

Emergent Syllabus

teacher guide



EMERGENT SYLLABUS

What is an emergent syllabus?

We normally think of a syllabus as setting out what will be learned over a period of time (often broken down into periodic units). This emergent syllabus is different, because it does not establish what will be learned, but rather the topics and situations that will be used to allow language learning opportunities to emerge. Indeed, the syllabus may not even do that, as it is for the student to decide the topics and situations that are most interesting and relevant to them; and this may vary at any time. This syllabus is less a plan than it is a framework within which the student can organize and plan their learning.

The purpose of this emergent syllabus is to combine the sense of structure that is gained from a textbook, with a dialogic learning approach typical of Dogme language teaching. The syllabus does not therefore set out which specific vocabulary, grammar or skills will be acquired at any particular time. Instead it helps the students and teachers identify which contexts are most relevant to the students in the near future.

This emergent syllabus is intended to give students greater control over their learning and to give them a sense of preparing for specific situations that they know they will find themselves in. It is intended to allay student's concerns that Dogme teaching lacks a clear direction and to ensure that important and relevant topics are covered. It establishes a framework for students to gain skills such as greater fluency and identify practical situations they would like to perform better in.

Emergence and Dogme principles

This syllabus is based on Dogme language teaching (and learning) principles, namely that dialogue is the main basis through which language learning takes place. Currently the syllabus has two main components: *My World* and *Practical Simulations*.

- **My World** is a series of student selected topics for Dogme lessons together with suggestions of how students can prepare for these classes
- **Practical Simulations** are task-based activities selected by students according to practical situations that they wish to prepare for (probably because the students anticipate being in this situation). The *Practical Simulation* plans have greater structure and include guidance on how the student (and teacher) can best prepare for class.

Relationships with other approaches

Dogme language teaching is a communicative approach and shares similarities with Task-Based Learning. This syllabus also shares similarities with [Task Based syllabuses](#) – especially with use of simulations (which are, in effect, task-based activities) and the focus on communication rather than accuracy. However, this emergent syllabus is conceived as a process that is learner generated and is so it also shares common ground with the [Process Syllabus](#).

Out-of-class learning

Although this emergent syllabus envisages a classroom context for the learning, it draws on the students' learning and practice beyond the classroom. *Practical Simulations* are designed to prepare the student for out-of-class situations and to also reintroduce those real-life experiences back into the classroom for further improvement.

In-class activities

Although the syllabus draws on the students' out-of-class learning, its main focus is in-class activities. The lessons are conversation-based, yet are much more than simply conversation practice (see "Pedagogical conversations" below). In-class activities offer opportunities to analyze and discuss the



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subject matter and to notice new language (both form and lexis). Lessons also allow for reflective consideration of language learning techniques and habits.

MY WORLD

What is My World?

My World activities allow the student to focus their learning on language (vocabulary, phrases, structure and style) that is most appropriate to their needs. This approach recognizes that we each use our native language (and therefore any learned language) differently according to our needs and interests. For example, my English (my native language) is different from my sister's English because I find myself in different contexts, talking about different topics with different aims. I may have a wide range of English that is strikingly similar to my sister's but the English I actually use is different. Therefore, it makes sense for me to learn a similar (equivalent) foreign language to express myself (as myself) in that new language. Furthermore when we speak and write in our native language we are fairly repetitive (using the same words and phrases again and again) – so the faster we acquire an equivalent set of words and phrases in a foreign language, the quicker we can express ourselves in an equivalent way.

My World activities encourage learners to describe their life and their environment, to express opinions about this and to interpret new experiences they encounter. The approach is both a way to acknowledge the importance of the student's own experiences and perspectives and also a way to ensure that the lesson content (ie conversation) helps the student learn relevant and interesting language. As such *My World* activities provide a framework for Dogme teaching/learning, so that the pedagogical conversations are tailored to the learner. Some students may prefer to discuss these topics in a less personal way (eg talk about local transport rather than how they commute to work); in this case a very similar approach can be used (see the *My World* topics sheet).

Student and teacher roles

The purpose of *My World* activities is to encourage the student to use language that s/he is likely to use in real-life; it is to keep the student talking and writing about what they find most interesting (probably the same themes they talk about in their native language). Your role as a teacher is to encourage and facilitate this, while also ensuring that the conversation and activities are pedagogically beneficial (see "Pedagogical conversations" below). The student will gain most if s/he prepares (see "Preparation" below), but this is not essential and lessons may run very smoothly without any preparation.

