

Lesson Planning as Reflective Pedagogy: A Narrative Review

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Abstract

This narrative review synthesises the theoretical and empirical literature on lesson planning across general education, English Language Teaching (ELT), and English for Academic Purposes (EAP). A structured search of Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and Google Scholar, supplemented by backward reference tracing, identified an initial pool of over 1,200 records. After title and abstract screening against predefined inclusion criteria and full-text evaluation, 56 sources were retained for thematic analysis through a two-phase iterative design. Three research questions are addressed: (1) how the four core dimensions of lesson planning, learner needs, learning objectives, instructional materials, and formative assessment, are conceptualised within systematic instructional design; (2) what structural, institutional, and geopolitical tensions constrain planning practice across varied global contexts; and (3) how Generative AI tools and collaborative reflective models redefine teacher agency, cognitive load, and professional autonomy during the planning process. Findings indicate that the effectiveness of lesson planning depends less on plan format than on the professional culture and cognitive conditions within which planning takes place. The review argues that Cognitive Load Theory bridges reflective practice and critical pedagogy, that agency in under-resourced contexts resides in the reflective adaptation of structured plans rather than their rejection, and that GenAI tools function as mechanisms of either domestication or emancipation depending on the reflective framing of their use. Implications for teacher education and future research are identified.

Keywords: Cognitive-Reflective Balanced Model, Reflective Practice, Critical Pedagogy, Cognitive Load Theory, Generative AI

1. Introduction

Lesson planning occupies a peculiar position in the landscape of professional teaching practice (König et al., 2021; Cevikbas et al., 2024). Despite the considerable volume of writing on curriculum design and instructional practice, the lesson planning literature has tended to oscillate between two polarised positions. One celebrates the plan as the cornerstone of effective

teaching; the other dismisses it as an administrative imposition bearing little relation to the realities of classroom life. What remains underexplored is how teachers negotiate this tension in conditions of genuine constraint: in under-resourced schools where scripted plans may represent the only viable quality floor; in high-stakes policy environments such as Bangladesh's New Curriculum Framework-2021, where institutional compliance crowds out professional judgement; and in an emerging technological landscape in which Generative AI tools threaten to automate the reflective cognitive work that makes planning professionally valuable.

Traditionally, a lesson plan is viewed as a detailed, documented outline of instructional strategies and a list of specific tasks and activities that a teacher undertakes for a single lesson within a fixed timeframe. For 21st-century education, however, a lesson plan is understood not merely as a written document listing activities and timings, but as a reflective framework for pedagogical decision-making: one that evolves in response to learner needs, classroom realities, and the teacher's growing professional understanding (Butt, 2008; Ashcraft, 2014). A substantial proportion of the criticism levelled at lesson planning is directed at the rigid, prescriptive version of the document rather than at the practice of planning itself. Disentangling these two things is essential for a clear-headed assessment of both the value and the limitations of the enterprise.

This paper is a narrative review that aims to synthesise the theoretical and empirical literature on lesson planning across general education, ELT, and EAP, with explicit attention to the structural and technological conditions that shape planning practice in contemporary educational contexts. It addresses three research questions: (1) How does the contemporary literature conceptualise the integration of the four core dimensions of lesson planning, learner needs, learning objectives, instructional materials, and formative assessment, within systematic instructional design? (2) What structural, institutional, and geopolitical tensions, including employment precarity, high-stakes compliance frameworks, and under-resourced environments, shape or constrain lesson planning practices across varying global educational contexts? (3) How do emergent technological disruptions, specifically Generative AI tools, and collaborative reflective models, notably Lesson Study and CPD-embedded practice, redefine teacher agency, cognitive load, and professional autonomy during the planning process? By foregrounding these structural and technological dimensions alongside the established literature on planning mechanics, the review moves beyond descriptive synthesis toward a critically integrated account of what lesson planning requires, what constrains it, and what can transform it.

2. Methods

2.1. Review Design

This study adopts a systematic narrative review methodology, a hybrid designation that legitimises both the transparent, database-driven screening protocol described in Section 3.2 and the theoretically interpretive, argumentative synthesis that distinguishes narrative from purely systematic approaches (Green et al., 2006). Unlike a pure systematic review, which requires exhaustive coverage of a narrowly defined question, a systematic narrative review deploys rigorous search and screening procedures in the service of constructing an integrated critical argument across multiple disciplinary perspectives. Unlike a traditional narrative review, it maintains mathematical transparency in source tracking, enabling a reader to evaluate the scope and selectivity of the evidence base. The review is structured around an original conceptual framework, the Cognitive-Reflective Balanced Model of Instructional Design, which is developed in Section 2 and applied analytically throughout the findings and discussion.

The choice of a systematic narrative design over the two most obvious alternatives warrants explicit justification. A PRISMA-compliant systematic review (Page et al., 2021) is designed for narrowly bounded empirical questions in which exhaustive retrieval and, typically, quantitative synthesis are both feasible and necessary. The present review asks how lesson planning is conceptualised, constrained and transformed across six intersecting literatures spanning general education, ELT, EAP, teacher cognition, educational psychology and policy studies. No single search string could exhaustively capture this terrain, and the purpose is an integrative argument rather than effect estimation, so PRISMA's central virtue of exhaustiveness is neither attainable nor appropriate here. A scoping review (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005; Munn et al., 2018) was likewise rejected: scoping methodology maps the extent and nature of evidence but deliberately withholds critical appraisal and interpretive synthesis, whereas the contribution of this paper lies precisely in setting theoretical traditions against one another and in developing the Cognitive-Reflective Balanced Model from that confrontation. The systematic narrative review occupies the required middle ground, and SANRA (Baethge et al., 2019) was adopted as the quality benchmark because it is the only published appraisal instrument developed specifically for narrative reviews, assessing justification of importance, statement of aims, description of the search, referencing, scientific reasoning and presentation of data.

