

easy-to-follow advice for fun, effective lessons

FREE

foreign languages
talk time
response time
prosody
accuracy
group work
free activities
better
listening
drills
language
beginners
teaching
efl
fluency
speaking speed
correction
warm up
communication

CHAPTER

Chris Cotter

Chapter One: Lesson Structure

A lot goes into a successful lesson: activities that are fun and educational, a high student talk time, a clear objective, a classroom that is student centered, a lot of group work, and effective correction, just to name a few points. So much rests on the structure of the lesson, though. A poorly planned lesson that meanders from explanation to activity to feedback can seem confusing. It can result in lower rates of retention by the students. It can harm and make ineffective all the other key elements, such as correct usage of the target language, high talk time, or active participation. Students may lose interest or become frustrated with either the lesson objective or the course, or even possibly both. It may even make the teacher look less able, thereby leading him to lose authority. Hence the very first chapter of this resource talks about lesson structure.

Let's look at two examples to further highlight the need for a soundly structured lesson.

Example One: Paul is a new teacher who has put together three activities to practice the past tense. These activities have worked well in other classes, as students used and reused the language many times. However, in the classroom, he briefly explains the target language, and then jumps into the activities. There isn't enough time for examples or drilled practice because he wants to get all three activities completed within forty minutes. Unfortunately, students struggle, make many mistakes, and even lose interest in the activities. At the end of the lesson, most students can't use the new language. In addition, no one really had much fun.

Example Two: Stacy understands how difficult a foreign language can be, especially with all the nuances, exceptions to the rules, and differences between "real" versus "textbook" English. In the classroom, she prefers to spend a lot of time with explanations, thereby providing detailed and thorough information for the class. Like Paul, today she also teaches the past tense, and spends most of the time talking about its usage. She also provides a long list of irregular verbs. The students don't have much time to practice because of all the new content. What's more, they don't have much time to mix new language points with previously studied material in real conversations. Although they walk away with notebooks filled with clear and detailed information, they can't effectively use all that Stacy has provided.

Both of these classes could have been successful had more consideration been given to the structure.

What is lesson structure?

The lesson structure guides students through the contents for a particular class meeting. It may focus on a specific grammar point, may work to improve a specific skill like speaking or listening, or may provide some cultural component like how to ask for clarification, give self-introductions, or actively participate in a conversation. The lesson structure may also tie into past and future class meetings, as with a course syllabus.

To put it in other words, sound structure ensures that the teacher successfully hits the lesson target every time. This means that students learn, understand, and apply the target language in a specific activity. Students also tie the new language with previously studied material, walking away with a highly personalized lesson. They can accomplish all

of this within the allotted time of the class, and with a minimal number of mistakes because of a well-structured lesson.

A lot goes into the structure, and in short will determine how well students absorb the new material. There are three essential components, each of which will be presented in greater detail hereafter.

Component One: The lesson should move along a series of steps which build on one another. The steps lead to a final objective. Think of a staircase with lower steps supporting upper steps.

Component Two: The lesson should move from heavily controlled activities which leave little room for mistakes towards activities which give greater and greater opportunities to experiment and personalize the language. The controlled nature of the initial activities allows students to specifically focus on the new material. Other language points don't get in the way. The subsequent freer activities then let students mix the new language with previously studied grammar, vocabulary, and other language points.

Component Three: This component focuses more on the clock, allotting a specific amount of time to stages within the lesson. For example, students need an initial activity to start thinking in English. The teacher needs to present new material, after which students need to practice it. At the close of the lesson, students need feedback, correction, and a quick review.

It's important to understand that each component must be applied in a lesson. These should not be viewed as three separate options to structure a lesson, but rather three interlocking layers that will result in a successful and satisfying lesson. Students will be better able to leave the classroom and use the target language when all three get applied.



Let's look at each component in greater detail.

