(HOW) SHOULD WE INFORM LEARNERS OF LESSONS & ACTIVITY AIMS? AN ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT CONDUCTED WITH YOUNG ADULTS STUDYING FOR AN ENGLISH STUDIES DEGREE IN A GERMAN UNIVERSITY

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Introduction

Although TEFL training programmes usually train teachers to include copious detail in their lesson plans, particularly regarding the aims of lessons and activities, there is typically much less discussion about whether these aims should also be communicated to learners, and, if so, how. I would suggest, though, that this is in fact a matter worth looking at in more detail, and in this article I would like to share some findings of a recent research project I conducted, which help to answer both of these questions.

Background Literature

Several voices highlight the importance of students being aware of the activities'/lessons' aims in relation to the overall course. Winch & Gingell (1999: 232) explain Hirst & Peter's (1970) definition of teaching, which claims teachers "must be doing things with the subject matter that indicate their purposes to the learner". Williams & Burden (1997: 82) also stress that "teachers first need to be clear why they select [an] activity and then help their learners to see the value for them." Woodward (2001: 2), too, lists characteristics of a 'good' lesson/course, including that the students and teacher are aware of what there is to learn and of why they are doing the chosen activities.

These authors justify their position with points such as empowering students in their learning, in terms of deciding which part of a lesson to concentrate most on, and so they can 'file' acquired knowledge logically in memory. Regarding specific activities, understanding why the activity is to be completed, i.e. exactly what it trains that is relevant to their learning, is also assumed to increase learners' motivation to participate, which can result in more practice and presumably better overall performance on assessments. Williams & Burden (1997: 125) agree that "[t]he greater the value that individuals attach to the accomplishment of or involvement in an activity, the more highly motivated they will be both to engage in it initially, and later to put sustained effort into succeeding in the activity."

This is arguably a product of increased 'receptivity'. Allwright & Bailey (1991) use the term 'receptivity' to mean learners' openness towards the teacher, teaching style and activities. They explain, for example, that some learners may not be receptive to group-work, as they miss input from the teacher. Although the teacher may plan to 'give input' in the first part of a lesson and see the group work as an opportunity for freer practice, students may not understand this and thus may not be open to group tasks. Students may also lack openness to the presentation of course content if it does not match their expectations or is different to their previous experience. Learners accustomed to grammar worksheets may view communicative activities as 'having fun' or passing time, for example, thus not recognising the goals of such activities. Being receptive to the teaching style also involves understanding why things are being taught/practised in this way and respecting the teacher's professional decisions.

Action Research

To move from these mainly theoretical perspectives on planning lessons/activities and whether/how understanding aims may help students focus and progress in their learning, I decided to conduct a small-scale action research study on communicating course and lesson aims to adult EFL students.

For this project, 'action research' is understood as any small scale research conducted by a practising teacher which looks at any aspect of how a class is run, and is particularly aimed at answering a question or addressing a difficult or controversial issue. The results of the research can then be used by the teacher (and colleagues if the results are shared) to inform future practice and to suggest solutions to any problems or puzzles caused by the controversial issues/questions.

With this definition, 'action research' can have the following phases, which fall within the action research cycle described by Nunan & Bailey (2009): formulation of research question,

background reading, developing (and maybe piloting, or evaluating with colleagues) a method of data collection, data collection, collating & analysing data, reflection & drawing conclusions. Once conclusions have been drawn, these can lead to the formulation of a consequent action plan or changes in teaching practice, and/or the dissemination of the research findings, as in this article.

Research Procedure

My study was based on teaching language lessons to four different groups, each of about thirty young-adult learners reading English Studies degrees at Trier University, which were assigned to me for a 14-week semester with 2 hours of contact time per week (see Figure 1 for details). The vast majority of these students speak German as their native language. Notwithstanding this specific context, the findings that emerged from this study may be applicable to other ELT contexts and thus of interest to a broad range of teachers and teacher trainers.

Figure 1. Overview of classes on which the study was based.

