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PRINCIPLES OF LESSON PLANNING: A GUIDE FOR STUDENT TEACHERS

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RESUMEN

Este artículo pretende guiar a los estudiantes de Enseñanza del Inglés como Lengua Extranjera de la Universidad de Costa Rica, Sede de Occidente, en el proceso de planeamiento. El trabajo presenta los principios y componentes básicos del plan de lección organizados en tres etapas: antes de planear, mientras se planea y después de planear. A la vez, el artículo pretende motivar al estudiante practicante en el campo de la investigación acción como una alternativa para crecer profesionalmente.

Palabras claves: lección, planeamiento, pre-planeamiento, curriculum, objetivos, ejemplos del lenguaje, cultura y valores, actividades de mediación, adecuaciones curriculares, investigación-acción.

ABSTRACT

This article attempts to guide students of Teaching English as a Foreign Language at the Universidad de Costa Rica, Sede de Occidente, in the process of planning. The paper presents the basic principles and components of lesson planning by organizing them into three different stages: before planning, while planning, and after planning. Also, the article pretends to motivate student teachers in the field of action research as a way to grow professionally.

Key words: lesson, planning, pre-planning, curriculum, objectives, language examples, culture and values, mediation activities, curricular adaptations, action research.

According to Brown (2001: 149) the word lesson is popularly considered to be a unified set of tasks that cover a period of classroom time, usually ranging from forty to eighty minutes. These classroom time units are administratively significant for teachers because they represent "steps" along a curriculum before which and after which teachers have a hiatus (of a day or more) to evaluate and prepare for the next lesson, also he affirms that those lessons, from the point of view of teachers and students' time management, are practical, tangible units of effort that serve to provide a rhythm to a course of study.

In other words, what Brown affirms is that a lesson is a proposal for action rather than a blueprint to be followed slavishly. And once teachers put their proposal for action into action, all sorts of things might happen, quite a few of which we might not have anticipated.

For Rinvolucri (1996: 7), a plan is a mental structure or the map teachers need initially to help them through the landscape. And students, too, like to know what their teacher has in store for them. Evidence of teacher planning helps to ensure their confidence in the person who is teaching them.

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Additionally, Harmer (2007: 365) considers that planning can be visualized in different ways. The first one is when teachers allow the coursebook to do the planning for them; they take in a lesson or unit and teach it exactly as it is offered in the English book. Second, when teachers scribble a few notes down in a folder or notebooks. Perhaps these might consist of the name of an activity (e.g. different holidays – discussion), or some language (e.g. inviting). Sometimes the notes will be more elaborated than this. And third, teachers do some kind of vague corridor planning in their heads as they walk toward the class. Even when teachers do not make notes or write a plan, they generally have ideas in their head anyway. Harmer (2005: 169) critized this way of planning by saying

> the overriding principle is that we should have an idea of what we hope our students will achieve in the class, and this should guide our decisions about how to bring it about. At the very least, we should have what has been called a door into and a door out of the lesson where written plans act as a useful record of what we hoped to achieve, and where we aimed these records (after the lesson) to say what actually happened, they become effective accounts which we can use for action research.

For English teachers, who work at the Ministerio de Educación Pública in Costa Rica educational system, , it is not only important to considerer the point of view of these authors, but also to take into consideration some essential elements before, while, and after planning a lesson. All these elements will be explained in this document with the main purpose of guiding all the teachers who ask for direction in this field. It is necessary to point out that no method, approach or technique is going to be included in this paper due to the fact authors number more than twenty, and English teachers may feel free to choose the one they consider the best for the teaching of English as a foreign language.

According Brown (2001: 152), in normal circumstances, especially for teachers without much experience, the first steps of lesson planning are: how to begin planning, variety, sequencing and timing, individual differences, student talk

and teacher talk, and adapting to an established curriculum.

The previous points of view, presented by different authors, about planning, and how to do it, sometimes is not comprehensible for beginner teachers in a Costa Rican context, due to the fact they cannot visualized different moments in the process of preparing and implementing a lesson plan. For that reason, based on the presented theory and the author's experience of more than fifteen years as English teacher, lesson planning will be presented as three different but integrated processes: "before planning", "while planning", and "after planning". Also, each process will include some aspects to be considered in each of them.

1.   Before planning

First, let's remember what different authors have said about pre-planning in order to get some examples of how teachers over the years have focused on the process.

Harmer (2005: 367) utters that there is a stage that teachers go through, either consciously or subconsciously, that happens before we actually make a plan of what is going to happen in our lesson. For him, this pre-planning stage is the start of the whole process, where teachers gather ideas, material and possible starting-off points.

