styles and speeds of learning, and the need for recycling material. Four kinds: These include a spiral curriculum, matrix models, revision units and field approaches to sequencing.

1. The best known advocate of a spiral curriculum is Bruner (1962), which involves deciding on the major items to cover, and then covering them several times over a period of time at increasing levels of detail. Also, it provides easily monitored recycling of material, it allows for learners who were left behind to catch up at the next cycle, and it makes sure that the full value of the most important aspects of the language are dealt with.
2. A matrix model is somewhat similar to a spiral curriculum, the main difference being that the change when meeting old material again is one of diversity rather than complexity. In a matrix model one unit of progression is systematically varied against another, so that the same items are met with different contexts.
3. The revision unit model matches Brumfit's (1985) "syllabus with holes" which he proposed as a way of giving attention to fluency development, the holes being the time given to recycling old material and suspending the introduction of new material.
4. A field approach to sequencing material involves: (a) deciding what items need to be covered i.e. make up the field, (b) providing a variety of opportunities to meet these items, (c) checking that each important item will be met sufficient times.

***A modular approach to sequencing.*** The second major type of approach, a modular approach, breaks a course into independent non-linear units. These units may be parts of lessons, lessons or groups of lessons. Ellis (2003a, 2003b) proposes a modular approach for task-based language courses. In his proposal there are two unconnected modules. At beginner levels the sole focus is on a communicative, meaning-focused module. From intermediate level onwards attention is also given to a language- (or code-) focused module, with the intention of "drawing attention to form in order to destabilize learners' interlanguage" (Ellis, 2003b: 237) and thus avoiding fossilization of language errors. This approach suggests a way to deal with the concerns mentioned above about a lack of attention to accuracy in some task-based language courses (Towell and Tomlinson, 1999).

## **B. Format and presentation**

It is at the format and presentation part of the curriculum design process that the data gathered from needs and environment analysis, and the principle chosen to maximize learning come together in activities that involve the learners. Most of the decisions made regarding constraints, needs, principles, content and sequencing will only be indirectly observable through the format and presentation of the lessons. There is plenty of evidence to show that teachers and learners do not share the same view of parts of a lesson (Block, 1994), and that

the learners sometimes do activities in ways that defeat the purpose of the activity (Hosenfield, 1976). One way of trying to check this balance of opportunities is to see a course as consisting of four strands which are each given a roughly equal amount of time (Nation, 2007).

**Meaning-focused input.** Krashen (1981) would call it learning from comprehensible input. The conditions which are needed for such learning are a low density of unknown items in the language input, a focus on the meaning of the message, and a large quantity of input.

**Meaning-focused output.** Meaning-focused output involves learning through speaking and writing. Learning by input alone is not sufficient because the knowledge needed to comprehend input does not include all the knowledge which is needed to produce output. A well-balanced language course spends about one quarter of the course time on meaning-focused speaking and writing.

**Language-focused learning.** Language-focused learning involves a deliberate focus on language features such as pronunciation, spelling, word parts, vocabulary, collocations, grammatical constructions and discourse features. Also, according to two major effects, language-focused learning can result in deliberate conscious knowledge and in subconscious implicit knowledge of language items. This explicit and implicit knowledge can be helpful in making learners aware of language features which they will meet in input and needed for normal language use respectively. Deliberate learning of vocabulary items can result in both kinds of knowledge (Elgort, 2007).

**Fluency development.** This strand of a course does not involve the learning of new language features, but involves becoming fluent with features that the learners have already met before. The conditions for the fluency development strand are: (1) easy, familiar material, (2) a focus on communicating message, (3) some pressure to perform at a faster speed, and (4) plenty of opportunities for fluency practice. In a very interesting book entitled *“Planning from Lesson to Lesson”* Woodward and Lindstromberg (1995) describe two ways of planning a lesson. One way is called a “block” lesson where the lesson has a set format and is a separate block largely complete within itself. Typical block formats include the type of lesson looked at earlier in this chapter with listening and reading input, language-focused activity, and meaning-focused output. Another block format involves an experience-providing stage, a guided practice stage, and then a fluency-development stage. The other way of planning a lesson is by making use of “threads”. Threads are activities that run through a series of lessons. Threads are activities that can be used again and again with minimal planning and only small changes. 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.

### C. Monitoring and assessing

Monitoring and assessment can have both informational and affective goals that can provide a teacher and learners with information about the learners’ present knowledge and progress, and a means of encouraging involvement and participation.

