

**A Critical Review of The Importance of Medium
Term Planning for Language Teaching
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ABSTRACT

This paper aims at critically discussing the importance of medium term planning for language teaching. It discusses its importance for certain issues particularly aims and objectives, content and integration of key skills, learners' needs and theory of learning. It also sheds light on its importance for styles of teaching and learning, activities and resources, class management as well as assessment. Descriptive critical analysis technique is used to investigate the problem in question. A review of Literature is conducted to collect the data required. Main finding came to is that medium term planning for effective learning is of primary importance as it draws teachers' attention to think methodologically of and put effectively into practice various instructional considerations very specifically for the aims, objectives, content, learners' needs, the pedagogy, activities and resources as well as feedback. Recommendations are made to adopt medium term planning for language teaching and further studies be conducted in this area.

Keywords: *Medium term planning, language teaching.*

Effective learning has to be planned. Good planning for learning is useful, manageable and worthwhile. It subtly and systematically develops teachers' awareness of a series of key related philosophical, curricular and pedagogical issues such as assumptions about learning, aims, content, teaching methods and feedback. Borich (1996, pp. 98-101) maintains that lesson and unit planning enable a teacher to think in an orderly way about *why, what, who* and *how* he will teach. Overall and Sangster (2003, p.126) assert that medium term planning is of paramount importance for teachers to consider and put effectively into practice certain planning inputs as teaching methods, activities, resources, ICT and differentiation. It is observed that language teaching programmes' short and long term planning is not sufficient to achieve the educational goals in pre-higher

education stage. Thus, this paper will critically discuss the importance of medium term planning concerning certain considerations focusing particularly on : aims and objectives, content and integration of key skills, learners' needs, theory of learning, styles of teaching and learning, activities and resources, class management as well as assessment. The paper will also clarify the weaknesses of medium term planning to be considered when putting theory into practice.

Before going any further, it is important to define the boundaries of what is meant by medium term planning and explore other types of planning ⁽¹⁾ a teacher needs to be fully aware of in order to devise and make optimal use of an effective scheme of work. Borich (1996, p. 105) defines teaching planning as 'the systematic process of deciding what and how students should learn'. Overall and Sangster (2003, p.126) defines medium term planning as 'the planning that takes place over a number of weeks'. The outcome of this process is a plan that specifies different characteristics of future teaching practice.

Unlike long-term planning that 'gives an overview of each term for each year group, and short-term planning which gives an 'at a glance' weekly overview of each lesson' (Davison and Dowson 2006, p. 71), medium term planning maps out *when* and *in what context* it will be taught, e.g. through a unit of work. It 'considers how a unit of work will unfold, for example how much time will be spent on certain texts and tasks, and where they will be addressed', (Framework for teaching English, Year 7, 8 and 9, 2001, p.19). However, 'successful planning must demonstrate a strong logical coherence between the medium term planning and long-term and, short term planning' (Lieberman 1990, in Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2004, p. 127). That is why effective planning entails attention to overall planning when getting to devising a medium term scheme of work.

Medium term planning is important for many reasons. First of all, it is necessary for the establishment of clear and accurate awareness of the aims, goals and objectives that the educational process is targeted to realize, as set in the National Curriculum and the detailed Framework documents. Aims are general expressions of values that reflect societal concerns, as it is in the case of the National Curriculum Aims. Goals are more specific than aims. They convey to the learners a sense of purpose to motivate them to be actively involved in the learning process. Objectives are meant to

convey to the students the specific behaviour to be achieved, the strategies used to attain them, the time as well as the expected level of proficiency. Although they are included in curriculum guides, they sometimes need to be reformulated to fit the students needs, the instructional priorities of the school district and the organization of content(Borich (1996, pp. 98-101). In other words, these aims and objectives are more than likely to be interpreted and adapted, in the process of planning, to reflect particular needs and circumstances . For example, the NLS Reading sub-strand (13) 'Study of literary texts' is reformulated into the objective : ' to comment on writer's use of language, linguistic and dramatic devices' so as to take into account the interests of Secondary English Year 7 pupils.

