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The lesson

Overview

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2.1 The lesson: different perspectives

The lesson is a type of organized goal-oriented social event that occurs in most, if not all, cultures. And although lessons in different places may vary in topic, atmosphere, methodology and materials, they all have several basic elements in common:

- Their main objective is learning;
- They are attended by a predetermined population of learner(s) and teacher(s);
- They are held at a preset time and place (except for asynchronous online lessons: see **18 Digital technology and online teaching**).

There are additional aspects of a lesson which may be less obvious. It is useful to consider these through the medium of metaphor, as suggested in **Pause for thought** below.

Pause for thought

Which of the following metaphors captures the essence of a lesson, in your opinion? You can choose more than one, or invent a new one of your own.

climbing a mountain consulting a doctor a conversation eating a meal
a football game a menu a television show a wedding

Optionally, discuss your choices with a partner, and your reasons for them. Then read on.

Comment

It is interesting that in any given group of people, there will be a wide variety of different selections, because of the different ways individuals interpret reality (see **20 Learner differences 2: diversity and inclusion**). The main aspects of a lesson which are foregrounded in the different interpretations are the following:

Cooperative interaction. This is most obvious in the metaphor of conversation, but is also represented by the wedding, the television show and, in perhaps a rather different way, the football game. The focus here is on the dynamic relationship among students, or between students and teacher. A lesson essentially involves cooperative social interaction, and should promote the participation of all members of the class.

Goal-oriented effort, involving hard work. Here, climbing a mountain might be an appropriate metaphor, or perhaps a football game. This image suggests the existence of a clear, worthwhile objective, the necessity of effort to attain it and a resulting sense of satisfaction and triumph if it is achieved, or of failure and disappointment if it is not.

An interesting or enjoyable experience. Enjoyment may be based on interest and entertainment (television show), challenge and fun (football game), or the satisfaction of a need or desire (eating a meal). The main point is that participants should enjoy it and therefore be motivated to attend while it is going on – and to come back for more!

Preset roles. The role of the teacher typically involves responsibility and activity, and that of the students, responsiveness and receptivity (though of course in specific procedures the roles may temporarily be reversed). The consultation with a doctor, or the wedding, would represent a role-based culture of this kind. Participants in such events know and accept in advance the demands that will be made on them and their expected behaviours.

A social event with elements of ritual. Examples here would be a wedding or a television show. Certain set behaviours occur every time: for example, there may be a certain kind of introduction or ending, certain pre-determined exchanges or sequences, and the components of the overall event may be selected from a limited set of possibilities.

A series of free choices. Occasionally, it may happen that participants are free to do their own thing within a set of choices (a menu) or a relatively loose structure (a conversation). They construct the event as it progresses, by making their own decisions. The teacher is less of an authority figure than a facilitator, participating with the students in the teaching/learning process.

Each of the interpretations described above – and you may well have discovered others – represents one aspect of the whole picture. It is helpful in your planning and teaching of specific lessons if you are aware of these different possible perspectives: a lesson is not just a type of interaction, for example, or a goal-oriented process, or a ritual social event. It is all of these, and more.

2.2 Functions of the teacher in the English language lesson

During the latter part of the twentieth century, there was a strong reaction against the old-fashioned image of the teacher as ‘master/mistress’ and lecturer. As a result, teachers have been encouraged to see themselves mainly as supporting learning rather than causing it, as facilitators who help students acquire knowledge or skills, rather than ‘tellers’ who teach facts. There is a general condemnation of the ‘mug and jug’ model (the student as empty mug and the teacher as a jug pouring information into it) and of teacher talk in general, with a preference for eliciting ideas from students, rather than instructing them.

