UNIT FOUR: COMMENTARY

LESSON PLANNING

1. Assuming that your course participants are all working in a school of some kind it is almost certain that they will be required to prepare lesson plans. These may take the form of brief notes to enter into a class record book or, as in many state school systems, detailed documents that have to be submitted, often a term or even a year in advance, to a designated official. Unfortunately, these documents, which serve an essentially administrative purpose, are very often confused with teaching plans. If teachers have spent hours writing up these documents it is not surprising that they should want to use them in the classroom, even though they are largely useless for that purpose.

   In this session we consider the nature and purpose of lesson plans and we focus on the structure of lessons and how we can describe the different parts of a lesson. We do not present a template for how to set out a lesson plan. If a lesson is appropriately and clearly structured in the mind of the teacher it does not really matter how it is set out on the piece of paper the teacher takes into the classroom.

2. We start our discussion with something the course participants should remember from Unit One of the programme. Among other things, the discussion should cover a comparison with the lesson plans the course participants have to write and how much information is necessary in a lesson plan to be able to teach effectively. What's missing from this example lesson plan? *Timing*. An experienced teacher will be able to estimate the time needed for different elements of the lesson. Less experienced teachers will find it useful to work out how long things should take in order to achieve a balanced lesson. (If you have time, you might ask the course participants to suggest timings for the lesson as a group activity.) Could the course participants teach a lesson from this plan?

3. Lesson plans are used for different purposes. These include at least:

   - Administrative
   - Reporting
   - Teaching.

   By *administrative*, I mean documents produced before the course, the term or the school year to satisfy the institution's, or the Ministry's, bureaucracy. These tend to be far too detailed and might best be regarded as pious wishes rather than useful teaching aids.

   Lesson plans produced for *reporting* purposes will usually take the form of brief notes compiled after the lesson and written into a class record book.

   A *teaching* lesson plan is whatever an individual teacher finds most helpful to take into the classroom to assist in the achievement of an effective lesson.

   You may well find yourself discussing the merits or otherwise of the "administrative" lesson plan and the formats required by your course

participants' various institutions, but the focus of this session is on the *teaching* lesson plan.

4. The instructions for this activity may seem simple, but experience shows that you will have to stress very strongly that you want the course participants to focus on recent actual lessons they have taught. They should not waste time attempting to create a plan for a new and possibly "ideal" lesson. The quality of the lesson is not the point. We are principally interested in how they write lesson plans and what that tells us about how they approach the organisation of a lesson.

    Course participants should sit in small groups and be given 10 minutes or so to work individually on this. Then they should look at the plans produced in the group and discuss the differences. The point of this is to get course participants thinking about how they write lesson plans, to compare different lesson plan formats and to consider the relative "teachability" of the documents produced. Note that further activities in this session should lead course participants to reconsider how they write lesson plans, so don't waste time assessing the effectiveness of the plans. For now, just note the differences and get people thinking about how some lesson *plans* (and not necessarily *lessons*) might be more effective than others.

    You will also probably want to go on to discuss the relationship between lesson plans and lessons. A coherent lesson plan should make it more likely that the teacher will present a coherent lesson. A lesson plan, however, is only a plan and we all know what happens to the "best laid plans". So a good plan can never guarantee a good lesson and a good lesson may result which differs widely from what the plan envisaged. Certainly, no teacher should ever expect a lesson to turn out exactly as the plan prescribes. Whatever happens in the classroom, however, the teacher should always begin with a clear idea of what the learners should be able to do at the end of the lesson and of the path s/he expects to follow to achieve these aims.

5. Write up the suggestions as they are made and open up the discussion when the suggestions dry up. Begin by clearing away the administrative terms (year, term, age, number in class etc.) and focus on those terms that deal directly with the conduct of the lesson. You may be able to group terms that have a similar function and you may have to ask people to explain what they mean by certain terms. You may be able to distinguish between essential elements of a lesson plan and occasional elements, i.e. those elements that are only needed in particular circumstances for particular purposes.