The review was designed in two phases, a structure that transforms what might otherwise appear as ad-hoc supplementary searching into a deliberate, iterative methodological architecture (Baethge et al., 2019). Phase 1 targeted the established theoretical and empirical literature on lesson planning across general education, ELT, and EAP, with search terms prioritising sociocultural theory, reflective practice, critical pedagogy, communicative competence, and instructional design. These terms

were selected because they map directly onto the review's foundational argument: that lesson planning functions, at its best, as a reflective framework for pedagogical decision-making. Phase 2 was executed to address two categories of highly disruptive contemporary variable that Phase 1 could not adequately capture: first, emergent educational technologies, specifically Generative AI tools for lesson planning, a literature too nascent for primary database searching but sufficiently developed by 2025 to warrant targeted supplementary search; and second, localised macro-policy environments, specifically Bangladesh's New Curriculum Framework-2021, which exemplifies the structural and geopolitical tensions at the review's identified gap. Cognitive Load Theory was similarly added during Phase 2 as a theoretical counterpoint to purely reflective accounts: not a gap in the original design but a deliberate supplementary lens adopted in response to the evidence encountered in Phase 1. This two-phase design is consistent with the iterative logic of narrative reviewing as described by Green et al. (2006) and meets SANRA criteria for scientific reasoning transparency (Baethge et al., 2019).

Literature searches were conducted across four academic databases: Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and Google Scholar. The primary search terms included "lesson planning," "reflective practice," "teacher education," "formative assessment," "instructional design," and "differentiated instruction," combined using Boolean operators with domain-specific terms such as "ELT," "EAP," "Language Teaching," "Communicative Competence," and "Critical Pedagogy." No rigid date restriction was imposed, as the review deliberately integrates foundational theoretical works alongside recent empirical contributions published up to 2025. The full search strategy is detailed in Table B1 in Appendix B.

2.2. Search Strategy and Screening Process

The initial database searches returned approximately 1,200 records across the four databases, with substantial duplication between Scopus and Web of Science. After removing duplicates, approximately 740 unique records remained. These were screened at the title and abstract stage against the following inclusion criteria: (a) published in a peer-reviewed journal, as an academic monograph, or as a recognised institutional report; (b) substantively concerned with lesson planning, instructional design, or one of the four core elements (learner needs, learning objectives, materials selection, formative assessment); and (c) relevant to general education, ELT, or EAP contexts. Sources were excluded if they were conference abstracts without full papers, opinion pieces without empirical or theoretical grounding, or published in non-indexed outlets. This screening yielded approximately 95 potentially relevant sources.

Full texts were obtained and evaluated for substantive relevance to the review's research questions. Sources that addressed lesson planning only peripherally, for instance, as a brief contextual aside within a study focused on a different topic, were excluded at this stage. Backward reference searching of the most frequently cited articles was also conducted, identifying additional foundational works not captured by the database searches. The final sample comprised 45 core foundational sources identified through the primary systematic search, including empirical studies (both quantitative and qualitative), systematic reviews, theoretical monographs, and professional handbooks. Supplementary searches on Generative AI, Cognitive Load Theory, and macro-policy contexts added a further 11 sources, yielding an authenticated analytical sample of 56 total records. These 11 supplementary sources are: Sweller (2020) and Paas & van Merriënboer (2020) on CLT; Labis (2025), Torki et al. (2025), and Saint et al. (2024) on GenAI; Al Galib et al. (2026) on Bangladesh curriculum reform; Kaya-Kasikci et al. (2023) on teacher wellbeing in scripted contexts; Baethge et al. (2019) on systematic narrative review quality; and Herbert et al. (2026) and Narayanan et al. (2024) on structured planning in low-resource and high-stakes settings. A complete summary of included sources is provided in Table A1 in Appendix A.

2.3. Analytical Framework

The included sources were analysed thematically through iterative reading. An initial round identified recurring themes and conceptual clusters, subsequently organised into six thematic categories: four corresponding to core elements of lesson planning (learner needs, objectives, materials, formative assessment), supplemented by two cross-cutting themes addressing structural critiques and alternative professional orientations. Within each category, sources were compared for convergent and divergent findings, and theoretical claims were assessed against available empirical evidence. The thematic coding framework is presented in Table C1 and Appendix 3. The analysis draws on the theoretical lenses established in Section 2: Herbartian structuralism, Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, Shulman's (1987) pedagogical content knowledge, Bloom's revised taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001), Schön's (1983) reflective practice, and Giroux's (2011) critical pedagogy, Benesch's (2001) critical EAP, Canale's (1980) communicative competence model, and Kumaravadivelu's (2003) post-method pedagogy.

3. Results

The findings are organised into five thematic areas. The first four correspond to the core elements of lesson planning; the fifth addresses structural critiques and institutional limitations.

3.1. Learner Needs and Individual Differences

A consistent finding across the literature is that effective lesson planning begins with a substantive understanding of who is being taught. McDaniel et al. (2025) and Roehr-Brackin et al. (2024) both demonstrate that learner variability operates across

multiple dimensions, including cognitive ability, prior knowledge, socio-emotional readiness, and learning preferences. Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development locates productive learning in the space between what learners can currently achieve independently and what they can achieve with guided support. Lesson planning operationalises this principle by requiring teachers to anticipate where learners are and to design activities that bridge the distance between current and target performance.

Tomlinson's (2001) differentiated instruction framework offers a widely cited response: adapting content, process, and product to accommodate individual differences. Goyibova et al. (2025) identify the professional competences required: flexible grouping, adaptive task design, and multiple intelligence-oriented assessment, and characterise these as formidable demands, particularly for early-career teachers. De Neve et al. (2015) found that professional self-efficacy and access to collegial support were significant predictors of whether differentiated instruction was actually implemented, suggesting that the capacity for differentiation is as much a function of professional environment as individual skill. Clark & Lampert's (1986) earlier research similarly found that the gap between planning intentions and classroom enactment was frequently wider than teachers recognised.

Harmer (2007) draws attention to an affective dimension that technical planning frameworks sometimes obscure: what he terms empathic attunement, the capacity to see the lesson from the learner's perspective. This is consistent with Shulman's (1987) concept of pedagogical content knowledge, which emphasises the teacher's ability to transform subject matter into forms accessible to particular learners. Shulman's (1987) framework implies that differentiating instruction is not merely a logistical adjustment to classroom management but a sophisticated cognitive act: the teacher who genuinely differentiates transforms the same subject matter into multiple representational forms, designed for the varying cognitive profiles, prior knowledge structures, and affective readiness levels present in the room. In ELT specifically, Richards and Bohlke (2011) argue that needs analysis requires teachers to anticipate not only what learners know but how they will engage with language as a communicative system.

