

Plan Ahead:

A Do-It-Yourself guide to helping your students think about what they will say

By Marc Helgesen



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It happens every day. We walk into class. We are anxious to get the students talking as much as possible. We assign the task and expect the learners to start speaking right away. The result? It's a lot like this Calvin and Hobbes cartoon.

Who hasn't experienced something similar? When pressed for an instant response, we say whatever we can say instantly. So, naturally, it is the easiest, simplest response we can come up with. And keep in mind Calvin is responding in his mother tongue. Everyone reading this article is either a native speaker of English or an advanced non-native. We sometimes find instant responses challenging. Yet we ask our students, who are at a far lower level of English competency, to do tasks that require immediate production of English. In doing so, we are asking them to create the content (think of what they want to say) and create the form (think of how to say). No wonder their responses are so often short, simple and less than satisfying.

A solution—or at least a tool—to help learners move beyond this frustrating state is **language planning** (LP). At its simplest, language planning can be just a matter of setting the task and giving the learners a few minutes to look over the

textbook or worksheet and think about what they want to say.

But wait, some teachers say. Our students don't have enough hours of class to begin with. Do we really want to take away speaking time to have them just thinking about what they will say? Actually, yes. A few minutes in an LP task before a main task often reaps clear benefits that more than make up for the time invested:

- *Increased fluency.* This makes sense. The first time you say something, you are mentally constructing it as you go. With language planning, learners do it once in their minds first so, once they get to the speaking part, they have already been through it mentally.
- *Increased complexity.* Again, the learners have thought through what they want to say so they are able to explain things in a complex, connected way.
- *Increased accuracy.* They've mentally been through it so they are able to say things more clearly and correctly. Sometimes. While LP research shows fluency and complexity consistently improve, the results on accuracy are mixed. This doesn't mean, however, that LP is a negative when it comes to accuracy. What sometimes happens is, as linguists

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Departments:

*Vocabulary, Tech Talk,
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and School Owners.*

tic complexity goes up, the learner jumps to a higher level of grammar. Naturally, errors are going to occur when students are working with language they have not yet mastered (That's why they're called "learners.").

- *Greater vocabulary variety.* When students are attempting "instant production", there is little time for mental "word-searching." They have to use the words they already know and can access easily. When they do LP, they have time to remember new vocabulary they are in the process of learning—or even look up new words they need.

- *Learners may avoid fossilization.* They have time to think about how they will say things and don't have to rely on the forms they usually use.

Language planning is a fairly new concept in ELT. Most of the research is new and the ideas don't appear in many textbooks yet. Fortunately, it is often easy to DIY—Do it-yourself. You can easily add LP task to most classroom activities. This article will suggest five activities that facilitate LP.

Language Planning activities.

- **Just a minute**—mental rehearsal. After you've introduced a task, have the learners take a minute (or two or three) to look over the page or worksheet. Tell them to notice what they will need to talk about. Ask them to think about how they will ask questions. They should also think about their own answers or other things they want to say. They also think about how they will say it.

Personalized pair- and groupwork activities often, for classroom management reasons, have more items than many groups are likely to have time to ask/answer. You can make use of this by having the learners decide for themselves which they want to talk about. In the processes, they are thinking both about the meaning of the item and their own feeling about it. The result is deeper processing. One easy way to encourage this is to have them rate each item 1-3.

- 1 ☺= interesting. I want to talk about this.
- 2 ☹= so-so. I'll talk about this if I have time.
- 3 ☹= not interesting. Forget this one.

They simply start with the 3's, which means that are starting off the activity in a positive way. Yes, they are moving toward the less interesting items but often, if the task starts off well, the energy will build.

A more teacher-directed way of doing this is to read the specific items from the task. Follow each with, "Think about what you want to say." Then, "Now, think about how you will say it. What words and sentences will you say?" In the case of a pairwork where you can't read out the items since they are different on each page, just do it by directing their attention to the items. "Look at the first one. Think about what you want to say. (Etc.)" There is, by the way, some evidence suggesting increases in accuracy are more likely when the LP tasks are teacher guided than when they are more open.

