

How can I design a flow of activities that supports student learning?

Preview

Even when a teacher has a well-formed learning objective, he still needs to set up a flow of activities that support students in achieving that objective. This chapter explores the principles of designing stages in a lesson. As you read the following story, consider how you would feel in Mark's place and what you would need in order to learn effectively.

Mark has never used a computer before, and he needs to be able to email his brother, Peter, who is abroad. Mark's friend Ellen says she can teach him the basics. They sit down in front of the computer and Ellen demonstrates the whole process of opening up an Internet program, finding an email website, and using the tools on the site to write an email. Mark observes everything but grows increasingly confused and nervous. At the end of the demonstration, Ellen quits the program and tells Mark to go ahead and try it himself. Mark moves into the chair and tries to move the mouse but can't get the cursor to go where he wants. He also realizes he doesn't remember what he should do next. Panic and frustration set in! What could Ellen (or Mark) have done differently in this scenario?

Experience: Learning to Juggle

In this chapter, we provide a lesson in the basics of juggling to focus on how the staging of a lesson can affect student learning. Students often become overwhelmed when faced with a great deal of information and little or no time in which to work with it. When designing a lesson plan, teachers need to stage the lesson so that the students can focus on content in a way that allows them to work toward a final objective.

Consider the metaphor of a person trying to cross a river on stepping stones. It is relatively easy and rather elegant to walk across a river on carefully placed stones. If the stones are uneven or too far apart, a person may have to put forth more effort to cross the river. They may also fall in the water or turn back if there aren't enough stones, or if they are too small and slippery to step on.



Framing the Task

Although it takes time to become proficient at juggling, you can acquire some of the basics through the following lesson. If possible, work with one or two peers, observe each other, and share your discoveries about juggling. As you go through the lesson, keep track of how much time you spend on each stage. Spend at least 20 minutes going through the stages.

You will need three balls or sacks to juggle; any kind of ball—a tennis ball or a golf ball, for example—will do. If you don't have those, fill up some balloons with sand or dirt. In a pinch, you can even use small rocks. Try to make whatever objects you use about the same size and weight.

Note: If you know how to juggle, demonstrate your ability and help a peer go through the steps. Remember to let *them* do it! Observe their progress as they go through the stages and offer feedback and suggestions if they ask.

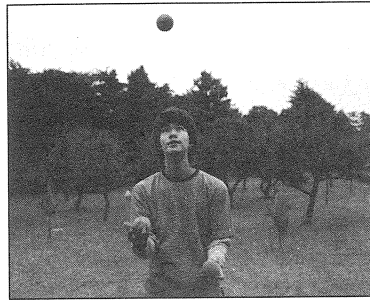
Remember to note when you start and finish each stage. This will help you in reflecting on the experience.

Stage 1:

Decide how you feel about the activity. What is your immediate reaction to the idea of learning how to juggle? Discuss this with a partner or write in a journal for a couple of minutes.

Stage 2:

Look at the following picture. What comes to mind when you think of juggling? What do you notice about the act of juggling? What seems to be important when juggling?



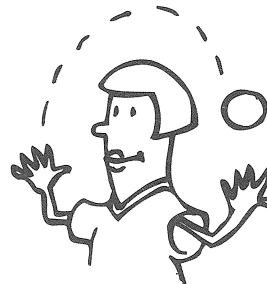
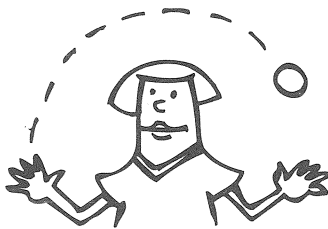
Stage 3:

Give juggling a try. What happens?

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Hint: In this lesson, watch your partner sometimes. Talk about what happens. You might also go back and look at the pictures.
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Stage 4:

One of the key parts of juggling is mastering the throw and catch. Notice how the ball moves in the picture below and where the hands are positioned. Why might these things be important?



