

Planning – does it make lessons better?

~~~~~

- <Georgina> Ok, does anyone have any questions about this month's topic - Planning - does it make lessons better?
- <Ronald> Hi, I'd like to know how long most of you spend planning?
- <jeremy\_harmer> Hi Ronald. Does it depend on what kind of lesson you're planning and how often you have done something like that before?
- <Ronald> I guess so - if I've done it before, it takes less time.
- <lily> Hi! I'm a teacher from Argentina and my plans are never fulfilled our educational system is changing and that brings a lot of work for us teachers, sometimes useless.
- <Marta> My planning depends on what type of lesson it is - but up to 3-5 hours I guess.
- <Georgina> Jeremy, how much time would you spend planning?
- <jeremy\_harmer> In my case it depends on how well I know (a) the students, and (b) the lesson content. Even after all these years there are areas of grammar I have to go back to again and again. And then there are lessons where you have to prepare physically cutting things up, photocopying, that kind of thing. Marta, do you mean 3-5 hours for one lesson?
- <Marta> No, per week, but I think it depends on how difficult/diverse the class are.
- <Pierre> I think some kind of a skeleton plan is helpful - but I think it is important to take things as they come and to be able to fly with them. I would say that I take half an hour for each teaching hour
- <jeremy\_harmer> Hi Pierre. The skeleton plan sounds about right for my own personal taste - a kind of 'proposal for action'. Just some notes to remind you of where you think you'd like to go unless something better/more important comes up?
- <Marta> I teach young learners a lot, so I find I have a lot of cutting out etc to do, though I wouldn't include that in the time I spend planning.
- <jeremy\_harmer> Marta, thank heavens for that! I was worried that 3-5 hours was for less time than that! But you're absolutely right. It does depend on the class and the kids themselves.

~~~~~

Making Life Easier

- <jeremy_harmer> My dream has always been to collect a huge collection of lesson plans, which you can access again and again. And although there is that kind of filing system in my brain (just like any other experienced teacher) still you find yourself having to reinvent the wheel time and time again.
- <Natasha> Jeremy has just read my thoughts - recycling lesson plans to save time!
- <Pierre> Yes and course books really don't provide lesson plans--- you really need to shape the material and make it work for your students
- <Sarah> Recycling - Exactly!
- <JanetW> Jeremy, do you have a list of headings or a structure that you use to guide you through planning?
- <jeremy_harmer> Hi JanetW! Well I suppose the headings depend on how skeletal you want to be...
- <javi> Teachers have it easy these days, though, don't they cos course books have improved so much -as far as TT books I mean. They are full plans and objectives and extra materials the time's needed to dredge through it all.
- <Georgina> Interesting point Javi - what do the rest of you think? Do teachers have it easy with regards to planning?
- <jeremy_harmer> Hi Javi! Yes books do provide instant lessons, and when teachers are desperate they often use them (understandably) just as they are. But that's kind of not really the ideal it's there for when you've run out of time, energy or inspiration. I agree with Pierre in the end, that working out 'how' to use published material is a major part of the teacher's/planner's art.
- <Marta> Desperate - that's a bit harsh, isn't it?
- <jeremy_harmer> I mean some teachers just note down the name of an activity or a page number or even a piece of language and that's enough to remind them of everything they want to do. Whereas others (especially if they're planning really carefully for

