

Lessons in planning – a Process Approach to lesson planning

Rose Aylett describes an innovative approach to helping teachers with lesson planning.

How well do you plan? Does the time you spend on your lesson plans reflect the quality of the lessons you teach? Do you spend seemingly endless evenings staring at a blank sheet of paper trying to think of an engaging lead-in? Does your use of the IWB warrant the three hours a day you spend making digital materials?

If the answer to any – or all – of the above is yes, don't panic – you are not alone! For many teachers, new and old alike, daily lesson planning can be a time-consuming and thankless task, for which we are given little to no training during the course of our careers. Chock-full of other input sessions, like how to write a cover page or a language analysis sheet, the CELTA and other initial teacher training (ITT) courses leave little room for discussing the day to day realities of lesson planning. Trainers regularly dismiss 'real' lesson planning: 'of course, you won't plan like this when you really start teaching', before continuing with a convoluted introduction to the class profile – obviously not much use when a few days later, you do start teaching, and planning takes up twice as much time as the actual lesson itself.

My research

Over the last few months, I've been working with newly qualified teachers as a mentor on the British Council Cairo's Teacher Support Programme

(TSP). Assisting these teachers with their planning, in addition to interviews conducted with a wide range of teachers and trainers at the centre, has highlighted some of the most common challenges teachers face when lesson planning. These include (but are not limited to): a lack of preparation time and ideas, a tendency to over-plan and a failure to achieve the main aims of the lesson.

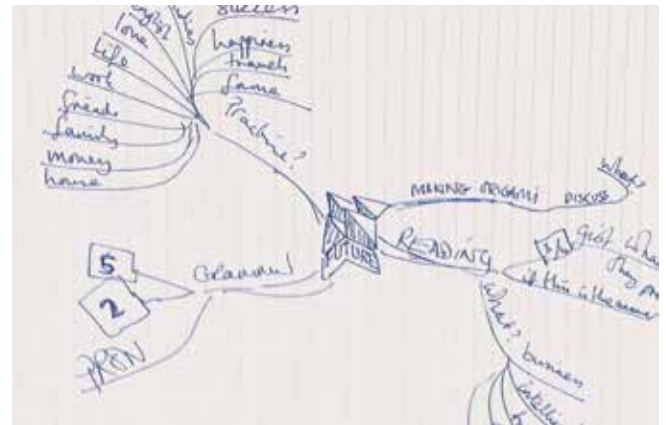
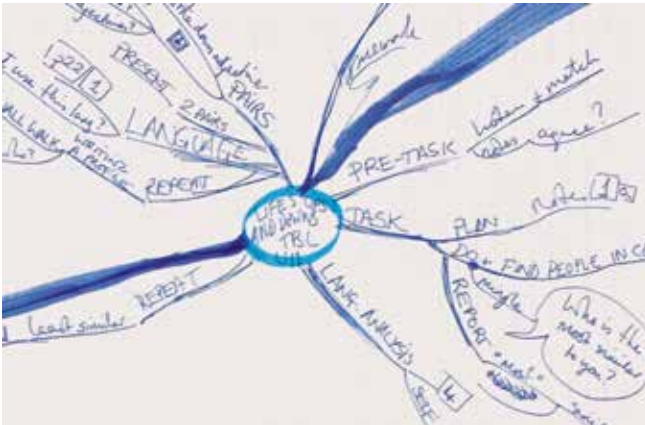
One of the most enlightening things about these conversations has been uncovering the enormous diversity in the way teachers plan. In terms of process, it is clear to me there is no 'right' way to plan a lesson, except the way that works best for the individual teacher and results in the best possible learning. I agree with Steve Brown (2013), who writes: 'How your plan looks is irrelevant; it may not even exist in physical form. But what is important is that you have put in some careful thought prior to lesson delivery.'

The planning paradox

ELT teacher training has long given priority to the writing of formal lesson plans, complete with main and subsidiary aims, class profiles, timings, stage aims, interaction patterns and the like. The logic behind this model is that if teachers are trained to write such detailed plans, they will be able to successfully apply these processes to their everyday planning. Unfortunately, evidence suggests this approach, when

applied exclusively, doesn't have the desired effect. Teachers graduate from ITT courses brimming full of enthusiasm and ideas, but without the skills to write a good lesson plan within a reasonable time limit. Several of the newly qualified teachers I spoke to when conducting research for this article sheepishly admitted that they regularly spent up to five hours preparing for a single lesson. Other colleagues, such as Monzer, lamented a stifling of creativity: 'When I have the time, I'm not just a good planner, I'm creative ... if not, I'm an average planner.'

With this in mind, perhaps it's time to radically rethink how we train teachers to lesson plan, and strip planning back to its fundamentals. In essence, planning is a thinking skill that involves visualising the lesson before it takes place. According to Jim Scrivener (2005: 109), it involves 'prediction, anticipation, sequencing, organising and simplifying ...'. Though the formal lesson plan is an invaluable tool in preparing teachers for observed lessons (giving both the teacher a structural template and the observer a marking criteria), it seems to me that equal, if not more time, should be dedicated to training teachers in the art of 'informal' lesson planning. Trainers should preoccupy themselves less with the final product (ie. the formal plan) and instead focus on the planning process, addressing how best to assist teachers in the day-to-day application of these thinking skills in working lesson plans – the scrappy bits



of paper that teachers take into class with them on a daily basis.

Process lesson planning?

