

## *Bridging theory and practice: insights on lesson planning from English teachers*

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**Abstract :** Grounded in principles of language teacher education (HARMER, 2007; FARRELL, 2018, 2021; RICHARDS, 2006, 2011, 2015; UR, 2024; WRIGHT, 2005), this study discusses six English teachers' beliefs and practices on lesson planning, focusing on four aspects: the significance of lesson planning, the need for flexibility and adaptability, the influence of working conditions on lesson planning, and the role of academic training in developing planning skills. Through an initial questionnaire and semi-structured online interviews, the findings reveal that while lesson planning is crucial for structuring lessons, teachers emphasize the need for flexibility to respond to classroom dynamics. Moreover, it was found that institutional constraints often limit teachers' autonomy in planning, restricting creativity and personalization. Additionally, the study uncovers an existing gap between academic training and the practical demands of lesson planning, with teachers acquiring much of their expertise through professional development and hands-on experiences. The study concludes by highlighting the importance of mentorship and continuous learning in developing effective planning strategies. Finally, it suggests that future research should explore ways to bridge the gap between theory and practice in teacher education, and investigate the role of technology in enhancing teachers' planning skills.

**Keywords:** English language teaching. Lesson planning. Teacher's beliefs. Teaching practices. Language teacher education.

## *Unindo teoria e prática: reflexões sobre o planejamento de aulas de professores de inglês*

**Resumo:** Fundamentado em princípios da formação de professores/as de línguas (HARMER, 2007; FARRELL, 2018, 2021; RICHARDS, 2006, 2011, 2015; UR, 2024; WRIGHT, 2005), este estudo discute as crenças e práticas de seis professores/as de inglês no que se refere ao planejamento de aulas, com foco em quatro aspectos: a importância do planejamento de aulas, a necessidade de flexibilidade e adaptabilidade, a influência das condições de trabalho no planejamento de aulas, e o papel da formação acadêmica no desenvolvimento de habilidades de planejamento. Através de um questionário inicial e entrevistas online semi-estruturadas, os resultados revelam que, embora o planejamento seja crucial para

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estruturar as aulas, os/as professores/as enfatizam a necessidade de flexibilidade para responder às dinâmicas da sala de aula. Além disso, restrições institucionais muitas vezes limitam a autonomia dos/as professores/as no planejamento, reprimindo a criatividade e a personalização. Também, o estudo revela uma lacuna existente entre a formação acadêmica e as demandas práticas do planejamento de aulas, considerando que os/as professores/as participantes adquiriram grande parte de sua expertise por meio de desenvolvimento profissional nas escolas que atuam e de experiências práticas. O estudo conclui destacando a importância da mentoria/supervisão e da formação continuada no desenvolvimento de estratégias eficazes de planejamento. Finalmente, sugerimos que futuras pesquisas explorem maneiras de preencher a lacuna entre teoria e prática na formação de professores/as, além de investigar o papel da tecnologia no aprimoramento das habilidades de planejamento de professores/as.

**Palavras-chave** : Ensino de língua inglesa. Planejamento de aulas. Crenças de professores. Práticas de ensino. Formação de professores de línguas.

## Introduction

Thinking about what to teach before going into lessons is definitely part of every teacher's routine. As stated by Egounleti, Toboula and Yebou (2022), lesson planning allows teachers to reach their students more meaningfully, as it requires reflection on what to include in lessons according to students' particularities. Also, Richards (2006) explains that lesson plans help teachers anticipate possible problems, which helps enhance students' experiences while interacting in class. Moreover, Sadam's review (2020) on the effectiveness of lesson planning in language teaching shows that planning a lesson potentializes the development of specific teaching strategies according to students' different learning styles.

Although many studies demonstrate the positive aspects of lesson planning, some research has been done on its challenges. For instance, Nga (2022) affirms that planning may be, at times, a laborious task, especially for teachers who have not received appropriate training. Furthermore, Nga's study (2022) reveals that time constraints make it stressful for teachers to design logical lesson plans. In the case of Brazil, Batista (2020) claims that there is a gap in policy documents regarding language education, as they "do not prescribe the necessary conditions for English Language Teaching (ELT) to take place effectively" (BATISTA, 2020, p. 135). In our view, this lack of clearance in providing practical and effective instructions on teaching makes lesson planning a more challenging process in Brazil.

Planning lessons effectively brings significant benefits but also presents challenges due to varying lesson needs and contexts (ALGHAMDY, 2023). It involves complex aspects, such as the teacher's beliefs, working environment, and the teacher's educational background. Murdani *et al.* (2020) highlight that teachers' beliefs influence their teaching more than their

knowledge, shaping their lesson decisions. Mercer (2020), with attention to the relation between working conditions and language teaching, found that respectful treatment and being heard improve teachers' well-being and lesson planning. However, König *et al.* (2019) criticize the lack of research on developing planning skills in language teacher education, noting an abundance of theoretical guidelines but limited empirical studies.

In light of this, this study investigates three aspects of lesson planning: 1) the participants' beliefs about lesson planning, 2) the impact of working conditions on lesson planning, and 3) the influence of teachers' educational backgrounds. Initially, the participants completed a questionnaire on lesson planning. Empirical data was further collected through semi-structured interviews with six English teachers from Goiás, Brazil. The interviews, conducted online via Google Meet, included participants from four distinct educational settings: private language schools, public schools, a federal university, and independent online teaching.