An objection: You might well point out that, since the students are doing this silently, in their minds, you have no way of knowing if they are doing it in English or not. True, but a more important question might be this: Are you sure you want them thinking of the information in English from the beginning? Since you want fluency and complexity, you

might point out that it is OK to be thinking about the content in their native language. Then, after a minute or two, ask them to go back and do "English please." They think about what they want to say with the specific mental task of deciding how they will say things.

It is worth noting that LP doesn't necessarily mean the learners are thinking of the specific answers they will give. In some cases they do. But just thinking through the topic and considering possible answers and issue is worthwhile.

A note about background music. Some students and teachers are uncomfortable with silence during LP mental preparation time. Try playing soft background music to "fill up" the "empty time." I usually use new age, light classical or world music (world music because I don't need to worry that they are focussing on the lyrics when the songs are in Zulu, Nepalese or some other language they don't know). I put the CD player on one side of the room and tell students that, if they don't like music playing during class, they can sit on the opposite side of class. This is rarely a problem.

- **Guided visualization.** A very useful way to prepare for a speaking activity, especially one where learners are sharing a personal experience or story (real or imagined), is to have them mentally (re)experience the event as a way to get ready to talk about it.

Have the learners close their eyes (Some may not be comfortable with closing their eyes initially. Don't worry. Just keep going with the activity. As they become comfortable, most will join in.). In a slow, relaxed voice, guide them through the story. Pause often to give them time to visualize. Again, you may want to use background music.

A guided visualization is easier demonstrated than explained. Read the sample script below. As you read, in your own mind imagine the story.

Think about a time—a guided visualization.

Think about a time you felt very happy—or very sad. It can be any time that it is OK for you to talk about. Any time you were happy—or sad.

And, in your mind, you can experience that time now. You remember the time...and the place...and the people who were there. You can experience those now.

And you can see yourself. Look around. Where are you? Are in inside or outside? Look at the place you are? What do you see? What do things look like? What do people look like. Notice their clothing. Notice what they are doing. Notice their faces.

Who are these people? Do you know them? Who are they? Are they talking? Listen. What are they saying? What are you saying? What else do you hear? Birds? Cars? Music? Other sounds. What do you hear?

And what do you feel? What's the weather like? Is it hot? Cold? Do you feel the wind? Are you standing or

sitting? Can you feel the ground under your feet? Or can you notice a chair or something else against your body. Are you moving? Feel the movement of your And notice your emotions. How do you feel in your heart? This is an important time for you. How do you feel?

And now, you will have about a half -a- minute to experience the time now. And as you do, notice everything you can see, you can hear and you can feel. (30-second pause).

And when you are ready, take a deep breath, come back to the room and open your eyes.

As you read, did you notice that the script was structured to guide you in remembering the situation of the story by leading you through the three main senses: sight, hearing and feeling? It began with sensory neutral language: *remember; experience*. Then it moved into visual images: *Look around. What do you see? What do things look like?* From there, we progressed to the auditory sense: *Are they talking? Listen. What else do you hear?* Next we moved into the sense of touch/feeling. This kinesthetic sense, also called "haptic", includes both physical sensations (*Do you feel hot/cold/the wind?*) and emotions (*How do you feel in your heart?*).

Finally, before the 30-second imagination time, the listener is reminded to experience the story through these senses (you can *see*, you can *hear* and you can *feel*). Barring a handicap like blindness or deafness, we all experience life through all the senses, and we all have a preferred modality—the sense that for us is strongest. By guiding the listener through the three main senses, you are ensuring that everyone gets some focus in their main sense (preferred modality). Also, since we all have all the senses, the other input makes the visualization a richer, more complete experience. Note that the other senses, smell (olfactory) and taste (gustatory) are also very powerful. They can be a part in guided visualization where they fit into the story (the tastes and smells of childhood holiday, for example) but are generally less flexible than the others.