Stage 5:

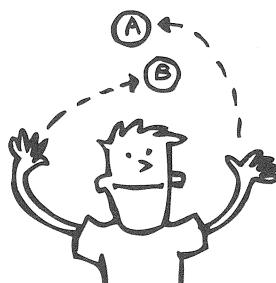
Practice the throw and catch action with one ball.

Stage 6:

Continue the throw and catch, but now look straight ahead so that you focus on the top of the ball's arc instead of your hands. How does using your peripheral vision affect your ability to catch the ball?

Stage 7:

When you feel comfortable throwing and catching one ball, add a second one. Notice how the two balls move in relation to each other in the picture below.



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Hint: Be sure to throw both balls up in the air in arcs opposite one another. Do not just pass the balls from one hand to another in the same circular motion—this is actually a different style of juggling that is more difficult with three balls!
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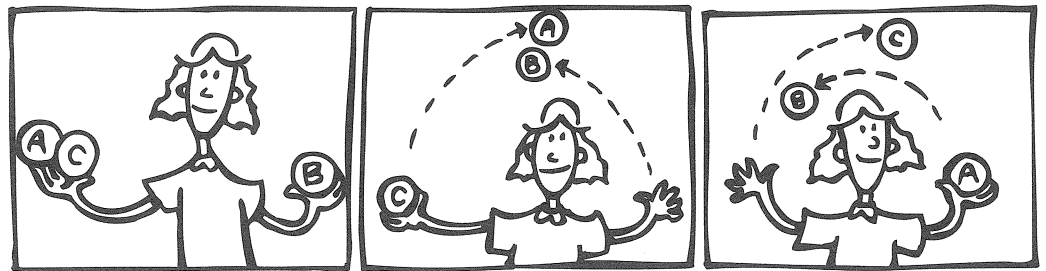
.....
Option: Go back and practice the throw and catch action a little bit more at this point.
.....

Stage 8:

Keep practicing the over/under pattern. Remember to sometimes start with your right hand and sometimes with your left.

Stage 9:

Once you feel reasonably comfortable doing the over/under pattern with two balls, you are ready to add a third ball. Look at the picture below. Notice how the balls move in a one-two-three pattern.



.....
Hint: Don't worry about catching all of the balls when first doing the one-two-three. Focus on throwing all of them. It can also help to put the balls down and just practice the movement with your empty hands.
.....

Stage 10:

Try the one-two-three pattern. Put two balls in the hand you want to start with. As in the graphic above, toss one of the two balls up in the air. When it is about to start falling, toss the ball in the other hand. As you catch the first ball and the second just starts to fall, toss the third and final ball. Catch the second and third balls. This is the one-two-three pattern.

.....
Option: You may want to go back and practice the throw/catch and/or the over/under pattern a little bit more at this point.
.....

Stage 11:

Keep practicing the one-two-three pattern until you feel comfortable. Remember to try starting with each hand, i.e., first with two balls in the left hand and one in the right, then with two balls in the right hand and one in the left. After you've done the one-two-three pattern successfully several times, try doing it twice in a row, then three times, etc. Before you know it, you're juggling!!

Reflecting on the Experience

Take about 10–15 minutes to write about your experience learning to juggle. Use the questions below to guide your reflection. After you finish, discuss your feelings and ideas with a partner.

1. As you look back on the juggling lesson, note three different feelings you had. What was happening when you had those feelings?

2. At this point, how well can you juggle? What were you able to do with some confidence by the time you finished the lesson? What would you need to be able to juggle three balls with confidence?

3. Read through the stages of the juggling lesson again and note what helped or hindered your learning. How much time did you need for each stage? Note details of what you and your peers did at each stage. How did each stage help or hinder your learning?

Stage 1: Thinking about learning to juggle	
Stage 2: Evaluating and discussing the juggling	
Stage 3: Giving juggling a try	
Stage 4: Learning the throw and catch motion	
Stage 5: Working on the throw and catch action	
Stage 6: Working on eye position	
Stage 7: Learning the over and under tossing pattern	
Stage 8: Working on the over/under pattern	
Stage 9: Adding a third ball; learning the one-two-three pattern	
Stage 10: Trying the one-two-three pattern	
Stage 11: Practicing the one-two-three pattern; alternating start hands in the one-two-three pattern	

4. What about the staging of this lesson helped or hindered your learning? Did you need something else?
5. What generalizations can you make about staging a lesson in a way that helps students achieve a learning objective?