Class	Number of students	English Proficiency (CEFR)
1– Lang 802 Cultural Studies	33	C1
2– Lang 402 Intro. to Professional Writing	34	B2
3– Lang 801 Advanced Academic Writing	32	C1
4– Lang 201 Academic Spoken English	27	B1/B2

My study took the form of a developmental record focusing on the research question, 'How can I communicate lesson and activity aims to learners most effectively?' My intention was to ascertain the advantages of communicating a lesson's or an activity's aim to my learners, and to evaluate various strategies for doing so, following Woodward's (2001) suggestions (see Figure 2). In order to be able to communicate the lesson/activity aims to students using the various strategies, I drew up detailed lesson plans for my reference. The overarching aim(s) of the lesson were written at the top of the plan, and the rest of the information was presented in a fairly standard tabular layout, with columns for a description of each activity, its timing, the interaction it involved, and the detailed aims of the activity. I employed

each strategy for two lessons with each class, and kept a developmental record which consisted of my tabular lesson plans, and my post-teaching reflections on the success of the lesson/activities and the various strategies employed to make learners aware of the aims. All of my reflections were typed up immediately after each lesson into an extra column in my lesson plans. Students also gave feedback at the end of each lesson by completing sentences such as, "One activity from today's lesson was… I think we did that because…". Student responses that occurred frequently were also paraphrased and typed up on my lesson plans, as well as any which were particularly pertinent or necessitated further action on my part.

Figure 2. Strategies for communicating aims to students.

Strategies for Communicating Lesson Aims

- show list of lesson aims as a 'menu' (e.g. OHT, chalk board)
- read aims to class, using some different words or phrasing to clarify meaning
- read & explain aims, giving examples of activities to achieve each aim
- students brainstorm what they think aims of the course/lesson are
    - compare students' lists with teacher's list of aims (whole class discussion)
    - explain orally aims on teacher's list that students' brainstorms didn't produce

Strategies for Communicating Activity Aims

- introduce activities as normal, assume students can identify which lesson aims each activity is working towards
- introduce each activity with explanation of how it fits in with the lesson aim
- at end of lesson, teacher re-caps activities and how they fit to the lesson aims
- at end of lesson, ask students to re-cap activities and how they fit to lesson aims

Findings – should we communicate aims?

Regarding the question of whether communicating lesson or activity aims to students is beneficial, my reflections and students' comments highlighted mainly the same points that are mentioned in the literature – and clearly answer the question with 'yes'. Firstly, students really did seem to feel empowered in their own learning (though they did not use this term themselves!). Since it may be unrealistic to expect students to concentrate fully for a complete 90-minute lesson in a foreign language, explaining the aims of different parts of the lesson meant that they could take control of their learning within the lesson, particularly in terms of choosing when to concentrate a lot, and

when they could relax slightly, depending on how closely their individual aims corresponded to the aims of specific activities. According to their feedback, seeing the course and lessons broken down into separate parts with separate aims also enabled them to file the newly acquired knowledge and skills in 'chunks' or patterns within previous knowledge in their long-term memory. Both of these points hint at increased learner autonomy – which is also highly valued within ELT. Put simply, if learners understand where the course aims to take them, they can use this information to guide their self study, how they go about tasks, and so on.

I also noticed an increase in willingness to participate in lesson activities. It really seems to be the case that understanding why the activity is to be completed increases learners' motivation to participate. More specifically, understanding the significance and usefulness of the language or skills practiced beyond the academic setting increased my students' motivation to participate in unpopular activities. A clear example was the academic writing class, where students were not receptive to tasks where they were not actually practising writing essays. Gathering information after the first session about the kinds of activities students are open ('receptive') to enabled me to design subsequent lessons accordingly. Alternatively, I found that putting extra effort into explaining why a certain activity is important, if it fell into the category of something the students had expressed dislike for, was particularly useful in gaining their cooperation and convincing them to participate for their own benefit. In general, I also noticed what can be termed 'increased receptivity' (as discussed above) to me as a teacher and the tasks I planned for our lessons. Though this study cannot prove it empirically, it appeared to me that this increased level of motivation and participation also brought about better performance on the assessments for the courses in question.

However, students' responses also proved, as Woodward (2001: 68) says, that due to distractions and diversion in class, "what the teacher thinks has been covered may not have registered at all in students' minds as the main point of the lesson". An example here is the cultural studies class, where students' feedback focused overwhelmingly on factual content and not on the key language skills I was aiming to review with them. In these cases, I found that it was useful to ask students to re-state outcomes of activities/lessons, so that they could clarify in their own minds what language points had been learnt and practised, but

also so that I could see what they had taken away as the main point of the sessions.

