

WELL BEGUN IS HALF DONE: KEEPING THE SPARKS FLYING DURING ENGLISH LESSONS

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Abstract: Opening plays a very crucial period in the course of a lesson. Just like other expressions to illustrate the energy it gives, the analogies could be “Love at the first sight”, or, “First impression (of you) is so exciting, the rest is up to you”. Lessons opening, when it is made beneficial to the students, serves as a fire trigger, providing them with strong power at the start, and sustains “eternal flame” till the end of the lesson. This article argues the rationale behind it and presents some ways of creating such lessons opening in the context of English language teaching.

Keywords: lesson opening, begin, engage, classroom, English lesson

Abstrak: Pembukaan memainkan periode yang sangat penting dalam pelajaran. Sama seperti ungkapan lain untuk mengilustrasikan energi yang diberikannya, analoginya bisa berupa "Cinta pada pandangan pertama", atau, "Kesan pertama (dari Anda) sangat menarik, sisanya terserah Anda". Pembukaan pelajaran, ketika itu bermanfaat bagi siswa, berfungsi sebagai api pemicu, memberi mereka kekuatan yang kuat di awal, dan menopang "nyala abadi" sampai akhir pelajaran. Artikel ini mengemukakan alasan di baliknya dan menyajikan beberapa cara untuk menciptakan pelajaran seperti itu dalam konteks pengajaran bahasa Inggris.

Kata Kunci: pembukaan pelajaran, mulai, terlibat, kelas, pelajaran bahasa Inggris

A. INTRODUCTION

Planning is such a crucial part of anyone's career. Just like writers need to plan a story and have marketing plans to sell their work, teachers always must have different kinds of attention grabbing activities and especially in the case when a lesson beginning backfires. In the context of teaching, in this case English language teaching, planning covers opening, sequencing, pacing, and closure. Together with incidences of interaction of teacher/students and classroom management/administration, planning make up more holistic aspects of the lesson called external features (Howard, 2010).

To teach English in Indonesia's setting, where it serves as a foreign language is generally not a simple matter, let alone to make students stay "awake" during the whole lesson. Certain teaching insights and skill are badly required to get students engaged in the entire lesson. Within his career as a university teacher working with teacher trainees, a trainee teacher's assessor, and a speaker in many occasions, the writer frequently notices trainee teachers and classroom practioners experiencing problems in the teaching and learning they held that the writer believed due to poor starts of the lessons. Many of them found it difficult to grasp students' interest even from the start. Then, the question is: What can an EFL teacher endeavour to have good starts of his/her lessons so that the students are on fire since the start and keep "burning" till the end of the class?

B. DISCUSSION

The most crucial part of a lesson occurs during the first five to fifteen minutes. This period belongs to the opening of a lesson. It consists of the procedures the teacher uses to focus the students' attention on the learning aims of the lesson. This is the general goal, that can be broken down into a variety of purposes. According to Richards and Lockhart (1996), specific lessons openings can be used to:

1. help learners to relate the content of the new lesson to that of the last or previous lessons (cognitive contribution)
2. assess relevant knowledge (cognitive contribution)
3. establish an appropriate "set" in learners: i.e., prepare them for what is to follow (cognitive or affective contribution)
4. allow "tuning-in" time, especially important if learners come from a radically different environment (pragmatic contribution)
5. reduce the disruption caused by late-arriving students (pragmatic contribution).

A lesson opening can be used for one of the purposes mentioned above or its combination. Whatever the purpose is, the key is to keep the "sparks flying,". To keep the sparks flying it all really depends on *how* the teacher can spark up his classroom right away. In other words, to keep the sparks flying during the lesson the teacher needs to determine the kind of activity or strategy to begin the lesson. Here are a number of options for the activities to begin a lesson.

1. Describing the goals of a lesson.
2. Stating the information or skills the students will learn.
3. Describing the relationship between the lesson/activities and a real-world need).
4. Describing what students are expected to do in the lesson.
5. Describing the relationship between the lesson/activities and forth-coming test or exam.
6. Beginning an activity without any explanation.
7. Pointing out links between this lesson and previous lessons.
8. Stating that the activity the students will do is something they will enjoy.
9. Doing something in order to capture the students' interest and motivation.
10. Reviewing learning from a previous lesson.