Peer Voices

As you read Jill's and Lisa's reflections on the juggling lesson, note how they were similar to or different from yours. How did the different lesson stages seem to affect their learning?

Jill:

“ I had anxiety at the beginning. I felt butterflies in my stomach. I felt frustration. My inclination was to give up. When we first tried to juggle in stage 3, I had an impossible time. Neither of us could do it and gave up quickly. When the specific techniques were described, this was very helpful! I needed to go step by step—a little at a time. It's important to start with the basics. I could do the throw/catch with ease. Talking about it and watching each other helped. Working on eye position helped me get the balls to a high and equal level.

The over/under was very important—it was definitely the key to mastering the throwing technique. For example, just describing the throw as over/under was very helpful. I worked on that for four or five minutes, just trying to get the hang of it. I dropped the balls a lot and also experimented with throwing them higher and in different types of arcs.

At each stage, my partner and I discussed or tried the information/skill described. We helped each other out and watched each other. Giving and getting suggestions from my partner also really helped. Adding the third ball was very difficult. Getting helpful suggestions when difficulties arose was just what I needed. For example, focusing on getting all three balls into the air instead of worrying about catching them was important! I felt elated when I finally juggled, doing the one-two-three pattern. I felt joy.”

Lisa:

“ I was curious and eager to understand the juggling strategy, yet in the back of my mind was a sense of “I can’t do it. It looks like a skill only someone with more coordination can do.” I was able to build my confidence a little with each step, but the balls falling reinforced the “I can’t do it” feeling.

The explanation of the juggling helped, especially when looking at the pictures. The picture alone would not have been enough. I liked the break down of the throw and catch action. Being able to work on my eye position was a good strategy—I didn’t feel as stressed about the position of my hands. The intro to over/under was very good, especially with verbal help from my partner, Jill. Practicing it broke the process down for me. Working on the over/under was a little nerve-wracking because I knew how important it was. We spent about eight or nine minutes working on that motion.

I did decide to go back to the throw/catch pattern after a few minutes, and it really helped me get the basics down. When I started the one-two-three, I didn’t want to throw the third ball at first, but breaking the process down helped a lot. Also, doing the movement without the balls helped me a lot. Little steps are important, but also giving students a glimpse of the BIG picture first helps them set goals. ”

Points of View

In this section, we look at how the staging of a lesson can affect learning. As you read, think about your own learning experiences from the previous section. Take a moment and consider what you know about these questions:

- What key stages do students go through when learning?
- What do students need to master new content?

Working with Content

Teachers must decide **how much content students can focus on** without being overwhelmed. They also need to create a **logical sequence** that helps students work toward a final objective.

In the juggling lesson, for example, the throw and catch action is a fundamental skill that needs to be learned early in the process. By then adding a second ball and spending time on the over/under pattern, the teacher provides a kind of stone to cross the river mentioned metaphorically in the Preview section.

With the inclusion of pictures and verbal directions, the teacher helps students focus on key elements of juggling. Noting visually how one ball goes under another helps students learn that pattern. Doing the one-two-three motion without the balls might help some students internalize the pattern. Effective teachers need to be able to break down content so that students can progress step by step. This type of thinking requires the teacher to have a solid understanding of the content, a sense of what is initially possible for students, and a clear, student-centered objective.

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This process of breaking down content and helping students focus is known as **scaffolding** and allows the students to work on content in a meaningful way that is challenging but not overwhelming. In this way, the teacher provides stepping stones for students to cross the river and reach their learning objectives.
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Allowing Students to Encounter and Clarify Content

Students rarely enter a learning situation with no knowledge of the content. In the first stage of the juggling lesson, sometimes called a **presentation stage**, the teacher gives students a chance to share what they already know about juggling. This allows students to activate their prior experiences, ideas, and feelings (also called **schema activation**).