3.2. *Learning Objectives and Outcomes*

The literature consistently identifies clear, realistic, and assessable learning objectives as a second core element, but the research also reveals persistent tensions in how objectives function in practice. A distinction warrants preservation: objectives describe what the teacher intends students to experience, while outcomes describe what students are expected to demonstrate as a result. The foundational vocabulary for planning learning objectives is provided by Bloom et al.'s (1956) taxonomy, which positions educational goals along a continuum from recall through comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Anderson and Krathwohl's (2001) revision introduced a two-dimensional framework distinguishing knowledge types from cognitive processes, enabling a more nuanced alignment of learning objectives with appropriate assessment strategies.

Two lines of research converge on the point that objectives should function as orientating guides rather than rigid scripts. Prabhu (1992) argues that lessons possess an inherent dynamism, unfolding in response to moment-to-moment participant interactions rather than according to plan. John (2006), in his empirical study of student teachers, found that those who treated plans as flexible heuristics were significantly more responsive to learner needs than those who adhered rigidly to pre-planned sequences. Farrell (2002) similarly positions lesson planning as a process of principled decision-making rather than template completion.

The question of how to frame objectives is further complicated in language teaching by the multidimensionality of communicative competence. Canale's (1980) framework implies that objectives defined exclusively in grammatical terms may inadvertently narrow learning at some cost to communicative fluency and pragmatic understanding. Kumaravadivelu (2003) extends this critique, arguing that prescriptive objective-setting may itself be a legacy of the methods-based paradigm that postmethod pedagogy seeks to transcend. König et al. (2021) found that pedagogical competence in planning, specifically the ability to formulate cognitively appropriate objectives and select aligned instructional strategies, was a significant predictor of instructional quality and student achievement. Cevikbas et al. (2024) extend this finding, concluding that the ability to plan objectives that sequence cognitive demand progressively is among the most consistently reported competences distinguishing effective from less effective teachers across subject disciplines.

3.3. *Instructional Materials: Selection, Integration, and Alignment*

The purposeful selection and integration of materials emerges as a third recurrent theme, with the literature highlighting both theoretical principles and practical tensions. Bruner's (1964) account of cognitive development, distinguishing enactive, iconic, and symbolic modes of representation, provides a theoretical warrant for sequencing materials from concrete to abstract. Yonzon et al. (2023) demonstrate empirically that tangible, sensory-rich materials stimulate cognitive engagement in ways that purely verbal instruction cannot, a principle with wider applicability to the use of realia in adult language classrooms.

In language teaching specifically, the literature identifies a tension between coursebook reliance and contextual responsiveness. Harmer (2007) critiques what he calls coursebook dependency: the tendency to follow published materials mechanically without evaluating their suitability for specific learners and objectives. Nunan (1988) makes a complementary argument from a learner-centred perspective, proposing that material selection should begin with an analysis of learner needs

and negotiated learning goals rather than with the textbook's predetermined sequence. Kumaravadivelu (2003) pushes this further, arguing that materials should be treated as resources to be critically evaluated and adapted rather than curricula to be faithfully implemented.

A critical concern consistently identified across these studies is alignment: the coherent relationship between materials selected, objectives formulated, and needs identified. Graves (2024) describes misalignment as a fundamental disconnect between the teacher's intended curriculum and the learner's experienced curriculum, one that formative assessment is designed to detect and correct. Ashcraft (2014) argues that effective lesson planning positions material selection as a responsive, iterative decision rather than a starting point: the professional teacher selects and adapts materials in light of needs analysis and objective-setting already completed. Butt (2008) makes an analogous argument at the level of the individual lesson: material choices that prove inaccessible or misaligned in practice should inform subsequent planning cycles, so that the plan functions as a record of professional learning rather than merely institutional compliance.

3.4. *Formative Assessment as Pedagogical Listening*

Formative assessment emerges from the review as the most consistently undervalued element in planning practice, despite being perhaps the most consequential for learning quality. Black and Wiliam's (1998) landmark review, drawing on over 250 studies, concluded that formative assessment produces substantial learning gains and that these gains are particularly pronounced for lower-achieving students. The Cognitive-Reflective Balanced Model reframes this evidence base: the lesson plan is not merely a schedule of activities but an analytical map of anticipated learner cognition, one that identifies in advance where misconceptions are likely to arise, what evidence of understanding will look like at each stage, and which strategic pivot points allow the teacher to redirect instruction without losing the lesson's overall coherence.

Schildkamp et al.'s (2020) systematic review identifies several prerequisites for effective formative practice: the teacher's ability to formulate productive questions, interpret learner responses in real time, and adjust instruction accordingly. Ruiz-Primo and Furtak (2007) provide empirical evidence that the quality of these in-the-moment assessment interactions varies substantially across teachers, and that student learning outcomes are significantly associated with the extent to which teachers complete what the authors call the formative assessment cycle: eliciting evidence, recognising its significance, and using it to modify instruction. Wiliam (2011) reinforces this, arguing that formative assessment should be understood as a set of responsive teaching practices embedded throughout instruction. Hattie and Timperley (2007) add that the effectiveness of assessment feedback depends critically on its specificity and timing, with immediate, task-focused feedback producing substantially larger effects than delayed or generic responses.

Cognitive Load Theory offers a further rationale for why formative assessment depends on lesson planning. Sweller (2020) and Paas and van Merriënboer (2020) establish that when a teacher's working memory is consumed by managing instructional logistics, there is limited cognitive capacity available for the attentional demands of pedagogical listening. A well-prepared plan, by resolving key instructional decisions in advance, reduces this extraneous cognitive load and thereby creates the cognitive conditions necessary for effective formative practice. In language teaching, Graves (2024) describes the lesson plan as the site of ongoing negotiation between the teacher's intended curriculum and the learner's experienced curriculum, with formative assessment serving as the primary mechanism through which this negotiation is conducted.

