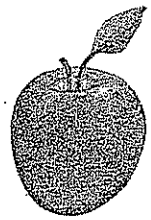

Planning Lessons

LINDA JENSEN

Jensen's "Lesson Planning" chapter serves as a guide for novice teachers who need to create formalized lesson plans. The chapter covers why, when, and how teachers plan lessons, as well as basic lesson plan principles and a lesson plan template. A sample lesson plan is provided in the context of a weekly overview, module overview, and course overview.

INTRODUCTION: DEFINITION OF A LESSON PLAN

All good teachers have some type of plan when they walk into their classrooms. It can be as simple as a mental checklist or as complex as a detailed two-page typed lesson plan that follows a prescribed format. Usually, lesson plans are written just for the teacher's own eyes and tend to be rather informal. But there may be times when the plan has to be written as a class assignment or given to an observer or supervisor, and therefore will be a more formal and detailed document. This chapter will serve as a guide for creating these more formalized lesson plans.

A lesson plan is an extremely useful tool that serves as a combination guide, resource, and historical document reflecting our teaching philosophy, student population, textbooks, and most importantly, our goals for our students. It can be described with many metaphors such as road map, blueprint, or game plan (see Ur 1996); but regardless of the analogy, a lesson plan is essential for novice teachers and convenient for experienced teachers.

Why We Plan

Deciding what to teach, in what order, and for how much time are the basic components of planning. The lesson plan serves as a map or checklist that guides us in knowing what we want to do next; these sequences of activities remind us of the goals and objectives of our lessons for our students. As previously mentioned, a lesson plan is also a record of what we did in class; this record serves as a valuable resource when planning assessment measures such as quizzes, midterms, and final exams. A record of previously taught lessons is also useful when we teach the same course again, so that we have an account of what we did the term or year before to avoid reinventing the wheel. When we have to miss class, a lesson plan is a necessity for the substitute teacher, who is expected to step in and teach what had been planned for the day. In addition, just as teachers expect their students to come to class prepared to learn, students come to class expecting their teachers to be prepared to teach. A lesson plan is part of that preparation.

Yet in spite of the importance of planning, a lesson plan is mutable, not written in stone; it is not meant to keep a teacher from changing the duration of an activity or forgoing an activity altogether if the situation warrants. A good lesson plan guides but does not dictate what and how we teach. It benefits many stakeholders: teachers, administrators, observers, substitutes, and of course, students.

When and How We Plan

To be perfectly honest, a certain amount of lesson planning takes place the night before a class is taught. This planning, taking place just hours before entering the classroom, should be the fine or micro tuning of the lesson, not the big picture or macro planning that is based on a

Celce-Murcia, M. (Ed.). (2001). Teaching English as a second or foreign language (3rd ed.). Boston, MA: Heinle & Heinle.

programmatic philosophy or syllabus design. A good lesson plan is the result of both macro planning and micro planning. On the macro level, a lesson plan is a reflection of a philosophy of learning and teaching which is reflected in the methodology, the syllabus, the texts, and the other course materials and finally results in a specific lesson. In brief, an actual lesson plan is the end point of many other stages of planning that culminate in a daily lesson.

Before a teacher steps into the second language classroom, he or she should have developed his or her own understanding of second language learning and teaching. This background includes knowledge of theories of second language acquisition and learner characteristics (see Oxford's chapter in this text) as well as familiarity with both historical and current trends in second language pedagogy (see chapters by Celce-Murcia and Savignon in this text). This background knowledge will create a personal philosophy that is realized whenever the teacher is preparing lessons, teaching classes, or grading assignments or tests. A good teacher cannot help but bring his or her own sense of good learning and teaching into the classroom. Ideally, this philosophy will be consistent with the teaching methodology employed by the institution since the methodology will then help implement the syllabus and influence the choice of textbooks for most programs.

Once the syllabus and texts have been decided, planning for the year or term takes place. For many teachers, especially newly hired ones, these decisions have already been made and the macro planning has been taken care of by colleagues or supervisors. In some cases, however, the new teacher may be responsible for the macro planning as well as the micro planning. Consulting or planning with fellow teachers about syllabus design and textbook selection can be very helpful in this type of situation (see chapters by Nunan and Byrd in this text). In rare cases, nothing may be in place so it may be entirely up to the instructor to design the course syllabus, choose the teaching materials, and plan the daily lessons. Generally the opposite is true for the novice teacher, however, who will have very little input at first in terms of macro and even micro planning. (See Appendices B, C, and D for examples of macro planning: a course overview, a module overview, and a weekly overview.)

