

# Part I

## *Topics in the Design of Materials and Methods*



# 1

## *The Framework of Materials and Methods*

### **1.1 Introduction: setting the scene**

As teachers of English as a foreign or second language (EFL/ESL), we are members of an established worldwide profession. As Richards (1985: 1) reminds us, ‘the current status of English has turned a significant percentage of the world’s population into part-time users or learners of English’. Wherever we work, we share many assumptions about what we do; we prepare and use teaching materials and classroom methods and techniques based on similar, or at least comparable, principles. Yet, despite this commonality, it is not unusual for teachers to report a sense of isolation from colleagues in other countries, and even in different areas of their own country. Another attitude that is sometimes expressed is that the teaching situation in our country, or school, is unique, with its own special problems and difficulties. There is some justification for these feelings, of course: many teachers work in geographical isolation, and may not have access to channels of professional communication (journals, conferences, in-service training courses); different countries have widely differing educational systems and philosophies, resulting in teachers being subject to different expectations and pressures.

In this chapter we shall take some time to look beyond our individual teaching circumstances to what can be thought of as a professional ‘common core’. This has relevance to all teachers, whether we work in a Japanese high school, a Mexican university, a private language school in Spain, a Chinese polytechnic, a Turkish secondary school, a Zairean college – this list could go on indefinitely. We shall argue that the idea of a ‘common core’ is also useful whether our materials and methods are selected by us or specified by the educational authorities. It is, then, broadly made up of two kinds of factors: firstly, of the various wide-ranging criteria on which decisions about language teaching programmes are based, and secondly, on the *pedagogic* principles according to which materials and methods are actually designed. We shall take these two kinds of factors together and refer to them as the shared *framework*.

In what follows, this notion of a ‘framework’ is set out in a little more detail. We then subdivide it under the two headings of ‘context’ and ‘syllabus’, both exploring their general implications and trying to relate them as we do so to our own familiar and specific teaching situation.

## **1.2 The framework: context and syllabus**

In simple terms, the overall goals of a language teaching programme usually derive from an analysis of the reasons why a group of learners in a particular environment needs to learn English: these goals may be stated in general, educational, or very specific terms. They may, on the one hand, be set out in the large-scale categories of a national language policy with many associated implications for the development of the curriculum. For instance, the aim of English Language Teaching in Malaysia was earlier stated to be ‘to create a society that is able to utilize the language for effective communication as the need arises, and as a key to wider experiences. For those furthering their studies, the skills learned should become an instrument with which they may cope with the necessities of using the language’. The new guidelines for language teaching in Japanese schools include such statements as ‘to develop understanding of language and culture through a foreign language . . . to develop a positive attitude towards communication in a foreign language, and a basic practical communication ability in hearing and speaking’. Alternatively, at the other end of the scale, a course may be organized to address a particular learning need for, say, the identifiable purposes of a small group. For instance, a course may be designed ‘to meet the needs of learners who need to improve their ability to communicate when socialising, telephoning, making business presentations and taking part in meetings’, or ‘to help international postgraduate students in English-medium universities develop the writing skills necessary for writing dissertations’.

There is, then, a whole spectrum of possibilities for defining the goals of language teaching, for a country, an age group, a whole school, a class, or an individual; and whether for general educational purposes, business, scientific development, cultural appreciation or many other reasons.

- 1 Is there an explicit statement of the goals of the language programme on which you work? If so, what are its primary aims?
- 2 If there is not such a statement, try to draft one that represents your own understanding of the goals.

To define what is meant here by ‘framework’ we start from the view that materials and methods cannot be seen in isolation, but are embedded within a broader professional context. This is represented in figure 1.1, which shows in a very simplified form the typical stages of planning an English language programme.

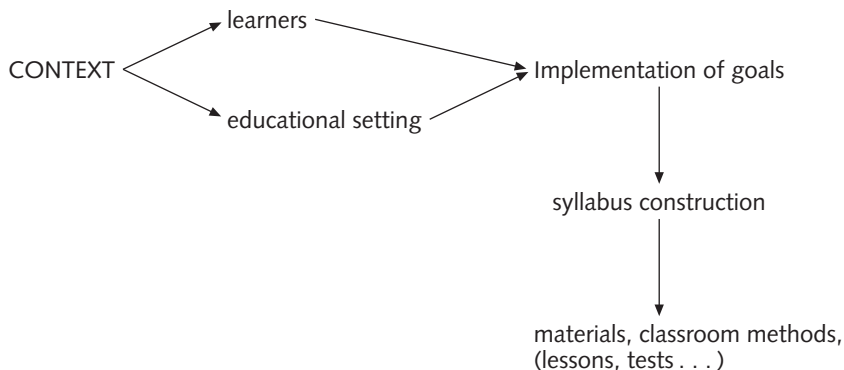


Figure 1.1 The framework of language teaching.