11. Previewing the lesson.

According to a study by Aung and Tepsuriwong (2017) activity numbers 10 (Reviewing) and 11 (Previewing) are two commonest ways used by teachers under their investigation. However, those activities do not stand alone as lesson beginnings. All their research subjects began their lessons with greetings. Oops! All teachers do this. So, it is unfair to consider classroom opening. Each of the subjects in the study of Aung and Tepsuriwong used two to five activities in the lessons openings. No one went straight to the main lesson. They argued that those opening activities were important for establishing the affective and cognitive frameworks in their lessons.

Up to this point, there is still no guarantee that the lesson opening is able to keep the sparks flying till the end of the lesson. If the activity engages students right away, there will be enough “sparks” to fly for the rest of the lesson and your job will be relatively easy. If the activity, however, is not challenging or repetitious (the students would think: “We’ve done this before”, or “It’s already familiar to me”) there will be “lulls” that often result in discipline problems. Therefore, the warm up activity, pre-teaching activity, or whatever the suitable term is should be well-prepared for an effective teaching and learning process in classroom.

It is hard to believe that students will engage in the lesson if the teacher begins it by using greetings as the commonest way of all and checking attendance. It is going to be worse still if the teacher calls students by name one by one. Sad to say that this has been a common practice. Checking attendance should not take time, or students will lose interest. It is a good idea for a teacher to ask who is/are absent only instead.

Students are not likely to be interested in the lesson just right from the start if the teacher begins the lesson directly with describing the goals of the lesson. Obviously enough, activity number 9 (Doing something in order to capture the students’ interest and motivation) in itself is not final. Opening activities like describing the relationship between the lesson/activities and a real-world need will be much meaningful. You surely still need to know how: How will a teacher do something to capture the students’ interest and motivation? So, finally, we have come to creative ways, involving certain techniques, media, and activities, or its combinations. Sometimes, the terms techniques, media, and activities overlap. That is not an important matter. The rest of this paper is dedicated to the discussion of ways or techniques to keep the sparks flying during the whole lesson.

1. Prediction – because it is challenging. The nature of prediction that is identical to possibilities enable students to try without fear of making mistakes (e.g. telling the next paragraph of a told story or written passage).

Prediction-based activities are many if a teacher is creative and fond of experimenting with new techniques. In listening or speaking class, for example, a teacher may play a recording and stop it just at a particular point to ask what happens next (“What do you think will happen after this?”) or what the speaker says (“Can you predict what will the other person say?”). Of course, it requires wise consideration in the part of the teacher when preparing the technique as to which is the right point to stop (usually with the help of counter).

2. Guessing – because it is challenging and contains information-gap. There are many kinds of written and spoken puzzles. Printed puzzles, including crossword are easy to find in resource books. A creative teacher even can create his own simple puzzles for his classroom use. For *reviewing* vocabulary taught in the previous lesson a teacher can ask students in pairs to solve the same puzzle in limited time. Cards, including flashcards are also good media to arouse curiosity of the students. Flashcards

Once when starting a pronunciation class the writer assessed the students' relevant knowledge by using a mystery game. To let him know the students' mastery of sound /l/ I kept an object (i.e. a lipstick) in his hands, he gave the students clues and enthusiastically they tried to solve the mysterious object. Regardless of their final guess, they burst into laughter.

3. Games – generate fun. Example, correcting errors from pairwork error dictation (spelling errors), vocabulary games, grammar games, etc.

As part of my working experience as a pronunciation teacher, once the writer used a kind of chain whisper (Suwartono, 2016). He meant to assess consistency between perception and production of each member within a team. Two or three lines backwards are formed. Each team selects a head (standing at the front) and a tail (the last in the line). The heads are asked to listen directly to the speaker on the recording (eg. electronic dictionary installed to the laptop) through headsets. The heads then whisper what was just heard to the second student in their team.

The team whose tail raises hand the first and can correctly pronounce the word becomes the winner. However, when the pronunciation is not correct, then, the second to raise hand is invited to say his/her word. When he/she is right then the team is the winner; otherwise, the third is given opportunity to propose his/her word orally. An atmosphere of tension is immediately felt in the course of this game challenging both individual and team to achieve the goal. The teacher and the other students who do not belong to the fighting teams should keep eyes on every member of the teams to ensure a fair play. To make it more difficult, it is possible to provide unfamiliar words or extended units of phrases or sentences.

