A Lesson about Animals for ESL Students: Use or Abuse?

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Introduction

"Animals" is a common topic used in ESL classrooms with young learners. Students learn the names of animals, habitats and diets, among other basic information. This lesson, however, seeks to transfer the topic of animals from the elementary school classroom to a university setting through a more advanced and communicative approach to the topic. Given the relevance of animals in our daily lives -- as pets, food on the table, the clothes some people wear -- the topic of "animals" is immediately applicable to many students. I've used the following lesson successfully in undergraduate and graduate classes at the university level as a means for promoting a high degree of learner-learner interaction through information sharing and role-playing.

The Lesson

- **Purpose:** Discuss how people "use" and/or "abuse" animals; give opinions/evaluate groups' propositions; practice phrases of agreement and objection
- **Skills:** Speaking and Listening
- **Level:** High-Intermediate to Advanced
- **Materials:** "Animal Bag" (a bag containing an assortment of toy animals), black-board
- **Time:** Ninety minutes

Step One: Warm Up

Students freely engage in a brainstorm activity around the question of "How do people use animals?". Examples might be that people keep animals as pets, and use them in performances. After providing a few minutes for brainstorming, the teacher should elicit a few responses to share with the class as a whole, as a means of briefly analyzing some ideas, building up some vocabulary and perhaps providing some corrective feedback.

Step Two: Preparation (A)

The teacher now assigns students to groups (each group should have an absolute minimum of three students for reasons to be made clear later in the lesson). After this rearrangement has been completed, the teacher takes out the "Animal Bag", and has one member of each group select a toy animal. There are always a variety of reactions -- from joy to even terror -- at this point depending on which animals have been placed in the bag! Once the choices have been made, the teacher writes these five statements on the board: How will you use your animal to...

1. make life more interesting?
2. make life more comfortable?
3. keep warm on a cold night?
4. help others?
5. prevent yourself from becoming hungry?

After writing these statements, the teacher informs the groups that they will be using their animals to answer the five questions. At this point, a demonstration would likely help the groups better understand what they need to accomplish. The teacher should choose an animal that was not selected from the "Animal Bag," and answer the five questions. These examples will help clarify the task, and instill some confidence in the students.

An ample amount of time should now be provided for small group discussion of the five questions. The teacher can listen-in on groups, and provide feedback/guidance as he/she deems appropriate.

Step Three: Preparation (B)

After groups have discussed and agreed upon how they intend to use their animal, the teacher will direct students to the statements used in Agreeing and Objecting he/she wrote on the board (see below) during Step Two:

AGREEMENT	OBJECTION
That seems okay to me.	I completely disagree.
There's nothing wrong with...	It's definitely wrong (to)...
I can't say I disagree with...	It's really not good (to)...
It sounds alright (to)...	It's terrible (to)...

The teacher explains that these expressions are used to agree or object to someone's statements, such as those statements made during Step Two of the lesson. The students' attention ought to be paid to situations when and how the infinitive and –ing forms of verbs could be used. For example, the teacher might want to illustrate the difference between "It's definitely wrong to use a rabbit's fur to make gloves and hats" and "It's definitely wrong using a rabbit's fur to make gloves and hats". This could be contrasted with the necessity of using the –ing form in sentences like "I can't say I disagree with using a rabbit's fur to make..." while also showing how "I can't say I disagree with to use a rabbit's fur to make..." as being ungrammatical.

For everyone in all groups to first practice these Agreement/Objection statements, the teacher can write some of his/her own answers to the five questions in Step Two on the board, and ask students in their groups to agree or object to the teacher's responses. This is an excellent opportunity for the teacher to monitor whether or not students are correctly utilizing these expressions.

Step Four: Main Activity - Role Play

After setting an appropriate time aside for students to practice these new expressions, the teacher will select one person from each group to be a member of a new "Animal Welfare Inspection Team." The term should first be explained, perhaps with some examples of real organizations that look out for the welfare of animals.

Once one student from each group has been chosen to form the "Team," the teacher explains their task: to "rate" each group's use of their animal under the five situations in Step Two. Members of the "Team" will separately visit two different groups, neither of which can be their original group, and discover how the group uses their animal. "Team" members are to agree or object to the uses (using the expressions), and give reasons for their responses while group members respond/react to the "Team" member's words.

After meeting with the two different groups (with a time limit to be set by the teacher) to find out how the animals were used, members of the "Team" will join back together. At this point, the teacher will introduce to the class the "grading system" the "Animal Welfare Inspection Team" will use to assess how each group "uses" its animal or, perhaps, "abuses" it. The grading system, written on the board, is as follows:

- A: The group is kind, and uses its animal without causing harm.
- B: The group only sometimes causes mild pain to the animal.
- C: The group needs to pay more attention to their negative effects on the animal.
- F: The group seems to intentionally abuse their animal through their use of it.

While the "Animal Welfare Inspection Team" members exchange findings on how the different groups use/abuse their animals, and reach a consensus on how to grade each of the different groups, those who aren't "Animal Welfare Team" members discuss what kind of grade they anticipate to receive from the "Animal Welfare Team" and why.

Step Five - Presentation of Findings (Conclusion)

Representatives of the "Animal Welfare Group" present their "grades" to the different groups in the form of a short class presentation. After each grade has been given, with a short justification, groups are encouraged to agree with or dispute the decision reached by the "Animal Welfare Team" in the form of a class debate with students remaining in their roles as users of an animal or Animal Welfare Team member, and see whether or not opinions might change with the addition of extra information provided by group or "team" members.

Comment

This lesson has produced some lively discussions both in the preparation stage when some students came up with unorthodox uses of their animals, and in the "evaluation," or presentation, stage when groups were given a rating that differed from their own perception of themselves. In conducting this lesson, students were able to practice both previously learned/acquired linguistic knowledge and awareness of issues pertaining to the treatment of animals. Students also engaged in free discussion and debate that encouraged a great deal of learner interaction.