    A lesson plan provides a framework for an imagined lesson. It is inevitable that when we talk about the parts of a lesson plan we are also largely discussing ideas about possible divisions of a lesson. So getting people to suggest terms for parts of a lesson plan indicates what they believe to be the desirable format for a lesson. However old-fashioned it may seem, it is likely that the terms Presentation, Practice and Production will be proposed as forming the principal divisions of a lesson plan and, therefore, of a lesson. This should lead you into a discussion of the value of terms such as these.

    A principal drawback of the 3Ps lesson structure is its rigidity. It implies a sequence which does not necessarily reflect the most productive way of organising a lesson.

6. The point of this exercise, of course, is to remind the course participants that there are many lessons that do not conveniently fit into the Presentation, Practice, Production sequence and that it might be helpful to find a terminology to describe parts of a lesson that do not necessarily imply a particular sequence. This discussion leads into:

7. The terms A, R and C, standing for <u>Authentic Use</u>, <u>Restricted Use</u> and <u>Clarification and focus</u> come from Chapter 9 of the first edition of Jim Scrivener's *Language Teaching,* published by Macmillan Heinemann in 1994. I found the terms immensely useful as a way of getting teachers to move away from the Presentation, Practice, Production straightjacket. They clearly do not tell the whole story and Jim Scrivener removed them from the enlarged second edition of his book published in 2005. I wonder if I am alone in still preferring the first edition of Jim Scrivener's wonderfully practical work. It seems to me to be more compact, more direct and more closely relevant to the development of new and short-experience teachers. Anyway, if you follow my plan for this session you will follow the general discussion of the lesson descriptions in the handout by introducing the A, R, C terminology and asking the course participants to apply them to the parts of the lessons described in the handout.

    A (Authentic Use): focus on communication (speaking, reading or writing); using whatever language is needed to do the job.
    R (Restricted Use): communication is controlled in order encourage the practice of particular bits of language.
    C (Clarification and Focus): introduction, explanation and specific practice of bits of language.
    (If you have access to the first edition of Jim Scrivener's book, you will find a useful page of examples illustrating the terminology on page 134.)

    Applying the terminology to the lesson descriptions on the handout you get:

    Lesson 1: C, R, R, A
    Lesson 2: R, C, R
    Lesson 3: A, C, A

    All terminology has porous borders and you may find yourself using an "It depends what you mean by ….." in your discussion. The main idea is to highlight the fact that there are other ways to plan and describe lessons than using the Presentation, Practice and Production sequence.

8. Probable best responses to the second handout are:

    1. C, R, A
    2. R, C, A
    3. A, C, A

    You will need to point out, if it does not come from the course participants, that most lessons will not consist of single examples of A, R and C. Using A and R does not imply single activities. You may have a sequence of exercises, for example, and you may have more than one occurrence of any type of activity throughout the course of a lesson.

9. We want to discuss two other aspects of lesson planning before getting to the workshop activity. First we want to draw together some characteristics of a good lesson plan, by which we mean a plan that is appropriate for the

learners and will lead to an effective lesson.

As a result of the discussion you should have a list of characteristics which includes at least the following:

- *Clear aim:* you need a clear idea of what you want the learners to be able to do by the end of the lesson.
- *Appropriate activities:* e.g. exercises, explanations, games that are at an appropriate level and have appropriate topics for a particular group of learners.
- *Well-organised activities:* you need to know exactly how things are going to work in the classroom. How are the learners going to be grouped? Who will talk to whom? How will you introduce each activity? What aids do you need?
- *Variety:* see below!
- *A usable document:* can you take the plan into the classroom and use it? Is it clear? Is it legible?

10. Adding variety.

The feedback discussion should include at least:

- Pace: fast/slow; intense/relaxed
- Topic: the lesson may well have an overall topical theme, but you can add variety by doing an unrelated game to finish off.
- Organisation: individuals, pairs, small groups, large groups, whole class.
- Language activity: listening, speaking, reading, writing and a variety of combinations.
- Difficulty: more or less demanding; more or less simple.
- Mood: serious concentration/fun.
- Engagement: just follow instructions/use personal initiative.

11. Adjust the topic cards as appropriate for your course participants.