- observation or something) use headings like 'aims' 'procedure' 'anticipated problems', 'additional possibilities' etc.
- <javi> Where I work teachers are more and more demanding to have everything given to the. Life made easy.
- <Natasha> I do not think teachers have it easy - there are more resource materials out there now - but the structure of the lessons still comes from the teacher. I use parts of resources from different course books.
- <Lydia> I agree with Javi. You express a rather native-speaker view here, I think.
- <jeremy_harmer> Marta, I guess what I mean is that some coursebook lessons are fine as they are and that one time when teachers use them without too much thought is when they (have to) prepare at the last minute. Whereas many other teachers will want to look at the coursebook lesson and amend it to suit their own students and their own preferences.
- <Lydia> State secondary school teachers, for example, in countries with educational reforms and lack of training don't have time - or don't feel motivated to plan lovely new lessons. Also, lots of thought has gone into course books and we should use the planning and experience without felling we are somehow under performing if we don't.
- <javi> I think it might not be the ideal but it's what a big percentage of teachers do
- <jeremy_harmer> Hello Lydia. I really approve of what you've just said. Of course it's not just state school teachers, it's teachers who often have more than one job and are really pushed for time. As a coursebook writer myself, I have nothing against good coursebook lessons (of course I don't!) but given time (a critical factor I agree) I would always want to play with a coursebook lesson to make it suit a particular group.
- <Lydia> That's what I think. We shouldn't make teachers feel bad because they use the book. I got that impression, a bit.
- <jeremy_harmer> Lydia you're quite right, and I apologise if that's what it sounds like.
- <Pierre> I agree with what you are saying about coursebook-- although these are often written with the ideal class in mind. I think most coursebook units are impossible to use unless you do a bit of work on them in terms of personalising etc
- <jeremy_harmer> Well Pierre, as this conversation is developing I think I want to try and agree with you and with Lydia too (that's being British for you!) in that good coursebook lessons are usually usable as they stand but that in an ideal world we'll always want to tailor them to our own needs.
- <Sarah> That's why it's important to choose a book that is tailored to your countries needs perhaps?
- <jeremy_harmer> Hi Sarah. Yes, coursebook choice is a really important role for administrators, teachers and students (who should also be included I think). Sometimes books aimed at specific learning communities are the best ones around, but not always.
- <Pierre> Very diplomatic of you Jeremy-- and yes Sarah--important to use a tailored coursebook. Even so-- what will work for a particular class/group of learners will not work for another...this is where planning comes in

~~~~~

### Negotiated Syllabi

- <Sarah> Have you ever involved your students in planning the curriculum and if, so how did you approach it and what was your experience?
- <JanetW> Would you share your plan with students at the beginning of a lesson?
- <jeremy\_harmer> I'd like to hear what the others have to say to Sarah's question.
- <Georgina> Good questions - how much involvement do you have with the students?
- <Sophie> On Janet's question, I think it's fundamental to tell them what they're going to learn what your objectives are what skills etc they'll be practising this means they develop greater learner autonomy as they understand what you are getting at and evaluate at the end of a lesson/week, whether they achieved what you were intending to do.
- <jeremy\_harmer> Janet, I wonder whether that isn't a matter of style. I generally tell students what I think we're going to do in general terms, but other really good teachers write up the skeleton plan on the board at the beginning of the less. Others don't do either of these things.



## Live Moderated Chat Transcript

- <JanetW> Sarah. I would sit down at the start of the course and discuss what the students learning objectives are so to that extent the students are involved in my planning process.
- <Pierre> Well I think that students don't really want to be involved in that-- they trust teaching practitioners in the way one would trust, say, a doctor
- <Georgina> Would you all agree with Pierre?
- <jeremy\_harmer> Gosh, Pierre! It's true some students want to rely on the teacher, but if you can get them involved - even superficially - in planning what's going to happen (or commenting on what's happened which were the best bits of last week's lessons, what would you like more of etc) then you have students who are more engaged and that's a good thing, isn't it?
- <Sophie> With the arrival of online learning and the importance to the learner of taking more responsibility for their role in the process I think we need to seize every opportunity to help them veer away from teacher dependence in the way you suggest. It only takes a minute!
- <Sarah> I agree. Surely it's not like a granny going to the doctor's. We demand so much engagement from our learners this is just another step that Sophie and Janet suggest here.
- <jeremy\_harmer> OK, here we go again! I entirely agree with Sophie here, but on the other hand in the first ever module on the ELT Forum we discussed learner autonomy and the problem that some students are more prepared/able to be more autonomous than others which suggests that we invite students to be involved in planning at some level but we don't push it to the point where they feel overburdened with it.
- <Georgina> Would negotiating syllabi with the students help them be more independent?
- <jeremy\_harmer> Well Georgina it should do - or at least students should be more engaged in the whole process.
- <JanetW> I think the problem is that when something is new, students often don't know what they want to learn so you have to be fairly directive. At least in the early stages.
- <jeremy\_harmer> Janet I'm sure you're right about that.
