

Academic English Program Classroom Observations

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Abstract

This observation paper includes descriptions and my comments about the Academic English Program (AEP) classes at INTO CSU during Spring 2012. The observations are a requirement for E 515 Syntax and the paper focuses only on syntax related topics. The observations provide detailed explanation of six grammar lessons for basic, intermediate, and advanced learners with reflections on each lesson.

Keywords: grammar, S+V agreement, tense, adverb, clause, progressive, gerunds

Academic English Program Classroom Observations

I observed six Academic English Program (AEP) grammar classes at INTO CSU during Spring 2012. I experienced how the knowledge that I learned from Syntax for EFL/ESL was presented in an actual ESL/EFL classroom. Through these six observations, I gained insights on how to teach abstract grammar to EFL/ESL learners and learned integrated teaching skills from experienced AEP instructors.

Basic Level Class Observation

Basic I

The first observation class was Basic Grammar and Communication. There were eight male students and all of them spoke Arabic. The grammatical topics were Subject + Verb agreement and *be*-verb questions. Because the majority of students started learning English beginning January 17th, most still have difficulty with using *Be*-verbs. The teacher tried to teach basic rules about S+V agreement and *Be*-verb questions using interesting and simple activities.

The teacher was good at using authentic expressions about the students' daily lives and other homework assignments, rather than relying only on a typical textbook. She began the lesson with greetings and asking, "Amal, what did you do yesterday?" His answer had a mistake, he said, "I play computer games." And she replied to him by saying, "You played computer games," emphasizing the word *played* with a higher pitch and strong stress to let him realize his error. Second, she let students write today's date and weather on the board to induce them to use *be* verbs without noticing they were doing it. They wrote the sentences using incorrect grammar like, "The weather it's nice." What was noticeable was how she corrected their errors. Instead of pointing out the errors about the sentence or punctuation directly, she

kept saying weird sentences containing the same errors as they did: “Ali He is nice,” “Hassan He is a student,” until they found the errors on their own. She used their homework for teaching grammar. She listed and presented their homework with examples of bad grammar such as *A: Is homework easy? B: Yes, he’s not./ A: Hathan and Nasrulla brother? B: No, he is not.* They were allowed to find the errors on their own. Through this relaxing use of familiar things, she tried to motivate students and warm up the class to participate for the remainder of the session.

She then used role-play to apply their learning into real life situations. Students practiced the *be* verb patten by answering the teacher’s questions: “Are you friends?” “Are they friends?” And then, they practiced the pattern with a partner. During this activity, she helped students to speak correctly.

The last skill she worked on used a textbook that had information missing on each page. Before this activity, she introduced her family tree as a way to show S-V agreement and use the family vocabulary they learned like grandfather, wife, and sibling, etc. What was remarkable was how she focused on each subject and verb to remind students of their agreement. There was a family tree in the book with missing information on each page. First, she let students fill in the blanks, which required using *Be* verb questions to obtain the answers. Next, she checked their answers by inducing their response: *Is Robert Susan’s father? Yes, he is.* Through the information gap activity, grammatical points were consolidated.

To sum up, I learned many things from this observation. The teacher used very authentic material based on the students’ daily experience and many teaching skills such as role-play and information gap to teach grammatical points efficiently. What I should bear in mind from the observation is to use inductive ways to teach grammar, relying on many example sentences to let students find the rules and correct their mistakes on their own. In addition, I got to know that

some mistakes derive from LI interference; In Arabic, nouns have a gender. Accordingly, *homework* is a male word, so they use the pronoun *he* for homework instead of *it*. Last but not least, I realized that the teacher's positive feedback and the classroom environment, such as the classroom rules and word wall, play a crucial role to facilitate student learning.

Basic II

There were seven students in the second observation class and all of them were from Saudi Arabia. The topic of the lesson was about shopping and the grammatical topics were present progressive, like *What are you doing?* and S+V agreement like *How much are~? or how much is~?*, which might be often used at a shop. Since all the students were from Saudi Arabia, the atmosphere was more like family and there was close rapport between the teacher and the students, which played a crucial role for the effective teaching and learning. Students started learning English recently, and they had difficulty with vocabulary and grammar. So, the teacher tried to teach students with an easy and clear teacher talk, role play, word games, and visual aids such as word cards and pictures.

She began by introducing today's teaching point by asking, "What did you do this weekend?" One of the students replied that he went shopping. The teacher asked him, "Did you go shopping? What did you buy?" The student answered, "Shirts, hat," showing his shirt and the hat. It was a perfect start for the lesson. The teacher let students write down the dialogue from the tape recorder and extracted key expressions from it like: A: *What are you doing?* B: *I'm going to the drugstore. What about you?* A: *I'm going to the bank.* She didn't mention the grammatical terms like present progressive here and I think she didn't need to at this level. Next, the teacher named many kinds of shops, using the textbook. Because the basic level students didn't know the meaning of a drugstore, or other shops, the teacher spent more time explaining

the meaning of the vocabulary compared to intermediate or advanced level instructors. Then, the teacher let students do role-play using the key expressions from the dialogue and present their role-play in front of the class. Through this activity, students could develop confidence as well as English proficiency.

