



Course Concepts

An introduction to the series

This is a series of Course Concepts for teaching English as a Foreign Language to (young) adults at a relatively advanced level. They are for skills-based courses and will cover the following: Oral Skills; Writing Skills; Reading and Vocabulary Skills; Study Skills; Translating Skills; Combined Skills.

What is meant by Course Concepts?

Before you can teach a course, any course, you first have to do a lot of planning. Who will you be teaching? What will they know already? What are they required to learn? What will they want to learn? How much time do you have? What do you want to teach them? How are you going to teach? What is the guiding principle behind your choice of content and methodology?

In other words, you need a clear concept for your course. This takes time, and energy.

As a teacher of English for many years at the Language Institute of the University of Konstanz in Germany, I had the freedom (or seen from the other perspective: the necessity) to develop my own courses, from the concept to the materials, and I also had the time to discover what was effective and useful in the long run. I taught a wide variety of courses to a wide variety of students and staff, at different levels, from absolute beginners to students of English preparing for their degree exams. For each course I had to ask the questions above and find answers.

Over the years, concepts for certain kinds of courses grew out of this experience. They served as a kind of framework. They could be adapted and developed. They worked.

Out of all the course concepts I developed, those offered in this series are for skills-based courses at a relatively advanced level. They can be seen as the backbone of any English programme and can be taught anywhere, not only at a university.

Why offer Course Concepts? Who are they for?

They may be for you.

If you are working with (young) adults at a relatively advanced level, whether at a college, university, school, evening classes or any other institution, you

will probably be expected to teach the kind of course for which there is no course book. The course concepts here are for teachers who do not have the time, or perhaps feel they lack the experience, to develop a complete course from scratch themselves. They offer the teacher the kind of support a course book does, but they also allow or rather encourage flexibility. They are what I would have wished for in my early years of teaching.

Each individual Course Concept focuses on a particular set of skills e.g. Reading, Oral production, Writing, or combination of these. Each one includes a rationale, a step-by-step path, and sample materials. Each one is structured in a logical and sensible way, with one thing (task, topic, sub-skill etc.) building on or linking with the other. They can be used as they stand; they can also be used as a framework with which you can develop your own individual course. You can change the order in which things are done to suit your own purposes. And of course the actual materials used (texts, films etc.) should be chosen to suit the needs and interests of your particular students. As the contribution of the students to each course is considerable, the experience for the teacher is always different. The learning never ends. This is what makes the teaching so interesting and enjoyable.

What kind of learners are they intended for?

The Course Concepts are based on courses originally designed for university students, primarily those with English as a major or minor. In Germany, students usually begin studying around the age of 19, and based on their school leaving exams are considered to have reached level B2 in English on the CEFR¹. In reality, this may be the case for some skills, but generally not for all. For this reason I concentrated on helping the learners first to consolidate their knowledge and ability at the B2 level before progressing to C1, perhaps even C2.

The Concepts work well with all adult learners, as their needs in terms of skills tend to be the same. Their personal interests may be very different, however, and this must be catered for within each Course Concept.

Some methodology and principles:

Each course presented here as a concept is designed for one university term, i.e. roughly 14 weeks of classes, with only one 90-minute class per week. If students majoring in English are expected to reach C1/C2 but are only required to take six courses, then twenty-one hours contact time per course is actually not much.

For this reason very careful choices of course content and of methodology had to be made: what exactly did I want the students to learn during the term, and how could I make best use of the time spent together in class. I tried to differentiate between what is best done together - sharing ideas, experiences, knowledge, in a multitude of ways, and what is better done outside of class -

1 Council of Europe (2017). *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment*.

lengthy reading and writing, reflecting, planning, researching.

Thus in the classroom itself the emphasis is clearly and definitely on person-to-person interaction and cooperation within the whole group; outside the classroom students can work independently, and at their own pace, using all the resources available.

The underlying principles can probably best be summed up as general humanistic principles of education where the teacher's job is to create the kind of environment conducive to learning. This includes having a stress-free atmosphere where cooperation is the norm, not competition, and where the learner can be active in many different ways and at different levels. It could be sharing ideas with a neighbour, running a session of the class in a team, creating a portfolio, learning how to use a dictionary effectively, or it could be taking on more responsibility for their own learning.

For me, helping the students to become more aware of processes of learning, not in the abstract but with regard to themselves, was an important part of my job. The intention was that they should gradually learn how to help themselves and each other, and thus become more effective learners, so that they can go on learning, long after they have left the course or even the university.

How all this is actually done varies from course to course and class to class. One of the basics, however, is quite simply encouraging students to get to know each other and be supportive of each other in class. Another is encouraging students to make their own connections between things, whether words or ideas, as we learn better by linking than by listing.

Some are unhappy with this approach at the beginning as it is a major change from what they had been accustomed to and requires active participation in the learning process. However, when students had a chance to realise the value of what they had done during the term, they gave very positive feedback e.g. "... you don't just want to give a lot of information to your students, but let them think how to learn more effectively. I am sure it will help me in my future education very much."

The course concepts are low-tech and low-cost. Students were not required to buy books or other materials; a particular English-English dictionary was, however, strongly recommended as it played an integral part in all courses, and constituted a good long-term investment for the students. Course materials and other information relevant to the courses are available on my website [www.FindYourFeet.de].

Having access to a range of authentic materials i.e. materials produced in English for the purpose of communication, not teaching, is practically essential for teacher and learner. The Internet is the obvious source today. You may also be lucky enough to have an institute library with a media centre on the spot. However, wherever you teach you can also try to build up your own collection of material, for use by you and the learners. You can cast your net wide, going beyond the usual newspapers, magazines, novels and films, and include letters, concert programmes, maps and visitor brochures, government documents and event flyers, anything you can get your hands on and is meaningful for you. My collection was large and varied, covering forty

years of teaching, and I was glad to be able to draw on it.

In all classes students were given the course description at the first meeting. We talked this through in detail together so that everyone had the opportunity to ask questions about any aspect of the course which was not clear to them. I emphasised that I was committing myself to offering a good course with clear aims that could be reached provided the students were willing to commit themselves to working along with me.

To sum it up, the courses all aimed to give the students opportunities to grow and develop as life-long learners, as well as improving their English. For those intending to become school teachers I hoped that experiencing this kind of teaching and learning might eventually influence their own teaching. I certainly enjoyed teaching the courses, and learned a great deal. Retirement is giving me the time to write them up as Concepts, a process which I am also enjoying. I hope you find them useful.

If you would like to find out more about the principles behind my language teaching, please see:

Ross, Fiona (2017). Learning English, and Teaching English - and Linking the two together. *Zeitschrift für Interkulturellen Fremdsprachenunterricht* 22:2, 188-189.

[<http://tujournals.ulb.tu-darmstadt.de/index.php/zif/issue/view/69>].

FyF_cc_introduction.pdf

May 2019