

Affordance-based lesson planning in pre-service teacher education

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This article reports on an exploratory study investigating the extent to which affordance-based lesson planning is feasible and useful in pre-service teacher education. After using both affordance-based and outcomes-based lesson plans, trainee teachers in North Macedonia participated in both a survey and interviews. Respondents found both types of lesson plan useful, but in different ways and for different reasons, with some disagreement among the sample in a number of areas. While their considerations of affordance often helped them to prepare and reflect on lessons effectively, they also expressed concern about the time and cognitive challenge required to do so, with many indicating that they would appreciate more agency, both to develop their own pro formas and to explore affordance in alternative ways, such as through discussions. We conclude our article with a number of reflective questions that may be useful to other teacher educators and practicum supervisors.

Key words: affordance, lesson plan, pre-service, teacher education, planning

Introduction and background

The term *affordance* has recently gained currency in educational research and theory, particularly language pedagogy, for its ability to describe how possibilities and opportunities for learning may or may not present themselves to learners and lead to ‘uptake’, restructuring, or development (van Lier 2004). It is a key construct within complex and dynamic systems theories that emphasise the unpredictability of learning and the need for those of us that support, facilitate, and monitor it (i.e., educators) to be both proactive and reactive in our efforts (Larsen-Freeman 2019). As such, in a previous *ELT Journal* contribution, the second author of this article (Anderson 2015) argued for the re-evaluation of the lesson plan pro forma (LPPF) as a key artefact in teacher education that had, to date, been underdiscussed in the literature on language teaching. His analysis of 23

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LPPFs from different contexts indicated that most promote outcomes-based lesson planning, in which teachers are expected to describe (on the plan) and then deliver a lesson that causes universal behavioural change among the learners so as to demonstrate achievement of the pre-specified outcomes. Outcomes-based planning originates in Ralph Tyler's rational-linear framework from the 1940s and remains influential through the widespread use of Bloom's or 'SMART' objectives in lesson planning. [Anderson \(2015\)](#) argued that such practices are in conflict, both with what we know about how languages are learnt (e.g., the dynamism and unpredictability of language learning) and how experienced/expert teachers teach (e.g., their flexibility and creativity in responding to this unpredictability).

In the same article, [Anderson \(2015\)](#) proposed a number of changes to the LPPF to enable teachers to respond more flexibly to the needs of learners and the affordances of the lesson, what we here call affordance-based lesson planning (ABLP). These included:

- replacing the foundational construct of 'lesson outcomes', 'aims', or 'objectives' with the more flexible, differentiated one of 'predicted learning opportunities' (PLOs);
- replacing so-called 'anticipated problems and solutions' with 'possible occurrences and responses';
- changes to the lesson procedure section of the plan (e.g., a 'Reasons' column, the inclusion of optional/'flexi-stages', reference to individual learners and the use of flexible 'time frames') to enable teachers to respond appropriately to learning as it happens during the lesson (see [Figure 1](#)).

These proposals have stimulated debate with proponents of outcomes-based planning (see [Pang 2016](#); [Anderson 2017](#)). They have also inspired experimentation and change by other researchers. This includes [Sayed's](#)

Stage	Time frame (minutes)	Procedure (indicate if stage is optional)	Reasons	Possible occurrences and responses
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.

FIGURE 1
Extract from an affordance-based LPPF featuring time frames, an optional lesson stage, 'Reasons' column and possible occurrences and responses (adapted from [Anderson 2015](#): 235).

(2016) quasi-experimental comparison of two classes he taught in Saudi Arabia; one involving more 'traditional' instruction and one involving several affordance-based and 'reactive' activities, including some proposed by Anderson (2015). Encouragingly, Sayed recorded statistically significant learning gains in the affordance-based class when compared to the traditional class over just five weeks. Both Chick (2015) in the UK and Nguyen (2022) in Vietnam have experimented with reflective post-lesson discussion to promote greater awareness of affordance among pre-service teachers. Based on his experience, Nguyen (2022) offered useful additions to Anderson's (2015) taxonomy of learning opportunities. Chick (2015) reports only limited success in moving pre-service teachers away from more outcomes-based approaches towards more 'reactive approaches'. While interesting, these studies have not focused directly on the LPPF itself as either a facilitating or obstructing artefact in attempts to move pre-service teachers (PSTs) towards more affordance-based approaches to teaching. As such, a clear research gap exists for studies exploring the relative merits of affordance-based approaches to lesson planning, including the use of said LPPFs, when compared to more traditional outcomes-based approaches, either in pre-service or in-service contexts.

