# Lesson planning:
# Towards purposeful learning
# and effective teaching

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## Abstract

My aim is to show that lesson planning is a key feature of effective teaching in that it is evidence of much deeper, reflective activity. This reflection focuses upon issues fundamental to all teaching which includes the aims, the delivery, the learning processes involved and evaluation mechanisms. I take many, but not all, of the important questions and interrogate them, with exemplification and justification.

I conclude that lesson planning is a creative process which provides a framework for purposeful learning.

## Introduction

Lesson planning ought not to be the special responsibility of trainee teachers but, rather, a hallmark of the professionalism of all teachers. Lesson planning is at the very essence of reflexivity concerning the fundamental questions of what the teacher intends that the pupils should learn and how this is to be achieved. Experienced teachers sometimes claim that they do not plan lessons; what they probably mean is that they do not write their plans down but rather draw on their mental computerised bank of lesson units, a store of wisdom held in the memory on account of familiarity and regular usage.

There are pragmatic considerations too. School learning time is precious and all too short, the time allocated for modern foreign language learning not always generous.

It is important, therefore, to make the most productive use of that time with reference, in particular, to questions of the identification of appropriate linguistic objectives and linguistic sequencing. This will involve issues of short, medium and long-term planning as the teacher locates the present learning needs within a greater framework of linguistic progression.

## Linguistic objectives, sequencing and progression

The proliferation of competency-based models, tightly defined performance criteria and the definition of objectives, has undoubtedly been useful in developing the concept of learning progression in particular. Indeed, it is high impossible to decide whether progression in learning has taken place unless we are clear about the stages of learning and about how performance may be expected to indicate that a change in learning in general and in linguistic knowledge in particular has taken place. This is all part and parcel of the modern notions of accountability and evidence-based learning, with clear performance indicators which can be made available for scrutiny and comparison. However modern linguists have also reacted against the overkill of what Schön (1983) calls *technical rationality*, with its mechanistic overtones and generally constraining applied science approach. In professional terms, Schön urges that teachers «*develop an epistemology of practice which places technical problem solving within a broader context of reflective inquiry»* (Ibid:69) This parallels the view of language, which, whilst basically a rule-governed activity, is essentially creative and can accommodate a wide range of idiosyncratic, unpredictable and innovative language combinations.

Nonetheless, the concern is to determine what might constitute the core learning of each lesson unit, the baseline which all must attain although some learners it is hoped, will exceed that expectation. The core learning will be described principally in linguistic terms, specifying the exact items of lexis and syntax. Working within a spiralling model of language learning, the teacher will need to consider what needs to be pre-taught or revised, and to consider the ensuing items of follow-up lessons, so that these will form a learning continuum of reinforcement, combining the known with the unknown, to allow new and expanded use of language. Thus, for example, the passé composé in French using, as it does, the auxiliary verbs *avoir* and *être*, presumes that the learners will already have met these auxiliaries so that the learning focus can be on the composite nature of the tense as a whole, its past participles and any

necessary agreement. Once this tense has been practised sufficiently, at a later stage, the conditional perfect can be modelled on it, learners perhaps able to use it by analogy without any formal instruction. At a much simpler level, it will evident that adjectival agreements will be random and meaningless unless the pupils are aware of the gender distinctions of nouns. Those teachers who would delay or even pretend to dismiss such basic grammatical structures for school learners do them a great disservice and simply compound the problems.

Other decisions relating to the core learning will consider the number of examples, the appropriateness of the selected items and the accuracy of the language. There is no shame in language teachers needing to check the up-to-datedness of language, the accuracy of examples (my survey of some English textbooks for young learners has found much curious, stilted and ungrammatical English in some of the books) and the pronunciation of items; quite the reverse as teachers should feel confident and professional in their concern to provide the best language models possible. Reference to native speakers, more competent and/or more experienced practitioners and reference material is part of a language teacher's continuing professional development. It is an exercise which teachers should see as enriching and linguistically enabling, an integral part of a teacher's personal progressive learning curve, complementing the progression of the learners.

