

## Chapter 1

# COURSE DESIGN

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This chapter looks at how the course was designed. It describes the rationale of the course, the stages in the design process, the personnel involved, the type of the course, the aims of the course, course evaluation and further development.

### 1.1. Rationale

The purpose of the course is to support examination reform in Hungary, in particular the reform of the school-leaving examination due for implementation in 2005. Examination reform is intended to establish and raise standards, but writers have pointed out that a new, improved examination does not necessarily lead to better teaching and learning. Alderson and Wall (1993) use examples from five countries (The Netherlands, Turkey, Nepal, Kenya and Sri Lanka) to show that washback (the supposed effect examinations have on the classroom), and in particular positive washback, is difficult to identify.

For examinations to have a positive effect on the classroom Hughes (1989: 46) recommends information and training for teachers, noting *“however good the potential backwash of a test may be, the effect will not be fully realized if students and those responsible for teaching do not know and understand what the test demands of them”*. Bailey (1996: 275) supports this, stating that teachers (among others) *“must understand the purpose of the test”*, adding *“a test will promote beneficial washback to programmes to the extent that it measures what programmes intend to teach”*.

In order to achieve successful innovation Fullan (1998: 253) notes: *“there is no panacea or model of change... change is a highly personal psychological process... resistance and conflict are positively necessary... improving relationships is the key to successful change... emotion and hope are crucial motivating factors”*, and Kennedy (1986: 169) stresses *“the collaborative, problem-solving nature of innovation”*.

The designers of the NETT course attempted to take into account all of the advice noted above.

### 1.2 Stages of design and development

The development of the final version of the course has taken two years so far. There have been four phases:

Phase 1: Training the team of course designers and preparing the actual writing process.

Phase 2: Designing and piloting the first version of the course.

Phase 3: Revising the materials on the basis of the first pilot and piloting the second version.

Phase 4: Revising the materials again, and writing the latest, third version.

### 1.2.1 Phase 1

Phase 1 lasted a year. It started in January 1998, when the team of future course designers participated in a joint training course at Lancaster University with the other members of the Project team. This was the official start of the Project's In-Service Teacher Training Team (the INSET Team). In fact at that time the members of the team had already been working together for more than a year, since as soon as the Examination Reform Project was established the British Council started to train a group of experienced secondary school teachers in the area of testing. They completed a module called 'Assessment in Language Learning' in the academic year of 1996/1997. In February 1998 the members of the team started an MEd in ELT course at the University of Manchester. This course contributed a lot to their professional development, and provided them with the expertise the Hungarian Examination Reform Project required in the area of language teaching and testing. The four skills-based modules of the MEd course helped the team later design and deliver the skills-based modules of the pilot courses. 'The Education of Language Teachers' module deepened and extended their already existing knowledge and experience in pre- and in-service teacher training.

In the Lancaster course mentioned above, the team explored how to develop a new examination system, how to introduce new examinations and how to design an in-service training course to familiarise teachers with the new examinations. By the end of the training the first outline of the course had been designed by the team.

The next step was participating in a classroom observation project, which aimed at observing English lessons all over Hungary, taking notes, conducting structured interviews with secondary school teachers and summarising findings in a Baseline Study. Each member of the team observed at least 20 lessons in the first quarter of 1998.

The observations provided the team with a good grasp of what was really happening in Hungarian classrooms. On the basis of the observed classes and the teacher questionnaires the following conclusions were drawn (summary of *Chapter 8.9*, see Nikolov in Fekete *et al.*: 1999):

- **Few teachers felt motivated or successful.**
- **Most teachers were overworked, underpaid and disillusioned**
- **A lot of teachers seemed unaware of what was going on in their classroom.**
- **The teachers' general methodological and language proficiency was below the expected level.**
- **Most of the classes were teacher-fronted, pair and group work was not widely used.**
- **Both teachers and students used Hungarian excessively during the English lessons.**
- **Levels in both grammar schools and vocational schools were low, though levels in grammar-school groups were perceived to be somewhat higher.**
- **Although the majority of the groups used native (British) communicative course books, these materials were exploited traditionally and eclectically.**
- **Supplementary materials were mostly of Hungarian origin, with a focus on grammar (a negative examination washback effect).**
- **The most frequent task types in the lessons were:**
  - **question – answer**
  - **translation**