The context and research activities

We report on the findings of an exploratory research project investigating the extent to which the incorporation of elements of affordance-based lesson planning is useful for PSTs. The study was conducted in North Macedonia, where the first author supervises teaching practice for a cohort of around twenty to thirty Macedonian pre-service English language teachers each year on a module in the fourth and final year of their BEd. She has for several years been experimenting with a number of changes to these practices based, in part, on Anderson's (2015) recommendations.

The PSTs were already exposed to more traditional, outcomes-based lesson planning (OBLP) in earlier modules, where they were introduced to aims, procedures, sequencing of activities, timing, and interaction patterns. Our aim was to provide ample opportunity for them to make use of an affordance-based LPPF (for six weeks) and then a second opportunity to use an outcomes-based LPPF (for two weeks) to enable them to compare the two LPPFs during a term when they were working both in mainstream secondary schools and informal education (with orphaned teenagers). We formulated the following exploratory *research and reflection questions* to guide our enquiry:

- What aspects of LPPFs do the pre-service teachers find useful and why?
- Was there a preference for either the affordance-based or outcomes-based LPPF, and if so, which one?
- What lessons were learnt from the trial?
- How might more affordance-based approaches to planning be better facilitated in pre-service contexts?

The broad aims of our project were introduced to the PSTs at the start of the module alongside the ABLP, when there was time and ample opportunity for them to explore and discuss issues of affordance and learning through a range of activities, including:

- individual and group use of affordance-based LPPF followed by class discussion of emergent themes;
- micro-teaching sessions with feedback activities focusing on responsive teaching; and
- an online seminar discussion of a video on ‘Teaching the Unteachable’ to explore the need for flexibility in teaching and to discuss the PSTs’ lesson planning practices, preferences and challenges, including affordance. The video is available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xdXgYLBjy-E&ab_channel=CentreforPracticeBasedResearchintheArts.

Through observations of the PSTs’ work and informal discussions, the first author noticed that they generally coped well with the new affordance-based LPPF, with some PSTs suggesting they struggled at times to consider more aspects of the lesson than they were used to; for example, the reasons and possible occurrences for each stage. This is unsurprising, given that PST development is characterised by a strong initial focus on their own and their learners’ behaviour before they are able to focus primarily on learner learning (see Kagan 1992).

It is important to clarify that while we didn’t openly state personal preferences for either LPPF, from both discussions and materials shared, it is likely that the PSTs would have inferred our preference for affordance-based planning. Nonetheless, we encouraged open and frank discussion of the merits of both ways of planning throughout and made it clear that our primary interest was in understanding and accommodating the PSTs’ needs and preferences.

We adopted a sequential exploratory approach to data collection, based on Dörnyei’s QUAL→quan design (2007: 171), interviewing a small number of participants first, followed by a quantitative questionnaire shared with the wider cohort. This approach was chosen to ensure a rich understanding of PSTs’ lesson planning perceptions and practices first, while allowing us to finetune our subsequent questionnaire. The initial semi-structured video interviews were conducted upon completion of the module to discuss the PSTs’ experiences of using the two LPPFs. Five PSTs from the cohort of 25 were invited to take part in the study and agreed; all were in their early 20s but varied in terms of their module contributions and teaching experience (see Table 1).

Interviews lasted between thirty and forty-five minutes; interview data was open-coded inductively and findings were summarised. We then compiled a short, mainly quantitative, anonymous (to encourage critical responses), online questionnaire informed by the interview responses to investigate how representative the opinions elicited from interviewees were of the wider cohort. The questionnaire included 23 Likert-scale items and two open-response items to elicit any further opinions. Responses from 11 students were analysed quantitatively for mean scores and standard deviation; their responses were indeed found to support the range of opinions from the interviews well. Findings are reported below, where all participant names are pseudonyms. All participants provided informed consent for data collection. Pro formas for interviews and the questionnaire are available from the authors upon request.

TABLE 1
Interviewees' profiles regarding their module participation, lesson planning, and teaching experience

Interviewee pseudonym	Frequency and quality of contributions to study tasks	Quality of lesson planning (as indicated by practicum log entries)	Teaching experience outside of practicum
Margarita	Regular, insightful	Minimal evidence of planning Very good	Works in private language school parallel to studying None
Anika	Infrequent, insightful	Good, and improving throughout	None
Nevena	Infrequent, informative	Very good	None
Ines	Occasional, informative	Good	None
Nikolina	Occasional, insightful		

Findings and discussion

Perceived general benefits and challenges of using lesson plan pro formas

We present and discuss our findings in order of our research and reflection questions.

