

# LECTURE 1

## AN INTRODUCTION TO DIDACTICS: THE LEARNER AND THE TEACHER

### Outline

1. What is didactics?
2. Why Didactics Matters for Future English Teachers
3. Etymology and Core Meaning of Didactics
4. General and Subject Didactics
5. The Didactic Triangle: Teacher – Student – Content
6. Hopmann's Three Cornerstones of Didactics
7. Didactics Between Curriculum and Classroom Practice
8. The Art of Teaching: Tact and Professional Judgment
9. Detailed Definition of Didactics (Synthesized)

## Introduction

Teaching is far more than the delivery of information; it is a reflective and purposeful act that connects **the teacher, the learner, and knowledge** in a dynamic relationship. This is the essence of **didactics** — the systematic study of how teaching and learning occur, why certain methods are chosen, and how educational intentions are transformed into meaningful classroom experiences.

The word *didactics*, from the Greek *didaskein* (“to teach”), reminds us that teaching is both a **science** and an **art**. It involves not only the transmission of linguistic and cultural knowledge but also the understanding of **how learners construct meaning**, and **how teachers adapt content** to learners’ needs, abilities, and contexts. As Comenius first suggested and modern scholars reaffirm, effective teaching proceeds “from the known to the unknown” — respecting the learner’s development while guiding them toward discovery and autonomy.

In the English classroom, this relationship becomes even more complex. The **teacher** serves as a facilitator and model of communication; the **learner** brings prior linguistic knowledge, motivation, and identity; and the **content** — language itself — is both the medium and the goal of learning. Didactics helps us examine this triad critically:

- How do teachers plan and structure learning systematically?
- How do learners engage, participate, and construct knowledge?
- And how do teaching methods evolve to meet diverse communicative needs?

This lecture introduces didactics as a reflective discipline that links theory to practice. We will explore **the nature of didactics, the learner’s central role in learning processes, and the teacher’s evolving professional responsibilities**. Through this exploration, we will see how teaching becomes an intentional, ethical, and adaptive act — not just something teachers *do*, but something they *think through* and *grow into*.

By the end of this lecture, you will be able to:

1. Define *didactics* and explain its relevance to English language teaching.
2. Identify and describe the **key elements** of the didactic process: the learner, the teacher, and the content.
3. Reflect on the **interactive relationship** between teaching and learning.
4. Recognize how didactic principles guide **classroom planning, decision-making, and professional reflection**.

### 1. What is didactics?

Dictionary definition: The activities of educating or instructing; activities that impart knowledge or skill.

Didactics refers to the science or art of teaching, encompassing the theory and practical application of teaching and learning processes. It involves structured instruction, focused on aims, subject matter, and methods, to effectively impart knowledge and skills, and also examines the interactions between teachers, learners, and the content itself.

Didactics considers the selection and structure of educational programmes, the content that should be presented (and what is omitted) and the ways in which this is done, in order to encourage learning.

## 2. Why Didactics Matters for Future English Teachers

As future teachers of English, it is essential that you understand not only *what* to teach and *how*, but also *why* you teach particular content in specific ways. This is where the concept of **Didactics** becomes central. While often translated simply as “the science of teaching” or “instructional methods,” the German concept of *Didaktik* is much broader and richer. It links curriculum, teaching practice, and educational philosophy, offering a structured way to think about how knowledge is transformed into teachable and meaningful content for learners.

Jan Amos Comenius (17th century) is often called the “father of modern education” because he insisted that teaching should be systematic, humane (intended to have a civilizing effect on people.), and patterned after natural learning processes i.e., curriculum and pedagogy should imitate how learners naturally come to know the world. For English teachers this idea matters because it presses us to design sequences, tasks, and materials that match students’ developmental readiness and sensory experience, rather than forcing abstract grammar or vocabulary before learners have concrete anchors.

## 3. Etymology and Core Meaning of Didactics

The term **Didaktik** originates from the **Ancient Greek word *didaskein***, meaning “to teach” or “to show.” Over time, it developed into what is often called **the “art of teaching.”**

In modern usage:

- **Didaktik (German)** refers not only to teaching methods, but also to the *process of making content meaningful for students*. It involves reflection on how subject matter is transformed by teachers for pedagogical purposes.
- **Didactics (English)** tends to refer more narrowly to instructional methods and the science of teaching.