- *reading aloud*
- *grammar exercises in the form of substitution drills*
- *Some task- and text types were not at all familiar to the teachers.*
- *Listening was the most neglected skill area.*
- *Classroom English was not considered a part of the syllabus .*
- *Facilities were not fully exploited; equipment was available in schools, but considerable effort was needed to access it*
- *A general lack of awareness among teachers was observed and recorded regarding the effect of different classroom activities and the teachers' role model on the development and maintenance of students' motivation .*  
*When asked about the reasons for lack of favourable attitudes and motivation, teachers found fault only with learners.*
- *The observed teachers rarely thought about their learners' strengths and weaknesses. When asked, they did not see where and how action could be taken .*
- *As for the planned new school-leaving examinations, about half of the observed teachers felt threatened, others were challenged by them.*
- *However, they all greatly appreciated first-hand information, which signaled that involvement of grassroots teachers in the development of the planned new examinations would be favourable in the long run.*  
(see Nikolov in Fekete *et al*, 1999: 221-245.)

The conclusions of the observations were later incorporated into the aims, content and delivery of the course in the following way:

- **Awareness raising** became one of the main aims of the course in two different aspects:
  - a) raising **awareness of what is really going on** in the participants' own classroom
  - b) raising **awareness of new teaching and testing techniques**
- A possible outcome of the course was that teachers' general **methodological proficiency level** would **increase**.
- During the course the participants were presented with **a great variety of teaching techniques** (different versions and combinations of individual, pair and group work), which could serve as a positive model for those who earlier mainly used only teacher-fronted techniques.
- The course was **conducted entirely in English**, which again provided a good example for the participants' classroom teaching.
- Another main aim of the course was to **support teachers in raising standards** of student performance.
- A recurring element of the modules of the course was **studying, analysing and using** in actual skill-based teaching tasks examples **of the available course books** from the point of view of their possible use or adaptation for teaching for the planned new examination.
- The course familiarised the participants with **all the possible task and text types** of the planned new examinations. Some of these were completely new to participants.

- Since according to the Baseline Study survey **listening** was the most neglected skill, the course put a **special emphasis** on this area.
- The variety of ways of **using the available teaching equipment** during the course provided a good example for participants to follow.
- A **wide selection of** possible different **classroom activities** and **the trainers' model behaviour** during the course enabled the participants to **enrich** their already existing **reserve of tools** for developing and maintaining their students' positive attitudes and motivation. A recurring element of each module was discussing and experimenting the teaching implications.
- **Teaching clinics** were provided at the end of each module of the course examining the possible problem points in teaching the given skill. Participants shared their experiences with each other and the trainers, and were offered **guidance** as to what kind of action could be taken to improve the current situation; where, when and how to act.
- The first main aim of the course was to inform teachers about the principles, content and procedures of the planned new examination system. It is claimed that teachers who are **informed** about and **involved** in the development of the new examinations feel much less threatened by the new system, and much more valued by educational policy-makers. The pilot courses proved this fully.
- The **enthusiastic and encouraging atmosphere** of the course and the **model behaviour of the trainers** (classroom teachers themselves) motivated the participants a great deal, and provided them with **new hopes and expectations** for the future.

From June 1998 the Project started to train its members to write items. The INSET Team went through the item writer training with the other members of the Project, because this was the best way to understand the rationale behind the planned new task and text types, and to become capable of explaining how the tasks worked. Being capable of anticipating difficulties in this area and dealing with them was an essential part of course design and delivery.

On the basis of the draft examination specifications each member of the team wrote a complete set of items for each level and each paper of the new examinations. Some of these items were among those selected for the first pilot examinations. Being trained item writers later enabled the INSET Team members to incorporate the different task types of the new examinations into the content of the course and to explain how they worked in case the participants of the course had any problems.

