

Topic 21. Programming in the FL Area: Programming Units. Criteria for the sequencing and timing of content and objectives. Selection of the methodology to be implemented in learning and evaluation activities.

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1. Introduction

In the modern legal framework regarding the teaching of a foreign language (FLT) that language teachers must put into practice through the **learning situations**, the child is expected to become an active agent in charge of solving daily-life situations, using the FL as an instrument of communication. Obviously, the **role of the teacher as designer of learning situations**, demands new skills related to technologies and new methodologies to deal in more complex teaching contexts, such as the “classroom of the future”, promoted by the Regional Educational Administrations.

The new trends in foreign language teaching (FLT) are in 2024 identified as an **advanced view of communicative competence**, in which the **integration and use of technologies and purposeful use** of the language are at the heart of good teaching practice. In accordance, the new **Organic Law 3/2020, December 29th**, which modifies Organic Law 2/2006, May 3rd establishes in its article 4.4 concerning the Basic Education, a twofold educational goal grounded on both **training and socialization through competency knowledge**. Besides, our State legislation, **LOMLOE**, for the improvement of quality in Education and **RD. 157/22, 1st March**, establishing the curriculum for primary education; are also enclosed in the Curriculum Act (**regional curriculum**), which considers the knowledge of a FL and the development of basic communicative competence as one of the main objectives to be achieved along this stage.

In this topic we shall deal with the programming process in the FL area, to move on to the analysis of the criteria to be followed by FL teachers to sequence and distribute objectives and basic knowledge (contents) into the different cycles of Primary Education; and how these contribute to the development of the Key Competences. Then, we shall comment on the main methodological implications of such distribution of the curriculum into different levels and how these aspects influence both learning and evaluation activities. Finally, after a brief conclusion, the main sources used for the elaboration of this discussion will be presented.

However, let us start by defining what we understand by programming.

2. Programming in the FL area: Programming Units

Scrivener (2005) points out that **planning implies imagining the lesson before it happens**; and involves prediction, anticipation, sequencing, organising and simplifying. When **planning a lesson**, we must consider a number of crucial factors and planning elements, such as the atmosphere, the particular group of learners, the aims and content, the activities to be carried out and the evaluation system.

As Ellis (2005) suggests, all spoken and written language involves planning, which is essentially a problem-solving activity. This implies deciding what we intend to teach, how and when we shall do it, and how and when we shall assess the whole process.

We can divide the programming process into three different but interwoven **stages**:

- **Long term planning** for a form (i.e. programming).
- **Short term planning** (i.e. units).
- **Lesson planning** for individual lessons.

Nevertheless, to be effective and useful, all stages of programming should have some **common features**. In this sense, planning should be:

- **Adapted** to our school’s specific context and environment and to the school’s Educational Project.

- Designed by considering the **characteristics and needs** of the students in the school rather than for a standard student.
- **Flexible** and subject to be modified according to the information received along the assessment process.
- **Feasible and realistic**, rather than too ambitious.

On the other hand, the FL teacher has to adapt the teaching practice to different situations and has to tackle the fact of mixed-ability in the FL class, which involves the design of tasks demanding different degrees of ability and diverse methodological strategies. In accordance, FL teachers are in charge of elaborating a supportive FL teaching action, paying special attention to methodological implications in the elaboration of both learning and evaluation activities, so that children may be helped to develop their communicative competence more effectively.

In this point, we shall concentrate on the design and components of **units** and how to approach **lesson plan programming**; having in mind the underlying principle of our teaching practice.

Escamilla (2008) defines **units** as a way to plan the teaching-learning process around a content element bringing together the whole process, making it meaningful. Irrespective of the **organisation in our units**, they are built up around certain defining elements, which include an initial description, objectives, content, evaluation criteria and learning standards, activities, resources, space and time organisation.

In what follows, we shall draw the overall picture of the **components in a unit**, considering the curricular elements in (**regional curriculum**). In the **unit construction process**, the role of the teacher as designer of appealing and hooking learning situations in each unit is enhanced. The **basic decisions** refer to:

- Find topics which meet the students' interests and needs
- Decide the basic knowledge, contribution to the specific competences through the evaluation criteria...
- Design activities according to them.
- Design the materials suitable for each unit.
- Decide about the strategies to assess the students' performance and the teaching practice.

