

# Comments on Jason Anderson's "Affordance, Learning Opportunities, and the Lesson Plan Pro Forma"

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## Abstract

Anderson's central concern in his *ELT Journal* article (Vol. 69, No. 3, 2015) is to introduce several helpful changes teachers can make to a regular lesson plan pro forma due to a particular language learning environment and unpredictable events. In introducing these changes, Anderson discusses affordance, learning objectives, and learning opportunities. Affordance is a jargon term, and those who use it should explain and illustrate it in words that everyone can understand. However, Anderson does not explain it very clearly for his readers. Moreover, in Anderson's entire article, he does not directly tell readers what he means by *lesson plan pro forma*, also causing difficulties for some readers. What's more, the logic of changing learning objectives to learning opportunities is questionable. In this paper, the author tries to make the terms "affordance and pro forma" much clearer and give a specific example of lesson pro forma, which aims at helping readers integrate affordance into lesson plan pro forma much better.

**Keywords:** comments, affordance, learning opportunities, lesson pro forma, teacher education

## 1. Introduction

Comparing language environment with biological environment, Haugen (1972, p. 57) first proposed "ecology of language," which is about the relationship between language and its environment. According to Gibson (1979, p. 121), the term *affordance* points to how an animal (or a person) perceives what one object in the environment affords (or provides) and acts upon it, and the object directly indicates one relationship between the animal (or the person) and its environment. For example, a man wants to cross a creek and sees a flat rock rising above the water. By perceiving the rock's "stepping-on" function, he steps on it and gets across the creek. Affordance perceiving is closely related to one's talent, interest, capacity, etc. (Wu & Li, 2009, p. 49). Thus, unlike the man, a child might not perceive the same helpfulness of the rock due to his short legs and limited balancing capacity or cognitive ability. In language learning, affordance assumes an active learner's establishing relationships with and within the environment (Lier, 2004, p. 92), and those connections are crucial for learning opportunities to emerge. For example, when students do not know English indefinite articles, a teacher can write several sentences that have *a* like "There's *a* pretty cat" on the blackboard and write the *a* in red; the red color will directly indicate the information that an indefinite article is needed in front of *cat*. When a boy imitates the example sentences to make his own sentence, he still might ignore the needed *a*. If the teacher then points to the indefinite article in one of the sentences, the boy will probably add an *a* because he perceives that the information of his teacher's gesture is to use an *a*. Therefore, affordance can be both cultural and natural, it is a kind of potential meaning and possibility, it's reflected in language expressions, and it implies certain potential language behaviors (Lier, 2004, p. 92).

The term *pro forma* usually relates to business forms. However, in education it is usually a printed plan with spaces for teachers to fill in. Pang (2016) offers an example of an EFL/ESL lesson plan pro forma and mentions its aims for a teacher: "To help you present the reasoned decisions reached for the lesson in a clearly laid out plan as a classroom guide for action and as a documentation of the pedagogical reasoning done for reflective evaluation" (p. 452).

Faced with a particular language learning environment and unpredictable events, ESL/EFL teachers can find in the article by Anderson several helpful changes they can make to a regular lesson plan pro forma. In introducing these changes, Anderson discussed affordance, learning objectives, and learning opportunities. While some of his

points are questionable, others will enable EFL/ESL teachers to be more sensitive about predicted and unpredicted learning opportunities in class as they integrate affordance into the outcomes-based approach to lesson planning.

## 2. Summary of Anderson's Article

### 2.1 How Considering Affordance Will Change the Lesson Plans

In his article, Anderson notes that unpredictable learning events [affordances] always emerge in class (p. 229), and he quotes Lightbown and Spada (2013), who say that “learners do not necessarily learn according to the teacher’s objectives.” Yet he finds that the most commonly used lesson pro formas in language teacher education are premised on an outcomes-based approach to teaching (p. 228), which might ignore unpredicted learning opportunities. Therefore, he thinks we should prepare for and respond to the unpredictable relationships and affordances in the lesson itself.

