

The container story

Level: Pre-intermediate +

Time: 90 minutes +

Summary: This lesson is about containers, shipping and the smooth transportation of goods worldwide. In this lesson, students:

1. compare and contrast different modes of transporting goods;
2. study a text about the history of shipping containers;
3. complete a timeline of events from the article;
4. discuss where any items they have used today have been shipped from;
5. research a topic and present their findings to the class.

Materials: One copy of the worksheet per student; one copy of the vocabulary record per student

Group size: Any

Note: This lesson plan is for both pre-experience and in-work business students based on an original article first published in *Business Spotlight* issue 5/2015.

Warmer

This task introduces the topic of transporting different types of goods and the logistics, possibilities and challenges involved in moving them around the world.

Key words

Students read the definitions and find the key words in the article. Tip: Before they look at the article, get them to read the definitions and guess what the words might be. After checking their answers, students should read the article again and notice how the words are used in context. Note that the definitions for the words are given in the order the words appear in the article.

Key:

1. shipping
2. goods
3. offloaded
4. warehouses

5. shipment
6. haulage company
7. cranes
8. standardized
9. supplies
10. seamless
11. invest
12. converted
13. tanker
14. sleepy

Understanding the article

Students complete the timeline about the container ship industry with facts from the article.

Key:

- 1937 – McLean realized that time was being wasted while goods were offloaded and loaded again between different modes of transport.
- during WWII – The US government used small, standardized containers to ship supplies.
- 1955 – McLean bought the Pan-Atlantic Steamship Company.
- 1956 – McLean's first converted tanker sailed from Newark to Houston.
- 1960 – The company changed its name to Sea-Land Service.
- 1966 – The Fairland, the first international container ship, sailed from the US to Rotterdam.
- the 1980s – Container ships were travelling all over the world.
- 2014 – Containers moved 10.5 billion tonnes of cargo.

Similar words

Students match the similar words from the article. Then, they should find out the differences in meaning and usage between the words in each pair, using a dictionary to help them, if needed.

Key:

1. e – A **harbour** is an area of water near the land where it is safe for boats to stay. A **port** is a harbour where passengers and goods can be taken on and off.
2. a – A **ship** is a very large boat used for carrying goods or people. A **tanker** is a large ship that carries oil or petrol.
3. d – A **truck** is a large road vehicle used for carrying goods. 'Lorry' is British English for truck.
4. b – **Cargo** is the word for things that are being sent by ship, plane, train or truck. **Goods** are items produced for sale.
5. c – A **container** is a very large metal or wooden box designed to be loaded easily onto ships and trucks. A **box** is a kind of container (usually made of wood or cardboard).

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Expressions

Students use the expressions to complete the sentences and, then, write six further sentences of their own – two per expression.

Key:

1. *had been born*
2. *on board*
3. *changed the shape of*

Discussion

Give students a maximum of five minutes to note down all the things they have come into contact with so far today that may have travelled in a container. Tell them to think of less obvious things, too, such as fuel. After a few minutes, get the students to discuss, in small groups or as a whole group, what they have noted down and say or guess where the items have travelled from.

Research and presentation topics

Choose the research topic/s that you think will be of the greatest interest, and the most useful, to your students. In a large class, divide the topics up amongst students. Topics 1 and 2, in particular, lend themselves to being set as homework. Findings can be presented in the next lesson.

Webquest

Students look at a shipping tracking website such as www.vesselfinder.com and see in real time where container ships are in the world. Discuss who might use these websites and why.

Vocabulary record

Here, students should be encouraged to record all of the new and useful vocabulary they have learnt during the lesson, not only in the form presented in the article but also in related forms.

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Talk about different ways that these items could be transported.

- 10,000 pineapples from South America to the Middle East
- 200 cars from Germany to the UK
- one panda bear from China to Canada
- 1,000 washing machines from Korea to South America
- 50 diamonds from Africa to Russia
- 12,000 pairs of sports shoes from India to Europe
- 5,000 Christmas cactuses from Brazil to the US

2 Key words

Read the definitions and then find the key words in the article.

