Module Two: Getting Started

Introduction

This module explores some issues relating to preparing to teach a lesson with a new group of students, including needs assessments and analysis, the use of placement tests to determine student levels and some first lesson communicative activities.

Imagine the following scenario: you have completed the online training course, applied for a job and been offered a contract. Although undoubtedly excited and eager to jump in and get started you are understandably also apprehensive. Even the most experienced teachers are prone to some butterflies in the stomach prior to meeting a new group of students for the first time. First impressions can set the tone for a whole course and/or series of lessons so it is important to get off to a good start and that requires careful planning and consideration.

1. Needs Assessments and Analysis

Many private language schools base their courses and examinations around published coursebooks such as *Headway* or *English File*. Module Eight addresses the pros and cons of working with coursebooks and teaching to a predetermined syllabus. As a general rule of best practice, teachers should always add supplementary materials to their lessons and provide a variety of activities. Sticking too rigidly to the coursebook can make lessons staid and predictable and basically just as boring for the teacher as for the students. For example, your new school is encouraging its teachers to experiment with lesson planning and has decided to abandon prescriptive course materials. This could be because the school is following the Dogme teaching style (see Module Three) or simply because they cannot afford to purchase endless sets of coursebooks. Whatever the reason, you have limited resources to work with and no detailed syllabus or scheme of work to follow. So what do you do? Where should you start?

Getting to know your new students is vital in building a positive learning environment and building teacher–student rapport and relationships. To this end a detailed *needs assessment* should be conducted and collated as soon as possible, preferably during the very first lesson. A *needs assessment* ascertains the principal interests of the students and identifies their language needs and expectations. Below is a checklist of key information that any worthwhile *needs assessment* should aim to gather and assess.

- Why are your students learning English? Why did they decide to come to this city/school?
- Who will they be speaking English to in the future? In what kind of situations?
- Do they find it more difficult to speak or to understand?
- Do they use English outside the classroom? When and with whom? How do they feel when using English in these circumstances?
- Do they read the news or watch English language television programmes and films?
- Which skills would they most like to work on? Speaking? Reading? Writing? Listening?
Stop Reading and Reflect

A traditional approach to compiling a needs analysis is via the use of questionnaires, as if conducting a market research project or an opinion poll. Think for a few minutes and make some notes about the most important aspects of questionnaires and issues to consider. For example: are the questions easy to understand? Are closed questions that elicit Yes/No answers easier for data collation or are they too restrictive in scope?

Task 2A

Compile a questionnaire for an intermediate class of adults to gather as much information from them as possible in ten simple to understand questions. Intermediate students can understand written English to a reasonable degree, although their lexis (the number of words they know) is not very advanced so you will need to think quite carefully how you phrase the questions and avoid any complicated vocabulary. The questions can be in open-ended format, encouraging the students to practise speaking if the students are interviewing each other in pairs, or closed format (yes/no answers or agree/disagree multiple choice responses to statements, etc.).

2. Negotiated Learning Method

Negotiated Learning Methods run on the principle that the students determine, through negotiation with their teacher/instructor, the content of their lessons according to their own specific needs and interests. Students are more likely to be enthused and engaged in their learning if it centres around a subject or topic that interests them or that they have some direct knowledge and/or life experience of.

One method of determining students’ specific areas of interest is to write up a list of general topics on the board such as:


Divide the class into small groups of three or four and encourage them to discuss amongst themselves which of the topics they would most like to have lessons created around and get them to rate the subjects in order of preference, with 1 being the most preferred and 10/12 the least preferred. Once all the groups have come to an agreed or negotiated decision the individual groups share their responses with
the other groups. Each group of three or four is given a number of votes (five votes works well with classes of 15 or more students) and the whole group votes on which topics and themes they would like addressed in the upcoming lessons.

By the end of the lesson you should have gathered lots of information about your students’ interests and activities outside of class. This information will prove to be invaluable in planning bespoke lessons to keep your learners engaged and help to build rapport.