### **The role of lesson planning in language teaching**

Many studies highlight lesson planning as a cornerstone in promoting effective language teaching (NESARI; HEIDARI, 2014; SADAM, 2020; ALGHAMDY, 2023). According to Richards (2015), the primary function of lesson planning is to anticipate and organize the learning process, transforming potential goals into real learning outcomes. The author elaborates that lesson plans reflect the critical decisions teachers make about their classes, typically encompassing: 1) lesson objectives; 2) the types of activities chosen; 3) the sequence of these activities; 4) timing; 5) interaction patterns; and 6) necessary resources. Furthermore, Richards (2015) notes that the complexity of lesson plans often depends on the teacher's experience, with novice teachers tending to create more detailed plans, whereas seasoned educators may rely on mentally-conceived frameworks.

Ur (2024) discusses the connection between meaningful learning and the variety of activities used in a lesson. The author asserts that "a varied lesson is likely to produce better learning", as it caters to diverse student profiles and reaches a broader range of learning styles (p. 22). Ur further explains that lessons may vary in different ways, influenced by factors such

as time constraints, student organization, chosen materials, the difficulty of tasks, pre-selected topics (both linguistic and non-linguistic), activity mood (fun, serious, tense, relaxed), and student engagement (whether active or passive). Although it is challenging for teachers to address all these aspects in every lesson plan, being mindful of them opens "various possibilities" for enhancing the teaching process (p. 23).

Farrell (2018) explores how reflective teaching may enhance teachers' classroom performance. He argues that by reflecting on their lesson plans, teachers can refine their practices to better meet their students' needs. Farrell also emphasizes the importance of teachers being responsive during lessons, criticizing an over-reliance on rigid lesson plans. He notes that when teachers strictly adhere to their plans, they may overlook students' responses, which can stifle learning opportunities. As Farrell (2018, p. 82) points out, "this approach however, has a tendency to downplay students' interpretations and reactions to the lesson material and as such can block opportunities for learning".

In spite of its many advantages, lesson planning also presents several challenges. Wright (2005) highlights that when planning a lesson, teachers might have to deal with two key aspects of classroom management: the conceptual and the chronological. The conceptual domain involves selecting appropriate topics for each lesson, while the chronological one is related to time constraints, which often vary according to institutional management demands. In the conceptual sphere, teachers may struggle with the challenge of working with pre-determined topics, limiting their autonomy in structuring the course. Similarly, in the chronological domain, teachers frequently find themselves pressed due to course-imposed deadlines. Wright (2005) argues that these challenges can diminish teachers' decision-making capacity and, as a result, hinder students' learning experiences.

### **Teachers' beliefs and teaching practices**

Existing research often emphasizes how understanding the link between language teachers' beliefs and their classroom practices can provide deep insights into their instructional decisions. These beliefs, intertwined with the knowledge gained through experience, guide teachers' pedagogical choices (GILAKJANI; SABOURI, 2017). The authors identify five key

aspects of teachers' beliefs: “beliefs about learners and learning, teaching, the curriculum, learning to teach”, and self-perceptions regarding the nature of teaching (p. 79). The origins of these beliefs can be traced back to a variety of sources: teachers' personal experiences as language learners, their professional experiences, their individual personalities, and the knowledge acquired through formal education (GILAKJANI; SABOURI, 2017).

Murdani *et al.* (2020) argue that teachers' beliefs are crucial when selecting strategies for implementing lessons. These beliefs can significantly enhance or hinder learning, potentially diminishing student engagement if the strategies are disconnected from their needs. Teachers' beliefs often operate on both conscious and subconscious levels and possess an evaluative quality, enabling educators to analyze the effects of their attitudes on students' experiences (p. 42). Exploring these beliefs not only sheds light on teaching practices but also promotes professional development, as it offers teachers an opportunity to reflect critically on their classroom actions.

Rahmalia and Nifriza (2023) investigate how teachers' beliefs about learners' autonomy shape their teaching styles. Their findings highlight a significant gap between a theoretical appeal of learner autonomy and its practical application into classrooms. This discrepancy underscores a broader issue within educational settings, where the ideals of pedagogical theories often clash with the realities of everyday teaching practices. Rahmalia and Nifriza's study serves as a critical perception on the challenges educators face in translating pedagogical beliefs into effective teaching strategies, especially once self-reflection has not been practiced as part of one's teaching routine.

In a 2022 study, Gao *et al.* delved into how lesson planning during the COVID-19 pandemic influenced teachers' beliefs and practices in China. They found that the transition to online platforms required teachers to suddenly adjust their lesson plans, reflecting their beliefs in the necessity and efficacy of educational technologies. This alignment suggests that teachers' pre-existing beliefs about technology in education heavily influenced their ability to adapt lesson plans effectively during the transition to online teaching. Finally, the study highlights the crucial role of teachers' beliefs in shaping lesson planning, especially in response to emergency teaching conditions (GAO *et al.*, 2022).

### **The influence of working conditions to lesson planning**

Breshears (2019) explores the precarious nature of English language teaching in Canada, particularly for adults. The author highlights that many English as an Additional Language (EAL) teachers face uncertain, insecure, and unstable working conditions. These conditions often include part-time or temporary contracts, low wages, and a lack of benefits, which contribute to job insecurity. She argues that these precarious working conditions significantly affect the pedagogical practices of these teachers. The instability in employment discourages thorough and thoughtful lesson planning and limits professional development opportunities. This situation not only impacts the quality of education delivered but also the personal and professional lives of the teachers. Breshears suggests that understanding and improving the working conditions of EAL teachers is crucial to enhance the quality of language education and teacher satisfaction.