**Types of monitoring and assessment.** The purpose is to make sure that the learners will get the most benefit from the course. This involves carefully observing the learners and the course, and suggesting changes to the course and the way it is run. Let us look at the major types of monitoring and assessment that can occur as part of a course.

1. *Placement assessment:* The aim of this testing is to ensure that the course is not going to be too easy or too difficult for the learner.
2. *Observation of learning:* While the course is running, the activities that the learners do are carefully monitored to see if each particular activity is likely to achieve its learning goal.
3. *Short-term achievement assessment:* At regular intervals during the course, the learners may be monitored to see what they are learning from the course.
4. *Diagnostic assessment:* In order to plan a program, it is useful to know where learners' strengths and weaknesses lie and where there are gaps in their knowledge. The aim of diagnostic assessment is to find the gaps and weaknesses and provide a remedy for them.
5. *Achievement assessment:* Usually at the end of a course, and perhaps at one or two other points during the course, the learners are assessed on what they have learned from the course. This may have the purpose of examining the effectiveness of the course as much as testing the learners.
6. *Proficiency assessment:* Proficiency assessment is based on items drawn from the language as a whole rather than from the content of a particular course. It tries to measure a learner's language knowledge in relation to other learners who may have studied different courses, or in relation to areas of language knowledge that are based upon an analysis of the language.

### **MODELS OF CURRICULUM DESIGN**

In order to see how adequate a model is, it can be compared with other models to see where they overlap and where they don't. Let us try to match the parts of Graves' diagram with the one used in this paper. The table below lists the parts of language curriculum design model and that of Graves' model.

<i>Language Curriculum Design model</i>	<i>Graves's framework of course development processes</i>
Environment analysis	Defining the context
Needs analysis	Assessing needs
Principles	Articulating beliefs
Goals	Formulating goals and objectives
Content and sequencing	Organising the course Conceptualising content
Format and presentation	Developing materials
Monitoring and assessment	Designing an assessment plan
Evaluation	Designing an assessment plan

**Table 2. A comparative analysis of Graves's model of curriculum design (2000)**

As it can be seen, each of the models has eight parts and there is considerable overlap between the two models. There are two major differences.

1. Content and sequencing in the *Language Curriculum Design* model matches two parts of the Graves (2000) model – organizing the course and conceptualizing content.
2. Monitoring and assessment and evaluation in the *Language Curriculum Design* model are included in one part of the Graves (2000) model – designing an assessment plan. In her book Graves distinguishes evaluation from assessment, but deals with both in the same chapter.

Clearly there is a great deal of similarity between the two models. The next table compares the *Language Curriculum Design* model and Murdoch's model. It can be seen four parts of Murdoch's model fit into environment analysis. Two parts of his model fit into needs analysis (lacks and necessities), and three parts into content and sequencing. Part of what is included in content and sequencing overlaps with format and presentation, that is, the choice of suitable textbooks. However, Principles, monitoring and assessment, and evaluation are not included in Murdoch's model.

<i>Language Curriculum Design model</i>	<i>Murdoch's model of curriculum design</i>
Environment analysis	Resource limitations that affect classroom activity Sociocultural factors and learning habits of relevance to English teaching Learners' age group, present lifestyle and interests Aspects of target culture that will interest learners and can be exploited in materials
Needs analysis	Learners' present level of competence Reasons for studying English and long-term learning aims
Principles	
Goals	Course objectives
Content and sequencing	Language and procedures to be covered by the course Emphasis on particular skills Themes for course materials and texts: choice of suitable textbooks
Format and presentation	Methodology to be used: type and sequencing of activities
Monitoring and assessment	
Evaluation	

**Figure 3. A comparative analysis of Murdoch's model of curriculum design (1989)**

### CONCLUSION & PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

In conclusion, we must see how the curriculum design model apply to the daily work of teachers in language classes. The reason for doing this is to show that even decisions which just relate to part of a lesson could be improved by an understanding of the wider curriculum design process. Teachers have always tried to find an answer to a mind-boggling question of "how languages should be taught or learnt"; however, there is no one right answer. Different environments require different approaches, and different teachers and learners are comfortable with different approaches. Rather than looking for the magic method, it is better to work at the level of principle, seeing how the same principles can apply in different situations. Moreover, teachers must know that environment analysis, needs analysis and principles make up the three outer circles of the curriculum design diagram. These three parts of the curriculum design process provide data and guidance for the parts of the inner circle of the diagram. Without the information from the outer circles, setting goals, deciding on the content and sequencing of items in the course, deciding what activities and lesson formats to use, and monitoring and assessing, learners' progress would be uninformed, ad hoc processes.