Furthermore, medium term planning helps teachers to organise their knowledge of and make sophisticated judgements about the nature and structure of the subject matter and grade level. Although content may be prescribed by a national curriculum, professional judgement is required, when planning, to decide the ways in which this is broken down and ordered for learning. It is necessary to select, organize, sequence and expand upon that content according to the students' characteristics (e.g. needs, level of achievement and cultural diversity) and behavioural objectives (Borich 1996, p. 184).). Wright, Ellis and Peverett draw attention to the importance of the teacher's knowledge of the subject matter :

Good teaching is born out of a recurring process : successful teachers continually update their own understanding, reflect upon the process of learning that they themselves are constantly undertaking, and then use that subject and pedagogic knowledge into their planning for students' learning.

(Wright, Ellis and Peverett (2007, p.47)

This reflects the importance of planning for teachers to be discerningly aware of and constantly keeping themselves update with content organisations (such as general-to-detailed), ordering of priorities (such as connections between parts ; lessons and units), major and minor themes, and content-specific facts, rules and principles. Not only does effective planning require a teacher to know the subject, but to know also how best to present it so that learning can be meaningful for students. He, for instance, may find it necessary for pupils to be assigned further work to get grasp of the prescribed content.

The importance of medium term planning is also clearly manifested in the integration of the key skills. Overall and Sangster (2003, p.108) hold that it is important for teachers to ensure, when devising their lesson plans, that the key skills are acutely covered within the set subject tasks. They also need to give good modelling of skills that enables students to apply them independently for their own purposes (Dean, 2004, pp. 56-57). This means that the teacher ought to think about how to teach the four language skills, Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing in the context of the subject matter⁽²⁾. Developing the Speaking skill, for example, can be through inviting students to take part in a conversation or follow a presentation given by the teacher. They can also be asked to tell a story or relate the plot of a book, they have recently read or heard about. In addition, they can take part in a discussion of a topic chosen by the teacher.

Planning, in addition, helps a teacher to organise knowledge of the learner in a way that thrusts towards students' achievement and academic excellence. That is to say, understanding learner needs, abilities, interests, prior achievement, personality (including anxiety, learning style, and self-concept), peers, and family. This tells the teacher at what level to begin instruction and to select objectives, content and materials that match students' characteristics and meet individual learning needs (Borich 1996, p. 106). Black et al.(2006, p.126) emphasises that one of the important approaches to helping students become effective learners is to start from the knowledge, skills and practices they have already gained. Good English planning is that 'starts from what is desirable and possible in the reality of the classroom engagement, with 'a best possible fit' into the detail of the National Curriculum through an organic way rather than mechanistic approach' (Stevens, 2004, The English Teacher and the National Curriculum, in Fleming and Stevens, 2004, p.11); (Stevens, 2005, p. 27). Grainger, Barnes and Scoffham (2004, p. 253) makes the point that good teachers are those who bring into equilibrium 'the incessant drive for measurable standards on the one hand and the development of creative teaching that cares for the learners' needs on the other hand'. That is, they need to achieve a good balance between the pupils' needs and the learning objectives in a meaning – orientated context. Games, for example, are used to satisfy the pupils' need to entertain and to learn new concepts and skills as well.

Student's positive motivation towards learning is largely dependent on effective medium term planning as well . When planning, a teacher bears in mind how to engender and develop motivation and enthusiasm for learning, not only for maximizing achievement but for curbing disruptive behaviour poorly motivated students can produce . This is through making the students' learning relevant to their interests, culture and preoccupations. Satisfying pupils' need of enjoyment and fun strengthens their motivation. Wyse and Jones (2008) assert that :

A good teaching practice should make adaptation in the teaching strategies, activities, resources, materials in the process of planning in a way that realizes the teaching objectives and the needs of the class and the enjoyable atmosphere.

