

“A goal without a plan is just a wish.”

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry (1900-1944)

Planning Your Work

Planning in many branches of human life makes life easier. Heading towards the aim and knowing what you will do next saves your time. It helps you to prepare things you will need; it gives you security and confidence. Older pupils become aware of how well-prepared the lesson was and young learners feel it subconsciously.

In schools we have to do long and short term planning. **Long term planning** is what we do before each term. We plan textbooks, teaching aids, interconnection with other subjects and particular topics. Cooperation with other colleagues pays here.

Short term planning covers one topic, one unit or one week. There may be three to ten lessons. We plan not only the topic but also methods, assessment (test, comment, feedback, evaluation ...), basic and supplementary material.

Lesson planning is probably what crosses our mind when we talk about planning because it is a part of everyday teachers' life. A lesson is a type of organized event and the teacher is the main organizer though sometimes not the main visible element. Lessons vary in time, place, topic, atmosphere, methodology and materials but they all aim at learning. They involve participation of learners and teachers and should be pre-scheduled. Pupils learn more easily when they know what to expect in the lesson and what they are expected to do from the teacher. A well planned lesson with routines enables them to predict situations. Each teacher has his own way of planning the lesson; each teacher has his own style. After a few lessons pupils get to know the system, the routine and feel comfortable. Although the teachers are different and they plan their lessons in a different way, some things are common with most of them:

A carefully planned and managed lesson needs a framework: a beginning and an end and some content in between. Writing a lesson plan the teachers write the **unit** plus the **topic** of the lesson, they also write the **class** and the **date**. Then the main core of the lesson plan follows. With each **activity** planned there is **timing**, what and how it will be realized and the supplementary **materials** used. The teacher also takes into consideration the link the lesson has with the one before. He/she thinks about the lesson after. **Organization** of the activities is important. The teacher decides where individual, pair or group work is suitable. Sometimes he involves whole class activities. The time of the day is not of the lowest importance, too. There should be balance between quiet and noisy exercises. The teacher considers whether all four language skills are covered and to what extent teacher-pupil and pupil-pupil activities are used. Lesson planning is a complex process which fortunately after years of practice is not so much time-consuming.

After the lesson is over the teacher still does not forget about the lesson. Even if he/she is not focussed on his/her **self-assessment**, good teachers hardly ever forget about the lesson as soon

as they close the classroom door. The question “Did the pupils learn what I wanted them to learn?” is always besetting. The answers then become the basis for the next lesson plan.

Of course there are **things that can go wrong** and that sometimes could not have been anticipated:

- An external disturbance may appear. A wasp may be flying around the classroom; a ring-tone of a mobile phone can interrupt the activity. Then either get rid of it or make use of it. The second choice is better. The disruptive element can be a good opportunity to increase the number of new words, to train some grammar or just to do storytelling where the element is involved.
- The class might be out of control thanks to the activity done. Then use a calming activity, tell the pupils a story, let them fill in the words in the story. Rather whisper than shout.
- When the activity takes too long, when it takes more time than you have planned, shorten it. Promise to finish the thing next time (but do not forget to do it). Asking pupils to do the rest as homework is not a very clever solution. You must have prepared a different homework in your lesson plan aimed at the topic.
- You can have extra time. There always should be an emergency activity at hand. It should have been involved in the lesson plan.
- An activity does not work. Bad instruction is usually the cause. Just explain the thing once more in a clear way. But if the cassette player does not work, do not try to repair it. You may lose the time. Just change the activity.
- An activity is too difficult. Either simplify the activity or move on to something else.

Nice conclusion and summarizing at the end of the lesson may point out that if not a lot of work then at least several steps forward have been done.

“A good lesson is adaptable and flexible; is a back-up system; has clear objectives; has a variety of activities, skills, interaction, materials, caters for individual learning styles; has interesting, enjoyable content; has an appropriate level of challenge and is well prepared, well planned and well timed.” (Brewster, J., Ellis, G., Girard, D.: The Primary English Teacher’s Guide, Longman 2005)

Both teachers and learners want to work in a good atmosphere in the classroom. This atmosphere depends on many aspects. The most important of them are: motivation, maintaining classroom control and discipline and organising learning activities.

Motivation is probably one of the key factors that influence the success of English language learning. If the pupils are not happy in the classroom not enjoying the lesson, the teacher’s job is much harder. Firstly we should provide the classroom atmosphere which promotes pupils’ confidence and self-esteem. Then our pupils will learn more effectively and enjoyably.

