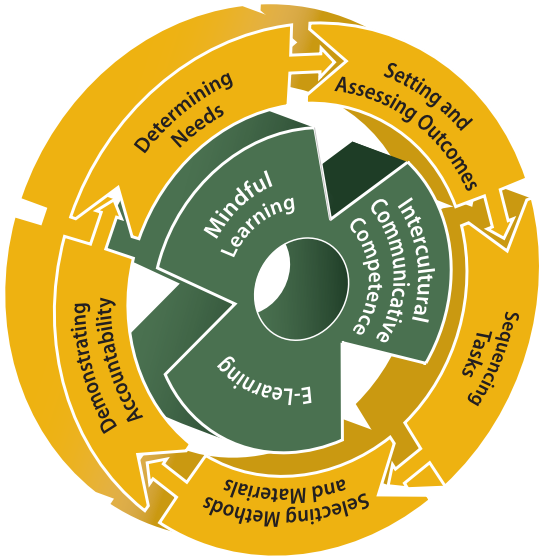




# Sequencing Tasks

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## ATESL Adult ESL Curriculum Framework





# Section 3: Sequencing Tasks

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## Overview

This section of the *ATESL Curriculum Framework* builds on previous sections. *Section 1: Determining Needs* provides details about using information gathered from needs analyses to inform curricular choices regarding learning outcomes, materials, tasks and activities, and assessments that best address the needs of learners. *Section 2: Setting and Assessing Outcomes* focuses on how to write learning outcome statements and how to assess those outcomes. This section, *Sequencing Tasks*, then, addresses identified learning needs and learning outcomes in instructional activities. In this section, we

- Identify tasks as an integrated, connected element of the curriculum.
- Provide principles for sequencing tasks.
- Present task-based, theme-based, and project-based learning as approaches to sequencing content and contextualizing language forms and functions within the curriculum.

## Introduction

Tasks are considered the foundational element of instruction within English language curricula in Canada. A task-based approach is a way of organizing curriculum content much like a theme- or project-based approach to curriculum. In a task-based approach, tasks may focus on the development of discrete skills (i.e., reading, writing, speaking, and listening), or focus on other aspects of language such as pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary development, or communicative functions. These aspects of language (skills, forms, functions) are scaffolded intentionally to build the competencies required for communication in the realworld. When the curriculum is organized by themes or projects, tasks are sequenced and contextualized within the curricular content, providing support within an integrated skills approach to curricula. Theme-based, project-based, and task-based approaches will be discussed in “Sequencing Tasks within a Curriculum” below.

Tasks are considered integral to each approach, and second language acquisition research supports the use of tasks in adult ESL curricula.<sup>1</sup> Tasks are connected to, and informed by, all aspects of the curriculum. Through tasks,

- Course content is selected and sequenced with the needs of learners in mind.<sup>2</sup>
- Learners demonstrate that they have met the learning outcomes.<sup>3</sup>
- Language strands (i.e., reading, writing, listening, and speaking) and other aspects of language learning (including pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary development) are sequenced, scaffolded, recycled, and spiraled throughout the curriculum.
- *Mindful learning*, *intercultural communicative competence*, and *e-learning* are woven together and connected to the language strands, as well as to one another, in a meaningful, contextualized way.
- A balance between a focus on language forms and a focus on meaning is achieved.
- Language learning in the classroom is related to language use outside the classroom.<sup>4</sup>
- Opportunities for evaluation and assessment *of* and *for* learning are provided.

<sup>1</sup> Ellis, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Learner needs as identified by all stakeholders that may include learners, instructors, program managers, community and professional associations, licensing bodies, and so on. See *Determining Needs*.

<sup>3</sup> See *Setting and Assessing Outcomes*

<sup>4</sup> Nunan, 2004.

When curriculum developers select and sequence curricular content (including tasks), this may be thought of as the curriculum-as-planned. When tasks are designed, implemented, and adjusted by the instructor for use in the classroom with a group of learners, tasks move from the curriculum-as-planned to the curriculum-as-lived. That is, in the classroom, tasks are responsive to individual learners and reflect the preferences of the instructor.

There is considerable diversity among the learner populations, instructor preferences, program goals, and curricula found within English language programs in Alberta.<sup>5</sup> In this section of the *ATESL Curriculum Framework*, we propose that curriculum developers provide task design principles, propose sample tasks for all learning outcomes, supply a selection of developed task exemplars, and suggest ways to sequence curricular content. In this way, the curriculum informs and guides the instructors, who design and implement tasks that provide language learning opportunities.

## Principles for Tasks

The following principles will help you select and sequence tasks within your curriculum:

- Tasks accommodate a range of proficiency levels and learner interests, and are suitable across a wide range of language learning contexts (i.e., LINC, EAP, ESL, ELT).
- Tasks are meaningful, and require learners to make use of authentic (or authentic-like) language to accomplish specific curricular objectives within a variety of contexts. This requires a flexible, responsive, and intentional approach to instruction.
- Learning tasks focus primarily on developing language proficiency for communication in the realworld.
- Tasks support the development of learners' language proficiency, from building receptive skills to building productive skills, moving to increasingly autonomous language use.
- Learning tasks and enabling activities are sequenced in a way that intentionally builds on the learners' skills, knowledge, and experiences.
- Enabling activities enable learners to manipulate and practice specific features of language within the context of curriculum content.
- Learners use classroom time to rehearse communicative skills they will need beyond the classroom.

## What is a task?

“ In Canadian Language Benchmarks 2000 a language task is understood to be a communicative, real-world use of language to accomplish a specific purpose (language function) in a specific social situation.<sup>6</sup> ”

There are numerous definitions of task in the second language literature.<sup>7</sup> In this document, we broadly refer to a task as course material used by instructors to help learners achieve their language and communication goals. More specifically, though, a task is goal-oriented, content-focused, outcomes-based, and includes opportunities to practice language for real-life use.<sup>8</sup> Tasks must have a communicative purpose; that is, as learners are involved in carrying out

<sup>5</sup> See Alberta Employment and Immigration, 2008 (*Government of Alberta Adult EAL/ESL Continuum*).

<sup>6</sup> Holmes, Kingwell, Pettis, & Pidlaski, 2001, p. 64.

<sup>7</sup> See Ellis, 2003, 2010; Nunan, 1989, 2004.

<sup>8</sup> Shehadeh & Coombe, 2010.

the task, they focus on conveying the meaning of the message, and they have opportunity to negotiate meaning. Furthermore, tasks are not simply “busy work” for learners. Rather, tasks require learners achieve clear communicative outcomes as defined and articulated within the curriculum. Although tasks are pedagogical in purpose, they do have a real-world focus. That is, they approximate the kinds of things learners need (or will need) to do in the real world, and move learners towards more independent, learner-directed language use.<sup>9</sup>

In order for learners to successfully complete a task, however, they may need to, for example, acquire some new vocabulary, develop a particular reading or listening skill, make use of a particular grammatical construction, practice some functional language, or learn the parts of a business letter. The activities they do in order to accomplish these learnings may not represent what they need to do in the real world, but are valuable nonetheless as steps towards more real-world language use. In this document, we use the term “enabling activities”<sup>10</sup> to refer to those learning activities that learners engage in (in the classroom or on their own) to build the language skills they need so that they can complete the more authentic tasks described above.

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*Instruction in speaking and writing provides a balance between fluency and accuracy, along with opportunity to practice and incorporate feedback, as learners use their productive language skills to accomplish tasks.*

Researchers and practitioners have long debated the role of language forms (e.g., grammar structures, pronunciation) and the role of language functions<sup>11</sup> within ESL curricula. As Ellis (2005) points out, however, both are important:

"Proficiency in L2 requires that learners acquire both a rich repertoire of formulaic expressions, which cater to fluency, and a rule-based competency consisting of knowledge of specific grammatical rules, which cater to complexity and accuracy."<sup>12</sup>

A related debate pertains to whether learners should be encouraged to focus primarily on meaning or on form. Again, as Ellis (2005) points out, both are necessary:

"Instruction needs to ensure that learners focus predominantly on meaning.<sup>13</sup>  
Instruction needs to ensure that learners also focus on form."<sup>14</sup>

Other debates within the ESL profession include the relative importance of

- Free/controlled production.
- Implicit/explicit knowledge of the second language.
- Input/output/interaction.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>9</sup> See the discussion of “real-world learning tasks” in *Canadian Language Benchmarks 2000: Guide to Implementation* (Holmes, Kingwell, Pettis, & Pidlaski, 2001, p.65-66).

