

Observation and Evaluation on an English Lesson - Is Volvo Swedish, American or Chinese?

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Abstract: This thesis is an observation and evaluation of an English lesson given by Liu Ling (the first-prize winner in the first China College English Teaching Contest) in Shandong Foreign Trade Vocational College. Firstly, it shows the lesson plan according to the activities and performances in the lesson. Then, it tries to describe the different stages of the lesson in detail and then gives the comments on each activity. Finally, it summarizes the whole lesson and gives a general comment of the whole lesson.

1. Description of Instruction Design

1.1 Introduction to Contents

This is a comprehensive lesson for Unit1 Company for freshmen at the beginning of their second term in their vocational college life. The main reading text (Is Volvo Swedish, American or Chinese) for the unit is an exposition about the history of Volvo. It is clearly-structured with a very clear time-line and several subtitles, so not difficult for students to understand. Moreover, the topic related with cars, brands and companies could easily arouse the interest of vocational college students and may better prepare them for their future career.

1.2 Analysis of Learning Situation

Vocational college students have had a command over English after intensive high school English education. And they are active in thinking and handy in practice. However, many of them do not have a strong English background and good learning habits. They may have a small vocabulary, poor grammar, not well motivated and lack self-control. Moreover, they could find it difficult to communicate in English and use English in their prospective work. Thus, the emphasis should be put on a comprehensive English skills, including speaking, listening, reading and writing. Furthermore, some practical skills will be cultivated, which will pave the way for their future career.

2. Lesson Plan

2.1 Teaching Aims

Through this lesson, students are expected to:

Topics:

- (1). Learn the story behind Volvo/ Geely
- (2). Make small talk
- (3). Know the names of part of a production process
- (4). Study the story of the Apple tech titan, Steve Jobs
- (5). Talk about IKEA

Skills:

- (1). Receive visitors to a company
- (2). Introduce yourself and your company
- (3). Introduce two people
- (4). Follow written instructions

- (5). Write business letters and reply to a business letter
Project: Research and present companies in your town
Grammar: Tenses and voices

2.2 Teaching Focus

- (1). People and issues
- (2). Listening and speaking
- (3). Writing
- (4). Assignment

2.3 Teaching Difficulties

Encourage students to communicate with natural sentences and eye contacts.

2.4 Teaching Aids

PPT, recorder, video, chalk, blackboard etc.

2.5 Teaching Procedures

2.5.1 Warm Up and Lead in

At the beginning of the class, Ms Liu posed a question: “what is the one thing you use so much that you can’t imagine your life without it?”. At different answers from students, she asked further questions, “Does it make your life easier? Life is made so much better with...”. Through interaction and questions such as “what are they in all”, the word “inventions” were elicited. Then, she lead students to give some adjectives about the potential effect inventions have on our life such as “easier, more fun, more convenient”. Students were asked to work with their partners and match inventions-related statements to the pictures on the textbook. Next, she showed other interesting pictures about awesome inventions in the new age. Finally, the question “what can make inventions accessible” was presented to the students in order to introduce the topic of the unit-company. A video about quirky was shown to help students understand the topic.

Evaluations: This lead-in is acceptable for it’s close to life and makes a natural use of the matching exercise on the textbook. Her interaction with student is recommendable for she encouraged students to use a variety of patterns to talk about their life all the time. For example, after a student gave one answer “internet”, she asked further, “How often do you use internet?” She also mentioned a lot her personal life such as her use of internet, her preference for Pizza. In this way, not only did students practice talking about their life but also a harmonious atmosphere was established in the classroom. Beside, her use of Chinese sometimes was in place. For instance “crawl and clean” is translated into 边爬边擦, which effectively helped students understand her.

However, the lead-in put too much focus on other inventions rather than cars such as Volvo. When the topic of the unit - cars and companies was elicited, the teacher didn’t go further into it. Instead, she just went directly to the reading of the text. In addition, I don’t think the video about quirky and the question “what makes inventions accessible” are meaningful in this part. And actually students did not follow them very well. They failed to give the answer - company. In my view, it’d better if she lays the focus on cars and car companies by showing related pictures, videos and testing students’ knowledge about cars and car companies.

