



## Combining Content and Language in Course Design

by [Sherise Lee](#)

My colleagues and I laughed the other day when someone asked when course design is truly “done.” We all jokingly agreed “never,” and that is in part true—as teachers, we are restless (sometimes obsessively so) in making our courses the best they can be. The aim of this article is not to determine when course design is finally complete, but rather to focus on evaluating coherence in the design of a content-based course in an effort to maximize student learning outcomes.

I teach at an art university that combines content from students’ majors (ranging anywhere from fashion to fine art to architecture) into our English as a second language classes. This integration of “language teaching aims with content instruction” (Snow, 2014) is known broadly as content-based instruction. Our commitment to content-based instruction is evident in the naming of our English as a second language classes as “English for Art Purposes” (EAP). Students take their EAP classes concurrent with courses that count toward their degree.

To make the language learning authentic to our students’ majors, we rely significantly on creating our own curriculum over adopting published textbooks. The particular class that I teach is a high intermediate four-skill course in speaking, listening, writing, and reading. When I first began teaching the course, there was an established curriculum that was broadly related to art and design, but I was tasked with redesigning the course specific to architecture, interior architecture, and landscape architecture majors while still staying true to the learning outcomes of the course. The first couple of semesters were admittedly rough trying to adapt on the fly, but I was relieved to come across Stoller and Grabe’s (1997, 2017) Six Ts approach to course design with *themes*, *topics*, *threads*, *transitions*, *texts*, and *tasks* to help evaluate what I was doing and to meaningfully connect the dots between content and language in the course.

Stoller and Grabe (1997, 2017) designed the Six Ts to be user friendly and widely applicable to different contexts. I will briefly summarize each of the Six Ts and describe their application to the course I designed. See the Appendix as a visual example of how the Six T’s fit together in the course.

## 1. Themes

Themes are the overarching framework for the content that the course will organize itself around. They can be abstract or concrete, and the focus and number of themes will vary within each course. In evaluating the existing course, I realized that if I were going to bring in content specific to the students' majors, I needed to have greater coherence between themes in order to deepen connections with the content and language. Following are existing themes that were attached to the course and the new themes that were adjusted to fit the now content-specific course:

Existing Themes	Revised Themes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Beliefs about art</li><li>● Opinions about art and art education</li><li>● Reflecting on the learning process</li><li>● Museums: Places for inspiration</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Learning to learn</li><li>● Design beliefs</li><li>● Design process</li></ul>

## 2. Topics

Topics further break down themes by specifying aspects of the theme to be explored in the course. A given theme can take different directions, and the topics of the course can really address that relevant content that the students need. In my case, as I tweaked the themes of the course on a broader scale, it was defining the topics that allowed the course to get more major specific.

Themes and Topics
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Learning to learn<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ Characteristics of strong language learners</li><li>○ Making a language learning plan</li></ul></li><li>● Design beliefs<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ Attitudes and motivations of architects and designers</li><li>○ Identifying yourself as an architect and designer</li><li>○ Defining and stating beliefs</li></ul></li><li>● Design process<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ Getting to know architects and designers</li><li>○ Architectural concepts</li><li>○ Precedents in architecture and design</li><li>○ Design observation + analysis</li></ul></li></ul>

## 3. Texts

Texts are the materials that provide the content to support the themes and topics of the course. In a course without an assigned textbook, this is where much time designing the course can be

spent, as some of these materials must be compiled (often adapted) and/or generated by the instructor (though certainly, a published textbook could serve as a text in the course). Following are some examples of texts in the course (not included are student-generated texts that are the products of the tasks in the course, e.g., brainstorming, pairwork).

Texts	Examples
Instructor-compiled texts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• YouTube videos</li> <li>• <i>Architecture Daily</i> articles</li> <li>• Excerpts from “Thinking Architecture,” Dwell.com, Google Arts and Culture, and additional architect websites</li> </ul>
Instructor-generated texts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Course reader</li> <li>• Grammar handouts</li> <li>• Quizlet vocabulary sets</li> <li>• Google Slides</li> </ul>

## 4. Tasks

Tasks include the instruction sequenced according to the themes and topics of the course. They are the tangible, concrete activities that are supported by the texts of the course and can encompass language, content, and strategy. In essence, they are the means with which to fulfill student learning outcomes and course objectives.

As such, tasks can be grouped in a variety of ways according to the needs of the course. For example, given that I teach an integrated skills course (reading, writing, listening, speaking), each of the themes and topics is supported by tasks in each of these skill areas. Tasks can be low-stakes (e.g., prewriting activities) or high-stakes cumulative assessments (e.g., midterm/final exams, project work) that come at the end of a topic or theme.

The number of tasks and type of task is determined by the scope of the course. The sequence of the tasks follows the progression and scaffolding of the theme and topic, typically moving students from schema building to production and finally to larger cumulative tasks. Here is a sample of tasks related to the theme of design beliefs and under the topic of attitudes and motivations of architects and designers:

Theme and Topic	Tasks
<i>Theme:</i> Design Belief <i>Topics:</i> Attitudes and Motivations of Architects and Designers	Listening to video, note-taking exercise, peer interviews, class discussion, mapping personal timeline, prewriting activities with graphic organizers, essay writing, vocabulary and grammar quizzes

## 5. Transitions

Transitions (along with threads, described in the following section) are like the glue that bind the themes and topics together. Transitions are distinct from threads in that they enable the teacher to help students provide connections between topics, texts, and tasks. For example, in my course, students move from hearing architects and designers describe their professions into exploring what experiences and inspirations have influenced them. To transition, I might say something like, “Now that you understand what it takes to be an architect and designer, let’s talk about what attitudes and motivations shape an architect and designer.”

