

## Planning Assessment within a Task-based Instructional Approach

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*Summary: This article describes how teachers can be trained to plan their courses effectively by using a teaching approach that blends task-based teaching with assessment.*

*Keywords: course planning, teaching approach, task-based teaching, assessment.*

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### Introduction

“We’d like you to teach a speaking course.” What would you do as a young teacher presented with such a task for the first time? As a college English teacher with five-years’ experience teaching in a program with preset materials and testing, this was the situation I faced during my first year teaching in the Japanese-university system; instructors are usually expected to be self-reliant, given only brief course descriptions, and thus responsible for selection of their course materials, teaching method, and means of assessment. It was an arrangement that proved to be a gift for my professional development: it taught me the importance of planning, particularly with respect to organizing instruction and assessment. Over the next sixteen years, I taught a variety of reading, writing, listening, and speaking courses that required using a range of instructional and assessment activities, experience that served to be valuable preparation for my current work as a TESOL instructor.

### Linking Assessment and Task-based Language Teaching

For the past eleven years, I have taught in the MA TESOL Program at Trinity Western University in Langley, B.C. The students include both experienced and novice English teachers from a variety of countries. Many of them are native speakers of other languages. Among the courses I teach is one on assessment. In line with my classroom experience, there are two critical ideas I want the students to grasp: one is that classroom assessment is interconnected with the other elements recognized as part of the curriculum, which includes learner needs, course aims and objectives, materials, instruction, and evaluation. The other is that as an integral element of the curriculum, effective assessment—that which helps learners achieve their learning aims for

a given course—needs to be well planned as teachers prepare and conduct their courses.

For most courses in our program, students complete a final written project. In the assessment course, the main project I have assigned has been to write a proposal outlining an assessment approach for a course that students have taught or planned to teach. For example, a student with experience teaching business English might present a plan for a speaking course for Korean business people in which those students would be required to give sales and other types of presentations for which both peer and instructor assessment would be given according to specific criteria.

This type of project is not without its weaknesses. The most general is that an “approach” is by nature rather broad; it is difficult for less experienced teachers to envision it working in the classroom with their target group of learners. A second weakness of the project has been an artificial separation of assessment from other curricular elements. I have thus sought to revise this assignment so as to enable students to take those other elements into consideration more easily.

The revised project implemented during the recent winter semester in 2022 owes its structure to that of topical modules in use in English courses for immigrants in Canada. Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (“LINC” as it is popularly known), the English program taught across the country for teaching adult learners of English, underwent restructuring early in the past decade to enable uniformity in program structure. The cornerstone of this restructuring is PBLA (Portfolio-based Language Assessment). This acronym is rather misleading; while a portfolio is kept for each learner throughout their time in the program, the language assessment conducted in the classroom is in fact task based—i.e., based on performance during communicative activities (Nunan, 2004).

It is this task-based method of evaluating learners used in PBLA that I've adopted in the revised project format. It places a strong emphasis on assessment for learning, which uses teacher feedback to help learners "identify where they are and what they need to do next" (PBLA) and also promotes assessment of learning, which teachers use to provide information to learners regarding what they have learned as well as what they have not. Assessment for learning can be applied at any time during a course; it challenges teachers to consider how their feedback can help their students to build the skills and/or knowledge that the course is designed to provide. Assessment of learning, meanwhile, helps teachers to be aware of knowledge or skill gaps that need to be addressed, whether immediately or at a later time.

When planning their classes, LINC teachers select general themes (e.g. housing) and within each theme prepare specific modules, such as "dealing with household problems" (Schmuck & Hajer, 2020). For each module, the teacher creates a detailed plan in order to meet specific standards-based, real-world goals and develops tasks intended to help meet the identified goals. The set of standards used in the LINC program was developed by the Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks. The Canadian Language Benchmarks comprise 12 proficiency levels; at each level, a profile of language ability, task ideas and can-do statements are designated for each of the four macro skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Once a teacher selects the module topic and goals and identifies the relevant language in relation to the topic, they develop the module plan around three types of activities:

- skill-building activities done primarily during the early stages of a module, focusing on grammatical structures and vocabulary terms relevant to the topic;
- skill-using tasks during the middle stages, which involve students carrying out authentic tasks with teacher guidance; and
- assessment tasks at the end of the module—similar to the skill-using tasks but unguided to demonstrate whether the learners have achieved the module goals.