Brown (2001: 152) states that before beginning planning, teachers need to be familiar with the curriculum the students will be following, as well as the text book. Based on the curriculum, the educators may determine what the cognitive target and the purpose of the lesson will be and write that down as the general objective. Then, considering the students' needs, draft out three or more specific objectives for the lesson. If students have a text book, the teacher may decide which exercises to develop, change, or delete and add to, all based on the objectives that have been drafted. Then, carefully plan step by step procedures for carrying out all tasks, especially those that involve changes, and finally state the purpose of each task as enabling objectives. He affirms that ideas for pre planning can come from a wide variety of sources such as something we

have seen on the internet, or on television. These pre- planning ideas are usually based on the teachers' knowledge of students' personalities as individuals, and as a group, as well as their level and capability.

Woodward (2001:1) refers to pre-planning as ideas. She says, "teachers need to be able to show evidence of following pre-plans through into clear thinking about exactly what teachers intent students to do (based on perception of student needs)". A year later, (2002: 25) in her folio, "Designing Online Training Materials for German-British Intercultural Encounter", she explains that she could not think of a single teacher in all the staff rooms she had worked in who had not done some thinking and preparing before class. It means that for teachers who have never taught before, it is very useful to write a script of the lesson plan in which they anticipate words students will say in return. It helps teachers to be more specific in the planning and can often prevent classroom pitfalls where they get all tangled up in explaining something. The scrip will cover introduction to activities, directions for tasks, statements of rules or generalizations, anticipated interchanges that could easily bog down or go astray, oral testing techniques, and conclusions to activities and the class hour.

A completely different point of view from the previous ideas is presented by Scrivener, (2005: 132), who refers to pre- planning as "the jungle path lesson" where the teacher has no idea about what he or she is going to do in the lesson. As a result, the lesson is created moment by moment with the teacher and the pupil working with whatever is happening in the room. He presents an example of the teacher walking into a classroom and asking "How was the weekend?" and, after listening to many answers, initiating a discussion based on what students had said. At some point the teacher selected a particular item and implemented instant exercises to help students work on them. However, Harmer (2007: 365), still points out that "in most educational contexts, a succession of jungle path lessons will suggest to the students a degree of careless – or even negligence – on the part of the unprepared teacher".

As you have seen there are two clear positions about what is pre-planning. In one hand, Harmer 2005: 367 ; Brown 2001: 152; and Woodward 2001: 1; 2002: 25, agree that English teachers will necessary consider some important aspects before planning, such as:

a. be familiar with the curriculum the students will be following.
b. gather ideas, material and possible starting-off points.
c. determine what the cognitive target and the purpose of the lesson will be and write that down as the general objective.
d. consider the students' needs and personalities as individuals and as a group, and draft out three or more specific objectives for the lesson.
e. if students have a text book, decide which exercises to develop, change, or delete and add to, all based on the objectives that have been drafted.
f. prevent classroom pitfalls by writing a script of the lesson plan in which they anticipate words students will say in return. It helps teachers to be more specific in the planning.

In the other hand, Scrivener, (2005: 132) presents as a possibility the "jungle path lesson", where English teachers do not follow a curriculum and do not worry about what to teach. It means teachers are not prepared with a topic, objectives, procedures, materials, and alternatives to assess students' knowledge and as a result the teaching and learning process is going to be improvised and broken in every class, due to the fact that in the Costa Rican educational context, each teacher is going to have more than eight groups of different levels each day. Even though he or she has an excellent memory, the process cannot be followed, as it ends with each class.

For the author, there are other aspects, as important as the ones presented by the previous authors that must be considered before planning:

1.1   Diversity, succession, and timing:

As soon as teachers start drafting procedures, they should visualize how the plan will hold together as a whole and consider if there is sufficient variety in the techniques to keep the lesson lively and interesting.

The techniques may be planned in a logical sequence; elements of the lesson will build progressively toward accomplishing the ultimate goals. Easy aspects will be placed at the beginning; tasks that require knowledge expanded for previous exercises should be sequenced appropriately. Also, teachers need to anticipate how well activities flow together and how much time students need to develop each one. Timing is one of the most difficult aspects of lesson planning to control, so, the author recommends not to worry too much about it. Instead, they should feel happy if pupils have sufficient time for genuine interaction and creative use of language. If a planned lesson ends early, have some backup activities (extra activities) ready to include, but if the lesson is not completed as planned, teachers should be ready to gracefully end a class on time and, on the next day, pick up where they left off.

