

Didactic unit design

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Abstract

Teachers use course books within the classroom and the units to be found in them because it saves time however, units should be personalized to the students' needs and the characteristics of the schools, resources available, etc. if they are going to have maximum effect. This article argues in favour of the importance of designing units specifically for our students and the adaptation of existing materials and resources as a means of improving the teaching-learning progress.

Keywords: unit design, foreign language teaching, language schools, needs analysis

Título: Diseño de la unidad didáctica.

Resumen

Los profesores utilizamos unidades didácticas ya diseñadas por editoriales dentro del aula por la facilidad y por la comodidad que ofrecen al profesor, pero ¿realmente son eficaces? El diseño de la unidad didáctica debe tener en cuenta el alumnado, el centro, los medios disponibles dentro del aula, y las unidades publicadas pueden no ser aptos para nuestra escuela. Este artículo muestra cómo se debe diseñar una unidad a través de un ejemplo para escuelas oficiales de idiomas.

Palabras clave: Diseño unidades didácticas, escuelas oficiales de idiomas, inglés.

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Teachers have become so used to using existing material that the process of didactic unit design is fast becoming outdated. If we take into consideration the effort and time that designing a didactic unit takes, it would seem logical then to adopt those created by "real" experts in the form of textbooks but in the end, are they effective? A didactic unit is not just content from the corresponding syllabus but also the result of other key elements such as needs analysis, student preference for study, student diversity, location, teachers etc. In all probability, these are not covered in the standard version we have adopted for use in the classroom. These factors are subject to context and must be taken into account on designing our didactic unit. This article does not aim to condone the use of readymade didactic units, but aims to underline the importance of adapting existing ones and creating new ones tailored to our students. Here, we will explain the process of didactic unit design by giving an example.

What must we take into account when designing a didactic unit?

CONTEXT

Where we will be teaching? To whom? The age of our students, the catchment area, the school per se, its resources, etc. must all be taken into account.

This didactic unit will be used in an E.O.I in the Canary Islands on one of the smaller islands. In this case, the population is mainly urban, although the surrounding areas are agricultural or residential zones with little commercial activity. The majority of the population therefore is employed in Public Administrations, Agriculture or the Service Sector. In general, as there is no marked immigration or cultural and social differences, the students are homogeneous, coming from similar backgrounds.

The school in itself is small, consisting of only six classrooms, each with a capacity for thirty-five students. Each classroom is equipped with a whiteboard, a computer with an internet connection and an overhead projector.

NEEDS ANALYSIS (NA)

In order to define the students' needs and thus be able to better design the unit, I designed a questionnaire, which covered the following areas:

- Personal information.
- E.O.I familiarization.

- Preferred teaching/learning methods.
- Spoken English ability.

It was uploaded to Google Drive and each student was given a link.

By providing direct questions, I could avoid excess information, which would camouflage the students' needs. Each student would have individual access, avoiding interference from the other students. They could also do it at their convenience and give the questions the consideration needed. It also saved classroom time for other activities.

To clear up any ambiguous answers I also conducted an individual interview when needed.

Although objective, in that it collates information like age, it is mainly subjective in that it elicits the learners' attitudes and views on preferred learning methodology, motivations, impression of their language level etc. (Nunan, 1988). NA is based on the assumption that learning is a process that involves both the students and the teacher, where the learners achieve a sense of control over their learning (Graves, 1996) and teachers are better prepared to deal with the course planning.

I also decided to do a teacher's checklist (Burgess and Head, 2005) as part of my NA.

To ensure confidentiality the students were assigned a letter: A, B, C, D, etc.

The NA revealed that the students who attend this E.O.I do so:

- To improve their knowledge of languages in order to increase their opportunities of finding employment, thus making themselves candidates that are more competitive.
- As a job requirement of their current employment.
- To gain an A2/B1/B2/C1 certificate as proof of proficiency. On the island there are few organizations, either public or private, that provide preparation for the obtainment of these diplomas of language level, thus the Language School many times is the sole option.
- To study languages as a hobby: i.e. with no specific aim.

It also showed that the majority of students:

- have little study time outside the classroom.
- are highly motivated
- have limited access to spoken English outside the classroom.
- prefer working in a group.
- use IT to study.
- do not like their mistakes being pointed out by the teacher.
- prefer aural methods of study.
- do not like to follow a textbook.
- consider themselves shy.
- consider themselves lacking in fluency.
- find pronunciation, grammar in speech and vocabulary most difficult.

With the above information and the more specific details of the syllabus, the teacher can start to design their didactic unit. Here is an example:

TITLE: Manic Monday

TECHNICAL DETAILS:

- Level: 3rd year of Official Language School (Intermediate level 1.) After finishing years 3 and 4 of intermediate level, the learner will have achieved level B1 on CEFR.