This distinction is crucial: the German concept embeds a broader cultural and educational idea — *Bildung*, or holistic formation and personal development. Didactics is not just about transferring knowledge; it is about enabling learners to build structured understanding within a broader educational vision.

## 4. General and Subject Didactics

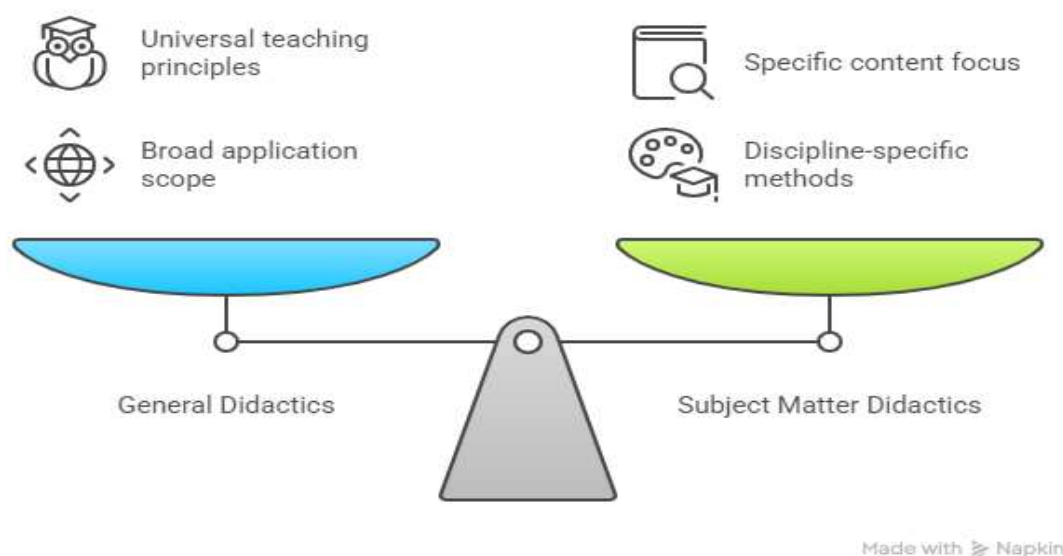
Within Didaktik, two branches are distinguished:

- **General Didactics:** Deals with universal principles, phenomena, and structures of teaching that apply across all subjects (e.g., how to structure a lesson, how to sequence learning, how to make content meaningful).

- **Subject Matter Didactics:** Focuses on how to teach the specific content of a particular discipline – for example, *English language didactics*, which addresses how to teach grammar, vocabulary, skills, and cultural content in English.

Both are essential for teachers: general didactics provides the overall framework; subject didactics adapts it to the specifics of language teaching.

