

# Aligning Learning Activities and Assessment Strategies in the ESL Classroom

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## Introduction

Accurately gauging the extent to which student progress meets the goals that have been set is one of the most difficult tasks which educators must perform. In order to do this effectively, it is essential that instructors design their lesson plans in such a way that expectations placed upon students regarding performance standards, instructional objectives and learning activities identified for use in the classroom, and assessment strategies employed in evaluating student learning are well-aligned with one another.

As a means of demonstrating the form that this alignment might take, I will discuss this alignment within the context of a lesson plan which I have used in since 1996. The class for which this lesson plan was developed was (and remains) part of Centenary College's spring Intensive English Language Program (IELP), a six-week program offered each year to students of Centenary's sister college in Tokyo, Japan. The original class for which this lesson plan was designed consisted of twenty 19 year-old female Japanese students at Obirin Junior College. This lesson plan has been subsequently used in both the spring and summer Intensive English Language Programs at Centenary College.

This discussion will begin with a presentation of the standards which informed the design of the lesson plan, and a description of the performance standards set out in the plan which students are expected to meet. The lesson plan itself follows. Finally, I will attempt to form a conclusion addressing the success with which the various elements of the plan have been aligned. It is important to note, and I wish to emphasize, that the particular lesson plan under discussion here is an actual lesson plan which has seen three years use in the classroom, not a hypothetical one constructed solely for the purpose of serving as the object of this study.

## The Standards

Any English as a Second Language exercise is founded upon a single standard against which students will be measured: the relative character and quality of the English used by students as compared to the character and quality of the English used by native speakers. Of course, when we assign levels to second language (L2) students, we are judging them not only against the standard set by native speakers, but also relative to a) the received academic standard, and b) other L2 students. These standards, English as used by native speakers and English as used by L2 students, are built of a large number of components, including (but not limited to) the following:

1. Vocabulary - number and quality of items known; ability to use items correctly and appropriately
2. Grammar - knowledge of morphology and syntax; ability to apply knowledge correctly and appropriately
3. Oral production - the ability to create utterances comprehensible to native speakers
4. Listening comprehension - the ability to comprehend utterances produced by native speakers
5. Written production - the ability to manipulate symbols (letters, characters) and produce language structures comprehensible in a visual context, and to express feelings, concepts and ideas in writing
6. Reading comprehension - the ability to comprehend language symbols and structures in a visual or tactile context, and to understand feelings, concepts, and ideas expressed in writing

Within each of these areas any number of items might be identified by the teacher as the object of a specific lesson. The ultimate goal of ESL teaching is mastery of the English language; however, prior to becoming fluent in their use of English, students must first acquire a clear understanding of and proficiency in each of the areas outlined above.

# About the Plan

This lesson plan was developed for use in the Intensive English Language Program, a six-week ESL program offered annually during the spring and summer semesters at Centenary College in Hackettstown, New Jersey. This program is attended by students from Obirin Junior College, Tokyo, Japan. Daily, the structure of the program is as follows:

- English Language and Conversation (three hours)
- Lunch (one hour)
- Language Lab (two hours)
- American Culture (two hours)

After dinner, students are expected to study and complete homework for approximately three hours. Upon completion of the IELP, students are awarded three transfer credits in English which they may apply as an elective toward their Obirin degrees. The lesson plan which will be described below is used in support of a unit on "apartment hunting" in the conversation class.

## The Objective

The objective of this lesson is to actively engage students in the process of seeking out and making inquiries regarding the availability and suitability of living space in as authentic a manner as possible. In addition to this introduction to the apartment hunting process, students are required to make actual contacts and inquiries based on their identification of available and potentially desirable living spaces advertised in local newspapers. This requirement is intended to force students, who otherwise tend to become overwhelmed by and shy at the prospect of interacting with a native speaker, to use the English skills they possess in an authentic, real-life situation which many of them are likely to encounter again.