Pedagogical conversations

My World activities involve a great deal of conversation. Dialogic learning forms a large part of the pedagogical foundation of this emergent syllabus. However, we cannot take it for granted that the conversations will lead to learning. So what makes conversations pedagogical?

- **Layered conversations:** pedagogical conversations have three layers: the topic itself; the new language that emerges from the discussion; and the language learning (meta-cognitive) skills that make the student a better language learner. Each layer has its own role to play and the participants need freedom to move between the layers (eg pause the discussion about the topic and explore a phrase or point of grammar).
- **Real conversations:** the discussion needs to be genuine and of interest to the participants. It also needs freedom to change direction without the pressure to reach a certain goal or conform to a specific structure.
- **Continuity:** moving between the conversation's layers interrupts the flow, so there needs to be ways to pick up the conversation again. Props (objects, photos etc) help the participants return to



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the topic. They provide a reminder of the subject matter and serve as an impetus to ask further questions to restart or continue the dialogue.

- **Space for emergence:** slowing down the conversation will allow more space and time for new language learning opportunities to emerge, as it will make it easier for participants to move between the conversation's layers.

Read more about pedagogical conversations: www.avatarlanguages.com/blog/pedagogical-conversation

Preparation

The *My World* topics sheet gives suggestions of topics and some ideas of what could happen in class. It also suggests what the student should do in preparation:

- **Finding props:** the conversations will flow better if the learner brings a prop (object, photo, video, sound recording etc) into class. The prop provides a focus for the conversation and it encourages the teacher to ask more questions and so prolongs, broadens and deepens the conversation. Props could include photos and videos (either taken by the student or found online), maps (print / online) sound and voice recordings, timetables/brochures, links to locations in Google Street View, packaging (of drinks or food) or any other object.
- **Language preparation:** class activities can range from intensive analysis and correction of the student's (written) work to free conversation. There is scope for the student to prepare before class – perhaps by creating a text to read, a presentation to give or simply a list of key vocabulary/phrases that the student wants to use in the discussion.

My World activities step-by-step

You may like to consider the following steps...

- Select a topic: suggest two or three topics from the My World chart and/or ask the student(s) to suggest their own. The more it is about the student's own life, the more likely it will be relevant and of interest. Students that are new to this approach to lessons may need/want more guidance – especially to help them expand the topic into a broader and more detailed conversation.

Consider these questions to expand on talking about one's home...

- What do you like most about your home?
- What would you like to change about it?
- Where do you spend the most time in your house/apartment/home? Why?
- Which is your favorite room? Why?
- Prepare for next lesson: encourage students to prepare for the next class about the chosen topic; perhaps...
 - Finding images and objects to provide a focus for conversations
 - Writing own texts or presentations to read in-class as introductions to class discussions
 - Finding texts written by others (short enough not to crowd out dialogue within class)
- Guide in-class conversations: elicit emergence from the dialogue
 - Encourage participation so that learners want to talk. This is more important than accuracy, so some students may need less correction work to feel comfortable participating.
 - Ask questions to keep the conversation going. Encourage longer responses by asking how and why.
 - Explore lexis and form with the students. Prioritize issues that come up more often, so that there is a natural repetition. In this way you will cover (or "uncover") the points that are most important and urgent. Some suggestions of what to look for...
 - Lexis: inappropriate/incorrect use of words; misunderstood/incomplete understanding of a word's meanings



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- Phrases/collocation: awkward/incorrect combination of words; opportunities to suggest useful and flexible phrases
- Grammar: incorrect use of tenses and verb conjugation etc
- Pronunciation: words or sounds where the student is unclear
- Natural breaks will occur in the conversation and they can be used to have class discussions on questions of form and lexis that you (or the students) have stored up over the lesson activity.
- Follow-up work: students can produce work to present or summarize the topic: perhaps a text, blog post, presentation or video. Student work can be published online to increase a sense of achievement and to motivate higher quality work.

Further reading about publishing student work online: <http://www.avatarlanguages.com/blog/wikitravel/>

Examples of online student work: <http://www.avatarlanguages.com/studentwork.php>

PRACTICAL SIMULATIONS

What is a Practical Simulation?