Womack *et al.* (2015) investigate the impact of time demands and formal requirements on lesson planning among teachers. The authors note that it is common for public school teachers in Louisiana to produce between 10 and 15 pages of lesson plans on a daily basis. Furthermore, they claim that teacher education programs often impose strict demands for detailed lesson plans as part of observational evaluations. Despite these rigorous requirements, Womack *et al.* argue that the essence of effective lesson planning lies in its precision rather than its length. The scholars emphasize that a lesson plan must be clear and practical, but it does not need to be overly extensive, suggesting that "the key issue for lesson planning is certainty, not exhaustiveness. The plan has to 'be there', but it doesn't have to be unnecessarily lengthy" (WOMACK *et al.*, 2015, p.12). This perspective challenges the notion that more detailed plans inherently lead to better teaching outcomes, highlighting the importance of understanding the implications of working/training conditions in teaching practices.

### **Teacher education and lesson planning**

In a study to investigate pre-service teachers' lesson planning skills, König *et al.* (2019) explore how initial teacher education shapes the development of adaptive teaching through structured lesson planning. More precisely, the authors focused on "the ways in which the

learning group's cognitive level fits with the respective lesson's assignments" (p. 132). The study highlights that training helps pre-service teachers not only to structure lessons effectively but also to adapt their teaching strategies to meet the diverse cognitive needs of their students. Also, the study identified a significant improvement in the teachers' planning skills as they progressed through their induction period, suggesting that on-going and structured educational opportunities play a crucial role in their professional development (KÖNIG *et al.*, 2019). This connection between teacher education and effective lesson planning reveals the necessity of well-rounded training programs that foster both general pedagogical skills and subject-related expertise to enhance teaching efficacy.

Rajendran *et al.* (2023) discuss the role of Continuous Professional Development (CPD) in enhancing teachers' abilities with lesson planning. The authors discuss how CPD provides teachers with updated pedagogical skills, which are critical for efficient lesson planning. They noticed that "CPD initiatives that offer structured learning experiences and exposure to new teaching strategies enhance teachers' ability to develop comprehensive lesson plans that meet diverse student needs" (RAJENDRAN *et al.*, 2023, p. 1349). This relationship shows the importance of on-going professional development in providing teachers with the necessary knowledge and tools to plan lessons successfully. Also, it may ensure that teachers' teaching strategies remain responsive to the changing dynamics of different classroom environments and educational advancements.

### **The methodology of the study**

This study is grounded in exploring the planning domain of language teaching, thus being inserted in the field of Applied Linguistics. Its findings are interpreted based on qualitative perspectives, centralizing humans and their perceptions as subjects of study. An initial questionnaire, which generated around 6 pages of written answers, and semi-structured interviews, which resulted in 85 minutes of recordings, were the primary data-collection instruments. Besides choosing a pseudonym, saying their age and indicating a preferred gender, the participants answered the following questions in the initial questionnaire:

**Table 1** – Questions of the initial questionnaire

Number	Questions
Question 1	<b>What is your teaching context?</b> (describe your working environment: public/private, language school/regular school/university, your tasks as a teacher, the relationships you have there, and how you feel working there.)
Question 2	<b>How long have you been working as a teacher?</b> (talk about your professional background)
Question 3	<b>What is your academic background?</b> (where you've studied/graduated, what you've studied, etc.)
Question 4	Harmer (2007) makes use of a planning continuum to describe different profiles of teachers when it comes to lesson planning. In one end of it, there are the "overplanners", who always plan their lessons thoroughly. Differently, on the other end of the continuum, there are those who hardly ever plan their lessons, they're into delivering their lessons according to whatever comes from their students. The author points that there might be many other types of teachers between the two ends of the planning continuum. <b>Having this analogy in mind, where do you think you stand in this planning continuum?</b>
Question 5	While investigating teachers' perceptions about lesson planning, Alarcón et al. (2019) used conceptual metaphor as a tool to access the participants' beliefs. In a process of metaphor elicitation, the author asked the participants to complete the statement "Lesson planning is like a... because...". The following sentences show some of the participants' answers:  - Lesson planning is like a roadmap, because from what is proposed in it, a line can be followed to fulfill what the Ministry proposes as a goal to achieve for each student.

	<p>- Lesson planning is like the foundation of a building, because the lesson planning is the basis of a lesson. That is to say, in a lesson planning, we as teachers must reflect on the most correct way to teach knowledge, considering the objectiveness, contents and students' contexts.</p> <p><b>Considering what you've just read, complete the following statement:</b> Lesson planning is like a... because... Feel free to complete it as you please.</p>
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Source: Created by the authors

Six participants took part in this study, whose working environments vary significantly. Sakura, a 25-year-old woman, works at both a private language school, where she feels valued and well-paid, and a private online platform, which seems to offer language education as a product. Carlos, a 33-year-old male, teaches at a public regular school, specifically working with the first, second and third grades of high school, where he prefers not to go against “how education is handled there”, although he does not agree with it. Rita, a 28-year-old woman, teaches privately, offering “individual personalized classes” online. She values the fact that she does not need to cope with imposed schedules, being freer to deliver lessons and able to access students more meaningfully. Lucas, a 24-year-old man, also teaches privately, delivering online lessons to adults. Although he finds it less stressing than working at language/regular schools, he claims that the students’ particular needs overlap his desire to teach critically. Ray, a 29-year-old woman, succinctly answered she works at both a regular and at language schools. Larry, a 60-year-old professor, has taught English, over the past 30 years, at all levels of a federal Brazilian university. He now prioritizes supervising future teachers, which he finds the most rewarding part of his career.

