Connecting pupils, students and theory in a project: Planning time in the classroom, a crucial element in lesson design

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This study is about three teachers who design a 10-lesson teaching plan in a research project and carry it out with their classes. Through the course of their endeavors they are exposed to different ideas about what constitutes a successful lesson, what they can expect from their pupils, and their role as teacher. The role of planning is a central aspect of their newly imposed methodology of task-based learning. The teachers monitor their pupils' response and their own responses as they make their way through the project. Each teacher develops her understanding of language learning on her own terms, in her own classroom. Pre- and post-tests are taken in order to determine whether or not spoken language production has improved among the pupils. Affective variables are measured and enthusiasm scores highest. Crossing the bridge between theory and practice is possible and this study illustrates how teachers can benefit from bringing theory and research projects into their classrooms.

Introduction

The participants in this study are teachers in a teachers-in-service training course, a 15 credit course that goes over three semesters. The three teachers presented in this study each have their own 5th grade class and are employed at different schools. Their goal with the course is to improve their English teaching, but they have a rather vague notion of what that entails. The vagueness extends to ideas about what constitutes a successful lesson. Rarely do they refer to method as something that they prioritize in lesson design. This is unfortunate because the connection between theory and practice becomes more diffuse than it needs to be. Method is the bridge between theory and practice and constitutes a toolbox for adjusting lessons in order to maximize the learning process in the classroom. Task-based learning is introduced as a methodological framework in the lesson design process because it makes clear connections between principles of language learning and lesson structure.

The primary component of the task-based approach is the task. In this study, planning time is related to the task as either pre-task planning time or on-line planning time. Within the task-based framework, planning time is a part of the task-cycle, in which the learner is given opportunity to prepare a short text or discourse that will be presented to the class. The purpose of this component is that the learner has a chance to

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pay attention to form and accuracy. Willis (1996) provides an excellent account about the task-based learning framework in an accessible manner.

Planning time

Planning time is time for figuring out how to solve a task and what language bits you will need to do it. There are two types of planning referred to in this project with respect to the task. Pre-task planning occurs prior to performing the task, a learner is given information/details about organization, how to solve the task or given a model. On-line planning provides the learner with ample time to complete the task.

Planning time is chosen as a variable and focus because it has been shown to have a substantial impact on learner performance in experimental studies, and based on observations in classrooms, it appears that perhaps planning time is a neglected area and is worth investigating. This turns out to be the case as will be discussed below.

In experimental studies, planning time has been in focus in terms of pre-task and on-line planning. Pre-task planning time has been shown to reduce cognitive load and communicative stress (Ortega, 1999). Giving learners time previous to task completion has also been found to promote higher lexical and structural complexity (Yuan & Ellis, 2003). On-line planning time has been shown to enhance fluency and lexical density (Mehnert, 1998). Foster and Skehan (1996) conclude that 'trade-off' effects are found between structural complexity and accuracy, such that one precludes the other. Skehan and Foster (1997) confirm this notion in that speakers attend to either complexity or accuracy during a task. By adjusting planning time we can focus learners' attention on either complexity, accuracy or fluency.

Planning time benefits learner performance in many positive ways, so it could be interesting to see what happens if we incorporate a focus on planning time in our lesson design and whether that ultimately has any effect on language production. No studies have, however, been done on planning time in the classroom. There is probably a reason for that as was found out in the implementation of this study. Whereas in experimental studies, conditions are controlled and it is possible to make clear distinctions between pre-task and on-line planning, in the lessons in which we tried to manipulate the pre-task and on-line planning, the distinction becomes quickly hazy. Planning time in experimental studies is controlled attention to figuring out how to solve a task or how to say something, the classroom is a bit more chaotic and consequently planning time in this study is defined as 'giving instructions about why and what they are going to do as well as time to do it.'

Study questions

The main question is whether or not planning time has an effect on language production. Planning time is given focus and attention by the teachers in their lesson design and implementation of those lessons. Lessons 2-4 are designed to influence the planning time in different ways and to see if the pupils experience the differences between being given time for pre-task planning and/or on-line planning. Pre- and post-tests are taken in order to determine if learners' language production improves. The areas that are investigated include fluency, lexical complexity, structural complexity and accuracy.