- <Pierre> Well Sophie, I am not sure if teaching dependence is exactly what I am advocating... I think though that students have general ideas about what they want to achieve (e.g. work on their fluency etc) but I think we are really overdoing it with student participation.
- <Sophie> Have YOU ever negotiated your syllabus, Jeremy?
- <jeremy\_harmer> Sophie, not outright from point A. Instead what I've frequently done. is give them a general idea of what will happen in the lessons and then start getting them to review what they have done after every say 4 or 5 lessons on the understanding that I will modify what we do (within reason) based on their comments. In that way they do have a direct say in what is going on - and we get to discuss some learning issues too.
- <Pierre> I agree with Jeremy. I think that reflection is actually an essential factor if students are to involved in planning/negotiating the content of lessons
- <javi> Me too. I agree with Jeremy and Pierre!

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

### Trained to Plan

- <Fiona> What do you think about the relative importance of planning in RSA prep and other pre-service courses?
- <jeremy\_harmer> Hi Fiona. I think planning is important in prep courses. Pre-service teachers need to think carefully about the content of a lesson - and the need the experience of seeing what happens to plans in a real classroom despite Mario R's criticisms, I liked the procedure that Craig Thaine described in one of this month's development packs since it gave his trainees a feeling of shape etc - and the only other way of getting this is through experience which by definition such trainees don't yet have.
- <Marta> In my training at University, planning was important, but no one really helped with how to plan. I'm not sure I do it right!
- <jeremy\_harmer> Marta, I'm sure you do it fine (well if you feel comfortable with it, anyway). But I do think it's important of lessons - and also to understand what plans are for/how

Planning – does it make lessons better?

Live moderated chat 18<sup>th</sup> December 2001

www.ELTForum.com

- important they are, and what on training courses to help trainees get a feel for planning a sequence to do with them once you get them into the classroom.
- <Fiona> How about in DIP courses. People still criticise the 'system' for demanding that teachers jump through hoops and present plans they would never normally use. Do you think this is a fair criticism?
- <javi> Without this it's more difficult, I agree.
- <jeremy\_harmer> Fiona, it's true that DIP candidates have to do everything in a rather rigid way, but I would defend that on the grounds that any observer has to understand what is in that teacher's mind in order to be able to say whether the teacher has got anywhere near where they wanted to go or if not whether there are perfectly valid reasons for not having got there.
- <javi> The PPP model do you mean? Another 'used to lesson!!!!!! As an assessor you'd go mad!!!!
- <jeremy\_harmer> Javi, I think any planning input on teachers' courses would show trainees how to approach. As an assessor I do go a bit mad sometimes! Lots of teachers, understandably, play safe for external assessments!
- <jeremy\_harmer> A whole range of lesson types of which anything PPP-like would just be one small option.
- <Marta> But it's important to include planning in tt courses. You can only do things on the fly with experience and expect to achieve your objectives efficiently, which takes us back to the beginning.
- <jeremy\_harmer> Marta I agree with you 100%. Experienced teachers can do things very informally, of course. It's much more difficult at the beginning and actually I find it more difficult later on too but maybe that's just my problem!!
- <Marta> I have to go to. Perhaps I'll try and be a bit freer with my teaching and let you know how it goes - my coursebook still gives me confidence. Perhaps that's because I'm not a native speaker.
- <Fiona> No one could disagree with that. But I see Javi's point about 'cookie cutter' lessons.
- <jeremy\_harmer> Marta coursebooks are fine. Nothing to do with not being a native speaker.
- <Marta> No, I know, but sometimes comments like earlier make me quite angry.
- <jeremy\_harmer> Marta, sorry if you felt anything was said was directed like that. Again, I would like to say that good coursebooks are good, but that the skill of a good teacher is to use, adapt, omit, replace, etc coursebook material - an ongoing dynamic relationship with a coursebook.
- <Pierre> Jeremy, do you think that it would be useful for a DIP assessor to see teachers in an everyday situation-- that it is where they use a skeleton plan rather than an artificial lesson plan with assumed problems etc.
- <Fiona> Yes that's right. Maybe we should move away from this approach and do what Pierre's suggesting - make teachers realise it isn't about a rigid, 'exam' lesson plan, but about achieving learning objectives.
- <Georgina> This is a good point - perhaps then we'd be assessing the 'real' teacher.
- <Fiona> Exactly.
- <jeremy\_harmer> Pierre, if it was possible (in terms of time and money) to shadow a teacher for some time you'd end up with the kind of ideal you're suggesting (and that's what mentoring systems in some education systems do). However any external assessor does need to know why and on what basis a teacher has decide to do what they have decided to do that's why formal plans make sense even if they are a pain!
- <Fiona> I know what Jeremy says is true to an extent i.e. that examinees will act in an atypical way just because they are being examined but we should aim to minimise this, no?
- <Georgina> Aren't RSA and Trinity supposed to be heading towards more shadow assessment rather than an external examiner coming in from outside?
- <Fiona> Yes Georgina. There's much more continuous assessment, isn't there?
- <jeremy\_harmer> Well yes, in a way. The external assessor in the RSA DIP, for example, only assesses one out of 5 formally assessed lessons.
- <Fiona> We can shadow teachers when they are doing teaching practice though.
- <Pierre> But what I would say to this then is - does the whole process of being assessed teach us how to make better lesson plans-- even if they are highly artificial - I don't have an opinion I am just asking!

Planning – does it make lessons better?

Live moderated chat 18<sup>th</sup> December 2001

www.ELTForum.com



## Live Moderated Chat Transcript