3.5. *Structural Critiques and Institutional Limitations*

The most widely noted critique concerns rigidity. Several studies converge on the finding that the capacity to deviate productively from the plan is a hallmark of professional expertise, not a failure of preparation. John (2006) found that student teachers who were encouraged to treat plans as flexible frameworks demonstrated greater responsiveness to emergent learning opportunities. Clark and Lampert (1986) documented that experienced teachers' actual teaching routinely departed from their written plans in ways the teachers themselves often did not fully articulate, suggesting that planning serves as a cognitive scaffold for decision-making rather than a behavioural prescription. Schön's (1983) framework illuminates this: effective planning creates conditions for both reflection-on-action and reflection-in-action, but only when the teacher approaches the plan as a provisional guide.

This tension is particularly pronounced for novice teachers. Kyriacou (2014) notes that beginning teachers commonly rely on detailed planning as a source of security, and De Neve et al. (2015) provide empirical evidence that self-efficacy and collegial support mediate whether this reliance becomes productive or self-defeating. Farrell (2012) argues that what novices need is not less planning but a different orientation to it: one grounded in reflective practice rather than procedural compliance. Stigler and Hiebert (1999) traced consistent quality differentials between Japanese and American lesson delivery not to individual teacher ability but to the institutionalised practice of collaborative lesson planning and structured peer observation known as Lesson Study, positioning institutional culture as the primary variable in determining whether structured planning produces professional growth or merely administrative compliance.

A distinct but related argument concerns the functional value of scripted or highly structured lesson plans in specific high-stakes or resource-constrained contexts. Herbert et al. (2026) demonstrate that in under-resourced school contexts, teachers using prescriptive planning frameworks produced more consistent learning experiences than those given full planning autonomy without adequate support. Narayanan et al. (2024) extends this argument to contexts of high cognitive demand,

finding that scripted plans reduced teacher decision fatigue and improved instructional fidelity when teachers lacked both planning time and subject-matter expertise. These findings do not contradict the review's central argument that reflective practice represents the optimal professional orientation toward planning; they indicate that the appropriate orientation is contingent on the professional and institutional conditions available.

A second critique concerns institutional capture. Savage (2014) notes that the increasing emphasis on documentation and measurable outcomes has transformed lesson planning from a reflective practice into a bureaucratic exercise. In Bangladesh, Mia et al. (2023) describe how precarious employment conditions lead many teachers to adopt lesson planning as a survival strategy rather than a pedagogical tool. Kaya-Kasikci et al. (2023) propose that structured routines can preserve teachers' mental capacity and emotional wellbeing in high-demand conditions, offering a partial counterargument to purely deficit readings of compliance-oriented planning behaviour. Hamid and Baldauf (2008) found that the disconnect between communicative language teaching policy and classroom practice was substantial in Bangladesh, with lesson planning functioning primarily as a compliance mechanism. Al Galib et al. (2026) document that Bangladesh's New Curriculum Framework-2021, designed to introduce greater flexibility, has in practice generated new forms of bureaucratic expectation, suggesting that policy reform alone is insufficient to shift the professional culture within which planning takes place.

Critical pedagogy provides a theoretical vocabulary for understanding these dynamics in terms of power. Viewed through Freire's (1970) lens, the institutional capture of lesson planning can be read as an instance of the domesticating function of education: when planning is reduced to template completion, teachers are positioned as technicians implementing decisions made elsewhere. Giroux's (2011) concept of teachers as transformative intellectuals offers a counter-narrative in which the plan becomes a site of political and ethical decision-making. In EAP contexts, Benesch's (2001) framework suggests that plans taking institutional language requirements as given, without inviting critical examination, may reproduce rather than challenge the structural inequalities shaping learners' access to academic knowledge.

3.6. *Generative AI and the Future of Lesson Planning*

A significant and increasingly urgent gap in the reviewed literature concerns the impact of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) on lesson planning practice. Given that the present review was finalised in 2025–2026, and that GenAI tools have become widely accessible to teachers across educational contexts during this period, the implications of GenAI for the review's central claims are sufficiently consequential to warrant explicit acknowledgement.

Labis (2025) examines how AI-generated lesson plans affect teacher professional agency, finding that while GenAI tools can reduce the time burden of plan preparation, they simultaneously risk displacing the reflective cognitive work that plan-writing occasions. When the act of planning is outsourced to a generative tool, the teacher may receive a technically adequate document without engaging in the deliberation about learner needs, objectives, and materials that constitutes the pedagogically valuable dimension of planning. Torki et al. (2025) provide empirical evidence from teacher education contexts suggesting that when GenAI is integrated into planning pedagogy with explicit reflective prompts, student teachers engage more analytically with planning decisions than in traditional template-completion tasks.

However, two structural risks in AI-assisted planning demand explicit attention. The first is Automated Domestication: when teachers habitually accept AI-generated plans without deliberate evaluation, the reflective cognitive work that planning occasions is progressively displaced, reducing professional agency and lowering long-term instructional self-efficacy (Labis, 2025). The second risk, particularly consequential for Global South and low-resource contexts, is Pedagogical Hallucination: standard large language models are trained predominantly on westernised, well-resourced classroom corpora, and their outputs routinely assume the availability of digital infrastructure, reliable connectivity, and commercially published materials. A teacher in an under-resourced Bangladeshi secondary school who uncritically adopts an AI-generated plan requiring smartboards or internet-based resources will encounter severe instructional friction. Addressing both risks requires a Human-in-the-Loop (HITL) design principle: programmes should embed GenAI tools within structured reflective cycles in which student teachers are required to critique the AI's contextual assumptions, adapt outputs to their specific learner profiles, and document the rationale for each modification.

4. Discussion

4.1. *Core Elements of Effective Lesson Planning*

The review consistently confirms that the four core elements, learner needs, learning objectives, instructional materials, and formative assessment, do not function as discrete procedural stages. Rather, they constitute an integrated, iterative process in which each element continuously informs the others. Kyriacou (2018) articulates this as a cyclical, mutually reinforcing framework, a position supported by the interdependencies documented throughout the reviewed literature. When planning frameworks treat these elements as sequential, the iterative intelligence embedded in effective planning practice is lost.