3. Creating Student Profiles

Armed with the results of the questionnaires and/or the negotiated learning activity, you should now be in a position to build up short student profiles of your individual students. This can be done from your own notes but a more effective method is to create an activity where students interview each other to gather the information for you. The following activity works very well with multilingual classes but can be adapted for monolingual classes.


For example:

- Why are you studying English?
- How long have you lived in Spain/England, etc.
- Where do you work?
- Do you play any sports?
- What food do you like to eat?

Also elicit from the class grammatically correct responses and model answers:

- I need to study English for my job
- I play tennis
- I like to eat pasta/pizza, etc.

Brainstorm as many question forms as possible within a time limit and then whittle them down to the six or seven key pieces of information you require to create the student profiles. Divide the class into pairs and have each pair interview each other, noting down responses. Once the interviews have been conducted, direct the students to write up the information they have gathered onto file index cards (lower level groups may need a writing frame with some prompts or sample sentences in gap fill format). Gather in all of the profile cards, shuffle them up and redistribute them to the class. Tell the students they are NOT to show their file card to anybody else. Each student then takes turns in the ‘hot seat’ and answers questions from other members of the class with the aim of the rest of the group finding out who the information on their profile card relates to.

For example:
Student 1: ‘Do you play sport?’

Student in hot seat: ‘Yes, I do.’

Student 2: ‘What sport do you play?’

Student in hot seat: ‘I play football.’

The student in the ‘hot seat’ can only answer with the information they have on the card (not their own personal information) and cannot give away the name of the person until all of the information on the card has been shared with the group. This is to avoid the common trap, particularly with young adult groups, of the class repeatedly asking ‘are you Pedro/Maria?’, etc. The process then continues until the group has gathered and shared all of the information on the cards and each student has taken a turn in the ‘hot seat’.

As a plenary towards the end of the class, gather in all of the cards and invite the students to tell you three things they have learned/learnt about members of the class.

For example:

Student 1: ‘I have learned that Jana likes Italian food and works as a nurse.’

Student 2: ‘I have learnt* that David watches American films and has been studying English for five years.’

By the end of the lesson you will have gathered invaluable information on your students and have a brief profile of each student.

Differentiation

Differentiation is an important aspect of lesson planning as a class of students are unlikely to all work at the same speed, therefore it is essential to have some ideas of how lessons can be extended for more able students or simplified for less able students (see lesson plan below). For example, for a particularly advanced class it may be worth pointing out the difference in the examples above, namely the past participle of the verb ‘to learn’. In American English, ‘to learn’ is a regular verb (the participle form ends in ‘ed’); in British English it is irregular, hence ‘learnt*’. This could also be used as the springboard for a class discussion on the differences between British and American English and/or some pronunciation work as ‘learned’ when used as an adjective (meaning a highly educated person) has two syllables, whereas ‘learned’ as the past tense or past participle usage has only one syllable.

Task 2B

Although ostensibly an adaptation of the classic Twenty Questions/Who Am I? parlour game, the creating student profiles activity has considerable worth in terms of
a first class activity. Make a list of key aspects and values, such as skills practised, functions covered, class dynamics, etc. that creating student profiles covers for both teacher and students.
First Lesson Planning

The twenty-hour weekend course should have introduced you to lesson planning and the two templates which (with a few modifications) remain more or less standard formats. However, given the time constraints on the weekend course there is no harm in quickly refreshing and explaining the format again, especially as you will be required to submit lesson plans as your first assignment.

