


# Planning Lessons and Courses

Designing sequences of work  
for the language classroom

Tessa Woodward



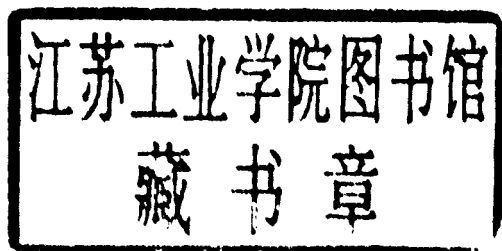
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**8 What are our freedoms and constraints? (continued)**

*Crowd control*  
*Basic chores*  
*Group work*  
One-to-one (or very small group) teaching  
Practical principles for teaching one-to-one  
or very small groups  
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# Introduction

## What do I mean by planning?

The title of this book is *Planning Lessons and Courses* so I'd like to define right away what I mean by it. By 'planning', I mean what most working teachers do when they say they're planning their lessons and courses. Thus I take planning to include the following: considering the students, thinking of the content, materials and activities that could go into a course or lesson, jotting these down, having a quiet ponder, cutting things out of magazines and anything else that you feel will help you to teach well and the students to learn a lot, i.e. to ensure our lessons and courses are good. I do NOT mean the writing of pages of notes with headings such as 'Aims' and 'Anticipated problems' to be given in to an observer before they watch you teach.

I also take it as given that plans are just plans. They're not legally binding. We don't have to stick to them come hell or high water. They are to help us shape the space, time and learning we share with students. We can depart from them or stick to them as we, the students and the circumstances seem to need.

## What do I mean by a 'good' lesson or course?

I've said above that planning is something we do to ensure our lessons and courses are good ones. But what is 'good'?

When busy and tired, we often regard the variables of our classes (such as the type of class, the prescribed syllabus, the schedule) as constraints blocking the achievement of a 'good' lesson or course. 'If only ...,' we think. 'If only my class were smaller or I had more resources or I had more time to plan. Then I could teach really well.'

We have perhaps too a view of other people's classes, small ones or big ones or homogeneous ones, as being 'normal' and our own as being exceptional or inferior in some way. We might hear laughter through a classroom wall or watch a teacher preparing bits of paper for an interesting activity and we may feel, 'Gosh! I wish I could do that!' We may assume that 'good' lies outside our own work, outside ourselves.

## Introduction

If we have the definition above, of a 'good' lesson or course being one that other people experience or that goes exactly to plan or one that is exactly what we've been told is good or one that's only achievable if we have hours of planning time available, then we are setting ourselves up for failure every time a class is bigger or smaller or worse resourced than it's 'supposed' to be, every time students act like real people and do something unpredictable. We can look at the variables of the classroom differently though, regarding them instead as part of the description of our situation. 'I have a largish class,' we can think, 'with not many resources. So some things are not possible and other things are possible. I'll have to create what I can, given my situation. This is my setting and my design problem and this is how I'm going to set about solving it. I'm going to do the best I can and THAT is what I'm going to call "good"!'

We need to have robust, personal criteria for what we consider good work. Granted, we will inevitably have absorbed notions of what 'good' is from outside ourselves, perhaps from our training, from our favourite teachers from school, or from colleagues, authors or conference presenters that we happen to like. But we need to ponder our own definitions of 'good' to make sure they're realistic and set us up for success.

I'll state my own criteria for a good language course or lesson now. A good lesson or course, to me, is one where there's *plenty of language learning going on* and where the students and I:

- feel comfortable physically, socially and psychologically
- know a little about each other, why we are together and what we want to get out of the experience. (We also know these things may keep shifting slightly as we go through the course.)
- are aware of some of what there is to learn
- are aware of some of the things we have learned
- have a notion about how we learn best
- accept that language is a mixture of things (part instinct, motor skill, system, cultural artefact, music, part vehicle for content and part content itself), that it changes all the time and thus that we need to teach and learn it in a variety of ways
- know why we're doing the activities we're doing
- do things in class that would be worth doing and learn things that are worth learning for their own sake outside the language classroom
- become more capable of taking the initiative, making decisions and judging what is good and useful
- start useful habits which will continue after we have left each other
- follow our course and lesson plans or depart from them when necessary in order to bring about the criteria above.