It is important to note that students are **encountering** key elements of juggling throughout the lesson, and that students may present key information to each other while observing and discussing their juggling patterns. In a classroom setting with a large group of students, the teacher has a stage in which to **elicit** what some students already know so all students can benefit from it. In this way, the teacher builds the lesson on the abilities and needs of specific students.

The use of **pictures, demonstrations, verbal explanations, peer teaching, and practice** all contribute to students **relating new information to prior knowledge**, a key feature of learning. By using a variety of sensory modes, the teacher helps students with different learning styles **notice key features** in the content.

Allowing Students to Work on Accuracy

In the juggling lesson, it is important that students first master the initial throw and catch motion. The throw needs to have an arc to it and move from right to left or left to right, at least in this early stage of juggling. If the move is not done correctly, it will be very difficult to juggle without dropping the balls later on.

A student might start juggling and look proficient, only to drop all of the balls almost immediately. To master the different elements of juggling, students need time to **remember and internalize** movements. The initial throwing of one ball in Stage 5 is an example of just such a controlled practice. The student encounters the key elements of the throw/catch movement through the picture and verbal explanation, then remembers and internalizes that part of juggling by doing it over and over. This is not mindless **repetition**—the student will likely **experiment** with exactly how to hold the ball by noting where it lands in the hand, how much strength to apply, etc. In this way, students continue to **make discoveries and encounter** important aspects of juggling even in the practice stages.

They will continue to notice the results of their efforts but will also benefit from **feedback and correction** from the teacher and other students. The student might **personalize** the movement by imagining the ball is an egg, requiring a delicate touch. They might say to themselves “nice and soft” or “one-two, one-two” as a way of **making it their own**. This stage of the lesson is a kind of **controlled practice** in that the content and student activity are both very restricted. As the lesson progresses, the students continue to recycle what they have learned and move toward a **freer practice** that actually resembles juggling.

Helping Students with Effectiveness and Ease (Fluency)

As the student internalizes the juggling moves, they develop an **unconscious competence**: they no longer actively think about what they are doing. Just as you tie your shoes or drive while thinking about other things, the fluent use of something involves doing it with a certain ease.

In the juggling lesson, the teacher creates a **real-world context** by demonstrating what juggling looks like at the beginning. In Stages 6 and 7 of the juggling lesson, students may fluently use the throw and catch technique while trying to remember/internalize the over/under technique with two balls. From this example, it’s clear that accuracy and fluency are not necessarily a linear process. A competent juggler might go back and focus on their throw and catch technique when trying to progress to juggling four balls.

A combination of **accuracy and fluency** means that someone can juggle without dropping the balls or straining and still carry on other actions like chatting with someone and smiling. Part of being fluent means using the skill for your own purposes. In the case of juggling, the purpose might be entertaining yourself or others. A competent juggler is not easily distracted and does not mind people talking around them. That is part of the **real-world context** of juggling. If a student stays within a controlled classroom environment, it is not clear that they have **mastered or acquired** the content.

It is also important to point out that lessons do not always begin with presentation and move to controlled practice. In fact, many approaches to lesson design—**Task-based Learning** and the **Test-Teach-Test** model—involve starting with a fluency activity to see what students can do and then improving on or expanding that skill. (See the For Further Reading section at the end of the chapter for more about these lesson designs.) In the case of juggling, a later lesson might ask students to start with basic juggling then move to doing tricks like throwing the balls higher or spinning around to catch them.

