

Principles of Improving the Effect of Lead-in in Comprehensive English

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Abstract: *Comprehensive English is the main course of Business English major in higher vocational and technical schools, targeting at cultivating students' interest in learning Business English, improving their international business literacy, and helping them grasp the basic business knowledge. The ultimate goal is to develop students qualified for the international business exchange and communication. Stimulating student's interest in business knowledge is absolutely the first step to realize these purposes. Lead-in is, generally speaking, the key to arouse students' interest, so how to produce desirable effect of lead-in activities has become a difficult teaching point and even a vital research target. A questionnaire is conducted to identify the problems in the lead-in of this course, and based on the analysis of three major elements including the textbooks, teachers, the principles are explored to improving the lead-in effect.*

Keywords: *Comprehensive English; lead-in; teaching principles*

1. Introduction

Lead-in, referred to as “warm-up”, kicks off the lesson by engaging both teachers and students^[1]. During this interval, the teacher ought to be teaching content oriented and design teaching activities pertinent to the unit with multimedia resources, such as videos and images, hereby fostering students' active participation.

The primary objectives of lean-in encompass two. One, intrinsic in nature, is to capture students' attention, igniting their interest in learning, fostering motivation, clarifying learning objectives. The other is centered on the performance of students and the teacher. They are expected to seamlessly and effectively assume their roles within the classroom teaching environment in a timely manner.

In summary, lead-in works as a foundational step for the entire class—a “preparatory action” for the forthcoming mental activities. Meticulously crafted lead-in activities have the potential to preemptively captivate students, laying a robust foundation for a good class. The effect of lead-in, so to speak, has a direct and profound impact on that of the course^[2].

2. Analysis of current status of the effect of lead-in in Comprehensive English

Comprehensive English stands as a cornerstone for vocational students majoring in Business English, spanning the first and second years of college. The author has undertaken the responsibility of teaching Class 2 and Class 3 in the year 2022 and have now completed the teaching of 4 books. Class 2 comprises 43 students, including 38 female students, while Class 3 consists of 40 students, with 36 female students. Their ages range between 18 and 19 years old. These two are experimental classes.

To assess the effect of lead-in conducted in this course, a total of 83 questionnaires are distributed. The questionnaire includes 15 questions, aiming at evaluating the effect of lead-in activities in terms of forms, objectives, and student participation. Remarkably, all 83 questionnaires are returned with a 100% recovery rate. The following is the analysis based on the insights gleaned from the questionnaire data.

2.1. Diverse activities but lacking freshness

When asked “Are lead-in activities various in the form? Please list in detail your favorite forms”, close to 80% of the students believe “quite rich” or “very rich”. Video is hugely favored by 77% of students, case study by 62 and English song by 60%. Additionally, discussion and brainstorming are mentioned by 44% and 40% respectively. These findings indicate lead-in is designed to be quite diverse

in form. However, the data has also revealed that students feeling “not very interesting” or “quite common” account for 20%. Lack of novelty makes it challenging for students to concentrate on the lesson long.

2.2. Engaging topic but low participation

Questions regarding the lead-in topics has two: “Do you find the topics appealing? Why?” and “Are you free to express your ideas on these topics? Why?” For the first question, over 90% of the students feel the topics appealing, and the reasons are many, for example, “integrate business knowledge into daily topics”, “topic subjects are typical, for example, companies like Xiaomi, Huawei, Apple” and “open to discuss, stimulating, and thought-provoking”.

Unlike other foundational subjects, English is a practical course where language skills need to be cultivated and enhanced through practice. Therefore, students’ participation makes a difference in its teaching effect^[3]. However, students’ participation is not desirable as is showed in the second question. More than 60% are unable to express themselves in response to open-ended questions. Such inability is primarily attributed to a prevalent problem that is their limited knowledge coupled with their weak oral skills. Despite the teacher’s efforts to integrate business professional knowledge into everyday life, the complexity of the topic presents challenges. Consequently, students encounter difficulties in participating in topic discussions, ultimately diminishing their enthusiasm and resulting in reduced engagement.

2.3. An emphasis on lead-in but unreasonable time allocation

The answers to the question “Are lead-in activities conducted every class” are “usually” or “basically every class”. Teachers prioritize leading the new topic in a dynamic and captivating manner, rather than relying on dry, conventional methods. Engaging introductions are pivotal in capturing students’ attention and creating a relaxed, harmonious atmosphere conducive to effective learning.

When asked “What do you think is the proper time allocation for lead-in?” 86% of students agree “10-15 minutes”. But they unanimously express concerns about “Lead-in, especially for the first class of a new unit, is excessively lengthy”. A proper time allocation for the lead-in is crucial. If it drags on too long, students lose interest and become bored, and if too short, it may fail to capture students’ attention^[4]. Unfortunately, that lead-in time for Comprehensive Course is not well controlled, and students, influenced by numerous lead-in activities and excessive knowledge extension, naturally can’t grasp the key points and, over time, may feel fatigued, leading to distractions. This, to a certain extent, erodes students’ patience and enthusiasm, contradicting the initial purpose of lead-in.

