8 Tips for Best Practice Lesson Planning
By Alex Warren, Senior ELT Academic Consultant, EMEA National Geographic Learning

Even for experienced teachers, lesson planning can be challenging and time-consuming, especially if using materials with which they're unfamiliar. Teacher's Books can help take some of the pain out of the planning process and are often seen as a teacher's best friend. However, they can also stifle a teacher's natural creativity as they are focussed on teaching the coursebook rather than a particular group of students. In other words, teachers can't just rely on the teacher's book to just teach the book for them.

So, what exactly makes for a successful lesson plan? What should we be thinking about when planning a lesson from a coursebook? There are, of course, many answers to those questions, but here are eight points to consider.

Add, Skip, Adapt, Replace
When teaching a lesson from a coursebook never feel that you have to teach it sequentially from Ex.1 all the way through to Ex.12. In fact, don't! Remember, the coursebook content is just a springboard from which to work and you need to make the lesson as meaningful, enjoyable and memorable as possible for your students. Think about what you can add to the lesson, what you can skip, what you can adapt and what can you replace to make it a better fit for your students. Ultimately, we need to remember that we should use the coursebook like a good chef uses a recipe and that the coursebook should never be the totality of the learning experience. You can find more ideas on being creative with the coursebook here.

Make Connections
Always try to make as many connections to students as possible when planning to make it meaningful them to and to enrich the learning experience. Think about how you can connect it to their prior learning, their prior experiences and knowledge and also how you can get students to connect to each other through collaborative work.
By doing this you will be adding a layer of personalisation to the content, which in turn will make it more engaging and motivating for them. You can find some more ideas on making connections and personaliszing lessons here.

Start with a bang!
Always try to start with something that is going to grab your students' attention and pull them in. Remember, a lesson can be won or lost in the first five minutes. First impressions and all. Using impactful and surprising images, quizzes, class mingles, discussions, brainstorming, games are all good ways of engaging your students from the start of a lesson. You can find more ideas here.

Variety
Variety is the spice of life and the same is true of the classroom. When planning your lessons, try to ensure as much variety as is reasonably possible for your students. Think about variety of input, variety of skills and systems, variety of interaction patterns, and variety of practice activities; all of which can help your students feel stimulated and engaged in class. When you've finished planning your lesson, use a checklist to make sure you've included enough variety.

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Plan to Differentiate
No student is the same, so make sure to think about how you are going to help support the weaker students and how you're going to challenge the stronger ones when you're planning. For example, for weaker students it might be providing them with more detailed grammar support or reducing the number of options in controlled practice activities; while for fast finishers you would have additional tasks and extension activities up your sleeve. See Emily Bryson's blog or Anna Hasper's interview for more on differentiation and accessibility in the classroom.

Make Learning Visible
To help students see their own learning and development, it's important to make learning as visible for your students as possible. At the start of the lesson put clear lesson outcomes on the board – these can then act as success criteria which can be ticked off as you progress through the lesson. At the end of the lesson, ask students to reflect on what they learnt and what they are now able to do – this can be done as a discussion, by using learning journals or by using exit tickets. Check out author John Hughes' blog all about visible goals.

Be Flexible & Adaptable
Flexibility and adaptability are key 21st century life skills which all teachers need to have and to bear in mind when planning and teaching. Why? Because rarely do things go exactly to plan in the English language classroom, no matter how detailed our plans might be. And while flexibility can't necessarily be planned, it's something to bear in mind as you don't want to fall into the trap of being railroaded into following your plan, no matter what. Think about what your lesson outcomes are and which activities could be skipped or adapted if needs be – for example a classroom mingle activity takes much longer than doing it as a pair or group task.

Reflect!
When you've finished your lesson, it's really important to take a moment to reflect on it and your plan. Think about things like whether (all) the students achieved the stated outcomes (how do you know), what you think worked well (and not so well), what you could add or do differently to make it better next time, and what you learnt from the lesson. Making reflection notes on your lesson plan or coursebook will ultimately help you become a better teacher going forward. Here are some more ideas on being a reflective teacher.

Ultimately, while lesson planning is a tricky business, it's one that's necessary for successful lessons while acting as a pathway through which you can become a better teacher.

Task:
Choose one or two of the ideas and focus on them when you're next planning a lesson. How will you incorporate them?

Further Reading:
https://infocus.eltngl.com/2020/11/11/engage-build-consolidate-an-effective-framework-for-lesson-planning/

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Teaching authentic listening skills
By Lewis Lansford

Listening is hard, widely held to be the most difficult of the four skills for many English learners to master. Unlike reading, where you can go back and re-read and may be able to stop and use a dictionary to look up unfamiliar words, with listening, you often have only one chance to hear what someone is saying. If you miss too much, you soon become hopelessly lost and the conversation, lecture or film moves on without you and catching up on what you've missed begins to seem impossible.