<sup>10</sup> These enabling activities are referred to as “enabling skills” by Nunan (1989, 2004) and as “enabling tasks and activities” by Holmes, Kingwell, Pettis, & Pidlaski (2001). In the *ATESL Curriculum Framework*, we use the term *enabling activities* to avoid confusion, and by it we are referring to both *language exercises* and *communicative activities* as described by Nunan (1989, 2004). *The Canadian Language Benchmarks 2000: Guide to Implementation* (Holmes et al., 2001) distinguishes between “real-world learning tasks” and “enabling tasks” (i.e., “enabling activities”) and describes their relationship to one another within a language learning task continuum (pp. 65-66).

<sup>11</sup> Language functions are the purposes for which individuals use language, for example, to refuse a request (e.g., I’m sorry, but...), ask for directions, clarify a problem.

<sup>12</sup> p. 210.

<sup>13</sup> Ellis, 2005, p. 211.

<sup>14</sup> Ellis, 2005, p. 212.

<sup>15</sup> Again, in his *Principles of Instructed Language Learning* paper, Ellis (2005) identifies each of these dichotomies as important and necessary.

Sequencing instruction through authentic tasks which are supported by enabling activities allows for an integration of fluency and accuracy, and meaning and form. Similarly, enabling activities which begin with controlled production of language can help learners develop the skills and language they need to engage in the freer production required by a task. Some enabling activities encourage an explicit knowledge of the second language, but other enabling activities and the eventual focus on completing a real-world task supports the development of an implicit knowledge of the language.

In this framework, then, we are proposing tasks (supported by enabling activities) as the core building blocks for sequencing curriculum content into lessons, themes, projects, and courses. We suggest that a curriculum specify sample tasks supporting each of the different learning outcomes so that instructors have a sense of how to go about meeting the outcomes. We also suggest that a curriculum include a number of well-developed task exemplars which are tailored to represent the program's philosophy and goals, embody the learning outcomes and assessments, and address the needs of the learners.<sup>16</sup>

## Elements of a task

The elements of tasks are described by researchers and practitioners with varying degrees of specificity and complexity. We propose that task exemplars be comprised of goals, content (i.e., materials), and procedures.<sup>17</sup>

### Task goals

Providing a list of goals for a task clarifies the purpose and aims of the task, and shows how the task is connected to the broader curriculum. A task may have a broad range of goals or purposes, including, for instance

- **The broader purposes of the curriculum.**

An English for academic purposes (EAP) curriculum, for example, will have tasks designed to prepare learners for success in academic settings. A LINC curriculum, on the other hand, will have tasks designed to help “newcomers to become oriented to the Canadian way of life.”<sup>18</sup>

- **The general learning outcomes (GLOs), specific learning outcomes (SLOs), or performance indicators identified within the curriculum.**<sup>19</sup>

The task goals identified within language programs across the *Adult EAL/ESL Continuum*<sup>20</sup> will differ considerably due to the wide range of general and specific learning outcomes that different curricula seek to address. Within an ELT program designed for internationally-trained doctors, for instance, the goal of a role-play task may be to build physician/patient rapport by setting a patient at ease during a consultation.<sup>21</sup> The goal of reading a newspaper article in a LINC program may initially be to “use reading strategies of preview, skim, and scan to read faster with improved comprehension.”<sup>22</sup> A second, more intensive reading of the article may have the goal of “[identifying] keywords, main ideas, and important supporting details in everyday, business, and academic texts.”<sup>23</sup>

<sup>16</sup> There are many excellent resources available for developing tasks. See the reference list at the end of this section, especially: Ellis (2003, 2010); Holmes, Kingwell, Pettis, and Pidlaski (2001); Nunan (1989, 2004); and Shehadeh & Coombe (2010).

<sup>17</sup> Nunan, 2004.

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/resources/evaluation/linc/exec-summary.asp>

<sup>19</sup> Nunan, 2004.

<sup>20</sup> Government of Alberta Alberta Employment and Immigration, 2008.

<sup>21</sup> Watt, Chambers, & MacMillan, 2008.

<sup>22</sup> Capune, 2008, p. 24.

<sup>23</sup> Capune, 2008, p. 24.



• **The particular needs and expressed interests of the learners in a class.**

For instance, an instructor may choose to have students read an article that deals with child health or emergency wait times in their community in order to meet a specific need or interest expressed by learners in the class. At the same time, this choice of article would be related to the broader goal of orienting learners to the “Canadian way of life” in their own community, as well as to a specific reading learning outcome from the curriculum.

Most tasks will have more than one goal, as in the example above regarding reading a newspaper article on healthcare in a LINC class. This is particularly true when a task involves multiple activities or steps. For example, a task might involve learners participating in a simulated meeting on a topic related to a local controversy or concern in the community (e.g., whether to run an LRT line through a particular community, whether to enforce an “English only” policy in a particular workplace, or whether to require that healthcare workers receive a flu shot). To accomplish this task, learners will need to research the topic, take on the role of a member of the community and identify the arguments and perspectives that person might make, and then participate (make and respond to recommendations) in a simulated meeting. Following are some potential goals for including such a task in a curriculum:

**Table 1. Task goals for a simulated meeting**

**Sample task goals**

<b>Settlement</b>	<i>Learners will engage with an issue that is relevant to their community, thereby developing an awareness of the “Canadian way of life.” By becoming familiar with this issue, learners will be able to participate in discussions on the topic with people they meet outside of class, thereby participating in the wider community.</i>
<b>E-learning</b>	<i>Learners will build their Internet search skills by searching for news articles on the topic.</i>
<b>Reading skills</b>	<i>Learners will understand main ideas, identify opinions and points of view, and evaluate arguments in newspaper articles.</i>
<b>Vocabulary</b>	<i>Learners will understand and make use of topic-specific vocabulary from the readings as well as functional vocabulary related to expressing opinions, agreeing, and disagreeing.</i>
<b>Communication skills</b>	<i>Learners will</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Use verbal and non-verbal cues to indicate a desire to contribute during a simulated business meeting.</i></li> <li>• <i>Express and support opinions; make recommendations.</i></li> <li>• <i>Respond to what others say with comprehension checks, comments, expressions of agreement and disagreement, and requests for clarification.</i></li> </ul>
<b>Mindful learning</b>	<i>Learners will evaluate their own and others’ learning using a peer assessment rubric. Learners will approach the topic from a variety of perspectives.</i>
<b>Intercultural communicative competence</b>	<i>Learners will recognize favourable and discriminatory stereotypes in newspaper articles. Learners will identify the (perhaps contradictory) “Canadian” values at work in the issue being discussed, and compare and contrast those values with their own personal values.</i>





For more information on learning outcomes, see *Section 2: Setting and Assessing Outcomes*.  
 For more information on goals related to mindful learning, see *Section 6: Mindful Learning*.  
 For more information on goals related to ICC, see *Section 7: Intercultural Communicative Competence*.  
 For more information on e-learning goals, see *Section 8: E-learning*.

## Task content

Most tasks require some form of content or materials, though in some cases, learners may generate the materials themselves. Part of the role of a curriculum developer is to search out resources and materials which would be interesting and engaging, and support the tasks. When selecting or recommending curricular materials, consider whether they

- Are stimulating, current, relevant, meaningful, and connected to the learners' real-world needs, interests, and future goals.
- Address learners' skills, backgrounds, and experiences.
- Reflect multicultural perspectives and viewpoints.
- Are at an appropriate language or benchmark level for the learners.<sup>24</sup>
- Maximize learner involvement and language learning opportunities.<sup>25</sup>
- Expose learners to "rich, meaningful, and comprehensible input of language in use"<sup>26</sup> and help learners focus on salient features of language.
- Represent a broad range of material types, including, for instance, a combination of authentic materials,<sup>27</sup> created materials,<sup>28</sup> and/or published materials.<sup>29</sup>

Table 2 below provides an overview and examples of the different types of materials that may be suitable for inclusion as task content.

<sup>24</sup> The *performance conditions* listed for reading and listening at each benchmark in *Canadian Language Benchmarks 2000* can help you determine whether a text is appropriate for a particular benchmark level (Pawlikowska-Smith, 2005).

<sup>25</sup> Kumaravadivelu, 2003.

<sup>26</sup> Tomlinson, 2010, p. 87.

<sup>27</sup> Authentic materials are materials that were created for the purpose of communication between native speakers and not designed for language instruction.

<sup>28</sup> Programs, curriculum developers, and instructors may choose to develop or adapt authentic or published materials to suit the particular outcomes and objectives of their course as well as meet the needs or levels of their particular language learners. We refer to these as "created materials," referring to materials created or adapted by individual instructors for use in their classrooms, and by curriculum developers as part of the resources to support a curriculum.

<sup>29</sup> Published materials refer to textbooks and other resources designed specifically for instructional purposes.