In principle, of course, most teachers would like to see themselves as supportive rather than dictatorial, and to encourage learner independence and autonomy. A strong emphasis on student initiative and responsibility, however, can sometimes interfere with learning, particularly in language courses. Language is composed of a collection of arbitrary sounds, vocabulary and conventions of grammar and syntax: there is no way the students can discover these without substantial exposure to information and/or an instructor. If substantial exposure is not available – and sometimes even when it is – the teacher needs to be proactive in order to enable students to learn. Effective language teaching, therefore, needs to be based on a substantial amount of teacher-initiated instruction, as well as student-centred activation.

Pause for thought

How many different kinds of functions does the English teacher have during a lesson? Make a list, and then compare it with the list below. You’ve probably used different terminology, but will have some similar items. Check to see what your list has left out – or added.

Comment

The list you make, and the order in which you list the functions, will clearly be based on your own learning experiences, as well as your beliefs about how a teacher should function. In any case, the teacher fulfils a number of different roles during any lesson: I’ve seen lists that run to 30 or 40 different possibilities! My own is shorter, but still very varied.

Teacher functions

Instructor. The teacher, together with the teaching materials, provides information about the language: its sounds, letters, words, grammar and communicative use. The most essential teaching skills here are the ability to provide clear explanations and appropriate samples of spoken and written language.

Activator. Getting the students to use English themselves is essential for acquisition to take place. ‘Using English’ does not necessarily mean getting them to speak or write; it may involve only listening or reading. So the teacher needs to provide tasks that activate the

students and get them to do something that involves engaging with the forms, meanings and uses of the language.

Model. The teacher represents the prototype of the English speaker for the students during a lesson. It is the teacher's accent, writing and language usages that the students will use as their immediate model. So at least some of the lesson time needs to be devoted to providing such a model.

Manager. The management of classroom process includes activities such as bringing the class together at the beginning of a lesson and organizing group work, as well as making sure that individual members of the class are attending and responding appropriately. This may be more, or less, difficult to do, depending on the class population (see **17 Classroom discipline**).

Provider of feedback. The teacher provides feedback on student oral or written production. Exactly when and how much corrective feedback to supply is a tricky issue (see **12 Feedback and error correction**), but it is, along with the provision of approval and confirmation, an essential function. In order to progress, students need to know what they are doing right or well, what they are doing not so well, and how they can improve.

Supporter. The teacher encourages students, helps them understand and produce appropriate language, suggests learning strategies or resources that may be useful, and encourages initiative. This not only improves learning and raises motivation, but also encourages the students to become independent learners who will continue to progress after and outside the lesson.

Assessor. Teachers occasionally have to spend some lesson time assessing students. This might be formally, through graded classroom tests, or informally, through quick quizzes or dictations or ongoing assessment. This is because, in any process, we need to know where we are now in order to know where to go next, and assessment provides vital information on students' present level of proficiency (see **13 Assessment and testing**).

Motivator The level of initial student motivation when they come to study English may vary, but whether the language-learning process in the course of the lesson is interesting and motivating or boring and demotivating is largely up to the teacher (for more on interesting activity design, see **4 Tasks**). Even students who are at first unwilling to participate can be motivated to do so if they are given appropriate and stimulating tasks, together with the teacher encouragement and support mentioned above.

2.3 Classroom organization

The lesson may include various kinds of classroom organization: teacher-fronted, full class, collaboration between students in group work, or individual work. The types of interaction involved in each will be explored in more detail in **3 Classroom interaction**.

Teacher-fronted. The most common type of classroom organization is teacher-fronted. This may be based on elicitation of responses through questioning (see **3 Classroom interaction** for more on this), which involves student responses. Or it may be 'teacher talk' where there is no overt student response, only attentive listening. This might be

based on things like explanation of a grammar point, presentation of vocabulary, telling a story, or a lecture on a topic connected to the language.

Teacher talk is often condemned as being overly teacher-centred, and not allowing sufficient opportunities for students to be active learners. There are even YouTube videos advising language teachers how to cut down on their 'TTT' (teacher talk time) in lessons. However, for many students, teacher talk is their only opportunity to get much-needed live comprehensible oral input, addressed to them and adapted to their level; and teacher explanations of language points are likely to be clearer and more effective alternatives to written or recorded versions of the same. The important point is to use teacher talk where it clearly fulfils an important function in promoting student learning, and to complement it with student activation.