A parallel development in introducing new examinations into traditional systems in Europe was the Baltic Examination Reform Project. By June 1998 in the member states of the joint Baltic Examination Reform (see Mazuoliene, 1996, Wall, 1996) the newly developed school-leaving examinations in English had been successfully introduced, and the three Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania) held a conference in Riga to discuss and share their experiences. A delegation of the Hungarian Examination Reform Project was invited to participate in the conference. One representative of the INSET Team was a member of the delegation. The team gained plenty of valuable experiences from the Baltic example (see Együd 1998).

In August 1998 a 3-day workshop was held in Szeged (southern Hungary) for Hungarian and international ELT experts, British Council in-service counterparts and BC staff to discuss the development of the course with the team members. This workshop was led by Prof J Charles Alderson of Lancaster University and Richard West of the University of Manchester. Each INSET-team member formed a group with some of the experts and counterparts, and these groups worked in parallel on the development of the course, trying to outline the content of each module in more detail, and spotting the problem points. At the end of the workshop the team had 5 extremely useful draft suggestions, which they later could use for the first version of the course.

The last step of the preparation was participating in administering the speaking pilot tests of the new examinations in December 1998. This operation was essential for the course design, since the live data collected during the pilot served as a firm foundation when providing the participants with examples of the new task and text types (see more details in Együd *et al* in Alderson *et al*, 2000: 258-278).

### **1.2.2 Phase 2**

Phase 2 started in January 1999, in Manchester. The Project team participated in a course at the University of Manchester. The aims of the course were the following:

- a) Discussing the results of the speaking pilots, preparing the other pilot tests.
- b) Visiting different examination authorities in Britain.
- c) Finalising the draft of the first pilot INSET course.

After the Manchester course the members of the Team had two months to finish the first version of the course. The first pilot course took place in Eger between March and May 1999.

### **1.2.3 Phase 3**

Phase 3 started in June 1999 with revising the materials on the basis of the experience of the first pilot course. The second pilot was held in Debrecen between September and November 1999.

### **1.2.4 Phase 4**

At the moment the team is in Phase 4, writing the latest, third version of the course and preparing it for accreditation.

### 1.3 Personnel

Pilot course writers, developers and trainers were, with one exception, members of the INSET Team who had been working with the Reform Project from the start. The reasons for this were:

- Trainers knew a great deal about the progress and development of the Examination Reform.
- They knew the course very well, having designed it.
- Training on the course gave first hand experience that helped with later revisions.
- Teachers have many doubts and fears about the new examinations. Since the trainers were practising secondary school teachers, it was more likely that the participants of the course would find the ideas about teaching for the new exams believable and practical.

The first pilot was based at a provincial grammar school in Eger and the trainers were 3 members of the INSET Team. The second pilot was organised in co-operation with a county pedagogical institute in Debrecen, with 2 members of the INSET Team and a local university lecturer participating as trainers on the course. At this stage our main aim was to trial the course in a close simulation of possible future circumstances, that is why we co-operated with a local tertiary pedagogical institute and a local university lecturer.

Throughout the course development period and later, the Team had two British Council Advisers: Prof J Charles Alderson, and Philip Glover. Both Advisers were present during the delivery of the course. At various points the team also had support from other consultants, namely from the University of Manchester (Richard West, Jane Andrews) and from Lancaster University (Dianne Wall, Caroline Clapham).

### 1.4 Course type

The course is an intensive 60-hour in-service training course. Its mode is a combined one: it consists of 35 contact hours and 25 distance hours of study. The contact hours in both pilots were divided into two two-day units (with 14 – 14 hours each) and a one-day final unit (7 hours) with monthly intervals between them. This structure seemed to be optimal considering the amount of classroom-based assignments and the potential future participants' workload and their available free time for this course.

#### 1.4.1 Course content

The course consisted of detailed study of the *Working Document* (Vándor, 1998) with reference to course books and other resource books, teaching implications, classroom research and some observation. Following the content of the proposed examination, the course had five core modules, four of which were skill-based (reading, listening, writing, speaking), and a Use of English module. Each module repeated the four stages and the elements of the cyclical process described earlier. Besides the five core modules of the course, the contact sessions included introductory, review and concluding sessions as well.