The above survey results indicate that lead-in has achieved some commendable outcomes like the offering of diverse forms and engaging topics that largely spark students’ interest. There are still notable concerns whether the lead-in is fresh, easy to understand and conducted in proper time. Failure to address these issues could significantly undermine the effectiveness of lead-in activities.

3. Problem analysis of lead-in effect in Comprehensive English

A profound self-reflection is conducted on the problems mentioned above for the purpose of tracing the root causes. There are three factors leading to the poor effect of lead-in when applied in the Comprehensive English: textbooks, the teacher and students.

3.1. Textbooks

Integrated Course is taken as the textbook for Comprehensive English course, a part of the New Standard Vocational Business English series, consisting of 4 books. The series textbook places emphasis on both skills and business, language and culture, as well as science and practicality, working on enhancing students’ proficiency in business language and their understanding and application of business knowledge.

Book 1 and 2, focusing on cultivating students’ business awareness and humanistic qualities, cover a wide range of topics such as online fraud, service quality at McDonald’s, gender inequality in the workplace, and business ethics. These topics are closely related to students’ daily lives, and even topics like business ethics, which are somewhat specialized, are commonly discussed online. However, what bothers teachers is how to integrate ideological political elements into those topics while ensuring they are interesting and engaging. The aim of such integration is to stimulate students’ critical thinking and

cultivate their good understanding of business ethics.

Topics in Book 3 and 4 are more specialized, as exemplified in corporate culture with Apple, Google, and Microsoft as focal points, Satyam's sensational marketing fraud, and Warren Buffett's investment style. Compared to the previous two books, these topics are less commonplace and somewhat more complex. Students' limited knowledge in these areas also increases the challenge.

3.2. Teachers

The teacher acts as the creator, participant, and facilitators of lead-in activities, whose effect largely hinges on the quality of the teacher. Whether the lead-in activities are designed reasonably to truly arouse students' curiosity while also ensuring the integration of knowledge and culture, and whether they foster an inclusive and lively classroom environment, the teacher is the key factor. Young teachers are taken as research subject here.

Young teachers overly depend on textbooks. They tend to strictly to established teaching objectives of textbooks. Therefore, it is difficult for them to jump out of the conventional teaching ideas to design more creative lead-in activities.

Young teachers fail to control the difficulty of the lead-in activities within an appropriate range. For more desirable teaching effect, they design lead-in activities beyond the students' ability, but without considering their actual level. As a result, students remain silent in these "carefully designed" lead-in activities.

Young teachers overlook the diversity among students. Students vary greatly, not only in personality traits but also in learning preferences and English proficiency. The same lead-in activity may achieve different effects. Young teachers are inflexible and may have difficulty adapting their teaching methods to accommodate the varied needs of their students.

Young teachers are unable to manage the time allocated for lead-in activities well. Due to their lack of experience, they are likely to encounter difficulties in time management, attempting to cover too much content in a short span. For that reason, activities in lead-in are excessively dense.

3.3. Students

Effective language teaching shouldn't go against natural processes but follow them; it shouldn't hinder learning but facilitate it. Students shouldn't follow the lead of teachers and textbooks but guide them^[5]. Students are supposed to be placed great emphasis. Here is the related analysis of the targeted students in terms of their personality traits and the degree of proactive learning.

Generation Z students are born in a digital age, and their personality traits have both positive and negative aspects. On one other, heavily affected by social media, they are quiet outgoing and derive pleasure from social interactions and viewpoint sharing. Besides, they develop a keen interest in group activities such as role-playing and video-shooting tasks. On the other hand, being engrossed in short clips on platforms like TikTok, they cannot stay focused on a task for an extended period. In other words, their attention spans are comparatively short.

In summary, they prefer lead-in activities with emoticons and video inserts, as they offer strong interactivity and visual appeal. Additionally, they welcome simple, straightforward questions.

When it comes to proactive learning, there are notable differences among different academic years. Freshmen typically demonstrate the highest level of proactive learning, followed by juniors, while sophomores tend to show relatively lower levels, and seniors the lowest^[6]. The higher the proactive learning is, the livelier the classroom atmosphere is and more productive discussions are. Topics in Book 4 are far away from students' everyday life. For sophomores, whose proactive learning are diminishing to large extent, these topics become even less appealing.

4. Principles and their application in lead-in for better effect

The following principles are proposed to address the existing problems in lead-in of Comprehensive English based on a targeted analysis for better effect. The detailed application of these principles is as follows.

4.1. Content-oriented

The lead-in should closely align with the teaching content, which is the primary principle. Teachers should adhere to the content-oriented teaching principle by designing lead-in activities around the unit subject, ensuring they are appropriate in detail and length.

Unit 6 *Investment* in Book 4 takes Warren Buffet as the subject, introducing his investment philosophy. The teacher needs to lead the concept of investment, the success of Warren Buffet as a celebrated investor, and, most importantly, help students realize the risks associated with investment through his failures in investment.