(Wyse and Jones, 2008, p. 224)

Learning is more likely to take place when teachers systematically tap into pupils' motivation through an interesting and enjoyable classroom environment. Hall and Thomson (2005, p. 15) demands securing opportunities for pupils to enjoy their subjects to be motivated to learn in a meaningful context. Selecting content that connects with students' life-experience is essential. Varying the teaching/learning methods during a lesson is a great help to arouse interest (Pollard and Triggs 1997, p. 245,246). Motivation can also be increased by the ways activities are set up and by the nature of activities. Cooperative group work can be encouraged by providing opportunities for students to express themselves and to discuss different views (Johnson and Johnson 1982, in Pollard and Triggs 1997, p. 229). Thanasoulas (2002) adds that maintaining motivation is also an essential requirement to be taken into account when planning a lesson. He points out that this can be realized through using approaches such as : (1) increasing learners self-confidence by providing regular experiences of success, (2) developing learners' autonomy through emphasising independent interaction with learning materials and educational technologies, (3) increasing learners' satisfaction through allowing learners to display their work ⁽³⁾, celebrate success as well as using rewards.

Medium term planning is, moreover, a prerequisite to discreetly integrate differentiation into the process of teaching and learning ,i.e. to decide the appropriateness of particular tasks, activities and resources for students with particular needs. Pollard and Triggs (1997, p. 249) assert that a teacher ought to decide how

to deal with individual needs in mixed ability classes. In whole – class activities, for example, teachers can adjust the level of questioning to individual students through a set of strategies such as : inviting students to build on each other's contribution, ask questions of each other, clarify their thinking and aid learning for each individual student in the group. Differentiation can also be realized by techniques such as differentiation by task and by outcome. The first technique concentrates on setting tasks with different levels of difficulty to tally with mixed ability classes, i.e. when pupils are assigned a graded reading passage, levelled according to their academic achievement. The other technique is concerned with setting the whole class the same task but expect that it will be accomplished at different levels of expertise (Differentiation www.teachers.tv/video 2008), i.e. when all pupils are asked to write a letter to somebody, and expected to respond to this challenge at different levels).

The planning process enables the teacher to make full use of knowledge about learning, and that is, in turn, has greater influence on the classroom practice, especially decisions made about effective teaching methods and learning styles. The most prominent model of learning is that is based on the theories put forward by the Russian psychologist Vygotsky ⁽⁴⁾ whereby pupils' learning is embedded in social interaction in which the teacher (or adult) models and scaffolds the learning (Davison and Dowson, 2007, p.67).

It is clear that learning, according to Vygotsky's views, develops constructively through interactive and collaborative social activity. This implies that putting students into interactive groups help them learn effectively more than in individualistic and competitive situations. Therefore, cooperative styles of teaching and learning ought to be stressed when devising a medium term plan.

Although group working is, in most cases, necessary for learning and social development, it may be stressful to some students, especially those who prefer individualistic styles of learning. Students also differ in their learning preferences (e.g. visual learners, auditory learners and kinaesthetic learners). So, planning is important for a teacher to consider a variety of learning and teaching strategies to satisfy pupils' different needs and different styles of learning.

Medium term planning, besides, provides teachers with the opportunity to determine which activities and resources to choose

for effective learning. Activities selected for students are supposed to be 'well-paced, well structured and appropriately challenging, leading to practice of learning and encouraging learners to take the initiative and to respond purposefully in a more complex and sophisticated way'. Pollard and Triggs (1997, pp. 257-259) state that the choice of learning activities ought to take into account factors such as their appropriateness to the target objectives⁽⁵⁾, learners' abilities and needs, their potential for motivation and differentiation as well as the time available⁽⁶⁾.

