

Intentions and signposts

Jason Anderson asserts that ELT is all about clarity of direction.

One of the biggest differences in notions of best practice between the fields of ELT and mainstream education relates to how we begin our lessons. Consult any guide for primary, secondary or tertiary teaching and it will say the same: irrespective of the subject, it is essential to make your intentions clear to the learners at the start of the lesson. However, consult Jeremy Harmer's *The Practice of English Language Teaching*, Jim Scrivener's *Learning Teaching* or any of the other bestsellers in our discipline, and you will find very few, if any, concrete recommendations on whether we should do this, or how.

This may not come as a surprise to many language teachers. For several decades we have considered that language teaching is different from other spheres of education. Data supporting natural sequences of acquisition, and evidence that teaching doesn't always lead to learning – or, indeed, that practice doesn't necessarily make perfect – have convinced many in our field that we have no need to conform to the rules governing what happens in mainstream classrooms. This evidence, while rather patchy and often contested, has nonetheless had a profound impact on methodology in language teaching, espousing the strong version of Communicative Language Teaching, the Natural Approach, Task-based Learning and more recently Dogme ELT. Proponents of all these approaches will generally favour a process-oriented approach to planning, in which procedures – or even procedure types – are all that is specified in advance, and the

outcomes are left open-ended. They also tend to argue that it is impossible to present such emergent outcomes at the start of the lesson. But that is not necessarily what I'm arguing for ...

What the evidence is telling us

Two of the largest meta-analyses ever conducted on best practice in mainstream education agreed conclusively that making intentions and goals clear at the start of the lesson has a significant positive effect on the students' learning. John Hattie's often-quoted meta-analysis, *Visible Learning*, and Robert Marzano's less well-known study both came to the conclusion that providing a clear structure (often called an 'advance organiser') improves learning. They also agreed that setting clear goals improves learning even further, and that involving the learners in identifying their own goals improves learning most of all. Interestingly, they also agreed that setting more specific behavioural objectives, such as SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable/Appropriate, Relevant/Realistic, Time-bound) objectives, does not have very much effect on the learning. So, it's not about objectives or outcomes: it's about clarity of direction.

What it means for language teaching

Before we rush to over-interpret this data, it is important to recognise that much language learning involves skills practice. As such, gains are incremental, and it can be difficult to specify clear

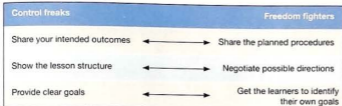


Figure 1

goals. Nonetheless, by identifying more specific subskills, and being clear about which skills we are working on, we can help to make our lesson structure and potential goals fairly explicit. In addition to this, there is quite a lot of language learning that involves building declarative knowledge (knowledge that can be consciously recalled), and for this kind of learning, the evidence described above applies just as well as it does in other areas of education. Vocabulary learning, in particular, is very much about declarative knowledge (see Irina Elgort and Paul Nation's research summary), and even grammar learning, in part, involves developing explicit understanding of rules of usage. As Rod Ellis puts it: '... learners can learn facts about the grammar of a language in any order, but they will follow a definite sequence when mastering grammar for communicative use.'

So how might we apply this to our teaching?

Control freaks and freedom fighters

Just as learners differ in how they learn best, teachers will always differ in their beliefs on how best to facilitate learning. Some of us believe that learning can and should be controlled by the teacher, and others take the view that it is precisely

the attempt to control learning that can hinder it. For the sake of argument, let us call these two polarities *control freaks* and *freedom fighters* respectively, recognising that the majority of us locate our practices (either by choice or context) somewhere in the middle. Irrespective of where you find yourself on this continuum – and this can vary between classes of learners or lesson type – there are ways for you to clarify the intended learning, or to explore the potential learning opportunities at the start of the lesson, as shown in Figure 1.

On a personal level, I usually like to identify the skills and specific activities that I have planned for a lesson, and either suggest or elicit potential learning opportunities from the learners.