Firstly, a video clip from *Broken Girls* where Caroline, who has owned a start-up, seeks investment from her aunt is used, and the teacher asks the question “*What is Caroline doing?*” to lead the concept of investment.

Then, the second question comes, “*Who do you know are famous inventors?*” Generally speaking, the first investor coming into students’ minds may be “*Warren Buffett*”. The teacher posts a discussion topic “*What do you know about him?*” on Learning Pass, an online learning platform, and students work in pair for his basic information such as age, birthplace, nickname, success and failure on his investment history in 10 minutes and enter their searching results online.

The teacher works as a helper in explaining the cultural connotation of “*Oracle of Ohama*”, and letting students ponder over what lesson they learn from him since even Warren Buffet fails to invest, which is an attempt to establish the awareness that “*No one is perfect*”, “*Investing is profitable and meanwhile risky*”.

Finally, with a consideration that students may name other investors, the teacher requires the students to identify a Chinese celebrated investor and then briefly introduce this investor online. With the guidance of content-orient teaching principle, this activity shall not exceed 5 minutes shorter than that of Warren Buffet since it is not the focus of this unit but barely a supplement.

4.2. Student-centered

The student-centered principle means great respect for differences among students and the delivery of tailored instruction. So, the diversity of students’ personalities and English proficiency in lead-in design should be considered.

Unit 2 *Society* of Book 2 is about gender inequality in the workplace. There are two activities for lead-in. For Class 1 and 2, activity 1 is the same. The teacher leads the lesson by playing Taylor Swift’s song *The Man* and asking “*Which lyrics impress you most?*” The repeated lyrics “*And I’m so sick of them coming at me again. Cause if I was a man, then I’d be the man*” convey a clear message, making it easy for students to understand that the song is an attempt to advocate for women’s rights and interests.

Given the characteristics of Class 2 and Class 3 students, Activity 2 is conducted differently for each class. In Class 2, where students have a strong foundation and excel in critical thinking but are more introverted, more written or individual reflection tasks are necessary to allow for thoughtful responses. An online discussion “*In what ways or in which aspects of society does gender inequality exist? Please provide examples.*” is given online and students need to enter their answers in 5 minutes. In contrast, for Class 3 students who are more active but have weaker English proficiency, more teacher-led discussions and scaffolding are needed. Students discuss the same topic in groups. Before discussion, the teacher guides them to reflect on various aspects such as family roles, the workplace, education, etc. Examples include “*full-time housewives*”, “*unequal pay for equal work*” and “*insulting language in Chinese*”. Sentence structures are given as reference. After group discussions, representatives from each group share the results publicly.

4.3. Fun combined with practicality

Arousing students’ interest is the starting point for achieving all objectives, and what successfully stimulate students is what they are familiar with since they tend to resonate more with real-life situations [7]. Therefore, lead-in design should adhere to the principle of combining fun with practicality. Teachers should ensure the lead-in interest to greatly motivate students and, incorporate familiar topics, experiences, and cultural references into teaching.

Unit 4 *Banking* in Book 4 centers on various loan services provided by banks. The following are to

be achieved through lead-in activities: to introduce fundamental services of banks including depositing, withdrawing, transferring money and providing loan as well, to popularize the types of bank loans, to educate students to be beware of online lending such as naked loans.

Firstly, a case, “*Li Hua is about to get married, and the bride price is up to RMB 500,000. Unfortunately, he now has only 20,000 in hand. How to help him out?*”, is offered in Learning Pass for discussion with a duration controlled within 3 minutes. Students are expected to work on this case and get Li Hua out of this financial trouble, and they may suggest Li Hua to “borrow money”.

Then, the teacher asks “*Where can he borrow the money?*”. Students’ responses contain “*from friends, parents*”, “*usury*” or “*Perhaps the bank loan is the most helpful*”. What is to be clarified is that borrowing usury is illegal, and the borrowers, generally speaking, bear severe consequences, and that loans are a fundamental service provided by banks.

Finally, the teacher plays a video, asking students to summarize the types of the bank loans rather than directly asking them to answer this question. With knowledge input, the difficulty of outputting knowledge is reduced significantly.

5. Conclusion

It is believed that textbooks, teachers, and students are key factors affecting the lead-in effect in light of the problems existing in Comprehensive English course. Textbooks serve as a reference for designing lead-in activities. Students’ personalities vary from person to person, and evolve dynamically. Thus, implementing effective lead-in activities becomes a formidable challenge. As for teachers themselves, by thoroughly understanding the textbooks and gaining insight into students’ individualities, they will accumulate experience through repeated lead-in exercises. Also, a profound reflection on these experiences enables them to capitalize on strengths and address weaknesses, continuously enhancing their lead-in skills for a more satisfying effect. Certainly, classroom lead-in is an art that requires constant refinement. There is no one-size-fits-all method. Teachers must be pragmatic and develop tailored lead-in strategies.

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