Whether goals are stated in terms of a national language policy, or in the more restricted environment of, say, a particular school or college, the possibilities for actually implementing them will be directly related both to the learners themselves – their needs, characteristics and so on – and to the whole educational setting in which the teaching is to take place. Obviously, as we shall see in our subsequent discussion, goals need to be realistic for specific circumstances. There is little use, for example, in planning for a multimedia course if appropriate equipment is unavailable or unreliable, or in making too many general assumptions about classroom methodology. The statement of goals, then, related to the learners and conditioned by the setting, leads to the selection of an appropriate type of syllabus content and specification. The broad syllabus outline will in turn have direct implications for the more detailed design and selection of materials and tests, the planning of individual lessons, and the management of the classroom itself. Clearly this logical planning sequence is an idealization of what is often a less well-defined procedure, where ‘set’ materials may linger behind aims that have been reformulated and updated, or conversely where new syllabus types may be ill-matched to existing educational objectives. The logical sequence will nevertheless be used as a reference point for discussion, and as a starting point for the exploration of individual teaching circumstances.

This whole topic is dealt with in considerable depth by Stern who, in his *Fundamental Concepts of Language Teaching* (1983: ch. 3), proposes a very detailed ‘conceptual framework’, designed as a model that is intended to capture what he sees as the complexity of language teaching. After surveying a number of earlier models, he then sets out his own scheme. Its main components are (a) views of the nature of language, (b) views of the learner and of language learning, (c) views of teaching and the language teacher, and (d) the whole context, which includes the educational setting, the language context, and the language teaching background. The chief characteristics of the model are that it should be *comprehensive*, covering any type of language teaching operation; that all factors under each heading are *interdependent*, so that ‘no single factor,

for example the teacher, the method, the materials, a new concept . . . or a technological device, can by itself offer a general solution to most language learning problems' (1983: 47); and that it should see language teaching as *multidisciplinary*. Stern's perspective will be evident both in this and most subsequent chapters.

The rest of this book will be concerned with the third stage of figure 1.1, the design of materials and methods. Let us now look at the most important contextual factors involved in planning, and then at the key types of syllabus from which actual courses are derived.

### *Contextual factors*

In the preceding section, we took a broad view of 'context' and included both learners and setting under this heading. Let us examine each of these in turn in a little more detail.

*Learners* It is possible to identify a number of important learner characteristics or 'variables' which, as we have suggested, influence planning decisions and the specification of goals. The relative importance of these variables, and their effect on programme design, obviously depend to a certain extent on some of the situational factors to be discussed in the next section. For example, a pupil's mother tongue may be more, or less, significant depending on whether more than one native language is represented in the classroom, or perhaps on the educational philosophy of that particular environment.

For the moment we can list here the key characteristics of 'the learner', indicating how they might affect planning and noting that they form part of our common frame of reference as language teachers, wherever we work. Some of these are characteristics of whole groups or subgroups of learners; others are individual and less open to generalization. Again, some can be known in advance and incorporated at the initial planning stage, in principle at least. Others are more appropriately assessed in the classroom environment itself, and as such are more obviously susceptible to teacher reaction and influence.

We consider the learner's

- *Age*: this will particularly affect topics chosen and types of learning activity, such as the suitability of games or role play.
- *Interests*: as with age, this may help in the specification of topics and learning activities.
- *Level of proficiency in English*: teachers will wish to know this even where their classes are based on a 'mixed proficiency' principle rather than streamed according to level.
- *Aptitude*: this can most usefully be thought of as a specific talent, in this case for language learning, as something that learners might show themselves to be 'good at', perhaps in contrast to other subjects in a school curriculum. (It can be measured by formal aptitude tests, although they are

not very frequently used.) The relationship between aptitude and intelligence is not clear, and is certainly not direct.