Resources, in the form of textbooks, equipment, apparatus, artefacts, media, visits as well as human resources, such as an expert in a particular field are all well adjusted to a focus when and by virtue of planning for a medium term scheme. Each resource has certain implications for the knowledge, values and skills which is likely to be acquired through it. In addition, resources should be specifically targeted and geared to students' learning needs (Pollard and Triggs 1997, p.171). Wyse and Jones (2008, p. 224) maintain that it is advisable for teachers, in the process of planning, to consider not only how to match different resources to the activities but to harness them to create an interesting and motivating classroom environment for students. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2005, p.70) hold that one of the important advantages of ICT, as a learning resource, is 'its ability to engage learners affectively – their emotions, motivation and personality development'. In addition, it seems to me that the teacher's positive attitude towards resources in general and ICT in particular is also a prerequisite for effective planning⁽⁷⁾. From my teaching experience at High Schools, teachers' negative attitude towards ICT, for example, causes them to hardly pay it little, if no, attention in the planning process although it is part and parcel of the National Curriculum. Thus, owing to imbalanced teaching practice, not only were the learning outcomes difficult to realize but the opportunity afforded by ICT to improve the students' achievement and raise their motivation and engagement has been lost as well.

The process of planning is fundamental to consider the element of timing with precision. Although a teacher is expected to commit to the 'Literacy Hour' format- a daily lesson consists of four timed parts, he is allowed latitude to adapt it so that he can keep a balance between the target tasks and the time permitted. This potential restructuring of time patterns, in my view, and in agreement with Stevens (2005), is a sign of creativity that necessitates

emphasis when devising lesson plans. This means that the time allotted for every part of the lesson plan may sometimes vary from lesson to lesson, in response to creative delivery.

Medium term planning is essential for establishing effective leadership in and outside the classroom. It requires a teacher to be knowledgeable about effective class management and how to reduce the occurrence of classroom indiscipline. Borich (1996, p. 470) claims that effective classroom climate is a preventive measure of students' misbehaviour⁽⁸⁾. Classroom climate means the social and organizational environment in which interaction between a teacher and students takes place. The social climate refers to the teacher's style of management (e.g. authoritarian/permissive, or something in between) and the degree of competition, cooperation, or individuality permitted in the classroom. Organizational climate is determined by the positioning of desks, chairs, tables and other internal arrangement of the classroom. Choosing the suitable variation of classroom climate depends on the target objectives and the learning activities. A group discussion, for example, requires a less rigid discipline that allows freedom to express oneself spontaneously. (Borich 1996, p. 472). A competitive climate (e.g. for drill and practice) requires a more formal classroom maintaining strict alignment of desks (Borich 1996, pp. 475-476). So, a teacher needs to decide, in the process of planning, which variation of classroom climate will be suitable for students to curb students' disruptive behaviour.

The process of medium term planning is also indispensable for the teacher to make shrewd decisions regarding students' assessment. He, for example, 'needs to decide what purpose and type of assessment that pupils need to demonstrate their abilities and achievement', ⁽⁹⁾ (Cohen, Lawrence and Morrison, 2005, pp. 358). Assessment opportunities can be used to provide feedback to students and to measure their achievement as well. They could also be used formatively, pre-and-during learning and summatively, as end-of-course/phase assessment. The formative assessment ⁽¹⁰⁾ can be 'applied daily, weekly, termly and yearly using marking, record keeping and maintaining portfolios. The summative assessment can be applied using level descriptions, tests, tasks and a summary of teacher assessment. Hence, a teacher is given a chance, through planning, to deliberately select and take priorities concerning the suitable assessment opportunities for pupils.

However important medium term planning is, it needs more time, effort and facilities. Teachers ought to be trained to know how to put medium

term planning into effect. They also need to secure more time and effort to prepare for the task. The syllabuses need to be organised to be geared with medium term planning. Pupils themselves should be adapted to the new atmosphere the medium term planning creates. The other members of the school's staff ought to be aware of and have positive attitudes towards medium term planning.