When you speak and write, you can choose words and grammatical structures that you know and work around the ones you don't. When writing, you may have the opportunity to use grammar books or other references as necessary, and in many speaking situations, you often can ask for help and support from whoever you're talking to.

But with listening, on top of often only having one chance to hear, there's the added potential challenge of unknown words and grammar, the possibility for irony or humour behind the spoken words, varied and unfamiliar accents, or just plain fast speech.

When it comes to accents and speed, a huge hurdle for language learners is the obvious mismatch between the pronunciation for words given in the dictionary – how we usually teach them – and the way they actually sound when uttered in conversation.

Consider this simple question: Did you see her again?
The pronunciation as given for the words in the dictionary is as follows:
dɪd juː siː hɜːr əˈgɛn?

However, there are at least five common ways the question might sound in conversation:
- **d**ɪdʒə **ˈsiːərəˈgɛn**?
- **juː** **siː**: **h**ɜː**r** əˈ**gɛn**?
- **j**ə ˈ**siːərəˈgɛn**?
- dʒ**uː** **siː**: **h**ɜː**r** əˈ**gɛn**?
- dʒə ˈ**siːərəˈgɛn**?

Cauldwell (2013) refers to the various non-dictionary pronunciations as soundshapes, in contrast to the citation form of words found in dictionaries. The different ways of saying the same thing aren't failures on the part of the speaker to speak intelligibly, but instead are just natural variation that occurs as a result of the speaker's accent, the combination of words being spoken, the formality of the occasion and so on. And this is what we need to help learners prepare for.

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Citing Buck (1995), Cauldwell recommends a four-step approach to helping learners improve their listening in the real world:
1. Make them aware of the situation
2. Discuss it
3. Explain how pronunciation changes
4. Give examples

If we were to apply the above four steps to the word did in the above example, it might look like this:
1. Point out the fact that pronunciation changes in fast speech.
2. Discuss how words mix together and may sound different than they do in clear, careful speech.
3. Point out that in particular, did you often sounds like /dɪ ə/.
4. Present several sentences with did in both careful and fast speech, giving students clear examples of the change.

The fact that one simple word invites so much discussion and consideration highlights the challenge of listening to natural speech. However, with time, attention and practice, learners can and do master authentic listening and become ever more successful communicators.

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Cauldwell, R. (2013). Phonology for Listening: Teaching the Stream of Speech. Speechinaction.
Buck, G. (1995). How to become a good listening teacher. In Mendelsohn, D. J. and Rubin, J. (eds) A Guide for the Teaching of Second Language Listening, 113–131. San Diego, CA: Dominie Press.

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Accessible Learning
By Emily Bryson

Every learner is different and as such it's important that our classrooms are tailored to their needs and that our learning materials reflect their lives.

Small changes can have a big impact on the learning experience, and often making a simple tweak for one student can support other learners too.

It is unlikely that every student in class will be the same level in each of the four skills and finish tasks at exactly the same time. As teachers, we need to equip ourselves with simple techniques to stretch stronger learners and make activities more accessible to those who need it.

We may also have to make small adjustments to our teaching to support learners with additional needs such as learners with autism, dyslexia, dyscalculia, AD(H)D, sight or hearing impairments and disabilities or mobility needs.

In addition, some students may have differing levels of educational history. I teach ESOL, mostly to people seeking refuge and migrant workers. I find that learners who have completed school or even university have strong study skills and can apply them to their language learning, while learners who have had limited educational opportunities require more support with skills such as note-taking, homework and planning their study time.

I also teach learners with a range of literacy and digital skills. Some learners have a strong knowledge of Roman script (perhaps from their L1), while others are learning how to write in English for the first time (possibly as their first script). Likewise, I have students who could teach me a thing or two about computers, while others find it difficult to use a mouse or type their passwords accurately in English.

I'm sure I'm not alone in having such diverse learners. One of the best ways to support learners is to use graphic facilitation activities in class. Using simple drawings in the classroom is a great way to communicate language points, check understanding, engage learners and stimulate critical thinking. Creating tools such as vocabulary templates and graphic organisers are a fun and engaging way to reduce processing load for learners with additional needs and help students remember through visual cues.

The Voices Online Platform has a number of functions which teachers can use to make lessons more accessible. Each reading text can be modified to a size and font of the learners' choice and has supporting audio. These sound files are helpful not only for learners with dyslexia, emergent literacy or sight impairments but also for students who wish to listen to their English homework whilst travelling or doing other tasks. Every video in the series has subtitles, to support learners with hearing impairments as well as learners who require more support with listening or who may be in crowded places.

Teaching Pronunciation for Global Communications
By Marek Kiczkowiak

Did you know that when recordings of some published materials are analysed, it turns out that the vast majority of voices belong to first language English users?