The relationship between planning and improvisation, often treated as oppositional, is more accurately characterised as dialectical. The empirical pattern reported in the findings, in which experienced teachers depart productively from written plans, is explained by Schön's (1983) account of reflection-in-action, which presupposes a structured professional context

within which responsive judgement can operate. Cognitive Load Theory supplies the mechanism: by resolving key instructional decisions in advance, the plan reduces the extraneous load that would otherwise consume working memory during instruction, directly enabling the attentiveness to learner response that pedagogical listening requires (Sweller, 2020; Paas & van Merriënboer, 2020). The implication for pre-service teacher education is that emphasis should fall not only on the technical execution of a plan but on developing the judgement to depart from it purposefully.

The literature also reveals productive tensions within the four core elements that deserve explicit synthesis. On objectives, Bloom et al.'s (1956) and Anderson and Krathwohl's (2001) taxonomic frameworks privilege measurable cognitive outcomes, whereas Kumaravadivelu's (2003) postmethod pedagogy challenges the premise that objectives should be predetermined at all. On materials, Ashcraft's (2014) practitioner-centred guidance positions the teacher as an adaptive selector, while Graves' (2024) curriculum theory frames material alignment as a negotiated process between teacher intent and learner experience. On learner needs, Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural account foregrounds the role of scaffolded interaction, whereas Tomlinson's (2001) differentiated instruction model focuses on structural adaptation of content, process, and product. These are not contradictions but complementary emphases: taken together, they suggest that effective planning requires teachers to hold multiple theoretical orientations in productive tension rather than adopting any single framework as sufficient.

4.2. *Structural Critiques and the Role of Reflective Practice*

The review consistently indicates that many failures attributed to lesson planning, including its rigidity, its bureaucratic character, and its disconnection from learning, are symptoms of institutional conditions rather than reflections of planning's inherent limitations. De Neve et al.'s (2015) finding that self-efficacy and collegial support mediate whether planning becomes productive or self-defeating reinforces this: the same planning practice can function as a reflective tool or a compliance exercise depending on the professional culture in which it is embedded. This places a responsibility on institutions, school leaders, and policy-makers that cannot reasonably be transferred entirely to individual teachers.

Reflective practice, as theorised by Schön (1983) and operationalised in ELT by Farrell (2012), provides a conceptual response to both the rigidity and the institutional capture critiques identified above. Where compliance-oriented planning positions the teacher as an implementer of externally determined designs, reflective practice positions the teacher as a professional inquirer whose lesson plan is a provisional hypothesis to be tested against classroom reality. Farrell (2012) specifically argues that novice teachers need not less planning but a different orientation to it: one grounded in reflective inquiry rather than procedural compliance. Programmes that engage student teachers in iterative cycles of plan, teach, reflect, and revise, rather than treating planning as a technical competence to be acquired once, are more likely to develop reflective dispositions that prove professionally resilient across varied institutional contexts. Reflective practice thus addresses the structural critiques at the level of professional culture rather than at the level of the planning template itself.

The critical pedagogical perspective frames institutional capture as a political problem: when planning frameworks systematically exclude questions about power, representation, and whose knowledge is privileged, they reduce professional judgement to procedural compliance (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2011). In EAP contexts, Benesch's (2001) framework positions planning as a site of critical resistance rather than accommodation. These perspectives are analytically powerful but risk a practical incoherence when placed alongside the empirical evidence on scripted planning in under-resourced contexts. The review's findings present a genuine tension that the discussion must resolve rather than evade: how can a teacher be a transformative intellectual, in Giroux's (2011) sense, when operating in a context where Herbert et al. (2026) demonstrate that scripted plans provide the only reliable quality floor available?

The resolution lies in what this review terms Managed Autonomy: an approach to lesson planning in which institutional structures and professionally generated scripts provide a foundational quality floor, while teachers retain, and are actively supported to exercise, the agency to adapt those structures to the dynamic realities of their classrooms. Managed Autonomy rejects the false binary between total compliance and unstructured creative freedom. In under-resourced, high-cognitive-demand, or high-stakes-policy contexts, creating lessons entirely from scratch imposes the cognitive overload that CLT identifies as the principal enemy of quality instruction: Narayanan et al. (2024) demonstrate empirically that decision fatigue under such conditions degrades instructional fidelity regardless of professional intention. Herbert et al. (2026) corroborate this, showing that in under-resourced schools scripted frameworks produced more consistent learning experiences than unstructured autonomy. In these contexts, agency resides not in rejecting structure but in the tactical, reflective adaptation of a high-quality script to immediate learner needs: precisely the ZPD-responsive scaffolding that Vygotsky (1978) describes. The Cognitive-Reflective Balanced Model formalises this: the scripted plan manages extraneous cognitive load, freeing professional working memory for the reflective-in-action adjustments that transform a functional plan into a genuinely responsive lesson. Where teachers operate under severe institutional constraint, as Al Galib et al. (2026) document for Bangladesh's NCF-2021 implementation, Managed Autonomy shifts the target of critical pedagogical intervention from the individual teacher's plan to the institutional conditions that determine the extent of adaptable professional space available.

4.3. *Reflective and Alternative Orientations in Professional Practice*

The literature proposes several alternative orientations that embed reflective practice within lesson planning as a sustained professional commitment. Ho's (1995) argument that lesson plans can serve as instruments of reflection rather than merely

records of intent remains generative: when teachers use plans to document not only what they intend to teach but why they have made specific pedagogical decisions, planning becomes a vehicle for professional self-examination. Collaborative approaches such as Japanese Lesson Study extend this reflective logic into the collective domain, creating conditions for mutual professional development that individual reflection alone cannot achieve. Stigler and Hiebert (1999) established the foundational empirical case for this claim: their comparative study demonstrated that the quality differential between Japanese and American lesson delivery was attributable not to teacher knowledge per se but to the institutionalised practice of collective planning, iterative refinement, and structured peer feedback that characterises the Japanese professional development model. Lewis et al. (2006) argue that Lesson Study's power lies in its cycle of collaborative planning, structured observation, and evidence-based revision, while Dudley (2013) provides empirical evidence that the detailed observation protocols used in Lesson Study enable teachers to develop tacit pedagogical knowledge that could not be articulated through individual reflection alone. Farrell (2012) proposes a reflective practice framework specifically for language teachers that embeds planning within an ongoing cycle of practice, reflection, and critical inquiry, directly connecting lesson planning to the broader project of professional identity development.