## Teaching approach

This term I intend as a broad, embracing concept which includes matters of pedagogy, methodology and the whole framework of how the content is parcelled up and delivered. As with the definition of learning objectives, there is a multitude of questions to address which will inform the choice of teaching approach. Whilst a teacher is likely to have a particular teaching persona reflecting certain personality traits as well as methodological preferences, each class or teaching group has a particular group personality as a result of its range of ability and particular cluster of personalities. This leads us to vary our approach accordingly, perhaps more formal with one group, more grammar-focused with another, informal with yet another, simplified and basic with another. In other words, we apply the construct of differentiation to our approach, our definition of learning outcomes and our expectations. This is entirely as it should be, sensitive to and recognising the diversity

of learners and their needs. It will involve organisational and management issues to ensure that the best conditions for learning are in place.

In practical terms, an early consideration will be the question of how to introduce the learning objectives to pupils. This is a crucial point in the learning process and the introduction needs careful scripting. The teacher will need to decide whether to give an overview of the whole lesson and the expectations of the learners, or alternatively, whether to launch in immediately with exposure to the language items to immerse the learners in the subject matter, requiring the pupils to use their powers of deduction. Marland, (1993:129) author and headteacher, suggests that we should *sign-post* a lesson: «Pupils ... need to know where the lesson is going, how much of the time they will have in which to choose their own activities, ... or what proportion of the period will be devoted to full-class questions-and-answer in a language lesson. For too many pupils, most lessons are a more or less exciting mystery tour, in which they never know how long they are going to be at one activity before they are set down or whipped off for another. The teacher needs to establish *signposts* in a lesson»[1].

A further key factor, especially with new learning, is the *memorability* factor, involving a presentation procedure which will have an impact on the learners and create a strong association with the new items. Amongst the mundane, routine lessons which we, as teachers, deliver as a matter of course, these special lessons represent our *star* performances, in which we invest a bit more time and energy than usual. They are markers of especially important learning stages.

A further consideration is that of deciding the extent to which either the target language or mother tongue is used. This has become a futile and tiresome debate amongst language teachers, although there are signs that the argumentative tension is lessening as teachers accept that, of course, it is desirable to use as much target language as possible but that there are occasions when a little judicious use of the mother tongue is not only necessary but perhaps also helpful to learners. An example of this concerns grammatical structures where a simple explanation in the mother tongue following intensive exposure and practice in the target language, will clarify and de-mystify learning for the pupil. This is an important point since it is reasonable to assume that some learners within any group may not have understood or will have made erroneous assumptions. Research on the use of audio-visual methodology shows that pupils interpret visuals in a variety of ways and can even parrot associated

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[1] Marland, M. 1993. *The Craft of the Classroom*. Heinemann. Oxford.

language utterances without understanding what they are saying. Let me illustrate this point with an anecdote.

The picture in a course book , widely used in Britain in the 70's and early 80's, shows a little girl with a shopping basket, an *equals* sign (=), a town in the distance and a tortoise! When I asked the pupils what they thought they were saying based on their interpretation of the visual image and what they heard, they assumed the girl was going shopping to buy a pet tortoise or had a pet tortoise and was thinking about it as she walked to town. In fact, the phrase which the pupils were repeating in association with the picture was «elle ne marche pas vite» (she is not walking quickly)! For English pupils learning French, this is a phrase which belies even intelligent guesswork, especially since this was the first introduction to a negative. This is an extreme example but a memorable one and always a good example with which to alert trainee teachers to the problems of visuals and to the possibility of erroneous learning which may ensue.

## Difficulties in learning and error-making

It is a new requirement, and an entirely welcome one, for trainee teachers in England and Wales to show an awareness of and the ability to predict probable areas of difficulty and to be able to develop strategies to both pre-empt or cope with error once made. Experienced language teachers will be aware of the errors learners regularly make and, perhaps, a sharper focus on a consideration as to why this should be so would be beneficial to both teacher and learner.

