

Lesson planning: the importance of language analysis

Alexander Makarios explains why understanding the language point and how learners will react is key to lesson planning.

In my experience of training language teachers, mostly on CELTA courses, I have noticed that good preparation goes a long way. Analysing language for teaching purposes is a huge part of that preparation.

Candidates following teacher training courses find language analysis (LA) a rather demanding and tiresome experience – to say the least. However, it is essential to bear in mind that LA is a crucial part of lesson planning for several reasons.

Why should we analyse language before lessons?

- **Language development:** it is a good point to remember that analysing language for individual lessons can be a good 'excuse' for teachers to **enrich their own knowledge** of the systems of the language and therefore become more proficient by studying descriptive/pedagogic grammars to find the information they need. In fact, this seems to be an ideal way of building on their knowledge over a period of time, as it is a given that we are not born with explicit knowledge of a set of grammatical rules.
- **Effectiveness of the clarification stage:** we all want the presentation stage of our lesson to be as succinct and effective as possible; we want to use **simple language** to explain

or elicit, to incorporate helpful **techniques** such as timelines, colourful and appropriate patterns to indicate significant phonological features on the whiteboard, **appropriate** and **natural examples** of the target language, and **suitable questions to check** the learners' understanding. Can you imagine how demanding and stressful it would be to improvise and come up with all of those things on the spot while trying to take care of everything else at the same time during the lesson?

- **Being confident:** I am sure we have all found ourselves in the awkward position during a grammar lesson when a learner asks a difficult question regarding let's say the tense we have just presented, but we are not able to give a clear and simple answer. Consequently, the learner gets confused or even frustrated – a thing that we want to avoid at all costs in the classroom. Well, a thorough preparation can greatly help in similar cases as it will prompt us to think of **potential problems the learners might have** because of let's say the difference between their mother tongue and the L2 structure. In this way, we will be much better prepared for learner questions, and this is definitely a thing that all learners, especially adults, greatly appreciate.

- **Feedback and correction:** an essential part of any lesson; we will be much better able to, first of all, **identify learner errors** revolving around the language presented and give clear and useful feedback, perhaps using the information we have already put on the WB, i.e. the timeline indicating meaning, sentence stress patterns highlighting phonology, etc.
- **Covering all aspects of the target language:** by preparing a detailed LA, we are less likely to forget to focus on meaning, form, issues of tenor perhaps, pronunciation, and ways to check understanding; therefore, we ensure that we will have done our best to help the learners understand all aspects of the target language.

How can we prepare an effective language analysis?

Obviously, by accessing appropriate materials such as:

- **Pedagogic grammars**, i.e. a grammar consisting of sets of rules for teaching/learning purposes. An example of a pedagogic grammar is Martin Parrott's *Grammar for English Language Teachers*.
- **Descriptive grammars**, i.e. a grammar describing how the

language is actually used by its speakers; an example of a descriptive grammar is Douglas Biber's, *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English*.

After we have studied and found the appropriate information, we need to think of how we are going to cover all of the aspects of the language we will be focusing on in our lesson. An effective way of achieving this is to prepare grids or tables.

Figure 1 shows an example of one such table.

Language area:
Meaning/Use:
Form:
Pronunciation:
Checking of understanding:
How the TL will be highlighted on the WB:

Figure 1

An important thing to remember at this point is that we are not aiming at merely copying the information or the rules we have found in grammars; what we should do is the following.

- **Choose the appropriate rules for the level of the learners**, i.e. if we're teaching the present progressive tense, we need to choose the specific use and not include all of the rules at the same time. This would be entirely unrealistic as a lesson aim, let alone confusing and discouraging for the learners.
- **Simplify the language**, i.e. avoid unnecessary terminology which the learners might not be familiar with, use simple lexis and structures to form the rule or the questions to elicit the rule, etc.
- **Choose appropriate techniques** to highlight meaning/use, form, and phonology in the class.
- Think of practical ways of putting this **information on the board/smart board**, i.e. how many target language examples we should write down on the WB, what different colours to use, where exactly on the board we should write it so that we do not erase it later on, etc.
- Choose **suitable ways of checking the learners' understanding** of meaning and form, i.e. what specific questions to ask to make sure the learners have understood the language rather than simply ask 'Do you understand?', etc.

Language analysis and popular pre-service teacher training programmes, i.e. the CELTA course

For those of you who have braved to read thus far, I am sure I might have given the impression of an extremely pedantic teacher suggesting spending hours and hours to analyse and prepare language for the classroom. However, this article is not the rumblings of a madman.