However, taken these decisions, the **construction process of the unit** entails considering the following **elements**:

1. **Initial description and justification:** In this stage we may present the **topic** which acts as integrative element or thread. This topic or title will aim at being appealing or interesting for children, starting with a creative name.
2. **Selection of the basic knowledge in relation to a specific context.** As we know, the **regional curriculum** establishes that the **Basic Knowledge** in the **FL area** is divided into three blocks: namely **communication, plurilingual and intercultural**. It is expected that students put into motion the basic knowledge in varied communicative situations: personal, social, educative, from daily life and relevant texts, including aspects related to the Sustainable Development Objectives (SDO) and the challenges of the 21st century.

3. Selection of evaluation criteria and their contribution to the Specific Competences.

These **Specific Competences** of the **FL** come down to:

- To **understand** the general and specific and predictable information in brief and simple texts, clearly expressed in standard language, **using** diverse **strategies**...
 - To **produce** simple texts in a comprehensible and structured manner...
 - To **interact** with other people using daily expressions, resorting to cooperation strategies and using analogic and digital resources, in respectful communicative interchanges.
 - To **mediate** in **predictable situations**...
 - To recognise and use the **personal linguistic repertoires** between different languages...
 - To **appreciate and respect linguistic, cultural and artistic diversity from the FL**
4. Attention to **diversity measures**: adaptation of materials and instruments of evaluation, gradation of tasks and consideration of the students PAP (Personalised Attention Plan). As we know, this is the document that gathers the measures for the specific needs of educational support (SNES).
5. **Sequence of activities**: Activities are sometimes referred to as the trunk in any formative unit. In this point, it is essential to design a coherent learning sequence in which the activities do not appear in isolation; rather, they should be interrelated and specify what students will actually do with the input that forms the point of departure for the learning task. They should involve students in active and purposeful use of the language in meaningful contexts. Activities can be classified according to a wide range of criteria. Depending on the **prevailing aim** or on the **stage of the unit** in which they are implemented, we may distinguish evaluation activities, motivation activities, reinforcement activities, detection of previous knowledge, etc.
6. **Methodology** has to do with the principles and strategies affecting how we intend to apply the unit, such as groupings, didactic resources, time and space distribution, diversity treatment, education in values, cross-curricular links, etc.
7. **Evaluation** has a dual entity: **evaluation of the learning process** (strategies and instruments, systematic observation, oral exchanges, written tests, self-evaluation, co-evaluation, etc.), and, of course, with the **evaluation of the teaching process**.

The regional ordinances as for evaluation establish that the **references to evaluate students** are the **evaluation criteria**, which define what children must be able to know, and do, from a competence-based perspective. Notwithstanding, we also need to consider that the teaching staff must have taken the decisions on the **instruments to evaluate** the learning standards for a better understanding of the evaluation process. Similarly, we shall consider **evaluation procedures**, such as daily observation, final tasks, participation and interest, etc.

Concerning teaching practice, the evaluation of the teaching process shall consider the following aspects:

- Analysis of the teaching programming and attainment of evaluation criteria.
- Analysis of the teaching process.
- Adequacy of methodology and strategies.
- Feedback received by the learners.

Nevertheless, prior to the concretion of the unit, we must follow some criteria to sequence and time contents, which is the subject matter in the next point.

3. Criteria for the sequencing and timing of content and objectives. Selection of the methodology to be implemented in learning and evaluation activities.

The criteria for the sequencing and timing of content and objectives are closely related to what we understand by learning a foreign language, the FL general objectives to be reached and the type of content to be covered. In this sense, the **CEFRL** refers to an **action-oriented approach**, as a general view of language use and learning in which learners are “social agents” using the FL in a given set of circumstances and social contexts.

Learning a FL involves as its ultimate aim the students’ development of their **communicative competence**, in the multiple real-like contexts designed along the learning situations in the units. Therefore, sequencing the abilities and content necessary for this ambitious goal leads to alternate the weight and importance amongst comprehension and production abilities, both through oral and written discourse.

