How to Have a Good Lead-in in English Classrooms

Liu Jingxia, He Jing

China Three Gorges University

ABSTRACT

Lead-in is the first and most basic teaching step in English classrooms, and is important for efficient teaching. With an appropriate lead-in, students will be motivated and become more concentrated and interested in English classes. Based on the previous studies and the author's own teaching experience, the paper gives some principles and strategies for designing efficient lead-ins. The author hopes the present study will bring enlightenment to English teachers.

1. Introduction

Lead-in is the first stage of classroom teaching, which is about 3-5 minutes at the beginning of a new lesson or before presenting new knowledge. "It is a technique used by teachers at the beginning of a presentation to prepare students to learn and establish a communicative link between the learners and the information about to be presented (Arendas, 1998: 240)." As is known to all, words like "front", "beginning" and "first time" can attract a person most. It is because of "the first effect", and the function of "the first impression". This kind of phenomenon is called "primacy effect" in psychology (Yan, 1999). As the proverb says: "A good beginning is half done." Similarly, a good lead-in is a key factor for successful teaching. It can initiate students' thinking and arouse their desire for knowledge, serving as a magnet to draw students into the lesson and help students get a clear idea of what are going to learn. It also contributes to formation of good classroom atmosphere, helping students establish a positive mental state or attitude of readiness. Therefore, it is important for teachers to design effective methods for leading-in to arouse students' interest in the class immediately, by which the whole procedure can certainly go smooth. This paper provides some strategies of leading-in and hopes they will benefit English teachers.

2. Related Studies on Lead-in

The studies on lead-in can be dated back to 1970s. C · Turney (1975) pointed out that it is very important to attract students' attention and cultivate their desire for learning at the beginning of teaching. He put forward the functions of leading-in: gaining attention, arousing motivation, setting up a teaching target, structuring and making links. G · Roger & S · Walters (1983) stated that the lead-in language should make the communication between teachers and students free and lively. He suggested a variety of methods of lead-in, for example, socializing, which is based on the real life situation, and inducing, which can lead students inductively to solve the problems the teacher give them and construct the internal links of the knowledge through the guiding of the teacher.

James M · Cooper (1992) pointed out that the ultimate goal of lead-in is to stimulate the interest of students for learning and their desire to participate in the class activities. Arendas (1998) emphasized that lead-in is crucial for the structure of the whole class teaching, which plays an important role for the learning and the motive. Robert E · Slavin (2004) gave requirements to design lead-in: 1) Lead-in should attract students' interest, and 2) teachers should provoke their curiosity and make them be interested in the new contents.

Some Chinese scholars and educators also notice the important role of lead-in in EFL classrooms. Hu Shuzhen (1996) thought that lead-in, as an important link in the classroom teaching, can be at the beginning of a lesson, and sometimes is throughout teaching. She described the functions, types and basic requirements of lead-in. Liu Xianguo (2004) studied optimized lead-in language and regarded the language of lead-in as an art, like "the first hammer knocking in the minds of students or like the magnet drawing their attention"(p.17). Li Rumi (2000) stressed that lead-in is the key link of the classroom teaching and lead-in in different characteristics would produce different functions. Fu Jianming (2005) pointed out that lead-in can cultivate students' motive for learning and create fine learning and teaching environment, which influences the quality and efficiency of teaching.

All the above researchers emphasize and highlight the importance of lead-in in language teaching.

3. The Principles of Lead-in

It is very important to follow some principles to design lead-in. Some researchers (e.g. Hu Shuzhen, 1996; Willis, 1996; Yan Chengli, 1999; Slavin, 2004) have promoted some principles of designing lead-in. The author summaries them as follows:

1) Being interesting
The starting point of teaching is to stimulate students' learning interest. Psychologically, interest is a kind of positive emotion that comes into being during the process of the ways of knowing. Interest in learning can lead to positive social interaction with members of the groups (Gardner & Miller, 1998). An interesting lead-in can stimulate students' learning motivation. Learners' interest and motivation always take up a central place in language learning.

