Components of an Effective ESL Lesson Plan

EDAE 590: Teaching ESL to Adults

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There are several key components for effective lesson planning in the second language classroom. This research will examine the purpose of lesson planning and its importance to teachers and learners. It will focus on methods for incorporating the essential components of objectives, meaningful content, an integration of language skills, continuity, and evaluation into a lesson plan. Lastly, it offers suggestions of promising practices to aid educators in creating lesson plans. The research is provided to suggest the importance of generating lesson plans that will guarantee effectiveness in the second language classroom.
Components of an Effective ESL Lesson Plan

Lesson planning is an integral part to the success of teachers and learners, and serves a variety of purposes. One important purpose is to help you develop your abilities to select, structure, and organize lesson content into effective support for learning (Richards & Bohlke, 2011). Lesson planning allows teachers to assess the overall success of a class and adjust their strategies to better meet the needs of learners. While these may be the purposes of lesson planning, it is important for educators to have the knowledge of how to plan effective lessons. Even with a plethora of options available, there are essential components that every teacher should include in their language lessons. These consist of:

- **Objectives** that are designed to meet curriculum goals and learner needs
- **Meaningful content and materials** that apply to learner’s daily life
- **Activities** and materials that promote the use of all five language skills
- **Continuity between previous and future lessons** and activities
- **Means for evaluating learner and lesson success**

**How are S.M.A.R.T. Objectives Created?**

Creating effective objectives is a key component to any successful lesson, but how is this accomplished? The objective of a lesson is a statement informing the student what he or she will be able to do by the end of the instruction (Milner, Milner, & Mitchell 2009). Students often know what they want to learn and why they want to learn it, but how and when they will learn it is something many learners do not consider. By using S.M.A.R.T. goals, teachers can create objectives that will answer the **how** and **when** as well as the **what** and **why** of learner goals. S.M.A.R.T. is an acronym for: specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and timely.
Specific

The lesson objectives should be specific, not general. The more specific the goal, the easier it will be to assess the success of the learner in regards to the objective.

• General objective: Students will improve their writing skills
• Specific objective: Students will be able to write cover letters for job applications

By making this objective more specific, teachers have a better understanding of what needs to be accomplished in a lesson or course, and students can clearly understand the tasks they will be able to perform.

Measureable

Objectives should quantify the amount of change expected (Center for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2009). This means that goals should be stated so that both teacher and student will know when the goal has been reached. A key component to creating measurable objectives is writing the objective to show student ability, not knowledge. This means teachers must use language that showcases student performance by using verbs such as write, classify, identify, summarize, and compare.

Achievable

Teachers must create challenging yet attainable objectives that meet the needs of the learners and the course. Achievable learner outcomes will not set too many goals at once. They will also be attainable within a given time frame and with available program resources (CDC, 2009).

Realistic

Learner objectives need to be realistic if teachers expect learners to meet them. Realistic goals should focus on weaknesses and areas where learner improvement is needed. Objectives
should be at the appropriate level for the students. Objectives also must be realistic in regards to how long the students will be in class and how long they will have to complete the desired learner outcome.

**Timely**

Learner objectives should have a timeframe, or some type of deadline for when they need to be achieved. When instructors set time restrictions, it helps students know when and how long they have to reach the objective. Also, including a time frame in the objectives helps in planning and evaluating the program (CDC, 2009).

**How is Meaningful Content Applied in a Lesson?**

When considering adult ESL students, it is clear that they have a vast array of reasons for needing or wanting to learn English. Obtaining citizenship, attending college, community involvement, and employment are a few of these reasons. It is important for educators to understand their students’ needs and create lessons that utilize the skills students need to achieve their goals.

One option teachers have to incorporate meaningful content in the classroom is designing contextualized language lessons, which focus on a particular language competency, function, or grammar point used in real-world contexts. The key to effective contextualized language lessons is that they include a variety of practice activities that use language in real-life, meaningful ways (Parrish, 2004). For example, learners who want to improve their telephone skills can be exposed to a multitude of activities that provide practice using these skills in different situations, such as calling a business for hours, making an appointment, or leaving a message.

The types of activities and materials used also play an important role in making learning meaningful. A variety of discourse types may be introduced through stories, peer- and group-
work, the use of ‘authentic’ materials such as newspapers and television broadcasts (Lightbown & Spada, 2013). This creates a more realistic simulation of situations that are applicable to learners’ daily lives. Realia\textsuperscript{1} is also helpful for lower-level students and students with low literacy. Integrating the use of authentic materials into a lesson can help students gain meaning and understanding without the pressures of trying to decipher what a word or text is saying.

**How Can the Five Language Skills Consistently be Integrated into Lessons?**

One key concept in language learning is that, regardless of method or approach to teaching, educators must consistently incorporate all five language skills into their lessons. The four language skills are defined as: speaking, listening, reading, and writing. The fifth skill is most commonly referred to as *cultural awareness*, which is defined by understanding the beliefs, values, and perceptions of a particular society.

