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Practical tips for effective lessons

Monica Ruda-Peachey takes a new look at an old problem.

In my early years of teaching, I remember struggling with building effective lesson plans. As a result, my lessons didn't always fully achieve the outcome I had hoped for. It was all quite frustrating because I used to spend hours preparing exciting lead-ins, designing great mingling ideas and creating engaging activities, just to be let down by the way it was all put together. As many ELT professionals do, I have often looked on the internet for inspiration, suggestions and advice. Up to this day, however, I still haven't been able to find 'practical' tips on how to develop a lesson plan that would facilitate the delivery of an effective lesson. Before all else, working towards my Delta qualification was a real eye-opener that helped me realise what my lesson plans were missing or had too much of. Understanding and addressing the issues in my lesson plans was key to

my role as a teacher trainer. As such, I had the opportunity to work with a wide range of teachers, from experienced to newly qualified, as well as with individuals attending their first ELT qualification course. To my surprise, the vast majority of the teachers I observed often faced similar issues to the ones I had during my pre-Delta years.

So, what are the most common challenges to a successful lesson plan? Here is what many teachers have told me:

1. My lessons don't flow.
2. My lessons are boring.
3. I always forget to teach pronunciation.
4. I never seem to have enough time for what I plan to do in class.

5. I don't know the level of my students.
6. I've been told I use too much Teacher Talking Time (TTT).

Believe it or not, all the issues mentioned above can be addressed in the planning stage. However, you might need to adjust the way and the order in which you plan your lessons – it might take you a few tries before you feel comfortable with the changes. Nevertheless, try giving the following tips a go.

Bottom to top planning

It seems logical to start planning your lesson from the beginning; however, here it is suggested that you create the final (consolidation) activity first. Generally speaking, a lesson often comprises three parts: lead-in, target language presentation, and consolidation practice. Especially among inexperienced teachers, lessons tend to be presentation-heavy, resulting in too much TTT and not enough student practice. With bottom to top planning, the time available for each lesson is roughly distributed among the three parts as follows: lead-in – 10%, target language presentation – 20%, consolidation practice – 70%. Giving so much importance and time to the consolidation practice requires careful planning – the key here is to focus on the lesson aims. Before preparing your lesson, focus on completing this sentence

'By the end of this lesson, my students will be able to ...' and this should make the aim of the lesson clear in your mind.



Let's see an example: by the end of this lesson, my students will be able to introduce themselves. As this item of functional language is mainly used in oral communication, you might want to come up with a speaking activity that allows space and time for mingling and for target language practice. In addition, you might want to give students enough time to prepare their questions/answers. Also, don't forget to consider the time needed for instructions and classroom set up. If we stick to the '10–20–70%' rule, we can calculate that in a 45-minute-lesson, the consolidation practice would last around 30 minutes; in a 60-minute-lesson, about 40 minutes and so on. For this activity, my sub-stages would be:

- Write some keywords (e.g. name, age, nationality, profession, hobbies) on the board.
- Give students enough time to write the questions for each keyword and their own answer for each of those questions, while you can observe and provide assistance as they write.
- Give instructions (e.g. explain/demonstrate how the activity is going to be carried out).
- Rearrange the furniture in the classroom to allow freedom of movement.
- Students do the activity, while you observe and take notes.
- Feedback (on language and pronunciation).

Your lesson now needs a short and straightforward language presentation, which would take place before the final activity. To help you shape your presentation, answer the following questions.

- What language do my students need in order to perform well in the consolidation practice?
- What phrases and expressions are they likely to know already? How can I find out?
- What phrases and expressions will I need to introduce? How?

Let the answers to these questions help you design an engaging and inclusive target language presentation, allowing the students to be the 'stars of the show', hence reducing your TTT. Remember that you should dedicate only 20% of your lesson to the presentation part!

For your lead-in part (just 10% of your lesson, remember?), why not show the students a picture or a famous quote, or ask them a question that would prompt some conversation on the topic? They should feel immediately connected to the lesson and willing to participate.

To sum up, what are the advantages of bottom to top planning?

- It provides plenty of time for practice.
- It promotes a gradual flow of the lesson.
- It ensures greater focus on the lesson aims.
- It helps reduce your TTT.
- It decreases the chances of running out of time for the final practice.
- It enhances the opportunities for a student-centred lesson.

Experiment!

Whether it's about controlled or free practice, teaching techniques or learning methods, don't be afraid to try something new, and don't forget to tell your students that it's an experiment! A change in your classroom routine is usually exciting for most students, but I'd recommend it only after you've established a good rapport with your class. If you're planning to restructure the delivery of your lessons (e.g. flipped classroom), let students know in advance. Tell them what will change and how, explaining your reasons behind it. I've found students are more motivated and willing to support your idea if you give them the chance to ask you questions and express their opinion on it.

So, what are the advantages of experimenting in your classroom?

- It puts a fresh spin on your lessons, avoiding repetitive routines.
- It keeps students engaged. It helps you with your professional development

by trying new methodologies, teaching techniques and activities.

