

Affordance, learning opportunities, and the lesson plan pro forma

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This article argues that the most commonly used lesson plan pro formas in language teacher education are inappropriately premised on an outcomes-based approach to teaching, one that is in conflict with what we know about how languages are learnt and how experienced teachers teach. It proposes an alternative, affordance-based approach to lesson planning and makes a number of practical suggestions to modify the pro forma and its role in lesson observation. It is argued that the suggested changes encourage teachers to plan for and respond to the learning opportunities of the lesson, thereby reflecting more closely the practice of experienced language teachers and the reality of differentiated language learning. It also makes recommendations on how such a pro forma could be used in both initial certification and in-service teacher development in a wide range of learning contexts, potentially compatible with product, process, and procedural approaches to syllabus design.

Introduction

The lesson plan pro forma plays a central role in teacher education. It is a necessary component for the assessment of teaching during initial training, advanced qualifications, quality assurance inspections, and in-service teacher development. It is used in all three phases of the observation cycle—planning, teaching, and the post-lesson discussion—and provides written documentation of a teacher's aims or learning outcomes by which the lesson is primarily assessed. Given its importance in this cycle, it can be argued that the lesson plan pro forma constitutes a fundamental paradigm within teacher education. From the very first lesson that we ever teach as trainee teachers to the most important lessons in our career, the pro formas we use both influence and reflect our perceptions and understanding of the lesson event itself.

Thus, it is perhaps surprising that the lesson plan pro forma receives little attention in the literature on lesson planning, syllabus design, or general ELT pedagogy. In *Planning Lessons and Courses*, for example, Woodward (2001) provides no sample pro formas, only extracts from plans or informal lesson notes. It is equally surprising that currently used pro formas generally reflect a transmissive, outcomes-oriented approach to planning that derives essentially from Tyler's 1949

rational-linear framework (Crabbe 2003), and as such propagate the same basic principles: lessons are viewed as events in which teachers plan for and attempt to affect universal behavioural change in a group of learners by achieving their aims, objectives, or learning outcomes.

Such an approach to teaching is in conflict with what we know about how second languages are learnt. We know that learners do not necessarily learn according to the teacher's objectives, and that the learning that actually occurs in each learner's head is often difficult to predict or control (Lightbown and Spada 2013). It also has little in common with the practice of experienced language teachers, who regularly deviate from the lesson plan for a number of reasons (Farrell 2002), something that is widely acknowledged as good practice in the literature on lesson planning. Scrivener, for example, advises: 'Prepare thoroughly. But in class, teach the learners, not the plan' (Scrivener 2005: 109), and Kumaravadivelu argues '... it is crucial that teachers strike a balance between their role as planners of teaching acts and their role as mediators of learning acts' (1994: 33). While a number of authors have criticized outcomes-oriented approaches towards planning for language teaching (for example Allwright 2005), none have suggested that the lesson plan pro forma itself, and its influence on assessment procedure, may have inadvertently militated against change within frameworks for teacher assessment, and by extension, teacher education. As a result of this inertia, today we can see fundamental differences between how experienced teachers plan for and facilitate learning on a daily basis, and how teachers are expected to plan for observed lessons. These differences relate not only to degree of detail in planning, but also to how teachers prepare for and respond to the unpredictable events, relationships, and 'affordances' of the lesson itself.

Affordance

The term 'affordance' was coined by the psychologist James J. Gibson, and has been borrowed by a number of writers on language learning, including van Lier (2004) who preferred it to the term 'input' to describe the way in which the learning environment provides opportunities (which may be both positive or negative, effective or ineffective)¹ for the learner to learn. Critically, in van Lier's use of the term, the learner is not a passive recipient of data, but an active participant in the process, such that 'learning opportunities arise as a consequence of participation and use'. The learner '[establishes] relationships with and within the environment' (ibid.: 92), directly perceiving and acting on the 'ambient language' around her/him. Van Lier's notion of affordance invokes a number of influential concepts in pedagogic theory such as noticing (Schmidt 1990),² the interaction hypothesis, and negotiation of meaning (Long 1996).³ It recognizes the unique relationship between each learner and the learning environment, something that is likely to resonate well with experienced teachers. We know that while it is impossible for us to control any of these relationships or processes in their entirety, we can influence them, especially if we are also able to differentiate appropriately, '[creating] the optimal environment necessary for learning to take place' (Kumaravadivelu 2003: 48). To do our job well, we must plan

for affordance and respond to it when it happens; we must be both proactive and reactive teachers, the catalysts of learning opportunities.

