2 What level are my students?

Task 35: Organising students into levels

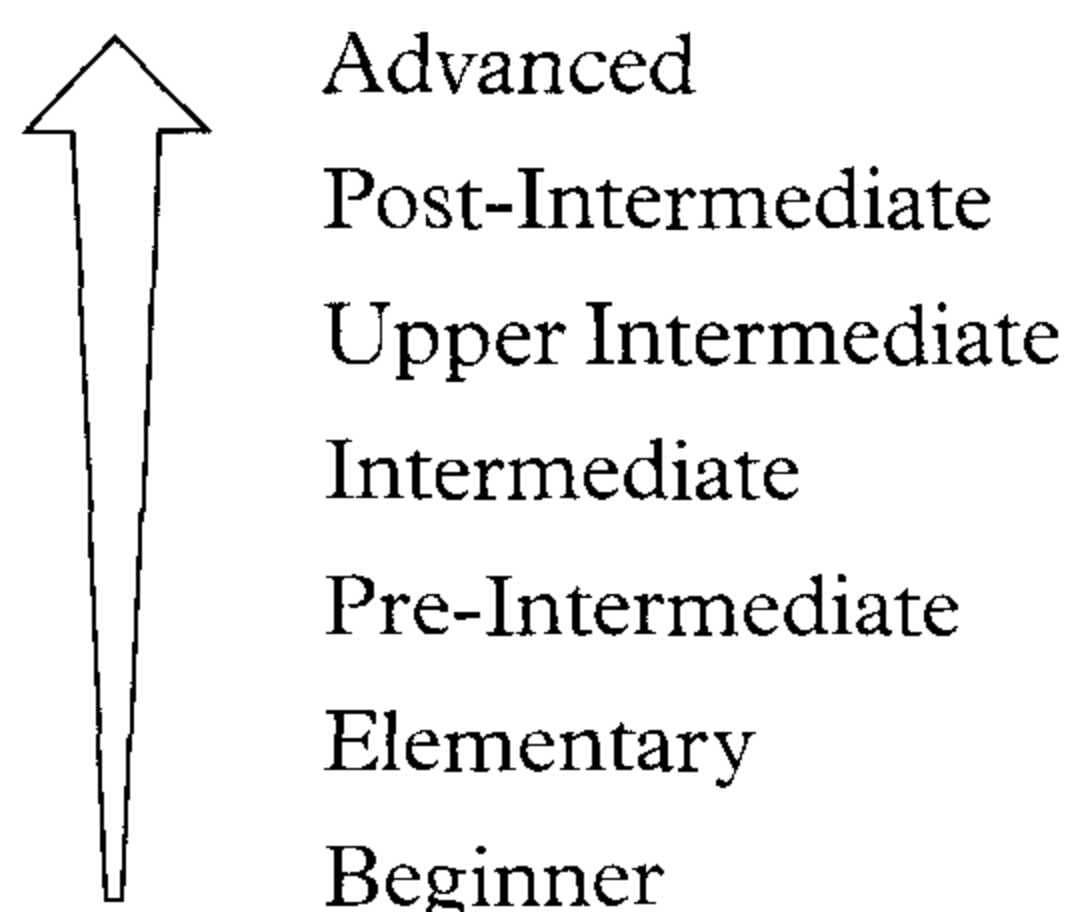What is your school's structure of class levels?
Do you know of any other ways of organising students into classes?

Commentary ■ ■ ■

The section below describes some typical ways of organising levels. ■

Common level structues in schools

Many schools divide learners into classes at named language levels, often using coursebooks labelled for those levels. A common structure is:

Advanced

Post-Intermediate

Upper Intermediate

Intermediate

Pre-Intermediate

Elementary

Beginner

Each of these levels may be subdivided, e.g. into Intermediate 1, Intermediate 2, etc. Schools often plan progress on an assumption that it will take the average learner a certain period of time to move from one level to the next, e.g. 45–60 hours of classroom time (plus homework) to move through a third of one of the named levels. (Just to add to the confusion, an 'hour' may mean different things in different places: for example, a 'period' of 45–50 minutes is referred to as an 'hour' in many countries.)