When involving teachers in a research project, two general questions need to be addressed:

- Will teachers benefit from this project? Will they feel that they have improved their English teaching as expected for the course?
- Will pupils benefit from this project in terms of becoming better language users?

In order to answer these questions, three areas are addressed in this study.

- What has changed in the teachers' approach to teaching English?
- How do learners perceive the changes?
- Are there measurable improvements in speech production?

Project design and material

Even though the entire class participates in the project, this study focuses on the three 5th grade teachers who come from three different schools. In the beginning of the project, they agree on a topic, and then plan 10 lessons together using the task-based learning framework. As they carry out their lessons, they evaluate and make adjustments to their teaching as a group.

Table 1 shows the distribution of planning time in lessons. The first lesson is to be a comfortable lesson to provide a base-line to the project, lesson 2 has no pre-task planning and no on-line planning during task. Lesson 3 has pre-task planning but no on-line planning, while lesson 4 has no pre-task planning, but includes on-line planning. The remaining lessons 5-10 include both pre-task planning and on-line planning.

Table 1: Distribution of planning time in lessons

	Pre-task Planning	On-line Planning
Lesson 1	Traditional Lesson	
Lesson 2	No	No
Lesson 3	Yes	No
Lesson 4	No	Yes
Lessons 5-10	Yes	Yes

Material collected from teachers consists of an initial survey about lesson design and what they consider to be a successful lesson, a text accounting for their intentions and expectations of the project, a teacher questionnaire after each lesson asking about how they perceived pupil participation and reaction to lesson as well as observations about language learning experiences, project evaluation, and in one case, a delayed response from a year later.

In order to register how the learners perceived the lessons, the teacher interviewed 3-5 pupils immediately after every lesson. Continuums are used to find out about the following variables:

- Did you think this lesson was easy or difficult?
- Did you feel you were very active or not so active?
- Did you think it was an interesting or a boring lesson?
- Were you relaxed or frustrated?

The pupils are recorded before and after the 10-lesson teaching block which occurred over a period of 10 weeks. Volunteers are selected from each class to narrate a story using comic strips. During the recording procedure, pupils are given as much time as they want to prepare their stories, and any questions they have about content or clarification of the pictures are provided before their stories are recorded.

The material is transcribed. Pauses are indicated in the transcripts with periods for complete breaks marked by falling intonation, commas indicate a shorter break and then the speaker continues an utterance, and three dots indicate a perceptible break. A control group from a different town is recorded for comparison purposes. Different teachers are used in the experiment group and control group, rendering a comparable analysis impossible. Thus this study can only allude to tendencies between the two groups. Each pupil narrated two comic strips before and after recordings. The comic strips are taken from Gilabert (2004).

Speech production is measured in terms of fluency, lexical complexity, structural complexity, and accuracy. The calculations are described in detail below.

Unpruned speech and pruned speech are used to measure fluency. Unpruned speech is calculated by counting the number of syllables and dividing by the total number of seconds and multiplying by 60. Pruned speech is calculated in the same manner, but excludes repetitions, self-corrections, false starts, and comments in Norwegian.

Lexical complexity is measured using four different measures, percentage of lexical words, ratio of lexical to functional words, Guiraud's index, and a second index. The percentage of lexical words is calculated by taking the number of lexical words in the transcriptions and dividing it by the total number of words and multiplying it by 100. The ratio of lexical to function words is calculated by taking the number of lexical words and dividing it by the number of function words and multiplying it by 100.

Guiraud's index of lexical richness is calculated by taking the number of types divided by the square root of the total number of words in a text ($types/\sqrt{tokens}$). Wordsmith, a concordance program, is used to identify types. The second lexical richness index is the same as Guiraud's index except that the square root of the number of tokens is multiplied by 2 before being divided by number of types ($types/2\sqrt{tokens}$). This makes the calculation less sensitive to text length. It was thought that this would be necessary given the shortness of texts, however no differences are found between Guiraud's index and the second lexical richness measures.

Structural complexity is basically the ability to put more than one constituent together in a meaningful way. In other words, in cases where coordination or subordination are put together in meaningful ways, there is complexity. False starts, repetition, corrections, are not counted as Analysis of Speech Units (AS-units) in this calculation.