Whether based on elicitation or teacher talk, a teacher-fronted process is often what is called *lockstep*: all the students are expected to do the same thing at the same time, according to the teacher's instructions or cues. But variations are possible: see **3 Classroom interaction** and **20 Learner differences 2: diversity and inclusion**.

Full-class. Full-class interactions are mainly in the form of oral discussions. The teacher here acts only as a facilitator or catalyst, encouraging student contributions, but keeping their own speech to a minimum. Sometimes the discussion may be supplemented by writing: students may make notes of what is said, or either the students or the teacher may record key points on the board, or using the chat facility in an online lesson.

Group and pair work. When a class is organized into pairs or groups (in an online lesson this would be through the use of breakout rooms), the responsibility for learning activity falls on the students themselves. There are two main types of such collaboration. The first is when two or more students work on a task that could in fact have been done by an individual: for example, when students are asked to do a grammar exercise, or write a paragraph, together. What often happens in fact is that one of the pair or group does most of the work, as there is no real necessity for collaboration in order to achieve the goal. Better are group tasks which do require collaboration: recalling or brainstorming tasks, for example, where a number of students working together will always find more and better results than a single individual; or discussions, where the group has to reach a consensus; or information-gap, where students find out things from each other.

Individual work. Individual work is likely to be done on reading and writing tasks. All the class may be working on a single task, but – unlike the lockstep process referred to earlier – individual work enables students to work at their own pace and sometimes actually to make other choices relating to content (see **3 Classroom interaction** and **20 Learner differences 2: diversity and inclusion**). In an online lesson, this would be 'time out' from the online interaction, usually with a preset time limit. An important type of individual work is homework (see **4 Tasks**).

It is important for a lesson to include different types of classroom organization, and not to be limited to teacher-fronted.

Pause for thought

Look at the following teaching objectives, as expressed by the teacher, and suggest which patterns of classroom organization might facilitate their achievement most successfully. Then read on.

- 1 **Comprehension check:** 'We've just finished reading a story. I want to make sure the class has understood it, using the comprehension questions in the book.'
- 2 **Familiarization with text:** 'We've just finished reading a story. I'm fairly sure they've understood the basic plot, but I want them to get really familiar with the text through reading, as they're going to have to pass an exam on it.'
- 3 **Oral fluency:** 'I have a small [15] class of businesspeople, who need more practice in talking. I want them to do a discussion task where they have to decide which qualities are most important for a manager.'
- 4 **Grammar check:** 'We've been working on the distinction between two similar verb constructions. I want to find out how far they've grasped it, using an exercise in the book where they have to choose the right construction for the context.'
- 5 **Writing:** 'They need to improve their writing. I want to ask them to write for a few minutes in class, but am worried they might just make a lot of mistakes and not learn anything.'
- 6 **Grammar practice:** 'They need to practise asking questions. I thought of using an interview situation where they might interview me or each other.'
- 7 **New vocabulary:** 'I want to draw their attention to some new vocabulary we've met in a text.'

Comment

There may, of course, be more than one way of achieving any particular objective: having made your own selections, compare them with my own suggestions below.

- 1 **Comprehension check.** Usually this is done through teacher-led question-answer sessions based on the textbook questions, but individual work is probably more effective. In full-class questioning, only a minority of the class answers: more students participate if you let all of them try to answer the question individually in writing, while you move around the class to help and monitor. You can always check their answers later by a quick full-class review or by taking in notebooks.
- 2 **Familiarization with text.** It is probably best to use individual work here, in the form of silent reading. Or, if the students have already read the text on their own, it can be helpful to read it aloud yourself (teacher-led) while they follow, in order to recycle it in a slightly different way. Another possibility is to ask different students to study different sections of the story in depth, and then get together to teach each other what they have studied (individual and group work).