What a Lesson Plan Looks Like

Although there are a variety of formats to use when creating a lesson plan, most templates share certain characteristics. When creating a lesson, a teacher must consider the background of the students, the objectives of the lesson, the skills to be taught, the activities, the materials and texts, the time constraints, and the connections to previous and future lessons. Like most activities, a lesson plan has stages: a beginning, a middle, and an end. As mentioned previously, the amount of detail actually written down will vary with individual preferences and experience. Some instructors like to keep notebooks of lessons plans for each class; others may use note cards or loose sheets of paper that can be shuffled around. Many instructors now use computers to write up lesson plans; the advantages of this are that the lessons are neatly typed, easy to save, and can readily be copied and modified as needed. Keeping at least one paper copy filed away in case of a technological breakdown is also a good idea.

Most plans begin with a brief description of the class and students; for example, the name of the course and the level, and the background of the students are useful to note. It is also important to add the date as well as the week and day of the course. Given the trend of adhering to competency requirements and published standards, a lesson plan may also need to include the competencies and standards that the lesson addresses. Some teachers list the grammatical structures and key vocabulary terms that will be introduced as well.

Teachers also find it wise to note what has been covered during the previous class or what students already need to know for the particular lesson, especially if it will begin with a review of previous material. The day's goals and objectives should be included as should a list of texts,

materials, and equipment such as audiovisual aids. Some instructors find it helpful to list the day's materials and audiovisual aids in a box at the top of the page to serve as a reminder of what they need to bring to class. If more elaborate material preparation is necessary before class, teachers may also list the steps necessary to prepare these materials. Noting any homework or assignments to be returned or collected that day is also useful information to have at the beginning of the lesson plan.

The middle component of a lesson plan is the lesson's content; this includes procedures or activities along with transition notes, as well as time management and class management notes such as the students' seating arrangements for different activities. Novice teachers should also try to anticipate what may go wrong or prove to be problematic so that contingency plans are prepared in advance and written into the lesson plan.

Lessons usually begin with warm-up and/or review activities. Teachers need to decide how they will connect the day's lesson to the previous class meeting and how they want to interest and motivate their students for the day's activities. Once warmed up, the class is then ready for the presentation and practice stages of the lesson. These stages have been referred to with a variety of labels such as *into, through, beyond* (Brinton, Goodwin, and Ranks 1994); *engage, study, activate* (Harmer 1998); *lead-in, elicitation, explanation, accurate reproduction,* and *immediate creativity* (Harmer 1991); and *verbalization, automatization,* and *autonomy* (Ur 1996). All of these labels describe stages in which first, the language form or content is introduced and presented; second, comprehension is checked before a form of guided practice is implemented; and third, some type of less structured, communicative activity takes place so that students can practice what they have just learned in a less controlled, more natural situation. The communicative stage also provides an opportunity for students to integrate the new knowledge presented in the lesson with previous knowledge. Finally, teachers and students should evaluate how well the new material has been learned in order to determine the shape of future lessons.

Some teachers find it useful to write brief comments on a lesson plan that help with the transition from one activity to another, so that the lesson flows well and the various activities have a sense of connection. For example, when transitioning from a listening activity to a reading activity a teacher can discuss how certain listening strategies can be adapted as reading strategies. Creating smooth transitions and links can be challenging for novice teachers, so planning these moves and noting them in a lesson plan is worthwhile and valuable for both instructors and students.

Time management can also be challenging for beginning teachers and even experienced teachers cannot always accurately predict how long a certain activity will take or when a discussion will become so engaging that it should be allowed to continue longer than planned. Nonetheless, it is important to note the number of minutes allotted for each activity in the margin of the lesson plan; this also means that the teacher should wear a watch or be able to see a clock in the classroom in order to be aware of the time. More often than not, an activity is underestimated in terms of length, so teachers should decide ahead of time what part of a lesson could be skipped or shortened or saved for the next class. This does not mean that teachers should not overplan. There are times when an activity will take less time than anticipated or suddenly seems too easy or difficult, so the teacher will decide to sacrifice it; good teachers err on the side of overplanning and/or have some useful five to ten minute supplementary activities available in their repertoire of teaching tricks. It can be a very frightening experience for the novice teacher to look up at the clock and see that she has ten minutes left until the end of class and no idea of what to do. Initially, it is useful for inexperienced teachers to plan their lessons so that each minute of class is accounted for before they step into the classroom.