- Topic: Daily routines, free time and hobbies.
- Students: 16+ (According to legislation: article 8 Decree 362/2007 2nd Oct 14 years of age, not the case here).
- Group: 30 students. There is one student with slight visual impairment. (NB. Class is relatively small due to the circumstance of the school belonging to a small island.)
- Sessions: 6 (Each session is 2 hours and 15 minutes in length.)
- Context: The School is located in a small urban area of a non-capital island. The classrooms of the School are large enough to take classes of up to 40 students and they are equipped with natural light, an overhead projector and a whiteboard.

JUSTIFICATION:

This unit is comprised of elements of the basic general content of the Intermediate Level of the Official Language School Syllabus as specified in the Royal Decree 1629/2006 of 29th of December. In addition, in accordance with the School's General Annual Programme and Educational Programme, it aims to achieve communicative competence in order to promote employment and academic opportunity. We should underline the fact that many potential students have left the island due to the lack of opportunity it offers in these fields due to its peripheral nature.

It is the first unit of eight, which make up the course syllabus for 3rd Year, equivalent to an Intermediate Threshold Users level. The topic used is "daily routines, free time and hobbies" as:

a) it is a means of allowing the students to get to know each other, thus making them feel more comfortable in the classroom and preparing them for the upcoming collaborative work they will be doing with their peers on several occasions throughout the course and

b) it revises and expands on knowledge that is characteristic of the Basic Waystage User, giving the student the opportunity to get back into the swing of things.

UNIT OBJECTIVES:

According to J.D. Brown (cited Graves, 1996); goals must be what the students should be able to do when they leave the programme. They should also be general (Richards, 1990) but not to the point that they are vague (Graves 1996).

To achieve the unit aim I have divided it into "precise" and "feasible" objectives (Richards, 1990: 124). These chunks (Woodward, 2001) will motivate the student as it breaks the aim into "learnable and teachable units" (Graves, 1996: 76). The students will know exactly where they are going, which according to studies by Mayer and Clark (Nunan, 1988) makes learning much faster. Bearing this in mind:

At the end of the unit, students will be able to:

1. Correctly pronounce the "s" sound.
2. Know and use vocabulary related to routines and hobbies correctly.
3. Give opinions with reasons.
4. Correctly describe habits and routines.
5. Correctly use stative and dynamic verbs.
6. Correctly distinguish and use the present simple and present continuous tenses.
7. Write an informal email
8. Get the gist of audio texts
9. Give feedback, which can be used to cater the classes to the students' needs.
10. Read a text and give relevant information.
11. Correctly form and use object and subject questions.

This is not to say that throughout the unit the student may achieve other objectives that were not foreseen at the beginning and which work towards its aim. (Graves, 1996).

CONTENT:

Linguistic competence:

- Form and use of the present simple and present continuous tense.
- Knowledge of lexicon related to routines and hobbies
- Static and dynamic verbs
- Subject and Object questions
- Pronunciation of the “s” sound.

Socio-linguistic competence:

- Use and register of informal written structures (writing an email)
- Use of polite linguistic structures to give opinions and reasons

Pragmatic competence:

- To ask and give information about personal issues
- To give an opinion and justify it.
- To situate events in the present and present continuous
- Knowing the appropriate structures and form of an informal email

EVALUATION CRITERIA: The student:

- correctly pronounces the /s/ sound.
- Knows and uses vocabulary related to routines and hobbies correctly.
- Gives opinions with reasons.
- Correctly describe habits and routines.
- Shows understanding through correctly using stative and dynamic verbs in written expression.
- Shows understanding through correctly using the present simple and present continuous aspect in written and spoken expression.
- Writes an informal email
- Can read a text comprehensively and shows understanding by giving the relevant information.
- Shows understanding of aural texts by answering questions about it.
- Gives feedback used to cater the classes to the student’s needs
- Correctly uses object and subject questions

ASSESSMENT:

During the unit, it will be necessary to assess the students on a regular basis to avoid deviation from the objectives. At the same time, the students have the information they need and it gives them the chance to improve (Baxter, 1999). It is also expected by the students (Burgess and Head, 2005).

As specified in the Royal Decree 1629/2006 of 29th of December, evaluation in this unit will be continuous assessment, taking into account the work done in class, that done at home and student attitude and participation. It is a continuous process undertaken throughout the unit. Evaluation therefore is direct and indirect, as well as being holistic. It is to an

extent therefore subjective, although in order to validate the evaluation of the teacher, individual and peer assessment will also be taken into account. Evaluation will be done via criterion referencing.

Formative assessment will not be graded as, according to Crooks (2001), the student may focus only on the result and not the feedback being given. To avoid negative backwash, feedback will be given in the form of comments and observations.

Throughout the unit the teacher will supervise learning unobtrusively. The NA showed that the students did not like to be corrected. Assessment therefore will have to be subtle and guided by suggestions and positive feedback. This is one of the reasons that the unit has been designed to be learner focused with emphasis on peer assessment.

There will also be a group discussion between the students afterwards, where ideas, thoughts, impressions and advice will be exchanged, thus ensuring self and peer assessment. This assessment is valid, in that it is only assessing the course objectives, reliable, practical and enforces positive backwash.