Given the above, it is clear that if we want the planning procedures encouraged in language teacher education both to provide for what we know about how learners learn languages and to reflect the practice of experienced teachers, we need to ensure that the lesson plan pro formas we use firstly encourage us to plan for affordance and then allow us to respond to it effectively when teaching. However, of the 23 lesson plan templates examined for this article (including those of well-known ELT authors, those used on courses leading to formal qualifications, and those used by EFL and ESOL organizations worldwide in both the private and state sector),⁴ few made any concessions to allow for affordance, and all were predicated on outcomes-based approaches to planning. The majority of these pro formas included most of the following sections:

- 1 aims, objectives, or learning outcomes;
- 2 context (including information about the learners and their prior knowledge, and the 'fit' between the observed lesson and the scheme of work/syllabus);
- 3 personal aims or developmental points (sometimes including a suggested focus for the observer);
- 4 procedure or activities (usually detailing student activity and/or teacher activity, timings, interaction, and optionally including stage aims and resources); and
- 5 anticipated problems (or occurrences) and solutions (or responses).

In addition, those used in training for formal assessment often also had sections for language analysis, and those used in the UK state sector usually had differentiation strategies and sometimes policy statements (for example on inclusivity or equal opportunities).

Below, I would like to suggest a number of changes to the lesson plan pro forma described above, and how it is used during the lesson observation cycle in both supported professional development and teacher assessment at both initial and more advanced levels. In my work as a teacher and teacher trainer (both pre- and in-service), I have found these changes useful inasmuch as they encourage teachers to plan for and respond to affordances more effectively than current pro formas. They are fairly straightforward for organizations to adopt and for teachers, trainers, and management staff to adapt to.

Learning opportunities, not learning outcomes

The first suggested change to the lesson plan pro forma concerns the part of the plan where teachers describe their 'Aims', 'Objectives', or 'Learning outcomes' for the lesson. Current approaches to planning generally encourage teachers to describe what they expect all the learners to learn, rather than to speculate as to what the learners may achieve as individuals. The underlying assumption is that, for teachers to demonstrate their competence, they need to be able to describe and then force a specific, invariably undifferentiated type of learning upon all the learners in the class, after which they evaluate the degree

to which they succeeded in meeting ‘their’ aims. As such, the lesson plan becomes a contract, not between the teacher and the learners, but between the teacher and the observer, wherein both parties tacitly agree that an inability to demonstrate achievement of these aims reflects incompetence in teaching. While skilled observers are able to identify and praise valid reasons for non-achievement of aims, this contract-based approach to lesson observation inevitably penalizes responsive teaching. The trend in other types of education, supported by some writers on language learning (for example Farrell op.cit.: 32) is towards the pinning down of learning outcomes in precise terms, including SMART objectives (an acronym standing for ‘specific’, ‘measurable’, ‘achievable/appropriate/agreed-upon’, ‘relevant/realistic’, and ‘time-bound/based’) taken from personnel performance management, and action verbs based on Bloom’s Taxonomy of Educational Objectives (a system for classifying educational objectives into levels within three domains: cognitive, affective, and psychomotor). This trend may currently be exacerbating the influence of this contract-based view of lesson planning, which is inappropriate for the description of second language learning processes, where learning is inevitably incremental, always differential, and difficult to control (Lightbown and Spada op.cit.) or measure accurately (Ellis 2005).

Following both Crabbe (2003, 2007) and Allwright (op.cit.), I would like to propose the learning opportunity to replace the learning outcome as a planning concept, due partly to its flexibility of application and its relative familiarity to teachers. Building on Crabbe’s (2007: 118) observation that learning opportunities should include both processing of comprehensible input (i.e. understanding written or spoken information) and skills rehearsal (i.e. practising speaking/conversation or writing skills), as well as metacognitive learning (i.e. learning about how to coordinate and organize the learning process), I am here defining learning opportunities as potential acts of explicit or implicit learning that *may* occur during or as a consequence of the lesson. In language learning, this may include noticing, uptake, restructuring of the interlanguage, and proceduralization of knowledge, as well as metacognitive, affective, and other factors that may lead indirectly to language learning (see Table 2 below). The word ‘may’ is key to separating a learning opportunity from a learning outcome. Unlike the learning outcome, which is a description of teacher intention, the learning opportunity is a prediction of learner development, one that may or may not happen depending on the affordances of the lesson. It may be either teacher-initiated or learner-initiated (Kumaravadivelu 1994: 33; Allwright op.cit.: 16).