After having enough information on the outer circle, it's time for teachers to pay attention to elements of inner circle. Goals are represented in the small inner circle of the curriculum design diagram. This is because the whole purpose of the language course is

centered on what the learners need to learn. Goals are central to any curriculum designs, but unfortunately not all teachers set language learning goals for the activities they use in class. Content and sequencing is also essential, since teachers must know what will be in the course and the order in which it will occur. The choice of the ideas content of a course can involve the application of several principles. The idea behind content-based instruction is that a course which focuses on a content subject like mathematics, literature or tourism can also be a very useful means of language development. There are two major dangers to be aware of in such courses. Firstly, a focus on the content matter is necessarily a message-focused approach to language learning. The focus is on the content matter of the material. It is important in such courses that language-focused learning is not neglected. That is, there should be some deliberate focus on language features in such courses (Langman, 2003). Language-focused learning has a very important role to play in any language course. Secondly, a focus on a particular subject area can mean that more generally useful language items might not be met often in the course. Content-based instruction, however, can be a very effective way of improving content matter knowledge and language proficiency.

Evaluation is another important element, which is firstly done by teachers themselves. When a teacher says that a course is going well, this is useful, but not very convincing, evidence for outsiders. Having some measurable form of evaluation may be more convincing. It is always useful for teachers to keep records of learners' performance, and where possible to include some formal evaluation at various times in their courses. This evaluation can consist of brief questionnaires, examples of students' work, records of improvement such as speed-reading graphs or writing graphs, and the amount of work completed such as the amount of extensive reading that the students have done. In addition, it is a useful professional development exercise for teachers to evaluate their language course using some principles of language teaching. That is, for each principle, the teacher describes how it is being implemented in their course.

At the end, it must be mentioned that the study of curriculum design requires the integration of knowledge from a number of fields. First, curriculum design for language teaching is part of the wider field of curriculum design in education. Much of the research and theory drawn on in this book has its roots in this larger field. Second, curriculum design inevitably involves assessment and evaluation and these are both part of a wider field, and represent rapidly growing areas of knowledge in second-language teaching. Third, curriculum design involves the consideration of learning and teaching and the principles that guide those activities. Fourth, curriculum design involves teacher training, innovation and the continuing development of teachers.

The purpose of this paper was to present the issues and options available for curriculum design and help with developing an understanding of the basic concepts of it both for specialists and teachers; therefore, they can recognize problems and be able to converse about curriculum design. In this way, even beginner teachers can at least convey vital information to curriculum designers and contribute to improving the system rather than to be a passive "victim" of an ineffective educational system.

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## Appendix 1. Questions for focusing on needs

<i>Goals</i>	<i>Questions</i>	<i>Types of information in the answers</i>
Language	What will the course be used for? How proficient does the user have to be? What communicative activities will the learner take part in? Where will the language be used?	sounds vocabulary grammatical structures functions set phrases and set sentences tasks
Ideas	What content matter will the learner be working with?	topics themes texts
Skills	How will the learner use the language? Under what conditions will the language be used? Who will the learners use the language with?	listening speaking reading writing degree of accuracy degree of fluency
Text	What will the language be used to do? What language uses is the learner already familiar with?	genres and discourse types sociolinguistic skills

## Appendix 2: Methods and examples of need analysis

<i>Type of need</i>	<i>Focus</i>	<i>Method</i>	<i>Example</i>
Necessities	Proficiency	Self-report Proficiency testing	Level of vocabulary knowledge (Nation and Beglar, 2007) Level of fluency e.g. reading speed
	Situations of use	Self-report Observation and analysis Review of previous research Corpus analysis	Analysis of texts (Nation, 2006) Analysis of exams and assignments (Friederichs and Pierson, 1981; Horowitz, 1986) Analysis of tasks (Brown et al., 1984) MICASE ( <a href="http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/micase/">http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/micase/</a> )
Lacks	Proficiency	Self-report Testing	Vocabulary tests
	Situations of use	Self-report Observation and analysis	Examiners' reports Analysis of tasks (Ellis, 1986)
Wants	Wishes	Self-report	
	Use	Observation	Records of choices of activities Teachers' observation