- 3 **Oral fluency.** Group work is best in this case, certainly much better than full-class interaction. A class of 15 may seem small, but even so, dividing it into five groups of three gives each participant, on average, five times as much speaking practice (see **3 Classroom interaction**). Even if some of the time is spent speaking the students' L1, they are likely to spend more time speaking English than they would have done in a full-class discussion.
- 4 **Grammar check.** The teacher's clear objective is to assess ('I want to find out how well they understand it'), though they do not actually use the word. Therefore, as with the comprehension check, it would be best to use individual work to ensure that each student has the chance to answer the questions. Later, a teacher-led process can be used to check answers.
- 5 **Writing.** Initially, most writing is done individually, so it makes sense to start with individual work. A collaborative stage can follow, as students help each other improve, correct and polish their texts. Teacher monitoring can take place during the writing, if there are not too many students in the class, or later.
- 6 **Grammar practice.** In order to make the interview produce as much practice of questions as possible, it is a good idea to let students prepare at least some of these in advance: individually, in pairs, or through full-class interaction (brainstorming suggestions). Students may then interview the teacher or each other.
- 7 **New vocabulary.** In general, the most efficient way to deal with new vocabulary is just to present and explain it (teacher talk). If, however, you think that some of your class know some of the items, ask them, and give them the opportunity to teach them for you (closed- or open-ended teacher questioning).

2.4 Lesson planning

Most English lessons in schools are about 45 minutes long, though sometimes, particularly where the students are adults, they may be as much as 90 minutes. For the purposes of this chapter, I am assuming that the lesson takes between 45 and 60 minutes.

Components

A typical English lesson is likely to include a selection of the following components:

- reading of a written text, with associated comprehension tasks
- a listening comprehension activity
- an oral communicative task, such as discussion of a topic
- a writing task
- presentation and explanation of a grammatical point
- presentation and explanation of vocabulary

- presentation and explanation of other linguistic features (e.g., pronunciation, spelling, punctuation, aspects of language use)
- exercises on linguistic usages, such as grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, spelling or punctuation
- silent reading (e.g., using simplified readers)
- review of homework
- preparation for a test
- a test

Pause for thought

Have a look at a unit from an English coursebook you are familiar with. Which of the components listed above can you identify?

Comment

The last four items above are not, of course, normally included in a coursebook unit. You are, however, likely to have found most of the others. Typically, a unit will include substantial work on grammar and vocabulary, and tasks activating students in all four skills (listening, reading, speaking and writing). Which of them is emphasized more and which less will depend on the type of course and the target student population. In a book for a CLIL course, for example, the focus is likely to be on content-based reading or listening material; in a course focusing on conversational English, there are more likely to be oral tasks and a lot of vocabulary rather than grammar.

Variation

In a lesson which is entirely taken up with one kind of activity, interest is likely to flag. Students will find it more difficult to concentrate and learn, and boredom may, in some classes, result in discipline problems. A varied lesson is likely to produce better learning, to be more engaging and enjoyable for both teacher and students, and to cater for a wider range of learning styles (see **20 Learner differences 2: diversity and inclusion**). It may also prolong energy levels by providing regular refreshing changes in the type of mental or physical activity demanded.

Lessons may vary in a number of ways:

- **Tempo.** Activities may be brisk and fast-moving (such as guessing games) or slower and reflective (such as reading literature or writing brief compositions).
- **Organization.** The students may work individually, in pairs, in groups, or as a full class interacting with the teacher, as described in the previous section.