Include some pronunciation work in your lessons

I know it sounds easier said than done, but don't give up just yet. I completely understand why teaching pronunciation can be daunting, but debunking certain myths might help.

Myth #1. There's no need to teach pronunciation, students will pick it up as they go along

Although this can be true to a certain extent, you'll find that the majority of your learners will require some help in achieving a higher degree of intelligibility. Furthermore, introducing pronunciation work in your lessons will provide students with the tools that can enable independent learning. For example, learning to decipher the phonemic chart would enable them to teach themselves new words, by looking them up on the (online) dictionary. Start by making a list of your students' nationalities and finding out (online!) the most common pronunciation challenges associated with the native language (L1) of each student. For example, Spanish speakers usually find the sounds /tʃ/ and /ʃ/ confusing. As I am aware of this, I make a note on my lesson plan when introducing the target language, regardless of the lesson aim, and gradually include some choral and individual drilling. I'm sure they'll appreciate personalised lessons that cater for their pronunciation needs.

Myth #2. In a tight curriculum, there's no time to teach pronunciation

Many teachers are under the impression that in order to teach pronunciation, they need to dedicate entire lessons to it. Although this is an option, I feel that it isn't the most effective one, especially if the pronunciation practice isn't reinforced daily. For this reason, I support the 'less is more' motto – short but strategically thought out practice, applied when introducing the target language, consolidated during the final activity and corrected when giving feedback at the end of the lesson.

Base activity	Adaptation for stronger students	Adaptation for weaker students
Students create their questions based on the prompts: Find someone who ... ■ plays the piano ■ likes pizza	<u>In addition</u> to the Base activity, these students will come up and write other questions without prompts.	<u>Instead</u> of the Base activity, these students will create their questions by putting the words in order. ■ play/piano/Do/the/you/? ■ pizza/you/?/like/Do
Students answer reading comprehension questions beginning with: ■ What ... ■ How ...	<u>In addition</u> to the Base activity, these students will answer questions beginning with: ■ Why ...	<u>Instead</u> of the Base activity, these students will answer questions beginning with: ■ Who ... ■ When ... (Specific clues, such as capital letters, days of the week, months, dates, years, will make the answers more accessible.)

Myth #3. Pronunciation can't be taught by a teacher with an accent

Whether it's regional or foreign, most people have an accent and most learners of English strive for clear communication with a global audience. Based on these notions, I believe that to improve their listening skills, students should be exposed to a variety of English accents from all over the world.

Myth #4. Most teachers haven't been trained to teach pronunciation

Well, this might be a truth, more than a myth. Nevertheless, there are many useful websites and YouTube videos that can help teachers improve their knowledge and skills with regard to teaching pronunciation. Once again, less is more as there's no need to learn all at once.

In short, what are the advantages of teaching pronunciation?

- It improves students' communication skills.
- It increases students' confidence in speaking.
- It enhances lesson personalisation.
- It promotes teacher development.
- It can be seamlessly included in any lesson.

Add a contingency plan to your original lesson plan

No two students have the same needs and learn at the same pace, but they all want to make the most of their learning experience. With this in mind, one of the most difficult things to do as a teacher is to prepare a lesson for a class that they haven't met yet. After spending time and effort creating and delivering an interesting lesson, it can be very disheartening to discover that the stronger students found it boring, while the weaker ones found it too challenging. To avoid this, you can plan ahead ways to make your activities more inclusive. For example:

Any teacher knows that sticking to the exact timings of a lesson plan is close to impossible, and this can often cause a good lesson to turn into a flop. However, this can be avoided by allocating a few minutes extra to each stage of the lesson that would allow you to deal with the unexpected, whilst still keeping on track. These 'flexi stages' are very useful when your students have a few more questions, they need a little longer for that controlled practice, or they don't want to interrupt that speaking activity.

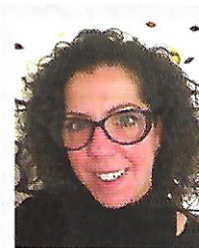
How can a contingency plan be beneficial for your lessons?

- It promotes inclusion.
- It helps maximise students' potential.

“With bottom to top planning, the time available for each lesson is roughly distributed among the three parts as follows: lead-in – 10%, target language presentation – 20%, consolidation practice – 70%.”

- It keeps students engaged.
- It allows time to better assess students' levels.

While it is true that a lesson plan may be completely disregarded if it isn't working for your class, with a bit of practice and a lot of patience it does lay the foundations of a well-structured lesson. Whichever lesson-related issue you may have, whether it be task engagement or lesson flow, from timekeeping to assessing students' pronunciation needs and proficiency level, rest assured you are not alone. Be bold, take the plunge and tweak that lesson plan: start from the end, with a bottom to top plan, surprise your students with experimental lessons, overcome that pronunciation-phobia and hope for the best, but prepare for the unexpected with a contingency plan.



Monica Ruda-Peachey is a DELTA qualified ELT writer and Trinity Cert. teacher trainer. She works with numerous clients on the creation of digital and print teaching and learning materials, as well as exam items. Prior to her writing career, Monica spent almost a decade teaching English to international students in the Czech Republic, Italy and the UK, where she currently lives.