The measure used for calculating structural complexity is the number of clauses divided by the number of AS-units. AS-units are described as «a single speaker's utterance consisting of *an independent clause, or sub-clausal unit*, together with any *subordinate clause(s)* associated with either» (Foster, Tonkyn, & Wigglesworth, 2000, p. 365). AS-units are chosen because they are best able to deal with features characteristic of spoken data, such as intonation and pauses. A clause is defined as a finite or non-finite verb plus one additional clause element.

The measure for calculating accuracy is the target like use of articles. One story for each pre- and post-test is marked for accurate use of indefinite and definite articles. All incorrect use of articles is counted. Possible places in which articles were not used but should have been used are also counted. The calculation for target like use of articles is the number of accurate use divided by the sum of all used and should have been used articles. There are many measures of accuracy, such as error free AS units, percentage of self-repairs, ratio of repaired to un-repaired errors, but I have chosen to use one test in this study.

Data presentation and discussion

Teachers' development: What has changed in teachers' approaches to English teaching, in particular with respect to planning time?

In order to say something about how their approaches have changed, the initial state, comments from teacher questionnaires, and the final evaluation of the project are presented for each of the three teachers.

In the initial survey, Maria is the only one to rank 'method' as first priority when planning a lesson, but she does not focus on its connection to language learning when asked about a successful lesson, rather: «When I see that the kids are interested and motivated, and active in speaking or other tasks.»

Early during the project, she comments that the pupils did not get enough time to talk in order to solve the task. This observation that pupils did not have enough time to plan or talk comes from lesson 2, the lesson for no planning. It illustrates her awareness of planning already at an early stage. We also find evidence that she is starting to think about how to create language learning opportunities, in «It was interesting to see that the second group managed to read the sentence, even though a word was missing!»

From the beginning Maria is painstakingly methodical about lesson planning in terms of following through with activities, but does not focus particularly on how the lesson can facilitate language learning. During the project there are not many comments in her teacher responses that reflect an explicit awareness of language learning, but in her final accumulative evaluations of her lessons, she states very clearly that she can tell that her class has improved based on their ability to read a text in the textbook and attributes this to the project.

The second teacher, Kristin, ranks topics and themes as most important when designing a lesson. She describes a successful lesson as «when the children participate and are happy with what they are doing – and of course that we mostly speak English.» Kristin is very focused on how the pupils observe things, and is aware of what they say, as is reflected in her teacher responses.

In her final lesson Kristin creates an atmosphere in which she challenges her pupils. She expects them to produce, whereas in earlier lessons everybody found the lessons easy and are relaxed, we finally get a pupil who is frustrated and finds the lesson difficult in lesson 10. There is reason to believe that this is a good sign, in that, she finds

the 'edge', or cross-section of challenging the pupils in such a way that results in pupils who are satisfied with themselves and their classmates who think they are clever.

In the evaluation of the project she brings planning time very clearly into the context of a lesson. She says that reporting in class is a very important part of the lesson, and they need planning time so they can think about what to say. Finally, she notes that «self-confidence in my class has increased; almost everybody speaks English in class and I expect more now».

The third teacher, Sally, also ranks topics/themes as most important when designing a lesson, but includes methods as 'very important'. In her comments about what she expects to get out of the project she writes:

> I think this project will increase my awareness about my role as teacher and my lessons. I hope to be able to be more creative in using different kinds of material. I think/hope that the pupils are going to be more active and satisfied. I hope the pupils are going to learn more when they are more active. In the future I think the pupils are going to benefit from my awareness of the importance of planning time.

She has an obvious expectation regarding the role of planning time and this will be reflected in how she implements the lessons and what the pupils get out of them. Already in lesson 3 when there is no on-line planning time she notes that «I learned that pupils need more time to think than I could give them.» As a consequence of taking away planning time, she reflects that her pupils could have benefited from it.

In lesson 5 pupils watch a short clip from a film and are given instructions about the task and how to solve it before watching the film. Sally writes: «The presentation of their answers went better when they got time to plan. If I hadn't told them before they started the task, I don't think all of them would have been this active.»

In the evaluation of the project, Sally comments that pupils use language in terms of whatever they have to take them as far as they can get, and that the teacher needs to give them time to use it. The teacher questionnaire after each lesson makes her aware of her goals and her role in the classroom such that she has clear goals for each lesson. She attributes this to better lesson planning such that the level of pupil activity increases in ways that encourages participation in the classroom.