There are other level systems you may come across. An influential one from the Council of Europe categorises learners as follows (with approximate indications of their correlation with the earlier level scheme):

C2 Mastery   (= Nearly native-speaker level)
C1 Operational proficiency   (= Advanced)
B2 Vantage   (= Upper Intermediate/Post-Intermediate)
B1 Threshold   (= Intermediate)
A2 Waystage   (= Pre-Intermediate)
A1 Breakthrough   (= Beginner/Elementary)

Other educational institutions may structure class levels around exams that students take, naming classes after the exam they are preparing for, e.g. using the Cambridge ESOL exam suite of KET, PET, FCE, CAE, CPE, etc.

Whereas, with adults, class make-up is typically organised on the basis of their perceived language level, in children's courses classes are more often based on students' ages.

Of course, all of these concepts of level are quite broadly painted. We now need to look more closely at the idea of 'level'.

Task 36: Mixed-level classes

1 Have you ever said 'This class is very mixed level'? What are some cause of mixed-level classes?

2 Do students in your school automatically move up from level to level at the end of a period of time?

Commentary ■ ■ ■

Keep thinking about the questions while you read the following sections. ■

What is a learner's level?

It is tempting to see all learners in one class as at a certain named level, e.g. Pre-Intermediate. Yet teachers often come out of class complaining that the students seem to be very mixed in level, and they may blame teachers who designed the placement tests or the school policy of class creation. The most common reasons are:

- **Grouping by age:** In secondary schools, students are often grouped by age, and this seems very likely to lead to problems if some learners are significantly stronger or weaker than others.
- **Keeping groups together:** A typical problem in many schools is caused by the fact that it is often less troublesome for school administration to keep learners together as a class, course after course, rather than to keep separating them and mixing them up. Because learners will progress at different speeds, this means that, even if a group was similar in level at the start of a course, there may be very different 'exit levels' at the end. If that class now continues en masse to the next course level, the differences between participants will become more and more pronounced.
- **Placement testing:** Placement procedures are another cause of 'mixed-level' problems. Placement by language level sounds sensible, but even this can be

problematic, because an overall 'level' only gives a very general idea as to how good someone will be at, say, listening to a university lecture or how much vocabulary they can use. Placement testers sometimes give priority to friendship or personal requirements rather than level when creating classes.

- **Insufficient levels:** Learners may be together in the same class because the school doesn't have sufficient levels to fine-tune the classes more.

'What level is the class?'

When I hear a teacher asking about the level of a class, I am reminded of the question 'How long is the coastline of Britain?', to which the answer is 'It depends how long your ruler is'. The more closely and carefully you measure, the more complex the answer becomes.

So, concerning level, how close are you looking? If you look from a kilometre away, maybe seeing the class as a group of people when we can't make out any of the individuals, then calling a class 'Pre-Intermediate' can make sense – it's a useful general classification that gives a reasonable overall picture of what they might know and what they might be able to do. It suggests material we can use and activities we can plan, and will probably allow us to teach (and survive) at least until we have a more accurate picture to guide us.

However, as soon as we move in a bit closer, say, to stand a few metres away from them, we notice that this group of people is made up of some very different-looking individuals. If we check the overall abilities of each person, we find that some are 'weak Pre-Intermediate', some 'mid-Pre-Intermediate' and some 'strong Pre-Intermediate'. Maybe there are even some people who seem to belong to another level classification, say 'Elementary' or 'Intermediate'.

If we move in even closer and stand next to one of these people (and talk to her), we might find out even more. We might discover that this person's general 'level' masks the fact that she has a range of levels over the different language systems and skills, e.g. perhaps her knowledge of grammar is very good, her vocabulary is a little weaker and her speaking and listening are very much poorer.