~~~~~

What is Lesson Planning?

- <jeremy_harmer> What's really important of course is what happens to the plan (however skeletal or not it is) and any good trainer or mentor will spend a lot of time discussing that how teachers should respond to 'magic moments' and 'unforeseen difficulties'. That's when the teacher's art really comes into play. Isn't it? To answer Pierre's point. I think being assessed forces trainees to think in detail about what lesson planning is and is not, and I do think that's a good thing provided everyone acknowledges that this is an artificial situation to some extent.
- <Fiona> Yes, it's the discussing of learning and if/how it took place- or not, that helps you develop as a teacher and helps the assessor see whether you know what you're about. The plan gives a framework for this.
- <jeremy_harmer> Yes, Fiona, that's right. The reflection on what happened vs. what the teacher hoped/thought would happen that's a powerful developmental experience.
- <Fiona> Yes. The best plan in the world can fail completely if you can't classroom manage etc
- <jeremy_harmer> And of course, the best plan in the world can be abandoned if something else more important comes up!
- <Georgina> We've had one last question about distance learning, but perhaps that discussion can continue in the Message Board as we have to end here. Fiona - I hope you don't mind!
- <Fiona> No, that's ok, the question: How would we deal with this aspect on an online distance learning course? - This has been great! Thanks!
- <jeremy_harmer> Fiona, really pleased you came along - and for all of your contributions.
- <Georgina> Thanks everyone. Do continue this discussion on the message boards.

If you'd like to join the next live session,
go to www.eltforum.com/forum.html for more details.
To add your comments to this topic, please go to the Message Board at:
www.eltforum.com/message_board.html