In metalinguistic terms, Richards (in Schumann and Stenson[2]) refers to Selinker's description of characteristics of what he called interlanguage and five processes which he identifies as central to second language learning. These I find particularly apposite to the consideration of the learners' errors. These five processes are: *language transfer* whereby erroneous transfer is attributed to interference, *transfer of training* where errors derive from the teaching method employed, *strategies of learning*, *strategies of communication* and the *re-organisation of linguistic materials* otherwise known as over-generalisation in the case of incorrect re-organisation. Experienced language teachers will be sensitive to such processes and will have experience of pupils

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[2] Richards, J. «Error Analysis and Second Language Strategies», in J. Schumann and N. Stenson (eds.) 1974. *New Frontiers in Second Language Learning.* Mass: Newbury House.

engaging in correct and appropriate transfer as well. All of these processes have resonance in the present widespread acceptance and understanding of communicative methodology. Learners also make mistakes due to factors such as memory, length of utterance or plain fatigue. Whatever the possible derivation, reflection upon likely difficulties in teachers' planning will make the teacher alert to the possibility and ready with both combative and constructive strategies which will aid the learners to make successful deductions and analogies. Attention to the selection of teaching materials to be used and learning activities in which learners will be engaged is a concomitant of such a focus.

## The learning focus

Whilst learning activities mirror to an extent the choice of teaching approach, there is again a wide range of choices to be made concerning the most productive and appropriate range of activities. The language teacher would probably relate the activities to the skill areas and decide, for example, whether an equal balance of skills was appropriate or whether an oral only approach would be the best, or perhaps intensive listening, quiet reading and writing or, indeed, any combination of these. Furthermore, skill-based activities could be organised slightly differently, for example, on a carousel basis with different groups engaged in different skill activities, rotating when instructed to do so by the teacher. The sequencing of activities is important to ensure that the learners have had sufficient teacher input to enable them to practise themselves.

The predilection for pair and group work is all very well but it requires a considerable amount of organisation. The composition of groups will need to be pre-planned so as to ensure the minimum of disruption, and a socio-metric mix which enables learners, either of differing abilities or in homogeneous groups, to work together. The task of the group needs very careful definition so that group members understand what they have to do. It is useful to appoint a group leader who can be relied upon to have a co-ordinating role; it is in this case essential that the group leader fully understands the task in hand, perhaps be given special instructions and cue cards. It is depressing to witness so-called group work degenerate into general gossip in the mother tongue because of a lack of structure and direction. All too frequently, question-formats have been insufficiently rehearsed, the teacher concentrating all too readily on responses at the expense of the necessary stimulus questions. Subsequently,

the group work which presumably is designed to engage pupils in interactive language activity is disabled by an inability to function in a key dimension.

Skills, teacher input, group work, all of these need a carefully apportioned amount of time, the teacher pre-planning the activities yet showing flexibility as learning progress is evaluated during the lesson, amendments and adjustments being made as necessary, decisions taken about deferment or speeding up if an activity is proceeding faster than anticipated. Such informed decisions can only be made on the basis of an overall plan so that parts of the lesson procedural jigsaw can be moved around. Trainee teachers invariably mistime activities but practice in timing and a careful recording of the timing of activities are useful learning mechanisms. Once the end of lesson bell has sounded, however this is indicated, pupils switch off and nothing can turn this tide. The ending of the lesson merits as much careful planning as the beginning, with time left to review the lesson, for homework to be discussed and for an orderly wind-down and 'cool-down' of the pupils. Yet another depressing vision is of the teacher having to shout above a sea of noise and movement when, technically, the lesson has ended but, unfortunately, the teacher has not yet completed what was intended. Kyriacou (1986:57) stresses the need «to debrief the pupils about the nature of the learning which should have been accomplished» and not ... «to assume that most learning is self-evident in its purpose and nature». Furthermore, «This ...can be extended to the explicit consideration of how a particular lesson may relate to previous and future lessons or indeed activities in other subjects, in order to create a greater sense of coherence for a course as a whole and to foster greater transfer of learning» (Ibid:58)


## Teaching materials and resources

I come now to a consideration of teaching materials which the teacher will select to resource a lesson plan and the chosen activities. I would lay great stress on the teacher's role in selecting and rejecting materials even when one is obliged to follow a textbook. This can and should be done selectively, rejecting inappropriate or dull sections for example, supplementing the course with creations of one's own or alternative sets of available materials. Following a course book slavishly is tedious for both teachers and the learners, ascribing to the course book a sense of overimportance which is not merited. The teacher should confidently dictate the pace and decide the linguistic sequencing of the programme of study and resource it appropriately.