Findings - strategies for communicating aims

Regarding the various strategies that can be employed to communicate aims to learners, my findings clearly highlighted the difference in appropriateness of strategies for use with learners at different levels. This is an aspect that is not discussed much in the literature. My advanced-level students (C1 on CEFR), for example were pleased to be guided to think about aims of the course/lesson/activity, and we often had lively discussions, particularly comparing groups' suggested aims and comparing students' lists of aims with mine. They were also confident in providing and discussing their own ideas on what a course's or lesson's aims could be, and example tasks that would help us to achieve these. It seemed to me that these learners have relatively clear ideas about their progress in learning English and the specific areas they still need to work on, and therefore understood why it was helpful for them to know the aims of our lessons and activities. On the flip side, students' feedback showed that they felt rather patronised by the teacher reading or explaining the lesson aims in a frontal manner, and it was also obvious to me in class that they were often bored and frustrated when these aims were repeated with the instructions of each activity. Overall, they reacted more positively to the strategies which required them to actively engage with the aims of our course, lessons and tasks. One down-side worth mentioning, though, is that these discussions, though interesting, were rather time-consuming and can eat into class time planned for other activities.

In contrast, lower-level students (B1 on CEFR) reported feeling more secure when the aims of each course/lesson/activity were explained to them, clearly preferring input from the teacher over discussing aims themselves. In these cases, asking students to suggest and discuss their ideas of aims and activities appeared to make some of them rather nervous, and the discussions were much shorter (but on the plus side less time-consuming!). Overall, involving students in this way proved to be an inefficient strategy for communicating aims. In fact, despite my efforts to encourage students to engage with my suggested aims, their end of lesson feedback often repeated my wording, perhaps reflecting a lack of real understanding of the aims presented. Student feedback also showed, however, that at least part of the problem with the discussions and feedback

was these lower-level students' lack of meta-language to express ideas about aims – some students resorted to writing in German (their native language) to be able to express their thoughts. Indeed, Allwright and Bailey (1991: 167) highlight language level as a possible obstacle for teachers wishing to enable students to comprehend meta-level information about courses/lessons. I had previously not considered this as a possible difficulty for my students as even the 'lowest' levels are a solid intermediate level. However, this project opened my eyes to this potential problem for students engaging with information on aims, highlighting this as an area that may be worthy of further investigation.

More encouragingly, my lower-level students responded well to the use of an aims 'menu' displayed on the board, were not patronised by having the list read out to them and paraphrased for clarity, and were also happy to hear my explanations of the lesson's aims with concrete examples. It seemed that this level of organisation and structure helped them to organise their notes in class, and that in particular seeing the aims in writing was conducive to their understanding. Nonetheless, some students looked rather perplexed at being informed about the lessons' aims, and others copied down the 'menu' in their notes – again hinting at how unfamiliar this situation is to them, and at their insecurity as academics. This impression was strengthened by students' reactions to hearing the aims of individual tasks explained each time. This strategy worked well with these lower-level students. They listened attentively, and the repeated explanations with activity instructions seemed to function as a reminder to be motivated for each task. It seemed to me as if they are not yet able to assess for themselves how certain tasks are useful for their learning progress and were grateful for the guidance.

Conclusion

On the one hand, my findings here support the sentiments expressed in most of the relevant literature; that learners should be informed about the aims of lessons and activities, as this is advantageous for their motivation and autonomy as learners. On the other hand, my findings highlight a new aspect worthy of attention in this topic area; that students' proficiency level in

English affects which strategies for communicating aims are most appropriate and most beneficial. I find it particularly interesting that these differences were so visible with my learners, as even my 'lower-level' learners are a solid intermediate, if not upper-intermediate, level. It becomes clear, then, that we all need to carefully consider which strategies to employ with which of our classes, but that teachers working with beginners or lower-intermediate learners, and possibly also with younger learners, will need to be particularly careful about the strategies they choose to employ and how they express and communicate the lesson/activity aims to their students.

Despite involving rather time-consuming and at times repetitive reflection, this action research project successfully fulfilled the aims set out at the start. It was interesting to re-read my reflections to formulate these findings and conclusions, and I have gained insight into an area of teaching I had previously not been required to consider. The aim of this article is to share this insight with other teachers who may wish to re-consider their approach to communicating aims to learners, and to give some guidance on various strategies for doing so. Although my findings do not claim to be generally applicable to all teaching contexts, undertaking this action research project has led me to believe that it would be definitely be a worthwhile endeavor for other teachers to try out and adapt the strategies discussed here. Perhaps future action research projects in other contexts will also lead to a larger discussion of this topic on teacher training courses.

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