So far it has been seen from this that medium term planning for effective religious learning is of primary importance. And this importance can be stated in the following points:

- Medium term planning is necessary for the establishment of clear and accurate awareness of the aims, goals and objectives.
- Medium term planning helps teachers to organise their knowledge of and make sophisticated judgements about the nature and structure of the subject matter and grade level.
- The importance of medium term planning is also clearly manifested in the integration of the key skills.
- Medium term planning helps a teacher to organise knowledge of the learner in a way that thrusts towards students' achievement and academic excellence.
- Student's positive motivation towards learning is largely dependent on effective medium term planning.
- Medium term planning is, moreover, a prerequisite to discreetly integrate differentiation into the process of teaching and learning.
- Medium term planning enables the teacher to make full use of knowledge about learning, and that has greater impact on the classroom practice, especially decisions made about effective teaching methods and learning styles.
- Medium term planning, besides, provides teachers with the opportunity to determine which activities and resources to choose for effective learning.
- Medium term planning is fundamental to consider the element of timing with precision.
- Medium term planning is essential for establishing effective leadership in and outside the classroom.
- Medium term planning is also indispensable for the teacher to make shrewd decisions regarding students' assessment.

So, to sum up, medium term planning is prerequisite for language teaching programs as it draws teachers' attention to think

methodologically of and put effectively into practice various instructional considerations very specifically for the aims, objectives, content, learners' needs, the pedagogy, activities and resources as well as feedback⁽¹¹⁾. Therefore, a medium term plan, that seems much likely to be applicable to different teaching contexts is supposed to reflect these theoretical issues.

In the light of these findings, this paper suggests that medium term planning theory should be adopted and be put into practice regarding language teaching programs. But it should be taken into consideration that it is to be tailored to the needs and circumstances of the targeted schools. It is also suggested that further researches are to be conducted to assess to what extent medium term planning shall assist reaching objectives it aims to and to diagnose hindrances that hamper what is expected.

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Notes

(1) There are four types of lesson and unit planning :

- 'Long-term planning gives an overview of each term for each year group;
- Medium- term planning gives details of the aims, texts and clusters of objectives to be covered over a half-term or three-to-four week period ;
- Short-term planning gives an 'at a glance' weekly overview of each lesson;
- Individual lesson planning focuses on the teaching and learning of one or two objectives, detailing the four-part plan.'

(Davison and Dowson 2006, p. 71)

(2) Integrating the four skills into learning , in my opinion, not only further develops students linguistic skills, but helps them learn and use the language structure implicitly and receptively as well, unlike the traditional grammar-translation method that puts more emphasis on the explicit teaching and learning of the language and thereof sounds meaningless. I found out, from my teaching work in High Schools, that academic achievement for students who learn the language implicitly was higher than those who learn it explicitly. The implicit teaching and learning of the language increased the degree of interactivity in the classroom context and therefore made it more enjoyable, interesting and meaningful.

(3) As an example for students' work display, as a means of reward, is what I have observed during my placement in Carmel College. The History teacher assigned an internet research task for Year 12 pupils. After feedbacking their printed hard copies, he displayed good models on the classroom walls. This is, in my view, a useful strategy that not only creates a motivating classroom environment but helps develop pupils e-learning skills. However, it requires that every learner has the basic skills to work on the internet.

(4) For Vygotsky, Knowledge is actively constructed through social interaction in meaningful contexts. In particular, interactions with parents and other important adults lead to the creation of knowledge, which is internalized by the children. He, therefore, affirms of the role of teachers in supporting learners in the learning process (Jordan, Carlile and Stack, 2008, p. 18). The teacher measures

the learner's intellectual development and provides the appropriate support to help the learner to advance to what is targeted in the task (Adams, 2006, pp. 256-257). Vygotsky (1986) states that : 'what the child can do in cooperation today, he can do alone tomorrow. Therefore, the only good kind of construction is that which marches ahead of development and

leads it' (Vygotsky, 1986, p. 188, in Hannon, 2000, p. 46)). The focus, here, is on 'a kind of collaborative, or shared meaning that is built socially by a group of members who interact with each other' (Spivey, 1997, p. 24).

(5) I agree wholeheartedly that activities ought to be discerningly selected in a way that helps realize the set objectives. However, what is noticeable is that some English language teachers, are not aware of this causal relationship between the two variables. Activities are usually chosen for the purpose of creating an interesting and enjoyable classroom atmosphere without taking into consideration their feasibility to work for the objectives given. And this calls for more emphasis to be put on this issue, particularly from in-service teacher training programmes.

