

## How to plan lessons

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## 1. What this unit IS NOT about

Prior to preparing plans for the individual lessons of a language course, several decisions need to be made. Depending on the nature of the decision, different entities are entitled to make them. By the time teachers of English need to start teaching language courses both in the public education system or and in private institutions like language schools, they are usually provided with the information regarding who to teach and what, therefore it is not the aim of the present material to discuss the several levels of decision-making and the different theories and ideas that these decisions are based on.



### Extra material

If you are interested in finding out more about syllabus and curriculum design, read

- 1) Chapter 11 (Planning and organising L2 learning and teaching) in Hall (2018) and
- 2) Chapter 12 (Plans) in Keith (2001).

## 2. What this unit IS about

### 2.1 What do you need to know first?

The aim of the present unit is to provide guidance to teacher trainees regarding how to plan lessons. Before we start, think about the following question:



### Introductory question

As mentioned above, by the time teachers get to actually having to plan a course and divide the course material into lessons, they are usually in possession of several pieces of information. Imagine that you are about to start teaching a course to a group of students. **What information would you expect to have before you start planning your course?**

Write a list of your questions. Try to be as specific and accurate as possible.



## Key

Harmer (1991:261-263) categorises the answer to the above question as follows:

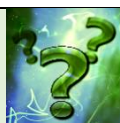
Teachers need to be informed both about the institutional framework as well as the students themselves.

- 1) The institution
  - a. time, length, frequency – that is, how long an individual lesson is, when it starts and how often it takes place
  - b. physical conditions – what the room is like, how is it equipped (chairs, desks board, electrical appliances)
  - c. syllabus
  - d. exams – what your students are expected to know by when
  - e. potential restrictions – e.g. class size, physical conditions
- 2) The students
  - a. age
  - b. sex
  - c. social background
  - d. occupation (if they are adults)
  - e. motivation and attitude
  - f. educational background
  - g. previous knowledge
  - h. interests
  - i. students' needs

## 2.2. Teachers' views on lesson planning

Once teachers have a general idea about the course that they are expected to teach, they can start thinking about planning the course and the individual lessons. More often than not teachers do not have the opportunity to select the course books that they wish to use, but they need to follow what the institution determined for them. If you ever have the freedom to select your own course material, make sure, you make your choice with your students' needs in mind. Please note that there is (and has always been) a huge variety of ELT course books, so it is a good idea to allow yourself enough time to familiarise yourself with as many potential course material as possible in order to make an informed decision. Also, it is important to bear in mind that you also need to find the book easy to use, practical and versatile. It may well be the case that if you select something, you end up teaching it several times.

Below you can read some questions in connection with lesson planning. Answer them in writing. Take time to think about the answers before you continue.



### Thinking task

1. How long before a specific lesson do you start preparing for it?
2. Do you make written lesson plans? Or do you rely on a lesson format provided by the coursebook or the Teacher's Book?
3. If you make your own written lesson plans, are these notes brief (a single page or less) or long (more than one page)?
4. What do they look like? What do they consist of?
5. Do you actually look at your notes during the lesson? If so, how often?
6. To what extent do you adhere to your lesson plans? Why do you deviate if you deviate?
7. What do you do with your lesson notes after the lesson?

(Questions adapted from Ur (1996:215))



Now listen to a teacher trainee and two teachers about the way they plan their lessons. What does each interviewee say about the following points? Take notes.

Click on the individual voice files in the attached folder. Listen and take notes, then answer the questions below. (Idea adapted from Ur (1996:215)). You can also find an abridged version of the answers below the key.



### **Follow up questions:**

Look at your notes and think about the following questions:

1. What is common in the three teachers' experience on lesson planning?
2. What are some differences?
3. Have you heard anything surprising? What was it?
4. Is there anything you disagree with?



### **Key**

#### **Similarities:**

1. Regardless of the amount of teaching experience they have, they all plan their lessons carefully.
2. All three of them make written notes, into a notebook or folder.
3. Their notes are similar in length: half a page or a page.
4. They all look at their lesson plans during the lesson – even if to varying degrees. All three of them consider this natural and nothing to be ashamed of.
5. All of them deviate from their plans if they deem it preferable in the given situation.

#### **Differences:**

1. The teacher trainee used to rely a lot on the teacher's book, now he doesn't use it much,
2. Teacher 1 still uses it and selects what she likes. The experienced teacher doesn't mention the teacher's book.
3. The teacher trainee writes two plans – one for the record and one for him to use, the former is long and detailed, the latter only includes a few key words. Teacher 1 writes the main tasks and her instructions, as well as the questions she is planning to ask. Teacher 2's lesson plan includes the main points to cover, breaking it down to smaller steps, short notes on the procedure, the approximate time it will take, any follow-up tasks as homework. She also thinks of writing the details in a different colour.
3. Teacher 2 seems to deviate from her plans much more freely and considerably more than the two less experienced teachers.
4. The teacher trainee and Teacher 2 mark in their lesson plans what they did differently, and how the group reacted to their planned activities. Teacher 1 doesn't talk about this.