How would this work in practice?

During the planning stage, the teacher begins by selecting the lesson focus according to his or her teaching context and preferred planning approach. This may be a syllabus or scheme of work item, a procedure (as in task-based learning), or an initial stimulus (as in Dogme ELT). Alternatively, it may be a specific hope for the language development of the majority of the learners (i.e. traditional ‘aims’). The teacher then attempts to predict a range of learning opportunities that are likely

to present themselves, including those that are evidently present in the chosen lesson focus, those that may only apply to a small number (even just one) of the learners, and those that may only happen if the lesson takes a specific direction or includes an optional stage. During the lesson, the teacher has the freedom to respond to affordances and learning opportunities as deemed appropriate, both those that are and those that are not predicted on the pro forma. Then, during the post-lesson discussion, rather than attempting to describe (or argue) the degree to which the aims were met, the observed teacher reflects on what learning actually occurred, to which learners and to what extent, including both predicted and unpredicted learning. This is accompanied by reflection on how well he or she facilitated this learning and by justifications for any decisions made during the lesson. As such, the learning opportunity as a planning concept recognizes the importance of being both proactive and reactive. It encourages both exploratory and reflective practice, and avoids the ‘make-or-break’ mentality and the unrealistic battle against the clock that is so often a critical factor in the success of an outcomes-oriented lesson. Table 1 provides an example set of learning opportunities for a 60-minute lesson involving a listening activity followed by a groupwork conversation activity. They are expressed as statements in the present simple tense for simplicity and clarity.

Describing learning opportunities

One implication of this proposed move to the description of learning opportunities instead of learning outcomes is the need to re-evaluate the language used on the pro forma to do this, especially the verbs. The ‘action verbs’ based on Bloom’s Taxonomy of Learning (see, for example, Farrell op.cit.: 38) have little use, given that they are only appropriate for providing evidence of the achievement of behavioural objectives. I propose that the verbs used to predict learning opportunities should attempt to describe both the explicit and implicit learning processes as accurately as possible, leaving to the post-observation discussion the complex, nuanced reflection on the degree to

Predicted learning opportunities

Learners ...

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- 1 improve their listening skills (listening for and identifying opinions expressed by speakers).
 - 2 consolidate and expand their current vocabulary in relation to the lexical field of online social networking.
 - 3 notice and deepen understanding of a range of useful expressions for expressing opinions.
 - 4 develop their speaking/conversation skills (expressing/responding to opinions).
 - 5 notice differences between structures they used to express opinions and structures used by proficient speakers of English.
 - 6 develop critical thinking skills through justifying opinions (especially AM, NM, and JP).
 - 7 improve strategies for selecting words from a text for checking in a dictionary (especially JP and BG).
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Note: student name initials are given in capitals where a learning opportunity applies especially to them

TABLE 1
Predicted learning
opportunities for a
60-minute lesson

which these processes occurred and the potential evidence supporting this. This is an inevitably challenging task for which face-to-face spoken reflection upon a past event is better suited than written predictions of behavioural change before the event.

My proposal is somewhat different from Crabbe’s (2007) learning opportunities, which describe learner activities or actions. However, by choosing to describe the learning processes themselves, I believe my proposed descriptors are likely to be compatible with a greater variety of approaches and contexts, and not biased towards process/product-oriented approaches. Table 2 provides a sample range of descriptors for some of the more common types of learning involved in second language acquisition, including non-linguistic cognitive skills and embedded skills often attended to in the state sector.

Allowing for affordance in the lesson procedure	The second suggested change to the lesson plan pro forma stems from a growing frustration that very few pro formas provide sufficient opportunities for teachers to acknowledge the importance of affordance
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Skills-related learning opportunities	
Learners ...	
• improve (e.g. their writing skills, specifically ...) • develop (e.g. their listening skills, specifically ...).	
Systems-related learning opportunities	
Learners ...	
• consolidate/reinforce/expand (e.g. knowledge of adjectives and noun phrases to describe personality) • improve their ability to use/proceduralize their knowledge of (e.g. the present perfect aspect to describe life experience) • notice/become more sensitive to (e.g. the use of spoken discourse markers to soften assertions).	
Metacognitive/study-skills learning opportunities	
Learners ...	
• develop/improve their ability to (e.g. infer the meaning of unfamiliar words from context) • develop strategies for (e.g. paraphrasing unknown words).	
Affective/social learning opportunities	
Learners ...	
• gain confidence in (e.g. sharing personal information) • recognize (e.g. common goals).	
(Non-linguistic) cognitive learning opportunities	
Learners ...	
• develop/improve their ability to (e.g. identify potential problems in a business plan) • develop strategies for (e.g. evaluating the arguments of a writer).	
Additional embedded (literacy and numeracy) learning opportunities	
Learners ...	
• develop literacy skills (e.g. spelling, copying, and note taking using newly studied lexis) • improve basic numeracy (e.g. converting a test score into a percentage).	

