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**The Impact of structured lesson planning on English proficiency development in second language learners (2024-2025 academic year)****Abstract**

The present study explores core reasons of low English language proficiency of NIS students in Turkestan and possible solutions to address the given issue. Statistical data on quality of education for 2023-2023 academic year demonstrated that NIS in Turkestan ranked at the bottom among all 20 NIS school branches across Kazakhstan in English language proficiency of learners. The significant role of English language proficiency in grades 11-12 STEM education underscores the necessity of addressing this research gap as a matter of urgency. To investigate reasons behind students' low English language proficiency and identify possible solutions for the given issue, the study employed a qualitative research method. The research instruments include interviews with 16 teachers from cross-disciplinary departments and lesson observations of 11 English teachers as a main focus group. Notably, the study was conducted as part of the action research project NIS Share. The study findings show that students have experienced difficulties in improving their English language proficiency because of inconsistent lesson planning. Therefore, the translation into standardized, five-phase lesson planning framework was highly recommended as a practical response for the present issue.

**Key words:** lesson planning, phases, skills, structured lesson, going to basics

**Introduction**

Improving the quality of teaching requires systematic reflection, collaboration, and evidence-based decision making. Action Research has been widely recognized as an effective approach for supporting professional growth and improving classroom practice (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988; Burns, 2010). It enables teachers to investigate their own practice, identify challenges, and implement practical solutions grounded in real classroom experience.

In the context of language teaching, structured lesson planning plays a crucial role in ensuring clarity of objectives, coherence of activities, and alignment between instruction and assessment. Richards (2013) emphasizes that effective curriculum and lesson design require careful planning to connect learning goals, teaching procedures, and assessment methods. When lessons lack structure, even experienced teachers may struggle with time management, transitions between activities, and maintaining focus on learning outcomes. The school leadership initially emphasized improving the way teachers organize the lessons. As a team, we made efforts to bring more structure to our teaching approaches and integrate English language teaching methods more effectively. However, we soon realized that while instructing teachers was necessary, it was not enough on its own. Deeper issues were at a play.

**Research Purpose**

The study aims to investigate core reasons behind NIS students' low English language proficiency and identify possible solutions to address the present issue.

**Research Questions:**

RQ1: Why did learners demonstrate low English language proficiency?

RQ2: What could be done to address the challenges experienced by students?

## Methodology

For this Action Research, we used qualitative research methods, including interviews and a focus group. We interviewed 16 teachers from cross-disciplinary departments to gather diverse perspectives on teaching practices and existing challenges. In addition, we selected 11 English teachers as our main focus group to explore the issue more deeply within one department.

To collect data, teachers in the focus group were asked to observe each other's lessons and conduct a SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) based on their observations. The purpose of peer observation was not evaluation, but professional learning, reflection, and open discussion.

Each English teacher attended colleagues' lessons to observe teaching approaches, student engagement, classroom interaction, and overall lesson delivery. After the observations, teachers shared constructive feedback and reflected on common patterns they noticed.

This collaborative process encouraged openness, strengthened professional dialogue, and increased teacher involvement in identifying key areas for improvement. The data gathered from interviews, lesson observations, and SWOT analyses helped us better understand the underlying factors influencing teaching and learning practices and guided the refinement of our research focus for the next stage of the Action Research cycle. After collecting feedback from these peer observations, we conducted a full SWOT analysis together during a department meeting. This analysis allowed us to clearly identify:

1. What we were doing well.
2. What needed to be improved.
3. What opportunities we had for growth.
4. What risks we needed to be aware of.

The SWOT analysis was not just a formality – it became a powerful tool for planning the next steps.

## Results

### SWOT analysis (teacher involvement)

SWOT analysis showed that teachers needed support in lesson planning. We asked every English teacher to attend their colleagues' lessons, not to judge, but to learn, reflect, and share thoughts. This process helped shift our team culture toward openness and ensure teacher engagement in decision making. Teachers noticed patterns in how lessons were planned, delivered and received by students.

While reflecting on the Opportunities section of the SWOT analysis, teachers in our focus group expressed a clear need for a structured planning framework. They shared that having a framework that breaks down what should happen at each stage of the lesson – from the introduction to the closing would make the planning process more manageable and less overwhelming. With a consistent format to follow, they could focus more on the quality of teaching rather than worrying about what to include or how to organize their lessons. Such a framework, they said, would not only keep them on track but also help ensure that each lesson was purposeful, balanced, and oriented on learning objectives.