The teacher may help the children to feel secure. It is the **physical surroundings** helping the pupils to feel relaxed and focused on learning. The teacher can put as much on the walls as he can – posters, postcards, pictures, pupils’ drawings, writing, calendars Plants, vases with flowers, four dimensional objects, anything which adds character to the room, is helpful. It just has to leave you space to work. Of course, children themselves can bring the objects, pictures or postcards. The teacher then tells the rest of the class a little bit about them in English. Objects may create a home-like atmosphere which helps the children to feel secure.

What are the other “pieces of security”? **Routines.** Regular activities, items bring the feeling of a well governed world. Let’s start the lesson with “Good morning” every day. Let’s have a birthday calendar, read the book of the month (regularly - e.g. on Wednesday). Error **corrections** should be done in a descent way. Mistakes and errors should not be corrected during using the language for communication. Whenever a pupil is trying to tell you something, forget his/her mistakes and accept his/her talk. Explain the children that everyone makes mistakes when he/she is learning. Pupils themselves should not laugh at others’ mistakes. Give **children** the **responsibility** for doing some practical jobs in the classroom - cleaning the board, watering flowers, bringing the teaching aids, chalks, giving out the library books. And also consider the following: Scott and Ytreberg in Teaching English to Children (Longman 2005) recommend organizing no competitions, giving no physical rewards or prizes and giving children no English names as they would lose a bit of their personal identity. Do you agree?

Motivation is some kind of internal drive which pushes pupils to do things in order to do something. Without motivation a large part of joy might disappear from our lessons.

Things already mentioned are interrelated with **classroom control and discipline**. Routines can bring flavour of discipline into the classroom. Young children gradually become familiar with the classroom patterns that help to make them feel confident. The teacher talks **English** as much as possible but a certain balance between mother tongue and English should be found. All instructions given in English may confuse children. They may feel uncomfortable if the teacher talks to them in a strange foreign language all the time. Children should be gradually introduced to use English through rhymes, songs and games. When speaking English use miming, acting, puppets, varied tone of voice, body language. Keep your language simple but natural and keep it at pupils’ level. The **teacher’s behaviour, his/her teaching style** and his/her attitude towards children and his job are another important aspect influencing lessons. Children work out very quickly what is and is not allowed. They generally like to work within a framework where the boundaries of acceptable and unacceptable behaviour are reasonable and consistent. Thus they know where they stand. The teacher should find a good balance between friendly and authoritarian approach. Good **discipline** is a good step towards good learning. It is achieved mainly with good organization of the lesson and tiny teacher’s tricks. Orders and restrictions do not work well. Address the pupils by their names which means to learn the names as soon as possible. Give clear instructions. Act firmly but friendly. Wait for quiet before beginning a new activity. Be tolerant of an acceptable noise level. Remember that the noisier the teacher is, the noisier the children will become. Give praise with sincerity and enthusiasm in a variety of ways. Praise groups or the whole class as well as individuals. Just find certain balance again and do not over-praise pupils, it may become valueless.

Planning a lesson the teacher anticipates the effects of different kinds of activities as well as their sequence and organization. **Organizing learning activities** takes much of the teacher’s time.

Concentration span with young children is not very long. Therefore they need constant change in activities. It is up to the teacher to find the right moment when the activity must be changed. He/she gives a new kind of activity and the way of organization. Children may work in groups or **individually**. Young children prefer working alone. Later they find friends and like to share. Then cooperation is something which has to be nurtured and learnt. **Pair work** should be used before children start working **in groups**. Some children do not like each other.

Therefore we should frequently change the pairs and groups. Children should not be always allowed to choose their groups themselves.

Many textbooks assume that all the pupils in the class are at the same language level. This would be an ideal situation which hardly ever happens. The average classroom is normally of very **mixed ability**. There even may be a bilingual pupil who speaks English well. The teacher must use strategies to encourage pupils to cooperate, to help each other, to share, even to help the teacher (bilinguals). The teacher may need extension activities for those who are “quick”; he/she may choose activities that cater for different levels and types (see chapter Different methods for different pupils). The teacher may even organize differentiated learning activities for different groups of pupils.

Time management is another skill the teacher should use. Good realistic timing helps the teacher to avoid rush, which may lead to inattention or ineffective learning. Timing is one of the most important parts of lesson planning.