

## **Approaches to Lesson Planning: A Workshop**

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### *Abstract*

*One of the most fundamental challenges for instructors is creating lesson plans on a regular basis that truly facilitate learning for students. One common model of lesson planning is to find a template and stick to it. The problem is that lesson plans tend to become an inhibiting framework and work to the detriment of course goals if viewed uncritically. One possible solution is to evaluate other lesson planning models, even those at first counterintuitive to the instructor, which may help to establish a number of creative plans to suit a range of teaching contexts. Periodically reevaluating which ingredients should go into a class is a process of reflection acting as a mirror to foster self-development as a teacher. This paper introduces such an experimental process by discussing a variety of lesson plan models, all of which have been considered appropriate and effective by teachers at particular times and in particular places. Given the diverse student populations encountered by participants in the workshop, it seems that such questioning of hitherto unchallenged assumptions about lesson planning may prove valuable.*

### **Introduction**

This paper introduces a series of lesson plans and instructional models that have been experimented with by the author over a number of years. Whilst not all of the models introduced may appear at first sight to be a template-style plan, the intention is to demonstrate that a rigid plan of action is not always the best or only approach to take before entering a classroom. The lesson plans have been introduced in a number of teacher training seminars, and were most recently adapted for use in the inaugural THT Seminar at Bishkek Humanities University in Kyrgyzstan.

The workshop began simply by explaining common assumptions about lesson planning, such as the process is frequently conceived as a series of steps that take place before entering the classroom. By signing up to that notion, gauging the suitability of a language-focused plan will necessitate instructors weighing up the pros and cons of particular exercises and activities. Teachers also need to have an awareness of the interactions and dynamics which feed into classroom management, such as keeping students engaged throughout the whole flow of the

class. Participants began experimenting with a range of lesson plans, to see how far the process of questioning would take them. One of the aims was to have participants realise that some of their own assumptions might need revising, in the sense that the plans they conceived several years ago might not accurately reflect the kind of teaching they were now doing in the classroom.

### **CELTA RSA Lesson Plan**

Lesson planning undergoes changes as research uncovers more about the learning process. A point in case is that the explicitly language-based focus of lesson plans which were formerly prevalent in training courses such as the CELTA RSA are themselves undergoing changes. By way of example, consider the emphasis of lesson planning as taught on the International House, London RSA in the mid-nineties (from the author's own notes):

#### LESSON PLAN

##### AIMS

Identify noun phrases; describe modifiers and quantifiers

##### SUBSIDIARY AIMS

Think about & discuss topic; understand gist of news

##### ASSUMPTIONS

Students (S) are familiar with concept of noun phrases

##### ANTICIPATED PROBLEMS

word stress in nouns; producing and using noun phrases

##### SOLUTIONS

model/drill stress patterns; contextualise meaning; information gap/matching activity

##### TEACHER (T) AIDS

board; grammar card game; picture on p. 19; hand-out

TIME	PROCEDURE	AIM	FOCUS
5 minutes	Ask S to imagine flying. Ever had a bad experience?	Create interest & establish theme.	T to S
	Ask/answer in pairs.	Personalise & elicit.	S to S
	Collect ideas.	Check concept.	S to T
5 minutes			

It is easy to see how this kind of lesson perceives language learning, and exactly how it

considers learning must take place, accomplished through a strict and non-negotiable presentation, practice and production (PPP) sequence. In fact, such a plan may work very well with teachers who have reasons for not giving up too much control in a classroom yet do not wish to have a grammar-translation class that inhibits efforts at communicative language teaching (CLT).

### **Edinburgh School of English Lesson Plan**

At first sight, the approach to lesson planning adapted from materials used at a language school in Scotland in the year 2000 (Edinburgh School of English, author's own notes) appears to be a more analytical framework. Here, teachers are advised to consider constructing their lesson plans around a series of questions:

- |     |  |                              |
|-----|--|------------------------------|
| (1) | <b>Conceptualizing the lesson</b><br>What do I want to do?<br><br>What am I going to use to do it?   | AIMS<br><br>ACTIVITY         |
| (2) | <b>Getting the materials together</b><br>How should the materials be organized so students can follow it?<br><br>What am I going to use?   | AIDS/MATERIALS               |
| (3) | <b>Thinking about your audience</b><br><br>What do I know about the students' abilities?<br>What language will students need to do the task?<br><br>Does the task give students a communicative purpose?<br>Does the task offer students a definable outcome?            | ASSUMPTIONS                  |
| (4) | <b>Troubleshooting</b><br>What contextual limitations (individual, class, institution, culture, etc.) are there?<br>What problems (vocab., grammar) might students have with the material?<br><br>How do I have to prepare to address these problems in the class?       | ANTICIPATING<br><br>PROBLEMS |
| (5) | <b>Execution</b><br>How am I going to do it?<br>What are the main stages?<br>How long will each stage take?<br>What working groups will I use?<br>What instructions will I need to give?<br>How about the pacing of the activities?<br>How will I keep students engaged? | PROCEDURE                    |

Despite the conceptual framework that appears to encourage analysis of key areas, there are a number of unresolved issues. The lesson plan sequencing is logical in one sense, but only if the

assumption is made that language learning takes place along one plane, and that language is the determiner of the class to which other aims are subjugated. Though partially centred on the student as learner, most of the decisions and control rest with the instructor.

### **Planning Lessons and Courses: Three Lesson Plans**

A look at the literature on the subject offers up lesson planning as conceived of by Tessa Woodward (2001). The book's cover asserts that, "Planning Lessons and Courses provides a step-by-step approach to lesson planning." Those steps appear fairly broad, including the following chapter headings:

- *Who are the students?*
- *How long is the lesson?*
- *What can go into a lesson?*
- *How do people learn and so how can we teach?*
- *What can we teach with?*
- *How can we vary the activities we do?*
- *Getting down to the preparation*
- *What are our freedoms and constraints?*

*(Woodward, 2001:viii - xiv).*

The editorial decision here is evidently in favour of widening the scope of the book, which may broaden its appeal and relevance to teachers starting out in lesson planning. How people learn languages, for example, is included here and is without doubt an associated theme since it forms part of the body of assumptions under which lesson planners work; but more space devoted to such background issues as this means less devoted to planning. Here, there is a heavy concentration on the whos, the whats and the hows, omitting other seemingly fundamental concerns such as why such an approach is desirable when planning lessons. Moreover, while ostensibly seeking to frame lesson planning as a sequence of questions, the author only turns to the making of lesson plans in the penultimate chapter. By then, the key process of asking questions has been abandoned in favour of the straightforward, 'Getting down to the preparation.' There is a sense of determinism in the process, with teachers likely to fall back on linear plans that constrain their teaching and their students' ability to learn effectively.

#### *Traditional Lesson Plan*

The book's structure notwithstanding, Woodward's work on lesson planning does help teachers to cast a more critical eye on lesson plans devised by themselves and others. A positive contribution is to identify clearly the limitation of ideas prevalent in lesson planning as it has

been conceived in the past. She describes what she calls ‘the traditional view’ lesson plan, one in which

*. . . you will want to find out what your students can do, specify broad and detailed goals, break these down into a ‘logical’ order, select learning activities and materials which are designed to bring about change, put these in place, and then test to make sure that the changes have occurred. This is the view of language and learning presented on many assessed training courses, which is understandable since working with teachers this way makes assessment of their teaching easier! (Woodward, 2001:185).*

The warning is clear: teacher trainers have their students make lesson plans that are easy to assess, but these plans do indeed act as an artificial constraint on their trainees. As teachers gain classroom experience of the classroom, they need to break free from the grip of their preliminary training courses.

#### *Student-Centred Lesson Plan*

By way of contrast, Woodward provides examples of a “student-centred lesson plan” and “content-based lesson plan.” In the student-centred lesson plan, the linearity and teacher control is replaced by a more organic, fluid interplay between instructor and learners, where the students are placed at the heart of the learning process.