There is a recurring comment about quiet and weaker pupils who 'blossom' and are active during the project. She comments on this in the final evaluation of the project: «The less active ones were more active after this project because I gave them the tools, language and knowledge of what they were going to do in a lesson.»

In the final lesson, the satisfaction and eagerness among pupils is attributed to them being prepared, practicing their presentations and showing their work to others. The planning and presentation of the task cycle has been utilized optimally by Sally, as the task cycle (task-planning-present) is found in most lessons. A year after the project Sally writes: «Lessons are going well. Have task-based learning as base in my planning.»

The teachers develop in different ways but they share an awareness of planning time as a valuable and necessary element in lesson design. They are able to test their ideas in their own classrooms and to measure the effects of changing one aspect of a lesson, i.e. planning. In the process they find that the ability level and eagerness of the pupils is higher than they expected. They find that they are able to speak English in the class-

room much more than before, and most importantly, they find that they can expect more from pupils.

Affective variables of pupils: How do learners perceive the changes in lessons?

In the lesson design, the first lesson is a 'traditional' lesson, the way they would normally conduct a lesson. This is to be used as a base-line for comparing to the upcoming lessons that are based in a task-based learning framework and have a particular planning element in them. This turns out to be interesting, because the second lesson is to be devoid of planning time, and is in principle, a lesson that does not allow planning on any level. In other words, no time to organize or structure a response and no time to plan how and what is going to be said. This should be a frustrating lesson. Surprisingly enough, none of the learners noticed that anything was different between lesson 1 (traditional lesson) and lesson 2 (no planning lesson). Later the pupils were asked about it and they explained that they were not used to having planning time during their lessons, so they did not notice anything unusual in lesson 2.

Pupils who participate in the questionnaire at the end of lessons tend to be rather relaxed in all lessons. There are no correlations between level of frustration and amount of planning time allotted in the lessons. It would have been more accurate to pose the question directly after the task with or without planning time and not after a lesson that could have been experienced as frustrating for several other reasons. What is interesting to note is that the teachers rarely have the same perception of how relaxed or frustrated their pupils are at any given time. When asked at the end of lessons, pupils express that they are generally relaxed. Teachers tend to underestimate the relaxed level of pupils. The one exception occurs in lesson 5 where Sally thinks the pupils are more relaxed than they think themselves. The explanation may be quite simply that she anticipated that the lesson would be experienced as relaxed because she knows that there is both pre-task and on-line planning time. Perhaps the pupils, who are not used to having access to planning in their lessons, find it more frustrating because it is something new.

One interesting observation is found regarding a connection between degrees of boring and frustrating by one of the teachers.

> I observed a difference between strong and weak pupils, in activity, interest and degree of frustration. The pupils who said this was a bit boring were the same ones that needed quite a bit of help.

Although there are no direct correlations between the four affective variables, there is a high degree of enthusiasm for the lessons and the project among the pupils. When told that they were on lesson 5 of 10, one pupil is quoted as saying, in a rather desperate tone: «Will we have lessons like these later if we see that this was a good way of learning English?» This is representative of a general enthusiasm found in the pupil questionnaires and the teacher questionnaires towards the lessons. Pupils express interest and enthusiasm about continuing with similar types of lessons.

Measurable features in language production: Are there measurable improvements in speech production?

The answer to this question is both yes and no. In Table 2 we find the number of pupils who improved speech production in the post test. If the number is higher in the post test than in the pre-test, then it counts as improvement. There are 16 pupils in the project group and 10 pupils in the control group. As a group, more than two thirds must have improved for there to be improvement. The project group improved regarding fluency and lexical complexity, but did not improve on structural complexity or accuracy. The control group improved only on accuracy, and not on fluency, lexical complexity, or structural complexity.

Table 2: Measures that indicate improvement in speech production between pre- and post-tests

	Measure	Project Group N=16	Control Group N=10
Fluency	Pruned speech	14/16	6/10
	Unpruned speech	14/16	6/10
Lexical Complexity	% of lexical words	14/16	2/10
	Ratio lexical to functional	13/16	2/10
	Guiraud's index	14/16	6/10
	Other index	14/16	6/10
Structural Complexity	Clauses per AS-units	6/16	3/10
Accuracy	Target like use of articles	5/16	9/10

Experimental studies have investigated benefits for pre-task planning and on-line planning in controlled settings under controlled conditions. By using a pre- and post-test after a 10-lesson teaching block, this study investigates the degree of language acquisition that takes place over the project period. We thought we might get all the benefits from pre-task and on-line planning after the project period.