(6) Culture-relatedness, in my opinion, is another requisite for selecting activities. Singing and dancing tasks, for instance, are widely believed to be interesting and motivating to pupils, especially those at kindergartens and primary schools but break, in some societies, with religious teachings, and long established traditions. As it is the case of Islamic societies where singing and dancing are proscribed by Islamic law. Therefore, instead of using singing, chants, for kindergarten and primary schoolchildren, and lyrics, for the older students, can be used to fulfil the intended outcomes as well as maintaining the class at a higher motivational level. Similarly, physical exercises, such as those of Physical Education lessons, can be applied, instead of dancing, in English teaching classes for pupils of different age groups. Consequently, planning for activities strikes effectively a balance between fun and learning as well as being in conformity with society's culture.

(7) In addition, ICT ought to be viewed as a medium for learning, not simply a tool that adds entertainment. It was observed, in my school placement visit to Carmel College, that the History teacher used the PowerPoint as an integral part of the lesson that supports the learner's creation of knowledge and thinking. The thirteen-year-old pupils were asked to find a picture in the textbook that well matches to a PowerPoint text, then asked to create a text that

matches to a different PowerPoint picture, modelling on the text displayed. It is noticeable here that ICT is used to provide Vygotsky's notion of 'scaffolding'. That is, it helps students to bridge the gap between their actual development and the level of development they are expected to realize. Therefore, it is important for a teacher, in the process of planning, to think over how to integrate ICT into everyday lessons.

(8) Many research findings* have concluded that that well-planned lessons are a preventive bulwark against student misbehaviour. In these classes the students have no reason to misbehave since the teacher knows well what and how to do in a way that busies students in assigned tasks all through the lesson. This is exactly what the teacher of Spanish has managed to do in Year 12 at Carmel College where my placement was. Unlike the History teacher whose Year 14 pupils were disruptive all the session owing to poorly-planned and boring teaching *, The pupils, in the Spanish class, were interestingly involved in the set work from beginning to end.

* See, for example, the 1993/1994 research findings of Michael Boulton, *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, vol. 161, no. 11, pp. 160-180. See also the research of Peter K. Smith on school bullying, *The Journal of Psychology*, vol. 180, no. 18, pp. 120-151.

* This ill-planned teaching was clearly shown in the misuse of timing. The Starter, for instance, was allotted too much time that made the students felt bored and, consequently, grew inattentive and misbehaving.

(9) Planning also helps a teacher to give due consideration to the following assessment issues ;:

- Identifying the target group :(e.g. one or more groups from a whole class) ;
- Deciding the timing of assessment : (e.g. duration and suitability of time for students) ;
- Deciding evidence of attainment : (e.g. the focus will be on processes or outcomes)

(Cohen, Lawrence and Morrison, 2005, pp.358,359)

(10) However important they are, formative, peer and self-assessment, from past teaching experience at High Schools, are not paid serious attention in the process of lesson planning, in comparison with other types of assessment especially summative and teacher assessment. It appears that this is likely due, in part, to widely held beliefs that the teacher is the only reliable source of

knowledge and the product of learning, not the process, is the most important. It is also aggravated by putting strong official focus on end-of-year exams. Therefore, in agreement with the Vygotskian principles that suggest 'development of an emphasis on the process of learning, not simply on the product and student-centred learning' (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2005, p.68), it is vital that more concentration is given to those types of assessment during the planning process. It is formative assessment, in particular, that shapes the basis for future plans. It gives 'students learning opportunities and helps teachers to assess to what extent their students are learning' (Beresford 2006, p. 34). Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2005, p.329) hold that formative assessment is 'designed to figure highly in planning for learning'. That is, it provides feedback to teachers on their current performances and their students' strengths and weaknesses in a way that helps the teacher to consider what to do next to improve learning.

(11) In spite of the importance of medium term planning for effective learning and teaching, it does not guarantee, by itself, to fulfil the educational ends. Teachers' positive attitude towards planning, in general, and medium term planning, in particular, is essential to put it into practice effectively. Also, they need much more practice to be skilled at devising and accommodating medium term plans.