Through this process, we learned some valuable lessons (*Diagram 1*). First, data overload is real. Too much unfocused information can prevent progress rather than support it. Second, true teacher engagement happens when teachers are part of the solution – not just being observed but actively reflecting, suggesting, and taking part in decision making. Third, “going to basics” was not a step backward. Focusing on structured, clear, and consistent planning brought clarity to the team.

### Going to basics

Another issue we ran into was how we framed our questions at the beginning. We focused too much on the teachers themselves rather than the teaching process. We kept asking *What approach are teachers using in the*

lessons? Are they effective? How qualified are the teachers? Are they encouraging students? Are they adjusting lessons? Are they using appropriate materials? While these questions seemed important, they led us to focus on teacher styles instead of actual structure and quality of the teaching happening in the classroom. Looking back, we realized that many classroom challenges came from weak or inconsistent lesson planning. Activities were not always connected; lesson objectives were not always clear to students and transitions from difficult to easy tasks could feel rushed or confusing (Teacher interview answers) and differentiation was ignored in most cases. Analyzing teacher interview data and observations, we concluded that the core problem lied in the simple act of planning that we took for granted. With this new direction, we finally landed on a research question that matched our goal and capacity: “*The Impact of structured lesson planning on English proficiency development in second language learners*”. This new insight encouraged us for new actions –a) we selected only English teachers as our main research focus since data overload made it quite challenging to track changes more clearly and practically; b) we asked teachers to observe lessons give constructive feedback; c) we knew that the main problem lied in lesson planning, and SWOT analysis of teachers confirmed that developing a more structured approach to lesson planning would be a significant step toward improvement.

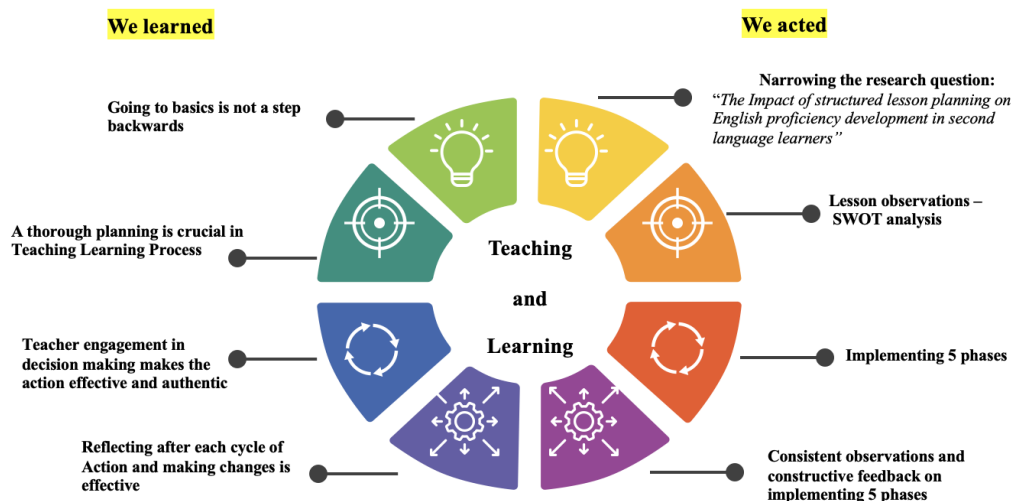


Diagram 1. What we learned and how we acted.

### 5 phases of Lesson Planning

As SWOT analysis in English Department was a successful practice, at a December methodological association meeting, we had a discussion with other colleagues of our school based on lessons observed during the first half of the 2024-2025 academic year across different subjects, including mathematics, biology, chemistry, physics, computer science, Kazakh language, Russian language and English. We discussed four focus areas: lesson planning, instruction, assessment, and overall assessment. Based on the lesson observation checklist, subject leaders were asked to identify two strengths and two areas for development in the teaching of each subject. During the discussion of solutions for the identified areas of development, it was proposed that each 40-minute lesson should be structured more clearly and systematically.

The key areas for development identified by methodological association leaders during the observations were very similar to those identified in the English Department:

1. Lack of time-management.
2. Ineffective planning and alignment of assessment methods, lesson objectives, and lesson content.
3. Limited ability to provide constructive feedback from teachers and among students.
4. Absence of differentiated instruction and challenges in applying differentiation strategies, especially in the context of deep learning and subject mastery.