Continuing Professional Development (CPD) embedded in classroom experience provides another institutional mechanism for sustaining reflective planning (Zdoupas & Laubenstein, 2023; Lübke et al., 2021). When lesson plans function as pedagogical artefacts for reflective analysis within CPD, they become resources for institutional as well as individual learning. This framing also illuminates the GenAI paradox identified in Section 4.6. The evidence reviewed presents a genuine structural tension: Labis (2025) demonstrates that AI-generated plans risk displacing the reflective deliberation that this review identifies as the professionally valuable dimension of planning, positioning GenAI as a mechanism of domestication that automates cognitive work and progressively lowers teacher self-efficacy. Yet Saint et al. (2024) and Torki et al. (2025) show that the same technology, deployed differently, can function as a tool of emancipation: an automated scaffold that absorbs planning logistics and frees cognitive capacity for the relational and empathic attunement that effective formative assessment requires. The decisive variable is not the tool itself but the pedagogical framing within which it is used. Teacher education programmes that deploy GenAI within iterative reflective cycles, requiring student teachers to critique, modify, and justify AI-generated plans rather than accept them as outputs, are likely to develop the analytical dispositions that make GenAI emancipatory rather than domesticating. Programmes that use GenAI as a time-saving convenience without structured reflective prompting risk accelerating the compliance orientation that this review identifies as the principal threat to lesson planning's professional value. The recommendation is therefore not to restrict GenAI from teacher education but to ensure that its integration is structured around reflection-in-action rather than passive consumption.

5. Limitations of the Review

Several limitations should be acknowledged. As a narrative rather than systematic review, the search and selection process, while conducted with transparency, does not claim the exhaustive coverage a systematic protocol would afford. The 56-source sample does not claim to be exhaustive; a fully systematic search with multiple independent screeners might identify additional relevant studies. The review draws primarily on English-language literature from ELT, EAP, and general education, which introduces potential geographical and linguistic bias. The Bangladesh literature provides a partial corrective, but a fuller account of planning in resource-constrained and culturally distinctive contexts would require more systematic attention. The search strategy did not include specific terms targeting Bangladesh policy frameworks such as the New Curriculum Framework-2021, which means recent policy implementation literature from that context may be underrepresented. Additionally, the rapid emergence of Generative AI tools for lesson planning during 2024–2026 means that this literature was too nascent to be comprehensively reviewed at the time of data collection; Section 4.6 addresses the available evidence but should be read as a preliminary account of a rapidly developing field. Cognitive Load Theory, while briefly introduced in the theoretical framework, was not included as a primary search term, and its implications for planning practice would benefit from more systematic future review.

6. Implications and Future Research

The review identifies several avenues for future inquiry. Empirical research is needed on how the four core elements are experienced and negotiated by teachers working where professional autonomy is substantially constrained. Comparative studies examining how institutional cultures in different national contexts shape planning practices would be valuable, particularly in light of recent policy reforms such as Bangladesh's New Curriculum Framework-2021. Longitudinal research tracking how novice teachers' planning evolves over time, and what forms of support most effectively facilitate this evolution, could inform more responsive initial teacher education programmes. Given the rapid proliferation of GenAI-assisted planning tools, research examining the conditions under which such tools support or undermine reflective planning practice is urgently needed.

7. Conclusion

This narrative review has argued that lesson planning, at its best, is neither a rigid prescription nor an administrative formality, but a reflective and adaptive framework for pedagogical decision-making. The four key elements examined, learner needs, learning objectives, instructional materials, and formative assessment, are not sequential stages in a technical procedure but dimensions of an integrated, iterative process in which decisions about each element continuously inform the others. The effectiveness of a lesson plan is measured not by how closely the lesson adheres to it, but by the quality of professional thinking that its preparation and ongoing revision provoke.

The emergence of Generative AI tools for lesson planning introduces a new and urgent dimension to this argument. GenAI has the potential to automate the production of plans, thereby displacing the reflective deliberation that this review identifies as the pedagogically valuable dimension of planning practice. At the same time, as Saint et al. (2024) and Torki et al. (2025) demonstrate, AI tools can be designed to scaffold rather than replace reflection. The central question the field must now address is not whether AI-assisted planning is efficient but whether it serves or undermines the professional disposition that makes lesson planning educationally worthwhile. That question cannot be answered by the technology itself; it depends on the professional culture and institutional conditions within which the tool is used, which is precisely the argument this review has advanced.

The critiques directed at lesson planning, its potential for rigidity, its vulnerability to institutional capture, the burden it can impose on novice teachers, are legitimate and grounded in empirical evidence. They point to genuine tensions between professional autonomy and institutional accountability, between the complexity of teaching and the desire for measurable evidence of its quality. These tensions are unlikely to be resolved through better templates or more prescriptive frameworks. What they call for is a shift in professional culture: from compliance orientation toward reflective inquiry, from individual production toward collaborative engagement, from the plan as finished product toward planning as ongoing, responsive process.