- *Mother tongue*: this may affect, for instance, the treatment of errors or the selection of syllabus items – areas of grammar or vocabulary and so on.
- *Academic and educational level*: which help to determine intellectual content, breadth of topic choice, or depth to which material may be studied.
- *Attitudes to learning*, to teachers, to the institution, to the target language itself and to its speakers. This is directly related to the following point.
- *Motivation*, at least in so far as it can be anticipated. Obviously a whole range of factors will affect this.
- *Reasons for learning*, if it is possible to state them. With school age pupils this may be less significant than with many adult learners, where it is often possible to carry out quite a detailed analysis of needs.
- *Preferred learning styles*: which will help in the evaluation of the suitability of different methods, for instance whether problem-solving activities could be used, or whether pupils are more used to ‘rote learning’, where material is learned by heart.
- *Personality*: which can affect methodological choices such as a willing acceptance of role play and an interactive classroom environment, or a preference for studying alone, for example.

Many of these factors will recur in the relevant sections of subsequent chapters.

*Setting* That aspect of the context that we refer to as *setting* is to be understood here as the whole teaching and learning environment, in a wide sense: it is the factors falling under this heading that will determine whether the aims of a language programme, defined with reference to the learners’ needs and characteristics, are actually feasible and realistic. In certain situations, the setting itself may be so significant that it provides the foundation for the specification of aims. This might be the case, for instance, in a country with a single political or religious ideological base, where the education system is primarily an expression of that ideology. In the majority of circumstances, however, the setting is more likely to condition the way in which goals are carried out, and indeed the extent to which they can be.

For most EFL/ESL teachers, therefore, the following factors, in some combination and with varying degrees of significance, will influence course planning, syllabus design, the selection of materials and resources, and the appropriateness of methods:

- *The role of English in the country*: whether it is a regular means of communication or primarily a subject taught in the school curriculum, where, in turn, it may or may not be the first foreign language. This relates to the linguistic environment, and to whether English is spoken outside class in the community or alternatively never heard.
- *The role of English in the school*, and its place in the curriculum.

- *The teachers*: their status, both at national and institutional levels, their training, mother tongue, attitudes to their job, experience, expectations. This topic will be discussed in detail in the final chapter of this book.
- *Management and administration*: who is responsible for what level of decision, particularly which are the control points for employment of staff, budgets, resource allocation and so on. Additionally, the position of teachers in the overall system needs to be understood, as does the nature of the hierarchy in any particular institution.
- *Resources available*: books and paper, audio-visual material (hardware and software for cassette and video), laboratories, computers, reprographic facilities and so on. Design and choice of teaching materials will be particularly affected by resource availability, as will the capacity to teach effectively across a range of language skills.
- *Support personnel*: administrators, secretaries and technicians, and their specific roles in relation to the teaching staff.
- *The number of pupils* to be taught and the size of classes. Overall numbers may affect the total number of teaching hours available, and the large class problem is a very familiar one in many settings worldwide.
- *Time* available for the programme, both over a working year (longitudinally), and in any one week or term (intensive or extensive). Many teachers would also consider that time of day is a significant factor.
- *Physical environment*: the nature of the building, noise factors, flexibility of tables and chairs, size of room in relation to size of class, heat and cold, and so on.
- *The socio-cultural environment*: this can often determine the suitability of both materials and methods. For example, some textbooks contain topics inappropriate to the setting, and some classroom methods require an unacceptable set of teacher and learner roles.
- *The types of tests used*, and ways in which students are evaluated: assessment procedures may, for example, be formal or informal and subjective. They may also be external, in the form of a public or national examination, or internal to the institution and the course.
- *Procedures (if any) for monitoring and evaluating* the language teaching programme itself. This kind of evaluation may be imposed by 'senior management', or alternatively agreed between teachers as colleagues.

Hedge (2000) covers similar points, classifying them into social, educational, pupil and teacher variables. Malamah-Thomas (1987: 97) describes setting in terms of three levels in an education system – the country, the school, and the classroom. She then divides the various factors into (a) physical, (b) temporal, (c) psycho-social, and (d) educational, showing how the three different levels may be affected by each of these. Thus, for example, psycho-social factors are related at national level to culture, politics and religion; at institutional level to school atmosphere and staff attitudes; and in the classroom to student-teacher rapport. Holliday (1994) is particularly concerned with the need for methodology



to be *appropriate* to its socio-cultural context, not inappropriately transplanted from a different – and often more privileged – system.