## **A brief overview of the interviewee's answers**

### **Teacher trainee**

1. Pre-plans the whole unit roughly, plans each lesson the day before.
2. He has to make a written plan now that he is on teaching practice. He used to rely on the plans in the teacher's book but can do it on his own now.
3. He has to write an 'official' lesson plan and this is long. But he also writes his own notes - in a notebook and this is what he actually uses.
4. The "official lesson plan" includes time, aims, procedure, classroom organization and aids. Writes full sentences. His own notes are just key words.
5. At the beginning of the teaching practice he looked at them at every step because he was nervous. Now he is more confident.
6. He flexibly changes it if e.g. there isn't enough time left for an activity or a spontaneous idea comes to his mind.
7. He reads through his plan after the lesson and makes a note of what he did differently and how the group reacted to the activities.

### **Teacher 1**

1. She prepares every class at least a day before it takes places.
2. She always looks at the lesson plans in the teacher's book and selects the parts that she finds appropriate. She takes written notes into a notebook. Handwritten, because it helps her organise her thoughts. And into a notebook because sheets of paper didn't work for her, she kept losing them. Now, with corona, she writes the plan to the google classroom platform.
3. Usually one page. Longer if she introduces new language or plans a complex task.
4. The main tasks, numbered. Under these the page numbers, instructions etc. She finds it important to plan the questions she asks as well.
5. She looks at her notes at the very beginning of the lesson and again in the case of more complex tasks
6. She is flexible, she doesn't adhere to her lesson plan very strictly. At the beginning she didn't know her students well enough so she had to re-plan more often. But now she can plan her lessons more precisely.
7. (Doesn't talk about this.)

### **Teacher 2**

1. That varies - sometimes for the next day, sometimes a few days in advance. When she has the time. Likes preparing on the same day as the previous lesson but rarely has the chance to do so.
2. Written notes. No set format.
3. Not long - half an A4 page on average
4. She writes down the main points to cover in the planned order, breaking down into smaller steps, short notes on the procedure, the approximate time it will take, any follow-up tasks as homework. The details she adds in a different colour, so that the main points stand out.
5. She does if necessary – and isn't ashamed of it. Her learners even seem to appreciate it as a sign of careful planning and professionalism.
6. She hardly ever does. She feels One has to have a plan in mind when walking into a lesson but the teacher can't know in advance how the group will receive and react to

- things on the day. You have to plan and execute in an agile way.
7. She has a folder for each of her groups and files the lesson plans there. She notes on the plan what she did differently and how the learners reacted to it.

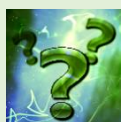


### Follow-up task

Reflect on your future practice: what do you think your lessons plans will look like? Did you hear any useful ideas from these three teachers?

## 2.3. How to make lesson plans?

During your teaching practice, your mentor will probably require you to write very detailed lesson plans – to make sure that you think through every little detail and every aspect of your upcoming teaching challenge. Study the following plan of an imaginary lesson taught by an imaginary trainee in the attached folder (Sample lesson plan 1) and answer the following questions:



### Thinking task

1. a) What details do you get to know about the lesson and the group from the header of the lesson plan?  
b) What other information might be included?
2. a) What aspects of the lesson plan do you think the different colours denote?  
b) What other details might be added?

(The lesson plan is based on the free online sample chapter of the course book New Headway 4th edition Pre-Intermediate. Click on the link below:

[https://elt.oup.com/catalogue/items/global/adult\\_courses/new\\_headway/pre-intermediate\\_fourth\\_edition/?cc=global&sellLanguage=en&mode=hub](https://elt.oup.com/catalogue/items/global/adult_courses/new_headway/pre-intermediate_fourth_edition/?cc=global&sellLanguage=en&mode=hub)

Printscreens of the pages are also provided in the attached folder.)

Now look at the key.



## Key

### 1. a) Self-explanatory

#### b) One might also include

- the venue of the lesson
- more information about the learners: motivation, achievement level, interests, group dynamics, any kind of unique properties like for example they are all studying to be nurses)
- assumed prior knowledge (e.g. in this case: basic understanding and more or less confident use of the simple past)
- what the group covered in the previous lesson and what the homework was

### 2. a) black: stages and steps in the lesson

blue: Classroom organization, how the steps are carried out

brown: teacher talk verbatim

green: potential problems and solutions

#### b) - all the teacher's instructions verbatim

- equipment
- the aims of each step



### Task

The mentor of our imaginary teacher trainee, a teacher with 26 years of teaching experience and a thorough knowledge of both the course book and his learners, might write the following lesson plan for the same lesson. Study Sample lesson plan 2 in the attached folder.

What basic differences do you see between the previous lesson plan and this one?



### Key

- just the main steps, the smaller steps either not mentioned or just briefly
- classroom organization and procedure not detailed – only occasionally
- teacher language only planned at a few places
- no pre-planning for potential problems
- one extra speaking activity (predicting Ed's problems). Note that with such an activity a lot of unpredictable vocabulary items might crop up – in order to handle these with confidence without losing face, the teacher has to have a firm knowledge of the language and a wide vocabulary. Teacher trainees often don't have this level of confidence yet.



### Summary

By studying the present material you have learnt

- what information you need in order to be able to start planning lessons
- what the main functions of lesson plans are, what information you need to include in them, what the possible formats are and what an ideal way of making them would be for your own use.



### Test your knowledge

By answering the following questions you will see how much you have learnt about lesson planning:

1. You are asked to teach an English language course. What questions do you ask from the director of the school?
2. How would *you* write your lesson plan for the lesson included in this unit? What would you include in your version of the lesson plan? Write your version.

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