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The ultimate purpose of learning a foreign language is to use it to effectively communicate in real-world situations.
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Language Learning

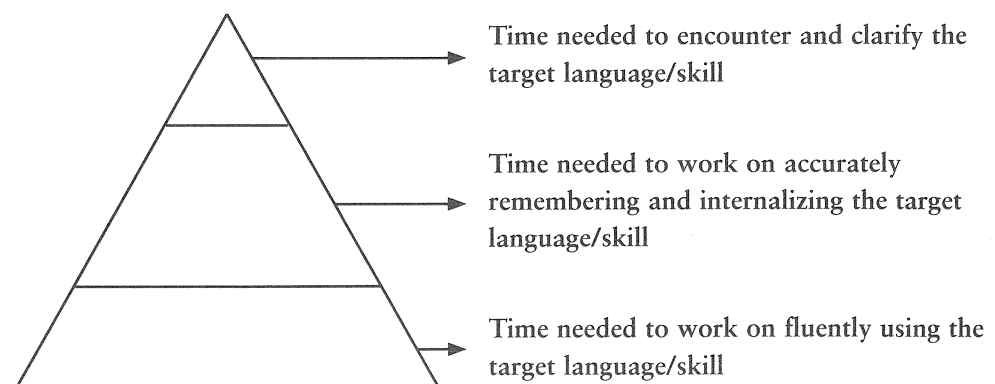
The principles used in the juggling lesson can be applied to language learning as well. Teachers can assess student learning only when they see students use their knowledge to accomplish communicative tasks. Just as the ability to describe juggling does not mean one can juggle, a student that can explain English grammar may not be able to describe their town in English. The other volumes in this series of books will explore what it means to effectively use language to communicate.

The ECRIF Triangle (Encounter, Clarify, Remember/Internalize, Use Fluently)

If you look at the juggling lesson in terms of time spent, it's clear that a relatively small amount of time is spent **encountering and clarifying** the actual juggling moves (Stages 1, 2, 3, 4, 7, 9). Quite a bit of time is spent trying to **remember and internalize** the moves accurately (Stages 5, 6, 8, 9, 10). The most time really is required for Stages 10 and 11 so the learner can **fluently use** those moves and juggle effectively.

It is important to remember that students may always work on accuracy by returning to previous stages and doing focused practice activities. In the juggling lesson, you had the option of going back and working on the throw and catch motion after being introduced to the over/under and one-two-three patterns. In this way, what you had already studied was **recycled** over several lessons.

An important aspect of staging a lesson is to think about how much time and focus is required for students to move from accuracy to fluency. This diagram illustrates the time necessary to improve skills and move toward mastery.



Originally developed by Professor Pat Moran at the School for International Training, this triangle diagram illustrates a basic principle of learning: Students need more time to remember, internalize, and use content than to encounter and clarify it. Understanding this principle helps a teacher stage single lessons and think about how to help students learn over a longer period. Even after the juggling lesson, for example, you will have to practice over a few days or even weeks to really feel confident.

Going back to Mark's story from the Preview section, it's clear that the bulk of his challenge was encountering and clarifying. The content he encountered was not broken down into reasonable chunks, and he did not have a chance to work with the content so that he could remember and internalize it.

Take a moment to review the information introduced to this point. Answer the questions posed at the beginning of the Points of View section.

Thoughts to Consider

What connections do you make between these quotes and your own ideas about staging a learning experience?

“What a child can do today with assistance, she will be able to do by herself tomorrow.”

– Lev Vygotsky

“The mind is not a vessel to be filled, but a fire to be ignited.”

– Plutarch

“Complexity creates confusion, simplicity focus.”

– Edward de Bono

“I am always ready to learn, although I do not always like being taught.”

– Winston Churchill

Key Questions: *Supporting Students as They Move toward Mastery*

As you read through these Key Questions, jot down notes in the space provided. Refer back to the Points of View section and think about your own learning experiences. Note general principles that guide you in staging a lesson.

- How can students **encounter** a target language/skill that they need?

Provide a real-world context

Find out what students already know or can do

- How can students **clarify** the form and meaning of the target language/skill?

- How can students **remember/internalize** the target language/skill?

- How can students **fluently use** the target language/skill?

Initial Response

What do you notice when reading the Key Questions for analyzing and planning stages of a lesson? Is there anything you might add or change to make them more useful?

Using the Key Questions for Analysis

Once more, read through the lesson plan for the juggling lesson (below) and choose several steps that were particularly vivid for you. Describe what happened in terms of the ECRIF Triangle. When were you focused on accuracy? When were you focused on fluency? Be specific about what exactly you were doing. Remember that several things may have been going on in any given step.

