

When you first start teaching, you may feel a bit overwhelmed. Of course, you know your subject very well, and you are passionate about it, but all you have learnt about teaching may not feel enough to prepare you in facing your new class.

If I think back to when I started my language teaching career, many of the questions I was asking myself back then come to mind. How do I make sure I give enough time to each topic or activity, but not too much? What if they ask me a question I don't have an answer for? What are the best materials to use for my lesson? What I should include and what can be left out? What do I do if something happens and I can't use the equipment I need? And the list goes on and on and on.

Of course, things do get a lot easier with time and experience. The more you do it, the more you get a "sense" of what works for you and your students. And you feel more confident that, whatever happens, you will be able to handle it.

In this article, I want to focus specifically on the following question:

How do I estimate the timing needed for each part of the lesson?

In the beginning, there will be a lot of guesstimating. With experience, you will take most of the guessing out of the equation, and your planning will become more accurate.

However, you will also learn that things don't always go the way you thought they would and that a lot may vary from one group to the next. The key is being prepared and also be prepared to be flexible.

One thing that I found very useful at the beginning of my career was always to create a detailed lesson plan, which included my "guesstimated" timing.

A lesson plan can help you in 2 ways:

1. it provides you with a road map to follow for the session. Which means you won't be straying too far from what you had planned to achieve for the session;
2. the notes that you write on it during or immediately after the lesson will allow you to verify whether your planning was correct or needs reviewing.

When you are passionate about what you do, it's very easy to go off on all sort of exciting tangents. I am not at all against tangents, especially the interesting ones. Sometimes they are useful and necessary. They keep your student interest high as well as making them feel that you value their interests and questions. And that you can tailor the class to their specific interests and needs. There, is where being prepared to be flexible comes in.

However, when you need to cover a certain amount of material in a given time, too much straying means you will not be able to achieve the goals for that class.

A lesson plan is not something fixed and immutable. It is a work in progress that becomes better and better as your experience grows.

Suppose you notice that you consistently do not allow enough time for activities, for example. That is a sign that you are trying to fit too much in your allocated time. There is only so much learners can absorb at any one time. Trying to fit too much in, does not help your students.

Perhaps you could spread the material over more sessions, or review your plan and eliminate everything which is not necessary.

If, on the other hand, you notice that some activities take more time than expected and others need less, you can adjust your timing accordingly within the session.

And, of course, if you always give activities more time than needed, that is also a sign that you should review your timing as well as your content. See what more you can fit in, perhaps in terms of practice and activities.

In time, you will get a better sense of how much time to give to each part of the lesson, and your plan will become more accurate.

Remember that keeping your student's interest and motivation up depends on many things, but finding the right balance of new learning, practice and review is one of the most important. I teach adult learners, usually 20+ years of age to people in their 90s. Most are working people attending evening classes. They come to class already tired from their daily work. Sometimes upset for what may have happened in the office, often hungry and more prone to think about their coming dinner than about Italian grammar. The right balance of challenge and fun is critical to keep their attention and interest throughout the evening.

Do, however, remember that each class will be different.

One group may need more time while another may breeze through more material than you thought. And the same group may be faster or slower at different times.

So be flexible, adjust your plan for each group and always have enough extra material and activities to cater for the unforeseen.

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