Theme	Topics	Transition
Theme: Design Beliefs	Topics <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Identifying yourself as an architect and designer</li><li>● Attitudes and motivations of architects and designers</li><li>● Defining and stating beliefs</li></ul>	Transition <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● “Now that you understand what it takes to be an architect and designer, let’s talk about what attitudes and motivations shape an architect and designer.”</li><li>● “We learned that beliefs support how an architect designs. Now, let’s explore what <i>you</i> believe about architecture and design.”</li></ul>

## 6. Threads

Threads happen on the larger scale between themes in the course and tend to be more abstract. If, for example, a course has the thread of visual communication, possible themes that can be grouped under this thread are line, color, and form. Threads bring greater coherence to the overall course. If teaching a course with fixed content or a textbook, developing threads can help make logical sense of how diverse themes come together. Threads do not always need to be planned before the course begins, but can be discovered along the way.

Personally, I think threads, if not already explicit, typically emerge having taught a course more than once. In my course, it was after doing a needs analysis with the architecture department that I determined students needed to develop their critical thinking skills as designers. Thus, as I reworked the course and integrated Bloom’s Taxonomy (Bloom, 1956) as a thread to help link the themes together and help students become aware of moving from gathering information to applying it, and then to finally analyzing it. This thread using Bloom’s Taxonomy became even more clear after the course took on an additional metacognitive objective to help students “learn how to learn” and be aware of how they are thinking in order to become more independent language learners.

Themes	Threads
Learning to learn, design beliefs, design process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Applying information (e.g., after identifying strong characteristics of language learners, applying these traits to being an architect and designer)</li> <li>● Analyzing information (e.g., after acknowledging design beliefs analyzing their role in the design process)</li> </ul>

## Conclusion

The Six Ts can be implemented at any point of course design—upon initial creation or as I did in evaluating a course to bring in content and/or to add coherence. Even if there is a textbook mandated by the institution, the Six Ts framework can help fill in the gaps that the scope and sequence may be lacking.

Truthfully, having the freedom to both select and create themes, topics, threads, transitions, texts, and tasks in a course is quite time consuming, and as my colleagues and I noted, there is something that always needs to be improved upon. However, I find that evaluating a course using the Six Ts framework is satisfying as a teacher, and, more important, I find that the students are the ones who benefit most from the resulting cohesiveness in the course, with the opportunity to make rich connections between the language presented and their chosen majors. Additionally, with a multiskills course, the various language skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking have a more seamless integration when the content is thoughtfully woven in.

I'll end with a short story—I was sitting with a former student in his architecture studio the semester after he took my class. As the instructor lectured, a slide flashed on the screen of one of the architects that we had discussed in our EAP class. We both shot a glance at each other knowingly and smiled: *Yes, this subject has resurfaced in your major class—and you are now equipped with the language to digest it even further!*

## References

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# EAP 4ARH

ARCHITECTURE | INTERIOR ARCHITECTURE | LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE

## Sample Theme/ DESIGN BELIEFS

### STUDENT OUTCOMES:

Demonstrate reading comprehension and critical thinking through written summary, paraphrase, and personal response to art and design-related readings (averaging B2 CEFR level), in both take-home and in-class timed writing tasks.

Engage in a structured, multi-draft writing process to produce a basic analytical essay with a clear thesis development and support.

## Topics/Threads/ Transitions/Texts/Tasks

TOPIC: ATTITUDES AND MOTIVATIONS OF ARCHITECTS AND DESIGNERS

### TASK 1

Students watch video of interviews with designers and take notes (TEXT 1).

### TASK 2

Students check their notes on designer beliefs with the video transcript.

### TRANSITION

### TASK 3

Students brainstorm individually where beliefs come from (TEXT 2).

### TASK 4

Students compare their brainstorm on where beliefs come from with a partner.

### TASK 5

Students discuss together as a class their answers on where beliefs come from.

### TRANSITION

### TASK 6

Students create timeline of various personal influences in design up to this point in their lives (TEXT 3).

### TASK 7

Students present personal timelines and interview each other in pairs.

### TRANSITION

### TASK 8

Students begin pre-writing using a graphic organizer to draw from personal timelines as content for essay (TEXT 4).

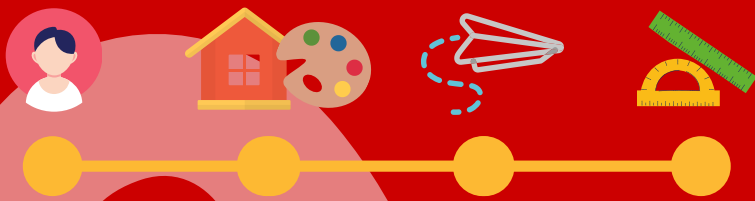
### TASK 9

Students create two drafts of their essay (TEXT 5).

### TASK 10

Students proofread and submit final draft of essay.

TOPIC: IDENTIFYING AS ARCHITECTS AND DESIGNERS



TOPIC: DEFINING AND STATING BELIEFS

Threads:

Applying and Analyzing Information