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as one of the main data-collection methods, especially because they provide flexibility, allowing the interviewer to explore both pre-determined topics and unexpected insights based on the participants' subjective experiences (DATKO, 2015). The interviews amounted to a total of six, one per participant, which happened online, via Google Meet. Before the encounters, the participants received the questions they were supposed to answer, which were:

**Table 2** - Questions discussed during the interviews

Question 1	What do you think about lesson planning in language teaching?
Question 2	Do you always plan your lessons? How do you plan them?
Question 3	Does your working environment affect your lesson planning? Explain it.
Question 4	What do you think about your academic/pedagogic background when it comes to lesson planning?

Source: created by the authors

### **Delving into the generated data: perspectives, beliefs and practices**

In this section, the data generated through both the initial questionnaire and the interviews are put in analysis. By interpreting and making sense of what was answered by the participants, thematic analysis was chosen to identify themes of interest according to the goals of this study. Maguire and Delahunt (2017) explain that a common practice when applying thematic analysis is to “use the main interview questions as the themes” (p. 3353). Based on that, the following discussion is structured according to themes that summarize the questions answered in both the questionnaire and the interviews, which we decided to call “planning inquiries”, as they explore different subjects concerning lesson planning.

#### **1<sup>st</sup> planning inquiry: the importance of lesson planning in language teaching**

All the participants highlighted the importance of lesson planning, acknowledging its essential role in their teaching practices. For instance, Larry described lesson planning as the basis of his lessons, comparing it to a “storyboard” that structures the sequence of activities and makes sure that the lesson goals are met. More precisely, Larry stated that

Lesson planning is like a Storyboard, which is a sequence of frame-by-frame drawings with the outline of the various scenes designed for video content or any other similar task to be accomplished. The look of this sketch is similar to that of a comic book and the objective is to elaborate and detail the sequence of the narrative. In the case of English lessons, the plan would bring a teaching sequence to be developed in class with the group, helping the teacher achieving his/her aims for the lesson(s), as a guide map involving all the major necessary elements for the class, such as the order of activities, materials, timing, interaction patterns, amongst others. (Larry, questionnaire)

Two aspects of Larry's answer can be discussed according to Richards and Bohlke's (2011) conceptions regarding lesson planning: lesson plans as being roadmaps for teachers; and the need for adaptability as the events of the lesson unfold. More specifically, considering the procedures that a lesson may involve, the authors state that "lesson plans represent a map of the territory you want to cover in a lesson and the route you want to take to get there" (p. 16). It relates to Larry's description of a lesson plan as a "storyboard", which shows his acquaintance to a more well-sequenced and pre-established type of lesson. Additionally, Richards and Bohlke (2011) explain that sticking to the goals of the lesson makes it a more purposeful process, which should include "as many opportunities for students practice as possible" (p. 7). That can be paralleled with Larry's concern with achieving his lesson goals, which is present in his perception of lesson organization as a powerful teaching strategy.

Sakura expressed a similar perception, affirming that lesson planning is "crucial" for organizing her thoughts and ensuring that her lesson flows smoothly. Also, she emphasized that, although lessons demand structuring, it should not be its only guiding principle. In more details, Sakura stated that

To me, it's very important and crucial. Of course, it's not something that I use to monopolize my classes, but to me, it's very important and helps me understand better my students. That's what I think about this question, and I was thinking before, okay, what can I answer here? Because if I don't plan, my classes get messy, you know? (Sakura, interview, question 1)

Sakura's answer aligns with Farrell's (2018) emphasis on establishing a balance between structured lesson planning and the flexibility required to adapt to unexpected situations during a lesson. Like Sakura, Farrell argues that a lesson plan should not be viewed as a rigid and unchangeable recipe, but rather as a flexible guide that accommodates students' needs and

responses. He argues that teachers must be prepared to adapt in real time, ensuring that the diverse dynamics and spontaneous moments that arise in class are not overlooked. This perspective leads teachers towards making real-time adjustments during their lessons, which enhances their students' learning experiences.

Moreover, Rita explained that lesson planning helps her remember important elements of her lessons. She creates digital lesson plans and store them in a cloud, which allows her to access and adjust them more easily. More precisely, Rita said that

I don't remember what we did today or what we did last class [talking about what she does with her students] if I don't write everything down, so I always plan them [the lessons] and it's how I do it. I have most of my material in a cloud, like Google Drive, you know, and What I do is... I have a word file for every student, I date it, I Write what we're going to do in that lesson and I link the file or the material that was... pretty much I know my material really well so I don't have to detail so much in this material. I have lessons I designed; I have lessons I adapted from books. The main book I use is English file, so I have all of them, so even with different levels of students I still can use them on different series of books and I can adapt the book or I can use a lesson I prepared myself or I can use lessons from lingua house or you know... platforms. (Rita, interview, question 1)

Rita mentions using Google Drive and cloud-based systems to store materials and track lesson progress, which shows her effort to use digital tools as support to lesson organization and flexibility. According to Wekerle and Kollar (2022), experienced teachers use technology not just to manage content, but to enhance students' learning by facilitating higher-order learning activities (p. 4). This is evident in the teacher's use of digital tools, like cloud storage, and educational platforms, like Lingua House, which foster adaptive lesson planning.