1.2   Individual differences

Into the class, teachers may find a majority of students who compose the "average" ability range, but also others that are well below or well above the classroom norm. For that reason, it is necessary to account for individual differences by designing techniques with easy and difficult items. These techniques should involve all actively, forming small groups that have either a deliberately heterogeneous range of ability, or, a homogeneous range to encourage equal participation using small groups and pair work gives them time to walk around and give extra attention to those below or above the norm.

1.3   Student talk and teacher talk

While teachers plan the lesson, they may consider if there is a balance between student talk and teacher talk because teachers' natural inclination is to talk too much. Consequently, when planning, ensure that all students have a chance to talk, to produce language, and even to initiate their own ideas.

1.4   Adapting to an established curriculum

It is presumed that educators will not write a new curriculum, but will follow an established one and adapt it in terms of their particular group of students, their needs, and their goals, as well as the educator's philosophy of teaching. They should first decide how each class hour will contribute to the goals that the curriculum is designed to achieve.

2.   While planning

It is impossible to say exactly what a formal lesson plan should look like, or what information should be included because there are different examinations schemes for teachers, and because different institutions and trainers have different preferences. Although for the Ministerio de Educación Pública in Costa Rica there is a format of lesson plan(see annex #1) where certain elements are almost always presented, such as the heading, general objective, specific objectives, language examples, culture and values, procedures, timing, evaluation, materials, and curricular adaptation. As I mentioned before, no one method, approach or technique will be included because the author considers there is no best one. English teachers are free to choose the one or ones they consider best when teaching English as a foreign language. I now turn to these elements in order to guide beginner teachers in this field.

2.1   Heading:

It provides general information about: the institution name, course name, teacher's name, level or grade, group number, timing, and cognitive target.

2.2   General objective:

This goal should be fairly generalized. Most of the times, it is written in the syllabus. It determines the purpose of the lesson, eg, *to*

understand simple and familiar vocabulary and expressions related to classroom objects.

2.3   Specific objectives:

It refers to what the English teachers hope students will learn to gain or accomplish from the lesson. For Brown (2001: 150) they are outlined in terms of what students will accomplish by taking into account students' needs and personalities as individual and as a group. However many language objectives are not overtly observable, and therefore teachers may need to depart from strictly behavioral terms for some objectives. He also suggests avoiding vague, unverifiable statements such as, "students should learn about the passive voice", "students will do the reading section", or "students will discuss the homework assignment", due to the fact teachers would be unable to confirm the realization of any of these sorts of loosely stated objectives. It is convenient to include objectives for listening, for speaking, for reading, and another for writing in every English class.

a.   **Listening:** identifying different classroom objects in the English class, by listening to the teachers.

b.   **Speaking:** recognizing simple and familiar vocabulary and grammatical structures related to classroom objects, by asking and responding to the classmates questions.

c.   **Reading:** scanning for information regarding classroom objects in a given text in order to answer questions.

d.   **Writing:** producing well structured sentences while looking at different classroom objects the teacher points out.

2.4   Language examples:

In this section teachers should write the vocabulary and structures she/he would teach. Be sure to propose a sensible progression of syllabus elements such as grammatical structures, and functions and build in sufficient opportunities for recycling or remembering language. An example could be:

Classroom objects: *pencil, sharpener, board, books…*
Structures: *it is a …, they are…, this is …, these are…, that is…, those are…, Do you have a…?, Are those…?, is this a…?, etc.*

2.5   Culture and attitudes:

In this section the teacher specifies same collection of sounds, letters or phrases that can have many diverse meanings according to different settings or countries and that must be explained to students in the lesson. For example, according to Harmer (2005: 35) in United States of America,

> the word *table* means a thing with four legs which people can write on and eat off and that book is a collection of words between covers. But of course the situation is more complicated than this. Both words have many different meanings, quite apart from those already mentioned. We can eat off a *table*, or we can *table* a motion at a conference. We can summarize information in a *table*, too. Then again, when we have read our *book*, we can ring up a restaurant and *book a table*. This polysemy is only resolved when we see the word in context.

All this information presented by the teacher allows students to say which meaning of the word is being used in a particular instance.

