

THE PLACE OF MODULAR SYSTEMS AMONG FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING MATERIALS

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Foreign language teaching materials have so far mainly taken the form of 'compact' language courses or of 'supplementary' teaching aids, including audiovisuals. This article aims to put forward a new way to look at such materials by introducing the concept of 'learning modules', i.e. elements which can be fitted together flexibly according to different teaching needs and situations. The 'modular systems' thus obtained are described in terms of their advantages and classified according to their specific function in implementing a language syllabus. The integration of modules in a learning system is then discussed, with particular reference to such problems as the relation with traditional teaching units, levels of linguistic competence, and the use of different methodological approaches. Finally, it is suggested that learning modules should be introduced into the classroom both by having recourse to published materials (examples are given as regards EFL/ESL), and through the production of modules by language teachers themselves. Appendix A gives a specimen selection of EFL modules developed by the author, and appendix B a few examples of modular construction.

Pedagogical as well as commercial reasons have so far led both course book writers and publishers to develop foreign language teaching materials which could meet a wide range of teaching needs and expectations in a variety of local situations. Reasons of cost have often prevented specialists in the field from developing particular materials suitable for a specific group of learners. With a few exceptions, most courses are therefore planned and marketed in order to appeal to as vast a number as possible of potential consumers. 'Supplementary' materials often offered side by side with the main course (such as workbooks, revision units, and a choice of audiovisual aids) usually help both teachers and students to adapt the course to their particular learning situations.

A greater emphasis has however recently been placed on self-instructional processes (1), programmed learning for individualized instruction, and, in more general terms, on the problem of evaluating the language needs of particular groups of learners (2), devising special courses for definite levels of linguistic competence, and developing suitable teaching materials. Such an interest, which is of no merely academic importance, reflects the need for new language acquisition systems capable of providing both individuals and groups with the quantity and quality of language most suited to their particular professional, cultural and socio-psychological exigencies (3).

The question of teaching materials which could cope with this new view of foreign language teaching is all the more urgent, as on one side, course book writers and publishers cannot possibly be expected to produce new materials for each specific group of learners, and on the other, teachers cannot often afford to spend vast amounts of time and energy to devise completely new series of teaching aids for each individual or group of learners they happen to have to care for. However, the traditional 'compact' language course often shows deficiencies in such situations, and therefore needs to be adjusted and/or supplemented with suitable materials. A possible alternative way of coping with such situations lies in the production and use of 'learning modules'.

By 'learning modules' we here mean a series of self-contained teaching programmes, each meeting a specific language need, and therefore having a clear objective and an explicitly stated function, which can be fitted together flexibly according to the needs and expectations of a particular learning/teaching situation. The structure of such modules should be designed in order to ensure the maximum of flexibility as well as of coordination, so that every combination of them may result in a structured modular 'system'.

The idea of a 'bank' of language materials, on which teachers could draw according to their specific needs, is not a new one: Howatt (1969), for programmed learning materials, Heaton (1975), for language tests, and Wright (1976), for audiovisual aids, to quote just a few examples, have all stressed the importance of a well-stocked file of materials for a language teacher. However, learning modules, as defined above, should first and foremost be combinable, i.e. designed in order to be easily fitted together to form a learning system capable of implementing a specific foreign language syllabus.

Some of the possible advantages of learning modules have already been mentioned. Flexibility being their keynote, they would prove to be useful materials in all those situations where a course book, however complete and comprehensive it may be, needs to be replaced, or at least adapted, supplemented and integrated, either at the language content level or from a methodological point of view, in order to meet the language needs of a particular group of learners. This means that modules would prove useful both when planning a particular course (as a learning system complete in itself) and as supplementary materials, i.e. whenever, for a variety of reasons including cost, it is either not possible or desirable to produce specific teaching aids. Modules would prove equally useful whenever problems of individualizing instruction should arise, such as when dealing with large classes or with different levels of language proficiency within the same group, or when revision, reinforcement, or supplementary practice is needed, or when coping with the difficulties of group work or project work. In all these cases, modules can offer ample scope for self-instructional activities, and, in more general terms, they can provide opportunities for individuals and groups to take a more active part in their own learning process by giving them an extra choice of language activities, materials and techniques.