In addition to written feedback from the teacher for each assessment task, learners are asked to reflect on how well they have carried out the assessment tasks and may also be asked to do a general reflection on their achievement of the goals of the module. (See Table 1 for a sample module plan.)

In order to help my assessment-course students prepare their final project, I developed a template,

Module Topic: Getting Coffee at a coffee shop

CLB Level 2

Skills	Listening/ Writing	Reading	Listening	Speaking
<b>Real-World Task Goals</b>	Taking Classmates' Coffee/ Tea Orders	Understanding a Change to a Classmate's Coffee/Tea Order	Understanding People in Line in a Coffee Shop	Ordering Coffee or Tea
<b>Indicators of Abilities</b>	<p><b>Listening Comprehending Information</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understand simple information about a familiar topic.</li> <li>• Identify specific factual details such as numbers, keywords.</li> </ul> <p><b>Writing Getting Things Done</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Complete short and simple forms that require only basic personal identification or familiar information, writing in appropriate sections</li> <li>• follow basic spelling rules</li> <li>• write legibly</li> </ul>	<p><b>Comprehending Information</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understand the purpose and some basic details in very simple, short texts related to everyday, familiar, personally relevant situations.</li> <li>• Identify purpose.</li> <li>• Identify a few key words and short, common expressions.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Interacting with Others</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understand greetings, introductions, requests, goodwill expressions and an expanding range of basic courtesy formulas.</li> <li>• Identify common courtesy phrases and an expanding range of expressions.</li> <li>• Respond to requests for basic personal information or to identify people and objects.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Getting Things Done</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Make and respond to simple requests related to common everyday activities.</li> <li>• Use appropriate memorized expressions, simple sentences and courtesy formulas.</li> </ul>
<b>Language Focus</b>	<p><b>Vocabulary</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• coffee, tea, black, green tea, decaf, cream, sugar, milk, small, medium, large, extra-large, double double</li> </ul> <p><b>Listening Grammar</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Basic grammar structures used to interpret listening texts (such as simple verb tenses, simple modals) ("I want, I don't want")</li> <li>• Basic syntax (such as indication of a statement, a negative)</li> <li>• Basic English phonological sound system</li> </ul> <p><b>Writing Grammar</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Common everyday English spelling rules</li> </ul> <p><b>Functional</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify the layout and parts of forms such as "areas to complete"</li> </ul>	<p><b>Vocabulary</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• cell phone, texting, text message, messaging app, change, order, more</li> </ul> <p><b>Grammar</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Basic words and expressions about essential everyday experiences such as text messages</li> <li>• Basic grammar structures such as simple verb tenses to get a general understanding of the text</li> </ul>	<p><b>Vocabulary</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• server, customer, line, toe, glove, keys, order, step, drop, forgot, Nice day, ch, no problem</li> </ul> <p><b>Grammar</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Basic grammar structures to interpret listening texts (such as simple verb tenses and simple yes/no questions)</li> <li>• Basic syntax (e.g. indications of a statement, a negative or a question; word order)</li> <li>• Basic English rhythm, intonation and other clues to interpret meaning</li> </ul>	<p><b>Vocabulary</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• tea, coffee, black, cream, sugar, milk, double double, with, small, medium, large, green tea, decaf, Here you go, Have a nice day, You too</li> </ul> <p><b>Grammar</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adequate pronunciation to convey basic messages</li> <li>• Use and understand common expressions for greeting (Hi, Hello) and leave-taking (Thank you. Thanks. Have a good day. Have a nice day.)</li> </ul>
<b>Skill-building Activities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "Coffee Order Vocabulary" matching activity</li> <li>• Writing coffee orders</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vocabulary matching activity (text messages)</li> <li>• Changing coffee orders activity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "Who says this?" activity</li> <li>• "Is it a question?" activity</li> <li>• Intonation for Questions and Statements" activity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "What do you say?" activity</li> <li>• "Responding Politely" activity</li> </ul>
<b>Skill-Using Tasks</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In groups, role-play using given cards that have different coffee/tea orders</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Read text messages and answer true or false questions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify appropriate responses to questions or statements people would say in line at a coffee shop</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In pairs and using props (if available), role-play ordering at a coffee shop</li> </ul>
<b>Assessment Tasks</b>	Role-play taking coffee/tea orders from the teacher	Read text messages about changes to a coffee/tea order and answer true or false comprehension questions	Identify appropriate responses to questions or statements people would say in line at a coffee shop	Role-play ordering a coffee or tea at a coffee shop