2.5.2 Activity 1 - Reading

Here is reading of the text. Ms Liu firstly asked students to go through the text very quickly (1 minute) to make a time-line of the history of Volvo by paying attention words indicating “time” and get five statements about major Volvo events in the right order. In this way, students’ skimming skill was practiced. Then, with the help of pictures she introduced two founders of Volvo, asked one student to read their quotation and called students’ attention to the guideline of Volvo- safety. Next, the teacher showed all the numbers in the text except those indicating years and invited students to

read the text for the second time to find out what the numbers meant. For the third time of reading, the students were divided into four groups with each group to answer one of four questions “What kind of vehicles does Volvo manufacture? What was the idea behind the first Volvo? What do Volvo and Geely want by 2020? What is Geely’s turnaround plan? (2 minutes). In this way, students’ scanning skill was practiced through cooperative work. While checking answers to the four questions, Ms Liu also checked students’ understanding of some difficult words mentioned such as “heavy construction machinery”, “withstand”, “turnaround”.

Evaluations: In this part, different reading tasks were well designed in order to practice students’ skimming and scanning. Meanwhile, the teacher used top-down approach to decompose the text. At first, the purpose for reading is to gain an overall picture and the main idea of the text. Then, important sentences and key words and expressions were analyzed. The highlight in this part, as for me, is cooperative work during the reading. Each group dealt with one comprehension question, which aroused students’ attention and interest. The lesson efficiency is enhanced in this way. When explaining “heavy construction machinery”, she used Chinese again to make herself understood better. But in terms of language points, she spent much less time. She only checked students’ understanding of the difficult words and expressions, giving verbal explanation of the words. As far as I am concerned, this part can be improved by firstly writing the words and expressions and their meanings on the blackboard or ppt to highlight them. And then give more detailed introduction to how they are used. Take “withstand” for example. As an important verb frequently used in our daily life, it is not enough to just paraphrase it as “endure”. More sentence examples could be given to help students remember the word and use it appropriately.

2.5.3 Activity 2 - Approach the Title

After textual comprehension, the teacher moved back to the issue of the text: ownership of Volvo cars. 1924, 1999, 2010 were put on the slide. She led the whole class to review the main events in the three years respectively, coming to the conclusion that Volvo is neither Swedish, nor American but now Chinese.

Evaluations: Ms Liu’s witty comments was a highlight. For instance, when students were not sure about the calculation of how many years Volvo has developed, she joked, “your math is just as good as mine”, which relaxed the class atmosphere.

Nevertheless, she spoke too much in this part and jumped to her conclusion. She did most of talking and the class became teacher-centered rather than student-centered. Besides, I don’t think it is a close-ended question whether Volvo is Swedish, American or Chinese. Thus it is improper to conclude draw such a conclusion. If I were the teacher, I would take it as a good chance to cultivate students’ critical thinking. For example, I would firstly raise the title to the students: Is Volvo Swedish, American or Chinese? Students may have different answers. They might say it is Swedish because.... or it is American because... Or it is Chinese because... Or even they can say it is Swedish, American and Chinese. This is an open-ended question and different answers are encouraged. On the basis of their brainstorming, I would put forward the theme behind the text ---- globalization. In this way, not only will their critical thinking be developed, but also their understanding of the text will ascend from simply a history of a car company to a more profound perspective. This could serve as a suitable emotional objective to achieve.

2.5.4 Activity 3 - Jargon Words

This activity aims at learning jargon words in the text. At first, the teacher gave the definition of jargon words and three typical examples i.e. the 9-to-5, suspect and AWOL. Then she asked students to discuss with their partners to work out the meanings of four more frequently used jargon words: BTW, FAQ, LOL, BFF. Finally, she presented all the jargon and business words (about twenty) collected from the text. Students worked with their partners to find out the words in their textbooks and listened to the teacher’s explanation of each one. Through pictures and her verbal explanation of

these words, students became familiar with different models of Volvo, the meaning of the brand name- Volvo and mastered some key words and expressions like make a profit, features, interfere.

Evaluations: She was very time conscious and passionate to push students to talk. For example, she repeated “talk, talk, talk” and “of course, you know it. It’s on your tip of tongue. It’s there.” Her vivid language again made the class more interesting like “They (the words) are playing hide and seek, only waiting to be found.” It is worth mentioning that she emphasized the pronunciation of laugh out loud (LOL), which she considered as a tricky one. And students practiced this pronunciation very actively.