**Table 2. Types of task content**

Types of task content	Examples
<b>Authentic materials</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Print materials such as magazine and newspaper articles, novels, brochures, and advertisements</li> <li>• Non-print materials, including realia</li> <li>• Learner-generated materials</li> <li>• Web-based and multimedia materials<sup>30</sup> (e.g., podcasts, weblogs, wikis, professional and personal web pages, digital photographs)</li> </ul>
<b>Created materials</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adapted texts</li> <li>• Graphic organizers (e.g., charts, timeline, semantic map)</li> <li>• Materials generated by using editable and customizable online tools (e.g., blog entry, wiki, podcast, webcast)<sup>31</sup></li> </ul>
<b>Published materials</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Textbooks and learner workbooks</li> <li>• Web-based and multimedia resources (e.g., CDs, DVDs, podcasts) language learning websites (e.g., Learning English with CBC Edmonton<sup>31</sup>)</li> </ul>



For more information on choosing appropriate materials, see *Section 4: Selecting Methods and Materials*.

### **Task procedures**

Task procedures refer to what the instructor and the learners will do in preparation for and during the task. They reflect the method or approach the instructor will take to best support learners, and they include enabling activities to help learners develop the skills they need to successfully perform the task. Task procedures work to address the following questions:

- What will learners be required to do during the task?
- How can learners best build the skills they need to successfully accomplish the task?
- Which method or approach will best help learners achieve the goals of the task?

Many types of enabling activities have been identified. Some focus on form, others on meaning; some focus on fluency, others on accuracy, and still others on skills and strategies. A complete language curriculum includes a variety of tasks and activities that encourage learners to shift their attention, as necessary, among a variety of different focuses (meaning, accuracy, fluency, skills, strategies, etc.), in order to build proficiency for real-world communication.

<sup>30</sup> Multimedia refers to materials that combine different content such as audio, text, video, still images, animation, and interactivity.

<sup>31</sup> <http://www.cbc.ca/edmonton/eal>

Enabling activities may include, for example, language exercises to clarify pronunciation (e.g., /p/, /b/), vocabulary exercises to reinforce the vocabulary related to a topic, and grammar exercises focusing on the accurate use of a target language form, such as present perfect tense. Learners may, for instance,

- Practice pronunciation drills (e.g., distinguishing minimal pairs), and focus on intonation and stress.
- Learn sight vocabulary using flash cards, and complete fill-in-the-blank and matching vocabulary exercises.
- Complete grammar exercises such as substitution drills, fill-in-the-blanks, sentence ordering, and transforming (e.g., changing direct speech into reported speech).

These types of form-focused activities are often highly scaffolded and structured, and may rely on methods that are instructor-led. They tend to focus on accuracy, rely on pattern drills and repetition for practice, and require learners to memorize language chunks and use problem solving strategies rather than processing whole sentences. As instructors lead learners through these activities, they provide guided input, model correct form(s), and correct learners' errors as they occur.<sup>32</sup>

Enabling activities may also focus on the development of discrete skills<sup>33</sup> and strategies<sup>34</sup> in preparation for a task which will require the use of those skills.<sup>35</sup> For instance, learners may use subordination to combine sentences, and practice writing thesis statements on particular topics in preparation for the task of writing an essay. They may put sentences from a workplace injury report in chronological order in preparation for the more real task of writing an injury report based on experience. Or they may take part in a timed reading program to increase reading speed, preparing them for a variety of authentic reading tasks (e.g., reading quickly through a website to gather information for a group presentation).

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*As learners interact with listening and reading texts, they identify and practice skills and strategies to access the content and to accomplish meaningful, real-life tasks.*

Enabling activities can also include focused and controlled communicative activities in which learners practice a target language form<sup>36</sup> or function<sup>37</sup> in a communicative context to increase their language fluency and accuracy. For instance, learners may practice the functional language used for negotiating, interpreting, and expressing meaning in the real world,<sup>38</sup> and then develop fluency in their use of the structure or functions in controlled communicative exercises prior to using them in a task. Although these communicative enabling activities are more authentic than the language exercises mentioned above, they may still be somewhat contrived and require more scaffolding, than, for instance, a real-world task.<sup>39</sup>

These enabling activities prepare learners for the freer, less scaffolded, and more authentic meaning-focused communicative tasks.

<sup>32</sup> Holmes, Kingwell, Pettis, & Pidlaski, 2001.

<sup>33</sup> E.g., paraphrasing, identifying main ideas, recommending.

<sup>34</sup> E.g., evaluating arguments, viewing an issue from a variety of different perspectives, using a rubric to plan for learning.

<sup>35</sup> E.g., writing a response to an article or letter to the editor; participating in a debate.

<sup>36</sup> E.g., using the present perfect tense to describe an automobile accident scene.

<sup>37</sup> E.g., practicing phrases for emphasizing importance (eg., it's necessary to, don't forget to, be careful to), and then using them in mini role-plays.

<sup>38</sup> E.g., complimenting, refusing, inviting, declining, and requesting.

<sup>39</sup> Holmes et al, 2001.

When sequencing the activities in a task, there are a number of considerations to bear in mind. We suggest three phases for sequencing activities within a task:<sup>40</sup>

- **Awareness-raising**

Introduce a task by first raising learners' awareness of what they might need to learn to accomplish that task. Introduce initial language skills, forms, functions, vocabulary, concepts (etc.) to provide a supporting framework for learners to build their receptive skills (i.e., listening and reading).

- **Appropriation**

Tasks provide learners with opportunities to actively build productive skills (i.e., speaking, writing) through practiced control that involves “demonstrating progressive control of a skill where the possibility of making mistakes is ever present, but where support is always at hand.”<sup>41</sup> Practiced control requires the support of the instructor and may also include peer support.<sup>42</sup>

- **Autonomy**

Tasks are sequenced in a way that gradually moves learners from practice with the target language forms, functions and discrete skills to freer practice. In this phase, learners use their newly acquired skills independently, in other words, without instructor or other supports.

Enabling activities and tasks may incorporate a variety of techniques of instruction, depending on their particular focuses.



For information on choosing appropriate methods, see *Section 4: Selecting Methods and Materials*.

It is important that assessment and feedback be integrated into the task activities; this topic is addressed in *Setting and Assessing Outcomes*.



For information on assessment, see *Section 2: Setting and Assessing Outcomes*.

The tasks that are suggested for a course should provide a snapshot of what is to be taught. They should reflect the needs of the learners, incorporate suitable materials, and address the outcomes of the course. With the building blocks (i.e., elements) of tasks in mind, we now discuss three approaches to sequencing tasks within the English language curriculum.

## Sequencing tasks within curriculum

There are a number of ways to sequence curriculum content, including performance-based,<sup>43</sup> content-based,<sup>44</sup> competency-based,<sup>45</sup> and outcomes-based<sup>46</sup> approaches. The consultations we conducted with English language providers and the results gathered from an e-survey completed by ATESL members indicate that the following three approaches are commonly used in English language programs in Alberta:

- Task-based
- Theme-based
- Project-based

Each of these approaches offers a broad way of sequencing curricular content and includes tasks as a fundamental element. Each approach is discussed below in terms of its unique features and is followed by examples illustrating how its structural elements are arranged.

### **Task-based approach**

Task-based language learning has become increasingly popular over the past two decades.<sup>47</sup> Early work focused on the process of learning and viewed language development as incidental to the task.<sup>48</sup> More recently, however, task-based learning research recognizes that an intentional focus on language is required for learners to make meaning. The *Canadian Language Benchmarks 2000*<sup>49</sup> takes a task-based approach to language learning and focuses on the communicative or functional features of language. While accurate use of linguistic forms is also considered necessary for supporting the meaning of the message, it is not the central focus.<sup>50</sup> A task-based approach to language learning considers accuracy and meaning as complementary components of the language learning process in preparing learners for real-life communication.<sup>51</sup> The intention of task-based language learning is to provide learners with opportunities to develop the language skills and competencies they need to successfully engage in real-world communication.

Curriculum developers who take a task-based approach to language learning select and organize materials (i.e., the curriculum content) to support different types of tasks, and work to tie and sequence tasks together. One criticism of a task-based approach, however, is that tasks may appear to be a collection of materials and activities with no frame to contain or unify them.<sup>52</sup> However, tasks may be connected by skill area (e.g., reading, speaking), learning strategy, or by form or function.<sup>53</sup> When sequencing tasks or “chaining”<sup>54</sup> them together, we suggest combining skill-building and skill-using (i.e., meaning-focused) activities.<sup>55</sup> In this way, the focus remains on practicing and developing language proficiency in ways that are meaningful for the learners.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>43</sup> For example, see Watt, Crutcher, & Lake (2006) for a performance-based model for an ELT program targeting internationally trained medical doctors.