Variation: the movie in your mind. Often, once students have done the guided visualization, I ask them to "rewind the video tape" and watch it again. This time, they focus on language. I give them a choice. They can watch the movie and mentally describe it (a visual task), just listen to the story and notice how it is described (an auditory task) or talk to themselves either silently—they subvocalize, moving their lips as if speaking but without sound—or mumble along as they think about what they are saying (kinesthetic tasks). In doing so, they have a chance to focus on the language. They also experience the story a second time.

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Which, of course, means that by the time they go into the next step of telling the story to a partner, they are dealing with it for at least the third time (the fourth time if it is a true experience). No wonder Language Planning leads to fluency—anyone can tell a story better the third or fourth time than the first!

- **The language map and the senses.** Most textbooks precede speaking activities such as pair- and groupwork with a language map/grammar box, target sentences or some other way of supporting the learners by showing them how to say what they want to say.

The sensory information introduced in the guided visualization can be used to help learners focus on pronunciation as a way to plan what they want to say.

I generally start with a plain old “listen and repeat. (L&R)” It’s not that I think that actually helps with pronunciation. That is usually just group mumbling. But I start there because everyone knows how to do it and also because it makes such a great contrast to the next step: silent listen and repeat. I have them say the sentences aloud, then say them a second time with no sound. They just notice the pronunciation in their minds and notice what they are physically doing. It is hard to really understand this simply by reading a paragraph. You need to actually try it. Try saying the title of this section aloud: The language map and the senses. Now say it again with no sound—move your lips, tongue and teeth. You are saying it, just don’t make any sound: The language map and the senses. Most people are surprised to notice how much more aware of pronunciation they are when they do this silently. Silent listen and repeat is a kinesthetic exercise. There are other tasks that focus on one or more of the other tasks (See the language map and the senses box). In my own classes, I introduce these at a rate of about one per class. Then, by the time we are 8 or 10 classes into the course, learners all have a repertoire of ways to practice. I give them a list and have them spend a few minutes before a task in pairs working through the language map. Some are doing silent listen and repeat with each other, others have their eyes closed while partners guide them through visualization tasks. Others choose auditory tasks. It really doesn’t matter which they do. They tend to choose those that make sense to themselves which usually means the task fits the specific student’s learning style. Just as importantly, they are spending several minutes focussed on the kind of language they’ll need for the task—and focussed far deeper than in most pronunciation tasks—so they are doing their own preparation/planning. (see Fig. 1 on p.7)

- **One more time with feeling—Task recycling.** As teachers, we often avoid asking learners to do the same task more than once. We are afraid they will get bored and lose interest. Naturally, we need to pay attention to learner interest. However, if the task is interesting and personalized, often doing it a second time with new partners can have excellent results. The first time through they were spending a lot of energy just assembling the meaning and language, the second time they are focussed more strongly on what they are saying.

This can be as simple as saying, “Everyone find a new partner. Try this again.” If so, it is a good idea to explain the reason: But recycling the task, it gets easier for them, their language level goes up and they learn things from a new partner.

On the speaking activity that follows an activity like *guided visualization*, you’ll almost certainly want them to share their stories two or three or more times, to maximize the practice and the results of the activity.

Another way to recycle the information is as a *memory game*. They close their books and see how much they can remember of what they and their partners discussed. Alternatively, they join a new partner and say as much as they remember of their previous partner’s contribution to the discussion.

Finally, you can recycle tasks by repeating them during the next class, often as a warm-up activity to get the students back in touch with the language they have been working on.

The recycling can even be a silent, mental follow-up. For example, ask them, as they take the bus or train home, to spend a few minutes remembering as much as they can of what they said during the task.

Although Language Planning tasks are still rare in textbooks, teachers can easily add them to existing classroom exercises. It is often as easy as asking, “*What do you want to say? And how are you going to say it?*” and giving the learner time to get ready.

“Chance favors a prepared mind.”

- Louis Pasteur

“Be Prepared.”

Boy and Girl Scout motto

Notes:

Much of my thinking on Language Planning stems from trying to think of classroom applications of the research of Peter Skehan, Martin Bygate, Pauline Forster, Gillian Wigglesworth, Tony Lynch, Rod Ellis and others.

