

The Importance of Planning

Lesson planning is at the heart of being an effective teacher. It is a creative process that allows us to synthesize our understanding of second language acquisition and language teaching pedagogy with our knowledge of our learners, the curriculum, and the teaching context. It is a time when we envision the learning we want to occur and analyze how all the pieces of the learning experience should fit together to make that vision a classroom reality.

There are a number of benefits to writing a lesson plan. First, lesson planning produces more unified lessons (Jensen, 2001). It gives teachers the opportunity to think deliberately about their choice of lesson objectives, the types of activities that will meet these objectives, the sequence of those activities, the materials needed, how long each activity might take, and how students should be grouped. Teachers can reflect on the links between one activity and the next, the relationship between the current lesson and any past or future lessons, and the correlation between learning activities and assessment practices. Because the teacher has considered these connections and can now make the connections explicit to learners, the lesson will be more meaningful to them.

The lesson planning process allows teachers to evaluate their own knowledge with regards to the content to be taught (Reed & Michaud, 2010). If a teacher has to teach, for example, a complex grammatical structure and is not sure of the rules, the teacher would become aware of this during lesson planning and can take steps to acquire the necessary information. Similarly, if a teacher is not sure how to pronounce a

new vocabulary word, this can be remedied during the lesson planning process. The opportunity that lesson planning presents to evaluate one's own knowledge is particularly advantageous for teachers of English for specific purposes, because these teachers have to be not only language experts, but also familiar with different disciplines like business, engineering, or law—fields that use language in specialized ways.

A teacher with a plan, then, is a more confident teacher (Jensen, 2001). The teacher is clear on what needs to be done, how, and when. The lesson will tend to flow more smoothly because all the information has been gathered and the details have been decided upon beforehand. The teacher will not waste class time flipping through the textbook, thinking of what to do next, or running to make photocopies. The teacher's confidence will inspire more respect from the learners, thereby reducing discipline problems and helping the learners to feel more relaxed and open to learning.

Some teachers feel that lesson planning takes too much time. Yet lesson plans can be used again, in whole or in part, in other lessons months or years in the future (Jensen, 2001). Many teachers keep files of previous lessons they have taught, which they then draw on to facilitate planning for their current classes. In other words, lesson planning now can save time later.

Lesson plans can be useful for other people as well (Jensen, 2001). Substitute teachers face the challenge of teaching another teacher's class and appreciate receiving a detailed lesson plan to follow. Knowing that the substitute is following the plan also gives the regular classroom teacher confidence that the class time is being used productively in his or her absence. In addition, lesson plans can also document for administrators the instruction that is occurring. If a supervisor wants to know what was done in class two weeks ago, the teacher only has to refer to that day's lesson plan. Finally, lesson plans can serve as evidence of a teacher's professional performance. Teachers are sometimes asked to include lesson plans, along with other materials, as part of a portfolio to support their annual performance evaluation. Teachers applying for new jobs might be asked to submit lesson plans as part of their job application so that employers can get a sense of their organizational skills and teaching style.

This book will lead you through the lesson planning process and highlight the role of the plan before, during, and after your lesson. The next chapter presents some approaches to lesson planning while the third chapter outlines the practical considerations involved in the process. Reflective Break segments pose questions to help you apply the information in this book to your own teaching practice.

REFLECTIVE BREAK

Think of a time you entered a class with a hastily written lesson plan or no plan at all.

- How did you feel?
- How would the lesson have been improved with more thorough planning?

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Approaches to Planning

The process of lesson planning can be approached in several ways. Forward, central, and backward design are approaches to curriculum development that are also applicable to lesson planning. Universal Design for Learning intends to address individual differences in learners and to remove barriers to their learning.

Forward, Central, and Backward Design

Forward, central, and backward design refer to the starting point of the planning process and how the process develops. With a forward design process, the teacher begins by identifying the linguistic or cultural content to be taught. He or she then decides upon the methods and activities to be used to teach this content and ends with the assessment of learning. For instance, the teacher might see that the syllabus calls for teaching language related to the topic of travel. The teacher decides to use pictures to present travel-related vocabulary and have students practice travel-related dialogues from their textbook. The assessment, which is an end-of-semester exam, requires students to match vocabulary words and definitions and to fill in the blanks in a travel-themed paragraph.

A forward design option may be preferred in circumstances where a mandated curriculum is in place, where teachers have little choice over what and how to teach, where teachers rely mainly on textbooks and commercial materials rather than teacher-designed resources, where class size is large and where tests and assessments are designed centrally rather than by individual teachers. (Richards, 2013, p. 29)