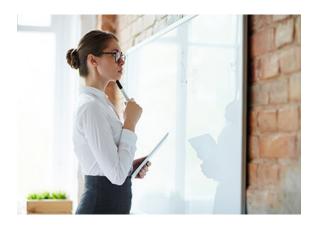## Planning a Lesson

Planning a lesson before teaching is a fundamental part of giving an effective ESL lesson. Depending on the experience of the teacher and the nature of the lesson, the planning process can be quite varied. Less experienced teachers should consider detailed lesson plans with one or two variations of tasks and exercises in case things don't go to plan, or at the very least, they should have an organized list with a logical and effective order of activities. The more experienced teachers become, the simpler their lesson plans can be. But planning is always essential no matter the experience of the teacher.

Lesson planning is important for developing the structure of a lesson and organizing its content. Planning improves your ability to select teaching activities and materials that will best match the needs of your students. A lesson plan gives the teacher a framework for the lesson and guides classroom management, student participation, and interaction patterns. A lesson plan also helps the teacher with the timing of activities to ensure the students receive a well-balanced and time-managed lesson. Furthermore, planning encourages the teacher to think about the process of teaching, which gives them a feeling of security knowing they are prepared to instruct the class.

Planning should not limit or restrict the teacher. On the contrary, teachers still need to employ creativity and improvisation skills. Following a lesson plan to a tee is not recommended. Teachers need to be able to think ahead for unexpected scenarios because it is not realistic to expect that a meticulously planned lesson will proceed accordingly.

Many factors need to be accounted for when planning a lesson. For example, consider students' learning preferences, their level of proficiency, the class size, seating arrangements, etc.
To create effective yet realistic plans, teachers should try to anticipate and prepare for what can happen during a lesson to the best of their ability.

Here is a list of factors to consider when planning a lesson:

Lesson Aims

A good place to start is to ask, "What language skill am I trying to develop?" A lesson plan needs to start with aims so that classes have a clear purpose and direction. Using 'will be able to' statements is a useful way of articulating lesson aims. For example, 'By the end of this lesson, students will be able to follow a lecture and note down key points by listening for signposting language.'

By doing this you are prioritising aims that focus on achievement and help ensure lessons are more student-centred. In other words, you are aiming to create a lesson that ends with students possessing more knowledge and skills than when they started. At the end of any lesson, students should get better at something.

Language Focus

The language focus should be directly linked to the aim of the lesson. If the aim is what you want your students to be able to do by the end of the lesson, the language focus specifies the elements of the language they need to work with to achieve the aim that was set. Look at the example below:

Aim: By the end of the lesson, students will be able to employ a variety of sentence structures in their writing.

Language focus: complex sentence structure: subordinating conjunctions, dependent and independent clauses.

For students to become better writers, the teacher has set the aim of having students use varied sentence structure as this is an important component of good writing. Therefore, the lesson could review complex sentence structure as a way of helping students achieve that aim. In short, think of the 'aim' as the communicative skill you want the students to achieve and the language focus as the elements of the language that will allow them to achieve that skill.

Teaching Activities

After defining the aim and the language focus, consider the types of activities that will be used in the lesson. Activities should have a clear link to the aims and language focus.

A good lesson plan needs to include careful consideration of teaching activities. For example, does the lesson require or is it suited to speaking activities, role-plays, brainstorming, listening exercises, etc. Teachers should also consider if activities should focus on accuracy or freer practice or both. For accuracy, the teacher leads and controls the practice, usually through structural and accuracy-focused exercises such as drills, grammar exercises, and mirroring. These normally take place in the early stages of a lesson. Freer practice activities give students opportunities to use what they have learned without direct control by the teacher and could include discussions, mini-presentations, or timed writing on a topic of their choice. Freer practice normally takes place at the latter stages and should be as authentic as possible. In other words, if the aim is to improve writing skills and the language focus is complex sentences, the students should be given a writing practice that resembles a writing task they are likely to encounter outside of the classroom. For a business English student, this could be an email, or for an EAP student a timed essay.

Suitability

Students should be interested and motivated by the activities provided. Therefore, consider if your students will enjoy the lesson. And just as important, consider if you would enjoy teaching the lesson. It is key that you know your students and what they are interested in.

No two students and no two classes are the same, so what you have planned for one group may not be suitable for another. Would the topic of your lesson be the same for a group of teenagers and a group of adults? Catering to the interests of your students helps foster more engagement and interest which are two important requirements for successful language acquisition to occur.

Timing

A common problem encountered by teachers is not completing everything that they set out in their plan. This is often because they have underestimated the time certain activities require, or they have not allowed for flexibility in their timings. Therefore, if your first guess is that an activity will take 15 minutes, plan for 20 minutes instead. Also, consider incorporating flexible time into your plan. For example, when your plan is completed and you have added up all your timings, allow for extra time. So, for a 60-minute lesson, aim for your timings to total 50 minutes, so that you can allow for the unexpected. In this situation, it is wise to also plan a backup activity just in case you need it.

Backward planning, which simply means starting from the final activity, is also helpful when trying to account for timings in your lesson plans. This is particularly so for lessons that are planned to end with a communicative task such as a role play. In this case, all the other activities in the plan should be working towards this end and should be subordinate to it. Try to look for any lead-up activity that might be considered superfluous and scrap it if it means there is not enough time to complete the role play.

Sequencing

A simple way of sequencing a lesson is to view it as a collection of three basic stages that can be categorised as input, learning, and use.