Other teachers who have influenced my thinking, especially on the activity-types described, include Adrian Underhill, Judy Gilbert, and Richard Bolstad.

For more on language planning, see Martin Bygate, Peter Skehan & Merrill Swain, ed’s. (2001) *Researching pedagogic tasks: Second Language learning, teaching and testing*. Harlow: Longman (Pearson Education) and Jane & Dave Willis (ed’s). (1996) *Challenge and change in language teaching*. Oxford: Heinemann (now MacMillan).

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The language map and the senses

These are techniques for helping students use different senses to work with different language forms. I usually introduce them one at a time, after learners already know what they will be doing in a particular task. The letters after each idea indicates the main sense(s) used:

👁 V= visual/sight • 👂 A= auditory/hearing • ✋ K=kinesthetic (haptic)/touch

- **Listen & Repeat.** Say each sentence. Students pause a few seconds and think about what they heard. Cue them say it. (Note - this is very traditional so it's an easy way to introduce sensory work.) (A-K)
- **Silent L & R** (*Listen & Repeat*) Say each sentence. Students pause and then repeat it without making any sound. They pay attention to their lips, teeth, tongue, etc. and think about pronunciation. (K-A)
- **Look at the words.** Students close their eyes. Say each sentence. Students imagine the words and notice how they are written. Typed or by hand? What color are the words? They can mentally change the color of words, underline key grammar items, etc. (V-A)
- **Lip-reading.** (Use this when you have several example sentences, a language box, etc.) Students work in pairs. One chooses a key sentence and says it silently (as in Silent Listen and Repeat). The partner watches and guesses. They take turns. (V-K)
- **Whose voice?** Students close their eyes. Say each sentence. Students repeat it in their minds. Ask students to think about the voice they heard when they repeated it. Was it yours or their own? They repeat it again in their own voice.(A)
- **Fix the pronunciation.** Students mentally repeat the sentence, imagining a very strong accent from their first language. Then they mentally "fix" the pronunciation, mentally repeating in their own voice with native-like pronunciation.(A)
- **Picture this.** Students close their eyes. Say the sentences. Students image a scene that shows the meaning of the sentence. Then they imagine the sentence next to the picture. Then, mentally, they repeat the sentence. (V-A)
- **Pictures and words.** (Use this when the forms/sentences involve a particular theme such as shopping, a sports event, etc.) This is similar to Picture this. Students imagine themselves in the picture. Then they mentally

write the sentence next to the picture. To review, give them a key word from each sentence. They think of the picture and try to remember the sentence. (V-A)

- **Tap the rhythm.** Students hear the model, then tap the rhythm on their desks, matching the stress and timing. Note: this is often easier with two hands—as if they were playing drums. (V-A)
- **Nonsense syllables.** Students repeat the sentences matching the stress and rhythm. They use nonsense syllables instead of the real words. (example: nonsense syllables = DAda Dadada). (A)
- **Write now.** Say each sentence. Students "write" with their fingers on their other hand or some rough surface. Some students will want to close their eyes as they do this. Others will want to say the words, mentally or aloud as they do it. (K and, with options, V-A)
- **Writing in the air.** (Use this when you have several example sentences, a language box, etc.) Students work in pairs. One chooses a key sentence and writes it with a finger in the air (or on the partner's back or hand). The partner watches (or feels) and guesses the sentence. (K-V)
- **That makes sense.** This involves all the senses. Students close their eyes. Say each sentence. Students imagine themselves saying the sentence. As they do, they imagine each sentence appearing next to the picture of themselves. They listen to the voice as well. (V-A-K)
- **Choose and remember.** Once learners have done several sensory techniques, have them choose how they want to work with the sentences. They can (a) repeat silently (b) close their eyes, imagine the words being underlined, changing colors, etc. as in Look at the words (c) or focus on the voice. Before your start, remind them of their choices. Then say the sentences. Students practice the way they want. Later (either right after this or later in the same class), say one key word from each sentence. Students try to remember the sentences. (V-A-K)