Seating arrangements for various activities should also be noted in the lesson plan. Preplanning pair and group work seating arrangements is more efficient than standing in front of the class and moving students around randomly.

There are times when random pairs or small groups may make sense but there are many other times when a rationale is needed in deciding who works with whom. Often we want groups to contain a mixture of talkative and quiet students; we probably want to mix language groups or separate best friends who talk only to each other. Planning these seating arrangements beforehand helps the class run smoothly and saves time. Most teachers also find it useful to give instructions for group or pair work to the class as a whole before breaking the class up; once students start moving around, they may become so active that getting their attention can take up valuable class time.

Teachers also need to anticipate where a lesson may break down. Especially when trying out a new activity or teaching a grammar point for the first time, novice teachers need to think about what may go wrong. What part of the lesson may be difficult for the students? What kinds of questions can the instructor expect? Will there be problems with student-student interactions? This type of forethought is especially important for lessons that rely on technology or equipment that may fail or not be available as planned. Anticipating problems and thinking of solutions beforehand makes both novice and experienced teachers feel more comfortable and confident when they walk into the classroom.

The final section of a lesson plan should include comments that end the lesson such as a review or summary of the lesson and that indicate homework or other assignments. Although homework may be noted at the end of a lesson plan, it is probably not a good idea to wait until the end of class to assign it to the students. Find a place on the board where homework can be consistently posted so students always know where to check for it. Post it there at the beginning of class or during the break so that everyone has a chance to write it down before those final hectic minutes of class when students are packing up their belongings and running out the door.

Some teachers like to leave a space on their lesson plans to comment on what needs to be covered during the next class session based on what went on during the day's lesson. Perhaps an activity had to be placed on hold or a teaching point needs to be covered again. Some teachers also like to note students' unanswered questions in order to research their responses before the next class meeting.

It is also a good idea to include space for lesson evaluation by the teacher after the class is over. The evaluation component of lesson planning provides an opportunity for honest reflection about what activities worked or did not work and why, as well as how the lesson could be improved or modified the next time around. Teachers also find it useful to add comments concerning student reactions to the lesson. It is these evaluative comments that can make a lesson plan a truly useful resource for future course and lesson planning. (See Appendices A and E for a lesson plan template and a sample lesson plan.)

Basic Principles of Lesson Planning

As with any skill, lesson planning becomes easier over time. As teachers gain experience in the classroom, they learn certain principles about planning. When seasoned teachers are asked to list some basic principles of lesson planning that novice teachers should be aware of, the ones that are frequently mentioned are actually basic principles of good teaching: coherence, variety, and flexibility. These principles have proven useful for all teachers, not just the second/foreign language teacher.

1. A good lesson has a sense of coherence and flow. This means that the lesson hangs together and is not just a sequence of discrete activities. On a macro level, links or threads should connect the various lessons over the days and weeks of a course. On a micro level, students need to understand the rationale for each activity; also, they learn best when there are transitions from one activity to the next.
2. A good lesson exhibits variety. This variety needs to be present at both the macro and micro levels. While for most students, a

certain degree of predictability in terms of the teacher, the texts, classmates, and certain administrative procedures is comforting; however, to avoid boredom and fatigue, lesson plans should not follow the same pattern day after day. On a macro level, there should be variety in terms of topics (content), language, and skills over the length of the course. On a micro level, each daily lesson should have a certain amount of variety in terms of the pace of the class, such as time spent on various activities, depending on the difficulty or ease of the material being covered. The percentages of teacher-fronted time and student-centered activities should vary from lesson to lesson; there are days when we want our students to participate and be active, but there are other days when we want them a bit calmer in order to be receptive to new material or practice a listening or reading strategy. Some teacher-trainers have referred to this as the ability to "stir" or "settle" our students depending on the need. Each lesson should also have some variety in terms of classroom organization such as whole-class, small-group, pair, and individual activities. The mood of different lessons will vary as well; mood shifts can reflect the teacher's disposition on a certain day, the chemistry of the mix of students, the weather, current events, or something unexplainable.