## *What are teachers' concerns about lesson and course planning?*

These are some of the things that are necessary for me to consider a course or lesson good, for me to consider my work good!

### **What are teachers' concerns about lesson and course planning?**

Our concerns about preparing lessons and courses tend to differ according to the amount of experience we have.

#### **A beginner teacher's concern: 'Planning takes too long'**

'It just doesn't seem right! I stay up till one in the morning preparing for a 45 minute lesson the next day! I can't see how I can keep this up. What happens when I start a real job and have to teach six hours a day? I mean ... does it get any better?'

This is what a beginner teacher asked me recently. I remembered when I started my first teaching job. I used to spend all evening planning lessons for the next day. Why does lesson preparation take inexperienced teachers so long?

I think it's partly because there are so many variables for a starter teacher to consider as they think about the time they will spend with a class. Starter teachers may think:

- What do I know about the students?
- What will be possible in that physical space with those chairs and that table? How long have I got?
- What shall I teach? Culture, a topic, study skills, listening, vocabulary? Or the next page of the textbook?
- How shall I teach it? How do I interest students and get them working together well and doing something worthwhile?
- How will I know whether things are going well or not?
- What materials shall I use? I hate this page of the textbook. I want a picture of a thirsty woman but I can't find one.
- How will I write my decisions down? My trainer has given me a model plan. I have to write in the timing but I have no idea how long things will take.
- How do I plan a whole series of interesting lessons? On my training course I only did one or two separate ones.
- Will the plan happen? Do I really have the control to make these things happen? Is it OK to change my mind in class and do something I didn't plan? Will the students change things?
- Am I really a teacher? Do I want to be one? Or does it mean being like my old, hated, maths teacher?



## Introduction

- I read the other day that languages are learned and not taught, so am I out of a job anyway?

It's no wonder that beginner teachers wander round their homes making endless cups of tea, staring at books sightlessly, and tearing up sheets of paper. There are a lot of things to consider and to try to get right, *all at the same time!*

### An experienced teacher's concern: 'It's getting boring!'

'Oh, that was so boring! Well, actually I don't think THEY were incredibly bored. I mean they were working all right but I bored MYSELF rigid! I've done that lesson too many times.'

Remarks like these, which I've heard in staffrooms or said myself, point to the dilemma of experienced teachers. Planning and teaching have got easier. They don't take up much mental space any more. Experienced teachers can switch onto 'auto-pilot', do things they have done many times before and use their energies in other parts of their lives such as bringing up children, learning fencing or falling in love again.

Auto-pilot is really useful. It can get you through times of fatigue, personal happiness or distress, but it can be boring for the pilot. It's good to be able to cut corners and have more time for yourself but it's not so good to succumb to the temptation of using old ideas and materials again and again.

## Ways of getting better at planning

As I said above, I can remember how it felt to spend all evening preparing for one lesson, to stare at paragraphs of explanation in grammar books wondering what anomalous finites were and whether it would be useful for students to learn about them. Here I am 20 years later and sometimes I still feel a bit the same! Now I'm reading about the grammar of speech and wondering if it would help me or my students to learn about it. But one thing IS different now. I can choose how long to take over my planning. I can plan a lot of the next lesson by the time I've finished the present one. I can plan a lesson in about ten minutes, jotting down a few notes on a piece of paper and things still seem to go all right. I can have an outline in my head that is designed to hand most things over to the students. I can spend a long time planning a course or lesson and actually enjoy it!

I'm not alone in this. One experienced colleague writes nothing down but says he does a lot of thinking in the bath in the morning. Another plans out loud to herself on the 45 minute car journey to work.