Component One: Goals, Objectives, and Steps

Goals, objectives, and steps: These words represent critical and different keys for any lesson. A goal represents the broadest of terms, followed by a lesson's objective. The steps represent the smallest unit. Consider the following:

Goal: This is the overall concept.

Objective: This is what the students will be able to do by the end of the lesson.

Steps: This is what the teacher must cover for students to achieve the objective.

Goal

A lesson will have only one goal. It represents the concept or purpose that the teacher wants to cover. Put another way, it may represent a broad grammar point or language skill. It's always very, very general. Some possible goals include:

- the simple past tense
- the future tense
- second conditionals
- directing a conversation
- presentations
- how to support an opinion

There exists a lot of options for focusing in the above examples. What's more, several teachers who cover any of these topics may approach the same lesson quite differently, opting for a different vocabulary, activities, and application of the language. However, as each class finishes the lesson, all will be able to use the simple past tense, second conditionals, or whatever the teacher covers.

It's important to note that goals may sometimes be spread over two or three sessions. This isn't necessarily a bad thing, but caution is required. If too many meetings are required to cover any one goal, it might be too broad. However, in shorter classes of less than an hour, it more often becomes necessary to spread a grammar structure over two sessions. There simply isn't enough time.

Objectives

A lesson will have only one or two objectives, which should be quite specific. More objectives mean the teacher has planned too broadly. The objective more narrowly defines what the teacher wants the students to accomplish. Put another way, it represents how the students will apply the new language at the end of the lesson. The class has been working towards a final, culminating activity here.

Let's look at two examples. One highlights an effective objective. The other example isn't effective.

Goal: Students will learn and use the past tense.

Objective: Students will talk about past vacations.

Goal: Students will learn and use the second conditional.

Objective: Students will have a discussion with the second conditional.

The first serves as a good example, as the teacher can easily determine if students have learned the past tense and are applying it to talk about past vacations. The second is far too broad, though. What sort of conversations will the students have? What are they trying to accomplish?

Let's further highlight the difference between goals and objectives.

Example One: Paul reassesses his lesson on the past tense. He realizes that his goal targeted the simple past, but the lesson needed more of a focus. He had no real objective. When he teaches the lesson again, he decides to focus on past vacations. He will still teach the past tense, but will incorporate the grammar structure and vocabulary into activities on vacations that students have taken. Past vacations, then, serves as his objective.

Example Two: Stacy's lesson similarly lacked an objective. Of course she also lectured far too much, but she perhaps did so because she didn't have any other purpose than to explain the past tense. She now decides to re-teach the lesson on the simple past. Her objective is for students to use the grammar and vocabulary to talk about last weekend, answering such questions as "What did you do last weekend?" and "Where did you go?" and "Who did you hang out with?"

Although Paul and Stacy's lessons will appear and feel quite different from one another, everyone in each class will still learn and understand the target language. They will leave the classroom with the ability to know how and when to use the grammar point, in this case the simple past tense. What's more, their objectives more effectively focus the contents of their lessons on a real and readily applicable aspect. Students can and do talk about past vacations, for example, or what they did last weekend. Another teacher who covers the same goal might focus on a lesson objective that deals with best, worst, or memorable birthdays in the past. Another teacher just after the winter break might have students talk about their time off. And yet another teacher might opt to talk about childhood, with students asking and answering questions about where they grew up, went to school, and childhood likes/dislikes (assuming it's an adult class, of course).

In addition, as a side benefit to building a lesson on an objective, the teacher may more easily re-teach grammar skills, vocabulary, and other content. He may keep the same goal, but simply change objectives. The material remains fresh, interesting, and challenging. It also makes any class feel less like a stale, rehashed textbook lesson, oftentimes which isn't so applicable to the lives and interests of the students.