There was clear consensus among the sample concerning the benefits of using LPPFs in general, with ten of the eleven questionnaire respondents indicating that it was, on balance, a useful experience. They felt that both LPPFs usefully scaffolded their learning, in terms of providing ideas for what aspects of the lesson to consider and helping them prepare for the lesson, both mentally and practically (for example, organisation skills). As Anika explained:

[Lesson planning] helped me get more organized and think about how much time the students will need about certain activities and how to react in certain situations. [. . .] I find them very useful, these templates. I cannot imagine going into classroom without having one of these ready.

Despite these positive overall evaluations, disadvantages of using the LPPFs and negative experiences were also reported. Margarita, for instance, recalled her experiences of teaching orphaned teenagers, who were sometimes demotivated or easily distracted, in their care homes. She felt this context made it difficult to work through the content they had planned. She said: 'We still haven't felt the benefits of lesson planning [. . .]. We didn't fully understand the usefulness and the point of lesson planning.' Nikolina also discussed context when reflecting on the usefulness of the LPPFs used on the module. She felt that different LPPFs could be useful in specific settings and in the context of specific teaching/learning preferences.

PSTs indicated that the LPPFs usefully supported critical reflection. Sometimes, the mere committing of ideas to paper served as a catalyst for reflection. Ines recalled a time when she planned together with a peer:

As we got to really think about [the lesson], [. . .] we were like, okay. This sounds great. I think it will be very interesting. But when we put it on paper and looked at the whole lesson plan, we said . . . I don't think this is really it.

Nikolina benefitted from looking back at past lessons to reflect on how she taught and why. However, she could imagine the post-lesson reflection prompts becoming ‘repetitive and disheartening if you have one or two not ideal lessons in a row’.

Despite recognising the utility of LPPFs, a slight majority (six PSTs) of questionnaire respondents felt that the LPPFs restricted their freedom to some extent. As Nikolina explained:

I sometimes wonder how much do [the elements of these lesson plans] help me? And do they sometimes hold me back. [. . .] Elements such as the time frame, yes, [this] helps me organize. [. . .] But at the same time, we want to keep classes organic and the communication natural. Should I stop students after that 5–10-minute time frame? There’s always a debate I have within myself when I have my classes.

Time was another frequently mentioned challenge; eight of 11 questionnaire respondents felt it was time-consuming to complete the LPPFs. Margarita found them to be a bureaucratic experience:

These templates would have been given more love if we had more time, and energy and space. I think that at one point [the LPPFs] started feeling [more] like chores [. . .] than a learning experience.

Margarita may well have struggled more for ‘time, energy and space’ than her peers because she was working as a teacher while studying.

The above reasons may explain why the LPPFs were not regularly completed by all PSTs. Four questionnaire respondents indicated that they failed to complete a LPPF when planning a lesson; six would have preferred to teach from informal notes; and seven would have preferred not to use LPPFs at all, and instead to plan in other ways (e.g., by discussing ideas with peers and producing a summary of their discussions). The quiet reluctance of some PSTs to use the mandated LPPFs can be interpreted as what Rainio (2008) calls *resistant agency* on their part, i.e., challenging the existing module requirements; if the LPPFs did not prove fit for purpose, why use them? Equally, if the PSTs were already successfully using other lesson planning formats that allowed for affordance (both Margarita and Nikolina used notes), why move away from something that seemed to work?

There was a clear consensus that respondents would have appreciated more agency in the use of the LPPFs, particularly to choose which LPPF to use (nine respondents) or to create their own LPPFs (10 respondents), drawing from the elements available. While opinions varied, there was marginally higher agreement that trying out two different pro formas was better than one and some felt that LPPFs should have been introduced at an earlier stage on the university modules.

There was a slight preference, on balance, for the ABLP in the questionnaire and for the OBLP in the interviews. However, when specific sections of the plans were compared, findings were complex and varied.

When comparing how lesson goals or intentions are expressed, there was a marginal preference among questionnaire respondents for learning outcomes (from the OBLP) (preferred by six) over predicted learning

Comparing
affordance-based
and outcomes-
based pro formas

opportunities (from the ABLP) (preferred by two; three were neutral). While the PLOs helped some PSTs realise ‘just how much you can do in one class’ (Nikolina), most felt they were ‘idealistic’ (Nikolina) and ‘tentative’ (Ines), i.e., less tangible to work with, when compared to learning outcomes.