Evaluation:

Evaluation of a unit is multifaceted in that it evaluates many different aspects: the installations, the materials, the teaching methods etc. but we can summarise all this into one basic function: to evaluate the effectiveness of the course (Richards 1990).

Evaluation of this course will be:

Formative evaluation: done by teacher reflexion based on

- the answer/question sections at the end of each class, which is where the teacher receives feedback from the students.
- the results of the formative assessment.
- observation of class room activities.
- tutorials

METHODOLOGY:

• The methodology to be used is learner based as requested by the students in the NA. The teacher will be a facilitator of information and a guiding figure (Burgess and Head, 2005). Peer correction and group activities will be used.

• As they have little time outside the classroom to study, I wish to make the unit as intensive as possible. In order to do this and to not bore and thus demotivate, it is necessary that it be ever changing, giving the student frequent fresh starts and avoiding monotony (May, 1996). Atmospherics (Woodward, 2001) will be an important part of the course to engage the students in the classes.

• As time is limited, the unit will be task based so that it focuses on each of the four skills to be evaluated at the end of the course: speaking, writing, listening and reading.

• The students do not have any opportunity to speak English outside the classroom therefore the classes will be in English. This was also requested in the NA.

MOTIVATION: I will be incorporating group activities to enhance student rapport and thus keep motivation high. The course is task orientated so that the students feel it is directly related to their needs and therefore has high face validity.

STRESS AND ANXIETY: Exams cause student anxiety and this can affect the students' performance. The course work therefore will use tasks that are similar to those to be found in the end of course exam and will imitate to some extent exam conditions.

BACKWASH: To avoid negative backwash the unit is designed on the students' needs as defined by the NA. To ensure positive backwash, it will use authentic materials so that the skills learnt can be used in their normal day to day lives.

BALANCING TEACHING AND TESTING: It is designed to teach first and then test the student. In this way the students' confidence is gradually built up: they can observe the learning process and see the progress made when given feedback. Continual revision and recycling will occur throughout to reinforce the objectives achieved.

SUITABLE MATERIALS: Authentic materials where possible will be used. The students stated in the NA that they did not want to follow a course book, so the materials will be as varied as possible: from the internet, created by the teacher and also by the students.

LEARNER AUTONOMY: As manifested in the NA, the students have little time and therefore need to learn how to maximize the time they have. The unit therefore is designed to show students that every opportunity is a learning opportunity and that it can be done outside the classroom i.e. by watching the TV in English, listening to English songs etc.

Silent period: Throughout the unit, the students will not be forced to talk in public until they feel ready, therefore the use of volunteers for class activities where speaking will be undertaken.

Community Language Learning: The students hold part of the responsibility for how their learning takes place, via group discussions of the learning process.

Use of L2 in the classroom: in order to maximise students L2 exposure.

The use of “realia” in the classroom to make learning more meaningful.

STRATEGIES:

- Use of varied activities, of different lengths to maintain motivation.
- Provide the student with tasks that are within their capacity. (Scaffolding of activities: starting off with revision of given concepts to continue with new knowledge).

ATTENTION TO DIVERSITY:

- The student with visual impairment will be given worksheets with augmented text size as well as a front row seat in class, in order to be able to better see the whiteboard and overhead projection images.
- Regarding different learning styles, in this unit we will use the following in order to stimulate the different cognitive learning styles:
 - Bodily Kinaesthetic: e.g. Simon Says, My Mirror.
 - Interpersonal: e.g. Who Am I? Relay Race
 - Linguistic: e.g. Grammatical explanations
 - Musical: e.g. Manic Monday song
 - Intrapersonal: e.g. Classroom Diary

USE OF NEW TECHNOLOGIES:

Internet (YouTube videos), overhead projector, audio material (songs).

Once the basics to the unit have been set, the teacher must create a sequence of activities to fulfil the unit criteria. In this case, the NA questionnaire reveals that the majority of students prefer to work in groups, logically then, the teacher should incorporate group activities into the unit to maximise motivation and learning. Again, as the classrooms have no Wi-Fi connection, interactive activities such as Kahoot, cannot be used within the unit, and so on.

As the unit stands, it can be used for a specific group but can it be used again for following groups? Theoretically, the answer should be no because in all probability the chances of teaching two identical groups are very minute even though there exist identical circumstances, such as the installations. Another factor is the evaluation of the unit in itself: did everything go perfectly? Or do we have to change elements? Formative assessment consists in seeing what works and eliminating what does not. Ideally, the unit should be perfect but experience shows that there are always modifications to be made to improve the overall outcome of the unit. It would seem then that the chances of repeating the same unit as it stands is minimal, so why do we as teachers continually use the same course book with the same units?

To conclude, this article argues that the use of prepared units by teachers may impede student learning and as a result, design and adaptation are key factors and should be encouraged by educational institutions.

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