<sup>44</sup> For example, see Chamot & O'Malley's (1996) *Cognitive Academic Language Learning* (CALLA).

<sup>45</sup> For example, see Holmes et al's (2001) *CLB 2000: Guide to implementation*.

<sup>46</sup> For example, see the *Alberta LINC 5 curriculum* (Capune, 2008).

<sup>47</sup> Ellis, 2003; Nunan, 1989, 1991, 1995, 2004; Shehadeh & Coombe, 2010.

<sup>48</sup> Prabhu, 1987.

<sup>49</sup> Pawlikowska-Smith, 2005.

<sup>50</sup> Holmes, Kingwell, Pettis, & Pidlaski, 2001.

<sup>51</sup> Nunan, 1989; Skehan, 2003.

<sup>52</sup> Nunan, 2004.

<sup>53</sup> The Toronto Catholic District School Board (2003) offers templates for using a task-based approach to sequence computer-assisted tasks, work-related tasks, and employability skills (pp. 34-39).

<sup>54</sup> Nunan, 2004.

<sup>55</sup> Skill-building activities are those that focus learners' attention on developing language skills (i.e., enabling activities). Skill-using activities ask learners to use their language skills in real-world communicative contexts. See *What is a task?* and *Task procedures* above.

<sup>56</sup> The *Canadian Language Benchmarks 2000: A Guide to Implementation* (Holmes et al., 2001) offers a general process for integrating tasks into lessons.

Sequencing tasks logically ensures that curriculum materials are presented in a way that supports learners as they build their language skills and knowledge, allowing them to move successfully from one task to the next within an instructional sequence.<sup>57</sup> Three underlying principles which can guide the sequencing of tasks in ESL curricula are scaffolding, spiraling, and recycling.

**Scaffolding tasks**

Scaffolding means “giving structure to support knowledge and understanding as it develops.”<sup>58</sup> That is, when new content and skills are introduced within the curriculum, the respective tasks must be structured in a way that supports learners – this support is referred to as scaffolding. Scaffolded instruction and practice allow learners to acquire new knowledge, develop target skills, and build proficiency. As the scaffolding is slowly removed, learners move from dependence on the instructor to increasing independence or autonomy. As Nunan (2004) points out,

The ‘art’ of TBLT (task-based language teaching) is knowing when to remove the scaffolding. If the scaffolding is removed prematurely, the learning process will ‘collapse’. If it is maintained too long, the learners will not develop the independence required for autonomous language use.<sup>59</sup>

For example, take the following workplace task drawn from an Essential Skills Profile: “Greet customers, take orders and suggest drinks.”<sup>60</sup> The specific learning objectives of the task, which we proposed in *Setting and Assessing Outcomes*, are threefold: learners need to be able to greet customers and respond to small talk; they need to be able to clarify instructions; and they need to be able to initiate taking an order and make suggestions. The performance indicators (see Table 3), which provide insight into how a task might be evaluated, also provide insight into the kinds of enabling activities and support (i.e., scaffolding) instructors might need to provide.

**Table 3. Performance indicators**

<b>Performance Indicators</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Uses appropriate expressions</li> <li>• Provides appropriate information</li> <li>• Offers to take an order</li> <li>• Makes suggestions</li> <li>• Clarifies information using echoing, paraphrasing, summarizing and questioning</li> <li>• Indicates understanding through verbal and non-verbal communication</li> </ul>
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The table below includes a series of enabling activities that would provide scaffolding for the above task.

<sup>57</sup> For a sample sequence of tasks and activities, see the section below titled *Canadian Language Benchmarks, Essential Skills, and Tasks*.

<sup>58</sup> Bow Valley College, 2009, p. 162.

<sup>59</sup> p.35

<sup>60</sup> This task is discussed in *Setting and Assessing Outcomes*. It is taken from the HRSDC’s (2009) Essential Skills Profile for Bartenders, NOC 6452.

Table 4. Scaffolding for the task,

**“Greet customers, take their orders, and suggest drinks”**

<b>Introduce the task; raise awareness</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Describe the task.</li> <li>• Ask learners what a server would need to do to “greet customers, take their orders, and suggest drinks” successfully.</li> <li>• Elicit items such as using appropriate expressions for greeting, small talk, offering to take an order, giving suggestions, showing listenership, and checking comprehension. These items can form a peer-feedback rubric to be used during the final role-play.</li> </ul>
<b>Brainstorm for expressions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In groups, have learners brainstorm for common expressions used in restaurants/bars in each of the following categories: initial greetings and comments (<i>Hi. How are you? Follow me. Not bad. Great!</i>); offers (<i>Can/could I get you anything to drink? Have you decided on a drink? Can/could I take your order?</i>); and suggestions (<i>How about a...? You could try... You might want to try... Maybe a... I really like the...</i>).</li> <li>• Have groups take turns presenting their expressions. Record the expressions on the board. Note: If there is room, these expressions can be left on the board until the role-plays are done.</li> </ul>
<b>Grammar lesson</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Present a brief grammar lesson or worksheet on the use of modals to make polite offers, and the use of modals and other expressions to make suggestions.</li> <li>• Review the verb forms which follow the modals and other expressions. (e.g., <i>Can/could I +base verb; You could + base verb; You might want +infinitive; How about +noun phrase/ gerund</i>).</li> </ul>
<b>Pronunciation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Model the linking and stress of the various expressions and grammatical constructions. Students practice saying the expressions and sentences fluently with correct stress and linking.</li> </ul>
<b>Listening &amp; clarifying information</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Read a complex order that a customer might make quite quickly to the class, and have learners attempt to write down the orders. Ask learners what they would have done in a one-to-one conversation to clarify the order and perhaps slow down a speaker.</li> <li>• Elicit ideas such as echoing, asking for clarification, and paraphrasing/summarizing. Write relevant expressions on the board (e.g., <i>Two orders of fries? Large fries? I'm sorry, I didn't catch that. What was that? OK, let me make sure I've got this right. You'd like...</i>)</li> <li>• Repeat the complex order, this time having learners practice echoing information as they hear it, asking for clarification, and paraphrasing and summarizing at the end.</li> <li>• Review nonverbal feedback learners could give to show they have understood.</li> <li>• In pairs, one learner gives an order very quickly while the other learner repeats, asks for clarification, paraphrases, and summarizes.</li> </ul>
<b>Role play</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hand out menus. In groups of 3, have learners take turns in the roles of waiter and customer, role-play taking orders.</li> </ul>



- Assessment**
- After each role-play, the “customers” fill in a peer feedback rubric based on the performance indicators above, giving the “waiter” suggestions for improvement. The instructor can also rotate from group to group, providing feedback.
  - If desired, and if time allows, the instructor can do the role-play with individual learners, assessing them using a rubric with similar criteria to the one they used for peer feedback.

It is important to note that subsequent tasks and role-plays which require learners to make suggestions and clarify comprehension may require less scaffolding. Also, notice that the above series of activities, as well as the series of activities below, integrates form- and meaning- focused activities which enable the learners to perform a real-world task.

Table 5 gives a series of activities which could provide scaffolding for a more academic writing task.

**Table 5. Scaffolding for the task,**

**“Write an academic essay on \_\_\_\_\_, supported by sources”**

- Jigsaw reading** Divide learners into 4 groups (1-4). Give each group a different article to read on the topic of the proposed essay. Form new groups (A-E), each with one person from the original groups, and have learners present their information to others who read different articles.
- Review** Review the parts of an essay.
- Group work** In the same groups (A-E), have learners create a thesis statement and essay outline on the topic. Present them for discussion with the entire class. (Or, regroup back to original groups and have learners each share the thesis statement and essay outline their group came up with.)
- Cloze exercise** Review reporting phrases. Learners complete a cloze exercise from an adapted academic essay, selecting the best reporting phrase to fit in each blank.
- Matching sentences with supporting quotes** Give learners a list of sentences expressing opinions on the topic of the essay. Next, either provide them with a list of quotes from the article (more scaffolding), or have them search through the articles to find quotes that could support the sentences (less scaffolding). Have learners use appropriate reporting phrases to integrate the quotes into the sentences.
- Paraphrasing** Provide learners with a selection from an article which could be used to support an opinion. In groups or pairs, learners write a paraphrase of the selection, being sure to cite that paraphrase correctly.
- Correcting references** Provide learners with a website including the basic APA (or MLA) rules for formatting references, and with a list of references that are formatted incorrectly. Have learners refer to the website to correct the format of those references.

<b>Writing references</b>	In groups, have learners write a reference page for their essay (using the 4 articles from the original assignment).
<b>Essay writing</b>	Provide learners with an assessment rubric, and review it with them. Learners write their own individual essay, incorporating quotes and paraphrases, keeping the rubric in mind.
<b>Assessment</b>	Learners use the rubric to evaluate their own essay, or in groups, learners can use the rubric to provide peer feedback. After revision, the instructor uses the same or similar rubric to assess the essays.