### 2.2 Replacing Learning Objectives with Learning Opportunities

His first suggested change in lesson plans and teaching based on them is looking for “learning opportunities, not outcomes.” For example, he describes one learning opportunity as “[to] develop/improve students’ ability to (e.g. identify potential problems in a business plan)” (p. 233). In order to clarify how this change would work in practice, Anderson explains, “During the planning stage, the teacher begins by selecting the lesson focus and then attempts to predict a range of learning opportunities” (p. 231). While describing learning opportunities, Anderson proposes that the verbs used to predict learning opportunities should attempt to describe both the explicit and implicit learning processes as accurately as possible (pp. 232-233).

### 2.3 Allowing for Affordance in the Lesson Procedure

Anderson’s second suggested change to the lesson plan pro forma is to allow for affordance in the lesson procedure. Specifically, the column of “possible occurrences and responses” is relocated in the procedure part of the plan, which ensures that the teacher dedicates some thought to affordances and how students might react to them on a stage-by-stage basis (p. 234).

### 2.4 Other Minor Changes to the Lesson Pro Forma

An affordance-based approach to planning must allow sufficient time and flexibility for unplanned or unanticipated learning to take place. Therefore, Anderson offers minor changes to pro forma plans. The first one is to provide “a rough time guide expressed as a minimum to maximum figure (4-7 minutes), rather than a precise number (5 minutes).” Another is to plan for “optional stages” within a procedure (p. 234).

Due to the change of learning objectives to learning opportunities in an affordance based approach, it is natural that the assessment criteria in lesson planning will also change. Anderson proposes, “During post-lesson discussion, teachers would be able to identify evidence of learning, describing what type of learning it was, and to which learners it happened (differentiated learning)” (p. 236). For an outcomes-based approach, teachers would be able to identify degree to which objectives were achieved.

## 3. Weaknesses of the Article

Affordance is a jargon term, and those who use it should explain and illustrate it in words that everyone can understand. However, Anderson does not explain it very clearly for his readers. Moreover, in Anderson’s entire article, he does not directly tell readers what he means by *pro forma plans*, also causing difficulties for some readers. What’s more, the logic of changing learning objectives to learning opportunities is questionable. According to Pang (2016), “Such an imprecise use of learning opportunities as a unit of lesson planning can be tracked to an insufficient understanding of the notion used by Grabbe” (p. 147).

## 4. Strengths of the Article

### 4.1 Recognizing the Prevalence of Unpredicted Learning Opportunities

The idea of affordance, Anderson notes, citing other researchers, “recognizes the unique relationship between each learner and the learning environment, something that is likely to resonate well with experienced teachers” (p. 229). That is, unpredicted learning opportunities always exist in class, and experienced teachers can always grasp the learning opportunities and make unpredicted learning occur. Referring to an article by Farrell (2002), Anderson notes that “experienced language teachers...regularly deviate from the lesson plan for a number of reasons, something, Anderson writes, that is widely acknowledged as good practice in the literature on lesson planning” (p. 229). Of course, it might be difficult for pre-service and novice teachers to respond to something for which they haven’t prepared. However, even though it may be difficult for us EFL teachers to control the

occurrence of unpredicted learning, we can try to plan for and make use of such unexpected learning opportunities (p. 229).

#### 4.2 Integrating Affordance into a Lesson Plan

To illustrate the importance of integrating *affordance* into a lesson plan, Anderson provides his findings from his examination of twenty-three lesson plan pro formas: The majority of these pro formas included most of the following sections:

“Aims, objectives, or learning outcomes; context (including information about the learners and their prior knowledge, and the ‘fit’ between the observed lesson and the scheme of work/syllabus); personal aims or developmental points (sometimes including a suggested focus for the observer); procedures or activities (usually detailing student activity and/or teacher activity, timings, interaction, and optionally including stage aims and resources); and anticipated problems (or occurrences) and solutions (or responses)” (p. 230).

The section “anticipated problems and solutions” is similar, of course, to preparation for unpredicted learning opportunities.

#### 4.3 Identifying What Learning Really Occurred in Post-Lesson Discussion

As noted above, there are always unpredictable learning opportunities in class. Thus to assess the unpredicted learning that occurs beyond a teacher’s objectives is of great value.