TABLE 2
Appropriate verb descriptors
for language learning
opportunities (not intended
to be exhaustive)

during the description of the lesson procedure. On many occasions, I find myself having to deal with it in the part of the lesson plan called ‘anticipated problems’ (see, for example, [Thornbury and Watkins 2007: 72](#)), even though affordances are often the opposite of problems; they are opportunities for (re)solution, for learner-initiated focus on form ([Kumaravadivelu 2003](#)), or for questions that may reveal more about a learner’s actual needs in relation to what is being taught than the learning outcomes on the front of a lesson plan ([Kumaravadivelu ibid.: 49](#)). Some organizations choose ‘anticipated occurrences’, a marked improvement on ‘anticipated problems’. However, I would argue that the term ‘possible occurrences’ is simpler, more neutral, and makes no assumptions about the likelihood of something happening. It allows for both positive and negative affordances to be described (indeed, what is positive for one may not be positive for another, [van Lier op.cit.: 91](#)) and encourages the teacher both to recognize the complexity of facilitating individual learning (i.e. differentiating) during a lesson event and to mentally rehearse possible responses. It can also be used to describe other occurrences not directly related to learning (for example organizational, technical, etc.).

In addition to renaming this part of the lesson plan, I believe we should also relocate it. ‘Possible occurrences’ deserve a column in the procedure part of the plan to ensure that the planner dedicates a little thought to affordances and how we might react to them on a stage-by-stage basis. [Table 3](#) provides an illustration of how this looks on a completed lesson plan pro forma, also showing a column that lists ‘Reasons’ as a simpler and less dogmatic alternative to ‘Stage aims’, following the procedure it is justifying. It is for the same lesson described in [Table 1](#).

Contingency for flexibility

An affordance-based approach to planning must allow sufficient time and flexibility for unplanned or unanticipated learning to take place, whether this be learner-initiated events or the teacher noticing and scaffolding emerging language. While this is often recognized by experienced trainers and some written guidance on planning (for example the *Cambridge DELTA Handbook* ([Cambridge ESOL 2010: 59](#))), it is rarely evident in the lesson plan pro forma itself. I would suggest several further minor additions to the pro forma, and how it is ‘read’, to ensure that contingency is built in, as follows:

- the use of the term ‘time frame’ to replace ‘timings’ as a column in the procedure section of the pro forma, providing a rough time guide expressed as a minimum to maximum figure (4–7 minutes), rather than a precise number (5 minutes) (see example in [Table 3](#));
- the opportunity for teachers to indicate optional stages within the procedure itself (see example in [Table 3](#));
- the recognition that while a linear description of procedure is convenient to most teachers, the prerogative to choose the order in which the stages occur should always remain with the teacher and be justified by the teacher during the post-lesson discussion (even if the stages occurred in the order predicted on the lesson plan).

Stage	Time frame (minutes)	Procedure (indicate if stage is optional)	Reasons	Possible occurrences and responses
6	3–4	Ls listen again and match the opinions on a handout to the speakers.	To provide opportunities for listening practice, noticing of relevant language, and ideas for discussions.	If NM and BG (weak listeners) struggled with first listening task, I'll give them the option to read the tapescript this time.
7	2–3	Ls compare answers in pairs. T monitors without confirming answers.	To help Ls develop analytical skills, correct minor errors and to allow T to check task achievement.	If pairs agree, they may forget to provide reasons. Watch for this and encourage early finishers to recall what they understood.
8	5–8	T elicits answers from Ls, eliciting reasons and peer correction if necessary.	To confirm correct answers; to help Ls to understand their errors.	Differential achievement likely; if so, challenge stronger listeners (LR, FB, and DB) to provide reasons and recall expressions used. Praise weaker learners for any success.
9	3–8	Optional: include if task was challenging. Ls listen again, reading tapescript as they do.	To provide further listening practice and opportunities to notice useful language.	Ls will probably notice unfamiliar language; if so, allow a few minutes for dictionary/internet use to check this. Help Ls with weaker study skills (especially JP and BG) to select which words they want to check carefully.

