

Observation and Reflection on an English Lesson

—The Great Famine in Ireland from 2013 Encyclopedia Britannica

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Abstract: This paper is an observation and reflection of an English lesson given by Professor Zou Weicheng from East China Normal University. In the first part, it presents the lesson plan according to the activities and performances in the 90 minutes' classroom observation. Then, it depicts detailed teaching and learning activities of the lesson and makes comments on them. Finally, a reflection and conclusion of the teacher's performance and the whole lesson are provided.

1. Introduction

The following paper is the detailed lesson plan listed systematically according to the lesson given by Professor Zou Weicheng. Comments and reflections are followed after each teaching procedure. In addition, some theoretical supports are provided in this paper. Generally, it is a wonderful lesson and well designed by Professor Zou Weicheng. When concerning with the student participants, it is highly likely that the students participating in the demo lesson are not randomly chosen. The participants' English level is Level C, the lowest level, whose language competence is quite similar to students from vocational colleges. As a part of the Teachers Professional Development, Foreign Language School in Shanghai Normal University spared no effort to help English teachers.

While observing the demo lesson, a systematic description and assessment of the teaching procedure provide a close-up picture of the teacher's performance, teacher-student interaction, and student-student interaction.

2. Description of Teaching Design

2.1 Introduction of Learning Material

The teaching material of the lesson is *The Great Famine* transcribed from Encyclopedia Britannica for freshmen majored in arts in Shanghai Normal University. The Encyclopedia Britannica is a good resource for learning, whose name has been synonymous with reliable and trustworthy information for generations. Founded in 1768, in Edinburgh, Scotland, it began with the encyclopedia of that name, created by two entrepreneurs and an editor. Over the years, its reputation grew as the greatest minds of each generation contributed work to subsequent editions. In the 20th century, the company expanded into new areas and new products, such as language instruction, educational media, the classics, and reference works in a host of different languages. In 1981 Britannica published its first digital encyclopedia—probably the first digital encyclopedia—and thus began a journey toward becoming an almost totally digital company. Today the Britannica.com Web site and many others published by EB and its divisions serve tens of millions of people around the world. They are updated daily.

This 90 minutes' lesson provides students with chances to practice reading, speaking, listening and writing skills. The article is logically structured with clear clues. The contents of the lesson can be naturally separated into five parts, as the video script is organized in five paragraphs. The first part is the warming-up part to attract students' attention and to help them step into the topic of that lesson. The first part is the introduction to the reason of the great famine. The second paragraph briefly introduces the disease that destroys both the leaves and the edible roots of the potato plant,

without which many Irish peasants had little food to eat and no money to pay their rent to the landowner. And in paragraph three, the great famine became widespread. Many people died of starvation. Although soup kitchens provided limited food rations and corn meal was imported, this was far less enough to prevent malnutrition. The fourth part explains the role the government plays in relief. The last part tells us the loss of population, as many Irish people fled their country to escape the famine to the United States.

2.2 Learner Analysis

There are about 30 students attending the class. These students are from art major with level C English, which is the lowest English level in Shanghai Normal University. Nevertheless, fortunately, the students are quite open-minded and they feel free to express themselves when they are required to answer questions. Noticeably, they are willing to learn and always take notes without being reminded by the teacher and they prefer to work in pairs and groups. Although Professor Zou did not know the students before class, the relationship between the teacher and students is friendly and less formal, which successfully facilitates the class activities.

3. Teaching Procedures

3.1 Step 1 Warm up and Lead-in

Before class begins, Professor Zou presented a world map and wrote down some keywords on the blackboard. Then, he asked students a question: "Do you know where Ireland is?" Several students can answer this easy but attention-attracted question. One boy student answered loudly and clearly and he pointed Ireland on the map in front of the whole class. Then, then, another question was aroused: "How many words do you know?" Students were required to work with a partner to study the vocabulary below and imagine a devastating disaster or a story on these expressions.



Evaluation

The warm-up part consisted of two small activities, all of which link perfectly and naturally with each other. Those questions the teacher asked and the pictures projected on the screen are closely related to the learning topic, which successfully aroused students' interest and instructed them directly to the topic. The teacher not only got well prepared for teaching with an acceptable pace of teaching, but also selected carefully and logically the keywords from the teaching material. This is a very good way to get the whole class hooked on the topic.

Wen Qiufang (2017) stated clearly in her production-oriented approach (POA) that there should be three steps in teaching procedure: motivating, enabling, and assessing, in which the teacher played a role as a facilitator to guide, design and scaffolding.