## Balancing Universal and Specific Teaching Approaches

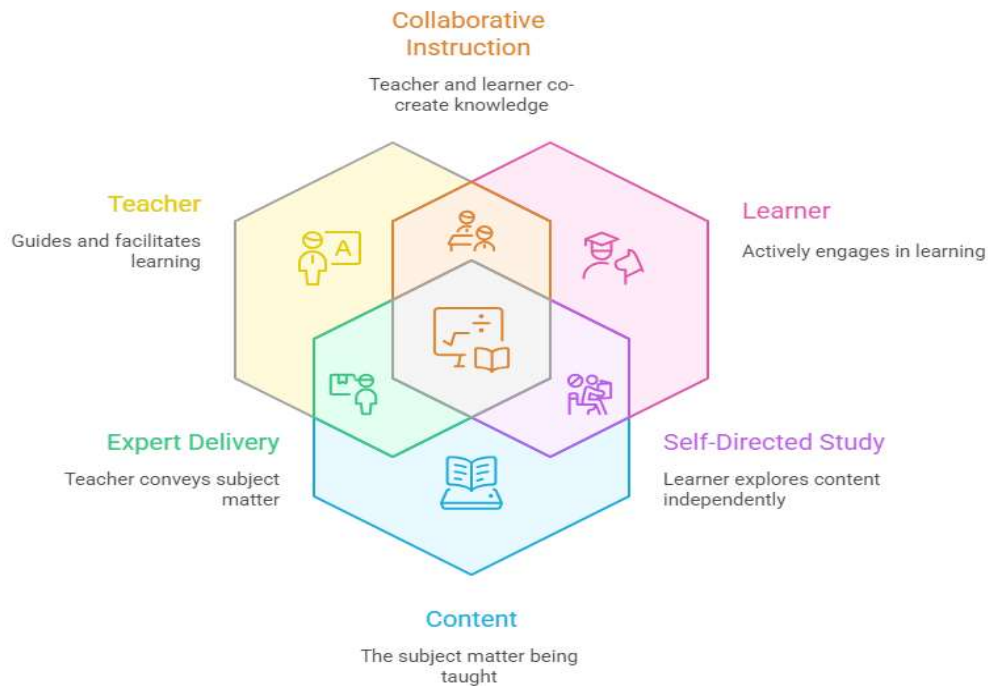


### 5. The Didactic Triangle: Teacher – Student – Content

A central model in Didaktik is the **Didactic Triangle** (Künzli, 1998), which visualizes the **three indispensable elements of teaching**:

1. **The Teacher** – the agent who plans, structures, and facilitates learning.
2. **The Student** – the learner, whose needs, prior knowledge, and engagement shape the teaching process.
3. **The Content Matter** – the knowledge or skills to be learned.

## The Power of Interconnected Teaching



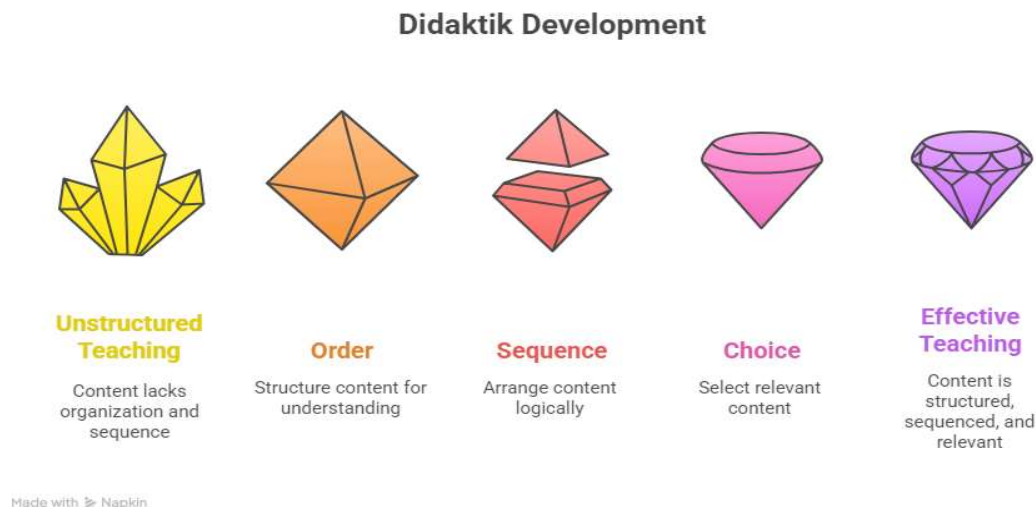
Teaching is understood as the **interaction between these three components**, and different didactic approaches emphasize different sides of the triangle. For example:

- Some approaches prioritize teacher–student interaction (e.g., communicative methods).
- Others stress the structure of content itself (e.g., grammar-based curricula).
- Others focus on learner-centered exploration of content.

Effective teaching happens **within the relations** of this triangle, not by focusing on only one element.

### 6. Hopmann's Three Cornerstones of Didactics

According to Hopmann (2007), the **historical and conceptual development** of Didaktik can be summarized through **three core functions**, which remain central to teaching today:



## 1. Order

Didactics provides a **structured preparation** of content. Teachers must analyze and organize the internal structure of knowledge so that students can understand both its parts and the higher-order system it belongs to.

- Example in English teaching: structuring a grammar topic (e.g., tenses) in a way that reveals underlying patterns, not just isolated rules.

## 2. Sequence

Didactics involves arranging content in a **logical and pedagogical sequence**, drawing heavily on the work of **Comenius**. He proposed moving:

- From *near to far*,
- From *simple to complex*,
- From *known to unknown*, and
- From *concrete to abstract*.

For English teachers, this means beginning with familiar language functions and contexts, then gradually moving toward more complex or abstract language forms.