Teachers are affected, directly and indirectly, by all these variables. Some they may be able to influence or even control: for example, the deployment of resources and materials, or the pacing of work within an overall time-scale. Others, of course, arise from decisions taken far removed from a teacher's day-to-day professional life, perhaps at Ministry level, or at an earlier point in the country's educational history. Whatever their source, it is the teacher who is in the 'front line' – attempting to promote learning and fulfil the stated goals against the background of a complex network of interrelated factors. Not everyone will work in a situation as gloomy as that described by Gaies and Bowers (1990: 176), with large classes, low motivation, inadequate coursebooks, poorly trained teachers, lack of resources, heavy workload and the like, but we may all share their conclusion that 'by coming to grips not only with new ideas but with the evidence of what happens when they are introduced into the local context, [teachers] equip themselves with the tools for establishing an appropriate methodology that can set realistic national objectives for teacher training and education' (181).

Consider the following short case study of a fairly typical teaching environment. Note how the factors associated with the learner and the teaching situation can affect the organization of the language programme, the materials, the teachers and the methodology. For instance, most aspects are determined by decisions taken at some distance from the teacher, although teachers' views may have some effect. Again, the classes are on the whole conditioned by the examination system, but a minority of pupils are able to select classes in line with their own interests, which in turn means that teachers may be less bound by coursebooks and able themselves to be more autonomous in choice of materials and methods. In other words, there is a complex set of factors in operation, and the teacher in the classroom is the focus of a variety of pressures and influences, both direct and indirect.

*Teacher X* works in a secondary school, with pupils ranging in age from 12 to 16. She teaches thirty periods a week, two of which are options selected by older pupils according to their interests. Course materials consist in the main of set textbooks graded according to age and proficiency level and focused heavily but not exclusively on accuracy. Materials are written by a Ministry of Education team according to Ministry guidelines, and teachers' opinions are solicited annually by an Area Language Teaching Adviser. It is Government policy to revise materials every 8 years.

Average class size is forty pupils. The pressure of the examination system ensures satisfactory attention, though – since there is little opportunity for travel – learners do not readily perceive the relevance of learning materials to their own lives.

The school has a language laboratory, and a very small collection of books (mainly stories) written in English. Classrooms are basic but adequate. Very

few supplementary English language teaching materials are available, though teachers are encouraged to make their own small-scale resource materials, and to share ideas at local teachers' centres. The school has one computer, so far without internet access.

This teacher has been to Britain once, on a three-week summer school. She corresponds regularly with an English school teacher.

- 1 Now examine your own teaching environment in a similar way. First list the characteristics of your learners and of the teaching situation.
- 2 Then decide which are the more significant of these, and try to plot the patterns of cause and effect that they set in motion. For example, how are your classroom materials selected? To whom are you responsible? What possibilities do you have for innovation, or for professional development?
- 3 Finally, you might like to consider what kinds of changes in your teaching situation would have the strongest effect on your role as a teacher – a change in your status? Smaller groups? More time? The possibilities are many.
- 4 Discuss your analysis with colleagues, both with those working in the same environment and, if possible, with others from different backgrounds. Keep a note of your analysis: it will be helpful to refer to it again in subsequent chapters.

### *The syllabus*

We can now assume that the goals of an English language programme have been set out and that the contextual factors affecting its implementation have been established and understood. The next step in the task of planning is to select a type of syllabus relevant to the learners for whom it is intended, appropriate to the situation, and which fulfils the aims as closely as possible.

The 'syllabus' can be seen for our purposes as the overall organizing principle for what is to be taught and learned. In other words, it is a general statement as to the pedagogical arrangement of learning content. Richards and Rodgers (2001) have proposed a useful framework for the comparison of language teaching methods that illustrates the place of the syllabus in programme planning. Their model has three distinct levels, which they term *approach*, *design* and *procedure*, and is intended to show the relationship between the theory and practice of language teaching as an 'interdependent system'. Briefly, 'approach' is the most general level, and refers to the views and beliefs – or theories – of language and language learning on which planning is based. The most obvious example here is a view of language described as a set of grammatical structures. The next level, 'design', is where the principles of the first level are converted into the more practical aspects of syllabuses and instructional materials. It is here that decisions are taken about the arrangement of content to be taught and learnt, the choice of topics, language items to be included in the programme, and so on. Finally, 'procedure' refers to techniques and the management of the classroom itself.