In fact, when Si (2019) analysed 5 major business English course books published globally, he found that only 16% of the voices on the recordings were from second language English users.

And did you notice that most of those 'non-native speakers' "speak and write with the same educated, English, middle-class, native-speaker voices" (Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2013, p. 244)?

Indeed, in Si's (2019) study only 0.5% of all the voices had a second language accent.

Meanwhile, in the real world outside the classroom the situation would be the exact opposite. While figures differ, it is very likely that more than 80% of all English users are not 'native speakers' of the language (Crystal, 2019).

This clearly means that since our students might mostly hear standard first language accents in the classroom, they are unlikely to be adequately prepared to deal with the myriad of accents that they will hear when they step out of our classrooms.

That's why one important principle I would suggest we need to adopt as English teachers is to provide our students with a variety of different accents and help them decode them through focused work on bottom up listening skills. This will help them be better prepared for the real-world pronunciation.

Apart from helping our learners understand different accents, it is important to consider how we can help them develop clear pronunciation that is easily intelligible to a wide variety of first, second, third, etc. language English users.

How do we know what such globally clear pronunciation might look like?

A lot of research has been conducted which can give us some important hints (Deterding, 2010; Deterding & Lewis, 2019; Jenkins, 2000). These studies show that certain pronunciation features are not that important for intelligibility. In other words, they can be pronounced quite differently without much impact on understanding. These are vowel quality, features of connected speech (e.g. weak forms), intonation, sentence stress.

Interestingly, when we analyse some published materials, it turns out that the vast majority of pronunciation slots in them are devoted to the pronunciation features mentioned above (Kiczkowiak, 2021). In fact, in one particular case of elementary level materials, 48% of all pronunciation slots were devoted to connected speech.

On the other hand, that same research suggests that other pronunciation features are very important for clear pronunciation. These are consonants (apart from the voiced and voiceless dental fricatives <th>), consonant clusters, vowel length, aspiration, and nuclear stress. Unfortunately, little attention is paid to these features (Kiczkowiak, 2021; Levis & Sonsaat, 2016).

While of course more research should be conducted, the data that we have indicates that not all pronunciation features are made equal with regards to intelligibility in international contexts.

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Intercultural skills for the real world
By Chia Suan Chong

English is a useful tool that will enable our students to communicate internationally. When communicating with people from different language backgrounds, students will inevitably also be communicating with people across cultures. This means communicating with people who might have different norms, different behaviours, and different communications styles from what they might be used to. So how can we prepare our students for such interactions?

Many teachers might be familiar with materials that use topics like food or festivals around the world as a basis for teaching English and getting students to practise speaking. These colourful aspects of culture are a great way of engaging students and they deal with parts of culture that we can easily see.

Another aspect of culture that can be visible is behaviour. We might greet someone in a certain manner or make someone feel welcomed in a particular way. We interpret what they say through the lenses with which we see the world. And when others behave in a way we are not used to, it can be easy to jump to conclusions based on our perspective of things. This could potentially result in miscommunication or misunderstandings. By encouraging students to explore these different aspects of culture, we are training them to become more aware, more open, and more prepared to adapt to the people they'll communicate with in English.

One useful way of helping students to develop intercultural skills is by using stories – stories of intercultural communication that might feature some kind of misunderstanding or miscommunication. These stories are known as critical incidents. Take this critical incident for example:

In class, Li Wei often uses his phone when working in groups. His group mates think he doesn't really like his classmates or the task, and that he doesn't really want to be there. They slowly begin to ignore him in their discussions.

What advice might you give Li Wei's classmates?
What advice might you give Li Wei?

Li Wei's group mates assumed that his preoccupation with his phone was due to his lack of interest in his classmates or in the task. However, there might be other reasons for his behaviour. He might, for example, be using his phone to take notes, do research on the task or find translations of the words his classmates were using. Alternatively, he might just be used multi-tasking when working together with others. By encouraging students to discuss the given scenario more deeply and consider multiple interpretations of a behaviour, students are given a chance to engage in speaking practice while learning to see things from different points of view.

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Perhaps when discussing this critical incident, students might realise that part of the issue is the lack of communication between Li Wei and his group mates. It is likely that Li Wei didn't realise that his group mates had a problem with his mobile phone usage. It is just as likely that his group mates did not clearly voice their feelings about the issue. Instead of ignoring Li Wei, his groupmates could choose to speak to Li Wei, ask questions and find out more. If Li Wei is able to notice the discomfort in his groupmates, he could help the situation by being more transparent about why he's using his phone.

While there isn't one correct solution to such critical incidents, the very act of discussing and exploring them allows students to increase their self-awareness, develop their ability to spot potential misunderstandings and learn to accommodate and adapt to the people they speak to. In this way, we can help students build stronger relationships and have more effective interactions across cultures.

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