Programme 1: Planning Your Lessons – teacher support worksheet

If you are a teacher of English, especially if you are working with large classes in difficult conditions, this series of twelve programmes is definitely for you. Our first topic is Planning Your Lessons. The teachers in the programme agree that lesson planning is definitely necessary. But where should you start? This is what two teachers we talked to from Afghanistan said:

‘Without a lesson plan, we should not be entering the class.’ (Khatereha)

‘Teaching is like an art. A teacher should be an artist. A teacher should always try her or his best to have a lesson plan.’ (Zalmina)

Usually teachers are given a syllabus, and often a set textbook to follow. This provides a framework and helps us to map out what areas of language we need to introduce, practise and revise. Sometimes teachers are asked to write a scheme of work for the year or term, based on the syllabus or textbook. Textbooks tell us what to cover but often don’t allow us to practise all the four skills: reading, writing, speaking and listening. In their lesson plans, many teachers find ways to introduce more ‘communicative’ activities to develop speaking and listening too.

Daya, from Nepal, thinks it’s a good idea to focus not just on what you are teaching, but on what the learners are learning, and how they are reacting.

There are various ingredients which combine together to make a good lesson. Agnieska, who comes from Poland, believes organisation is important, as well as interesting materials, good relationships, a good atmosphere and good preparation.

Over to you!
In your opinion, what makes a good lesson?

Ask a colleague!
Sometimes the best ideas and solutions come from colleagues. What are the vital ingredients of an effective lesson plan? Discuss this with another teacher and make a list below:

Teachers often use the beginnings and ends of lessons to engage their students in a friendly and personal way, using English naturally. A short ‘warm up’ activity can start the lesson in the right mood and get everyone focussed before we move on to harder things. This Afghan teacher began with greetings and asking about the weather:

‘Good afternoon guys. How are you? (Fine) Everybody’s good? (Yes) What about the weather? The weather is good today. Is it cloudy? (No) No, it’s sunny, yeah? (Yes) So everybody is ready to have a new lesson today? Nobody’s tired? . . .’

Agnieska adds that we should set goals, or lesson objectives.

‘To set goals before starting the lesson, what you want to teach, it is really important, because sometimes you can’t predict what children can do during the lesson.’

We need to include in our plan what we want our students to be able to do by the end of the lesson. For example, “by the end of the lesson students will be able to use three ways to ask permission: Can I..., Could I? and May I...?”
We need to be able to introduce the lesson in an interesting way, without just copying the material from the textbook and without translating.

Sahar from Egypt is teaching the expression “used to”. She explains:

‘I get two pictures of a rich man who has a very expensive car and cigarettes and so on . . . and a very poor person. And I start elicit that it’s the same person. So what happened to him? Now he’s very poor, he lives in a very rural area. So I elicit the language from the students. And from this context I start introducing “used to’. ‘He used to have a car, but now he doesn’t have any.’

She then moves from her example of the poor man who used to be rich to ‘personalise’ the language, first talking about herself and then letting the students talk about themselves but in a controlled way.

You can follow your text book or school syllabus but introduce language in a way that brings it to life and involves the students. In Sahar’s example she only needs to create two pictures, the rest of the information comes from the teacher and the students.

An exercise in the text book can of course be useful for a follow up - we don’t have to start with it! Remember that ‘resources’ can involve many things - your students and their world, you, your sense of humour and imagination, your story-telling or diagrams and pictures drawn on the board!

We need to match our teaching to students’ abilities. Every class is different and so are the abilities of our students. When we plan our teaching we need to be ready to deal with slower students as well as the more advanced. This needs to be built into your plan.

We should also vary the class ‘interaction’. This means sometimes you are at the front working with the whole class, and they are listening to you and following the teacher’s lead. But in other parts of our lessons, there are periods when we get our students to work together in pairs and in groups. When you plan the lesson, you should decide how the students will interact with you, the teacher, and with each other, at each stage of the lesson.

Planning how you will motivate students and retain their interest is also important. Oscar, from Colombia, says:

‘I think something really important and motivating for our students is that we teach the language in context. The teacher can prepare a story, or the topic the teacher wants them to learn, through content, through stories, through poems, songs - through something the students are motivated to know.’

Most of the teachers who talked to us for this series agreed that keeping our learners’ interests in mind was very important. And also being flexible with our teaching plan, so that we can make sure that we respond if the students don’t appear to be learning, and adapt the lesson to the students’ needs.

Programme Summary: Teachers agree that planning lessons is important. We need to encourage learning with a good atmosphere. We need clear aims for each lesson – what will the students know and be able to do by the end of the class? We need to think about the different stages – a warm up, teaching new language, time for students to practise, time for revision, consolidation and then follow up homework. We don’t need to limit activities to the exercises in our text book, and we should not forget about listening and speaking practice. English is about communication!

Try to include a balance of working as a whole class and working in pairs and groups. Be ready to deal with those who are more advanced as well as those who need more help!

Most important is to think about what our students are learning, and try to keep them interested.

Ask a colleague!

Talk to other teachers about the ideas in this programme and keep a list of useful ideas.