While presenting the new word “interfere”, she gave many sentences for students to translate. This is a very traditional grammar translation.

2.5.5 Activity 5: Translation

By talking about her recent translation experience, the teacher invited students to have a fun in translation. Firstly, she showed on slides a complex sentence in the text. To make it easier, she broke down this sentence into words and phrases. Then students put the translation of words and phrases together. Next, four more sentences were given to four students to translate respectively. When coming across the “self interest” in the sentences, she gave a detailed explanation by showing a pie chart, giving both English and Chinese equivalents. The following task was cooperative. Each student picked one sentence and had his/her partner translate it. Mr. Liu even joined in the activity and worked with one student. Then a student was asked to present his translation.

Evaluations: The translation part designed by the teacher was very attractive and full of fun. To begin with, the “Translator’s Corner” named after “Poet’s Corner” was very eye-catching and aroused students’ interest. What’s more, breaking down a long sentence into words and phrases makes translation more accessible to students. Besides, the teacher was very conscious of each student. So in this part she passed the microphone to a quiet girl in the middle who had not answered questions yet and said, “have a try, baby.” She gave a big applause on the girl’s excellent answer. The girl was obviously encouraged, so were the whole class. They answered questions in chorus and we are very happy to see a boy raised his hand to point out that “Sweden’s” was neglected in the teacher’s repetition of the complete sentence translation. The teacher was very quick-minded and took the chance to remind students of the importance of prudence in translation. As we know, translation is a more individual process, but through the translation task in pairs, she made all the students cooperative and involved in active thinking. And her humorous introduction “the one chance for you to torture other person.” added much fun to the task itself.

However, although she mentioned it was important to analyze the sentence structure before translation, she didn’t give further illustration. And she could also introduce some translation skills in this part.

2.5.6 Activity 6: Grammar - Passive Voice

She explained what passive voice was and how it was used with one sentence in the text and its function. Then students were asked to find out all the passive voices in the text. By reviewing those sentences, she laid the stress on the form of passive voice and its function - showing objective attitudes and facts about Volvo. She didn’t spend too much time on it and asked those who wanted more to refer to students’ books and exercise books for further self-study.

Evaluations: This part was very short but it was enough as passive voice was a very simple grammar point. Students reviewed passive voice and also their self-study ability was guided by the teacher. In this sense, Ms Liu was a facilitator rather than a lecturer.

2.5.7 Activity 7: Listening

Students firstly listened to a calling talking to the car expert and answered several questions. The answers were all right except the last one. Two girls said sorry for not catching it. At the hints by the teacher, a boy gave the correct answer. Then they listened to a conversation about meeting a business

partner at the airport and completed sentences. The teacher checked together. Students answered and spelled words in chorus.

Evaluations: The teacher is encouraging. When the two girls apologized for failing to catch the answer, she comforted, “it’s OK.” “You are sitting at the back.” She was always able to find appropriate words to encourage students. Then she asked “you didn’t hear any brands?” At this hint, a boy gave the correct answer, “BMW and VW”. Step by step, she elicited the correct answer. Later, students could not figure out what VW was. The teacher gave the explanation verbally, including the meaning of its name. As for me, there is still room for improvement. On the one hand, she could play the part about the last question again because obviously most students did not catch the brand names according to their response. On the other hand, she’d better use blackboard and chalks sometimes. For example, she could write the “Volkswagen” on the blackboard so that students can have a better understanding of the word.

2.5.8 Activity 8: Speaking

Based on the foregoing listening, students were asked to use sentence patterns they had heard to make up a dialogue. One student was the personal assistant to Mr. Li Shufu, Chairman of Geely. He/She was to pick up Mr. Hakan Samuelsson (President and CEO) of Volvo Cars at the airport. The teacher also worked with a girl on a dialogue. After their practice, a pair presented their dialogue in front of the class. To be more exact, it was more role-play than a dialogue. At Ms Liu’s request, they acted it out with body language and a prop- a bag. Ms Liu commented on their performance and encouraged the whole class to try more role-plays. In the end, a speaking task in the textbook was assigned to the students as homework.