Lesson Plan Template One

This pro forma covers general information about the lesson content, the aims and objectives (learning outcomes), materials used, assessment methods, etc. Below is an explanation of the information required in each field/section (in red) and an example of a lesson plan for a first lesson using one of the activities described above (in black).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lesson Plan</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lesson Plan</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>This section contains general information on the class</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date: 10/12/68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duration: 45 mins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of students: 16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject: EFL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skill: Speaking, Listening, Writing</td>
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<tr>
<td>Level: Intermediate</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Lesson aims:** This section contains the overarching aims of the lesson. It is good practice to make sure this aim is clear and student-centred. For example:

By the end of the lesson the students will have interviewed each other and gathered and shared information about their lives and interests with the rest of the group. Teacher will have gathered information about the needs and expectations of the class.

**Specific learning outcomes:**

This section should contain all the actual information/language/knowledge to be presented or practised during the lesson.

Revise question forms:

**Assessment methods:**

Open practice, teacher to monitor and listen for grammatical errors and pronunciation.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What? When? Where? Do you like/play/watch?</th>
<th>Error correction to be kept to a minimum as confidence building/icebreaking/information-gathering activity.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Etc.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grammar presentation:</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Forming questions using the second person / third person</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Previous knowledge assumed: None**

This section invites you to estimate/appraise knowledge and skills the students may have already acquired. If, for example, you were presenting ‘going to’ for future plans to an intermediate class it would be safe to assume that they may be familiar with future simple tense ‘I will’ but not ‘going to’. In this instance, however, it is a first lesson with a new class so as a rule assume no previous knowledge as the point of needs assessment/student profiles, etc. is to gather information.

**Materials and equipment required:** Simply a checklist of materials and resources required for effective presentation of the lesson.

- Whiteboard / markers / file cards / pens / spare paper

**Room layout:** Do you need to rearrange the furniture for a specific activity?

Start with class in horseshoe arrangement/split into pairs and then reassemble in horseshoe.
It is good practice to give some thought in lesson planning to the fact that it is unlikely that all students will work at the same level or grasp the target language at the same time. Therefore, you need to differentiate for stronger and less able students. Have extension activities to test students who complete tasks quickly and have easier activities to hand if students are struggling.

General notes on differentiation / learning styles:

If the students seem to be finding the revision of question forms fairly easy and are confident in asking questions in the second person (e.g. ‘what food do you like?’), a contrast could be made with the use of questions in the third person (e.g. what food does he/she like?). As an extension activity a short grammar presentation on the use of ‘they’ in the third person singular should test the most grammatically adept student.

If the students are struggling with forming questions correctly, provide written prompts on the whiteboard for them to refer to.

Anticipated problems and solutions:

Of course it is impossible to predict exactly what may go wrong in the classroom but it is useful to have a few contingency plans worked out beforehand in anticipation.

Problems
- Students struggle with forming questions
- Some students unwilling to participate in whole group ‘hot seat’ activity
- Students find activity too easy and complete the work well before the end of the lesson.

Solutions
- Simplify list of questions to present simple likes and dislikes and model vocabulary and new words.
- Pick only the more confident students for the ‘hot seat’ and give them several opportunities – ensure that all students ask at least two questions each, however.

Take the hot seat yourself and encourage the students to ask you questions – also write up the six facts about yourself activity (four true/two false) and play ‘detectives’. Run class discussion during plenary about differences between British (‘I have learnt’) and American English (‘I have learned’).
Lesson Plan Template Two:

The second lesson plan template contains specific information about the actual nuts and bolts of the lesson, its different stages and activities. The pro forma is divided into five columns: Time, Phase, Teacher Activity, Student Activity and Focus.