Next, she asked students what was the most common question at a store and the students answered, “How much is it?” as the teacher anticipated. The teacher wrote two contrastive sentences on the board: (A) *How much ___ the books? / They ___ \$7.25.* (B) *How much ___ the book? / It ___ \$3.5.* to show the subject and verb agreement. Students found out the agreement rule from the teacher’s writing and applied it to the exercise in their practice book with their partner. Unfortunately, they had more difficulty with reading the numbers of the price in the practice book rather than S+V agreement. The students did role-play again in front of the class, this time with more confidence after the pair practice.

To sum up, the feature of this lesson was repetitive pattern practice without in-depth grammatical explanations, which might have made students bored with learning English. I think her lesson was well planned for the beginner level because it used many visual materials and easy directions so as not to distract the students’ concentration. In addition, the combination of grammar and conversation practice was good for students’ meaningful learning rather than only relying on grammar learning.

Intermediate Level Class Observation

Intermediate I

There were eleven students in the class, ten of them spoke Arabic, and the other one spoke Japanese. The grammatical topics were future tense with time clauses, present progressive, simple present with future meaning, and future progressive, which seemed to be a little tough for

L2 learners. They were intermediate students and had a basic knowledge of English; nevertheless, they still made many errors. But thanks to the teacher's well-planned teaching, they showed progress in the session through well-organized pattern practices.

First, after presenting aims of the lesson, the teacher let students write their homework on the board and read it. The structure of the homework was *time word + simple present + future adverbials, future tense*. At the beginning, the teacher proposed the concept of "time clause," saying, "It is composed of time word + subject + verb." She refocused the structure again and reminded them of the pattern. While explaining, the teacher referred to simple present as the future meaning despite its present form, this helped students to review what they had learned. Though the future meaning in the form of present might be hard to understand, the teacher helped students by using meaningful pattern practices from the assignment based on their personal writing.

She presented an IEP schedule using present progressive and present tenses. Referring to the schedule note, she explained the present progressive and simple present. By exposing her students to sample sentences with present progressive and simple present telling future, she helped her students get accustomed to that usage. For instance: (a) *We're going to a palace called EPIC*. (b) *The activity starts at 5:00*. She then explained present progressive in (a) refers to a planned event or definite intention whereas the simple present tense in (b) tells future in a sentence concerning events that are on a definite schedule or timetable. She then used this example: *My wife has an appointment with a doctor. She is seeing Dr. North next Tuesday*. One of the students asked about the usage of *is seeing*, saying it seemed ungrammatical. She explained the verb *see* doesn't mean visual, it means to meet or visit a doctor in this case. The question was worthwhile to be asked, and her answer was clear for the student who knew *see* as

a sensory verb. To consolidate this, she let students do pair work with verb cards. Through this activity, students could tell various indicators of the simple present tense and present progressive. Her inductive approach to present samples first and explaining the general rules seemed to be efficient in facilitating the students' understanding. Besides, tense and aspect are different from each other; she didn't mention the difference as most teachers do. If they are highly advanced students, teach the concept of tense and aspect is needed, but I'm afraid it can be confusing to students at this level. In spite of that, are we supposed to teach the concept of tense and aspect? We need to decide it depending on learners' level.

Considering the students' levels and needs, the teacher tried to cater to the students. For example, (a) *After I finish homework, I will go to Denver.* (b) *After I have finished homework, I will go to Denver.* These two tenses are really confusing to L2 learners. If the teacher had intended to explain it more, she could have given more specific explanations. Instead, she said, "If these are confusing, forget about have+pp." Another confusing example from the students' homework was: (c) *Tomorrow I will lunch.* (d) *Tomorrow I am going to eat lunch.* The teacher made it simple by saying, "They were close, so don't worry about that." I think these responses are really helpful to the students at the intermediate level. If we try to focus on the difference between present and present perfect, and between *will* and *be going to*, students might have difficulties to grasp the difference rather than focusing on today's structure. I think one of the teachers' abilities is to set up the appropriate levels of teaching based on the students' needs and levels.

Intermediate II

There were eight male students in this class and all of them spoke Arabic. The topic of the lesson was future tense, and it was made up of a warm-up activity using video clips, and two activities to practice future tense. At the beginning of the lesson, before entering the main teaching, the teacher reviewed the midterm papers on past tense. Through reviewing mid-term

questions, students got feedback about the past tense and consolidated the form and meaning of past tense again leading to connect with today's topic-the future tense.

The teacher started the lesson by asking, "What are you going to do this weekend?" She presented today's topic without the students hardly noticing. Her way of presenting the future tense and getting students motivated seemed to be perfect. After presenting five short video clips, she let students guess what was going to happen next. For example, after watching a man proposing to a woman in public at a sports stadium, students predicted what was going to happen next by using the modal *will* or phrasal modal *be going to*. The five video clips were so funny that students paid attention to them and wrote many funny sentences. The teacher introduced *will* and *be going to* in a simple way, focusing on different forms rather than explaining the difference in semantics of each. To be specific, the teacher explained there are two ways to talk about the future, using *will* and *be going to*. *Will* is the base form, *be going* allows *infinitive*, and *gonna* can be used in a casual way in regards to forms. She didn't mention grammatical terms such as modal or phrasal modal at all, considering her students' understanding.