If Scrivener's processes of 'prediction, anticipation, sequencing, organising and simplifying' resonate with you, it's probably because you already encourage your own students to go through these processes when they produce a piece of writing. In ELT, this approach to the teaching of writing is widely known as 'Process Writing', and has been described as one 'which stresses the creativity of the individual writer, and which pays attention to the development of good writing practices rather than the imitation of models' (Tribble, 1997: 160). Process Writing involves students generating ideas, focusing, structuring, drafting, evaluating and reviewing their work before it is published and read by the target audience (White and Arndt, 1991).

Could these processes be more effectively applied to lesson planning? Teachers are already doing this in one form or another (whether mentally or on paper), because essentially, that's what planning is. Just as Process Writing aims to focus and give structure to the author's ideas before they begin to write, adjusting planning practices to incorporate these processes may help teachers address the aforementioned problems. I call this form of lesson planning 'Process Planning'. What follows are some concrete suggestions of how to apply Process Planning in practice.

Time limits

- Before they even put pen to paper, we tell our students how long they have

in order to complete the writing task we have set. Planning is no different: in order to reduce the time we spend on it, working to a deadline is a must. Generally speaking, a good planning to teaching ratio to go by is 2:1 ie. no more than one hour planning for every two hours taught. The most important thing is to set deadlines before you begin, and stick to them. One way of self-enforcing this is by arranging an appointment, such as a coffee date, when your planning time is up. Alternatively, beginning your planning shortly before your class has the same result.

- Another option is to experiment with 'pyramid' time-keeping. On Day 1, allow yourself 60 minutes to plan the lesson, on Day 2, 50 minutes, and so on. After you teach each lesson make a note of how the time limit affected the quality of the lesson you planned. Did the extra minutes make a difference? What did you do differently in order to meet the deadline?
- Covering classes at short notice are a sure-fire way to improve your confidence in planning to a deadline (Baguley and Wynne-Jones, 2015). A lot of teachers said that doing standbys helped them with their planning because it forced them to focus and do it quickly. If your teaching centre does not already have a standby rota in place, why not put your name forward?

Answering the question

- At times, we may fall into the trap of planning activities we perceive to be 'fun', rather than those that achieve the aims. To remind learners to focus

their answer, we often ask them to write the question at the top of their paper, and underline or highlight the key words. Teachers should do the same with their lesson aims, referring back to it at later points in the planning process.

Ideas generation

- Irrespective of task type, students need to activate their schemata on a given topic before they can formulate a coherent and comprehensive response. To encourage this, we might give them the opportunity to discuss ideas in small groups, draw a mind map, think of a list of pros and cons, etc. Generating ideas is equally important when lesson planning. How many times have you taught a lesson, only to think afterwards: 'Why didn't I think of doing that?' Before you start to 'write' the lesson, think about the contexts in which the language point would naturally occur, the topics that complement this and appropriate related tasks and activities. This can be simply done mentally, but is probably best done on paper for maximum effect.
- The most pro-active teachers don't restrict their planning to an hour with their head in the teachers' book, but seek inspiration everywhere around them. After all, some of the best ideas for lessons can come to us at the strangest times and places. Jeremy Harmer (2007) refers to this formative stage as 'Pre-planning'. It comprises material you've seen somewhere, a language item you want to teach, or vague idea of unit from coursebook.

If you are one of those people who has sudden flashes of inspiration, keeping a small, pocket-sized jotter is a good idea to record your thoughts. Then, when you finally teach the lesson itself, emergent language can be recorded alongside the plan, and easily revised in future classes. Mobile phone note apps perform the same function for the digitally-minded.

Structure and sequence

- Once you have a good selection of ideas, it's time to organise them into a coherent and cohesive whole. Most, but by no means all, teachers plan in a linear fashion. Some start the lesson plan with the final freer practice activity and work 'backwards' towards the lead-in. Doing this helps focus the lesson on the main aim, and highlight extraneous stages which do not fully underwrite it. This technique works particularly well with Task Based Learning.
- Another point to consider is the layout of your plan, and how this best reflects the way you think. One colleague, Peter, always draws his plans in the form of an elaborate mind-map, starting at one o'clock and working clockwise towards the conclusion of the lesson. He says that representing the lesson in this way helps him to 'see' the lesson on the paper, and supports his visual learning style. Margot, on the other hand, draws her plans as two-column tables, writing what she will do with the coursebook software on the left, and on the right a reminder of her board-work. Why not experiment with layout and see what works best for you? The most important factor to consider here is how easy the plan is to refer to during the course of the lesson itself.

Redrafting

- As teachers, we are often encouraged to reflect upon how the lesson we taught differed from our original plan and what we would do differently in the classroom, were we to teach the lesson again. Rarely, however, is much thought given to how the plan itself

could be adapted retrospectively. After each lesson, editing and annotating plans in a different colour (in the same way a student edits their first draft) is an invaluable part of this process. Plans can then be referred back to the next time the lesson is taught. In this way, the lesson constantly improves and the teacher doesn't get stale from teaching exactly the same thing again and again and again.

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Conclusion

Jim Scrivener (2005) maintains that planning should set teachers free in the classroom, although few teachers in training would describe themselves as liberated by the traditional format of the formal lesson plan. In reality, this kind of plan can become a straitjacket, and as Ahmed, a CELTA trainee, described it, 'very tedious and meticulous' to both plan and write. Initial teacher training courses have formalised the process of planning to the extent that the lesson plan is now regarded as a final product, rather than a process – or series of sub-processes – to be taught and practised during training and beyond. In order

to address this, teachers need to be trained in a way that ensures these processes are 'taking place in the mind even if not committed to paper' (Cattlin, 2014: Introduction). Though formal planning has an important place in both pre-service and in-service teacher training, the teaching of planning needs to be realigned with the everyday realities of teaching, if planning is to properly prepare teachers for life beyond the training room.

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