Practical Simulations help students role-play for real-life situations they will probably find themselves in. Simulations are very similar to role-plays, but there are some differences – especially that simulations do not have fixed scripts. Instead there is a description of a situation with specific tasks for the student to carry out. Students can, in fact, choose their own way to do the tasks, so it is up to the student to choose the language that will be used and practiced. The simulations described here are intended for learners with lower levels of competency, where they are learning basic, yet flexible, phrases for use in everyday situations. These simulations work best if the students prepare before lesson the kinds of phrases they want to use in the simulation (also see below “When students don’t prepare for simulations”). Giving students the opportunity (and responsibility) to prepare helps them learn the skills to do this on their own (when they don’t have access to a class or a teacher). In fact the simulation (and indeed all language teaching) can be seen as preparing the students to ‘teach themselves’ when they are not in class.

Why use Practical Simulations?

Simulations not only prepare students for real-life situations they will encounter, but they also help them develop skills to prepare for situations when they don’t have access to a teacher or a formal class. Students will become more independent if they are able to quickly identify the linguistic challenges that they will shortly face and then find resources to create solutions. For example a student will be more independent if s/he realizes before s/he enters the shoe store that s/he needs to know the word for “shoe size”. S/he can then use an online dictionary to find the new words and phrases. If need be, the student can then quickly practice the new language right before using it.

Smartphones (with web access) allow learners to prepare while standing in the shoe shop itself, but the same process can also be done before going shopping. Through doing simulations in class, students should develop these skills and will become better at running through future situations in their head so as to identify potential linguistic bottlenecks and then prepare for them.

Student and teacher roles

Although the student should come to class with prepared phrases, the flexible and realistic nature of simulations means that other vocabulary and expressions will arise in the class. So, as a teacher, you will be spending some class time helping the student find more phrases (according to the specific situation). Indeed, even the prepared phrases may have mistakes or be inappropriate for the situation – so part of the teacher’s role is to check and improve/correct the phrases.



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The students will gain most if you, as the teacher, are predictable in your responses – at least initially. When the student is comfortable with the routine, then you may want to add more complexity. This 'complexity' adds reality and prepares the student better for the real-life situation. For example, once the student has successfully ordered a cup of tea, you could repeat the simulation and suggest s/he orders a green tea or a pot of tea. You could also add little challenges to the conversations – for example, you could say that there isn't any tea and then encourage the student to consider alternatives, such as coffee.

Each mini-conversation should be simple enough for the student to successfully complete the task and challenging enough to be interesting and rewarding. Your judgment will help keep this balance; but so too will checking with the student: ask them if they want to take it up a notch or whether they prefer to repeat/rehearse the last mini-conversation again.

Reiterative process

Simulations prepare the students for future events, but they can also be taken further so that the student is able to reflect on the real-life dialogue and improve it. Students can easily record the real-life conversations they have (using an MP3 player or a cell phone) and bring the recording to a subsequent lesson. The conversation can then be analyzed to see what went well and what can be improved upon.

mLearning with *Practical Simulations*

Simulations help students practice for an event, but they also create reference material. If the student has an iPhone or other SmartPhone, then they can access past phrases anytime, anywhere. Encourage the student to keep a reference sheet that is always available – perhaps in Google Docs or stored on the phone, or perhaps just in a paper-based notebook. This will become their own PPB (Personal Phrasebook). Students can then use their PPB to help them prepare for a situation – perhaps when standing in line waiting to buy a train ticket or sitting in a restaurant waiting for the waiter to come to the table to take the order.

Further reading about Personal Phrasebooks: <http://www.avatarlanguages.com/blog/ppb/>

When students don't prepare for simulations

Students will not always find the time to prepare for lesson, so you may need to do some or all of this in class time. This may also be true if the student is unsure how to prepare and so you may find yourself modeling (demonstrating and guiding) the preparation activities. Take a look at the *student guide* to see how they can/should approach the preparation and then consider how to help the student do this when in class.

Helping the students prepare

First the student needs to consider what the problem actually is. The student should have a clear idea of what the task is and what information s/he needs to complete this task.

- Does the student need to know what the train times are?
- Does the student just need to make a request (to buy a specific ticket)?
- Does the student need to persuade? Does s/he need to win over the sales clerk to make an exception?

Once the student knows what s/he will be saying, the next step is to consider if s/he can already say this.

- Students should prepare by drawing on what they already know.



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- They should also look at previous lessons/simulations for phrases and vocabulary to recycle.
- They can then find new lexis that isn't covered by the above.

When helping the student look for new phrases, consider the following...