Let us look at how popular and renowned pre-service teacher training programmes, such as the CELTA, include LA in their assessment criteria.

The CELTA criterion 4i states the following:

[Candidates should be able to] analyse language with attention to form, meaning and phonology using correct terminology

- show that you can analyse language in detail for any language focused on in a lesson
- show how the form will be clarified on the board
- indicate how the concept will be established and checked
- indicate significant aspects of pronunciation relating to this language

The CELTA criterion seems to cover all of the things we mentioned earlier. Let us have a closer look at it:

1. '*... in detail for any language focused on*': it prompts us to analyse language not just for grammar or vocabulary lessons, but skills-focused lessons as well; for example, when we are planning to pre-teach vocabulary in a receptive skills lessons, or focus on a set of functional exponents in a speaking lesson prior to the speaking task, etc.
2. '*... how the form will be clarified on the board*': this is a reminder of the fact that we should prepare an LA for teaching purposes and not for academic purposes as if we were teaching grammarians-to-be.
3. '*... how the concept will be 1) established and 2) checked*': it prompts us to think of specific techniques to convey the meaning to check that the learners have understood it. Therefore, we should perhaps use simple language as well as contextualised and natural examples of language.
4. '*... significant aspects of pronunciation ...*': it finally reminds us to focus on the important and relevant aspects of pronunciation and, therefore, how we would present it in the class. For example, if we are focusing on the verb form *used to*, we ought to highlight issues of elision between the sounds /d/ and /t/ and the weak form of the preposition *to*.

Evaluating a sample language analysis of a grammar lesson

Taking all these points into account, let us now look at a sample LA and evaluate it.

Imagine you are teaching the present progressive to talk about future arrangements to a group of pre-intermediate adult learners. Please, have a look at the LA in Figure 2 and decide if it meets the CELTA criterion and if it is useful for a teacher prior to the lesson.

Then, you can look at the tutor comments in Figure 3 to compare your answers.

Now, compare your ideas and comments to the ones of the tutor.

Conclusion

I hope I have helped to highlight the importance and usefulness of analysing language for teaching purposes. Even if it does take a considerable amount of time in the beginning, you will eventually get used to it and, in the

long term, you will become much more adept at preparing an effective LA in a short amount of time. A last thing to remember is that EFL/ESL learners, especially adults, appreciate a knowledgeable and professional teacher as much as a 'fun' teacher in the classroom. Remember therefore to combine competence and confidence.



Alexander Makarios has been a teacher for 11 years; he has taught a variety of age groups, from YLs to adults in a variety of learning and teaching contexts. He holds a Cambridge CELTA Certificate and a Cambridge DELTA Diploma and is currently doing his distance MA in ELT at the University of Reading. He has been working as a CELTA tutor for the past 5 years and has trained teachers in China, South Africa, and Athens. He is currently working as a teacher trainer and teacher instructor at CELT Athens, Greece.

Language area:
The present progressive to talk about future arrangements.
Meaning:
When we want to say that an event will take place in the imminent future and it has already been arranged, we use the present progressive.
Form highlighted on the WB:
<i>I am seeing my friend tonight.</i>
Checking of understanding:
I will ask the Ls a couple of questions to check understanding of the meaning and I will also ask them to say if the present progressive has the same form with other tenses to check understanding of the form.
Pronunciation:
contraction of the auxiliary verb 'to be'.

Figure 2

Language area:	
The present progressive to talk about future arrangements.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • difficult language used • no techniques mentioned, i.e. a timeline • no mention of the context and how it could be used to convey the meaning
Meaning:	
When we want to say that an event will take place in the imminent future and it has already been arranged, we use the present progressive.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the form has not been highlighted at all. Just an example on the WB is not enough to highlight the form of the TL structure.
Form highlighted on the WB:	
<i>I am seeing my friend tonight.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • only one general technique is mentioned (asking CCQs) without any specific questions though, i.e. "Are we talking about now or the future?" etc. Therefore, the teacher will have to improvise during the lesson.
Checking of understanding:	
I will ask the Ls a couple of questions to check understanding of the meaning and I will also ask them to say if the present progressive has the same form with other tenses to check understanding of the form.	
Pronunciation:	
contraction of the auxiliary verb 'to be'.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • no techniques included at all; just a mere explanation of only one of the significant features of phonology for the particular TL structure.

Figure 3