Additionally, the teacher's practice of organizing a Word file for each student, continuously updating it with lesson content and linking relevant materials, shows an effective use of technology to promote individualized learning, a strategy that aligns with the findings from Wekerle and Kollar's study (2022). The authors argue that technology-experienced in-service teachers “frequently proposed more student-regulated active learning activities” (p. 12), integrating digital tools to support active and constructive learning. By creating and adapting personalized content for each student, Rita exemplifies how technology can be used to ensure that lesson planning remains flexible and student-centered, thus highlighting the relevance of integrating lesson planning and technology nowadays.

## 2<sup>nd</sup> planning inquiry: flexibility and adaptability in lesson planning

While all the participants acknowledged the importance of lesson planning, many also emphasized a need for flexibility and adaptability. Carlos, for example, compared lesson planning to a “flowchart”, where multiple paths could be taken depending on the students’ responses. The participant stated that

Lesson planning is like a flowchart, because things can go different ways depending on answers, attitudes or events in the classroom. There is not much linearity either, because you can go "ahead" or "back" in a lesson as needed, it will all depend on the teacher and students' motivations at the time things are actually happening and taking shape. (Carlos, questionnaire)

When discussing important elements of lesson planning, Nunan (2016) highlights the importance of promoting opportunities for learners to contribute to “content, learning procedures, and assessment” (p. 26). The author explains that these opportunities can be planned in advance by the teacher, or “arise spontaneously in the course of a lesson” (p. 26). It potentializes students’ engagement and fosters personalized learning. Carlos’ response is consistent with this rationale, since he argues that the lesson flow depends on students’ motivations and responses, which confronts the idea of linearity nurtured by many teachers as far as lesson planning is concerned.

In a similar way, adaptability plays a significant role in Ray’s planning. She explained that she does not overplan her lessons as she used to. Instead, she designs “skeletons” of lessons by writing down key ideas and always leaving space for improvisation during the class. However, Ray mentioned that her ability to plan is quite limited, as both schools where she teaches follow their own materials with pre-determined lesson plans. Our discussion on this matter happened as follows

**Interviewer:** Do you always plan your lessons? How do you do it?

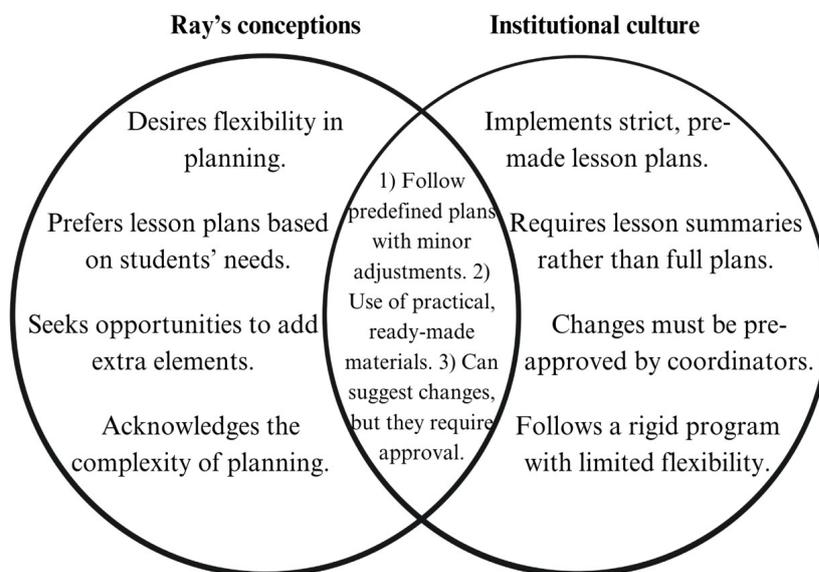
**Ray:** I do. So I work in a regular school and we have to give the coordinator our plans, so I absolutely have to do them. But since they have a strict bilingual program, I cannot really change much of what is said in the teacher's book,

teacher's manual. So I actually kind of have to follow it so it doesn't take a long time to do it because all I have to do really is just like read, understand what I have to do and, on the paper that I give to the coordinator, I just kind of summarize it. I don't detail it as much. I put it in topics like number one, warm up or this game, number two, start talking about this, number three, page, you know, it's more... we have to summarize it. But there's also a place where you put the goal of the class, what will they be able to do after the class ends or what they won't be able to do, I don't know. The focus, language, the vocabulary and the structures. So yeah, that's basically it for the regular schools because I can't really change much.