- See which phrases the student has already encountered (in previous lessons/simulations).
- Look at phrasebooks (online/paper-based) for suggested phrases.
- Use online searches for suitable phrases
 1. Linguee.com is a phrase-based search-generated dictionary. It works between English and German, Spanish, French and Portuguese; other languages are being added (Chinese, Japanese and Russian).
 2. WordReference.com has phrases both in the dictionary and in the forum. Students can check both places to see if the phrase has been included in the dictionary or discussed in the forum.
 3. Google translation may generate an accurate phrase. This resource is better for understanding a foreign sentence than it is for accurate translations.
- Think of phrases you would suggest. Use this last, because part of the task is for the student to learn how to look for phrases and vocabulary (when not in class).

Further reading about phrase-based dictionaries: www.avatarlanguages.com/blog/phrase-dictionary

Developing new *Practical Simulation* plans

The sample simulation plans (see appendix IV) are just that – examples of what you and your students could do. You will need to create new plans together with your students according to their needs and interests. In particular you will need to consider what situations the students will soon find themselves in and what (linguistic) aspects of these situations they will find most challenging.

The Template Simulation Plan will help you provide a structure to the new simulations and guide the student through the process. This includes a clear sense of what the task is (what will the student be able to do after the simulation – eg buy a ticket, get a haircut etc); the resources to help the student (eg websites with useful language and practical information); ways the conversation can be continued beyond the immediate simulation (eg related topics and conversation-promoting questions); and finally ways the student can draw on the simulation when in the real-life situation (eg a personal phrasebook with the key phrases to review immediately before the real-life conversation).

Adjusting for levels (competencies)

Simulations are probably best suited to lower level learners so that they quickly gain a basic ability to function in their new language. However, more advanced students will also benefit from this kind of activity – especially to tidy up their phrases (more grammatically accurate and more colloquially appropriate) and also to learn specific vocabulary (eg different teeth and filling techniques at the dentist). Clearly the more advanced the learner, the quicker you will move onto more conversational activities to keep the classes interesting and engaging.

PHRASE LEARNING

Learning is much more than just repeating and memorizing set phrases. The idea is to use phrases as a basis for deeper and broader language learning.

- **Phrases for patterns (leading to grammar):** the phrases learned will contain grammatical structures that can be applied more generally by the student. Although the student will need a rule to help apply the pattern in other situations, the example phrases helps the student internalize the pattern, so that it seems a natural structure.



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- **Phrases for new vocabulary:** phrases also allow new words to be more easily learned, because they can be slotted into an already acquired phrase. This gives the new word a ready-made vehicle for it to be used in and so gives it more relevance and makes it easier to use and internalize.

Understanding phrases

Help the student identify the phrase (in their own language); this will help them look phrases up. Phrases are usually based around a verb and perhaps a preposition; the subject, pronoun and objects are often interchangeable. However, when looking phrases up in a dictionary, it may well be under the noun/object.

Are some phrases better than others?

Phrases will be easier to learn if they are shorter. Shorter phrases are also more versatile, so they make better 'building blocks', that can be put together to form longer sentences in a wide range of situations. If phrases can be reused in many situations then they are of more value and students should be encouraged to recycle phrases where possible. Encourage the student to use phrases they learned in previous lessons or simulations. In a sense, one of the skills/outcomes we want is for the student to have the maximum ability to communicate for a given size of vocabulary/knowledge. Focusing on the most versatile, re-usable, recyclable phrases will help them expand their vocabulary by building on their existing knowledge.

COMBINING PRACTICAL SIMULATIONS AND MY WORLD ACTIVITIES

My World activities help the learner prepare for (repetitive) conversations in a similar (but far less specific and narrow) way to how the *Practical Simulations* help learners prepare for carrying out everyday tasks.

Linking *My World* and *Practical Simulations*

My World activities and *Practical Simulations* are treated separately in this emergent syllabus, but they do in fact overlap and they can easily be merged into the same lesson. *Practical Simulations* will likely need to include some free conversation so that the topic is discussed in a more natural way and so that the new words and phrases can be recycled in different contexts. *My World* activities will also naturally lead into specific tasks and so a brief simulation can easily be introduced.

Keeping it interesting

Practicing phrases for these practical situations could get a little monotonous in lesson, so you (and the student) may like to spend the latter part of the lesson doing more general work on the same topic (eg Dogme teaching via conversation). Try to recycle the same vocabulary but asking the student for his/her opinion – eg which type of tea or coffee do you prefer? How late in the day can you drink it? Do you have the same at home?

FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

This emergent syllabus is a work in progress. It will be developed over time to become a more complete tool. Future developments will include sections on the following...

- Reading skills
- Listening skills

Visit <http://www.avatarlanguages.com/teaching/guide.php> for further resources.