Steps

Lastly comes the steps of a lesson. The steps represent the key language that must be presented and practiced in the first half of the class so that students can successfully use the new structures in the latter half. If students can use the language in semi-controlled or free activities in the latter half, then the class will have successfully achieved the objective and goal. **Note:** Much more will be said about semi-controlled and free activities, as well as about the differences between the early and latter stages of a lesson.

It's important, however, to consider the steps as more than a step one, step two, step three approach. The teacher should present the information and have students practice the information in a logical progression. Subsequent steps build on what came before, and more often than not utilize the contents of the previous steps. If the lesson were to talk about what students did last weekend, the lesson might look like this:

Goal: To understand and use the simple past tense.

Objective: To talk about last weekend.

Steps: One: Introduce vocabulary related to weekend activities. For example: see a movie, hang out, etc.

Two: Students conjugate the verbs into the past tense, as in: see >> saw, hang out >> hung out.

Three: Introduce positive statements. For example: I went to a concert.

Four: Introduce negative statements, such as: I didn't hang out with friends.

Five: Introduce closed questions. For example: Did you hang out with friends?

Six: Introduce open questions. For example: What did you do this weekend?

This is a shortened outline, and the teacher will likely introduce additional vocabulary, wh-questions, and sentences which best answer open and closed questions. However, it should be clear just how each step logically builds on previous steps. All the information gets presented, used, and then reused.

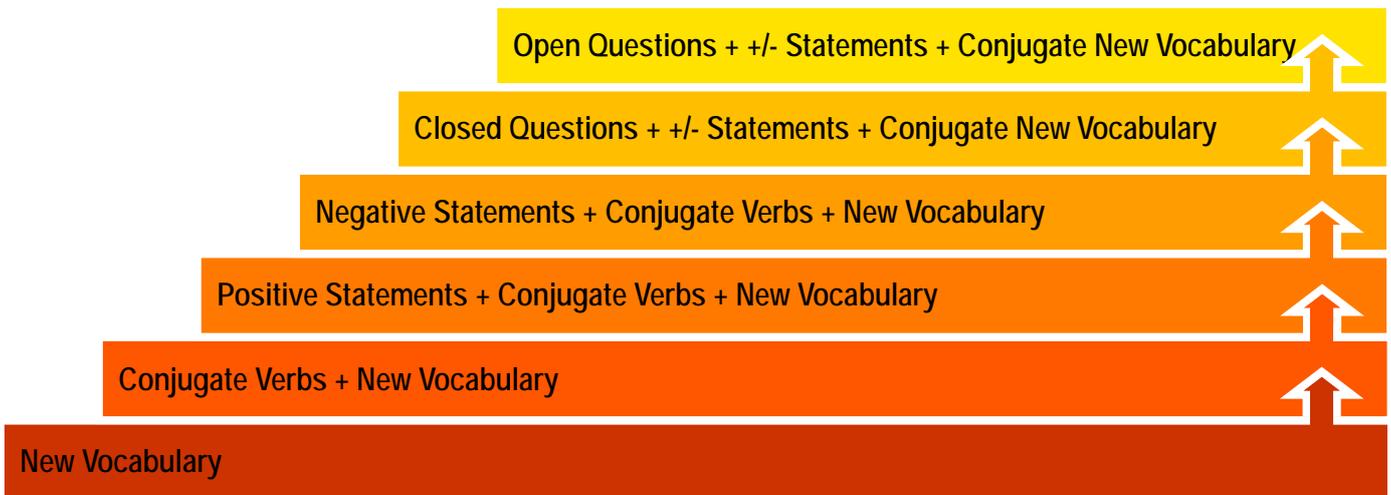
Let's highlight the importance of a clear and logical order. If the teacher were to introduce statements first, then students wouldn't yet know the vocabulary for the lesson. In a class of beginners, as everyone practices the sentence structure in drills and other activities, they must then also consider new vocabulary. Similarly, if the teacher were to introduce open questions before vocabulary and basic statements, then students wouldn't yet know how to provide correct answers. Again, in subsequent practice activities, everyone would need to consider how to form the question and then how to answer it. In other words, they must master two language points at the same time, which would lead to poorer facilitation of the language and reduced retention rates.