The follow up activities were really well organized to practice what they learned. Two activities practiced the future tense using *will* or *be going to*. One was to interview with their classmates to find someone who was going to do X using the handout the teacher gave. The other activity was pair work where students had to make a dialogue using the future tense based on the job the teacher secretly designated, and then they had to make a dialogue and do role play in front for the other students to guess what their job was. For example, the couple whose job was a fortune teller role played as a fortune teller and customer as follows:

A: *When will I get married?*

B: *You will get married soon and you will have children.*

She wrote down sentences that used incorrect grammar, such as *You will starting* or *Tuesday gonna rain also* from the students' play and let students self-correct them. Her lesson was very well planned from the warm up activity to consolidation in order to reach her goals. Students were able to use the form and the basic meaning of modal *will* and phrasal modal *be able to* for simple future tenses.

Advanced Level Class Observation

Advanced I

There were twelve students in this class and eleven of them spoke Arabic, and the other one spoke Korean. The grammatical topics of reduced adverb clauses (modifying adverbial phrases) and clauses for contrast were dealt with at the beginning for assignment checkup. The students' level was so advanced that the teacher used lots of grammatical terms such as independent clause, dependent clause and reduced adverb clause, etc. in this class compared to the basic or intermediate class. The flow of the lesson was faster than the other two levels also.

The teacher started by checking students' homework, which was about clauses for contrast. Using the students' homework, such as *While Kuwait speaks Arabic, Korea speaks Korean*, the teacher confirmed the students' understanding by asking questions about some basic grammatical concepts like independent clause, main clause and proper punctuations according to the order of dependent and independent clauses. He consolidated the students' understanding by giving them a fill-in-the-blank quiz using contrastive words like even though, although, bit, however, while, despite ,etc. Interestingly, he required students to create their own sentences rather than just filling in the blanks by giving extra credit.

Next, the teacher let students do directed dictation to introduce reduced adverb clauses. The dictation items were all about reduced adverb clauses such as *Riding the bus to campus*,

Ahlam saw a car accident, or Feeling sick, Walaa didn't come to class on Monday. Through this dictation, students became accustomed to this structure before the teacher mentioned the rules directly. In other words, students got to know the grammatical structure through sample sentences rather than through the teacher's explanation. Based on the dictation sentences, the teacher explained the rules for how to change time clauses into modifying adverbial phrases: (1) make sure that the subject is the same in both clauses, (2) find the adverb, (3) in the dependent clause, do the following things: remove the subject, remove the *be* verb, if there is one, change the verb to the *-ing* form. With the teacher's explanation, students learned that the adverbial phrases are technically called RAC (Reduced Adverbial Clause), though the adverbial phrases were without subject and verb. Students then tried to find the reduced subject, applying the rules to the dictation sentences. The teacher didn't forget to mention exceptions: *While* can be removed (optional), and *because* must be removed (necessary).

One of the reasons ESL/ESL learners feel that learning English is hard is due to all of the exceptions to basic rules. However, I think we need to teach exceptions if the exceptions are used often in real life, especially to the advanced learners.

Advanced II

There were twelve students in this class and ten of them spoke Arabic, the other two spoke Chinese. The topic of this class was gerunds and students learned about the form and the function of gerunds through various activities. Overall, her way of teaching and classroom management skills seemed to be great. The lesson was composed of introduction, development, and consolidation. Each part was linked to each other well, which led to successful learning.

The teacher distributed a handout, which had a definition of love and an illustration. The definition started with a gerund (*-ing* form). After letting students read it carefully, the teacher

instructed students to pair up and to define what love was using *-ing* form, and then draw an illustration relevant to the definition like the sample. After finishing their work, they attached it onto the wall and they presented their definition in front of the class. Until then, the teacher didn't mention grammatical terms such as gerunds. After students presented the definition, the teacher correct errors such as *Love is respecting to each other* → *Love is respecting each other*. Through this activity she presented today's learning goal unconsciously, which got students ready for the lesson.

She presented three example sentences from the students' writings to explain about gerunds in terms of form and meaning. Her explanation about the form and meaning of gerunds was very specific, using sophisticated grammatical terms since the students were advanced. She further developed the lesson while introducing gerunds as the objects of prepositions. After distributing the handout about holding common preposition combinations followed by gerunds, such as *be interested in +ing* or *be capable of +ing*, she let students practice the pattern through the *Find someone who* activity. Rather than presenting the pattern of gerunds as the objects of prepositions, she gave students opportunities to practice it in a meaningful way. Students learned the grammatical points through communicative practice rather than learning grammar for its own sake. Then, she confirmed what they learned about gerunds through summarizing a textbook and gave students assignments for further practice.

Her lesson was well planned from introduction to confirmation using appropriate activities for students to reach the goals she set up. Her lesson was organized very well, considering students' level and interests. I was really impressed with the way she presented and developed grammar points through communicative practices as well as her clear instruction, and appropriate guide to learning.