2.6   Mediation activities

The issue of how one activity leads into another is a matter of how different parts or stages of a lesson hang together. Teachers can write the stages on the board at the beginning of each class so that students will know where they are in the lesson sequence at any given moment. A possible sequence is shown here.

a.   **Routine activities:** it includes activities such as: greeting the students, calling the roll, asking a student to write the date on the board and read it aloud, etc.

b.   **Warm up or motivation:** instead of a language structure or function to be learned, students are presented with a task they have to perform, or a problem they have to solve, such as the teacher taking

a box, and asking questions, and waiting for students' answer in order to solve the problem of what is inside. This task may last no more than ten minutes.

c. **Presentation:** the teacher explores the topic with the class and may highlight useful words and phrases, helping students to understand the task instructions. The teacher can introduce an object and ask the students to use words to describe the object or word. The language, too, is presented.

d. **Practice:** the students now practice what they have learnt. They can perform the task and focus on language form as they do the tasks. For Beglar and Hunt (2002: 97). "Opportunities for practice may force students to pay close attention to form and to the relationship between form and meaning".

e. **Consolidation:** the students are asked to use the new language in sentences of their own. For example, the teacher may get the students to think about what their friends and family are doing at this moment. They must now come up with sentences such as: *My mother's working at the police station; I think my brother is lying on the couch, e,g.*

f. **Closing activity:** the teacher helps students with any mistake he/she heard during the consolidation task. He/she then directs students back to the task and they analyzed it for topic vocabulary, time expressions, syntax elements, etc.

g. **Extra-class work:** Brown (2001: 151) insists that sometimes it is misnamed "homework", but students do not necessarily do extra class work only at home. Extra-class work needs to be planned carefully and be communicated clearly to the pupils.

h. **Extra activities:** It is an application or extension of the lesson tasks that help students do some learning beyond the class hour. An example of an additional possibility could be:

If some groups finish first, they can quickly discuss what three things from the class they would most miss if they were at camp.

i. **Farewell students:** before the bell rings, students should be encouraged by the teacher for the good job they have already done and they get to say good bye.

2.7   Timing

The main body of a formal plan lists the activities and procedures in a lesson, together with the times the teachers expect each of them to take. Teachers should be sure to include in the tasks appropriate proportions of time for whole class work, small group and pair work, and teacher's and students' talk time.

2.8   Evaluation of learning outcome

It has to take part not as a separate element of the lesson but as a complement in regular classroom tasks. It is an assessment, formal or informal, that teachers make after students have sufficient opportunities for learning in order to make adjustments for next lesson. They are seen as achievement indicators teachers list to know whether or not students have been successful. A successful indicator might be that *students can confidentially produce unprompted sentences about what they should have done, or perhaps can give fluent and convincing answers in an interview role-play situation.*

2.9   Materials

Planning includes realizing what you need to take with you to the classroom, such as, flashcards, memory game, computer, poster, eg.

2.10   Bibliography

The teacher specifies the complete source of the materials she/he will use: the name of the book, article, song or newspaper, the name of the author, editor, country, and page numbers.

2.11   Curricular adaptation (accomodation)

It approaches teachers to who the students are, how they behave, and what to do regarding physical, psychological or pedagogical written diagnosis already established by some specialists. In this section, teachers may write down what is he/she going to do in support of the student's education, eg,   *José must be seated in front of the board due to his eyesight problem. María can go to the bathroom whenever she wants, even when she is taking an exam because of her incontinency problem.*

3.   After planning

Once teachers have implemented their lesson plans it is time to start *"action research",* for Harmer (2005: 414)

> action research is the name   given to a series of procedures teachers can engage in, perhaps because they wish to improve aspects of their teaching, or, alternatively, because they wish to evaluate the success and/or appropriacy of certain activities and procedures.

Teachers sometimes start action research because they worry about a problem and they want to decide what to do about it. According to Maley (2003: 5), teachers do action research because they want to find out why certain things happen and what would happen if they did something different.

Action research starts when teachers identify an issue they wish to investigate, for instance, know more about the learners and what they consider motivating and challenging. Teachers might want learn more about themselves as teachers, how effective they are, how they look to their students, how they would look to themselves if they were observing their own teaching. They might want to see if an activity would work better done in groups rather than in pairs, or investigate whether reading is more effective with or without pre-teaching vocabulary.

Having collecting the data, they analyze the results, and this is on the basis of these results teachers should decide what to do next. Alternatively, having resolved one issue, teachers may focus on a different problem and start the process afresh for that issue.

Appendix 1

Sample of a format of the lesson plan

The following format of a lesson plan is presented as an example of what teachers can use when planning a lesson. The components are organized by following the Ministerio de Educación Publica de Costa Rica requirements.

Lesson Plan

Institution:

Course: English

Teacher:

Cognitive target:

General objective:

Date:

Level:

Time:

Group:

Method/Approach/Technique:

Specific objectives	Language examples	Culture and attitudes	Mediation activities	Time	Materials	Bibliography

Curricular adaptation:

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