Extract from a student-centred lesson plan:

*Students will have just come from a swimming lesson and will straggle in so...*  
*1 Early birds finish their dialogue journals.*  
*2 When everybody’s in and settled, Carmela’s group asks the others their review questions on the last lesson.*  
*3 Pairs brainstorm all the words associated with the topic they’ve chosen for this lesson.*  
*4 Student on poster duty writes them up asking for help with spelling, stress marking, collocation and meaning, if unsure.*  
*5 Give student on cassette recorder duty the cassette of two people discussing the topic. The class says when the student should stop, rewind, play the tape, etc.*  
*(Woodward, 2001:188).*

There is an emphasis on flexibility, with the instructor showing awareness of issues that exist outside the classroom and that might impinge on what takes place within its walls,

### *Content-Based Lesson Plan*

In this case, the focus on language ostensibly gives way to a focus on content. Yet anyone expecting content to be placed firmly at the centre of this plan will be sorely disappointed.

Extract from a content-based lesson plan:

#### *Language area: hesitation and stalling devices*

- *Ask a couple of students some hard, fast questions in target language. Wait for slight embarrassment and pauses.*
- *Be reassuring! Switch to mother tongue and do same again, then asking what sorts of noises, phrases, etc. students would use in mother tongue if put in the spotlight in this way.*
- *Explain that today's lesson will be about what to say and do in the target language when you don't know what to say and do.*
- *Ask students to prepare some questions for me that they think I won't know how to/want to answer.*
- *Students shoot questions at me. I field them. This activity is called the 'Hot seat game'.*
- *Students repeat back to me as many of my phrases as poss.*
- *Oral practice and written phase.*
- *Hot seat game played twice more, with a student in the hot seat instead of the teacher.*
- *Explain hot seat will be a 5 min thread in future classes.*

*(Woodward, 2001:189).*

In essence, it is hard to shake off the belief in a language-based plan for many instructors. Witness how the term content in this plan merely involves a trick played on the class to encourage them to form questions. Effectively, it is still about as far as away from a content class as it is possible to imagine.

### **Non-Language-Centred Planning - The Australian Language Levels (ALL) Lesson Plans**

Just as instructors would normally reevaluate their lesson plans and make them more sophisticated over time (internal pressure), particular sets of circumstances pertaining to societal changes (external pressure) serve to stimulate developments in new directions. In multi-cultural Australia, striving to teach a variety of languages to students from diverse cultures and linguistic backgrounds, language teaching moved quickly beyond the model of instructors imparting knowledge, always determined ('planned') in advance, involving a view of language as merely discreet items or building blocks. According to Vale, Scarino & McKay (1991), emphasis at the planning stage should be placed on completion of an achievable task binding the whole class together. An instructor could combine ideas highlighted in the Pocket ALL with others that

reflect their own teaching preferences, such as form-focused instruction or error correction, but these elements would not dominate the lesson plan.

*Vertical and Horizontal Brainstorming Lesson Plan (see Fig. 1: Suggested module)*

Note that the emphasis here is increasingly on connected units of work, laid out in this example as a template for horizontal or vertical brainstorming. Ideas can be filled into the template working downwards in a list or across the categories, to create a lesson plan integrated on more than one plane. Indeed, one outcome of the THT lesson planning workshop was that experienced teachers were able to compare their own experiences of lesson planning with others to see if they were working along a simple continuum (e.g. a language focus, imparting knowledge, top-down, along only one learning dimension, etc.) or managing to straddle the complexities of interaction that reflect the classroom experience (language focus within context in which learning takes place taking account of psychological factors affecting learning and natural flow of the class, etc.).

**Figure 1: Suggested module. (adapted from Vale et al:48-49)**

**TABLE 10:** Suggested module pro forma

SPECIFIC GOALS:

GENERAL OBJECTIVES:

ORGANISATIONAL FOCUSES FOR UNITS OF WORK:

OTHER LEARNING EXPERIENCES

**ACTIVITIES**

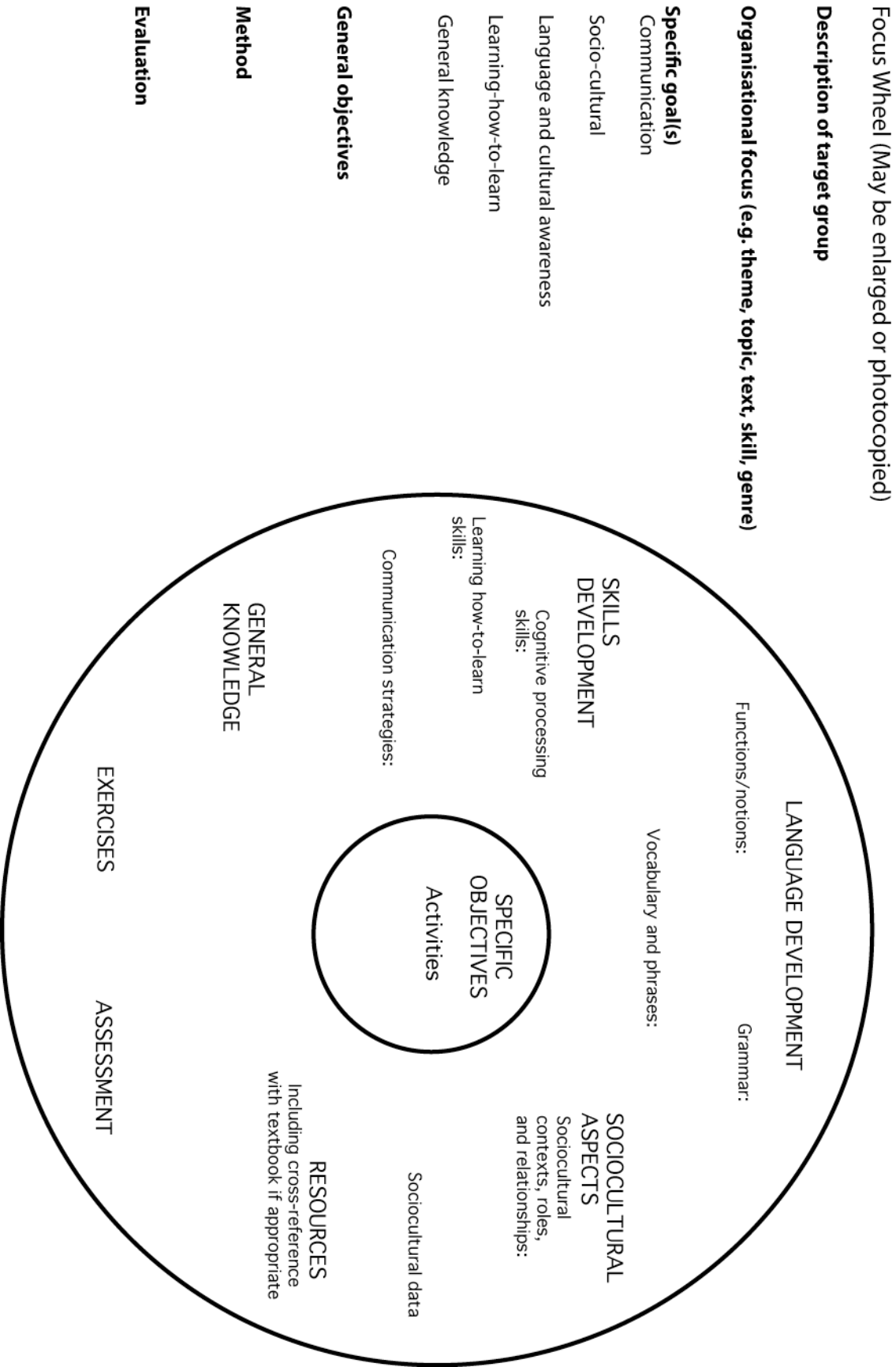
INTERPERSONAL		INFORMATIONAL		"AESTHETIC"	
L and S skills (conversation), or R and W skills (correspondence) <sup>1</sup>		L, S, R, W skills	S or W skills	L, S, R, W skills	S or W skills
Activity-type 1	Activity-type 2	Activity-type 3	Activity-type 4	Activity-type 5	Activity-type 6

<sup>1</sup>L, S, R, W stand for Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing

*Mind Mapping Lesson Plan (See Fig. 2: Focus Wheel)*

The alternative lesson plan forces instructors to think outside the box: here, linear-based lines of thinking are replaced by a mind map or a connected circle. There is no longer a beginning or end to the process, but an intricate web of interdependent connections. Although the elements of the lesson plan are virtually indistinguishable from the previous example, the emphasis has been changed by looking at the plan in a different way. By reformulating the plan and hence the direction of the class, the instructor is able to reevaluate the flow in which learning takes place, and numerous new possibilities open up, such as surrendering some control in exchange for learner involvement, autonomy, and increased student-student interaction. It can be seen as part of a scaffolding process, where a hands-on plan with lots of support and direction gradually gives way to less support and student initiative and responsibility for one's own learning.