It is important to note that subsequent academic essays would require less and less scaffolding. That is, for a second essay assignment, the instructor may continue to provide the articles on the topic, but the learners could come up with their own essay outlines and individually identify quotes that might support their points. Some scaffolding could be maintained by allowing learners opportunity to check their quotes and reference page with peers. For a third essay assignment, the instructor could encourage independence by providing only one source while having learners locate additional sources and write the first draft of the essay independently.

**Recycling and spiraling tasks**

“Learners should have increasingly spaced, repeated opportunity to give attention to wanted items in a variety of contexts.”<sup>61</sup>

When sequencing tasks, curriculum developers consider not only how to scaffold tasks to support learners, but also how to provide opportunities for learners to continue to build on their learning and apply their new knowledge and skills in other communicative contexts. In other words, curriculum developers provide opportunity for knowledge and skills to be recycled and spiraled.

*Recycling*

Recycling involves providing learners with repeated practice in different contexts to build “familiarity, understanding, and confidence.”<sup>62</sup> These activities allow learners to “use the language they already know, both receptively and productively,” allowing them to become increasingly fluent.<sup>63</sup> The process of recycling is not simply repeating the target language form or skill in the same way multiple times. Instead, recycling involves revisiting language forms or skills in a variety of different contexts and from a variety of different perspectives. For example, learners might initially learn to use echoing as a means of clarifying communication when making a doctor’s appointment by telephone.<sup>64</sup> Later on in the course, as learners do the task “Greet customers, take their orders, and suggest drinks,” they would add other methods of clarifying information (e.g., asking clarifying questions and summarizing) to their strategy of echoing. Later, in the more demanding task of responding to a customer’s complaint, learners would incorporate

<sup>61</sup> Nation & Macalister, 2010, p. 43.

<sup>62</sup> Bow Valley College, 2009, p 164.

<sup>63</sup> Nation & Macalister, 2010, p.54.

<sup>64</sup> E.g.,  
 A: So, we have an opening, Thursday, the 24th at 10 AM, and one on Friday, the 25th at 1:30, and then on the 28th...  
 B: Um... Thursday, June 24th, at 10? And Friday, at 1:30? Um...and the 28th?  
 A: Mmm. That’s Monday, at 3:00.  
 B: Monday at 3:00. OK...So...um, I think that the Friday, 1:30 opening would be best....

echoing, questioning, summarizing, and paraphrasing to clarify the complaint and to let the customer know that s/he has been understood. In this way, the language skill of “clarifying information” could be revisited in different contexts and from different perspectives. This recycling encourages a mindful approach and “maximizes opportunities for learning.”<sup>65</sup>



For more information on encouraging a mindful approach to learning, see *Section 6: Mindful Learning*.

*Spiraling*

Spiraling is a cyclical, circular process that involves returning to content, language forms (e.g., grammar, vocabulary) or language functions (e.g., giving information, interrupting) that learners understand and then adding more. In this sense, learners stretch towards greater understanding and skill, and build language proficiency. While spiraling is similar to recycling, spiraling takes place over a longer period of time<sup>66</sup> (i.e., over months, semesters, courses) and adds on to previous learning.

To illustrate the concept of spiraling and how language skills may be arranged incrementally within a curriculum, we include two examples from the Toronto Catholic District School Board (2003). Table 6 illustrates a spiraling grid for speaking (social interactions) and Table 7 is a spiraling grid for grammar (logical connectors and modals).

**Table 6. Competency spiraling grid for speaking (social interactions)<sup>67</sup>**  
(Reprinted with permission)

CLB Level	Language function(s)
CLB 5	Respond to small talk, accept or decline invitations and express or respond to compliments, congratulations
CLB 4	Open, close and respond to short casual small talk and leave appropriately
CLB 3	Introduce yourself and ask about the other person
CLB 2	Use courtesy formulas to greet familiar and unfamiliar people
CLB 1	Use and respond to basic courtesy formulas



Source: iStock.com

This example shows how language and social interaction may be spiraled in terms of increasingly more challenging communicative demands.

<sup>65</sup> Nunan, 2004, p. 36.

<sup>66</sup> Bow Valley College, 2009.

<sup>67</sup> Adapted from Toronto Catholic District School Board, 2003, p. 178.

Table 7 demonstrates the spiraling of two grammar items as they are introduced within tasks at particular CLB levels, and then reviewed through other tasks at later CLB levels.

**Table 7. Spiraling grid for grammar items<sup>68</sup>**  
(Reprinted with permission)

Grammar items	CLB 1-2	CLB 3-4	CLB 5-6	CLB 7-8	CLB 9-10
<b>Logical connectors:</b>					
sequence markers		●	●	●	●
coordinating conjunctions		●	●	●	●
correlative (paired) conjunctions			●	●	●
sentence connectors (subordinate conjunctions)			●	●	●
transitions (discourse organizers)				●	●
<b>Modals:</b>					
request	●	●	●	●	●
ability, possibility	●	●	●	●	●
necessity, obligation, permission, prohibition		●	●	●	●
certainty, probability			●	●	●
suggestion, advice, promise		●	●	●	●
habitual past			●	●	●
advisability and past modals				●	●

Within a task-based approach, curriculum designers aim to sequence and spiral material in the most useful way for learners to understand and learn. One way to do this is to grade language and linguistic content (e.g., grammar items, vocabulary, and functions) by frequency of use in English as well as by what is important for learners to know for their present and future use of the language. Nation and Macalister (2010) point out that

“One way to provide a systematic and well-researched basis for a course is to make use of frequency lists and other lists of language items or skills. These lists should be chosen and adapted as a result of the needs analysis in order to set the language learning content of the course. A list may be used as a way of checking or determining the content of a course, but this does not mean that the lessons have to consist of item by item teaching.”<sup>69</sup>

Frequency-based vocabulary lists (e.g., the academic word list<sup>70</sup>), grammar checklists,<sup>71</sup> and lists of functions and topics may be used to support the curriculum design process. That is, a discrete grammar skill, such as the present perfect, may be taught at different levels to support different tasks. For instance, learners at a low level may first be introduced to the present perfect when they participate in a “get-to-know you” task, asking and answering, “Have

<sup>68</sup> Adapted from Toronto Catholic District School Board, 2003, p. 341.

<sup>69</sup> p. 7.

<sup>70</sup> Coxhead, 2000.


<sup>71</sup> Clark, Moran & Burrows, 2007.

you ever...” questions. Later, in a bridging to nursing course at a much higher level, learners may be re-introduced to the present perfect as they role-play interviewing patients about their presenting symptoms (e.g., “So, how long have you had this fever? And you’ve vomited how many times since yesterday?”). This presentation of grammar naturally accompanies a communicative task and requires increasingly sophisticated knowledge and use of language within a specific context.

**Sample tasks: Canadian Language Benchmarks and Essential Skills**

The Canadian Language Benchmarks presents tasks as the “basic building blocks” of curricula and “effective planning [units] for language instruction.”<sup>72</sup> CLB and ES documents are useful sources of sample tasks, organized according to either the language levels or occupations of learners:

- The CLB provides lists of tasks that learners at a particular level would be able to do. These tasks are organized according to skill and level, and illustrate what a person at a particular benchmark should be able to do when reading, writing, listening, and speaking.
- The Essential Skills Profiles (ESP) also provide lists of tasks, organized according to occupation and essential skill.
- The *Comparative Framework*<sup>73</sup> provides side-by-side lists of CLB tasks and ES tasks at similar levels.
- Occupational Language Analyses (OLA) define the language requirements of individual occupations by providing detail regarding the language skills necessary to complete the workplace tasks of that occupation. In this way, they relate the ESP to the CLB, and can provide insight to curriculum developers and instructors regarding the kinds of enabling activities which might prepare learners to perform the tasks.



For more information on the Canadian Language Benchmarks, see *Canadian Language Benchmarks, 2011*.

For more information on the Essential Skills Profiles, see the *Essential Skills Profiles* on the HRSDC website.

For more information on the Comparative Framework and OLAs (Occupational Language Analyses), see *ITSESENTIAL.ca*.

Curriculum developers or instructors may begin with a real-world task, identified from an ESP/OLA, a CLB level, or a needs analysis. They could then work backwards from that task, identifying the learning outcomes that might be met through the tasks, and defining the particular skills that learners would need to develop to accomplish the task.<sup>74</sup> Curriculum developers and instructors might also begin with a particular learning outcome identified in the curriculum (or perhaps a broader program goal or content area based on learners’ interests), and then identify the tasks that learners could do to meet those outcomes. In either case, the curriculum developer or instructor would then need to develop a set of enabling activities based on that task.