## 3. Choice

Given the immense amount of knowledge available, **teachers must select** what to teach. Not everything can or should be included. This involves:

- Adapting curriculum to students' needs,
- Making informed, ethical decisions about what is "worth teaching," and
- Balancing curricular expectations with classroom realities.

This “choice” dimension highlights the **political and professional space** teachers occupy: they interpret curriculum frameworks (Lehrpläne), but have autonomy to choose, adapt, and prioritize content.

## 7. Didactics Between Curriculum and Classroom Practice

Didaktik operates between **two poles**:

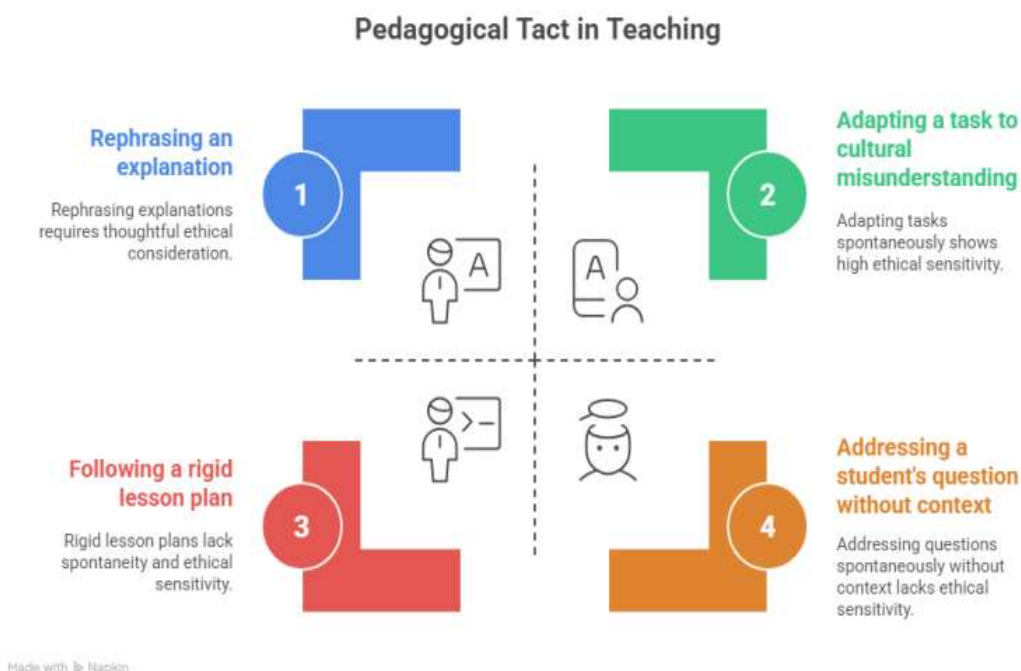
- **The Curriculum (Lehrplan)**: provides the legal and institutional framework for content, ensuring legitimacy and public accountability.
- **The Teacher’s Professional Practice**: involves interpreting, transforming, and enacting that content for specific learners in specific contexts.

Teachers, therefore, act as **curriculum interpreters**, not mere transmitters. Upon completing their professional education, they receive what Hopmann (1991) calls a “**license**” to **transform content** responsibly. Their decisions must be both **professionally reasoned** and **ethically grounded**.

## 8. The Art of Teaching: Tact and Professional Judgment

Herbart and Later Van Manen (1986, 2016) emphasized the teacher’s **pedagogical tact** — the ability to respond **spontaneously, ethically, and sensitively** to classroom situations. Didactics is not mechanical; it is a professional art that blends:

- Content knowledge,
- Pedagogical expertise,
- Situational awareness,
- Moral and educational responsibility.



For English teachers, this could mean deciding on the spot how to rephrase an explanation, how to adapt a task to an unexpected misunderstanding, or how to address a cultural reference students do not know.

## 9. Detailed Definition of Didactics (Synthesized)

Didactics is the scientific and practical field concerned with the structured transformation of content into teachable and meaningful learning experiences, situated between curricular frameworks and classroom realities. It focuses on the dynamic relationships between teacher, learner, and content, and involves the processes of ordering, sequencing, and selecting knowledge according to pedagogical, developmental, and ethical considerations.

