

# Alternatives to formal planning

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**Abstract** — Before the teacher goes into a lesson, it helps to be clear about what he wants to do. A lot is going to happen on the spot in the class – he can't ever completely predict how learners will respond to anything - but the better prepared he is, the more likely it is that he will be ready to cope with whatever happens. It is possible to teach without any pre-planning, but planning increases the number of options.

Although training courses tend to ask to prepare detailed written plans, it's important to realise that planning is essentially a thinking skill. Planning is imagining the lesson before it happens. It involves prediction, anticipation, sequencing, organizing and simplifying.

**Index Terms** — alternative, content, formal, plan, prepare.

## I. INTRODUCTION

A written plan is evidence that the teacher have done that thinking. It can also serve as a useful in-lesson reminder to the teacher's pre-lesson thoughts. As a general rule: Prepare thoroughly. But in class, teach the learners, not the plan. What this means is that the teacher should be prepared to respond to the learners and adapt what he has planned, even to the extent of throwing the plan away if appropriate. A carefully worked-out plan is the end result of thinking logically through the content of the lesson before the lesson. Thinking through possible content and problems before class provides the teacher with informed choices that set him free in class. But a teacher who is mainly concerned with following a lesson plan to the letter is unlikely to be responding to what is actually happening in class.

## II. FORMAL LESSON PLANNING

On teacher training courses, trainees are often expected to produce a written lesson plan for each lesson taught. This is not because teachers in the real world always do this for every lesson, but as training in 'planning-thinking';

evidence to your tutors that you have thought about the lesson; a chance for trainers to understand your thinking and find out how to help you better if things go wrong in the actual lesson.

Formal plans often divide into three distinct sections:

- background information about the class, the teacher, the materials and the overall aims of the lesson;
- language analysis of items that will be worked on in class;
- a detailed chronological stage-by-stage description of the intended procedure for the lesson.

In most formal lesson plans, the following are required:

- a clear statement of appropriate aims for the whole lesson;

- a clear list of stages in the lesson, with a description of activities, their aims and estimated timing;
- and, if it is a lesson that includes language system work:
- a list of specific target language items (or a statement about how and when they will be selected).

## III. ALTERNATIVES TO FORMAL PLANNING

Just because the teacher may have been trained into using 'traditional' formal lesson plan formats, don't assume that they are the beginning and end of planning. There may be good reasons for not using a standard 'aims-plus-procedure' plan.

Here are some ideas for choosing one or more and try them when preparing lessons.

### 1. A brief running order.

The simplest type of lesson plan, and one used by many teachers, is a basic 'running order' of activities, perhaps with a note of specific language points or materials that will be used. This plan has the advantage of being something you can do on the bus in to work or on the back of an envelope in the staff room five minutes before going into class!

### 2. Flow chart.

Write your procedure notes in sketch boxes, rather than in traditional linear down-the-page fashion. Show a variety of different possible running orders and routes through the stages by drawing lines between different boxes.

### 3. Dream through the lesson.

Don't write anything. Repeatedly imagine your way through the lesson, perhaps with your eyes closed. Think up possible different routes that you might initiate -or that learners might. See where each leads.

### 4. Focus on the critical learning moments.

Rather than planning the entire lesson procedure, before class decide on a number of specific key things you hope learners will gain from the class (e.g. being able to pronounce a set of new words well, being able to replay a difficult recording until they can understand the main message, etc.). For each of these, decide what the 'critical learning moment' will probably be, i.e. which thing you or they do (lasting no more than 30 seconds) that is likely to

make the most significant impact on their success - and why. Think through each of these moments very carefully. Even if you are writing a formal lesson plan, you may still find it useful to mark critical moments with 'C' and perhaps give more detailed information about how these will be dealt with.

#### 5. Half-plan.

This idea is for more experienced teachers, or others who feel confident about their own language awareness and of their ability to quickly think of mini-activities. Put your energy into planning how your class will do skills work (e.g. reading, speaking, etc.). Don't plan any language systems work (e.g. lexis, grammar, etc.). In class, spontaneously work on language issues as they come up if they are useful, interesting and appropriate for students. NB 'Work on' doesn't just mean 'explain' - can you invent on-the-spot practice tasks as well?

#### 6. Jungle path ... or perhaps don't plan anything!

Most lessons involve the teacher pre-planning a sequence of activities, predicting what language areas will be worked on, what problems are likely to arise and what the students may achieve in the lesson. An alternative approach would be to not predict and prepare so much, but to create the lesson moment by moment in class, with the teacher and learners working with whatever is happening in the room, responding to questions, problems and options as they come up, and finding new activities, materials and tasks in response to particular situations. The starting point might be an activity or a piece of material, but what comes out of it will remain unknown until it happens. The teacher is

working more with the people in the room than with his material or plan.

The main pre-planning for a lesson of this kind would involve the teacher using his knowledge of the learners and of the available resources to choose some activities and materials that are likely to prove challenging and raise important questions and issues. The teacher would have an intuitive sense of various potential links between activities, based partly on previous experiences of the outcomes of lessons using similar activities.

In class, some of these activities and materials may be used, some not. The teacher may also feel the need to find other materials as the lesson proceeds, some from a coursebook, some from his head, some from the staff-room library, etc. Although he may be clear about a number of possible directions the lesson might take, it will be impossible for him to state the lesson's aims until after it has finished.

After a lesson like this, many teachers are surprised to find that they come out feeling that they have taught particularly well; this may be to do with the fact that they have had to listen and respond to students far more carefully than they usually do.

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