The term **sequence** refers to the order in which we are going to present the content, whilst the term **timing** has to do with the amount of time and in what period we will need to achieve the intended objectives and teach the content. In order to sequence the contents to be taught during each school year, they are grouped around topics of interests distributed in units and conveniently related to the corresponding competences, evaluation criteria, instruments through which they will be evaluated, always bearing in mind the main aim of Foreign Language learning, that is, the acquisition of communicative competence. In this concern, **the regional curriculum** includes the **basic knowledge, evaluation criteria** and contribution to the FL **specific competences** to be covered along primary education for the different levels.

There are some **general criteria** which influence the objectives and content to be included in the FL programming. Amongst them, we may pinpoint the following, adapted from **Nunan, 2012**:

- **The students’ previous knowledge** (One of the basic ideas of the constructive approach to the teaching learning process is that of departing from student’s development level and then, once this level has been established, tasks should be planned a little bit above this level).
- **The extent to which they rely on the context.**
- **The students’ linguistic development.**
- **The students’ developmental stage.**

The **FL content** is not presented at random. Rather, **it must be sequenced and timed according to an internal gradation**, for which the main criterion to follow is the coherence between sets of content. We know that the learning acquisition process is not lineal, but a cyclic one where content is restructured into a global process. There are a series of **criteria** which may be useful so that we can sequence on grounds of difficulty:

- **The type of text** and students’ **motivation**.
- **The channel**: whether it is face-to-face communication, a recorded message, a written text, etc.
- **The type of comprehension**: global (skimming), the most relevant aspects, specific comprehension (scanning), etc.
- **The use of communication strategies**: verbal and non-verbal.

- The **need of help** on the part of the teacher, classmates, dictionaries or books of reference, etc. In this sense, **teamwork** and **collaboration** favour their FL learning process and contribute to develop learning to learn strategies and autonomy and personal initiative.

Finally, we cannot forget the importance of **socio-cultural aspects**, which are covered in a transversal way in all content blocks by introducing the cultural world and daily habits from English-speaking countries. Besides, this introduction of culture and society into the FL class should also offer the students the chance of contrasting such aspects with their own culture and society. The use of **European programs** (i.e. eTwinning or Erasmus+) and **Information and Communication Technologies (ICT)** represent invaluable tools for our young students to meet new cultures and traditions.

It must be born in mind that it is important to make students aware of the need to value and respect other languages, their speakers and traditions, to develop a pluricultural competence. To foster positive attitudes, we should implement activities where students have to listen to and respect other ways of living and behaviour different from one's own.

The methodological orientations suggested in **the regional curriculum** are clearly oriented towards the construction of ideal learning situations that enhance students' communicative abilities. Amongst them, let us remark:

- The tasks and activities can contain a high amount of oral tasks.
- For the design of tasks, the interests of students are taken as references, starting from their previous knowledge.
- Design of integrated learning activities that permit students advance in more than one competence at the same time.
- Promotion of the European Language Portfolio (ELP), as it provides a format which permits formal registration and recognition of FL learning, as well as varied intercultural experiences.
- The teaching action shall promote application of learning in different contexts.
- Students must have opportunities to express their ideas in the FL, as well as interact in activities.
- Use of updated and attractive graphic resources.
- Students must have opportunities to interact and be able to participate in tasks such as dramatizations, group presentations, face-to-face or online conversations...
- The FL class turns into a support for the presentation of didactic resources, as well as those materials elaborated by students, so as to reinforce and acquire basic knowledge.

It is important to extend the range of communicative situations in which the learner can perform with focus on meaning, without being hindered by the attention he or she must pay to linguistic form. **As for the principles** in FLT, let us remark the use of CLIL methodology for bilingual schools and the creation of plurilingual awareness and promotion of the FL culture at schools. Similarly, the **methodological guidelines** stressing the role of investigation and search of information, task and **Project-Based Learning (PBL)** as active methodologies through which students can develop the four skills, cooperative work, oral presentations, complementary activities in the FL, and the promotion of the reading habit in the FL.