- **Material.** A lot of your lesson may be based on the coursebook, but it is good to spend at least some of the time working on teacher- or student-initiated tasks or digital materials (see 15 **Teaching/learning materials**).
- **Mode and skill.** Activities may be based on the written or the spoken language; and within these, they may vary as to whether the students are asked to produce (speak, write) or receive (listen, read).
- **Difficulty.** Activities may be easy and non-demanding, or difficult, requiring concentration and effort.
- **Topic.** Both the language-teaching point and the (non-linguistic) topic may change from one activity to another.
- **Mood.** Activities vary also in mood: light and fun-based versus serious and profound, tense versus relaxed and so on.
- **Stir-settle.** Some activities enliven and excite students (such as controversial discussions, or activities that involve physical movement). Others, like dictations, have the effect of calming them down (MacLennan, 1987).
- **Active-passive.** Students may be activated in a way that encourages their own initiative, or they may only be required to do as they are told.

Obviously, when planning a lesson, you cannot go through each of the items above and check out your plan to make sure you are covering them all! But hopefully reading through them will raise your general awareness of the various possibilities. Note that lessons with younger learners should, on the whole, be made up of shorter and more varied components than those planned for older ones. But even adults, in my experience, dislike spending a whole period on the same task and appreciate a shift of focus and activity type during the lesson.

All of this applies also to a sequence of lessons. Make sure you don't get into a dull routine of doing the same sort of thing every lesson, and that you cover, over time, a variety of tasks, texts and materials.

Some practical tips on lesson-planning

- 1 **Put the harder tasks earlier.** On the whole, students are fresher and more energetic earlier in the lesson and get progressively less so as it goes on, particularly if the lesson is a long one. So it makes sense to put the tasks that demand more effort and concentration earlier on (learning new material, or tackling a difficult text, for example) and the lighter ones later.
- 2 **Do quieter activities before lively ones.** It can be quite difficult to calm down a class – particularly of children or adolescents – who have been participating in a lively, exciting activity. So if one of your lesson components is quiet and reflective, it is generally better to plan it before a lively one, not after. The exception to this is when you have a rather lethargic or tired class of adults. In such cases, 'stirring' activities towards the beginning of the class can be refreshing and help students get into the right frame of mind for learning

- 3 **Pull the class together at the beginning and end of the lesson.** We usually start with a general activity like greetings, attendance-taking and so on; but remember that it's a good idea to have some kind of rounding-off procedure at the end of the lesson as well (see the next tip). So activities which tend to fragment the class – group or pair work, or individual work on digital materials, for example – are best done in the middle of the lesson, framed by full-class interaction before and after. Teachers of younger classes often find that set rituals are useful for this: routine greetings and information about the date and weather at the beginning, for example, songs and farewells at the end.
- 4 **End on a positive note.** This does not necessarily mean ending with a joke or a fun activity. For some classes, it could be something quite serious, like a summary of what we have achieved today, or a positive evaluation of something the class has done. Another possibility is to give a short task which the class is very likely to succeed in and which will generate feelings of satisfaction. The point is to have students leave the classroom feeling good.
- 5 **Don't leave homework-giving to the end.** Give homework in the course of the lesson, and simply remind the students what it was at the end. If you leave it to the end, then you may find that you don't have enough time to explain it properly (see the section on **Homework in 4 Tasks**). In any case, it is better to round off the lesson with some kind of planned ending, as noted in **tip 3** above.
- 6 **Prepare a reserve.** Have an extra activity ready to include if you find you have time on your hands (see Ur and Wright (1992), for some ideas for short activities). Similarly, note down in advance which components of your lesson you will cancel or postpone if you are running late, or if you've added something unplanned which took up a lot of time.

2.5 Written lesson plans

It's important to write down in advance what you plan to do in the lesson – not just to think about it and put a bookmark at the relevant page of the textbook! This is particularly true for inexperienced teachers, but even many experienced ones – myself included – prepare written plans for every lesson, though they vary a lot in how they format them.

The function of such plans is not, or not mainly, as instructions to be referred to constantly during the lesson itself. In practice, I usually look through my lesson plan just before the lesson begins, and then rarely need to glance at it while teaching, except to check specific information like page numbers or vocabulary I want to cover. A more important reason is that writing makes you think concretely and practically. It ensures that you haven't forgotten anything and that you have planned and ordered all the components and materials appropriately. Knowing what is planned also contributes to your confidence when entering the classroom: a confidence which communicates itself to the students.