2) Being relevant
Designing lead-in must be based on the settled teaching aim and syllabus. The aim and syllabus are the most important components to be considered in the design. The materials chosen for lead-in should be related to the aim and syllabus of the lesson. Besides, the design of lead-in should deal with the assumption about the content and context for teaching and learning, and deal with how learners are expected to learn and how teachers are expected to teach with respect to a particular set of instructional

materials.

3) Being student-centered

Lead-in should be designed on the basis of students' needs and conducted according to students' cognitive and physical development. There are different levels and characteristics in different students, which requires teachers to design lead-in with proper techniques to meet their different needs. It helps to build up a bridge between teachers and students and arouse their learning motivations and form a harmonious learning environment as well.

4) Being brief

It is not good to take up too much time when teachers are leading in a new lesson. It is usually 3-5 minutes. If teachers spend longer time on lead-in, it will probably cause the unclear teaching aim or key points.

5) Being authentic and close to students' life

Canale (1983) stressed that being fully exposed to the authentic materials is one of key factors for language acquisition. Thus, the authentic materials in lead-in can genuinely improve students' interest. Life is the center of education, and teaching cannot be isolated from life. With authentic materials which students are familiar with, students can express themselves freely and build the confidence to interact with teachers as well.

The above are the basic guidelines for designing lead-in, although what kind of lead-in is very much a matter of personal preference.

4. The Strategies of Lead-in

How can we have an efficient and meaningful lead-in? Is there a best method to do so? There is no right answer so far, but there are some strategies that will help teachers make a good lead-in, although teachers do not have to take these as things that never change.

1) Situational lead-in

Situational lead-in creates authentic or situated learning which takes place in the setting similar with the actual life. Halliday (1964) held the view that when we acquire our primary language; we do so by learning how to behave in situations, not by learning rules about what to say. The goal of language teaching is to develop what Hymes (1972) referred to as "communicative competence", which involves being able to use language appropriately to a given social context. Teachers in communicative classroom will find themselves talking less and listening more. In situational lead-in, teachers set up a situation that students are likely to encounter in real life, which stimulates students' desire to communicate in their familiar settings. When using situational lead-in method, teachers should have the ability of acting. Only teachers

come into the situation firstly, and then students will follow.

2) Multi-media lead-in

With the development and popularity of computers and Internet in the information era, network technology plays an important role in education. The multi-media education gathers different pictures, texts, images, voices, etc. to display various information, which makes the lifeless knowledge interesting and abstract things concrete. Compared with the traditional teaching, multi-media lead-in has at least two advantages. First, multi-media can provide a great deal of real visualized stuff. The students can be promoted from the visualized stuff to their own understanding. Second, in multi-media lead-in, students can be activated by the harmonious, natural and relaxing environment and be led into the new lesson unintentionally and naturally, not feeling tired or boring. When using multi-media lead-in, teachers should choose the information relating to the lesson for slices of PPT.

3) Dialogue lead-in

Using dialogues is a good method to lead in a new lesson. Dialogues can be given between teacher and students or among students themselves on the topics like campus life, family, friends, hobbies, holidays, etc., as they are interesting topics for students. In dialogue lead-in, teachers should provide chances for students to chat, and necessarily, exert subtle influence to help students to complete the dialogues. By making dialogues, students can be directed into the new lesson naturally.

4) Revision lead-in

According to David Ausubel (1960), to learn meaningfully, students should relate new knowledge to what they have already known. Revision lead-in is to help students go over what they have already learned and acquired to link the new knowledge. In revision lead-in, teachers can explain the papers or exercises concerning what students have learned before, as they are important for the new lesson.

Although sometimes revision lead-in can be boring, it is also an effective way for leading-in.

5) Question lead-in

Question lead-in is probably the most common way in leading-in teaching. It is simple but effective to lead in a new lesson. "Questions to students in the course of the lesson serve many purposes, one of which is to prompt students to take the next mental step." (Slavin, 2004:223)Thus, a good teacher should be an effective questioner. In lead-in stage, teachers should be skillful in selecting appropriate questions for the subject matter and the purpose of the lesson. before presenting the new materials. By question lead-in, students' attention can be drawn to the lesson from the beginning.