4. Visual methods – for at least 2 reasons: (1) they support meaning; and (2) they generate interest. Photos or concrete objects like images, pictures and hand movements, and gestures can be used. Computer and projector are helpful.
5. Physical warmer – because it is somewhat dynamic and challenging. Examples which can also be used include: throwing a ball back and forth as you ask and answer questions; a board race (racing in teams to write as many things in a particular category as you can on the whiteboard); and miming vocabulary or whole sentences for the other students to guess. If not carefully chosen problems may arise that is a lack of language being used, embarrassment with something that can seem childish, or students who do not really need to be warmed up in that way.

Those ways mentioned above are in line with lots of ideas and studies (e.g. Maulida, 2016) that share, say, EFL teachers should incorporate mystery into lessons, not repeat classroom material, create classroom games, give students choices, use technology, not take

teaching seriously, make lessons interactive, relate material to students' lives, etc. Lots of resource books that provide a collection of short, easily-prepared activities to supplement the longer teaching procedures that make up the main body of English lessons either the ones with specific areas, such as "Pronunciation Games" by Hancock or the ones with mixed contents, such as "Five-Minute Activities" by Ur and Wright (1992) are still accessible. The following are a few ideas to challenge your imagination or creativity:

1. You have some close up pictures of actors, actresses, artists, or celebs. Develop a mystery game from the pictures.
2. You have a few "as....as" similes such as as white as snow, as sweet as honey, and as quick as light. Develop material for a lesson opening.
3. Your students always have different order in many things, such as order of birthday, alphabetical order of family names, order of distance to school and so on. Imagine what you can do with this kind of order for your short activity before lesson.

Below are some creative ways of lesson openings for English language teaching along with the rationale behind them.

1. What's the Question?

Level: Any Level

Type of Activity: listening and speaking

Purpose: review question forms previously studied in class

Procedure:

Form two teams (three will work, but two seems to add just the right amount of competitive tension). Explain the game, with a few examples of answers in search of questions. Ask, 'What's the question?', and get students to correctly say the corresponding questions for your answer.

Have two players--one from each team--come to the front. Style it like a game show if you like, with the students standing side-by-side. If you have access to bells or buzzers, it's even more fun. Next, read an answer to a question and say, 'What's the question?' The fastest player to respond wins a point for her/his team. New contestants come to the front for a new round. Rationale of this game is this game forces the students to think backwards a little, so they must provide a grammatically perfect question. All too often, they are used to answering rather than asking questions, so this is challenging and useful as review.

2. Chain Spelling

Level: Easy to Medium

The teacher gives a word and asks a student to spell it, and then a second student should say a word beginning with the last letter of the word given. The game continues until someone makes a mistake, that is, to pronounce the word incorrectly, misspell it or come up with a word that has been said already, then he/she is out. The last one remaining in the game is the winner. This game can be made difficult by limiting the words to a certain category, e.g.. food, tools, or nouns, verbs, etc.

3. Sentence Race

Level: Any Level

A good game for large classes and for reviewing vocabulary lessons.

Prepare a list of review vocabulary words. Write each word on two small pieces of paper. That means writing the word twice, once on each paper. Organize the pieces like bundles, 2 bundles, 2 sets of identical words. Divide the class into 2 teams. get them to make creative team names. Distribute each list of words to both teams. every student on each team should have a paper. Both teams have the same words. When you call a word, 2 students should stand up, one from each team. The students must then run to the blackboard and race to write a sentence using their word. The winner is the one with a correct and clearly written sentence. This is always a hit with kids. For more advanced students, use tougher words.

C. CONCLUSION

As has been presented and discussed above, teaching and learning English as a foreign language needs extra energy – efforts. The finest selected lesson opening may compensate for the energy needed by either teacher or students. Right way of beginning English lessons gives the power to the students that may fade away, but not be gone before the lesson ends. In other words, once the teacher chooses the right lesson opening, there will be enough energy for the students to accomplish the lesson.

D. SUGGESTIONS

As teacher is supposed to access a lot of references relevant with this matter and attend inspiring workshop presentations to improve his/her insights into creative, innovative and better teaching-learning process.

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