

1.1 Exploring Learning Outcomes

Effective learning outcomes need to be:

- Measurable
- Specific
- Useful for teaching and assessment
- Realistic for students to achieve
- Comprehensible to stakeholders, including teachers, learners and receiving institutions

If learning outcomes do not meet these criteria, they will be of limited use and need to be reworked.

Measurable and specific

For example, sometimes learning outcomes are too vague to be useful:

✗ *Improve their speaking*

As a learning outcome, this is far too vague and could function at any level of almost any ELT course, and so is not useful for teaching or assessment. And while a teacher could compare recordings of students at the beginning and end of a course to show that some improvement has taken place, it doesn't support any meaningful measurement of student achievement.

A more useful learning outcome might be:

✓ *Can make him/herself understood to a sympathetic interlocutor in very short, simple utterances in highly familiar contexts.*

This learning outcome specifies the type of utterances and the type of context in which they occur. To make oneself understood also indicates that fluent, confident speech is not required, as does the inclusion of "sympathetic interlocutor". Student achievement can thus be measured in an assessment task that has been designed to evoke the sort of speech specified, in the sort of context specified.

Experienced teachers will recognise the level of language being targeted by this learning outcome. Key words such as "simple" and "highly familiar" can be used in other learning outcomes at this level. A set of specific and measurable learning outcomes with this sort of consistency support teaching and assessment and can provide useful feedback to students on their achievement.

Useful and realistic

Learning outcomes may not be readily assessable for other reasons. Where too much is specified in the one learning outcome, it may be impossible to assess fairly. For example:

✗ *Can write essays, reports, descriptions, recounts and personal emails in well organised paragraphs, using accurate grammar and good cohesion.*

Does a student really need to produce all these text types in order to pass, and how realistic is it to assess them all? What about the language differences between formal and personal writing?

Cohesion is intrinsic to paragraph organisation, but it is possible to write effectively with some grammatical inaccuracies; and the degree of inaccuracy varies according

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to genre and context. If a student organises paragraphs well but makes some grammatical errors, this learning outcome has been only partially met and logically the student should fail.

And is it realistic to expect students to achieve “accurate grammar”? Probably not in some genres such as blogs or personal emails. And where accuracy is important, it is likely to be more realistic to specify the degree of accuracy.

The above learning outcome appears to be trying to encapsulate all that a student needs to achieve in writing skills. It would be more effective to break it up, for example:

- ✓ *W1 Can identify the text stages and conventions of a variety of genres.*
- W2 Can write clear, detailed descriptions on a variety of subjects related to own areas of interest.*
- W3 Can write a letter or email using a register appropriate to the context and commenting on the correspondent's information and/or opinions.*
- W4 Can write an essay or report which develops an argument, giving reasons and explanations.*
- W5 Can produce clearly intelligible continuous writing, which follows standard layout, paragraphing, punctuation and spelling conventions.*

Breaking up the original learning outcome in this way involves the syllabus writer thinking in greater detail about what learners need to be able to do. A different writer might focus learning outcomes differently – for instance, depending on the course, personal writing might have greater relevance or be omitted entirely.

Comprehensible to stakeholders

A learning outcome needs to be comprehensible to the people for whom it is written. Terms such as “cohesion”, “register” or “interlocutor” should be comprehensible to teachers and therefore useful for teaching and assessment.

However, if learning outcomes are going to be used on progress reports given to students, they need to be written in language that students understand. This may mean rewriting learning outcomes to avoid specialist language (e.g. “interlocutor”) or teaching key terms to students (e.g. “cohesion”).

Skills and content

A learning outcome may also be problematic because it requires skills or knowledge that are beyond the focus of the particular course. A language learning outcome that requires students to write on “technical subjects” might require knowledge that some students do not have. However, it may be relevant to require students to write on “technical subjects related to own area(s) of interest or expertise”.

It is worth remembering that topics which are common knowledge for some students may be unfamiliar to others. In framing learning outcomes content can be described using expressions such as “highly familiar”, “relevant to own needs and interests” or “which may be unfamiliar”.