3. A good lesson is flexible. Lesson plans are *not* meant to be tools that bind teachers to some preordained plan. Good teachers think on their feet and know when it is time to change an activity, regardless of what the lesson plan says. An interesting student question can take the class in an unanticipated direction that creates one of those wonderful "teaching moments," not to be missed. A brilliant idea can come as the teacher is writing on the board; sometimes pursuing these ideas is well worth a risk of failure. Even failure can be a valuable lesson for both the novice and experienced teacher.

CONCLUSION

Knowing how to go about planning a second/foreign language lesson is the result of many other stages of preparation. The teacher must be familiar with the principles of second language learning and teaching, as well as the needs of the institution and the student population. He or she must first see the big picture of the course and be aware of the goals and objectives for the entire term before planning weekly and daily lessons. If the big picture is kept in mind, the individual lessons will connect to form a learning experience that benefits both the teacher and the students.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How will your knowledge of second language acquisition theories inform your decisions in lesson planning? Give some concrete examples.
2. List what you consider to be the characteristics of good students and good teachers. How will this affect your lesson planning?
3. How much detail do you feel is necessary in writing your own lessons plans? Would this change if a supervisor wanted copies of your lesson plans?
4. As a novice teacher, what aspects of lesson planning are the most daunting? How will you go about getting assistance in planning your lessons?
5. How much autonomy are you comfortable with in terms of lesson planning? Would you prefer a teaching situation in which lesson plans are given to you and you are expected to closely follow them, or would you prefer being handed a textbook and told to write your own daily lesson plans? What are the advantages and disadvantages of each situation?

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

1. Observe several ESL/EFL classes and ask each instructor for a copy of the day's lesson plan. How closely did the instructor follow the plan? How is the plan similar or different from the actual lesson?
2. Interview one or two experienced teachers about their own lesson planning strategies. Ask if you can look at some of their lesson plans. Ask if over the years they have changed the way they plan lessons.
3. Examine an ESL/EFL text that you may have the opportunity to teach in the future. Create three sample lesson plans with a variety of skill or language foci. How would you avoid marching through the text page by page? How would you incorporate supplementary material?
4. Create a lesson plan for an ESL/EFL class in a computer lab (see chapter by Sokolik, this volume). What lesson plan considerations need to be made for teaching in this situation?
5. List a variety of opening and closing activities. Compare your list with the lists of others in your class. How do these activities reflect individual teachers' personalities?

FURTHER READING

Harmer, J. 1998. *How to Teach English.* (Chapter 12: How to plan lessons). Harlow, UK: Longman.
Excellent discussion of lesson planning for the inexperienced or novice teacher. Includes a "Task File" with a sample lesson plan on teaching the comparative degree to a low-level class as well as useful activities.

Harmer, J. 1991. *The Practice of English Language Teaching* (New Edition). (Chapter 12: Planning) Harlow, UK: Longman.
A more detailed chapter on lesson planning than *How to Teach English* with a focus on the teacher's background knowledge. Also includes a "specimen plan" for an intermediate adult class.

Nunan, D. 1999. *Second Language Teaching and Learning.* Boston, MA: Heinle & Heinle Publishers.
A very humanistic and personal account of second language learning and teaching. Enjoyable to read, especially for novice teachers.

Ur, P. 1996. *A Course in Language Teaching: Practice and Theory.* (Module 15: Lesson Planning) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
A reflective approach to lesson planning that is especially useful for experienced teachers.

Woodward, T., and S. Lindstromberg. 1995. *Planning from Lesson to Lesson: A Way of Making Lesson Planning Easier.* Harlow, UK: Longman.
Lots of lesson planning ideas based on the metaphor of using threads to create continuity

APPENDIX A

Lesson Plan Template for a 50-minute Class

	Background Information: course/level description of students (if necessary) aims/objectives skills focus/grammar/vocabulary texts/materials previous class work work to be collected or returned	**To do before class:** **Bring to class:**
Time Frame (in minutes) 3–5 4–5 10 10 15–20 3–5	**Procedures:** warm-up review introduction presentation activities communicative activities questions/homework extra activities (if necessary)	**Notes:** transitions seating plans potential trouble spots contingencies
	Comments/Evaluation:	