There was agreement (seven questionnaire respondents) that it was useful having to reflect on their reasons for planning decisions, as prompted in the ABLP.

Concerning the inclusion of possible occurrences and responses (PORs) on the ABLP, the PSTs identified both advantages and disadvantages. Concerning advantages, there was strong agreement that having PORs on the ABLP helped the PSTs imagine the lessons in advance (nine questionnaire respondents). To this, Nevena added the benefit of PORs helping PSTs prepare for the unpredictability of the classroom, ‘giv[ing] us at least a little bit of comfort that, if something occurs, we are ready to tackle the problem because we have this [. . .] template to refer to’. According to Anika, the benefits of the ABLP also extended to the learners:

You take your time to think about your students and their needs. So, whenever something happens in the classroom, you would be able to help them more quickly because you’ve already thought about it. And in that way, it was useful for the students as well.

Concerning potential disadvantages of the PORs, eight questionnaire respondents found completing them time-consuming; seven found them difficult to predict and occasionally repetitive. Overall, the interviewees felt that the ABLP required too much detail. Margarita described this as ‘excessive’ and Anika as ‘overthinking’. Anika felt that the OBLP provided sufficient opportunities for affordance:

[When using the ABLP] I had to really sit down and think about what will happen [at each stage], how can I react in that situation? And it took quite some time. Whereas when I used the [OBLP], I just thought about things that could happen [in the lesson] . . .

Yet, for Ines, the deep thinking promoted by ABLP was time well spent: ‘Of course, there could be millions of situations that could occur, but it’s better to be prepared for some than for none’.

In general, the interviewees indicated that they found the OBLP simpler and more practical to use, especially as it appeared similar to LPPFs from prior modules. Being less detailed (i.e., more open-ended), some felt the OBLP offered more space for them to be themselves; as Nevena put it, to ‘express how I am as a teacher and to include things that I feel like should be in a lesson’. The interviewees also appreciated the support the OBLP provided for affordance through its prompts for optional activities and anticipated problems.

Lessons learnt
from the trial

As is typically the case when it comes to researching one’s practice, our exploration resulted in more questions than answers. The project made us reflect on the extent to which we, as educators, plan for and respond to affordance when introducing LPPFs for our PSTs to use. If ‘the pro formas we use both influence and reflect our perceptions and understanding of

the lesson event itself' (Anderson 2015: 228), do we sufficiently discuss this interplay with our PSTs? Do our PSTs have a say in what LPPFs get used on our modules? How do we get our PSTs 'on-side' so they have more opportunities to engage in *constructive* rather than *resistant agency* (Rainio 2008)?

Further, if the main purpose of LPPFs is to aid and provide evidence of careful thinking (e.g., for assessment purposes) concerning how we scaffold learning, can this thinking be presented in other ways? For some PSTs in our study, a lot of useful thinking took place without it necessarily being recorded in a LPPF. As Margarita notes: 'I think that there was rarely a moment [on the module] [when] our brains weren't working to the max. [. . .] I kept thinking and thinking and thinking'.

Based on our findings, we here offer a number of reflections and suggestions for facilitating affordance-based planning in pre-service training.

Affordance was discussed on the teacher education module in the context of learning taking place organically, and teaching needing to be responsive to this. Ideally, such discussions should allow for everyone to explore their beliefs about teaching and learning, i.e., the 'rock we stand on' (Johnson 1999: 30). Such discussions are likely to elicit the complex web of factors involved in teaching and learning. This would be an opportunity to also discuss which of those factors are addressed in our LPPFs and which, if any, could be added or removed. Indeed, PSTs could be invited at an early stage in the practicum to consider developing their own LPPF(s) to reflect their beliefs about education, by drawing eclectically on the elements found in existing LPPFs, something for which there was a clear preference among our sample.

Engaging in formative discussion need only be the start, though, as teacher knowledge is 'largely experiential and socially constructed' (Johnson 1999: 18). The PSTs would also have benefitted from opportunities to micro-teach their group-planned lessons in order to experience and discuss the impact of affordance first-hand in a safe, supportive environment before teaching their 'real' learners. Indeed, PSTs need to experience the range of benefits of both informal and formal lesson planning discussed above if they are to question their intuitively held beliefs about planning (e.g., as influenced by their apprenticeship of observation; cf. Lortie 1975) and commit to the rigorous practice of using LPPFs meaningfully on the module.