Samples 1 and 2 show the course outlines for the two pilot courses as they appeared in course handouts. They show the evolution of the course, with

adjustments being made to the number and positioning of sessions. For example, more time was allocated for the introduction in the second pilot, and speaking and writing were introduced earlier, on day 2, in order to allow for time to reflect on and prepare for the tasks in those sessions.

*Sample 1: Course outline for the Eger pilot*

Time	Pre-course	Day 1-	Day 2	Dist A	Day 3	Day 4	Dist B	Day 5	Post-cse
08.30 - 09.15	Activity 1	Introduction	Listening 1	Activity 1	Reading 5	Speaking 1	Activity 1	Writing 6	Return of assignments
09.15 - 10.00	Activity 2	Reading 1	Listening 2	Activity 2	Listening 5	Speaking 2	Activity 2	Speaking 7	
10.00 - 11.00		Reading 2	Listening 3		Writing 1	Speaking 3		Reading 6	
11.00 - 11.45		Reading 3	Listening 4		Writing 2	Speaking 4		Listening 6	
11.45 - 12.45		Reading 4	Use of English 1		Writing 3	Speaking 5		Use of English 3	
12.45 - 13.30	Observation 1	Use of English 2	Review	Writing 4	Speaking 6	Conclusion 1			
13.30 - 14.15				Writing 5	Observation 3	Conclusion 2			
14.15 - 15.15				Observation 2	Review	Writing 5	Observation 3	Conclusion 2	

*Sample 2: Course outline for the Debrecen pilot*

Time	Pre-cse	Day 1-	Day 2	Dist A	Day 3	Day 4	Dist B	Day 5	Post-cse
08.30-09.15	Task 1-	Introduction 1	Listening 2	Reading activity Listening activity	Reading 5	UoE 1	Speaking activity	Speaking 8	Follow-up
09.15-10.00	Task 2	Introduction 2	Listening 3		Listening 5	UoE 2	Writing activity	Speaking 9	
10.00-10.15	Task 3	Reading 1	Listening 4		Writing 3	Speaking 3	UoE activity	Writing 8	
10.15-11.00		Reading 2	Writing 1		Writing 4	Speaking 4		UoE 3	
11.00-11.45		Reading 3	Writing 2		Writing 5	Speaking 5		Conclusion 1	
11.45-12.45		Reading 4	Speaking 1		Writing 6	Speaking 6		Conclusion 2	
12.45-13.30		Listening 1	Speaking 2		Writing 7	Speaking 7		Conclusion 3	

### 1.4.2 Resources

The resources were plentiful. The British Council sponsored and provided all the necessary materials (course booklets, stationery, books for the mini library and for the trainers, cassettes, videos, etc.) The venues of the course were suitable and well equipped; the trainers had all the necessary equipment (OHP, cassette player, VCR, large board area, large wall area for the posters).

### 1.4.3 Target population

The course was designed for secondary school teachers of English. This is a very broad category, including teachers with very different qualifications and backgrounds (teachers with a teacher training college degree, teachers with a university degree, former Russian teacher re-trainees, teachers at vocational secondary schools, teachers at vocational training schools, teachers at grammar schools). However, all these groups of teachers shared a common desire: to get as much information and help in connection with the new examinations as possible.

#### **1.4.4 Admission requirements**

The requirement for applicants was to be a qualified secondary school teacher (that is to have at least a teacher training college degree in English) and to be an active teacher in any kind of secondary school. Apart from this, no other form of admissions procedure was used.

#### **1.4.5 Need for the course**

There had been plenty of evidence before the actual course design began that there was a definite need for the course among secondary school teachers. In the course of several formal and informal occasions (meetings, conferences, in-service courses, workshops, professional fora) teachers had voiced their interest and their wish to know more about the new system. The interviews carried out during the classroom observation project resulted in similar findings. International examples, for example in the Baltic States (see section 2.1.1 above) had also shown that without informing and winning our teachers it would be impossible to introduce the new system.

### **1.5 Aims of the course**

The main aims of the course were the following:

- to inform teachers about the principles, content and procedures of the new examination system
- to encourage teachers to have a positive view of the new examinations
- to develop teachers' awareness of teaching and testing techniques
- to study and analyse classroom implications of the new examinations and to apply some in the classroom
- to support teachers in their aim of raising standards of student performance.