Figure 2. Focus Wheel (adapted from Vale et al: 56)



### *Context-Based Lesson Plan*

Since it can be broadly agreed that a lesson plan, by virtue of its planning function, describes actions conceived before the class takes place - as opposed to a retrospective description of what exactly did take place - it follows that Bax's (2003) contribution to the context-base teaching debate must be of particular relevance to THT seminars. Bax asserts that a lesson plan should not be isolated from the context within which learning takes place. The nuts and bolts of the lesson (methodology, language items) are informed by the context at the planning stage, not the other way round. What he proposes is an assault on CLT plans that place language before all else. For many of the participants, it helped to give voice to some of the inherent frustrations they had experienced as a non-native instructor of English conducting classes exclusively in English (because they believed the teacher training orthodoxy that English only was the one way to teach English as a second language).

From Bax (p.287), one might extract this kind of sequence at the planning stage:

- *looking at and analysing the learning context*
- *taking account of individuals (learning styles, strategies)*
- *taking account of classroom culture (group motivation, school environment)*
- *taking account of local culture (regional differences, status of teachers and students in the community)*
- *taking account of national culture (politics, religion)*
- *dealing with a teaching approach (methodology, materials, methods) to accomplish those aims*
- *considering a language focus (lexis, phonology, grammar).*

Language has thus been relegated to a much lower position on the list of planning priorities.

### *Instructional Design: Domain-Informed Lesson Plan*

The next example builds on work by developmental psychologists such as Vygotsky, who saw learning as a social activity. Such thinking attacks the notion of the language classroom as a place primarily to study language or else to study in isolation, and re-positions it as a milieu where social interaction is at its core. At the planning stage of a class informed by instructional design, the current state and needs of the learner are identified, the end goal of the learning process is defined, and the teaching acts as an intervention in order to help the transformation from needs

to outcome. Bloom's Taxonomy later helped to classify educational objectives for students. If it can be agreed that learning is a holistic process, it follows that the currently defined four learning domains are paramount through the stages of the lesson. Such a lesson plan is based on a spread of domain-based activities, with a variety of delivery considerations and assessment techniques (Vinson, 2009). In fact, it is much less a plan than a design, where a balance across the domains is key (Table 1).

Table 1. Learning Domains and Delivery of Instruction. Vinson (2009)

Learning Domain	Activities	Delivery Considerations	Assessment
Cognitive	Self-check quizzes Case studies Drill and practice Short answer essay Project or problem-based activities	Web-enhanced materials supplementing classroom lectures Hybrid course with cognitive content on the web Multimedia simulations of challenging and key concepts	Project based for higher cognitive skills Multiple choice or short essay questions Case Studies
Affective	Goal setting Self-reflective writing in a journal Practice tutorials designed for student success	Face-to-face meetings Motivational videos Streaming audio explanations and encouragement Interactive video, web casts, conference calls	Self-assessment using check-list Pre/post attitude survey related to course content Retention/success in course
Psychomotor	Practice of desired skill with feedback Arranging sequences of an activity in correct order	Face-to-face demonstrations Demonstration videos Pictures with audio and text explanations Interactive video demonstrations	Performance of skill matches set standard as observed by an instructor or designee
Interpersonal	Structured team projects with debriefing Analyzing video models and identifying correct from incorrect performance	Face-to-face small group coaching and feedback sessions Check lists, examples, videos and other cognitive support material presented online	Team, instructor and self assessment measures Analysis of video taped student performance of desired interpersonal skill

### *Blended/Hybrid Learning Lesson Plan*

The final example is from the author's own work (with Graeme Todd) on blended or hybrid learning (iZone, 2009), and reflects new interconnected contexts and generational changes. Here, the interaction and communities of learning exist both face-to-face and online, while self-study is from the written textbook as well as online. Learning takes place in multiple locations, such as

in class with or without a computer, on campus, off campus, and via a mobile device with any browser that connects to the online learning material. Hence the lesson plan has to transcend the dimensions of in-class, directed learning. There are a number of steps to keep the structure and flow of activities, but much less direction about language items. Considerations about context are left up to the individual instructor to determine in collaboration with the learners. It is online, downloadable, accessible at any time. Here is a sample of the structure and headings, taken from iZone Level 1, Unit 1:

*iZone 1 Unit 1 Lesson Plan*

*iZone 1 Unit 1 Small Talk*

*Unit Overview:*

*MyiZoneLab (pages 14–15)*

*Before students go online*

*After students have completed the assigned online activities*

*iZone in class (pages 16–21)*

*Listen and respond (page 16)*

*Pre-listening*

*Activity A: Listening*

*Activity B: Listening*

*Activity B: Extension*

*Activity C: Brainstorming*

*Activity C: Interviews*

*Strategy in action (page 17)*

*Communication strategy*

*Warm-up*

*Activity A: Pre-listening*

*Activity A: Listening*

*Activity B: Pair work*

*Activity B: Extension*

*Language in action (page 18)*

*Introduction*

*Warm-up*

*Activity A: Reading and listening*

*Activity A: Extension*

*Activity B: Pronunciation*

*Language note*

*Activity C: Substitutions*

*Activity C: Extension*

*Communication task (page 19)*

*Introduction*

*Step A: Listening*

*Step B: Listening*

*Step C: Speaking*

*Step C: Classroom management*

*Activity zone (page 20)*

*Step A*

*Step B*

*Step C*

*Step C: Extension*

*Video extras (page 21)*

*Warm-up*

*Step A*

*Step A: Extension*

*Step B*

*Step C*



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The teacher's notes then explain the timing of the components. The fluidity or organic nature of the blended or hybrid model, where learning takes place face-to-face with an instructor and fellow students in a classroom, and via e-learning, and in a variety of locations interacting online or with the textbook for self-study, is truly reflected in this kind of plan. It is a world away from the tightly controlled language lesson with which this paper began.

*How long does it take to complete a unit of iZone?*

An entire unit of iZone takes approximately three hours to complete, although this varies due to the inbuilt adaptability of the course and the environment within which it is being employed. The Online sections can be given as homework or completed in a suitably equipped classroom and if all sections are assigned will take most students between 80 and 100 minutes. Below are estimated times for each section.

Online Prepare

Video clip:	3 - 5 minutes
Language zone:	15 - 20 minutes
Strategy:	25 - 30 minutes
Role play:	10 - 15 minutes

Online Extras

Video zone:	5 - 10 minutes
Writing task:	10 minutes
Game:	10 minutes

Excluding Video extras, the in-class component of the course takes a similar amount of time, although much depends on the individual teacher's approach. If the Video extras and extension activities suggested in the lesson plans are taken advantage of, the in-class section of a unit will take considerably longer. Below are estimated times for each section.

Myizonelab:	5 minutes
Listen / Read and respond:	15 - 20 minutes
Strategy in action:	10 - 15 minutes
Language in action:	15 - 20 minutes
Communication task:	20 - 25 minutes
Activity zone:	15 minutes
Video extras:	30 - 40 minutes

Clearly, flexibility of this kind needs to be built into lesson plans when the generation studying and learning is no longer tied to fixed seats in an immovable classroom or physical location. The 'individual teacher's approach' and the student as an individual are placed firmly at the centre of the learning process.

## **Conclusion**

The workshop was thought-provoking in the sense that several participants came to realise how they too had been moving along the lesson planning continuum in the single plane outlined in this paper. They took away from the session the notion that their teaching had outstripped the limitations of the plans they were commonly using, and that they could help their learners more by considering alternative plans. They felt the mismatch between the agenda they were setting for their classes and the realities within the classroom, and it helped give voice to some of the frustrations and contradictions they had felt in their professional development. It is hoped that the ideas presented here are a starting-point for a kind of transition: there are no answers, but there are firm pointers. Teachers who embrace the complexities and sophistication of lesson plans that work seamlessly on a number of levels are more than likely to stretch out a hand to their learners. The students as individuals within the group are then better placed to reach their own potentials. Rather than a language-focused straitjacket, lesson plans are opportunities for creativity and growth.

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