Planning Units: What Should I do?

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We’ve all had to do it. Some years, it’s easy; other years, nothing falls into place. Some years we have a text book or even a curriculum to help; other years, we just have to see how it goes. Some of us are lucky enough to have a mentor, but most of us have to “go it alone”. Planning a syllabus can be an exhausting task. However, each year, we tend to face the same question … How many units can I squeeze into my semester?

Here are some factors you might consider when planning a unit of work...

Planning a Unit: 7 Factors to Consider

1. **Topic/Theme:** What are your students interested in? What are you interested in? Can you find teaching materials to address these topics?

2. **Task:** What kinds of tasks would you like to use?
   - Chalk and Talk (otherwise known as lecture), Q&A, etc.
   - Critical thinking activities, problem-solving activities, games, etc.
   - Group work, independent work, pair work, etc.
   - Inquiry-based learning, content-based learning, task-based learning, etc.
   - Communicative tasks, grammar tasks, fluency tasks, etc.

3. **Motivation:** How would you define motivation? What motivates your students?
   My teaching philosophy can be boiled down to two points:
   - If I’m bored teaching it, my students are bored learning it.
   - If my students are interested in what the class is doing, they will learn more efficiently and effectively.

4. **Variety:** Are your lessons always structured the same way? Do you use the same topics and tasks over and over and over and over...? How do you introduce variety into your classroom? Do you think of multiple intelligences? Are you addressing the needs of kinesthetic learners? Auditory? Visual? Interpersonal? Intra-personal? Musical? Logical?

5. **Personalization:** Remember, the textbook does not teach the class. You teach the class. Textbooks may not have the activities you seek. Maybe you know your students would rather talk about recycling at the school, and not the Amazon Rainforests. You control what happens in your class. Are you creating the exercises and activities that would motivate your students? Ask yourself for every lesson: Are the textbook activities and handouts going to work for my students?

6. **Multi-Media:** Are you giving them something to look at? Something to do? Are you utilizing what’s available to you and your students?
   - Computers
• Mobile phones
• Social media
• Video and board games
• Animation/video /DVD
• Power Point
• Learning stations (video, computer, realia, puzzles)
• Charts, graphs, pictures
• Realia/manipulatives
• Role play
• Different fonts (yes, it sounds silly but it can be an attention grabber)

7. **Reflection:** Reflection is a critical part of teaching. *Always* take the time to self-evaluate. What worked well? What failed? What are you learning as a teacher? How can you use what you have learned when planning your next unit?

**Planning a Unit: 3 Steps**

1. **Find a theme:** Try to make sure your theme is timely and will hold student interest. If you are using music, 18th century show tunes might not be the best choice. Think of things that are current. Always ask your students to contribute resources. So, if you are doing a unit on music, have students bring in their favorite songs, in any language (especially if it is in their L1!).

   Also, make sure your objective aligns with your theme. A unit on music might not be the best time to tackle TOEFL strategies, but a great time to focus on inference or sequencing.

2. **Choose a main structure:** Know what you are going to cover in each unit. For example, I mentioned that music is a great way to deal with inference and/or sequencing. You could also be broader and just focus an entire unit on reading, or on writing, speaking, listening, grammar, vocabulary, test taking skills, and so on. Always remember, it’s *your* class. Do what’s best for your students.

3. **Focus on Skills:** Below are several lists of skills to focus on if you don’t have a curriculum. Each skill should be thought of in reference to your students’ proficiencies. (I.e., some skills aren’t appropriate for beginning learners.) Know your students: Only you can plan suitable units for them.
# LANGUAGE SKILLS

## Reading
- Skimming & Scanning
- Context clues
- Making inferences, predicting
- Following directions
- Differentiating fact and opinion
- Sequencing
- Summarizing
- Paraphrasing
- Finding a topic sentence
- Finding supporting details

## Writing
- Producing a word
- Producing a sentence
- Producing above the sentence level (i.e. paragraphs, essays, etc.)
- Making lists
- Creating charts
- Recognizing/producing handwriting
- Word processing skills

## Speaking
- Speaking accurately
- Speaking fluently
- Answering a question appropriately
- Reading aloud
- Giving a presentation

## Listening
- Guessing the main idea, key facts, ideas and details
- Responding appropriately to questions
- Sequencing
- Connecting to personal experiences

## ORGANIZING A PAPER

### Research
- Finding proper sources
- Taking notes
- Brainstorming
- Understanding plagiarism
- Citing references

### Constructing
- Creating thesis sentences
- Using supporting evidence in the correct paragraph
- Writing drafts and editing

## ELEMENTS OF LANGUAGE

### Grammar Acquisition
- Comprehending form, meaning, or use
- Producing language focusing on a grammar point

### Vocabulary Acquisition
- Learning new words
- Reviewing vocabulary
- Learning roots and affixes

## Planning and You: A Summary

If the above information is little overwhelming, Parrot (1993) presented some wonderful questions to help with unit planning.

- How far in advance do you usually plan a unit?
- How much detail can you plan ahead? What factors affect the amount of detail you use in your units?
- How do ensure that your classes get a balance of language skills, grammar activities, fluency-oriented activities, etc?
- How do you ensure that there is variety in your units?
• How do you plan for revision?
• How do you plan homework for the students?
• Have you ever changed your planning style?

Adapted from Parrott (1993)

References


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