It's also important to highlight the need for a clear order in the steps, as it promotes automaticity. This term refers to reducing the recall time on the key language points, or getting the students to use the new structures naturally and without much thought. If students practice a specific word, phrase, or sentence structure enough times in activities that offer challenge and promote qualitative thought, then the new material becomes automatic. Students require less time to think about how to produce the language, especially the structure or form. The language gets produced more accurately. Students also become increasingly confident.

Let's use an example to further highlight the idea of a clear progression of steps in order to build automaticity. In the outline presented above, students practice the vocabulary first. They then reinforce the new words when conjugating the verbs. They then further practice the vocabulary and conjugation in short positive and negative sentences. They then practice the vocabulary, conjugation, and sentences once more when answering questions. And so on. With each step, students think less and less about the various aspects previously taught. Their full attention can be placed on each new step as previous steps acquire a degree of automaticity. The repeated practice further promotes retention too.

With a clear progression of steps, the benefits become clear in later stages of the lesson. Students are better able to devote more thought to providing real answers to questions, or linking gestures and facial expressions to a conversation, or pronunciation and intonation, just to name a few examples.

Take a look at the follow diagram which expresses this concept:



Component Two: Controlled, Semi-Controlled, and Free Activities

Now that the teacher has determined a Goal, Objective, and Steps for the lesson, equal attention must be given to the activities and their order. If a handful of activities are simply thrown at the class, then confusion or dissatisfaction could very likely be the result. Teachers should consider which activities will be used, when they will be used, and the order in which the activities will appear.

Controlled, semi-controlled, and free activities provide a rough order for any lesson. Controlled activities generally appear in the early stages of the class session. As the class progresses through the content for the day, they move towards semi-controlled and free activities. Each type of activity allows increased amounts of creativity, personal relevance, and experimentation with the language. But what exactly is the difference between the three, other than when these activities will appear in the lesson?

Controlled Activities

A controlled activity is one in which the teacher knows beforehand the answer, question, or some other language which the students will produce. The teacher knows because there is only one correct response. Let's look at the following activity which uses flashcards as a means to prompt sentences aloud from the whole class:

Teacher: (holds up a flashcard of people playing volleyball): What did you do last weekend?

Students: I played volleyball.

Teacher: (holds up a flashcard of a restaurant): What did you do last weekend?

Students: I went to a restaurant.

...

In this simple choral drill, only one correct response exists. Students can solely focus on the new language structure (in this case, the simple past tense again) because a variety of possible answers don't get in the way. And with each response, the target language becomes increasingly familiar. Increased familiarity leads to improved speed. In short,

the teacher provides an activity with a very narrow focus, so students won't get confused, distracted, or need to consider several new language points all at once. Substitution drills, in which students plug in new vocabulary or grammar into an existing sentence, are another example of a controlled activity. Both are described in detail in the following chapter.

For information on choral drills, see: [Chapter Two: Presentation and Practice: Choral Drills](#) - page 30.

For more information on substitution drills, see: [Chapter Two: Presentation and Practice: Substitution Drills](#) - page 31.

Some controlled activities include:

- [Charades](#) - page 97
- [Choral Drills for Grammar](#) - page 98
- [Dialogues](#) - page 106
- [Dictation](#) - page 107
- [Pickle in the Middle](#) - page 143
- [Sentence Scramble](#) - page 152

Semi-Controlled Activities

Of course, if the teacher were to limit the class to controlled activities, then everyone would quickly grow bored. There would be no challenge, and students would just switch off. As such, teachers must move towards activities which place fewer and fewer limits on possible answers. The class must move towards semi-controlled activities and, eventually, free activities.