**Interviewer:** But do you have the chance to suggest something or add something to the lesson plan?

**Ray:** I do, but I have to talk to the coordinator first, like oh I have this lesson, we were thinking about this, is it possible, is it not possible? And in the other school, I also have the plans made already because it's a very specific course for young kids and we also can't really change it, so I don't really have a lot of freedom, but the good part of it is that the second one I don't really have to plan again. I mean I read and then I prepare the materials and then I follow it basically. Which is more practical somehow, right? Yeah, I think some teachers really love planning because they have control on exactly what to do and how to do it, but it's also so difficult, right? (Ray, interview, question 2)

Two topics stand out in Ray's sharing: her acquaintance to developing simple and summarized lesson plans; and the rigidity of lesson planning in her routine due to course constraints. Richards and Lockhart (2007) argue that every language program "reflects both the culture of the institution as well as collective decisions and beliefs of individual teachers" (p. 38). Having it in mind, both Ray's conceptions and the institutional culture she is submitted to, as well as their convergences, could be materialized in a Venn diagram as follows



The diagram succinctly illustrates the contrasts and intersections between Ray's views on lesson planning and the institutional cultures of her workplaces. While Ray values incorporating additional practices outside the prescribed plans, the rigidity of the course structure often limits her ability to do it, which is exemplified by the requirement for pre-approval before making any modifications. However, a point of convergence lies in the preference for summarized lesson plans, with both Ray and the institutions supporting brief outlines that emphasize the key moments of the lesson. This aligns with the concept of "framework planning" discussed by Richards and Lockhart (2007), where plans serve as flexible guides rather than detailed scripts. The diagram shows that achieving adaptability in lesson planning depends not only on the teacher's personal beliefs but also on the educational culture in which they operate.

### 3<sup>rd</sup> planning inquiry: institutional constraints on lesson planning

The influence of working conditions over lesson planning was a topic addressed several times during data collection. Sakura, for instance, highlighted that one of the institutions where she works enforces strict lesson plans and prohibits teachers from discussing

controversial topics in class, like gender inequality or social justice. This was part of our discussion during the interview

**Interviewer:** Does your working environment affect your lesson planning? Explain it.

**Sakura:** There [at one of her workplaces], I don't have to design [lesson plans]. They already have. We just have to follow. You have to follow the lesson. I work as a conversation teacher, you know, there. And we have the questions. They're ready, I don't have to work, I don't have..., yes, we don't have, for example, homework. It's a different background from the other school. We don't have homework. We don't have planning. Actually, they don't want to ask for that, but I always try to plan, for example, what we're going to do, something like that, to follow that method. And we have different students. Every single class, they're different. My mind's just okay. I need to be happy and smile. That's what they ask, but they don't treat me well.

**Interviewer:** And what do you think about the lesson plans that they offer for you to use?

**Sakura:** They're a little not open, you know? We cannot talk about controversial things. We cannot talk about, for example, prejudice things. If something bad happens in that class, like someone says something racist, I cannot discuss that. (Sakura, interview, question 3)

The conversation above illustrates the significant impact of institutional constraints on lesson planning. As stated, Sakura's autonomy and ability to address social issues were limited by curricular impositions, where pre-determined lesson plans take over the course of lessons. This aligns to Priestley and Drew's (2016) findings on the relation between curricular policies and teachers' agency, which show a shift from performance-focused teaching perspectives to a deep sense of managerialism towards teachers' performativity in class. According to the authors, "curricular policy intentions are undermined by the effects of other policies and associated practices" (p. 3), inhibiting teachers' autonomy depending on their professional settings.

Carlos's response also highlights the fact that his lessons are guided by a pre-established syllabus. He explained, "I'm able to adjust the lessons, but they still need to align with the school's overall goals" (Carlos, questionnaire). Despite these constraints, Carlos often attempts to introduce extra activities or modify existing ones to better engage his students, while always ensuring that they align with the institutional goals. This relates closely to Johnson and Golombek's (2016) argument that experienced teachers often deal with institutional constraints by adapting materials or adding new content to their lessons without straying from the required

goals. The authors suggest that “experienced teachers are more adept at finding a balance between institutional requirements and their own pedagogical approaches” (p. 210). Carlos’s approach exemplifies this balance, as he carefully integrates his own teaching style while respecting the overall goals of his workplace.

Furthermore, when discussing how his working conditions have shaped his approach to lesson planning, Carlos explained how the several institutions he has worked for have had a significant influence on his planning process. He explained that each place imposed different expectations and constraints, which affected how flexible or structured his lesson plans needed to be. Our conversation on this topic went as follows

**Interviewer:** And the third one, does your working environment affect your lesson planning?

**Carlos:** When I started, I started working in language schools, and I worked in language schools for maybe nine years of my life, ten years of my life, I don't know. And I remember planning my lessons more thoroughly in this context.

It's almost like I felt like I needed to do that, because there was this pressure, I'd say. Like, I felt like I was going to be observed in these areas, you know? But now, I work in a public, regular school, and, well, they say that I observe my classes, et cetera, et cetera, but it's not about that. It's not that, you know, it's more that I used to be more rigid about time, about what students need to be doing in language schools. But in public, regular schools, you have like 40, 50 students in class, and you have no control whatsoever on the time you're going to be spending with some of the activities. Even if you clap your hands and like, okay, guys, we're done, we can go on like this, we need to move on. Even if you do that, like, there are 40 people who hadn't got to the stage you presumed they were going to be, you know? So, how can you fight that? How can you go against that? So, you have to let things flow to a certain extent, of course. (Carlos, interview, question 3)

Carlos’ approach to lesson planning reflects the natural progression that teachers undergo as they get experienced. Early in his career, still in private schools, Carlos felt compelled to overplan due to institutional expectations and smaller class sizes. However, as he moved to public schools and became more seasoned, his planning got more flexible and succinct, aligning with Farrell’s (2021) assertion that experienced teachers tend to streamline their planning as they gain confidence in managing diverse classroom dynamics. This change also highlights the influence of different teaching environments, as Carlos himself noted the shift from meticulous planning in private schools to a more adaptive approach in a public

institution. This flexibility matches with Farrell’s claim that “lessons do not happen sequentially” (p. 98), as they vary depending on different teaching contexts. The author adds that teachers have to avoid thinking that “learning environments remain fixed” (p. 98), so that they get more secure while in class.