Some of the PSTs suggested that LPPFs should be introduced gradually, from simpler (e.g., OBLP) to more complex ones (e.g., ABLP). In this way, discussions of affordance, too, would be scaffolded more gradually. If the regular use of detailed LPPFs becomes too much work, PSTs could team-teach in pairs, taking turns to fill in the LPPFs, while also benefitting from this collaboration.

Other PSTs suggested that the ABLP should feature only one section for possible occurrences. This would save time and ease the difficulty of generating possible occurrences for each lesson stage. An alternative to this might be for peers to discuss possible occurrences before completing them on the plan (e.g., *How do you think shy Stefan might react to a*

Facilitating
affordance-based
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service teacher
education
More
comprehensive
preparation for
teaching

Changes in how
lesson plan pro-
formas are used

whole-class debating activity?). A dialogic format would relieve the cognitive load for each PST to think up their own possible occurrences, while still engaging the PSTs in considering affordance. Also, a peer review format like this would encourage PSTs to be proactive, by positioning them as helpers, rather than defaulting to uncritically praising each other's work (Ončevska Ager 2023).

Alternatives
to teachers
completing
written lesson
plan pro formas

Some PSTs suggested discussing their lesson planning ideas with a partner using prompts from a LPPF, rather than filling in the LPPF itself (see Malderez's 2023 pre-lesson mentorial protocol). This can serve as a welcome break from individual written work. PSTs could alternatively audio/video record their lesson planning discussions and use, for example, artificial intelligence to transcribe their discussions and then complete a LPPF for them, especially if the latter is a formal requirement on their module.

**Conclusion and
further reflective
questions**

While the sample of PSTs surveyed may not be fully representative of the full cohort, our exploratory study has nonetheless suggested several benefits of using LPPFs to scaffold PST learning, including sensitising them to the importance of planning for affordance. As such, this study indicates that affordance-based planning seems to have a degree of transferability to the context in question, despite its origins in the UK, although the limitations of the small sample size and study duration should be acknowledged. Nonetheless, as Chick (2015) observes, learning about affordance can be a lengthy process which we can only initiate on a teacher education programme. Importantly, we also found that offering PSTs choice in how to use LPPFs may serve as a means for them to develop agency.

When it comes to related challenges, the PSTs found using LPPFs to sometimes be time-consuming, restrictive of their freedom or problematic in certain teaching and learning contexts. Some PSTs also found it difficult or discouraging to be required to reflect regularly and/or in detail on what might happen in the lesson.

For our colleagues working elsewhere we offer the following reflective questions that may help guide their lesson planning support. These questions are based, in part, on lessons learnt from the study itself, and, in part, originate in our prior experiences of facilitating PST learning:

- How do we, in general terms, plan to scaffold affordance-based lesson planning on our courses; for example, by moving from simple to complex LPPFs or from standardised structure to self-designed pro formas?
- If considered desirable, how can we ensure PST involvement and agency in affordance-based planning early on in courses or practica? How to gauge their previous experiences of lesson planning and related beliefs, as learners and teachers? How to get them to critically engage with existing LPPFs so that these pro formas are more aligned with (a) the PSTs' own beliefs about education and (b) the teaching/learning context at hand? And importantly, how to best make room for personal expression within the constraints of a LPPF?

- How can we provide opportunities for PSTs to experience the impact of affordance as implied in the LPPFs, in the relative safety of the teacher education room?
- How can we pace work on affordance-based planning so it does not become overwhelming or demotivating?
- How to regularly monitor PSTs' experiences of using LPPFs to be able to respond in a timely manner to their evolving needs?
- What other lesson planning activities, apart from using LPPFs, can we offer to elicit lesson planning ideas? In particular, what dialogic formats can we use to explore affordance in planning?
- How to prepare PSTs for their future professional realities, which might include the mandated use of potentially problematic or restrictive LPPFs?

We invite our colleagues to conduct similar trials with their pre-service, diploma or MA student teachers, and to reflect on and share their findings, either with us directly (contact details provided below) or through publication. Given how little consideration there is of affordance in the literature on lesson planning, we believe this is a fruitful avenue for further research and learning for teacher educators.

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Note:

Figure 1 is an adapted version of content used in Jason Anderson's 2015 paper published in *ELT Journal*. Anderson has agreed for this content to be reused.

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