We could look even closer than this, of course, and find the specific kinds of tasks that she is competent in or weak in, e.g. she can fill in an application form, but uses an inappropriate style for writing a formal letter requesting information.
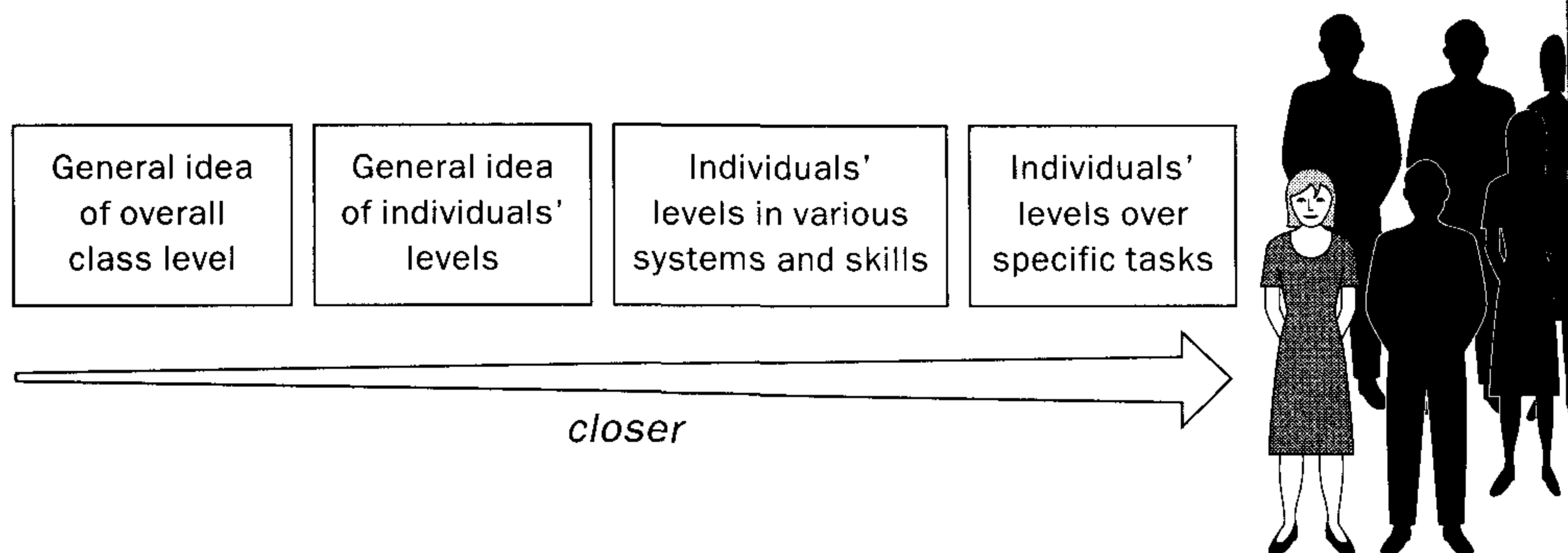

| General idea of overall class level | General idea of individuals' levels | Individuals' levels in various systems and skills | Individuals' levels over specific tasks |

closer

Figure 4.1   Level: how close are you standing?

Conclusions about level

What conclusions can we draw?

- Every learner has an individual range of levels.
- Every class is a mixed-level class.

When we plan lessons, we need to remember that we are planning something that may not be appropriate for some and may be easy or difficult for others, etc. Which is why the planning is only one part of structuring a lesson. In the act of teaching, we need to constantly notice and respond to feedback in order to adjust and redirect work moment by moment to make it as effective for each individual as possible.

3 Learners and their needs

Learners have distinct, individual reasons for being in a class and learning English – even when these are not consciously known or recognised. We can teach better if we know more about these.

Task 37: Ways to find out about learners' needs

What are some practical ways that we could find out useful data about learners' needs for learning a language?

Commentary ■ ■ ■

The various tools, procedures and materials used for finding out about learner needs usually come under the heading of 'Needs analysis'. Often a Needs analysis includes not only information about why learners might need language in the future, but also information about:

- where learners are starting from: their present language level, current problems, etc.;
- what learners would like to learn (which may be different from what they need);
- how they want to study it (people have very different preferences about how they learn things).

We might use formal gathering procedures (e.g. setting questionnaires, tests, etc.) or approach it more informally (e.g. gleaning information from chats and activities over a period of time).

Some key tools would be:

- writing: the learner writes comments, information, answers to questions, etc.;
- speaking: the learner speaks with you or with other students;
- observing: you observe the learner at work (in class or at the workplace).

If we expand on those general headings, we can generate ideas for creating a variety of Needs analyses (NB you're likely to want to combine a few ideas, rather than use one exclusively). ■

Needs analysis

Writing

The learners are asked to:

- fill in a questionnaire (e.g. about their work, interests, previous study, etc.);
- choose the best answer from a selection (e.g. 'I like doing written work for homework,' 'I like to do reading for homework,' 'I like to go over classwork for homework,' 'I don't like homework');
- gap-fill (or complete) sentences (e.g. 'In class, I particularly enjoy working on …');
- delete the things that are not true for you (e.g. I *never / sometimes / often* have to write in English);
- take a language test;
- tick the picture/diagrams that represent their use of English (e.g. pictures of office telephoning, greeting customers, etc.);
- write a paragraph about topics set by teacher (e.g. 'Your successes and difficulties with speaking English');
- write a letter/an e-mail/a note to your teacher (e.g. 'Your hopes for this course');
- write a homework essay about what you want to learn and why.