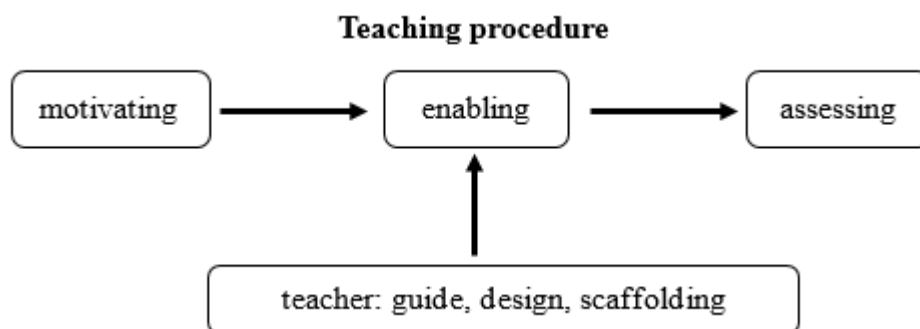


Fig.1

Professor Zou motivated the students well from the very beginning of the class, and gave students an acceptable and comprehensive input to arouse their interest and build a freedom on learning climate through pair work before teacher checked the answers.

3.2 Step 2 Interaction

Task 1: First Version Story

Vocabulary Brainstorming

The teacher guided the students to finish task 1: before you watch the video, study the vocabulary below with your partner, imagine a devastating disaster or a story based on the expressions he wrote on the blackboard. Then Professor Zou explained the keywords one by one. The first word he explained is *ration*; the teacher told the students his own experience on ration by his story telling: “when I was in your age, I always feel hungry, why? Because I was given the ration of food 1 jin each day, it sounds enough today, but in 1960s, we do not have enough meat and lack of oil, so 1 jin rice is not enough for me at all. Now can you guess the meaning of the word ration now?” Most of the students gave a positive response by nodding. When it went to *famine*, the teacher invited the students to give a synonym of *famine*, and the students said *hungry*, here the teacher encouraged the students to give the noun of *hungry*, the teacher guides the students clearly and logically. Moreover, the teacher raised another question: “can you think another word *starvation*?” at the same time, he wrote *starvation* down on the blackboard, most of the students took notes. Then, the teacher asked another two questions: “do we have land owner in our country? Who owns the land?” in order to help the students know better about the relationship between *landowner* and *tenant farmers*. Moreover, the teacher invited students to explain *crop failure*, *relief* and *soup kitchen* in English. The students are required to make a sentence by *interfere*, when students made a mistake, the teacher did not point his mistake but repeat the correct sentence according to the student’s sentence and invited him to make another sentence, which was correct after repetition. In addition, the teacher leaded the whole class to read all words loudly. Through this activity, the students have learned the new words and expressions.

Evaluation: Comprehensible input

This vocabulary brainstorming aims to help students grasp the new words and expressions through various types of ways such as storytelling, questioning, comparing and adapting the language to students’ acceptable level. To ensure that every student have a general understanding and know some background information, the teacher introduced each word in English. It is helpful for students to have anticipation about what kind of story they were going to make up. Moreover, the teacher gave her instruction clearly, before the students began to complete their task. It helps students to imagine the whole picture of the story more easily and systematically. Rather than using the mechanical way of doing exercise and checking, the teacher taught vocabulary in an interesting and learnable way. After each question, the teacher gave students a chance to think twice to ensure their understanding and enhanced their language learning.

The teacher used open-ended question type in this session. And he employed corrective feedback in repairing the students’ language errors and provided the feedback in the engaged communication. Repair plays a crucial role in improving students’ language acquisition. While checking the

meaning of these expressions, the teacher not only used pictures to offer more background information about the article, but also expanded students' vocabulary by providing more collocation and sentence examples related to the teacher's own experiences. Through adapting teaching language to students' acceptable level, the teacher maximized the students' engagement in class, which verified Krashen's Input Hypothesis (Krashen, 1985). It is a hypothesis proposed by Krashen, which states that in second or foreign language learning, for language acquisition to occur, it is necessary for the learner to understand input language, which contains linguistic items that are slightly beyond the learners' present linguistic competence. Learners understand such language using cues in the situation. Eventually the ability to produce language is said to emerge naturally, and need not be taught directly. The input hypothesis relates to acquisition, not learning. We acquire by understanding language that contains structure a bit beyond our current level of competence ($i+1$). This is done with the help of context or extra-linguistic information. When communication is successful, when the input is understood and there is enough of it, $i+1$ will be provided automatically. Production ability emerges. It is not taught directly.

Theoretically, the classroom can be an efficient place to achieve at least the intermediate levels rapidly, as long as the focus of the class is on providing input for acquisition. Outside world can supply more input. Professor Zou selected words carefully to establish a learning environment that a little beyond the students' English level in order to help them acquire input+1 language.