Whenever possible, I try to provide a written record of the planned activities that we can refer back to during the lesson – what some teachers call a 'lesson menu' (see Figure 2). I find that if I really want to involve the learners in identifying their own goals, I need this input before I start planning the lesson, and so I tend to do this at the start of a week or, even better, at the end of the previous week.

Signposting the learning

As Geoff Petty notes, if you have an advance organiser or lesson menu, it is

useful to refer back to it at important points during the lesson. These can be moments when you link key learning points to specific outcomes or learning opportunities, or simply segue between activities. This is sometimes called *signposting*, and can be done either retrospectively (when you focus on what has already been achieved), or prospectively (when you orient the learners' attention onto what is coming next). Given the importance of responding to the emergent needs of our learners (see my recent article in the *ELT Journal*), we can also carry out what we might call 'negotiated signposting':

Retrospective signposting

- So which of our activities have we done so far today?
- So what have we learnt today? Can you provide an example?
- Why did we do that activity? What was the aim of it?

Prospective signposting

- What do we have on our menu/plan that we haven't done yet?
- What are we going to do next? What do you think that will involve?

Negotiated signposting

- Which of the two activities would you prefer to do now? Have we got time to do both?
- Would you like to do that, or would you prefer to review what we've done so far?

Concluding the lesson

Just as practical guides on English language teaching are sometimes rather lax in their recommendations on how we should start lessons, they can also be unclear on how we conclude them. Once again, this is very much in contradiction of best practice in mainstream teaching, where research by Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam has indicated that conducting formative assessment at the end of lessons can have a very significant positive impact on the learning. As mentioned above, the development of procedural skills (reading, writing, speaking and listening), which is so important in language learning, does not lend itself easily to more formal formative assessment, but at the end of

Lesson menu	
Vocabulary:	Holidays and travel.
Grammar:	First and second conditional structures in contrast; study and practice.
Speaking:	Describing places to visit in your country and other countries; describing conditional situations.
Reading:	Three texts about holiday destinations; reading for key facts and recommendations.
Listening:	Peer-listening followed by quiz (optional).

Figure 2

Intentions and signposts

▶▶▶ a lesson that involves skills practice, learning can still be consolidated by eliciting from the students what skills were practised, how they feel they did with them, and what challenges they feel remain. As well as raising the students' own awareness of what they did and didn't learn, this can provide useful feedback to us for future planning cycles.

Lessons that involve new vocabulary, collocations or the introduction of new grammar rules can be concluded with more targeted challenges to the students, or simply elicitation of what that they have learnt. For learners at lower levels of proficiency, it may be useful to ask these questions in the mother tongue:

Skills-related questions


- What skills did we practise today? Which did you find most difficult? Why?
- What subskill were we practising? How might this be useful in the future?
- Would you like to continue with this tomorrow?

Vocabulary and grammar questions

- What new words did we learn today?
- Who can translate this word into their mother tongue? Who can use it in a sentence?
- What was the name of the grammar that we learnt today? When is it useful?
- How would you translate the following sentence into English?



In this article, I have shared my belief that language teachers should, no less than other teachers, be clear about their intentions and goals at the start of every class, and that they should refer back to these intentions throughout the lesson. I have suggested a range of ways in which this can be done to suit individual preferences, institutional constraints and different learning contexts, and I have shared some possible questions we can


use to signpost and assess learning during the lesson. This is something that many experienced teachers, especially those working in primary and secondary contexts, do all the time. If you don't, and you remain unconvinced by my arguments, I have one final question for you to consider: *If you were learning a language, what would you want your teacher to do?* 



Jason Anderson is a teacher, teacher trainer and author of several resource books for language teachers, including *Role Plays for Today, Teamwork, Speaking Games and Teaching English in Africa*. He has taught and trained teachers in primary, secondary and tertiary contexts in 12 countries worldwide for organisations including UNICEF, the British Council, VSO and International House.

jasonanderson1@gmail.com

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