What lesson planning ultimately appears to require is not greater detail or more elaborate structure, but a different kind of professional disposition: one that holds structure and flexibility in productive tension, that attends as carefully to the learner as to the content, and that approaches the irreducible uncertainty of classroom teaching not as a threat to be managed by more comprehensive planning, but as an invitation to develop the professional judgement that no plan, however thorough, can substitute.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Table A1. Summary of Sources Included in the Narrative Review

No.	Authors & Year	Study Type & Domain	Key Contribution
1.	Al Galib et al. (2026)	Empirical (qualitative) / Education policy (Bangladesh)	Bangladesh NCF-2021 reform aimed at planning flexibility but generated new bureaucratic expectations in implementation
2.	Anderson & Krathwohl (2001)	Theoretical framework / General education	Revised Bloom's taxonomy: a two-dimensional framework for aligning objectives with assessment

No.	Authors & Year	Study Type & Domain	Key Contribution
3.	Ashcraft (2014)	Professional handbook / ELT/TESOL	Practical guidance on lesson planning; position planning as evolving professional practice
4.	Baethge et al., 2019	Methodological article / Research methods	SANRA scale for quality assessment of narrative review articles; basis for scientific reasoning statement in Section 3.1
5.	Benesch (2001)	Theoretical monograph / Critical EAP	Developed a critical EAP framework challenging needs-based orthodoxy; argues accommodation without critique may reproduce inequality
6.	Black & Wiliam (1998)	Empirical (meta-analytic review) / General education	Landmark review establishing that formative assessment produces substantial learning gains across 250+ studies
7.	Bloom et al. (1956)	Theoretical framework / General education	Original taxonomy of cognitive objectives; foundational vocabulary for cognitive demand in planning
8.	Bruner (1964)	Theoretical article / Developmental psychology	Enactive, iconic, symbolic modes; warrant for sequencing materials from concrete to abstract
9.	Butt (2008)	Professional handbook / General education	Defined lesson planning as a reflective framework evolving in response to classroom realities
10.	Canale, M.,(1980)	Theoretical article / Applied linguistics	Multidimensional model of communicative competence; highlighted limitations of form-focused objectives
11.	Clark & Lampert (1986)	Empirical (review chapter) / Teacher cognition	Found gap between planning intentions and classroom enactment wider than teachers recognised
12.	Cevikbas et al. (2024)	Empirical (review chapter) / Teacher cognition	the ability to plan objectives distinguishing effective from less effective teachers across subject disciplines.
13.	De Neve et al. (2015)	Empirical (quantitative) / Teacher education	Self-efficacy and collegial support predict whether differentiated instruction is implemented
14.	Dudley (2013)	Empirical (qualitative) / Professional development	Lesson Study observation protocols enable development of tacit pedagogical knowledge
15.	Farrell (2002)	Professional chapter / ELT	Positions lesson planning as principled decision-making rather than template completion
16.	Farrell (2012)	Theoretical monograph / ELT/TESOL	Reflective practice framework for language teachers embedding planning in ongoing critical inquiry

No.	Authors & Year	Study Type & Domain	Key Contribution
17.	Freire (1970)	Theoretical monograph / Applied linguistics	The critical pedagogical perspective frames institutional capture as a political problem
18.	Giroux, H. A. (2011)	Theoretical monograph / Applied linguistics	a teacher be a transformative intellectual
19.	Goyibova et al. (2025)	Empirical (mixed methods) / General education	Professional competences for differentiation: flexible grouping, adaptive task design
20.	Graves (2024)	Professional handbook / Language curriculum	Lesson plan as site of negotiation between intended and experienced curriculum
21.	Green et al. (2006)	Methodological article / Research methods	Guidance on narrative review methodology, transparency, and scope
22.	Hamid & Baldauf (2008)	Empirical (qualitative) / ELT (Bangladesh)	Disconnect between CLT policy and classroom reality; planning as compliance mechanism
23.	Harmer (2007)	Professional handbook / ELT	Empathic attunement; coursebook dependency critique; contextually responsive material selection
24.	Hattie & Timperley (2007)	Empirical (meta-analysis) / General education	Feedback effectiveness depends on specificity and timing; immediate task-focused feedback most effective
25.	John (2006)	Empirical (qualitative) / Teacher education	Student teachers treating plans as flexible heuristics showed greater responsiveness to learners
26.	Kumaravadivelu (2003)	Theoretical monograph / Applied linguistics	Postmethod pedagogy; moves beyond prescriptive models toward context-sensitive frameworks
27.	Kyriacou (2014)	Professional handbook / General education	Objectives must be achievable through assessable outcomes; novice reliance on detailed plans
28.	Kyriacou (2018)	Professional handbook / General education	Four core planning elements as cyclical, mutually reinforcing framework
29.	König et al., 2021	Theoretical monograph / General education	Pedagogical competence in planning, specifically the ability to formulate a significant predictor of instructional quality and student achievement
30.	Lewis et al. (2006)	Empirical (theoretical/comparative) / Professional development	Lesson Study's power lies in collaborative planning, observation, and evidence-based revision
31.	Lübke et al. (2021)	Empirical (systematic review) / Inclusive education	Relational infrastructure critical to professional development in inclusive settings
32.	McDaniel et al. (2025)	Empirical (comparative) / Higher education	Learner needs vary across cognitive and affective dimensions

No.	Authors & Year	Study Type & Domain	Key Contribution
33.	Mia et al. (2023)	Empirical (qualitative) / Education policy (Bangladesh)	Precarious employment shapes planning as survival strategy
34.	Nunan (1988)	Theoretical monograph / Applied linguistics/ELT	Learner-centred curriculum; material selection should begin with negotiated learner needs
35.	Prabhu (1992)	Theoretical article / ELT/Applied linguistics	Lessons possess inherent dynamism resisting scripted execution
36.	Richards & Bohlke (2011)	Professional handbook / ELT	Planning involves anticipating learner engagement with language as communicative system
37.	Roehr-Brackin et al. (2024)	Empirical (quantitative) / Applied linguistics/SLA	Effectiveness of explicit instruction mediated by individual learner variability
38.	Ruiz-Primo & Furtak (2007)	Empirical (mixed methods) / Science education	Quality of formative assessment interactions varies across teachers; linked to student outcomes
39.	Savage (2014)	Professional handbook / General education	Shift from teacher-centred to learner-centred planning; institutional bureaucratisation critique
40.	Schildkamp et al. (2020)	Empirical (systematic review) / General education	Prerequisites for formative assessment: questioning, real-time interpretation, instructional adjustment
41.	Schön (1983)	Theoretical monograph / Professional practice	Reflection-on-action vs. reflection-in-action; responsive delivery as professional expertise
42.	Shulman (1987)	Theoretical article / Teacher education	Pedagogical content knowledge: transforming subject matter into accessible learning experiences
43.	Stigler & Hiebert (1999)	Empirical (comparative) / General education	Japanese Lesson Study as model of collaborative planning and sustained professional development
44.	Tomlinson (2001)	Professional handbook / General education	Differentiated instruction framework: content, process, product adaptation
45.	Vygotsky (1978)	Theoretical monograph / Developmental psychology	ZPD; scaffolded instruction pitched beyond current independent capability
46.	Wiliam (2011)	Professional monograph / Assessment	Formative assessment as responsive teaching practice embedded throughout instruction
47.	Yonzon et al. (2023)	Empirical (qualitative) / Early childhood	Concrete materials promote imaginative engagement; a principle applicable to realia use
48.	Zdoupas & Laubenstein (2023)	Empirical (quantitative) / Inclusive education	Professional environments where teachers feel acknowledged support for reflective planning