Speaking

You can:

- interview learners individually or in pairs;
- plan activities to focus learners on specific issues, leading to discussion;
- ask learners to select (and reject) items from a menu or a set of cards, discussing their reasons with each other;
- ask informally for advice about what would be useful to work on next lesson;
- collect oral (or written) feedback comments (e.g. about the usefulness of work you are doing) at the end of lessons;
- show the intended coursebook for the course and discuss it together with the class (e.g. 'Shall we use it?' 'How?' 'How much?' 'Pace?' etc.);
- get learners to help plan the course, the week or the next lesson;
- organise a social event at which informal discussions on needs arise;
- ask learners to describe/draw/make a model of their workplace or a diagram of their company structure, etc.

Observation

- Set the students tasks to do in class that will allow you to observe them working, speaking and using language. This will give you a chance to diagnose their language/skills problems and discover more about what they need.
- If you have a one-to-one student, it may be possible to observe him at his workplace and get a realistic idea of what he needs to do with English.
- Ask each learner to bring in samples of material they work with (or expect to work with in the future): leaflets, letters, tasks, professional magazines, etc.

NB If the learners' language level is low, many of the Needs analysis ideas could be used in their mother tongue.

Or here's a quick answer! Copy the Needs analysis cards or the questionnaires in Appendix 2 (Resources 10–12) to help you find out more about your learners.

Task 38: Using data from a Needs analysis

You've done a Needs analysis with your learners, using a few of the ideas from the list above. You're hoping that the data will be useful to you, but you are also aware that Needs analyses can be problematic.

1 Think of some reasons why the information you have obtained might be unhelpful or even untrue.

2 If the information is useful, what could you do with it now you've got it?

Commentary ■ ■ ■

Needs analyses are not always as useful as teachers hope they might be. This may be because learners (for some reason) have not taken their task seriously enough and have produced little information, or information they have not thought very carefully about, or even untrue information. This suggests that it is essential to carefully introduce a Needs-analysis task so that learners understand the importance and value of what they are doing and take an appropriate amount of time to complete it.

One useful purpose in doing a Needs analysis (even if you entirely ignore the resulting data!) is to allow learners to discover that other people in the room have different views, expectations and needs than themselves. It's natural that a student might imagine that everyone in class has approximately similar ideas to his own; to discover the breadth of different views can be an important 'light-bulb' moment, and thus a Needs analysis can be a vital awareness-raising activity, quite apart from any data that comes out of it. ■

'But, teacher – you know best'

Students may find the concept and practice of Needs analysis difficult. They may greet a Needs analysis with comments such as 'You are the teacher – you know best,' 'You decide. I trust you.' This may be because the learner genuinely doesn't know what he wants or needs, or it may be because he can't be bothered or doesn't think that it is a student's job to think about things like this.

Many students may have spent their whole educational career being told what to do all the time, constantly presented with work that has included minimal elements of choice. They may never have stopped to realise that what they learn and how they do it involves their own personal choice, and that it is their own time and energy they are investing. It may be a real surprise to be asked what they want or need, and not surprisingly they might need a clear explanation as to the purpose of it – and guidance as to how to start thinking about and conveying their ideas.

Humans don't necessarily think first and then write down their ideas. Often I don't know what I think about something until I start writing my ideas down; then I find during the process of writing that my thoughts are becoming clearer and more structured. Maybe then I have to cross out the first two paragraphs, but I needed to write them to get me to paragraph 3 (which is a cracker!). Your students may find that the same thing happens to them when they start to wonder

what their needs are. The process of writing (or talking) about things helps to give some form to thoughts that maybe didn't exist in any clarity until then. (I often find myself saying something like the content of this paragraph to suspicious learners; it sometimes helps!)

You may still come across the 100% 'abdicating' student – one who gives up a right to make any decision about his own future. It's worth pointing out to such a student that he is crediting me, the teacher, with magical, wizard-like 'mind-reading' abilities. My response will probably be to state that, yes, I do know something about language and teaching, but I am not an expert on him and have no insight into the inside of his head, his past life and learning, his preferences or his future plans.