On the other hand, Lucas, a relatively new teacher, has a more flexible reality, as he delivers online lessons to his private students. However, the core content of his lessons is based on a pre-determined syllabus, which comes from already-made online materials that Lucas uses to plan his lessons. As he stated, “I use ESL Brains for materials, but I still have to follow the syllabus strictly” (Lucas, interview), which may, at times, limit his autonomy to innovate or make adjustments in the lesson. Borg and Alshumaimeri (2019) argue that novice teachers tend to depend on institutional frameworks for guidance, as they are still developing confidence in their own lesson planning abilities. In Lucas’ case, it does not seem to happen due to lack of expertise, but to plan lessons more practically, thus overcoming the challenges of a consuming teaching workload, and due to adaptability to students’ needs, as Lucas explained that the content of the lessons have to match with his students’ particular goals.

#### **4th planning inquiry: the role of academic training in lesson planning**

The participants expressed different views concerning the influence of their academic training in preparing them for lesson planning. Lucas, in particular, was critical of his undergraduate program, stating that it did not nurture sufficient focus of lesson planning (Lucas, interview, question 4). He felt that much of what he learned about planning came from his hands-on experiences as a teacher, which aligns with Zeichner and Liston’s (2013) views on the relation between theory and practice in teaching. The authors argue that teacher education programs often focus too deeply on theory and neglects the practical aspects of teaching. They affirm that “in the traditional view of technical rationality [referring to educational discourse], there is a separation between theory and practice that must somehow be overcome” (p. 15).

In a similar way, Ray mentioned that, while her academic background provided her a strong theoretical foundation, it lacked particular training on lesson planning, especially considering younger learners (Ray, interview, question 4). However, Ray felt more positive

about her academic training, stating that her university experience gave her the necessary tools to plan lessons effectively. Sakura, similarly, expressed some criticism towards her academic training on lesson planning, saying that "It was only after I started teaching that I really learned how to plan effectively" (Sakura, interview, question 4), which echoes Lucas and Ray's discontent with this gap between theory and practice as far as lesson planning was concerned in their experiences as undergraduates.

Carlos' response also highlights a distance between his academic training and his current planning practices. Like Lucas, Ray and Sakura, he expressed that much of what he learned about lesson planning was solidified as he got experienced in teaching. More precisely, Carlos explained

**Carlos:** So, that's tricky. Because I remember having classes at college about lesson planning. We took them seriously. We learned how to plan a lesson. We learned the steps, the categories, blah, blah, blah. But I would say there wasn't a major concern of ours during college. So, we were more involved in, I'm going to say here, philosophical, political, theoretical aspects of education more than these formal ones. So, we learned how to do it. But especially for me, I worked mostly with critical teaching at the time I was in college. So, we wouldn't consider lesson planning a crucial part of a lesson. It was important, but it was not as crucial as being attentive to what students were saying, what things were popping up, etc., etc. So, I would say it contributed, but not as... No, no, no. Like, the area I study now is not as concerned with lesson planning as some other areas are.

**Interviewer:** I see. And do you think that critical language teaching goes together with lesson planning?

**Carlos:** To a certain extent, yeah. I think it aligns with what I've been telling you during this interview. You need to have something planned, but you cannot let that be your lesson. You need to be attentive to critical moments. It's one of those things that Penny Cook says. We have to be attuned and attentive to these critical moments, see what pops up. And then, as soon as a critical moment appears, grab it and improvise, do what you need to do to make your class more relevant to the moment you're in. You're not breaking rhythms; you're not breaking paces in a lesson. That's it. (Carlos, interview, question 4)

Carlos' remarks bring attention to a possible tension between formal lesson planning, which he learned in college, and a more student-responsive approach that is commonly emphasized in critical language teaching. He points out that, during his experience as a student-teacher, lesson planning was addressed, but it was not one of the primary focuses of the course. Instead, the emphasis was placed on the "philosophical, political, [and] theoretical aspects of

education” (interview, question 4). This could be approached considering Kumaravadivelu’s (2012) critique towards traditional assumptions in language teacher education, which tend to neglect broader social dimensions of teaching.

While discussing knowledge about language teaching, Kumaravadivelu (2012) explains that it has been grounded in two main approaches: “(a) use through usage and (b) usage through use, where use refers to communicative fluency and usage refers to grammatical accuracy” (p. 27). More simply saying, the author highlights two typically-applied approaches in language teaching: communication through grammar, when it is believed that students become able to communicate after consistent exposure to grammar, and grammar through communication, a process in which learners are expected to internalize grammar by understanding how to use language according to real-life situations. The scholar adds that, in order for the second approach to work effectively, students have to be integrated in a meaningful learning environment, where their needs shape the course of the lesson. It aligns with Carlos’ way of thinking about lesson planning, who states that it requires adaptation beyond formal aspects of teaching, prioritizing students’ responsiveness instead.