A good example of an activity with a somewhat increased amount freedom, which we can label a semi-controlled activity, has students brainstorm words focused on a specific topic. If the lesson were about occupations, for example, then students would work together to write down as many jobs as possible. If the lesson were about food, then students would work together to write down as many dishes as possible. The teacher can't guess the specific answers before the activity starts, even if there are a limited number of possibilities. One group of students might compile a list with a number of recognizable dishes, while another group has several of these same dishes plus Bolognese pasta, Japanese curry, and Polish pierogi. Perhaps another group brainstorms something entirely different, sticking solely to typical breakfast foods.

Another semi-controlled activity is called an interactive drill. It's also referred to as a Q&A drills, as students interact with one another communicatively to answer questions. Students may start with a question from a flashcard or other prompt. They then ask additional questions based on the response. The teacher can't necessarily predict the initial answer, nor can he guess subsequent questions and answers. If two groups each began with the same question, the ensuing conversations would appear somewhat different after a few exchanges. And yet, because of the theme, there may only be a limited number of possible answers. An initial question based on activities from last weekend will likely produce such answers as "I saw a movie" and "I went out to eat" and "I met my friends." Follow-up questions may also be predicted to some extent, as in "What movie did you see?" and "What did you eat?" and "What did you do with your friends?" These limits are especially true of lower-level students, who may not have extensive vocabulary or grammar abilities.

You can find more information in: [Chapter Two: Presentation and Practice: Interactive Drills](#) - page 32.

With semi-controlled activities, students also have the chance to somewhat personalize the language. However, they do so within still narrow confines, as they aren't yet fully familiar or confident with the new language. For example, the teacher writes on the board the following question: "What did you do last weekend?" Students then get into pairs to talk for three minutes, asking and answering additional questions based on the initial response. Students have the chance to provide real answers with the new language just practiced. And because the material is personalized and real, retention naturally improves.

Some semi-controlled activities include:

- [Answer, Add, Ask](#) - page 92
- [Continue the Dialogue](#) - page 103
- [Intros](#) - page 126
- [Pass the Question](#) - page 142
- [Summarization](#) - page 162
- [Vocabulary Feud](#) - page 178

Free Activities

Last of the three are free activities. Here the students have complete freedom in the answers or language produced. The teacher can't predict or control possible answers. This is a good thing, although it can feel chaotic at times. Students have the greatest opportunity to personalize the language, experiment, and incorporate previously learned vocabulary, grammar structures, and other concepts.

For example, an older woman studies English as a hobby. She will better remember how to use the target language once the class ends if the final activity lets her talk about something interesting and relevant to her life. Compare a more controlled activity, such as a dialogue about playing golf over the weekend. This isn't so relevant to her, and so interest and retention will naturally drop.

Some free activities are:

- [Milestones](#) - page 136
- [None of Your Business!](#) - page 153
- [Role Plays](#) - page 164
- [Round-Robin Story](#) - page 166
- [Teacher Speculation](#) - page 192
- [Steal the Conversation](#) - page 176

Let's close Component Two with a diagram and summary to highlight all that has been covered on activity types.



In the early stages of the lesson, the teacher exercises a great degree of control over what the students will say.

However, as the lesson progresses, this control gets handed to the students. By the end of the lesson, the teacher acts more as a monitor, offering assistance and advice when necessary. The students have more or less complete freedom in how they will correctly utilize the language. **Note:** Lower-level students will obviously stick more closely to the target language in their discussions, as they have yet to learn a wide range of vocabulary and grammar. Many activities will fall somewhere between semi-controlled and free. Higher-level students will feel more comfortable, and be more capable, with free activities.

The idea here can be compared to when children learn to ride a bike. All kids begin with two training wheels, as opposed to simply hopping on, getting a push, and riding down the street. In the English classroom, the teacher starts students with two wheels, or with controlled activities. As the students gather a sense of balance and confidence, the teacher removes one wheel. Students now use semi-controlled activities. Finally, the teacher removes the other training wheel and, in free activities, allows the students to ride by themselves.