Pair Work

The students are required to work with a partner to report a story according to the keywords they just have learned by a question: "Can you use these words to make up a story in 5 minutes?" Moreover, the teacher went around the classroom and encouraged the students to talk with each other. The teacher went to one pair and asked a question: what do the land owners do? In addition, he repeated the expression *interfere with* again to highlight the importance of the correct collocation. Then, the teacher went to another pair and asked what their story is, and he listened to the student patiently and interacted positively through praising students. He went to the third pair whose English level was lower than the first two pairs, so the teacher helped them to make up their own story.

Then, he went to another pairs and gave instructions. He controlled the topic and time well in this part. He invited two students to give a presentation in front of the whole class.

Evaluation:

The teacher asked the students to work in pairs to make up their own story. When the students were making efforts to finish the task, the teacher wandered around the classroom and paid attention to their progress. During the checking of their practice, he gave timely hints when a student's answer was not very accurate. This activity practices students' collaborative ability and oral English. The teacher paid close attention when the students were trying to making up the story. He praised those who spared no efforts on practicing. In addition, when finding one who misunderstood the instruction, he made further instruction patiently. However, the number of the students are a little bit larger, in which the teacher could not instruct each pair and provided a scaffolding for each pair. If possible, 20 students in an English class will be better in SLA.

Story Reporting

Two students were invited to report their stories. The teacher listened carefully and patiently and helped the students when they had difficulty in expressing in English, and then he raised a question after the students' report: "Are their stories reasonable? I will give you five more minutes to make up the story again after two students share their stories." The teacher used the world map again to highlight the location of the story.

Evaluation:

The teacher listened carefully, took part in the presentation of each presenter, and gave suggestions on how to make up the story reasonably. It provided students with a good opportunity to express in English and deliver a presentation in public. Those who caught this chance benefited a lot, as the teacher gave specific suggestions on their stories. Perhaps, if the teacher interviewed the presenter in class about their feelings of this task, more students will be more active in class.

Task 2: New Version Story

In this activity, the teacher asked the students to make up the new version story. The teacher wandered around the classroom and paid attention to their progress. He went around the classroom and gave proper guide and instruction when students are doing practice. He gave compliment to those who work hard on their story. And then a girl student volunteered to report their new version story. He took notes while the student delivered her presentation. He noticed that the student had problem in using passive voice, so he wrote down the sentence in passive voice on the blackboard, triggered their interest and paved the way for their further comprehension of the story: “*The soup kitchens were set up to provide relief to the tenant farmer.*” The teacher used this sentence example to illustrate what was passive voice and its function of indicating objectivity. He repeated the Chinese meaning of objectivity to make emphasis. Then he required students to write down more sentences of passive voice with a time limit of 2 minutes. At the end of this activity, he raised a question: “Are you clear about the whole story now?” The students responded actively to show their interest in the story.

Evaluation: incidental learning, focus-on-form

The teacher interpreted passive voice in detail while he noticed students’ language gap through interaction. In this activity, language learning is quite incidental, which requires a comprehensible and high language competence for teachers. His detailed evaluation of the girl’ performance gave her and other students an idea of how to do better next time. Discourse long enough to establish a more humane channel. If a therapist can maintain communicative fields for deeply disturbed patients, a teacher can maintain similar fields for those students whose discourse strategies the teacher does not yet understand. With a field of communication established, teachers can continue to analyze students’ language by listening closely to the students, attending to their own response, forming closely to the students, and seeing them invalidated or validated in the next classroom activity. Chomsky (1975) states that “People learn language from pedagogic grammars by the use of their unconscious universal grammar.” (Chomsky, N. 1975. Reflections on language. New York: Pantheon.)

The teacher focuses on form while interaction. The incidental learning happened while the students cannot make appropriate output in passive voice. “Focus-on-Form” refers to a particular type of form-focused instruction-the treatment of linguistic form in the context of performing a communicative task.

Incidental focus-on-form involves the use of unfocused tasks, i.e. communicative tasks designed to elicit general samples of the language rather than specific forms. Such tasks can be performed without any attention to form whatsoever. However, it is also possible that the students and teacher will elect incidentally attend to various forms while performing the task. In this case, of course, attention to form will be extensive rather than intensive—that is, many different forms are likely to be treated briefly rather than a single form addressed many times. For example, while performing an opinion-gap task, students might make a number of different errors, which the teacher corrects, or students might feel the need to ask the teacher about a particular form, such as the meaning of a key word they do not know. In the case of incidental focus on form, the forms attended to are not pre-determined but arise naturally out of the performance of the task. Even when the focus on form is planes, incidental attention to a range of forms in addition to the targeted form can occur.