Example In Stage 3, I encountered the basic shape of the throw and catch action by looking at the graphic and seeing my partner try it. I clarified the direction of the throw by asking my partner if it went from left to right.

In Stage 4, I worked on internalizing and remembering the movement by tossing the ball back and forth. I noticed where the ball should contact my hand and began to ...

Stage 1: Thinking about learning to juggle	
Stage 2: Evaluating and discussing the juggling	
Stage 3: Giving juggling a try	
Stage 4: Learning the throw and catch motion	
Stage 5: Working on the throw and catch action	
Stage 6: Maintaining the correct eye position	
Stage 7: Learning the over and under tossing pattern	
Stage 8: Working on the over/under pattern	
Stage 9: Adding a third ball; learning the one-two-three pattern	
Stage 10: Trying the one-two-three pattern	
Stage 11: Practicing the one-two-three pattern; alternating start hands in the one-two-three pattern	

Exploring the Practice: *Planning a Flow of Activities*

As you do the tasks in this section, focus on how you will put the themes of the chapter to work in your own learning and teaching. This process involves developing your beliefs and then looking at ways of putting them into action.

Core Teaching Practice

Effective teachers design lessons that are staged in ways that scaffold the content, balance accuracy and fluency work, and provide stepping stones to learning objectives.

Articulating Beliefs and Issues

Read through your notes from this chapter and highlight any points you can explore further to design stages in your lessons.

These key concepts discussed from the chapter will get you started.

- recycling
- feedback/correction
- determining what students know
- real-world context
- scaffolding
- practice
- allowing a sense of discovery
- helping students notice ways to encounter/clarify content
- repetition
- accuracy/fluency
- allotting time in a lesson
- peer teaching

What have I noticed?	What am I thinking about? (beliefs, questions, guidelines, etc.)
<p><i>In German class, we were discussing our dream jobs. My teacher corrected some grammar errors. I started thinking about grammar so much that I forgot what I was trying to say.</i></p>	<p><i>When the student is focusing on fluency, be careful of turning their attention to accuracy. One thing I can do is note the errors down and go over them afterward.</i></p>

Activities and Techniques for the Classroom

This section offers some practical ideas for designing and teaching lessons. As you read through the following options, consider which ones would suit your teaching style and beliefs. How do you think each of these options would affect your students' learning?

Planning from Learning Objectives

Many teachers start planning by thinking of what the students will do at the beginning of the lesson and then working through to the end. By first figuring out what you hope students will be able to do by the end of the lesson, you can better work on helping students encounter the knowledge and skills they will need.

Step 1: Work with the Content

- Identify your learning objective first and then note what students will need in order to achieve that goal.
- List all the things your students could benefit from knowing.
- Prioritize your list: Note which things are critical in the content and which things are interesting but not crucial.

Example Being able to throw the ball back and forth between the left and right hands is necessary in juggling.

- Consider what they may already know and what about the content areas might be challenging.

Example Making the toss in an even arc so that your hands do not move much is particularly challenging.

- Use the Key Questions from Chapter 3 to refine your learning objective.

Step 2: Brainstorm Ways for Students to Encounter the Knowledge and Skills

- List ways of getting students to think about prior experience with the content.
- List ways of finding out what students already know or can do.

Example Telling students the lesson is on juggling and asking for initial reactions/ideas.

- List ways of eliciting and presenting so that students notice key points about the knowledge and skills necessary.

Example Looking at pictures of the person juggling and noticing important points.

- List different ways of chunking the content so that students work with reasonable amounts at any one time.

Example First do the right/left toss with one ball, then repeat the action with two balls, etc.

Step 3: Brainstorm Ways for Students to Work with Knowledge and Skills

- List activities that students can do individually or with peers to help them internalize/remember the knowledge and skills.
- Consider ways of alternating between encountering and practicing.

Example Working with a chunk of content.

- Brainstorm activities that involve both recognizing and actively experimenting with skills.