The English Language Teaching profession nowadays has available a range of different types of syllabus from which a choice will be made for a specific situation. So however diverse our teaching contexts, our courses will be based on one, or a combination of, these principles of organization. Although syllabuses typically are written and published documents, their circulation is often restricted to the particular situation for which they have been drawn up. Therefore, one of the simplest ways of surveying the types of syllabus available is to examine the contents pages of published English language teaching textbooks, because they reveal the underlying principles and assumptions on which the writers have based their material. At one and the same time, they tell us something both about the approach and the design adopted, thus bringing together principle and practice in a directly observable way.

This is not a book about syllabus design as such, and it will not be necessary or appropriate to analyse each syllabus type in depth here. References to more detailed discussion are given at the end of the chapter, and the next chapters will examine the major areas of current debate. Let us simply try to identify the key principles of syllabus organization by examining the types of contents page most often found in the materials we use, because these distinctions will be the foundation for our discussion of ‘design and procedure’ in the remainder of the book.

Look at the coursebook(s) that you use most frequently. With which of our samples in figure 1.2 does the table of contents in your own material compare most closely?

The first of these obviously is organized according to a list of grammatical structures, and is one that will readily be recognized by most English language teachers. The second is based on the communicative and interpersonal uses to which language is put and, in contrast to the formal structural system of the first type, highlights what people do through language. It is normally referred to as a ‘functional’ syllabus. This design principle is often found together with the other list of items in the same box: they are technically called ‘notions’, a term used to describe the rather general and abstract categories a language is able to express, such as concepts of time and place. For convenience – and in line with common practice – they will be placed together here, and the syllabus as a whole designated ‘functional-notional’. The most important distinctions between this on the one hand and the so-called structural syllabus on the other will be taken up in the next chapter. The third sample presents a set of everyday situations or ‘settings’. The fourth focuses on language skills, and is concerned with what learners do as speakers, listeners, readers, writers. The fifth uses topics or themes as its starting point. The sixth invokes the concept of task, discussed in chapter 3.

We can now identify six broad types of syllabus:

- 1 grammatical or structural
- 2 functional-notional
- 3 situational

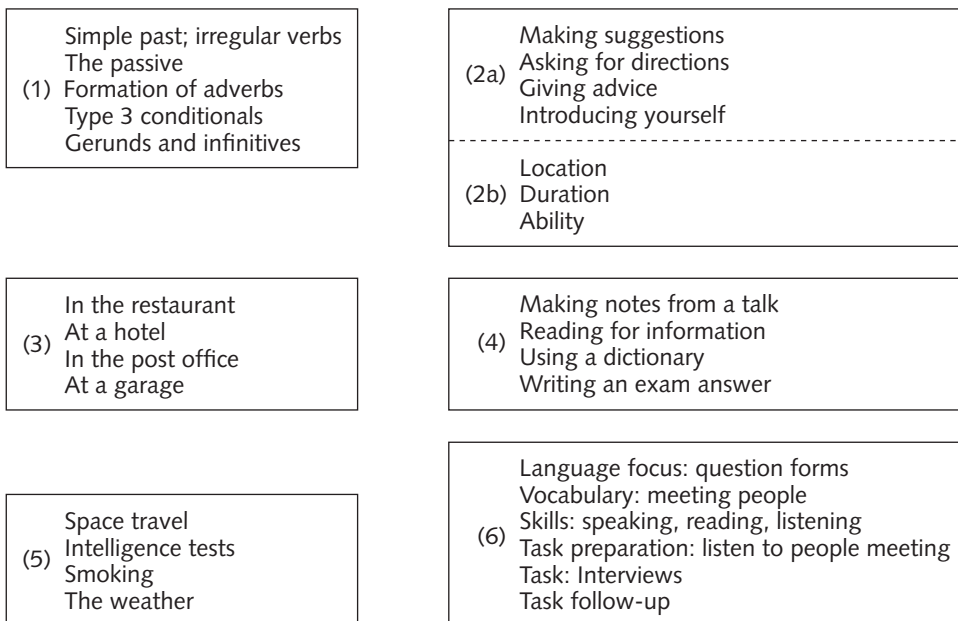


Figure 1.2 Principles of syllabus organization. (Adapted from *Cutting Edge* (Cunningham and Moor, 1998).)