Additionally, Rita and Larry’s responses intersect when considering the influence of their academic background on their planning practices. Rita stated that what she knows about lesson planning comes mostly from her experiences teaching at different schools

If I only had to trust what I learned at university, to use that in my life right now, it wouldn't be enough. That's something I always criticize about the course, I have to say they don't prepare us for real life, but I was like, I think you were lucky too [referring to the interviewer’s experience with planning] because we had that support at the beginning [support for working at a language center while still undergraduating] It was like the best way to start like a person who takes your hand and helps ‘Okay This lesson plan is not good’, ‘you have to do this, this and this to improve it’ and then we do that many times until we learn. Of course, we have always had to follow the communicative approach there, and it means we all based everything in that method. (Rita, interview, question 4)

She acknowledges that she was lucky for having worked at a language center while still being a student-teacher, where she had professionals to guide her towards effective lesson planning. Rita explains that if it was not for that, she would not have become so confident with her teaching practices, especially as far as lesson planning is concerned. Similarly, Larry’s

response shows that his current expertise on lesson planning reflects his long journey working and studying in different places, as he did not graduate from language teaching, but from international relations

I started being trained by professionals, attending BRAZ-TESOL, national and international seminars, taking courses with people like Penny Ward, Jeffrey Church, and many of the big, big names. And then I learned the importance of planning. And I was instructed. And in the international house, I had supervisors like Maria who would demand, yes, I had to show plans, complete detailed lesson plans with all information possible. And after the lessons, in the feedback session, I would have to justify my plan, explain why I chose everything I did, for what reasons, and if the lesson went well, why, or if the lesson didn't go well, why not, et cetera. And then I learned the importance of planning. (Larry, interview, question 4)

Both Rita and Larry's responses reinforce the criticism addressed by the other participants on the gap between theory and practice in language teacher programs. Rita, specifically, criticizes the limited real-world preparation provided by her university, noting that her confidence in lesson planning arose from hands-on experience at a language center, where professional mentoring played a crucial role in her teaching practices. Likewise, Larry attributes his expertise on lesson planning to professional development experiences outside formal academic training. This is in harmony with Kennedy's (2016) argument that "PD [professional development] alters teachers' knowledge, which in turn alters their practices, which in turn alters student learning. If there is slippage in any one of these steps, we might expect effects to be diminished", which highlights the intersections among teachers' education, their teaching practices and, finally, their students' learning process.

### **Final thoughts**

This study uncovers significant insights related to the beliefs and practices of teachers in Goiás, Brazil, specifically with respect to lesson planning in language teaching. Its findings provide understanding of four main inquiries: the importance of lesson planning, flexibility and adaptability in planning, the influence of working conditions on planning, and the role of

academic training in shaping planning skills. The research was conducted with six different language teachers, whose teaching environments varied from private language schools to public schools/university. Data was generated through an initial questionnaire and semi-structured online interviews.

Firstly, the teachers' responses strongly reinforce the notion that lesson planning is essential for structuring and organizing classroom activities, as seen in Larry's metaphor of lesson plans as a "storyboard" that frames lessons effectively, or in Rita's analogy, who sees it as a "cane" she relies on to walk. However, all participants highlighted that the main function of planning is to serve as a guide rather than a rigid script, emphasizing the importance of responsiveness to students' needs during lessons. This balance between structure and adaptability was seen in various teaching contexts, particularly in Sakura and Carlos' perspectives, showing that lesson planning is vital but must leave room for improvisation when necessary.

Secondly, regarding flexibility and adaptability, Carlos' metaphor of lesson planning as a "flowchart" encapsulates the dynamic nature of teaching, where planning must open room for non-linear progression based on students' interactions and engagement. These findings reflect a shared understanding among participants that adaptability is a key component of effective teaching, a view that contrasts with the more rigid approaches imposed by certain institutions, as experienced by Ray. This dynamic process of lesson planning shows that a successful lesson plan is one that not only anticipates events for a lesson, but also adapts it to real-time demands.

Third, the impact of working conditions on lesson planning is evident and acknowledged by all the participants. Teachers like Sakura and Carlos, working in environments where lesson plans are either pre-determined or where institutional pressures are high, feel constrained in their ability to fully personalize their lesson plans. These constraints, as discussed in the findings, often diminish teachers' autonomy and creativity, limiting their ability to engage with students critically. This aligns with research suggesting that institutional demands can either support or stifle teachers' capacity to develop responsive and meaningful lesson plans.

Finally, the study reveals a significant gap between academic training and the real-world demands for lesson planning. Rita and Lucas both highlighted how their formal education

was insufficient in preparing them for the complexities of planning lessons, as much of their expertise developed through hands-on experience and mentorship. Their reflections match with the broader criticism towards teacher education programs that often prioritize theory over practice. The intersection between professional development and teaching experience appeared as a crucial factor, with Rita and Larry's sharings underscoring the importance of continuous mentoring and learning from professional communities in order to develop and apply efficient planning skills.

### Directions for future research

Considering the findings of this study, future research should further explore how teacher education programs can bridge the gap between theory and practice, particularly in the area of lesson planning. Studies could investigate how integrating more experiential learning opportunities, such as mentorship, might enhance pre-service teachers' ability to design adaptive and student-centered lesson plans. Moreover, future research could examine the role of institutional culture in shaping teachers' autonomy in planning and how these environments can be reconfigured to support flexibility and creativity. Finally, with the rise of digital tools, it would be worth exploring how technological advancements can be integrated into teacher education to provide more effective lesson planning strategies that respond to diverse classroom contexts.

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