Table 1. Comparison between an outcomes-based approach and an affordance-based approach

<b>Outcomes-based approach</b>	<b>Affordance-based approach</b>
<b>observation</b>	
Evidence of achievement of aims.	Evidence of learning opportunities occurring, both predicted and unpredicted. Evidence of appropriate teacher responses to, and facilitation of, learning opportunities.
<b>Feedback/post-lesson discussion</b>	
Ability to identify degree to which aims were achieved.	Ability to identify what learning occurred, including scope (how many learners) and degree (how much learning) with reference to teacher role in this learning.
Ability to provide reasons for achievement/ Non-achievement of aims.	Ability to accurately relate actual learning to predicted learning opportunities and provide justification for Differences and choices made during the lesson.
Ability to identify appropriate learning goals for the learners in future lessons. Ability to identify areas for personal development.	Ability to identify possible areas of study for future lessons. Ability to identify areas for personal development.

Anderson provides helpful criteria for all three key stages within the lesson observation process, comparing an outcomes-based approach with an affordance-based approach, as Table 1’s assessment criteria show (p. 236).

## 5. Recommendations

### 5.1 Integrating Affordance into Outcomes-Based Approach to Lesson Planning

Advocates of outcomes-focused lesson planning say that paths should lead to destinations: “We should know where we’re headed in a lesson, articulating clear objectives to help us achieve our aims and gauge our success” (Swenddal, 2016, para. 4). This metaphor underscores the importance of forming learning objectives. And Don Snow notes, “A well-defined task gives students a clear sense of direction and lets them know exactly what they are expected to produce” (2007, p. 115). However, to make our learning objectives achievable by our students, we EFL/ESL teachers can apply affordance in our teaching, paying special attention to the relationship of our students with their environment. Indeed, as Qin Lili and Dai Weidong (2015) write, “The achievement of one

specific objective needs a set of special environment factors [affordances]" (p. 230). Take Don Snow's sample dialogue for example (2007, p. 110):

Kim: Let's go (and) get some food.

Jan: I would really like to, but I have a test tomorrow.

Kim: Can't you study later?

Jan: Not really. This is a pretty important test, and I haven't prepared much yet.

Towards this material, what environmental factors could we provide if we are going to realize the specific learning objective "While working in pairs, the students will be able to identify two language functions in the conversation"? The environmental factors will probably be the conversation itself, teacher's appropriate questions, underlines of the language patterns. To be specific, the teacher asks students to work in pairs to discuss the question "What do Kim and Jan do in the dialogue with language?" The question might indicate "figuring out the language functions" If students fail, the teacher can provide another environmental factor "underlining the structures 'let's go', 'can't you', 'I would like to, but ...'". In this way, students could be easy to recognize the affordances of the question and underlines: the structures are used to express suggestions and refusals. Without the environmental element "underlines", it's difficult for some students to recognize the affordance of the question "What do Kim and Jan do in the dialogue with language?" As noted above, affordance perceiving is closely related to one's talent, interest, capacity, etc. (Wu & Li, 2009, p. 49). Certainly, students couldn't identify two language functions in the dialogue for the lack of the above environmental elements, or some students might not notice the environmental elements due to illness, noisy classroom environment, etc. Anyway, we EFL/ESL teachers should keep the relationship between learners and the environment in our mind, which will help us design our lesson before class and reflect our teaching after class. Using affordance to guide our lesson plan is kind of teacher belief. However, it doesn't mean we must take it as a way design our lesson, but it provides you an alternative way to ask ourselves how to achieve the learning objectives, reflect how to achieve the learning objectives and reflect why we fail to achieve the objectives. Obviously, more methods do not do harm.

### 5.2 An Example of an EFL Lesson Plan Pro Forma

To illustrate the integration of affordance into an outcomes-based lesson plan, I will here mainly use the above conversation and Pang's lesson pro forma which mainly includes the sections like "background information, content and design, learning objectives, the process of teaching and learning, and reflection."

#### **An EFL lesson plan pro forma**

This lesson plan pro forma aims to help you present teaching suggestions in a clearly laid out classroom guide for planning for affordance, which should match the learning objectives and provide documentation of your pedagogical reasoning, as you reflect on the occurrence of both predicted and unpredictable learning.

##### *Section 1 Background Information*

School: \_\_\_\_\_ Class: \_\_\_\_\_

Teacher: \_\_\_\_\_ Module: \_\_\_\_\_

Duration: \_\_\_\_\_

##### *Section 2 Teaching Content and Design*

Reasoning suggested:

- 1) Analyze the teaching material from different perspectives such as language knowledge, language skills, genres, cross-culture terms and events, etc.
- 2) Relate the teaching material to the students' ZPD and needs.
- 3) Based on the above analysis, identify your specific objectives for this day's lessons.
- 4) To help students achieve the learning objectives, carefully identify relevant environmental elements such as key activities, realia, objects, teacher's instructions, classroom management and so on.