Having a lesson plan does not, of course, mean that you can't diverge from it. You may want to add extra, unplanned activities, initiated by you or the students in the course of the lesson and that you feel are valuable and worth adding. Alternatively, you may find as the lesson proceeds that something you planned is unnecessary or inappropriate (or you

simply don't have time for it), and you need to skip it. It's a good idea, therefore, to glance through your original lesson plan after the lesson, and note anything you omitted and still want to cover, perhaps in the next lesson.

The lesson plan format

Each teacher has their own preferred layout for a lesson plan. However you display it, I suggest you include the following information:

- How you will open the lesson
- A brief description of each component, in the order in which you want to use them (noting any you may omit if you run out of time)
- The classroom organization (e.g., 'group work') you plan to use for each
- Page numbers of any coursebook feature you want to use
- Lists of any vocabulary you want to teach or review
- Homework (if planned)
- How you will close the lesson
- A reserve activity for inclusion if you have time.

You will also need to prepare, of course, any supplementary materials you are using: copies of texts or other material for distribution; links to websites you intend to use; pictures, texts or graphics for display, either digitally or on paper.

Pause for thought

If you are already teaching, have a look at a recent lesson plan of your own. Does it include the components above? Does it also include the desired learning outcomes (goals) of each component?

Comment

It's important for the teacher to be aware of the learning goals of each lesson component: there's a tendency for some teachers to include activities simply because they keep the students busy, or because they seem nice. This is why novice teachers are often encouraged to write explicitly what the learning goal is for each lesson component. More experienced teachers usually skip the explicit writing of such goals, but can easily, if challenged, identify them. Occasionally, of course, you may include activities that have goals other than language learning as such: improving classroom climate or group solidarity, for example, or simply as motivating time-fillers for a difficult class in a lesson at the end of the day. But even in such cases, it's important to be aware why you are doing them, whether or not you actually write the aims into the lesson plan.

Other uses for the lesson plan

In addition to using the written lesson plan to guide your own lesson, there are two further major uses for it.

Share with the class. At the beginning of a lesson, many teachers like to write up on the board the main ‘agenda’ – a shortened version of their lesson plan – so that the students are also aware of what the lesson is to include and have a sense of structure and achievement. In general, sharing your plans and objectives with the students can contribute to a pleasant and cooperative relationship with the class, and this is one simple and practical way of doing so. You can then tick off the components as you cover them.

Reflection. It’s useful to use your lesson plan later as a basis for reflection. By each component, note briefly how it went, and then think about what you can learn for future action from successes or failures or interesting developments.

Review: Check yourself

- 1 What are the key characteristics of a lesson (in any subject)?
- 2 How many different ways of perceiving the English language lesson can you recall (for example, ‘cooperative interaction’)?
- 3 Can you recall at least five different functions of the teacher in the lesson?
- 4 Why is group work appropriate for practising oral fluency?
- 5 Why should a lesson include a variety of different components?
- 6 In what ways may these components be varied? Can you recall at least three?
- 7 Can you recall at least three practical tips about lesson planning?
- 8 Why is it important to write down your lesson plan?

Further reading

Harmer, J. (2015). *The Practice of English Language Teaching* (5th Edition). (pp. 214–224), Pearson.
(Further useful guidance on various aspects of lesson planning)

Woodward, T. (2001). *Planning Lessons and Courses*. Cambridge University Press.
(An extended treatment of various aspects of advance planning, both at lesson- and at full-course level, with practical suggestions)

References

Maclennan, S. (1987). Integrating lesson planning and class management. *ELT Journal*, 41(3). 193–197.

Ur, P. and Wright, A. (1992). *Five-Minute Activities: A Resource Book of Short Activities*. Cambridge University Press.