- 4 skills based
- 5 topic-based
- 6 task-based

We comment on ‘process’ and ‘procedural’ syllabuses in chapter 3. (See also Ur’s list (1996: 178–9), which gives a useful overview.)

It is, of course, unusual to find just one of these as the only organizing principle, in isolation from others, and before leaving this discussion of syllabus types two final explanatory points must briefly be made.

First, most syllabuses are based on a combination of two or more of the types we have illustrated. Some, like this one, for example, may have a ‘primary’ and a ‘secondary’ organizing principle:

At the bank: question forms  
 At a garage: imperatives  
 At a hotel: present perfect

Indeed, many situational and topic-based syllabuses are part of a broader pattern of this kind, where a grammatical point to be taught is linked to an interesting theme or practised in a ‘real-world’ setting rather than learnt mechanically and outside any context. Other syllabuses are multilayered, using several different principles (ideally) interwoven in a systematic way:

Talking about holidays  
 Requesting information  
 Question forms  
 At the travel agent  
 Listening and role play  
 Intonation practice

This deliberately is a somewhat extreme example, but it does show how topics, functions, structures, skills, situations (and pronunciation practice) can be brought together.

The second point to bear in mind here is the need to distinguish between the syllabus itself, and what we might call a 'syllabus inventory'. The inventory is simply a list of the contents to be covered in the language programme, whether that is a list of functional or grammatical items, or of skills, or of topics and situations. The 'syllabus' is the way in which that content is organized and broken down into a set of teachable and learnable units, and will include consideration of pacing, sequencing and grading of items, methods of presentation and practice, and so on. Harmer (2001b: 296) also refers to the criteria of learnability, frequency, coverage and usefulness.

Examine the list below, which shows a number of different types of learners and teaching situations. Work with a colleague if possible, and select two or three of them to look at in a little more detail.

<i>Where?</i>	<i>Who?</i>	<i>Why?</i>
China: university of technology	Undergraduates	Reading purposes: English is a library language
Turkey: secondary school	School pupils	Part of general school curriculum
Britain: university	Postgraduates in various subjects	To follow postgraduate studies after one year English
An English town: secondary school withdrawal class	Refugees, newly arrived	Language survival
France: evening class	Mixed group: retired people, housewives	Tourism and general purposes
London: private language school	Young adults from the Middle East (male)	To do engineering in further education
Japan: university	Undergraduates	To be tourist guides for foreign visitors
Malaysia: technical institute	Post-'O'-level student	To enter higher education in Australia

- 1 Try to decide what you think might be the most important factors to do with the *learners* and the *setting* for the situations you have chosen. For example, you may think that learners' proficiency levels, or attitudes to English, are significant, and that class size and resources are the key elements affecting the teaching situation.
- 2 Consider the kind of syllabus that might be selected as the most appropriate in each case, bearing in mind the stated learning purpose. It does not matter if you are not personally familiar with these kinds of teaching context. They are quite representative, and the task here is to practise applying and integrating some of the principles that we have been discussing in this chapter.

### 1.3 Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the background against which teaching materials and classroom methods evolve. Our professional activities as language teachers are not carried out in a vacuum and, in Richards' (1985: 11) words, 'Planning a successful language program involves consideration of factors that go beyond mere content and presentation of teaching materials.' Although we work in specific situations with specific groups of learners, according to a specified set of aims, our work can be described along a number of shared and generalizable dimensions. These dimensions are the characteristics of learners, the range of factors in the teaching situation itself, and the syllabus types available to us as a profession. The differences lie in the relative importance of these factors, and the choices that are made.

### 1.4 Further reading

- 1 Chapters 1 and 2 of Richards, J. C. (1985): *The Context of Language Teaching*. Chapter 1 is entitled 'The context of language teaching'. Chapter 2, which was written with Rodgers, is entitled 'Method: approach, design and procedure', and is a summary of the arguments set out in Richards and Rodgers (2001).
- 2 Harmer (2001b, ch 21) has a useful overview of the main types of syllabus.