Note: student name initials are given in capitals; Ls = learners; T = teacher.

TABLE 3
Extract from a lesson plan
pro forma showing possible
occurrences and responses,
reasons, time frames, and
an optional lesson stage

Assessment concerns

In order to be of any use, the suggested approach to planning must constitute a realistic vehicle for assessing teacher competence effectively. Table 4 shows how it can provide criteria for all three key stages within the lesson observation process, as might be required in higher-level teacher training qualifications and assessment schemes (such as the Cambridge Delta, the Trinity DipTESOL, or a PGCE with ESOL specialization).

An important implication of this suggested change to describing teacher intentions is the elevation in importance of the post-lesson discussion. Rather than being just a check of whether there are any mitigating circumstances for achievement or non-achievement of aims followed by observer 'feedback', it becomes central to the assessment of the lesson itself. During this discussion, a competent

Outcomes-based approach	Affordance-based approach
	Planning
Appropriacy of aims.	Appropriacy of learning opportunities.
	Observation
Evidence of achievement of aims.	Evidence of learning opportunities occurring, both predicted and unpredicted. Evidence of appropriate teacher responses to, and facilitation of, learning opportunities.
	Feedback/post-lesson discussion
Ability to identify degree to which aims were achieved.	Ability to identify what learning occurred, including scope (how many learners) and degree (how much learning) with reference to teacher role in this learning.
Ability to provide reasons for achievement/non-achievement of aims.	Ability to accurately relate actual learning to predicted learning opportunities and provide justification for differences and choices made during the lesson.
Ability to identify appropriate learning goals for the learners in future lessons. Ability to identify areas for personal development.	Ability to identify possible areas of study for future lessons. Ability to identify areas for personal development.

TABLE 4
Parallels and differences
between assessment
criteria in outcomes-based
and affordance-based
approaches to lesson
planning

teacher would be able to identify evidence of learning, describing what type of learning it was, and to which learners it happened (differentiated learning). They would be able to describe how they facilitated this learning, and they would be able to reflect on how the actual learning related to the learning opportunities predicted on the plan, justifying any differences between these from the perspective of the learners' needs and the affordances of the lesson event. As is currently common in post-lesson discussions, the observed teacher could then reflect on what they would do differently if they were to teach the lesson again, consider possible focuses for future lessons for the same group of learners, and identify areas for personal development.

Conclusion

An affordance-based approach to lesson planning for language teaching is arguably more complex than an outcomes-based one because it more accurately reflects the complexity of the multiple, varied learning that occurs whenever we attempt to teach a group of language learners. However, it has three clear advantages over outcomes-based approaches.

- 1 It is more realistic to what we know about how learning may or may not occur in the minds of learners.
- 2 It both reflects and accommodates the teaching practice of experienced teachers more accurately.

- 3 As a result of the first two advantages, it is likely to help trainee and in-service teachers to gain a greater understanding of how to understand learning and thereby teach more effectively.

In addition to these three advantages, the lesson observation procedure suggested above is flexible, potentially allowing for satisfactory description of lessons in a wide range of learning contexts, whether they be predicated on procedure, process, or product. It is also likely to have a positive influence on professional development, encouraging teachers to become, in the words of Kumaravadivelu (2003: 2), both 'strategic thinkers' and 'strategic practitioners':

As strategic thinkers, they need to reflect on the specific needs, wants, situations and processes of learning and teaching. As strategic practitioners, they need to develop knowledge and skills necessary to self-observe, self-analyse and self-evaluate their own teaching acts.

And this I feel should be the aim of all credible teacher education.

Final version received December 2014

Notes

- 1 Van Lier (op.cit.: 91) cites Gibson's original definition of affordances, stating that they can be 'either for good or ill'.
- 2 Schmidt's noticing hypothesis argues that the noticing of new language is the necessary and sufficient condition for converting input to intake (Schmidt op.cit.: 129).
- 3 Long's interaction hypothesis argues that negotiation for meaning that causes interactional adjustment facilitates acquisition by connecting input, internal learner capacities, and output (Long op.cit.: 451–2).
- 4 As the intention here is not to criticize, names of organizations have been withheld, but are available on request from the author.

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