<sup>72</sup> Pawlikowska-Smith, 2005, p. VIII.

<sup>73</sup> Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks, 2005.

<sup>74</sup> The “performance indicators” in the CLB 2000 document, are useful for identifying the particular skills learners will need for particular tasks.

The following illustrates a process for developing learning activities to support a task, integrating the CLB into instruction.

1. **Identify a real-world task which would be interesting and relevant to the learners** (e.g., from an ESP, OLA, a needs analysis, or a theme). The following task, for example, could potentially be identified in response to expressed learner interest:<sup>75</sup>

**Real world task**

- Furnish a basement suite in preparation for renting it out.

2. **Identify the target CLB descriptor(s) or competencies,<sup>76</sup> and adjust these competencies to fit the context of the real-world task.** In Table 8, task descriptions from Benchmark 6 are adjusted to fit the context of furnishing a basement suite.

**Table 8. CLB task descriptors adjusted for real-world tasks**

**Related Benchmark 6 task descriptors<sup>77</sup>**

**Information: Interaction one-on-one**

“Ask for and provide information in an interview related to daily activities.”

**Essential Skills:**

*Oral Communication*

*Writing: recording notes*

*Thinking: finding information*

**Suasion**

“Make a simple formal suggestion and provide a reason.”

**Essential Skills:**

*Oral Communication*

*Working with Others*

*Thinking (problem solving, decision making, task planning)*

**Adjusted to fit the context of the task**

During a fieldtrip to Ikea, learners ask store employees for specific information regarding in-store specials, the location of items in the self-serve aisles, current discounts, and desirable features of items. Their goal would be to gather information they would need to furnish a basement suite.<sup>78</sup>

Participate in small group discussions, making recommendations, providing reasons and researched evidence regarding

- What to include in a commercial.
- What to purchase to furnish a rental suite based on a pre-determined budget.

<sup>75</sup> This example is adapted from a series of activities developed by Friedemann Poetzsch in the *Alberta LINC 5 curriculum* (Capune, 2008, p. 45-48).

<sup>76</sup> Reflecting the learners’ benchmark levels.

<sup>77</sup> These descriptors are taken from the Benchmark 6 Speaking descriptors of “what the person can do” (Pawlikowska-Smith, 2005, p. 62-63).

<sup>78</sup> See Capune (2008) for a handout describing the “Shopping at IKEA” assignment (p. 45).

**Social Interaction: Conversation management**

“Indicate partial comprehension.  
Take turns by interrupting.  
Encourage conversation by adding supporting elements.”

**Essential Skills:**

- Oral Communication*
- Working with Others*
- Thinking (problem solving, decision making)*

Participate in small group discussions negotiating, and compromising to reach an agreement regarding

- What to include in a commercial.
- What to purchase to furnish a rental suite based on a pre-determined budget.

Manage the group discussion by indicating partial comprehension, taking turns interrupting, and encouraging the conversation by adding supporting elements.

**Information: Presentations**

“Describe and compare people and places.”

**Essential Skills:**

- Oral Communication*
- Computer use (if learners prepare a brochure or PowerPoint presentation)*

Present a two-minute commercial to the class on one of the items chosen.<sup>79</sup>

**Information: Interaction in a group** “Participate in small group discussions/meetings on non-personal, familiar topics and issues: express opinions, feelings, obligation, ability, certainty.”

**Essential Skills:**

- Oral Communication*
- Numeracy*
- Writing*
- Thinking (problem solving, decision making, job task planning and organizing)*

Participate in a small group discussion regarding which items to purchase:

- Express and respond to opinions
- Compare and contrast findings
- Describe effects of choices
- Agree and disagree

**3. Break these tasks into smaller competencies (i.e., performance indicators) that learners will need to be able to perform in order to complete the larger task.** Performance indicators can help identify the underlying competencies. For instance, the CLB task “Ask for and provide information in an interview related to daily activities” is accompanied by the following the Performance indicators:<sup>80</sup>

**Performance indicators**

- "Explains the nature of the inquiry and information needed.
- Provides necessary details.
- Asks relevant questions.
- Summarizes and repeats back. Thanks for the help and information.
- Speaks intelligibly; listener can follow."

<sup>79</sup> See Capune (2008) for a handout (p.46) and rubric (p.47) related to the TV Commercial assignment. Note: although this task is somewhat contrived (i.e., it is not a task that many learners would face in the real world), it is a text-type that learners would often encounter in the real world.

<sup>80</sup> Pawlikowska-Smith, 2005, p. 63.



**4. Structure enabling activities for learners to practice the competencies required in order to perform the real world task.** A consideration of the performance conditions for the benchmark can help ensure that activities and tasks are at the right level for the class. For example, Benchmark 6 performance conditions for one-on-one interactions include the following: “Interactions are face to face or on the phone; interaction is formal or semi-formal; learner can partially prepare the exchange.”<sup>81</sup>

The following set of activities could be used to prepare learners for a fieldtrip to Ikea where they will interact with store employees to gather the information needed to develop a commercial and make recommendations regarding what to purchase to furnish a rental suite (e.g., items available, pricing, location, sales):

### Enabling activities

- Learners brainstorm for ways to catch attention and introduce the topic (“Excuse me, I’m looking for…”).
- Learners practice checking comprehension through summarizing and echoing in short, guided communication activities.
- In groups, learners decide which thanking conventions would be most appropriate in this setting, and then practice the intonation (so as to sound sincere).
- Learners complete vocabulary exercises presenting key items related to furniture and furniture descriptions, and then refine their pronunciation of the new terms (related to problem sounds or word stress).
- Learners review how to form questions, (e.g., rather than a bald, “Where are the beds?” learners could practice forms such as, “Where could we find the beds?” or “Could you tell us where to find the beds?”). They practice the linking, stress, and intonation of the questions.

**5. Have learners perform the task.** Once learners have practiced the skills required, they can put them together in order to accomplish the tasks (see Step 2 above). For instance, learners might do the following tasks in sequence (each supported with relevant enabling activities), related to gathering the information necessary to furnish a rental suite:

### Task(s)

- During a field trip to Ikea, learners discover the information they need to develop a commercial and make recommendations regarding what to purchase to furnish a rental suite (e.g., items available, pricing, locations, sales).
- In groups, learners plan a short commercial featuring one of the items chosen.
- Learners present the commercial to the class.
- Learners use information gleaned from the field trip and commercials to participate in a small group discussion, making recommendations, negotiating, and compromising to an agreement regarding what to purchase based on a pre-determined budget.

**6. Assess.** Although assessment is listed here as a last step, it would be integrated throughout the series of activities. Holistic assessment would involve asking whether a learner performed the task(s) successfully. Analytical assessment would involve assessing some of the particular skills that were taught. It would be important to include a variety of assessment methods, some formative, some summative, some holistic, and some analytical. The pragmatic feasibility of assessment also needs to be considered (e.g., time available, number of students, location of activity).

<sup>81</sup> Pawlikowska-Smith, 2005, p. 60.

In the set of tasks described above, an instructor would need to decide how the success of the tasks would be judged. Pragmatically, it would be difficult to assess each learner's interviews with Ikea personnel. However, a completed worksheet identifying six items, their locations, and prices might provide a holistic sense of whether a learner has successfully identified relevant information. A self-analysis questionnaire or journal entry could provide further information (e.g., *How did I catch the person's attention? How did I check my comprehension? What questions did I ask? Did any communication difficulties arise? How did I solve them?*). A peer or instructor rubric could be used to assess a learner's contribution to the small group discussions.<sup>82</sup> Pronunciation of key words, knowledge of the topic, and an ability to make recommendations and provide reasons can all be assessed during the commercial. An oral report describing a group's decisions regarding what would be purchased to furnish a basement suite could also be assessed.



For more information on assessment, see [Section 2: Setting and Assessing Outcomes](#).

## Theme-based learning

A theme-based approach to sequencing instruction involves organizing and contextualizing curriculum content in a way that integrates language skills, language functions, and content-based concepts. This approach promotes active and cooperative learning.

The themes themselves are not just general topics or subject areas to learn about (e.g., health care, education); instead, an effective theme is designed to provide a specific focus or orientation to a particular topic suitable for investigative inquiry.<sup>83</sup> For example, *Blue Jeans... more than just a pair of pants*<sup>84</sup> and *It's all about me and we: Working independently and on a team*<sup>85</sup> are themes, while *fashion* and *employment* are their respective topics.