**Time:** This section gives an estimation of the timings for the lesson. Although not set in stone (rarely does each part of a lesson run exactly like clockwork) it is a useful guideline and helps the teacher to have a prompt to keep the lesson well paced. Breaking the lesson down into time blocks can be tricky and there is the need to make room for some flexibility. However, if a lesson has a duration of 45 minutes, 5–10 minute blocks work as a good guideline. Any shorter and the lesson will become overly complicated; any longer and tasks run the risk of dragging on a bit.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Teacher Activity</th>
<th>Student Activity</th>
<th>Focus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0-5 mins</td>
<td>Intro/Warmer</td>
<td>Intro/ circle activity to learn names. Toss ball around the room - model instructions: 'my name is…' / 'what is your name'; throw ball to the</td>
<td>Students partake in circle activity to introduce themselves to each other by throwing the ball to each other, stating their name and asking the question.</td>
<td>T-S</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>S-S</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-10 mins</td>
<td>Starter / Presentation</td>
<td>person you are asking the question to. Q &amp; A: Elicit/brainstorm question forms-write structures on the board. Divide class into pairs and model instructions/give sample question. Leave time for students to develop ideas and monitor the pairs.</td>
<td>Students come up with basic question forms and functions. Students work in pairs to come up with questions to gather interesting information about each other. Students share their questions with the class.</td>
<td>T-S</td>
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<tr>
<td>10-15 mins</td>
<td>Pair Work</td>
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<tr>
<td>15-20 mins</td>
<td>Feedback/consolidation</td>
<td>Collate feedback of students' questions - write six/seven on the board as prompts. Split class again into different pairs / hand out file cards and model instructions that students are to interview each other and note down the answers.</td>
<td>Students take it in turns to ask and answer questions and note down answers.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-30 mins</td>
<td>Open Practice</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>30-40 mins</td>
<td>Plenary 1 / Practice Game</td>
<td>Collect in file cards and redistribute them amongst the students. Model</td>
<td>Students take it in turns to sit in the 'hot seat' whilst other students ask questions to try and decide who the information on the card is about.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
**Phase:** Well-structured lessons have a range of different tasks and activities such as *warmers* and *starters*, followed by a number of *main tasks* and then finishing with a *plenary* or summary to reinforce/check for learning.

**Teacher Activity:** In short, what is the teacher doing during this phase of the lesson? They could be presenting target language on the board or monitoring group work, facilitating Q & A, etc.

**Student Activity:** In short, what are the students doing during this phase of the lesson? E.g. pair work, gap fill/grammar exercises/group discussion/role play, etc.

**Focus:** This column acts as an indicator of the ‘learning focus’ and is to ensure that Teacher Talk Time is counterbalanced with opportunities for the students to practise speaking either in pairs or groups. The following abbreviations are used to determine the focus of the different phases:

- **T – S** (teacher to student as in board presentations or eliciting in brainstorming activities or Q & A sessions)
- **S – S** (student to student as in pairs/group work or open practice activities)

Below is a phase by phase lesson plan to accompany the creating student profiles lesson.
Placement Testing

Language schools that follow a coursebook-based syllabus will often provide placement tests at the start of new courses or classes. These are to determine the approximate level each individual student is at and give indicators to what they know and what they don’t know. Often these placement tests are linked to the materials and target language presented in a coursebook series. Most coursebook series such as *New Headway*, *English File* and *Inside Out* are graded into five levels: beginner, pre-intermediate (sometimes referred to as ‘false beginner’), intermediate, upper-intermediate and advanced. The placement tests are usually intended to provide clear level descriptors to differentiate between these levels.

The structure of most placement tests follows a classic format of three components: multiple choice grammar test, listening test (also multiple choice) and a writing sample. The tests are usually designed for ease of marking so that the make-up of different groups and levels can be determined as quickly as possible. For this reason, the marking scheme is out of 100 with the grammar test weighted with 50% to 60% of the marks, with the remaining marks divided up between the shorter listening and writing tasks.

Normally, the grammar test will start with fairly simple structures for the first 20 questions and then increase in difficulty as students progress through the test. The multiple choice is in the form of a gap fill sentence that invites the candidate to choose the correct or most appropriate option.

For example:

1) Paulo _____ from Italy  
   a) be  
   b) are  
   c) am  
   d) is

By the middle of the test (questions 20–30) the structures have become more complex to involve aspects such as comparative or superlative adjectives.