Some materials are better than others but all materials need careful scrutiny for language content, iconographic representation, social and cultural information and inference and for the identification of deficiencies which will need to be attended to.

New teachers in particular and those who have no fixed subject teaching base also need the appropriate stationery, visual aids, and in a multi-media subject technology, equipment which is readily functioning. It is not unknown for *travelling* or *commuting* teachers to need a suitcase for the paraphernalia of present day modern foreign language teaching. I would postulate that one reason why the technological revolution has been slower to penetrate language classrooms than in other subjects is because of the unreliability of equipment and the time needed to set things up. I have long argued that languages should be reclassified within the technological sphere since good audio-visual equipment is crucial to language teaching, computer applications and software increasingly useful and enticing, soon to become indispensable. This would provide the language teacher with an entitlement to technical support, hitherto reserved for science subjects. This remains a pipedream for the moment and, for the time being, resourcefulness and a measure of technical expertise will be the responsibility of the language teacher.

**Assessment of learning**

Gone are the days when assessment or testing had a purely summative function and was restricted to pencil-and-paper type tests. Assessment is now embraced as a function of teaching and learning and is entirely integral to these processes. Assessment is, as such, an integral part of the planning cycle. Whilst summative assessment in the shape of end of unit/term/year tests remain in place, formative assessment has evolved as an important mechanism of evaluation; of course materials, of teacher performance and of learning outcome, providing a constant qualitative and quantitative supply of data and feedback to all relevant and interested parties. The data can be used to identify weaknesses as well as highlight strengths and successes, important reflective activity which can help teachers to plan for improvement. Where learners are given feedback, and it is desirable that this should be so, they can also reflect upon their learning, employing ipsative assessment strategies such as grade comparison and target-setting, monitoring their own progress and taking some responsibility for their learning.

Devising tests or using the tests available commercially is relatively straightforward although these need the same critical attention which, I argued earlier, should be given to textbook material. Formative assessment derives from the lesson activities and materials themselves, with varying degrees of formality. At the informal end of the spectrum, there are occasions when the teacher evaluates oral responses to questions, and when the teacher is automatically registering and evaluating the quality of response, its linguistic accuracy and complexity, pronunciation and intonation. Most commonly, and more formally, the teacher looks at pieces of written work because it is practically the easiest and most obvious evidence to evaluate. But, in communicative methodology which places a premium on oral and aural skills, due assessment must be made of performance in these skills, during lesson time, on the spot, whilst the performance is taking place; grades, marks, or comments noted down. New teachers in particular find this very hard to do which is understandable for, at the same time, they have to grapple with the techniques of teaching and often, class management problems too. This is why lesson and indeed unit planning should automatically include assessment, identifying those parts of the lesson which will be utilised for formative assessment purposes so that teaching, assessment and learning are seen and planned as complementary activities.

**Concluding Remarks**

Lesson planning is too often dismissed as a chore, even an irrelevance for which busy teachers have little time. What I have tried to argue is that lesson planning is but the surface evidence of a reflective process which is fundamental to effective teaching and subsequently productive learning. It constitutes a cycle which looks backwards as well as forwards when planning the present to provide a continuum of coherence and continuity.

Planning requires that attention be given to a range of important questions, from philosophical questions concerning the nature of desirable and worthwhile learning outcomes, through the practicalities of implementation to evaluative judgements about effectiveness and quality. Whilst most teachers undertake planning individually, it is an activity which can be enjoyed and exploited collaboratively, sharing ideas with colleagues, taking on board cross-curricular opportunities and links with whole-school language policies, locating the foreign language within a greater learning and linguistic whole. All of these dimensions can be knitted together in a planning matrix indicating

a rich web of inter-related teaching, learning and resource opportunities. Planning, above all, dispenses with the unsatisfactory nature of random and haphazard unplanned activity which *chunks* learning inconsecutively and incoherently.

Planning underpins purposeful learning and effective teaching and frees the teacher to concentrate on quality delivery and engagement with the learners.