Example Being able to notice when a juggling toss was done well or not vs. practicing the over/under toss.

Try It Out!

The following tasks help you apply what you have learned from this chapter to different learning/teaching situations. After the task, compare your ideas with those of your peers. Notice different options and help clarify each other's underlying principles.

Use the ECRIF, Key Questions, and Techniques, and work from the learning objectives to plan out the stages of a lesson. Choose one of the following three tasks.

Task 1

Go back to Joseph's shopping lesson from Chapter 3. How would you plan the steps of the lesson so that they balance accuracy and fluency (i.e., so that students are able to select a store to go to when told which item to get)?

Task 2

Go back to the Preview example. How would you help Mark use the Internet and send email? How would you plan the steps of the lesson so they provide a balance between accuracy and fluency?

Task 3

Design a lesson in which students learn how to ask for and say their phone numbers in English using the numbers 0-9 and the question, "What is your phone number?"

Action Plans

Use these concrete steps to put your learning from this chapter to work in your own teaching. Use additional space to make your own action plans.

1. **Re-examine a previous lesson.** Go back to your Teaching Game and revise the lesson plan for accuracy and fluency and incorporating the ECRIF questions.

2. **Analyze the focus of activities.** Look through your textbook and teachers' resource books and note the focus of different activities in terms of accuracy and fluency and the ECRIF questions.

Activity Name (book, page #)	Focus of the Activity (ECRIF, accuracy, fluency)	Options for Adapting It

3. **Observe a colleague's lesson.** Take notes on the stages of the lesson and how he or she seems to be affecting student learning.

Stages	Description: What are the students doing? What is the teacher doing?	Analysis: What is the effect on student learning?

4. **Re-evaluate previous lesson objectives.** Analyze a lesson you have participated in as a student or given as a teacher. What were the stages of the lesson? What were the students and teacher doing in each stage? What is the focus of each stage? How does each stage flow into the next? What changes or adaptations would you make to the lesson?

My action plans

Based on my work in this chapter, these are three things I want to do to stage lessons in a way that scaffolds the content, balances accuracy and fluency work, and provides stepping stones to learning objectives.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Synthesis

Check your understanding of the ideas presented in this chapter and consider how they have impacted your beliefs about designing lessons.

Review of Key Concepts

Give examples of how these key concepts relate to the staging of a lesson.

- Encountering content At different stages throughout the juggling lesson, students were able to encounter skills necessary for juggling such as the throw and catch action.
- Clarifying content
- Remembering/Internalizing content
- Fluently using content
- Test-Teach-Test
- Scaffolding
- Focus on fluency
- Focus on accuracy
- Noticing key features of content
- Schema activation
- Eliciting/Finding out what students already know
- Recycling content
- Setting a real-world context
- Assessing student learning
- Unconscious competence
- Repetition
- Controlled/Freer practice
- Experimentation
- Personalization
- Feedback/Correction

Reflection Questions

Write about the following questions or discuss them with a partner.

- What are the three most important aspects of staging a lesson?
- Explain the most critical factors in scaffolding a lesson.
- What have you learned about setting up a lesson flow that balances accuracy and fluency?
- How will you apply your ideas about lesson staging to your own teaching?

Other Reflection Options

Look back over each section of the chapter and any notes you have made. What have you learned about supporting student learning through the design and flow of your lesson plan? Choose one of the following activities to summarize your learning in this chapter.

- Write a letter to a friend explaining what you learned in this chapter.
- Write a paragraph starting with, “Staging a lesson is like...” Explain your metaphor.
- Draw a picture or diagram showing how lesson staging affects student learning.



Resources

- *A Framework for Task-based Learning*, by Jane Willis (Addison Wesley Publishing Company, 1996). This book outlines the main features of the Task-based Learning methodology and offers a review of many key concepts in English language teaching.
- *Planning Lessons and Courses*, by Tessa Woodward (Cambridge University Press, 2001). Chapter 3 of this book discusses the stages of lessons with many examples. Chapter 4 offers a variety of lesson shapes, including Test-Teach-Test and Task-based Learning.