As a result of this, the following course outcomes were hoped for:

- teachers would be well-informed about the new examinations
- teachers would be supportive of the new examinations
- teachers would use better teaching and testing techniques (positive washback)
- students' language skills and test performance would improve.

Since the course was a pilot course, it also aimed at the following:

- trialing materials and procedures devised to support the successful introduction of the new examinations in Hungary
- enabling course designers and writers to develop materials and procedures further



- developing trainers' training skills and providing experience that can be shared with future trainers
- examining the responses of a sample of secondary school teachers in a real training situation and collecting views for future use.

## 1.6 Basic training principles

The general training approach of the course was based on the cyclical process of experiential learning (Kolb, 1984), proposed by Richard West and Jane Andrews (University of Manchester). The cyclical process consisted of the following stages:

Stage 1:

Concrete experience

(This could be what teachers do in the classroom already, or what they know about something.)

Stage 2:

Reflective observation

(Reflection on experience in the light of new exam-related information.)

Stage 3:

Abstract conceptualisation

(Drawing conclusions from the previous stages, for example teaching implications.)

Stage 4:

Active experimentation

(This stage should involve classroom work, for example putting ideas into practice.)

Each cycle contained four recurring elements:

- reference to course books and other resource books
- study of the *Working Document* (Vándor, 1998),
- classroom observation
- teaching implications

Hayes (1995) lists some basic principles of in-service teacher development. The following principles played a significant role in deciding on the training approach and designing the tasks for each session of the course:

*'All teacher development activities should be classroom-centred.'* (Hayes, 1995: 256)

The course concentrated all the time on encouraging good classroom practice. All the activities used during the course could be adapted to classroom use. Participants found this one of the best aspects of the course.

*'Teachers should be involved in the preparation of courses.'* (Hayes, 1995: 257)

Participants' opinions, views and ideas were highly valued and carefully recorded. After the pilot courses they were incorporated into the final version of the course.

*'Trainers should themselves be teachers.'* (Hayes, 1995: 257)

Most of the trainers of the NETT Course were practising secondary school teachers themselves, who knew a great deal about the progress and development of the Examination Reform. Having designed it, they knew the course very well. Training on the course gave them first hand experience that helped with later revisions.

Teachers generally have many doubts and fears about both theory and practice of the new examinations. As Medgyes says, '*...methodologists are deaf (or pretend to be deaf) to teachers' inaudible cries, in spite of the fact that they are no longer the ivory-tower scholars detached from everyday practicalities that their predecessors might have been... The theoretician's perspective must be totally different from the practising teacher's, whose daily stint averages 4-5 lessons day in, day out. It is precisely these treadmill language teachers whose real problems methodologists and materials writers seem to be oblivious and insensitive to.*' (Medgyes, 1986: 111)

The major advantage of the decision that the trainers would be practising secondary school teachers themselves was that the ideas about teaching for the new exams presented by them were much more likely to be found believable and practical by the participants of the course. The participants highly appreciated this decision, and in a sense it contributed a lot to the fact that instead of the usual 'trainer-trainee' relationship a kind of equality was created right from the very beginning of the courses. *Sharing* and *discussing* were the key words instead of *telling*, *lecturing*. Everybody found this a very positive value in the courses.

*'Training methodology should be largely task-based and inductive.'* (Hayes, 1995: 257)

This principle was put into practice throughout the course. The course is not only largely, but **entirely task-based**.

*'Training/ development sessions should value participants' existing knowledge.'* (Hayes, 1995: 258)

The starting point of each cycle of the course was the participants' existing knowledge. We built onto this knowledge later on by exchanging and sharing ideas and information. By the end of each cycle this knowledge grew richer.

*'Teacher development activities should raise awareness of the teaching-learning issues... and give opportunities for in-depth analysis.'* (Hayes, 1995: 258)

*'Teacher development sessions should enable teachers to form generalizable conclusions about the topic under review.'* (Hayes, 1995: 259)

Stages 2 and 3 of each cycle served these purposes.