Pursuant to this objective, students will demonstrate: a) proficiency in their knowledge and use of English vocabulary related to housing; b) the ability to form appropriate wh- questions intended to elicit information which will assist in determining the suitability of a particular apartment; c) critical thinking skills, as evidenced in descriptions (written and oral) of the reasoning which led to the ultimate acceptance or rejection of a particular housing unit.

## The Learning Activities

Various learning activities, designed to introduce students to the subject matter and to improve their proficiency relative thereto, are employed in support of this lesson. They are:

- In-class presentation of vocabulary items, accompanied by teacher explanations and pronunciation practice/drills
- An in-class game in which students are provided with descriptions of four available units and asked to match fictional prospective tenants with the apartment best suited to them
- In-class review of newspaper classified advertisements
- Library work, in which students locate the classified section of a local newspaper and identify an apartment which they feel might be suited to their current circumstances (re: rent, location, etc.)
- In-class, teacher-guided composition of wh- questions to be used during a telephone inquiry regarding the apartment
- As homework, students make actual inquiry of the landlord/agency using the questions they have composed
- Students report results of inquiry and determination of suitability both orally in class and to the teacher in writing

## Evaluating Student Performance

The assessment strategies employed in evaluating student performance related to this lesson are as varied as the tasks which students are assigned. However, in the interest of brevity and for the purpose of this study, I will concentrate on the strategy used in only one area of the lesson - the actual contact between student and landlord/agency. As mentioned above, students must report the results of the inquiry with the landlord/agency offering the apartment for rent. This report takes two forms: a) an in-class presentation during which students describe their experiences interacting with a native speaker, as well as any information which they were able to gather regarding the apartment and rental terms; b) a written description of the conversation with the landlord/agency, the student's assessment of his own performance during the interview, and a justification for the student's decision to accept or reject the

apartment.

## **Assessing Oral Performance**

Assessment of the oral component of the report is conducted through teacher observation of student performance and teacher questioning during both the in-class presentation and a follow-up, one-on-one student/teacher conference. Students are evaluated primarily on the quality and appropriateness of the wh- questions which they have formulated, and on the effectiveness with which they were able to elicit information from the landlord/agency. The standard against which students are measured are the examples that were provided in class; additionally, students are judged on the quality and depth of their reflection on their own work.

## **Assessing Written Performance**

Similarly, student written performance is also measured against the standard set by examples discussed in class. These examples, whether drawn from the textbook, provided to students in the form of handouts, or presented by the teacher during class, remain available throughout the course of the lesson as a means by which students might judge the progress and quality of their work. In addition, students receive an in-class explanation regarding those aspects of their report on which they will be evaluated and the teacher's expectations in these areas. The criteria for evaluation include: spelling, punctuation, word choice, grammatical correctness, sentence structure and variety, clarity, coherence, organization, and overall effectiveness.

## **Providing Feedback**

Feedback is an essential component of this lesson, and is provided in any number of ways: in-class teacher response, one-on-one student/teacher conferences, written comments, etc. Most important, however, is the fact that during this lesson the lines of communication are not filtered through a one-way valve. Of course, feedback is provided to the student by the teacher; but, students are also encouraged and expected to evaluate the quality and appropriateness of the services they receive, and to offer constructive criticisms relative thereto. For example, the one-on-one student/teacher conferences are not intended merely as opportunities for the teacher to "preach from the mountaintop," but are rather meant to provide students with the chance to offer input as to how their learning might be better facilitated.

## **Conclusion**

Clearly, the alignment of performance standards, instructional objectives, and assessment strategies is necessary if student learning and progress are to be evaluated accurately. I hope that, through the presentation and discussion of the lesson plan presented above, I have been able to demonstrate at least some of the manifold forms that this alignment might take. During the design this lesson plan, the alignment of standards, objectives, and strategies was a matter of primary concern. I believe that this alignment - insofar as is possible within the context of a single lesson plan - has been successfully achieved: students are given the opportunity to learn, the teacher is provided effective means to gauge that learning, and communication between student and teacher is encouraged and supported.

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