While theme-based learning is sometimes thought to best suit lower proficiency levels and settlement programs, themes can be successfully used across a range of proficiency levels, age groups, content areas, and contexts. For example, while thematic units in a LINC program may focus on maintaining a healthy lifestyle in Canada or finding a dream home in the suburbs, a theme within an EAP program may focus on building a social life on campus.

A theme is articulated into a set of sequenced lessons and tasks that link and springboard one to another. Notice how the lessons and tasks in the sample thematic unit (see *Figure 1* below) are organized to move learners from teacher-supported to independent learning. This is accomplished by presenting language skills, concepts, and learning strategies in increasingly more challenging ways (i.e., spiraling).

<sup>82</sup> For an example of a peer assessment rubric for a small group discussion, see Table 5, Sample rubric **for** learning, in *Setting and Assessing Outcomes*.

<sup>83</sup> Richard-Amato, 2003.

<sup>84</sup> Roessingh, 1999.

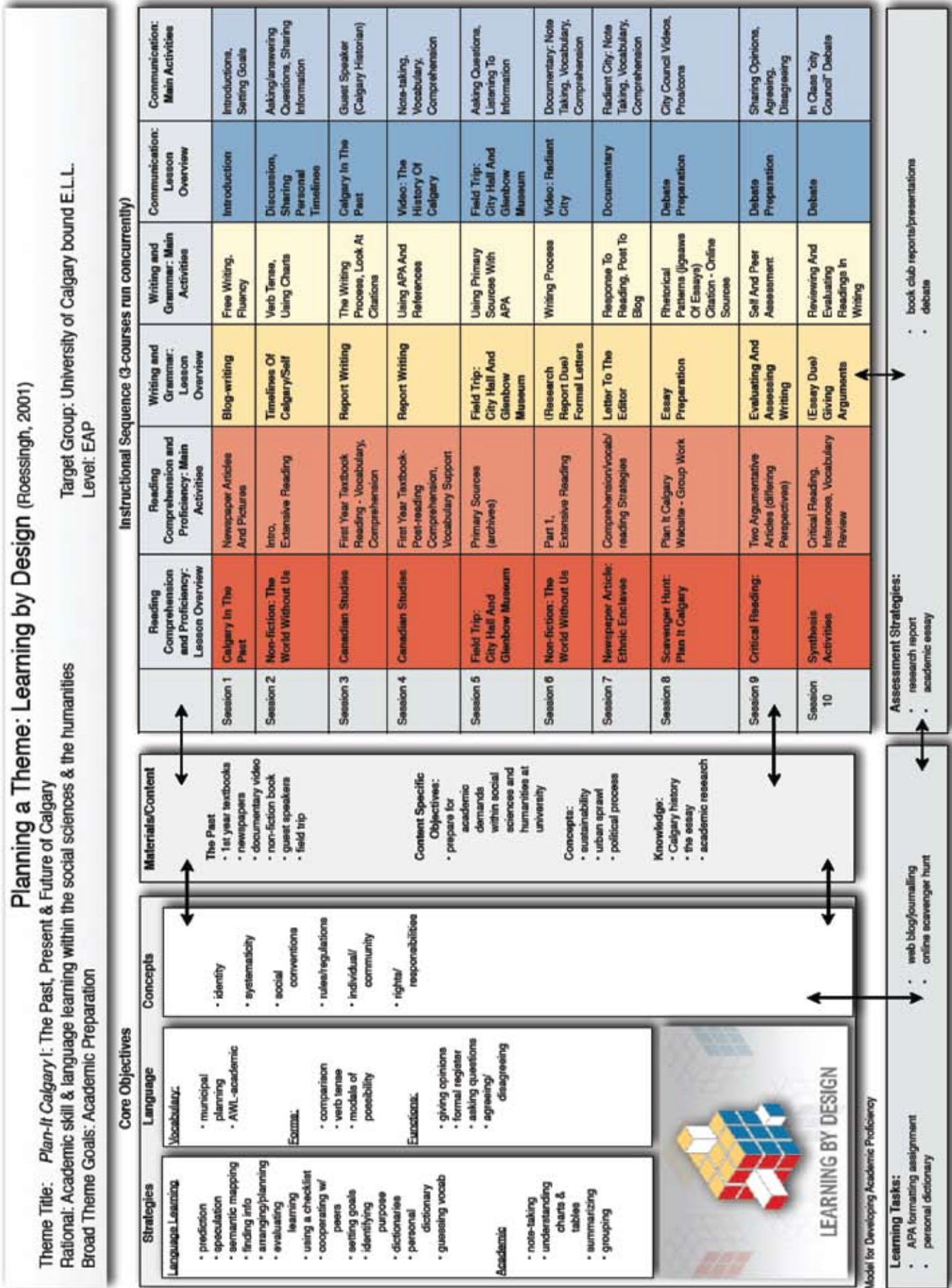
<sup>85</sup> Capune, 2008, p. 52.

It is also important to provide sufficient opportunity for learners to practice what they have learned as well as revisit or recycle key skills, concepts and strategies. For example, in the sample thematic unit (*Figure 1*), learners start examining citations in Session 3, do more work on APA references in Sessions 4, 5, and 8, and submit a researched essay in Session 10. The forms, functions, vocabulary, and concepts are recycled throughout the unit as learners

- Do extensive reading on the topic (from a wide variety of genres, including newspaper articles, stories, textbooks, websites, opinion pieces).
- Listen to documentaries and guest speakers.
- Participate in a field trip.
- Share opinions, ask questions, debate, agree, disagree – all on the topic of “the past, present, and future of Calgary.”
- Take notes, write a report, write an essay.

Both formative and summative assessment strategies are selected to specifically address the learning outcomes contextualized within the theme (*See Figure 1*). Using assessment strategies as teaching and learning tools in the classroom and as a source for ongoing feedback makes the assessment strategies transparent to the learners and involves them in the assessment process.

Figure 1. Sample thematic unit for an EAP program at the University of Calgary (Roessingh, 2010). Reprinted with permission.



In some settings, the curriculum developer provides the outcomes, sample tasks, and materials, and leaves the designing of thematic units to the instructors. The advantage of this approach is that instructors can collaborate with their learners to select suitable themes, thereby ensuring that the language skills, language functions, and content expectations are appropriate for the proficiency level of their learners, and address their learning needs and interests. Involving students in this way encourages them to take ownership in the learning process. Curriculum developers can support instructors in this process by providing

- Sample thematic units.
- A selection of possible thematic units to choose from, with suggested tasks, resources and assessment strategies.
- Materials and course books that are organized thematically, or can be easily incorporated into thematic units.

In other settings, themes are used as the primary organizing structure within curricula. The curriculum developer provides a series of thematic units which instructors are expected to cover. In these situations, instructors should be encouraged to adjust the tasks and activities so they more closely align to learners' interests and needs. They can also sequence themes on the basis of their perceived importance to learners.<sup>86</sup>

Curriculum developers (or instructors) who are designing thematic units may find the following framework useful (see *Figure 2*).<sup>87</sup> It is comprised of five essential components:

1. Core objectives (i.e., specific learning outcomes for language learning strategies, language skills, key concepts)
2. Materials/content
3. Lesson overview
4. Tasks
5. Assessment strategies

In this framework, each element is related and connected in an intentional way, and each aligns with the course objectives, outcomes, and goals of the program.

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<sup>86</sup> Brown, 1995.

<sup>87</sup> Roessingh, 2010.