I hope – by means of explaining why it is important – to encourage this learner to realise that 'learning' is not another product that one buys ready-made off the shelf, but is something that has to be adjusted and remade every time. It is a 'living' thing, not a piece of dead meat. I don't always manage to persuade every learner, but it's worth trying! Curiously, the hard-line abdicator is often the very same student who complains at the end of courses, saying how unsuitable and useless the course was, and how the teacher knows nothing about what students need.

Other problems with Needs analyses

Other problems with Needs analyses may arise when the learners have not themselves chosen to do the course (e.g. because the students have to attend secondary school or because a course has been chosen and paid for by an employee's company). Of course, in these circumstances, a Needs analysis may serve an additional purpose: encouraging the course participants to start taking ownership of their course, making choices about what they want or need (rather than assuming that everything has already been decided and is cut and dried). When people feel they have some power or responsibility over what happens to them, it can really change their attitude to it.

Of course, with any Needs analysis, there might be a danger that, in asking people what they want or hope for, you might lead them to expect that everything they ask for will happen. Having said that, I guess it's much better to find out rather than to pretend that the differences don't exist.
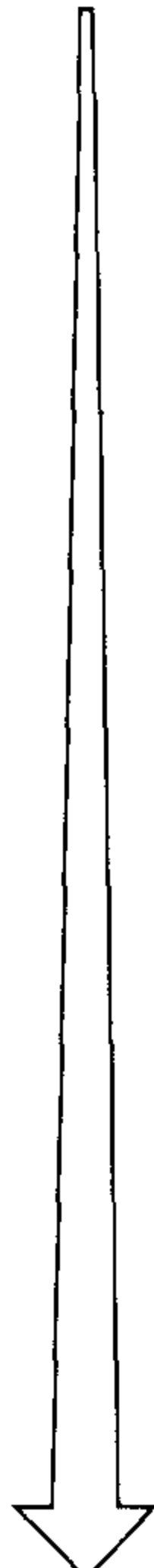
What can you do with the data?

Anyway, let's assume the information you get is true and useful. There are still potential problems. What can you do with it? Maybe you consider the learners' wishes are inappropriate or not realistic or not possible, or that the range of needs stated are too wide-ranging within the group. What are the options for making use of this data?

Task 39: Balancing course plans and needs

Imagine a situation where you're a class teacher and you've already devised (or been presented with) a course plan before the course starts. How could you let the data obtained from a Needs analysis influence or change that plan?

Commentary ■ ■ ■

This largely depends on your own attitude as a teacher: how much do you want the course plan to be changed? There are a range of possibilities, some of which are listed below in an approximate order from 'taking least account of the data' to 'taking most account'.

Least ↓ Most	
	Take no account of the Needs analysis data. Continue with the course as if the data hadn't been collected.
	Review the data, but decide that your original course plan is likely to achieve something very close to the desired outcomes, so continue using the original plan.
	Continue with the course as before, but allow the data to influence small aspects of how you help or deal with individuals in class.
	Continue with the course as before but add in a limited number of extra activities, lessons or variations to satisfy some stated needs or for certain individuals to do for homework (or in class).
	Replan the course, much as before, but aiming to cover the material in faster time (or drop elements) in order to add in a larger number of extra activities or lessons to satisfy some stated needs.
	Replan the course to incorporate substantial elements of the needs alongside relevant elements from the original plan.
	Put the original course plan to one side and base a new course plan entirely on the stated needs.

Of course, your original Needs analysis may itself have incorporated an element in which learners themselves helped replan the course, in which case, your best option is probably to try using that!

The options towards the top of the list will probably seem to be (initially, at least) less 'troublesome' to you. In many cases, you will consider it simpler and more straightforward to teach directly from a 'ready-made' course plan or a coursebook with only minimal (or no) reference to learner needs. And it is quite possible that a satisfactory course will ensue, achieving the intended aims for a number of learners.

But, although there is this chance of success, this type of course is also likely to produce learner feedback at the end along the lines of 'It was OK, but it wasn't really what I wanted'. You will only be able to offer learners what they really want or need if you find out what this is (even if they don't think they know what that is themselves) and by doing coursework that directly addresses this.

That's not to say that addressing needs won't be tricky – it may mean seeking out new materials, varying cherished routines and activities, finding ways to satisfy apparently conflicting wishes of different people, etc. – but, in the long run,

learners will probably notice and appreciate the way that the course is addressing what they need, rather than simply offering up some 'off-the-peg' solution. ■