Although the *language content* of modular elements can always be clearly set out (as most course books rightly do for each of their teaching units) in terms of notions, functions, structures, vocabulary and pronunciation problems dealt with, learning modules can profitably be diversified and therefore be classified according to their specific function in implementing a language syllabus. The following classification may give an idea of the possible teaching areas which can be covered by such materials:

1. *Skill-based modules*, when language activities are mainly intended for the practice of Listening, Speaking, Reading, Writing, and/or Integrated Skills (such as Listening and Note-taking, Discussion and Writing, Reading and Story-telling, etc.);
2. *Language-based modules*, when language activities are aimed at the practice of specific elements of the language system, such as structures, notions, functions, vocabulary, pronunciation and intonation;
3. *Situation- and Topic-based modules*, when the starting point for the learning activities is the practice of the language used in specific situations or for particular topics;
4. *'Language for special purposes' modules*, when the accent is, for example, on the language used for Science and Technology, Commercial Practice, etc. Such modules, which focus on the varieties of language, may also include materials for the study of literature;
5. *'Background' or 'civilisation' modules*, when the function of the materials is to provide students with an insight into the historical and socio-cultural background of the language and the countries speaking it.

This detailed classification, which is merely for illustrative purposes, should not conceal the overall objective of a language course, which is to provide learners with the kind of language competence needed in their specific situation. However, it is often useful to have a clear breakdown of the teaching objectives to be aimed at, in terms of skills to be developed, language content to be mastered, topics to be dealt with, and additional special needs to be fulfilled: this accounts for the above classification of modules according to their function. In practice, the various categories of modules can be combined together, and teachers may find it convenient to produce and use, for example, materials which develop integrated skills while practising at the same time specific language points or particular varieties of language.

The same remark should be made as regards the relationship between learning modules and the 'teaching unit' with its traditional stages (presentation, practice, production, testing). Modules can *either* be identified with complete units, in that they may include all the necessary stages, *or* be limited to a specific stage or a particular language activity which is meant to integrate or supplement a teaching unit. Conversely, a number of modules combined together can make up a complete, self-contained unit.

Modules can be produced at a variety of language levels; on the other hand, they can include a series of activities and materials suitable for different levels. Since they are not in the first instance meant to be used consecutively, a single module can be 'recycled', that is used a second or even a third time with the same students, each time at a different level of language complexity, provided its content and activities preserve a minimum degree of interest and motivation. Thus learning modules can help teachers implement both 'linear' and even more 'spiral' or 'cyclical' syllabuses (4).

Once again, the use to which modules can be put will depend largely on whether they are meant to replace a course book altogether, or whether they serve mainly as supplementary, integrating materials. In both cases, however, their construction must ensure that a coherent, structured system of language learning will result from their combined use.

Here the risk of building materials based on methodologies or techniques totally or partially inconsistent with one another should not be underestimated. Even if the use of different approaches to language teaching with the same group of learners may be productive and even stimulating at times, great care should be exercised in order to ensure that contrasting materials or techniques may not engender confusion in the students' minds. If course books sometimes run this risk, the corresponding danger implicit in building modular materials must receive even greater consideration.

As regards English as a foreign or second language, the market does not offer many examples of learning modules at present, although, as Brumfit (1979) has recently remarked, the need for such flexible materials is deeply felt.

In most cases, teachers will find that a vast amount of supplementary materials is available, particularly for practice, revision and remedial work, as well as audiovisuals for a variety of different purposes; the not-so-easy task of combining such teaching aids with the main course followed is usually left to the teachers themselves. The main difference between such materials and the learning modules, as defined above, is that the latter aim is to constitute a body of combinable elements: the emphasis is clearly not only on flexibility and adaptability, but also and above all on the possibility of mutual integration as parts of a structure (5). The works by Nuttal (1973) for structural units, Fletcher & Hargreaves (1979) for more recent functional units, and Byrne (1978, 1979) for 'interaction packs', despite their quite different approaches to language teaching, are all examples of flexible materials designed to assist teachers when integrating and supplementing course books. However, the work produced by Language Teaching Resources (1978) is at present the one that comes closest to the kind of learning modules defined above, for a number of reasons:

- (a) the project includes four different series of modules, designed to (1) provide practice in the spoken English used in specific areas of ordinary life (see the above-mentioned 'situation- and skill-based modules'), (2) supply materials for the revision of grammatical structures ('language-based modules'), (3) stimulate free discussion on a topic ('topic-based modules'), and (4) provide information on aspects of Britain and Ireland, and promote comparison by discussion ('background modules');
- (b) although the emphasis in each series is on a particular approach to language practice (through situations, revision of structures, topic discussion, and socio-cultural information), the modules themselves provide a variety of activities, ranging from listening and reading comprehension to role-play and discussion; each module can then be used either in its entirety or only in part;
- (c) The modules are cross-referenced, so that each of them can be linked with others providing revision work or further development of a particular topic. Modules are linked with one another by structures, topics or situations;
- (d) each module is meant for a specific level of linguistic competence, but, since most modules consist of texts, illustrations, and recorded materials, they may be used with multi-level classes, or at different levels of complexity with different classes, thus allowing both advanced and weaker students to find their own suitable materials;
- (e) although modules may take the form of a complete teaching unit, thus replacing a

- (e) although modules may take the form of a complete teaching unit, thus replacing a standard course book, their general aim is to provide supplementary materials;
- (f) the modules are flexible enough to be combined together in many different ways, so as to form different structured systems of language learning, according to both the student's situation and needs, and the teacher's intended syllabus;
- (g) the format of the modules (four-page materials in loose-leaf form) reflects the need for flexibility and adaptability.

If published materials are still lacking in this field, there is no reason why teachers should not built their own 'bank' of learning modules. Although such an operation would require a considerable amount of time and energy, developing such materials, even if over a period of years, and possibly on a groupwork basis, would provide teachers with a library of modules always ready for use and reference, so that it may well be worth the undoubtedly hard work of producing them.

To further exemplify how learning modules can be built and used in practice, Appendix A gives a specimen selection of EFL modules developed by the Author, and Appendix B a few examples of modular construction.

APPENDIX A

A Specimen Selection of EFL Learning Modules

Note: The language content of the following modules is set out in terms of the main general notions, functions, structures (language forms or exponents) and specific (topic-related) notions found in each of the modules. The terms used refer to the inventories contained in Van Ek, J.A., *The Threshold Level*, Council of Europe, Strasbourg, 1975. An outline description of the language activities involved in each module is given after the language content specification. The level of linguistic competence aimed at here is the same 'Threshold Level' referred to before.

No.	Main general notions	Main functions	Main structures	Topic and specific notions
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Section A — Skill-based Modules

A1 — Listening Comprehension

A1.1	existence/ nonexistence; presence/ absence; quantity	Asking Reporting	there is to have (got) some/any/no/ none	Food and drink
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Description of language activities Students listen to a dialogue in which George asks Mary questions about the food items they have (or have not) got at home. Students are given a list of such items and, while listening, number them in order as they are mentioned, and then put a tick beside the items George will have to buy.

A1.2	location motion distance length of time	Asking Reporting	Auxiliary 'do' how/how long/ how far	Travel to work
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Description of language activities Students listen to a series of short interviews of four people on their journey to work. While listening, students fill in a form specifying the method of transport, the distance in miles, and the time it takes each of these people to get to work.

A2 — Reading Comprehension

A2.1	Spatial relations (relative position, distance, direction)	Instructing and Directing	Prepositions (place) Imperative	Places
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Description of language activities Students follow a series of written directions on a map, and find out where the directions lead them to.

A2.2	Personal properties and qualities	Reporting (describing) Suggesting a course of action Expressing disapproval	To be (pres.) Simple Pres. could should not	Personal identification
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Description of language activities Students read a series of descriptions of people and find out what each of these people could or should not do as a job, according to their specific personal qualities.

Section B — Language-Based Modules

B1 — Structural Modules

B1.1	quantity	Asking Reporting (Inquiring about and Expressing want)	'to need' Aux. 'do' some/any/no/ none	Food and drink (Cooking)
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No.	Main general notions	Main functions	Main structures	Topic and specific notions
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Aim To practise some/any/no/none through drills ('practice' stage of a unit).

