

**Course Development Project**  
**Part I: A Critical Analysis of My Instructional Context**  
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*The Instructional Context*

This critical analysis focuses on the actual teaching context in which I currently work: an independent postsecondary language institute for adult learners located in Miami, Florida. Although this language institute provides instruction in foreign languages and prepares students for standardized tests such as the TOEFL iBT and the GMAT, the majority of the school's students are enrolled in an intensive English program requiring a student (F-1) visa. A smaller number of students are enrolled in non-intensive English tutorials, usually in a private (one-on-one) or small group format. The school's English curriculum is designed to accommodate students at all proficiency levels (from ILR level 0 to 4+), with parallel general and business tracks offered. Both the general and business programs include supplementary elective courses that focus on specific language skills (e.g., pronunciation) or specialized content and functional areas (e.g., medical terminology, business meetings, finance and accounting, etc.). For most courses, the school requires that teachers use a specific teaching methodology (a version of the direct or natural method), which is aligned with the program's overall goals of developing general (i.e., non-academic) communicative competence in the target language. However, despite having an official teaching methodology, the school has adopted a liberal philosophy toward teachers' implementation of the curriculum in the classroom; thus, some deviations from the official teaching methodology (such as the use of translation to aid comprehension for lower-level learners and the explanation of grammatical points, especially when the latter is specifically requested by students) are permitted.

### *The Learners*

Students from many parts of the world enroll in the school's language programs. In addition to most of Latin America, the nations of China, Saudi Arabia, South Korea and Thailand are well represented among the student body. In large part because Miami is not a predominantly English-speaking city (among Miami-Dade County, Florida's approximately three million residents, fewer than thirty percent are monolingual native English speakers and approximately seventy percent are native Spanish speakers), the school's students have diverse goals and the teaching context cannot be characterized as fully ESL or EFL, but as something of a hybrid. Within the same course, some students may be learning English to improve their work prospects at home and plan to return to their countries of origin (such students typically have high socioeconomic status and are well-educated, with significant prior experiences learning English, which typically have involved the explicit teaching of grammar, reading and writing rather than real-world communication skills), while others are recent migrants to the United States with hopes of remaining in the country permanently (these students tend to have a wider range of socioeconomic backgrounds and many have learned English both naturalistically and in the classroom). At the same time, in many of the intensive English courses, a significant number of students have little demonstrable interest in learning English and have enrolled for the conveniences provided by the student visa. Consequently, teachers are often faced with a puzzling array of backgrounds, expectations and communicative and learning styles among their students.

### ***Curriculum, Materials and Media***

Most of the curricula, materials and media used in this teaching context have been developed and provided by the school's international headquarters in Switzerland (the language institute is part of a chain of approximately three hundred schools, the majority of which are located in Europe). Each of the mainline courses and levels has a detailed curriculum that consists of an approximately two to three hundred (depending on the level) page instructor guide (known at this school as the *Trainer Resource Pack*), which contains not only the language structures, vocabulary and functions to be presented, but also suggestions for teacher-student and student-student dialogue and interaction, as well as worksheets and handouts to facilitate the teacher's presentation of the material. In my opinion, the *Trainer Resource Pack* is by far the strongest element of the school's curriculum, materials and media. Unfortunately, the student textbooks, exercise workbooks and listening materials (provided on a compact disc) pale in comparison. Although the student and teacher resources are aligned in content and objectives and follow the school's teaching methodology, the student materials have not been updated in many years, a fact made obvious by frequent references to dated technologies like fax machines and videotapes and a conspicuous absence of any references to globalization and the technologies that drive it, like the Internet. While the school's materials include an online multimedia component for use during language lab activities, most of the online content mirrors the dated materials from the textbook and exercise workbooks. Having recognized the limitations of these proprietary materials, the institute's administration not only allows but encourages the use of higher quality third-party and authentic materials in the classroom and gives teachers broad discretion in determining which additional materials to use. However, apparently due to licensing

agreements, the school cannot abandon the use of its lower quality proprietary course materials.

### *Assessment*

In contrast to the school's relatively poor course materials, assessment tools and practices are more robust. Learning is assessed informally through the use of quizzes, tests, projects and written exercises throughout the course, although these informal assessments do not contribute to the student's final grade (only courses in intensive English programs are formally graded and then only on a pass-fail basis; all other courses, including tutorials and electives, are ungraded). Learning is formally assessed at the end of the mainline courses with an achievement test that, like the school's course materials, is provided by the school's international headquarters and administered by the teacher. Each achievement test includes multiple-choice and true-false sections to measure the student's attainment of the course objectives related to the acquisition of grammatical structures, vocabulary and reading and listening skills. Each achievement test also contains productive writing and speaking sections that are scored according to provided rubrics and benchmarks, although the school has made no effort to ensure construct validity or inter-rater reliability. Students who achieve the minimum passing score on the test (equivalent to approximately 65%) pass the course and move on to the next level, while students who fail the test must repeat the course. Students enrolled in an intensive English program who fail the same course (level) twice are not allowed to continue in the program—a dire consequence for students in the United States on a student visa, who must then either transfer to another school within a short period of time or else leave the country. In addition to achievement testing, each student's language proficiency is formally assessed at the end of each course through the use of a full-length simulated TOEIC (the Test of English for International Communication, the official

version of which is administered by Educational Testing Service) and an oral proficiency interview (OPI) scored on ILR scale. Students are informed of their performance on both the simulated TOEIC and OPI, although their scores on these measures of language proficiency play no role in whether they pass or fail the course.