Input is the way language is presented to students which can be through authentic materials such as magazine articles, movies, or instructional materials specially designed for language learners. Another way of presenting input is through clarification where students examine a feature of language and seek and receive explanations from the teacher.

Learning deals with the process of understanding, memorizing, and noticing new language features. For instance, in this stage of the lesson, a teacher may decide to plan pre-communicative accuracy-based activities that focus on the presentation of structures, functions, and vocabulary. In the later stages, students are commonly prepared for spoken or written outputs. Output at this stage should usually be authentic (free and more natural) practice such as discussions and role-plays. After free practice, it is usually a good idea for the teacher to check using elicitation that a new structure, skill or strategy has been learned. A final step at this stage could include further practice where students are required to use the new structure, skill, or strategy in a new situation.

During these stages, consider if the tasks make sense regarding the level of difficulty and complexity in the order they appear. It is more productive to work on simpler tasks before complex ones as a way of building up the lesson and gradually increasing the difficulty of the learning process, continuously providing students opportunities to practice and produce. It is also recommended that activities that involve receptive skills come before those that require productive skills.

Materials

The choice of materials used in class should be thought of as a means of achieving the stated aims of the lesson. When considering the suitability of materials to the students' background and level, aim to provide comprehensible input that is slightly beyond their current level. Krashen's simple equation of 'I + 1' is a useful tool for doing this. 'I' represents 'input' that is at the students' current level and '+1' 'input' which is at the next stage of language acquisition. This helps ensure that materials are not too easy nor too difficult but present a more optimal level of challenge.

Using authentic or real-life content such as magazines, books, or podcasts can be used with higher-level classes as an effective way of finding material that is relevant to their interests. Conversely, lower-level students might benefit more from traditional instructional materials as they tend to focus on specific language points and provide clear examples. Being simplified and using graded language they can actually boost students' motivation and sense of accomplishment. This contrasts with materials that, despite their authenticity, students may find too challenging.

Learner Interaction

During some activities, students are expected to work alone such as in reading or listening tasks. Pair work provides optimal speaking time if you consider students individually and not being in the spotlight can be beneficial for introverts. Group work fosters social learning and allows students to perform more complex tasks, e.g. a role-play with four or five characters in the same dialogue. Also, group work can provide more points of view when having discussions and working with expressions for agreeing and disagreeing, for instance. Regardless of the interaction pattern, they are all necessary for language acquisition to occur in the classroom. Therefore, lesson plans should always accommodate for a healthy amount and mix of student interactions.

To enhance student interaction, consider some of the following suggestions:

- Provide opportunities for students to work in pairs and small groups and use multiple modes of interaction such as discussions, individual and group presentations, or brainstorming.
- Encourage students to work together in group projects.
- Devote a significant proportion of class time (15-30%) to student interactions.
- Set time limits to give interactions a sense of urgency.
- Switch up groupings of students so that they are not always talking to the same partner.
- Repeat tasks so that they become familiar and less time is wasted setting up an activity
- Pre-teach task language that is critical to task achievement.
- Give adequate preparation time to allow learners time to think about what they want to say and how to say it.
- Have different levels of a task prepared in classes with mixed levels so that, for example, lower-level students are enabled to participate.
- Provide activities that give students a reason to interact such as an information gap activity or project work.

Alternatives to formal planning

There are some reasons for not using a formal plan. Possibly it is not a priority as the lesson focuses on feedback, or maybe the session has been given over to project work, or perhaps the teacher simply doesn't have the time.

An alternative to a formal plan could be to use a simple running order, which simply involves jotting down activities in a logical order with brief observations and comments as in the example on the next page.

1. Lead-in to the topic: Students discuss questions related to university study.

2. Vocab preview: vocab definition matching activity for difficult words in the reading.

3. Students read the article and answer short answer questions: students share and discuss answers in pairs and report back to the class.

This approach is simple and can be done virtually anywhere, on a piece of paper or a notes app on a mobile phone.

For more experienced teachers, planning may only require listing critical moments. They can be organized like a bulleted list of aims and what is significant and relevant for each of them to be achieved. They can also be articulated as an important instruction, example, or response that needs to be prepared in advance. For example, a critical moment could be a phrasal verb that students might find confusing: 'I ran into my friend last night' versus 'The driver lost control and ran into a tree.'

As conceptualising is a big part of planning a lesson, it is a good idea to just sit down and try to visualize the lesson taking place. Ask yourself how you could start the lesson and what the possible outcomes of activities could be. This can help you better handle issues that emerge on the spot and that wouldn't fit in a lesson plan or adapt to problems like an activity finishing much earlier than anticipated.

After the Lesson

After the lesson has taken place, reflect on how the lesson went. In many cases, a lesson plan is just used before and during the lesson, but a good practice is to revisit plans regularly to keep track of activities that worked well. Lesson plans should also be kept as a record of what has been covered.

Lesson plans are also a valuable resource of feedback in the form of self-reflection. Going through the plan after the lesson helps promote self-development and address recurrent issues such as reducing teacher talk time, providing better examples, clearer instructions, and optimizing time management.

Here are some questions that you can use to evaluate a lesson's success:

- Did the students enjoy the lesson?
- What problems were there during the lesson?
- Which activities were successful, and which were not?
- Did I manage to achieve the aim of the lesson? How do I know this?
- Will I teach this lesson again in the same way?

As a teacher, you may find a lesson that worked perfectly well with one class has different results in another. You should always be prepared to go off plan if needed and adapt to the needs of the students. However, planning is an essential component of good teaching as it helps ensure lessons are relevant, purposeful, and most importantly, effective.