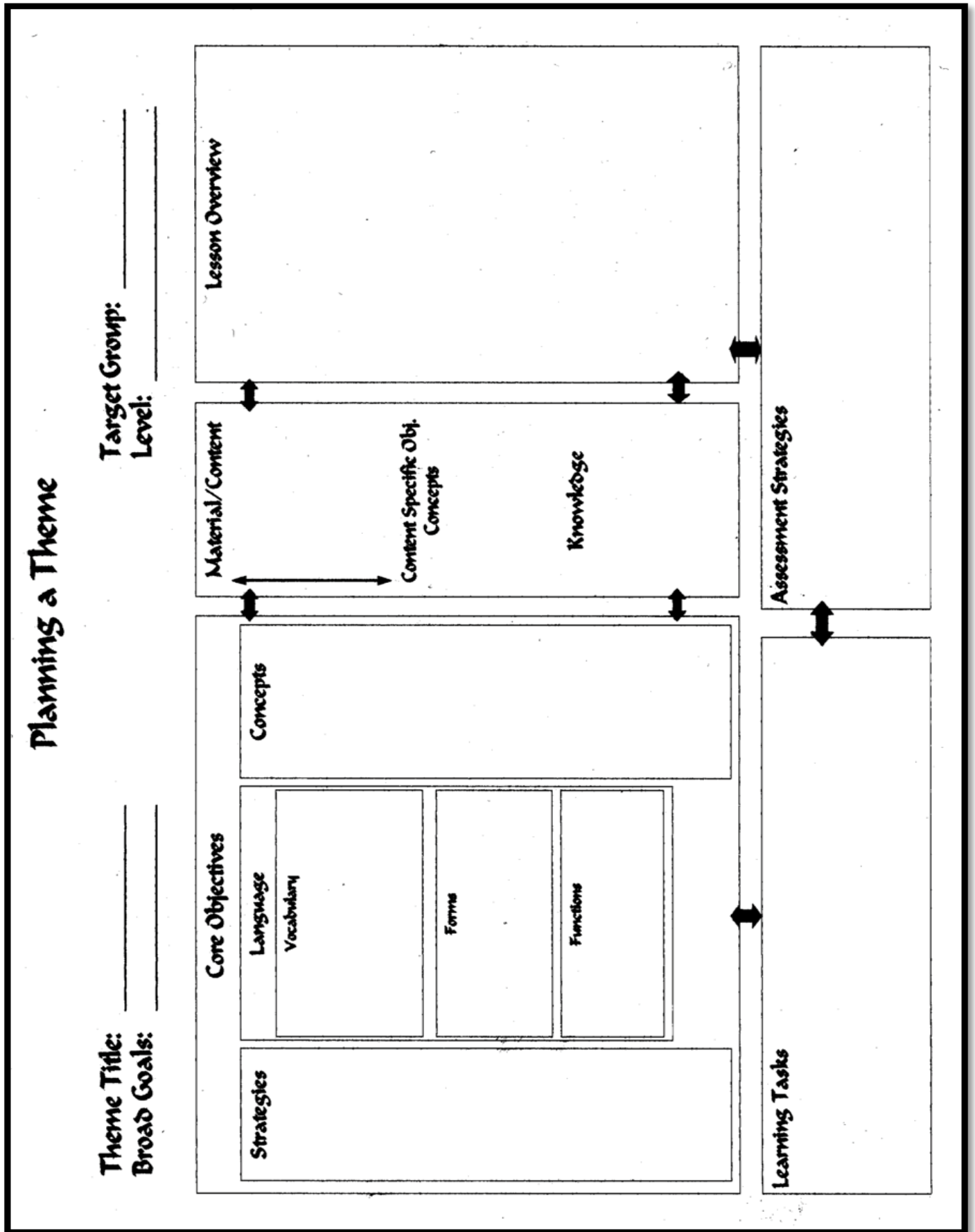


Figure 2. Planning a theme: Learning by design (Roessingh, 2001). Reprinted with permission.

## Project-based learning

*“Project work takes the experience of the classroom out into the world and provides an opportunity for informal learning. The potential benefit for students is clear: they are working on a topic of interest to them and using language for a specific purpose, with a particular aim in mind.”<sup>88</sup>*

Like a theme-based approach, a project-based approach to sequencing curricular content allows for integrated language and content development.<sup>89</sup> Projects are learning-focused, collaborative, task-supported, and extend over a period of time (i.e., a few weeks, months, a semester). Figure 3 below defines the essential elements of a project-based learning approach, in which learning is guided by a central question or set of questions that is negotiated between the learners and the instructor. The central question(s) guide and organize the inquiry process, focus the learners on real-world issues (e.g., environmental concerns, immigration, travel), and link to specific curricular content.<sup>90</sup> For example, in an intermediate ESL course, learners might explore the following questions: *In what ways does access to the Internet affect communication around the world? In your local community? Within your circle of friends? In your life?* (See Figure 4)

Projects are an ideal vehicle for inviting learners to demonstrate what they can do by incorporating a range of formative and summative assessment strategies. For example, when engaged in project work, learners complete real-world tasks such as conducting interviews with community members or writing letters to the editor of a newspaper. Instructors can use these learner-generated artifacts to assess their progress throughout the project. Also, instructors work in collaboration with learners to select the form of the final learning artifact that will culminate the project work. This artifact demonstrates the learner’s understanding of the learning objectives, and it may take the form of a written assignment (e.g., a paragraph, essay, report, or newspaper article), poster, presentation, performance, website or multimedia learning object (e.g., podcast, movie).

While there is considerable variety in the way you may choose to design a project, the essential elements should include a clearly stated central question, a set of questions or a problem to address, a project overview and rationale, a set of well-defined learning objectives and key concepts, a collection of materials and resources, a set of learning tasks, and a set of assessment strategies. Project-based learning is a flexible, versatile approach that allows you to incorporate those elements of language and curricular content that you choose to focus on.<sup>91</sup>

<sup>88</sup> Fried-Booth, 2002, p. 5.

<sup>89</sup> Stoller, 2006, p. 21.

<sup>90</sup> Stoller, 2006.

<sup>91</sup> Also see Beckett & Miller (2006) and Fried-Booth (2002).



Figure 3. Essential elements of a project-based learning approach (Adapted from Roessingh & Chambers, in press).



Figure 4. A sample project. *The Internet and communication.*

<p><b>Central question(s)</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In what ways does access to the Internet affect communication around the world? In your local community? Within your circle of friends? In your life?</li> </ul>
<p><b>Project overview &amp; rationale</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This project tasks learners to think critically about the use of the Internet for communicative purposes. It also asks learners to access online resources, communicate within various social media in a respectful, culturally-sensitive way, and reflect on their experiences as both consumers and producers of online materials/communications.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Learning objectives</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learners will...develop a final learning artifact that addresses one or more of the central questions; use the Internet to access information and communicate with others in a respectful, culturally-sensitive way; review international newspaper headlines, comparing and documenting the content over a period of time (e.g., one week); and develop skimming and scanning reading skills.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Key concepts</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Compare and contrast differences and similarities in communication styles, explore cultural bias in mass media, recognize the Internet as a multifaceted communication tool with associated advantages, challenges, and cautions.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Materials &amp; resources</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Set up a class wiki page (e.g., wetpaint.com). Post online readings and resources for learners to access and download. These may include links to online survey resources (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Friendster), and online news sources (e.g., Newseum.com).</li> </ul>
<p><b>Learning tasks</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ask learners to set up a social networking page and invite their classmates to join. They should monitor the page daily, post messages, and respond to the postings of others.</li> <li>• Ask learners to design and administer an e-survey that asks respondents questions about using the Internet to communicate, for example, through social networking sites, e-mail, or accessing news agencies. Learners may invite classmates, friends, and/or family members to complete the survey.</li> <li>• Using an online newspaper site, such as Newseum.com, learners read the daily headlines from three different international newspapers, compare, and document the content.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Assessment strategies (examples)</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have learners write about their online social networking experiences. Ask learners to identify the advantages and disadvantages of using online social networking sites.</li> <li>• Have learners design a poster or advertisement for an online social networking site. Ask learners to identify the purpose of the site, describe the steps to becoming a member and how to invite others to join, and online advantages and cautions for using the site.</li> <li>• Ask learners to present their findings gathered from their e-surveys.</li> <li>• Have learners write a short news article or create a podcast presenting findings from following the headlines of three international newspapers over a one-week period.</li> </ul>

## Conclusion

In this section of the *ATESL Curriculum Framework*, we have introduced tasks as a means for supporting the development of language proficiency for communication in the real world. We suggest ways to organize tasks and enabling activities so that key language skills, language forms, and course-based content are recycled, and so that tasks are logically sequenced, scaffolded, and spiraled in terms of increasing difficulty.

Tasks may be the principal organizing feature of the curricula (i.e., a task-based approach) or tasks may be used to support language teaching and learning (i.e., task-supported curricula) and contextualized within themes or projects. Theme- and project-based approaches are excellent ways to organize curriculum content and tasks, especially when language skills are integrated.<sup>92</sup> A task-based approach to sequencing content may be used in integrated skills classes, and it can also be used for teaching pronunciation, grammar, or a particular language skill.<sup>93</sup> Both task-supported and task-based approaches accommodate a range of proficiency levels, learner interests, and are suitable across a wide range of language learning contexts. Whether the sequencing of content within the curriculum is organized around tasks, themes, or projects, as Nation and Macalister (2010) point out,

*“it is important for the curriculum designer to keep some check on vocabulary, grammar and discourse to make sure that important items are being covered and repeated. If there is no check being made, it may happen that learners are not meeting items that are important for their later use of language. It may also happen that items are not being met often enough to establish them.”<sup>94</sup>*

In the next section of the *ATESL Curriculum Framework*, we take a principles-based approach to **selecting methods and materials** for adult ESL curricula.

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<sup>92</sup> E.g., a listening course or an intensive reading course.

<sup>93</sup> Especially in courses which focus on productive skills (e.g., conversation, writing, or a reading/writing).

<sup>94</sup> p. 7.

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