*'Teacher development sessions should offer opportunities for participants to share knowledge and ideas.'* (Hayes, 1995: 260)

One of the most successful aspects of the pilot courses was the fact that they offered considerable scope for the participants to share their knowledge, experiences and ideas. Participants gave highly positive feedback about this aspect.

## 1.7 Course evaluation

Morrow & Schocker (1993) offer an interesting process evaluation programme in their paper about a summer school for teacher trainers. In their conclusion they write the following: '*Summative questionnaires ask the participant to judge the worth of the product which he or she has received, process evaluation as described in this paper invites the participant to share in the design of the product and to reflect on how it is made. This is a very powerful experience.*' (Morrow & Schocker, 1993: 54)

Evaluation in the case of this course was a crucial factor, since among the aims of the course was gaining useful experience and data in order to revise and develop the first version of the course for later use. Process evaluation seemed to be the most suitable method of getting the necessary feedback. The evaluation took place on three levels: internal, external and self-evaluation processes were applied.

### **1.7.1 Internal evaluation**

Throughout the course participants provided internal evaluation. The internal process evaluation took place in the following pattern:

- 1) Participants gave feedback and evaluated the sessions and the course of events at the end of each day. This happened in the following ways:
  - a) group and plenary discussions during the feedback sessions
  - b) filling in questionnaires
  - c) giving impressionistic feedback in writing
- 2) Between the contact phases of the course the trainers offered on-line support for the participants via email. Participants could (and did) get in touch with the tutors, they could discuss their problems and they could add their opinion or ideas in connection with the modules they had covered, or the ones they were going to cover during the next phase.
- 3) At the end of Day 5 participants evaluated the whole course in a plenary feedback session, and they also filled in an evaluation questionnaire.

Participants' ideas, opinions and criticism were processed and discussed immediately by the trainers, advisers and observers, and after each day the Team revised the plans for the following days and modules according to the feedback. Also, after each phase of the course the trainers revised the content, techniques and the materials of the course according to the overall evaluation gained from the participants.

Participants were aware from the very beginning that they were sharing in the design of the course. They highly appreciated the fact that their opinions, ideas and criticisms were listened to and used in not only making the future course better, but also in shaping the new examination system in Hungary. In most of the participants' professional life this was the first time when the 'Bigs' (educational policy-makers) listened to and cared for what the 'Smalls' (treadmill classroom teachers) said. 'Sharing, shaping, looking forward' could be the best slogans for this course from this aspect.

### **1.7.2 External evaluation**

External evaluation was provided by the advisers and the observers present throughout the course. It happened according to the following pattern:

- 1) After each day the trainers, advisers and observers held an evaluation meeting, in which the advisers and observers gave feedback on every single event of the actual day. The problems were discussed and alternative solutions were offered. Participants' feedback was also discussed and incorporated.
- 2) After each phase (Days 1-2, Days 3-4, Day 5) the advisers and observers gave a written evaluative report. The findings of these reports were incorporated into the next phase and the revised version of the course.

- 3) After finishing the course the trainers, advisers and observers held a final evaluation meeting. Overall each adviser and observer produced evaluation reports on the course.

### **1.7.3 Self-evaluation**

The trainers themselves evaluated the course and their own performance. While one trainer was doing a session, the other two were taking notes very carefully, in great detail. Problems and difficulties were discussed on the spot, during the breaks in case of emergency, or later, during the daily evaluation meetings. These meetings started with a debriefing, in the course of which each trainer told about the day in great detail. After each phase the trainers wrote a detailed report.

On the basis of the different evaluations and experiences they also revised the content, procedures and materials for the second pilot. At the end of the course they produced an overall evaluation report on the course and on their own performance. Without this multi-level process evaluation it would have been impossible to achieve the aims of the course.

## **1.8 Further development**

At the time of publication of this book a course development team is working on an updated version of the course. The experiences of the two pilot courses and the current developments and changes in the specifications and the outline of the planned examination require some revisions in the content of the course, especially in the examination familiarisation part. At the same time the team is preparing the course for the accreditation process. The course is going to be offered nation-wide from September 2001.