Description of language activities After eliciting from the students the vocabulary relevant to the ingredients of cakes, the teacher gives the class a recipe. Working in pairs, students ask and answer questions on the ingredients of the recipe: Do you need any ...?/Yes, I need some/No, I need none, etc.

B2 — Functional Modules

B2.1	According to students' choice	Suggesting a course of action	Let's ... Shall we ...? We could ... What about + ING form	No topic-related or specific vocabulary
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Aim To practise 'Suggestions' forms through drills ('practice' stage of a unit).

Description of language activities Students hear a recorded sound (the rain, a music record, an alarm-clock, a typewriter, etc.) and supply appropriate suggestions, either working in pairs or as a whole class. Clues to possible suggestions may or may not be provided by the teacher.

Section C — Situation- and Topic-Based Modules

C1	quantity quality size, volume number value, price	Offering Accepting/Declining Suggesting a course of action Asking for things	Would you like ...? Yes, please/ No, thank you What about ...? Shall we ...? Can I have ...?	Food and drink (Eating and drinking out)
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Aim To stimulate free expression through role-play ('production' stage of a unit).

Description of language activities Students, working in small groups, read a menu and discuss what they are going to have at a restaurant, one student in each group acting as the waiter. To give a touch of extra realism, the teacher can provide each student or each group with a cue-card, suggesting some possible ways of action: for example, telling a student to act as a noisy boy or an impatient lady, or supplying the waiter with a different menu showing fewer available items, etc.

APPENDIX B

Examples of Modular Construction

Note: Although the number of the modules described in Appendix A is very limited, it may be sufficient to give at least a clear idea of how modular systems can be implemented. Each module can in fact either be used by itself, to supplement a specific syllabus or teaching programme for which it is designed (e.g. a Reading Comprehension course for Section A2 modules, or a Functional course for Section B2 modules), or be combined with other modules of a different type to produce a modular system. What is important to note is that the same module can become part of different learning systems.

The following combinations of modules are designed to integrate, supplement or partially replace units of standard course books.

Example 1: Grammatical Syllabus

Unit on 'some/any/no/none':

Practice stage: Module B1.1

Reinforcement: Module A1.1

Production stage: Working in pairs, students freely reconstruct the dialogue in Module A1.1, using the notes they already have on hand.

Example 2: Functional Syllabus

Unit on 'Suggestions/Offering':

Practice stage: Module B2.1

Reinforcement: Module A2.2

Production stage: Module C1.

Example 3: Situational Syllabus

Unit on 'Travel':

Reinforcement: (Listening) Module A1.2

(Reading) Module A2.1

Production stage: Working in pairs, and using the maps provided in Module A2.1, students ask and answer questions on their journey to work or to school, giving details of the itinerary they follow.

Example 4: Grammatical Syllabus

Unit on 'The Simple Present, including the Interrogative Form (Auxiliary 'do')':

Reinforcement: (Listening) Module A1.2

(Reading) Module A2.2

Production stage: Working in pairs, students build up an interview between a Careers Advisor and one of the people described in Module A2.2. The interview will be centred around personal identification, personal qualities, relevant job opportunities, etc.

Example 5: Functional Syllabus

Unit on 'Suggestions':

Revision of 'Suggestions' forms:

Module B2.1

Production stage: Module A1.1. Once the students have worked through this module, they will construct a dialogue between George and Mary, in which suggestions are made on the possible ways of cooking a dinner by using the food items they have got at home.

NOTES

- (1) See the 'Special Section on Self-instruction', *System* 7, 3—44 (1979), and 'Individualisation in Language Learning', *ELT Documents*, No. 103, The British Council, London (1978).
- (2) Cfr. Richterich R. R. and Chancerel J. L. (1980).
- (3) See the pilot work conducted by the Council of Europe within the 'unit/credit system for language learning by adults'. The relevant papers, of which the work mentioned in the previous note is an example, are now (1980) being published by Pergamon Press, Oxford.
- (4) For a discussion of 'linear', 'spiral' and 'cyclical' syllabuses, cfr. Howatt (1974).
- (5) An example of a comprehensive, structured, modular reading comprehension course is offered by the S.R.A. Reading Laboratories, Science Research Associates, Inc., Chicago.

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