Table 1: Sample Module Plan. Source: [https://tutela.ca/Resource\\_38927](https://tutela.ca/Resource_38927)

along with a sample, to guide their planning. It is important to note that before beginning their project preparations, students had already carried out a mini project in collaborative groups, with each group analyzing a LINC module and evaluating the quality of the assessment plan for that module. They are thus familiar with the LINC approach to blending assessment and instruction, and this familiarity is supported by lectures focusing on various types of classroom assessment. (See the planning template at Figure 1.)

To enable students to plan effectively, they are first asked to identify the learners in terms of their cultural background, first language, age, and English-proficiency level. The assumption is made that every learner's L2 proficiency varies by skill area, and that this variability differs for each individual; while some learners are strongest in the area of reading comprehension, others are best when it comes to speaking, etc. Such information is important as the teacher considers learners' needs with respect to the particular course they are teaching.

With an understanding of learners' proficiency levels, a teacher can then consider elements of curriculum to guide their planning. This begins with identifying the intended outcomes for a course; that is, what are the most likely next steps for learners at the completion of a course; will they continue their language studies at a higher level, seek entrance to an

English-medium university, or enter the workforce? Knowing the answer to this question is critical to helping a teacher identify language and other needs (e.g., pragmatic) that need to be addressed in the course. Knowledge of intended outcomes and needs can then help in identifying suitable course aims, content, and objectives. With respect to LINC, content is most commonly related to learners' everyday language needs.

Once the students in my assessment course have selected a module topic for their project, they are then asked to list skill-building activities, skill-using tasks, and assessment tasks for each macro skill. From these, they are required to draft one skill-building

**Module Planning Template**

<b>Who are the learners?</b>			
<b>What type of course/program are they in?</b>			
<b>What is their CLB / CEFR level?</b>			
Speaking:      Listening:      Reading:      Writing:			
<b>What are their capabilities at that level? (CLB / CEFR can-do's)</b>			
Speaking	Listening	Reading	Writing
<b>What is the topical focus of the Module</b>			
<b>What are the intended outcomes for learners in this module?</b> (“Students will be able to . . .”)			
<b>What are the learners' language and communication needs in relation to the intended outcome(s)?</b>			
Speaking	Listening	Reading	Writing
<b>What type of Skill-building (SB) activities would be appropriate for this group?</b>			
<b>What Skill-using (SU) tasks would be appropriate for this group?</b>			
Speaking	Listening	Reading	Writing
<b>What Assessment Tasks (AT) would be appropriate for this group?</b>			
Speaking	Listening	Reading	Writing

Figure 1: Module Planning Template

activity and one assessment task, in addition to providing a description of a skill-using task, all for the same macro skill. Peers and the instructor then review their work to identify any elements in need of revision. After that, they complete an outline of their project, for which they receive instructor feedback. Finally, they present their module proposal in the form of either a written report or a Google slides/PowerPoint presentation.

“We’d like you to teach a speaking course.” While I would ask some questions to administrators about the learners and the purpose of the course, I know that I can plan effectively when I have an understanding of my learners' goals and proficiency levels and can teach and assess the students in a manner that can serve their learning needs and help them reach the next stage in their English-learning journey.

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