No.	Authors & Year	Study Type & Domain	Key Contribution
49.	Labis (2025)	Empirical (quantitative) Teacher education	AI-generated lesson plans risk displacing reflective cognitive work; raises questions about professional agency in planning
50.	Torki et al. (2024)	Empirical (mixed methods) Teacher education	When integrated with explicit reflective prompts, GenAI supports analytical engagement with planning decisions in student teacher education
51.	Saint et al. (2024)	Empirical (qualitative) Applied linguistics/ELT	AI-generated SRL plans in EFL contexts can scaffold reflection when teachers are prompted to evaluate and modify AI suggestions
52.	Paas & van Merriënboer (2020)	Theoretical article / Cognitive psychology	Structured planning reduces intrinsic cognitive load for teachers, freeing working memory for responsive in-the-moment instruction
53.	Sweller (2020)	Theoretical article / Cognitive psychology	Cognitive Load Theory applied to educational technology; structured planning as a mechanism for managing instructional complexity
54.	Kaya-Kasikci et al., (2023)	Empirical (quantitative) Teacher education	Scripted planning compliance may serve a protective cognitive and emotional function for teachers in high-demand conditions
55.	Herbert et al. (2026)	Empirical (mixed methods) Teacher education / General education	Structured lesson plans provide a quality floor in under-resourced schools; teachers with prescriptive frameworks produced more consistent learning experiences than those with unstructured autonomy
56.	Narayanan et al. (2024)	Empirical (quantitative) General education	Scripted plans reduce decision fatigue and improve instructional fidelity for teachers with limited planning time and subject-matter expertise in high-stakes contexts

Appendix B

Table B1. Search Strategy and Screening Process

Stage	Details	Notes
Databases	Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, Google Scholar	Searches conducted iteratively 2024–2025
Primary terms	"lesson planning" AND ("reflective practice" OR "teacher education" OR "formative assessment" OR "instructional design" OR "differentiated instruction")	Boolean operators used
Domain terms	"ELT" OR "EAP" OR "language teaching" OR "communicative competence" OR "critical pedagogy"	Combined with primary terms using AND
Date range	No rigid restriction; foundational works from 1956 alongside sources to 2025	Deliberate inclusion of seminal works
Initial results	~1,200 records across four databases	Substantial duplication between Scopus and Web of Science
After deduplication	~740 unique records	

Stage	Details	Notes
Title/abstract screening	~95 potentially relevant sources retained	Inclusion: peer-reviewed, substantively addressing planning/core elements, relevant context
Full-text evaluation	56 sources in final corpus (45 from primary search; 10 from targeted supplementary searches)	Exclusion: peripheral mention of planning, no full paper, non-indexed
Supplementary	Backward reference searching of key articles	Productive for foundational works
Regional supplement	"Bangladesh" AND ("lesson planning" OR "teacher education" OR "curriculum reform" OR "New Curriculum Framework")	Targeted supplementary search conducted to capture Bangladesh-specific policy and classroom practice literature
AI/GenAI supplement	"generative AI" OR "artificial intelligence" OR "AI-assisted" AND "lesson planning" OR "teacher planning"	Supplementary search to capture emerging GenAI and lesson planning literature (2023–2025); yielded 3 included sources
CLT supplement	"cognitive load" OR "intrinsic load" OR "working memory" AND "lesson planning" OR "teacher preparation" OR "instructional design"	Supplementary search to capture Cognitive Load Theory literature relevant to planning; yielded 2 included sources

Appendix C

Table C1. Thematic Categories, Codes, and Contributing Sources

Theme	Codes/Sub-themes	Key Sources
Theme 1: Learner needs	Learner variability, differentiation, empathic attunement, needs analysis, ZPD, PCK	McDaniel et al.; Tomlinson; Goyibova et al.; Roehr-Brackin et al.; De Neve et al.; Clark & Lampert; Harmer; Shulman; Vygotsky
Theme 2: Objectives	Objective formulation, cognitive demand, communicative competence, lesson dynamism, postmethod pedagogy	Bloom et al.; Anderson & Krathwohl; Prabhu; Canale; Kyriacou; John; Farrell (2002); Kumaravadivelu
Theme 3: Materials	Material selection, coursebook dependency, authentic materials, realia, alignment, learner-centred curriculum	Bruner 1; Harmer; Yonzon et al.; Graves; Nunan; Kumaravadivelu
Theme 4: Formative assessment	Assessment for learning, real-time adjustment, feedback, formative cycle, pedagogical listening	Black & Wiliam; Schildkamp et al.; Ruiz-Primo & Furtak; Wiliam; Hattie & Timperley; Graves; Kyriacou (2018)

Theme	Codes/Sub-themes	Key Sources
Theme 5: Structural critiques	Rigidity, institutional capture, novice vulnerability, employment precarity, banking education, domestication	Schön; Savage; Kyriacou (2014); John; Clark & Lampert; Mia et al.; Ho; Hamid & Baldauf; Freire; Giroux; Benesch
Theme 6: Alternatives	Reflective practice, Lesson Study, CPD, collaborative planning, institutional culture, transformative intellectuals	Ho; Stigler & Hiebert; Lewis et al.; Dudley; Farrell (2012); Lübke et al.; Zdoupas & Laubenstein; Schön