Evaluations: A role-play in place of simply verbal dialogue was wonderful. The teacher gave them a bag, which turned it more real situation. Besides, she stimulated them to be creative to do some changes to the plot. Her comments on the role-play were well recommendable. First, she asked the whole class to give the two girls another round of applause, “a big round”. Students applauded for long. Then she gave comments in a very concrete way. “very nice”. “They make some changes to the plot.” “She is a very easy and outgoing girl.” “It is nice and sweet.” “That’s a very good version.” Ms Liu even imitated the girl’s manner in an amusing and exaggerated way, which caused a laughter.

2.5.9 Activity 9: Writing

Based Teacher led the students to go through a sample of a business letter in the textbook and stressed its layout. After showing students a video clip about how to write a business letter, the teacher lead them to review some key steps and did an oral writing of a business letter in her name step by step. The following was her assignment of writing a business letter after the class.

Evaluations: The writing part is a complete and step-by-step one. She followed input before output. The sample of a business letter was an appropriate material as input. But she’d better ask students to sum up its layout than she said it by herself. A video clip here was eye-catching, which made writing itself visual and more effective for students to remember. She could also invite students to do the oral writing. The TTT is too long compared with STT. Students were receiving information very passively. Some changes could be made to motivate them.

2.5.10 Activity 10: Listening and Speaking

The last task for the lesson was to learn how to talk about yourself and your company. Students listened to people talking about their companies and matched person with what they say. After they checked the answers together, they were asked to work in pairs after the class to act it out spontaneously in the next class. You are on a plane going to New York. You have some business there. Introduce yourself and your business to the person sitting beside you.

Evaluations: This part was easy and moved on very quickly. It was a very good decision to make the act-it-out as the homework. On the one hand, it is time-saving. On the other hand, students can be better prepared for the role-play.

2.5.11 Closing and Homework

The teacher gave each group different assignments. For Group 1, they were to work out the differences between Chairman and CEO. The assignment for Group 2 was to figure out the organization structures of Volvo, Geely and Apple companies. Group 3 was required to find out how Quirky works. For Group 4, they should introduce Steve Jobs and Apple Company. Besides, she asked all the students to draft their learning plans about Part B in this unit.

Evaluations: At the end of the class, her easygoing and thoughtfulness were fully displayed. She said to all the students, “thank you. You are the best of the best.” And she gave her cell phone number to students for contacts. Meanwhile, I think it was also a practice of dictating numbers. Drafting learning plans about Part B was a good idea to fuel students’ initiatives. It was obvious that she believes in a student-centered class.

There is a problem. Actually during her class, she also gave other assignments. So it could be suggested that in this part she list all the assignments so that students will not forget any.

3. Conclusion

In this English lesson, the teacher displayed almost all the qualities that made a good English teacher: patience, friendliness, kindness, passion, understanding, grasping wide scope of knowledge, fluent and beautiful oral English, excellent stage manner and so on. She usually walked around the classroom to help students or even joined in them while they doing discussions. It was worth mentioning that she was really an encouraging teacher, trying every means to motivate all the students. The way she interacted with students was excellent. She gave positive comments in a concrete way, making each student feel different. Moreover, varied intonation, vivid facial expression and even body language were used to stimulate students. Her language was quite witty and humorous, which added bucket-loads of cheer to the class. Consequently, a harmonious and relaxing atmosphere was established in the class.

Based on the objectives she presented at the beginning of the class, her teaching procedures were well designed step by step. Comprehensive skills were cultivated including reading, listening, speaking and writing. All forms of activities were used (meaning-focused and communicative), such as individual work, pair work, group work and the whole class work. Besides, she provided comprehensible output such as listening and reading. The class she presented to us was undoubtedly student-centered where she was a facilitator. Students had a lot of time talking and expressing themselves.

But teaching objectives were not classified clearly into knowledge, skills or emotion/attitude. In particular, the focus was on knowledge and skills parts while the emotional/attitude objective seemed to be totally ignored. In addition, there were too many close-ended questions, no open-ended questions. To solve these two problems, an open ended question “Is Volvo is Swedish, American or Chinese” posed after the text understanding will be a good solution. It can cultivate students’ critical thinking and guide them to think about globalization. Consequently, an emotional aim would be achieved.

In terms of teaching media, she used only PPT and textbooks and seemed too reliant on PPT. It was a pity that she did not even use the blackboard and chalks. They would be more effective especially during language points part.

References

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