Once we have clear elements to analyse how activities are constructed, we need to identify some **criteria for selecting activities**. Moon (2000) highlights some points to keep in mind that rely on **methodological principles**:

- Provide clear and **meaningful purpose** for using the FL.
- **Challenge learners** and make them think, in order to engage them.
- Provide enjoyable, **interesting activities** which foster willingness to continue doing the task.
- Provide activities which **create a need** for children to use the FL.

There are important **methodological considerations** in these principles. On the one hand, for activities to be successful they should be related to the **students' needs** and to specific situations in which **real use** of the language is promoted; being **interaction** amongst students essential in this process. Similarly, creating a **positive classroom atmosphere** will foster students' interaction and their self-confidence; and therefore, they will not be deterred towards assuming risks in language use. In addition, learning is **learner-centred** as children's needs and interests are placed at the centre of planning and teaching, and so they are encouraged to express their own meaning; they also take active roles in their own learning, whereas the teacher's primary role is that of facilitator.

Moreover, introducing **information and communication technologies** in FL activities contributes to reduce the distance between students' reality and school, since they are already familiar with the use of ICT to communicate.

In the context of **competence-based learning**, activities are understood as **contextualizing evaluation instruments**, as they are the situations designed by the teacher to ensure and check the learners' progress. In this sense, all activities entail an evaluation character, even initial activities where we can detect previous knowledge. Therefore, the following classification should be understood as illustrative of the main aim in the implementation of the practical proposals. Broadly speaking, any activity should be motivating, should develop different aspects of the language, and should be useful for the evaluation process.

Motivation activities. These allow teachers to detect or diagnose the students' previous knowledge and, thus, their starting point. Besides, these activities should also mean a stimulus for learners to become active and show some interest and curiosity for the new aspects being learned. The **feedback** provided in the accomplishment of the activity should be considered by both teacher and students so that the latter may feel more involved in their own learning process. Even though these kinds of activities are usually carried out at the initial stages of the teaching-learning process, this does not mean that motivation is exclusively aimed at the initial stages; rather, it should be a constant element in FLT.

Development activities. These activities mainly aim at the students' active and creative use of the language. Thus, they are based on a constructive process in which learners have to observe, look for information, contrast, verify, and make conclusions or deductions, etc. These activities also contribute to help children see the functionality or usefulness of learning the FL through their consolidation and use of different abilities, skills and strategies.

Summary activities. These activities are useful for teachers to check understanding and progression; and for students to be aware of their advances.

Consolidation activities. These activities are also referred to as "support" activities, since the main aim is to help students develop their abilities, regarding their specific needs, learning styles, linguistic and cognitive level, etc.

Evaluation activities. As already noted, many of the learning tasks or activities can also be regarded as evaluation ones, as long as evaluation instruments and strategies are put into practice so that the teacher may gather data and reach conclusions.

Obvious as it may seem, these activities are related to the evaluation criteria in **D (regional Decree)**, which are the elements that check the students' level of acquisition of the **specific competences**, thus these elements are linked. The competency formulation refers to a process and capability that students must acquire, together with the context or mode of application and the use of this process or capability.

4. **Conclusion**

In this topic we have seen that **planning** is inherent to FL teaching; and that whatever the level of concretion we are dealing with, **programming implies taking decisions** on what, when and how we are going to teach and evaluate the FL. From more general to specific, programming makes reference to didactic programming, didactic units and lesson plans; and in this topic we have analysed their components and the main **methodological implications** for their successful implementation.

Out of all the methodological considerations covered along this presentation, we should highlight two of them: the need to involve students in **active and real use of the FL** and the relevance of the context to simulate natural interaction and contextual support. Thus, FL teachers are supposed design formative units, paying special attention to methodological implications in the elaboration of both learning and evaluation activities so that children may be helped to develop their **communicative competence** more effectively.

In a nutshell, programming may be understood as the establishment of a series of activities or tasks in a given context and timing in order to implement and teach some content so that certain adjectives or goals may be attained.

5. **Bibliography**

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