Table 1 Types of form-based instruction

Type	Syllabus	Primary focus	Distribution
1. Focus-on-forms	Structural	Form	Intensive
2. Planned focus-on-form	Task-based	Meaning	Intensive
3. Incidental focus-on-form	Task-based	Meaning	Extensive

By Rod Ellis, 2002

Task 3: Jigsaw Reading Pair Work

The teacher wrote clearly on the worksheet:

Work in pairs A and B

Study the five pictures below.

If you are A, study picture A, B, and C. then ask questions to B about Picture C and D. If you are B, study the five picture A-E. Ask questions about Picture B and C.

Finally, work together to make a complete story, and report it to the class.

Professor Zou printed the worksheet in different colors. Student A worked on the blue worksheet, while student B was given the yellow worksheet. And the teacher emphasized twice that the students are not allowed to show their worksheet to their partners. The teacher walked around the classroom to offer help to students.

Evaluation

The jigsaw reading pair work was designed to help the students' discourse language competence. At the beginning of the class, the teacher introduced the teaching objective: the students are expected to retell the story and have some reflections on this story. And the comprehensible input to the students are quite important here. The teachers should adjust their direction and language to the students' acceptable language. The teacher should be careful about the input in the classroom and make sure that the input has a good effect on learners' learning. Therefore, the teacher should modify his talk in order to make it accessible to students. Learners are not passive recipients of input but active negotiators of meaning. Therefore, teachers should create the classroom conditions in which the negotiation of meaning can take place. Professor Zou engaged the students a lot and kept them busy to maximize their output.

4. Reflections

Logically, well-designed, and diverse classroom activities reflect Professor Zou's delicate selecting of the teaching material. He applies CLT (Communicative Language Teaching) and teaches in a student-centered and comfortable pace.

The most impressive feature of Professor Zou's teaching lies in his excellent control of the whole class, though he did not know the learners before teaching. In addition, his skillful control and moving between content and language according to his own understanding and content-language model as below. He pointed out that the best class teaching effect is with open language and open content, in accordance with which the teacher spare no efforts to reach the perfect zone, through which can maximize the students' engagement.

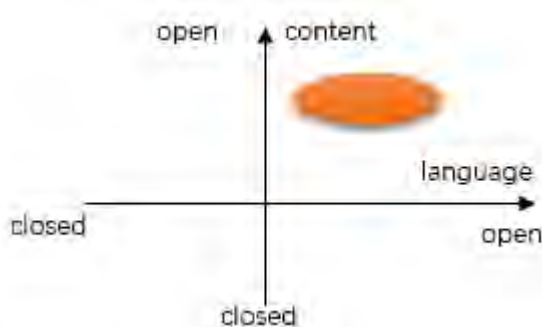


Fig.2 Content& Language Model by Zou Weicheng 2018

He predicted what kind of materials would arouse the students' interest and what their English levels are. His management of time while students were doing exercise guarantees the smoothness of reading and speaking activities. He used different colors in handouts to highlight the key information and different tasks and help students to follow what the teacher said. Clear objectives, high quality learning material, student-centered theory, and professional teaching staff are the major factors guaranteeing successful English teaching.

Moreover, Professor Zou is very skillful in guiding and praising students. While teaching, his passionate and powerful voice always attracts students' attention. The instructions he gave in the whole class embody his high language competence. And with different speeds of speaking, he patiently imparted knowledge and highlighted the difficulties and focuses of the lesson.

Additionally, the teacher attracted the students notice and attention consciously. He printed the

worksheet in different colors and he aroused the students' interest every three to five minutes. In notice hypothesis, in Second Language Acquisition, the students' concentration lasts for ten minutes in maximum, so the teacher should keep the learners busy and engage them with different ways. Professor Zou selected semi-open and open questions in order to provide a free learning condition to help them make modified output through pair work and teachers' timely feedback. The assessment framework is as follows:

Table 2 Assessment framework by Zou Weicheng 2018

	initiate	repair
self	a	b
other	c	d

He stated clearly that teaching was the process of setting up a semi-open framework to help the students negotiate meaning with the help of teachers and their partners. The highest level of feedback was self-initiate and self-repair. When students are in the other-initiate and self-repair, it means that they are closed to have learned.

However, if possible, the students are required to share their reflection on this story. The class is too large to give each student an opportunity to practice in class, which is quite essential in Second Language Acquisition. After class, if the students could write an essay to review this article, their output would be maximized.

In conclusion, a successful teaching design consists of four parts: planning loosely, selecting purposely, thinking deeply and joining widely. As a ESL English teacher, how to help the learners learn how to learn is a great challenging but also a potential chance to have a new look on Second Language Acquisition.

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