Principles of Worksheet Design: Creating Attractive, Effective, and Adaptable Worksheets

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Abstract

This article is a practice-based guide to help teachers of English as a second language create attractive, effective, and adaptable worksheets for their classes. First, a number of design principles that concern the creation of worksheets for learners of English are discussed. Where applicable, research to support those design principles is provided. The following section has instructions for aspects of Microsoft Word that are especially useful in worksheet design. Finally, three examples of worksheets are provided. The structure and design of each worksheet is explained in relation to the previous section. There are also suggestions on how to use each worksheet as a template and modify them for different classes.

Design is not something that most teachers are taught. Teachers learn how to lesson plan, interact with students, create assessments, develop syllabi, but rarely are they instructed on how to design worksheets, despite spending a considerable amount of time doing so. Even if it is only a list of questions typed up in Word's default Calibri 11 point font, nearly every teacher has created some type of document for their class.

While there is an incredible range of products that can be used in the classroom, it is still important for teachers to create their own materials to meet the specific needs of their individual classes. Some design principles are intuitive, and others can be gleaned from good examples.

This paper will first discuss some general principles of design that should be considered when creating a worksheet, and then go on to describe three simple, practical worksheets that can be modified for a variety of different classes.

Points of Consideration in Worksheet Design

The goal of each of these principles is to convey information in the most effective manner. For learners of a second language, the way a document is designed can often convey just as much, if not more information than the words on the page. Many of these principles are related to simplicity, which is especially important when working with students who have lower reading ability. In the worksheets they create, instructors should attend to the amount of text, directions, focus, blank space, font style, font size, and images.

Amount of text

Depending on the level of the student, a page filled to the brim with English words can be intimidating and overwhelming. An exception would be a reading class, but even then, students should be able to understand what to do rather quickly, without needing to understand and digest large blocks of text before they can begin on their task.

Directions

Include directions on every worksheet. It is best if the instructor reads them aloud, repeats them, and rephrases them to the class before they begin on the activity. Even with this repetition, students still might not hear or understand the directions the teacher has said. Also, many English learners are better readers than listeners, and would therefore benefit from directions presented in both modes. Again, keep directions short and simple.

Focus

Ideally, there is only one task on each worksheet. More question and task types will require more explanation from the teacher and create more confusion with the class. English learners are already under a considerable cognitive load trying to understand the language on the page; if its organization is confusing too, the learner will likely be lost. If different tasks must be included on the same page, make clear distinctions – both visual and verbal – of when one task finishes and the next begins.

Blank space

Designers use the Latin term "horror vacui" – the fear of the void – to describe the need to fill a page and leave no blank space. Blank space is a design tool. By creating more blank space around a particular object, it makes that object appear more valuable. For example, a boutique that has only a few items prominently displayed draws more attention to those items as opposed to a warehouse filled to the brim with clothes (Lidwell, Holden, & Butler 2010). Students' eyes will be similarly drawn to the words or objects that are surrounded by blank space. English learners' cognitive loads are lessened if they do not need to expend energy searching the page for important information.

Another note that should be obvious: blank space is needed for student answers. Make sure that there is adequate room under questions so that students can write their answers. Blank space on the side of the page also allows room for notes or definitions of vocabulary words.

Font

There is a generally held notion (see Kole's (2013) infographic) that serif fonts, like Times New Roman, are more legible on a paper, and sans-serif fonts, like Arial, are better for screen. However, Alex Poole's (2008) excellent review of the research on the topic shows that it

is conflicting and inconclusive. Teachers of English need not wade into the debate on fonts and typefaces. Rather, they should choose fonts that grab students' attention without distracting them. It is recommended to choose a simple, readable font and use it consistently so that students associate the font with the material. Stylized fonts should be avoided as they are usually more difficult for language learners to read.

Size

The size of fonts should be considered carefully as well. Titles and section headings should be larger and more prominent. Text sizes in worksheet should be used as an organizational tool. The section on "Shortcuts" gives a quick way to modify font size while typing.

Tavakoli and Kheirzadeh's study on the affect of font size on reading comprehension skills for EFL students (2011) showed that the general size of font in a reading activity does not impact the ability of the reader to complete the task. Therefore, it can be assumed that teachers need not worry much about making fonts larger or smaller based on the ability of their students.