Writing considerations:

- 1) What learning objectives are within students' skill levels?
- 2) What environment will be needed to achieve the learning objectives?

3) To match the learning objectives, what affordances (potential meaning-making phenomenon) will the learning environment provide?

Analysis of teaching materials and students: \_\_\_\_\_

Learning Objectives: \_\_\_\_\_

Key environmental elements: \_\_\_\_\_

### *Section 3 Process of Teaching and Learning*

Reasoning suggested:

- 1) Carefully select environmental elements which will match the learning objectives in each step.
- 2) Analyze and adjust the environmental elements when a certain learning objective cannot be achieved.
- 3) Think about the unpredicted learning opportunities when the environment provides unpredicted potential meaning (affordance) which leads to the emergence of unpredicted learning opportunity.

Writing considerations:

- 1) Whether can students perceive the potential meaning of the environmental factors and act upon them? If not, why do students fail to perceive the potential meaning? And what other environmental factors are needed?
- 2) How to make students build relevant relationships between them and certain environmental factors so as to achieve the learning objectives?
- 3) If unpredicted learning opportunities emerge, what extra affordances will be provided? Deal with learning opportunities immediately or leave it in next class?

Steps	Time frame	Instructional activities	Objectives	Environmental elements and their potential meanings
Step 1	2-3	Model-based dialogue: Present students the dialogue, and have them analyze it. Have them tell the teacher what the participants do the dialogue.	Identify the language function “suggestion” in the given dialogue	What do the participants do the with language?  ↓ “Let’s ...” is used to express function “Suggestions”

### *Section 4 Reflection*

Reasoning suggested:

- 1) Analyze the degrees to which the students perceive the potential meaning of the environmental elements, which leads to the (non)achievements of the learning objectives.
- 2) Analyze the occurrences of both predicted and unpredicted learning in class, and think about what makes unpredicted learning opportunities occur and whether it is worth using it for learning.

Writing considerations:

- 1) Have you achieved all the learning objectives? If not, why didn’t students build predicted meaning-making between them and certain environmental elements? What will you change next time?
- 2) What are the unpredicted learning opportunities? Are they valuable or not? Did you take advantage of them for students’ learning?

For some language structures, they have specific functions which students might not recognize due to lack of relevant environmental element. The given question “What do the participants do the with language?” might help students identify the functions of the language because this environmental element “question” indicates “language is used to express functions”. In this way, learning objective “identify the language function ‘suggestion’ in the given dialogue” will be achieved by providing relevant environmental element. Without the clear question, the students won’t pay attention to the function of language. Achieving a learning objective contribute to a lot of questions, a student might not notice the environmental element due to illness, noisy classroom environment, etc. Anyway, we teachers should keep these in our mind, with which we reflect our teaching. Using affordance to guide our lesson plan is kind of teacher belief. However, it doesn’t mean we must take it as a way to design our lesson, but it provides you an alternative way to ask ourselves how to achieve the learning objectives, reflect how to achieve the learning objectives and reflect why we fail to achieve the

objectives. Obviously, more methods do not do harm. In section “the process of teaching and learning”, the units of lesson plan pro form might be shown in the above sample example.

## 6. Conclusion

Much as a traveler in a new country goes to a destination, so also do teachers achieve teaching objectives in their lessons. Therefore, an outcomes-based approach can not be replaced by an affordance-based approach. Undoubtedly, there are many unpredicated learning opportunities in the classroom, and excellent teachers can always grasp the opportunities and make unplanned learning occur. However, most learning occurred are what teachers have planned before the lessons. As Pang (2016) notes, “The use of lesson pro formas is a common strategy employed to help teachers master the complexities of instructive competence” (p. 451), Anderson just provides teachers an alternative way to reflect learning opportunities in class. While some of his points are questionable, others will enable EFL/ESL teachers to be more sensitive about predicted and unpredicted learning opportunities in class if they integrate affordance into the outcomes-based approach to lesson planning.

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