To incorporate these skills, teachers must use an integrated approach to teaching. The best way to achieve this is by choosing activities that promote the use of all language skills. Now, this is not implying that every activity must incorporate every language skill. This would be very difficult to achieve, especially in certain content-based ESL classes. Even if every activity does not employ all skills, the activities as a whole need to include practice with all four language skills, and this may be achieved in one class or over the course of a week. That is to say, a teacher may begin a lesson with a listening activity and later in the lesson use activities that incorporate speaking and writing. The following provides examples of classroom activities focused around the topic of *weekend activities*, and incorporates all four language skills.

- Activity 1: Students receive photos of different weekend activities and categorize them according to indoor vs. outdoor activities

\textsuperscript{1} The term *Realia* refers to any material that is authentic such as newspapers, food, and clothes.
• Activity 2: Students listen to a conversation between two individuals discussing weekend plans and use a fill-in-the-blank form to complete the dialogue from the conversation
• Activity 3: Students mingle with others in class to ask what they will be doing over the coming weekend and share their responses with the teacher

These activities are centralized around a particular topic and incorporate all four language skills. The topic itself is meaningful and includes the use of the fifth language skill, cultural awareness.

The fifth skill, cultural awareness, should be employed in all aspects of a language lesson. One way of ensuring that this skill is embedded in lesson plans is by understanding learner needs and motivations for learning. In order to ensure instruction meets the needs of learners whose motivations and expectations vary greatly, a teacher needs to collaborate with learners to identify the goals for instruction (Parrish, 2004). Once instructors understand the needs of their students, they can use these needs to create meaningful content and promote authentic use of language.

**How is Continuity Achieved in Lesson Planning?**

Building continuity in lessons is an essential part to any ESL curriculum, and there are a number of ways teachers can accomplish this. Parrish (2004) offers the following three examples of strategies for achieving continuity.

- Plan in weekly blocks
- Develop curricular routines
- Create threads

Lesson planning in weekly blocks allows teachers to look beyond daily planning and connect lessons to one another. It also gives teachers the opportunity to guarantee they are including the use of a variety of skills, cultural knowledge, and formal language structures to create balanced
lessons. Developing routines gives instructors the capacity to create uniformity to their lessons and makes planning a less formidable task. It also helps give learners a sense of what to expect in class, so less time needs to be focused on directions and more time can be focused on activities and production. Another way to ensure continuity in lesson planning is to choose topics and themes around which learning is organized for an extended period of time. Woodward and Lindstromberg (as cited in Parrish, 2004) refer to these themes as threads for lesson planning. Using threads can increase continuity and provide practice that is meaningful to learners’ everyday lives.

Aside from creating continuity from one lesson to the next, teachers must work to create connections on a daily basis. Teachers need to make sure that activities in a single lesson follow a natural progression as well. It is important to keep in mind that effective lesson links or transitions help maintain students’ attention during transitions and establish a link between one activity to the next (Richards & Bohlke, 2011).

**How is the Success of a Lesson Evaluated?**

Once a lesson plan is created and implemented, the final step for ensuring lesson effectiveness is to evaluate the lesson. Teachers should constantly adapt their lessons to better ensure student success. Teachers can do this by reflecting on the success of their lessons and assessing their students.

After a lesson, teachers should take time to reflect on the successes and failures of the lesson. Teachers can ask several questions in regards to the success of a lesson. *What activities went well in the lesson? What activities did students struggle with? Were students engaged throughout the lesson? Were the lesson objectives met? Will I make changes to the lesson? In*
thinking about questions like these after a particularly successful (or unsuccessful) lesson, it is useful to write a brief report from time to time (Richard & Bohlke, 2011).

Teachers also need to provide proper formative assessment during each lesson to check student comprehension. An indispensable component in language learning, assessment measures to what degree students have attained certain learning goals (Song, 2013). One of the best ways of providing daily assessment is through alternative assessments. Because assessments reflect the content of the course, teachers can incorporate them into every lesson. Alternative assessments are typically aligned with the teaching approach used in the classroom, which helps create an accurate evaluation of progress. This will give teachers a better understanding of the success of a lesson as students will be more willing to participate and showcase their skills. As alternative assessments also provide opportunities for student and teacher interactions, instructors can obtain a realistic grasp on how effective a particular lesson was in achieving the outlined objectives.

**Conclusion**

In this paper, a number of factors have been researched for developing effective lesson plans. They assist teachers in developing their instructional skills to better meet the needs of learners and provide a framework for instructors to use in daily teaching. As planning can become an overwhelming task for teachers, it is important to keep in mind the components that can help create effective lesson plans. Teachers need to create S.M.A.R.T. objectives that meet the needs of their learners. They need to design meaningful lessons that utilize the five language skills and provide continuity from lesson to lesson. Finally, instructors need to evaluate the success of their lesson through self-evaluation and student progress. By utilizing these techniques, teachers can build effective lessons that create an environment that facilitates student learning and success.
References