Images

Images should be used carefully in worksheet design. Too many images can be distracting and take up valuable open space. However, there are occasions where images can be instructive, attention-grabbing, or both.

In the categorizing worksheet example in the next section (*Figure 1*), two images are included. Since this worksheet was designed for a lower-level class, they are used as instructive tools: they are visual representations of the two nouns in the title. They are also potentially attention-grabbing and more visually appealing than simply words and lines. Finally, they can serve as a teaching tool for the vocabulary on the worksheet, which includes words for the

different parts of plants – teachers can point out the parts of the picture that correspond to the vocabulary word.

<p style="text-align:center">Essential Microsoft Word Skills for Worksheet Design</p>

Hotkeys

With more than 1.2 billion users (Microsoft), Microsoft Office is the reigning software for creating documents. Most teachers of English are included in this number and use Word to create their worksheets. However, the proficiency level of working with the software varies among educators. One key step in increasing the speed and ease with which one uses Microsoft Word is to learn hotkeys. Below are a few selected hotkeys that are especially useful for creating worksheets.

- **Ctrl**+**C** = Copy

- **Ctrl**+**X** = Cut

- **Ctrl**+**V** = Paste

- **Ctrl**+**U** = Underline

- **Ctrl**+**B** = Bold

- **Ctrl**+**E** = Center highlighted text (Ctrl+R = Right justify, Ctrl+L = Left justify)

- **Ctrl**+**Shift**+**.**(**period**) = Increase font size

- **Ctrl**+**Shift**+**,**(**comma**) = Decrease font size

- **Ctrl**+**Shift**+**Enter** = Start a new page or split a table (especially helpful when a table is spilling onto the next page and causing problems)

Tables

Microsoft Word also allows users to create tables, which can be very useful for designing worksheets (and are used in each of the worksheet examples in this paper).

The use of tables can be simple or very complex, and an Internet search for specific functions is recommended. Worksheet creators should learn how to modify their tables by using the "Table Tools" tab that appears once a table is inserted into a Word document. Under the "Design" tab, cells can be shaded different colors and border styles can be modified. Under the "Layout" tab, the size of the cells can be changed, and more rows and columns can be added. Also under "Layout" is the option to split and merge cells, which can be useful when modifying or correcting a worksheet. (Note: the "Split Cells" button can also be used if the user does not want to merge all the highlighted cells into one single cell, but rather, for example, wants to merge three columns to two. Simply decrease the number of rows or columns and the table will merge).

Worksheet Templates

In this section, three worksheet templates will be shown and discussed. The first aim of this section is for teachers to see worksheet design principles in action. The second aim is to encourage teachers to consider the different situations in which these worksheets can be used. Each of the worksheets is very simple and can be modified easily to fit a wide range of skills and levels. Next to the title of each worksheet, there is a link for the downloadable Word file of that worksheet.

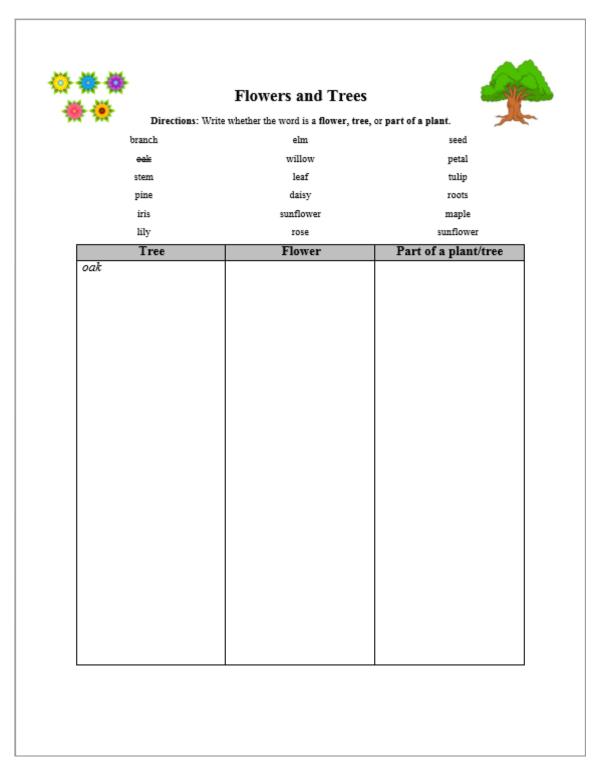**Columns** (web link for Word document)