Component Three: Time Management

The final component in structuring a lesson comes down to time management. And although lessons vary, with some classes thirty minutes, others forty-five minutes, and even some more than two hours, it can generally be said that most every lesson will contain the following stages:

- 1: Warm Up
- 2: Presentation and Practice
- 3: Application
- 4: Wrap Up

Much more will be said about each of these points in Chapter Two, including the needs, expectations, and purposes. However, the information here will be restricted to time for each stage.

Warm Up

The Warm Up gets students into English mode, which is particularly important for students who may not have used English since the last class. Students need to get their wheels turning if they want to comprehend and produce the language quickly and smoothly.

The ideal Warm Up lasts about ten minutes. Less time may be necessary in a class that only meets for thirty or forty minutes. The teacher doesn't want to spend too much time here because a fifteen or twenty minute Warm Up detracts from the much-needed chance to practice and apply the target language.

In some lessons, the Warm Up may last somewhat longer. This occurs when the students are generating vocabulary, phrases, or ideas that will be immediately applied by the teacher in the next stage of the lesson. For example, students who brainstorm words here can easily use them in subsequent steps. Therefore a little more time for the Warm Up doesn't take away from other stages.

See: [Chapter Two: Warm Up](#) - page 24.

Presentation and Practice

The Presentation and Practice portion of the lesson expects the teacher to present key language points one by one, and then allow the students to practice the material. The teacher should consider this stage as very closely linked to the Steps of the lesson.

For more information, refer back to: [Chapter One: Component One: Goals, Objectives and Steps](#) - page 13.

Excluding the Warm Up and Wrap Up portions of the lesson, roughly half of any lesson should be devoted to the Presentation and Practice section. For example, a ninety-minute lesson would likely have about forty minutes here. Students work primarily with controlled and semi-controlled activities as a means to build automaticity and confidence with the new language.

See: [Chapter Two: Presentation and Practice](#) - page 27.

Application

The Application stage of the lesson focuses on free use of the target language. This stage covers slightly less than half of the lesson. Students need an adequate amount of time in the Presentation and Practice to make the target language automatic, which then allows the students to experiment and focus on fluency in the Application. Less time in this stage of the lesson means too much controlled practice overall. Too much time here means there likely wasn't enough of an opportunity to practice the target language, which may result in a lot of mistakes.

It's also important to note that the Application stage of the lesson can span more than one class meeting. A large project may warrant that most or all of one lesson focuses on the Presentation and Practice, with a subsequent lesson focused on the Application. This is fine, although the teacher will still require a Warm Up and a Wrap Up for both class meetings.

See: [Chapter Two: Application](#) - page 36.

Wrap Up

Except in the shortest of lessons, the Wrap Up lasts about five minutes. Here the teacher provides feedback, correction, and praise to the students. This provides an opportunity to fine-tune the material, as well as to avoid interruptions during the Application. It's often far too intrusive to stop free activities and expect students to pick up the flow of the conversation.

Longer Wrap Ups generally means that the teacher has failed to budget his time. Instead of lengthening the Wrap Up or even finishing the class several minutes early, it's usually quite easy and of greater benefit to add a little more time to the Application.

For more information, read: [Chapter Two: Wrap Up](#) - page 41.

The chart below should be used as a guide rather than a rigid plan for managing the time of the lesson. However, the teacher should be aware that a Warm Up that goes over the five- or ten-minute mark takes away valuable time from the Presentation and Practice section, for example. And a Presentation and Practice that is too long means that the teacher likely chose too much to introduce. It also takes away valuable time from the Application portion of the lesson. And of course, too long an Application means little or no feedback in the Wrap Up.

Class Length	Warm Up	Presentation & Practice	Application	Wrap Up
40 min:	5	18	15	2
60 min:	5-10	25	20 - 25	5
90 min;	10	40	35	5