6) Hot topic lead-in

In hot topic lead-in, teachers focus on hot topics at home and abroad. The class can

discuss these topics. Maybe the discussion only lasts a few minutes, but it is valuable. It is not only an exchange of information, but also an exchange of the views on the world events. It enables students to participate in class activities actively and also develop a good habit of concerning for currents events.

7) Storytelling lead-in
Funny and interesting stories can help students to develop positive attitude to learning. Storytelling lead-in is another important way to stimulate students' interest in learning. It can provide a meaningful and natural context for students to begin a new lesson. When teachers are telling stories, the language should be simple; the pronunciation should be accurate and the speed should be appropriate. In addition, the use of body language and facial expressions is very helpful for students to understand the stories. In order to make the lead-in part more interesting, teachers can also encourage students to tell stories. Telling stories can inspire their imagination, develop their own creativity and their speaking skill.

5. Conclusion

Lead-in, as the first teaching step of a lesson, is one of the most basic and important steps in English classroom and contributes to having a smooth and successful class. It is obviously a short period but can not be underestimated. If lead-in is well designed, it can quickly attract students' attention, stir up their learning interest, help them to clarify the purpose of the lesson and make them take an active part in class activities. Based on the previous studies and the author's own English teaching experience, the paper summaries some basic principles for designing effective lead-ins, and also suggests some strategies to have efficient lead-ins. It is hoped that this research will benefit English teachers.

References
Arendas, R. 1998. *Learning to Teach (The Fourth Edition)*. New York: The McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc., 240.

Ausubel, D. 1960. The Use of Advanced Organizers in the Learning and Retention of Meaningful Verbal Material. *Journal of Educational Psycholog*y, 51, 267-272.

Canale, M. 1983. From Communicative Competence to Communicative Language Pedagogy. In Richards, J.C & Schmidt, R. W. (eds.). *Language and Communication*. London: Longman.

Cooper, J. 1992. *Second Language Learning and Language Teaching (The Fourth Edition)*. New York: D.C. Health and Company.

Fu Jianming. 2005. *The Principles of Education and the Technology of Teaching*. Guangzhou: Huangzhou Education Press.

Gardner, D & L. Miller. 1998. *Establishing Self-access Theory to Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Gower, R. & S. Walters.1983. *Teaching Handbook*. London: Heinmann.

Halliday, M.A,K et al. 1964. *The Linguistic Sciences and Language Teaching*. London: Longman.

Hu Shuzhen. 1996. *Teaching Techniques*. Changsha: Hunan Normal University Press.

Hymes, D. H. 1972. *On Communicative Competence*. Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press.

Li Rumi. 2000. *The Art of Teaching*. Jinan: Shandong Educational Press.

Liu Xianguo. 2004. *The Art of Stimulating Learning Interests*. Beijing: China Agriculture Press, 17.

Slavin, R. 2004. *Educational Psychology*. Beijing: Beijing University Press, 223.

Turney, C. et al. 1975. *Sydney Micro Skills*. Sydney: Sydney University Press.

Yan Chengli. 1999. *The Art of Teaching Language*. Beijing: Beijing Educational Science Press.

Willis, J. A. 1996. *Framework for Task-based Learning*. Harlow: Addison Wesley Longman Limited.

A brief bio: *Liu Jingxia* is an associate professor in English Department, College of Foreign Languages, Three Gorges University, in Hubei Province, China. She has English teaching experience of about twenty years. Her major fields of research are English teaching and discourse studies. She has published papers in Australian, English, American and Chinese journals.

He Jing is a lecturer in English Department, College of Foreign Languages, Three Gorges University, in Hubei Province, China. She has English teaching experience of about ten years. Her major fields of research is English teaching. She has published papers in some Chinese journals.

e-mail: clare04@126.com