**As a proposed solution to address these shared challenges (both in English and other Departments of our school), we recommended to divide the standard 40-minute lesson into five distinct phases to bring greater structure and clarity to the lesson delivery process. (Diagram 2)**

The proposed lesson phases were reviewed and accepted by the leaders of the methodological departments, and a presentation was conducted for the entire teaching staff. On January 21, a total of 78 teachers voted in favor of implementing the phases, and the decision was officially approved by the teaching staff.

After 3 months of using the five-phase lesson structure, teachers started sharing their feedback – and overall, it was very positive. Many said that the framework helped them stay more focused during planning and made their lesson feel more organized and balanced. They no longer felt overwhelmed about where to start or what to include. It also saved time, especially for newer teachers who previously struggled with structuring their lessons.

*Diagram 2. The standardized 5 phases of a 40-minute lesson.*

Phase	Name of the phase	Time	Reminder
I phase	Starter/Homework	5–7	<p><b>Starter:</b> Opening the topic/theme of a lesson through clarifying questions or brainstorming, ensuring 100% student participation by using methods that progress from simple to complex.</p> <p><b>Reviewing Homework:</b> Checking homework through questions and tasks that gradually increase in difficulty, analyzing questions that most students found challenging, and providing constructive feedback.</p>
II phase	Agenda/Learning objectives/Assessment criteria	2-5	<p>Discussing the learning objective with students to check their understanding and help them create a structured plan for new knowledge.</p> <p>Using teacher’s guiding questions to help students develop assessment criteria.</p> <p>Developing skills to understand new knowledge and connect it with what they have learned before.</p>
III phase	Skills Practice/New knowledge, content	13-18	<p>The lesson format must be student-centered, ensuring that students speak at least <b>80% of the time</b>. This stage should focus on developing students' skills, enhancing their abilities, or addressing their learning needs.</p> <p>Additionally, it is essential to create opportunities for students to provide <b>constructive feedback</b> to one another. To monitor their understanding of the topic, <b>formative assessment methods</b> should be applied throughout the lesson.</p>

IV phase	Problem Solving/Depth/	12	<b>Differentiated teaching</b> methods should be applied by providing students with a set of tasks of varying difficulty, progressing from simple to complex. These tasks can be given through handouts to accommodate different learning levels. By using advanced tasks, students can reinforce new knowledge and <b>develop critical thinking skills, problem solving skills.</b> Additionally, formative assessment methods should be used to monitor students' understanding of the topic.
V phase	Reflection	2-3	Students should reflect on the lesson by revisiting the learning objectives and assessment criteria. Based on their reflections, the teacher must provide constructive feedback to support their progress.

### Practical Recommendations

Based on the successful transition of the English Department from a focus on teacher-style to a focus on lesson-structure, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance the quality of teaching and learning across the wider school community. The school is recommended to introduce the five-phase lesson planning framework formally for all school subjects. This can provide consistency for students moving between different subject classrooms. It is also highly recommended to demonstrate a pedagogical shift where teachers shorten teacher talking time and deliver the lesson in the format of 20% teacher talking and 80% students' active engagement. For ensuring high quality of education, all departments should do SWOT analysis after each term to keep teachers involved in identifying relevant issues in teaching and decision making in terms of implementing possible solutions. More importantly, the school administration should establish a professional openness culture to encourage teachers to observe each others' lessons and exchange experiences.

### Conclusion

The findings of our Action Research confirmed that many classroom challenges were rooted not in teachers' competence or effort, but in the lack of structured and consistent lesson planning. Through SWOT analysis, peer observations, and reflective discussions, it became evident that teachers required practical support in organizing lessons in a clear and systematic way.

The shift from focusing on individual teaching styles to examining the structure of lessons allowed us to identify the core issue more accurately. By narrowing our research focus and involving teachers directly in reflection and decision-making, we strengthened professional collaboration and ownership of the process. The introduction of the five-phase lesson structure became a practical response to the identified challenges. The positive feedback from teachers after three months of implementation indicates that structured planning improved time management, alignment between objectives and assessment, and overall lesson clarity. Teachers reported feeling more confident, less overwhelmed, and more focused on student learning outcomes.

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