For example:

20) Paulo’s moped is _____ than Romeo’s moped  
    a) quickest  
    b) fastest  
    c) faster  
    d) fast

The final questions of the test are more likely to invite the candidate to choose the most appropriate word or phrase to fill the gap.

For example:
48) Before deciding to run a marathon please __________ you are not as young as you used to be

   a) believe that
   b) consider maybe
   c) think possibly
   d) bear in mind

These final questions can sometimes be ambiguous, with one or more answers possible and/or grammatically viable. However, they are aimed at students with an advanced grasp of English who have an ability or sensitivity to the subtle nuances in sentence structure and meaning.

Listening Tests

In addition to the main grammar multiple choice, many placement tests also have a short listening exercise. Typically this involves listening to a recording, typically of around two to three minutes long and answering comprehension questions (usually multiple choice). The recorded materials often take the form of a radio news bulletin or a short interview/dialogue. It is generally good practice to play the recording at least two or three times. To begin with, do not hand out the question papers but ask the students to listen to the recording and concentrate on getting the general gist of what it is about. Play the recording a second time, repeating the instructions and then distribute the question papers before playing the recording for a third and final time. Give the students a few minutes to read through the questions before playing the recording again. This is important as otherwise the students will be reading the questions and not listening (it is quite a skills test to listen and read at the same time!). Playing the recording three times following the process above should be sufficient; some students will undoubtedly struggle but resist the temptation to play the material over and over again as spoon-feeding the answers could contaminate the validity of the test results. The whole listening test normally takes between 10 and 15 minutes.

Writing Tests

The writing portion of the placement test is usually a timed, free-writing exercise with the emphasis on personalisation. The task could be writing a letter to a friend describing a holiday or a trip abroad or describing a favourite book or film. The candidates are usually given 30 to 45 minutes for the writing task and many tests stipulate a minimum word length (e.g. 200 words). It is good practice to point out to the candidates that the word length is a guideline and they will not be penalised for exceeding it and as a rule of thumb, 200 words is roughly four paragraphs.

Marking Scheme and Level Descriptors
The marking of the multiple choice sections is fairly straightforward and usually there is a template available to correct the tests as easily and quickly as possible. The personalised writing sections are more difficult to assess, however. Problems can arise for a number of reasons, ranging from the legibility of an individual candidate’s handwriting and how they have organised their scripts to more subjective judgements about style and content. The IELTS exam (International English Language Testing System) stipulates the following four-part assessment criteria which provides a yardstick for assessing personalised writing tasks (and can be adapted for marking students’ writing tasks in class/homework).

1) **Task Achievement:** To what extent has the candidate/student satisfied the requirements of the task? Have they understood fully what was required of them and produced a well-developed and appropriate response?

2) **Coherence and Cohesion:** To what extent has the candidate/student presented their scripts effectively? *Coherence* relates to how readable the script is: Can it be clearly understood? *Cohesion* relates to the organisation of the script: Is there a logical presentation of ideas, e.g. introductory paragraphs, summaries and conclusions, etc.?

3) **Lexical Resources:** To what extent has the candidate/student displayed a range of appropriate and accurate vocabulary in expressing their ideas? Is there much repetition of the same words and phrases or has the candidate displayed variety in the language they have used?

4) **Grammatical Accuracy:** To what extent has the candidate produced grammatically correct sentence structures and paragraphs? How many mistakes are there in the script and are they common errors or minor slips?

If the three components of the test are conventionally weighted (Grammar 60%/Listening 20%/Writing 20%), five marks can be apportioned according to how far the candidates/students have satisfied the four criteria above (i.e. 4 x 5 sets of grades). Below is a general guideline to how the marks out of a hundred translate into descriptions of different levels:

- 0 – 20% - Beginner
- 20% – 30% - False Beginner/ Pre-Intermediate
- 30% – 50% - Intermediate
- 50% – 70% Upper Intermediate
- 70%+ Advanced