This worksheet (*Figure 1* on the following page) uses a centered title with larger, bolded text. Below the title, directions are included and centered also. Two images are included for both aesthetic and pedagogical purposes. The vocabulary words are arranged with the "columns" feature in Word. The main section is a 3x2 table, with a narrow, shaded top row. The headings of the columns are bolded and centered.
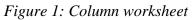
In addition to assigning this worksheet as homework, it can also be used as a group work activity. Students work in teams and decide together which column each word should be placed into. For more advanced students, this activity can be timed.

This worksheet can be adapted for several different classes. Some examples are below:

- **Grammar:** Classify words based on **parts of speech.**

- **Pronunciation/Listening:** Classify words based on what **vowel sounds** they have.

- **Reading:** Classify words associated with three different **characters**, **places**, or **authors**.

Flowers and Trees

Directions: Write whether the word is a **flower, tree,** or **part of a plant.**

branch	elm	seed
~~oak~~	willow	petal
stem	leaf	tulip
pine	daisy	roots
iris	sunflower	maple
lily	rose	sunflower

Tree	Flower	Part of a plant/tree
oak		

Figure 1: Column worksheet

Write Ten (web link for Word document)

Name: _____

Write Ten

Directions: Write down the category that your teacher says. Then write ten things in that category.

Category	Answers
things in school	pencil, pens, paper, desks, chalkboard, folders, teacher, students, eraser, computer

Figure 2: "Write Ten" worksheet

This worksheet (*Figure 2* on the previous page) uses a centered title with larger, bolded text. Below the title, directions are included and centered also. The main section is a 2x13 table, with a narrow, shaded top row. The headings of the columns are bolded and centered. In the first white row, an example is written in Bradley Hand font and centered.

This worksheet is only used for in class activities. The teacher calls a category and students have to write ten examples of vocabulary words within that category. The first person or group to finish is the winner. To increase the difficulty, the teacher can check students' spelling; if they misspell a word, they must correct it before they can be declared the winner.

This worksheet can be adapted for several different classes. Some examples are below:

- **Grammar:** Write ten adjectives.

- **Speaking:** Write ten three syllable words.

- **Writing:** Write ten things every essay should have.

Classmates List (web link for Word document)

Name: _____

Listening to Presentations

Directions: Listen to each presentation. Write down the speaker's vacation destination and some notes. You don't have to write about yourself.

At the end, write what you think are top three vacations in the last box – just write 1 (best), 2, and 3.

Name	Destination	Notes	Ranking (1,2,3)
Pumpkin			
Richard			
Moksha			
Alya			
Jaegyung			
Judge			
Jaeseok			
Ruixue			
Samah			
Dulin			
Ibtisam			
Baqar			

Figure 3: Classmates list

This worksheet (*Figure 3* on the previous page) uses a centered title with larger, bolded text. Below the title, directions are included and left justified. The main section is a 4x13 table, with a narrow, shaded top row. The headings of the columns are bolded and centered both vertically and horizontally (this can be done under "Table Tools", "Layout", and "Alignment"). In the left column, rows 2 through 13 have the names of the students in the class.

Again, this worksheet is used only for in class activities. This particular worksheet was used while students were giving presentations – while one student presented, the others were asked to listen and take notes on this worksheet. They were then used as "ballots" to vote on who had the best presentation and as participation points for class.

This worksheet can easily be adapted for mingling activities. By changing the title, directions, and column headings, and merging the 2nd through 3rd columns using the "Split Cells" button and choosing "1 column, 13 rows," the teacher can create a sheet that has the names of the students with just one space to the right of them. The heading can then be changed to a question or topic, for example, "*What is your morning routine?*" Students would then mingle with their classmates, share answers, and write down notes on what they heard.

Conclusion

In general, this paper is meant to encourage teachers of English as a second language to consider their design choices carefully. Although most teachers do not receive training in design and Microsoft Word during their training, these are essential skills for most workplaces. Teachers are encouraged to research the wealth of information on these two topics on the Internet and continue to advance their worksheet design skills.

References

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