The project group improved on fluency and lexical complexity after being exposed to 10 lessons in which there was a clear focus on planning, both pre-task planning and on-line planning. The data collection of spoken language however, caters most to pre-task planning. The pupils are asked to look at the pictures and think about what they are going to say, they are encouraged to ask about words and clarification of pictures, but when they start telling the story, they tend to keep going until they finish. Hence, there appears to be very little or no on-line planning. The pupils are primarily concerned with conveying the message in the story. Given the result of improvement in fluency and lexical complexity, this appears to be the case.

Pre-task planning promotes greater fluency and lexical complexity (Yuan & Ellis, 2003), and does not leave attentional resources to structural complexity and accuracy because learners at this proficiency level tend to be able to handle only one aspect of language when they have the opportunity to pre-plan the task. Wendel (1997) proposes that there is a trade-off between fluency and accuracy. The findings in this study support Wendel's proposal. The project group improves on fluency in language but does not

improve in terms of accuracy. The control group did not improve in terms of fluency, but did improve regarding accuracy. In other words, neither group manages to improve on both aspects of language.

The control group improves in accuracy, suggesting that they possibly conduct more on-line planning than the project group. We might expect that structural complexity also benefits from the on-line planning, but it does not. The explanation may be in the complexity of the task.

In experimental studies, structural complexity benefits from on-line planning. Gilabert (2004) predicts that the effects of planning time would be greater for complex versions of tasks, but what he found was that learner's structural complexity benefited from planning time when performing simple versions of tasks. Narratives that are used in the recordings are considered to be demanding tasks and given the lack of structural complexity, apparently did not benefit from the planning time. In other words, the task of narrating a story appears possibly too complex for the speakers and structural complexity does not improve.

Speech production improves for the project group in ways that we would expect in light of the experimental studies, but not as we had hoped in relation to the project teaching. Increased fluency and greater lexical complexity suggest that the speakers engage in conveying a message or telling a story, using the language they have to take them as far as they can go. Attention to accurate use of grammatical forms and syntactic complexity are not prioritized because they are not necessary to tell the story. Whatever benefits are gained during the 10-lesson project are not represented in the post-test results.

Concluding remarks

One of the strengths of this study is that three teachers in different schools are able to carry out the project teaching and find improvements in language production, suggesting that it is not teacher-dependent, but rather the lesson-design related. The fact that the project spans over a relatively short period of time makes is easier to claim that it was the project that makes an impact and is connected to the improvements and not other factors.

The project focuses on method in the lesson design and we find that planning time was experienced by pupils in a positive manner. An additional benefit gained from this project is that otherwise weaker pupils tend to be more active in the learning process. We vary planning time in lessons 2-4 to see if the pupils would notice whether or not anything is different, and we find that when no planning time is allowed, very little is actually experienced as different from a traditional lesson.

We affect change in the classroom by focusing attention on lesson design and adding planning time as a critical element in the lesson. Consequently, the teachers' focus on planning time in the lesson designing process draws their full attention, as their comments and reflections reveal that planning time is an essential part of their teaching and observations.

Therefore, we can conclude that planning time does have an effect on language production in the sense that the pupils in the project group improve their fluency and lexical complexity. The pupils' language does not, however, improve with respect to

structural complexity and accuracy. We can conclude that 10-lesson teaching block did not promote grammatical complexity nor did it increase accuracy among the project group.

Part of this is attributable to the narrative task itself, in that it is a demanding task for these young L2 speakers. Another more precarious aspect we must consider is that these young learners consume language as they are exposed to it in the classroom. Perhaps we must ask ourselves if there is enough structurally complex language found in the classrooms. Teachers experience that their pupils are eager and willing to speak English more than they have formerly believed possible. Maybe we need to take a closer look at our classrooms' input language.

Further study is needed to look at lesson design and how we can equip our teachers with a working methodology that will promote fluency, lexical complexity, structural complexity and accuracy. Crossing the bridge between theory and practice is possible and this study illustrates how teachers can benefit from bringing theory and research projects into their classrooms.

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