1. the business of carrying items, especially in a ship
2. objects produced for sale
3. removed from a container or vehicle and put somewhere else
4. big buildings where large amounts of products are stored
5. the process of taking items from one place to another
6. a type of company that moves items by road or railway
7. tall machines used for lifting or moving heavy objects
8. when all the things of a particular type have the same features or size
9. things such as food, medicine and equipment that you need to live or to perform a particular activity
10. continuing very smoothly and without stopping
11. use your money with the aim of making a profit from it, e.g. by putting it into a company
12. changed so that it has a new purpose or function
13. a large ship that carries petrol or oil
14. very quiet with not much activity

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The container story

by Vicki Sussens



1 Today, giant container ships transport goods across all the oceans of the world. Vicki Sussens reports on the first containers.

2 **The background**

Before shipping containers were invented, goods being transferred from lorries to trains to ships had to be individually offloaded and loaded again. This made up almost half the cost of shipping, according to Marc Levinson, author of *The Box: How the Shipping Container Made the World Smaller and the World Economy Bigger*. Goods also had to wait in warehouses for the next stage of transport, often delaying shipment. And the costs of transporting different goods varied.

3 **The problem**

One day, in 1937, Malcom McLean, owner of a haulage company in North Carolina, was waiting for cranes to unload cargo from his truck on to a ship in Hoboken, New Jersey. It took nearly the whole day and he decided a lot of time was being wasted. McLean had earned money to buy his first truck by working at a petrol station. The entrepreneur was looking for ways to improve his business.

4 **The solution**

McLean decided that, if goods could be transported in standardized containers, the entire container, and not just individual goods, could be transferred from lorries to trains to ships. The idea of transporting various

goods in one box was not new, according to the World Shipping Council's history of containers. The US government had used small, standardized containers to ship supplies during the Second World War. However, McLean's idea of a seamless transport system, later known as "intermodalism", was new. At the time, he owned only one truck, which was not enough to invest in his idea. By 1955, his business was big enough for him to be able to buy the small Pan-Atlantic Steamship Company.



5 **What happened next**

In 1956, McLean's first converted tanker, carrying 58 containers, left from Newark, New Jersey, to Houston, Texas. In 1960, with several container ships in operation, the firm's name changed to Sea-Land Service. In 1966, Sea-Land sent the world's first international container ship, the Fairland, from the US to Rotterdam, with 236 containers on board. The idea spread quickly and, by 1968, the container ship industry had been born. In that year, 18 new container ships were built globally. By the early 1980s, container ships were sailing to every corner of the world. "The container made shipping cheap and changed the shape of the world economy," writes Levinson. "Sleepy harbours such as Busan in South Korea and Seattle moved into the front ranks of the world's ports and massive new ports were built in places where none had been before." In 2014, containers moved 10.5 billion tonnes of cargo, according to Clarkson Research Services Limited (CRSL).

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3 Understanding the article

Complete the timeline with events from the article.

Timeline events:

- 1937
- during WWII
- 1955
- 1956
- 1960
- 1966
- the 1980s
- 2014

4 Similar words

Match the similar words from the article. Then, find out the differences in meaning and usage between the words in each pair.

- | | |
|--------------|-----------|
| 1. harbour | a. tanker |
| 2. ship | b. goods |
| 3. truck | c. box |
| 4. cargo | d. lorry |
| 5. container | e. port |

5 Expressions

a. Use the expressions to complete the sentences.

on board

changed the shape of

had been born

- By the late 1960s, the container ship industry _____.
- The Fairland sailed with 236 containers _____.
- The container _____ the world economy.

b. Now, use the expressions in sentences of your own. Write two sentences per expression.

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6 Discussion

Think about your day up to now. What have you touched, used, worn, eaten, etc? Which of the items you have come into contact with today are likely to have been transported in a shipping container?

For example:

- a banana from South America
- a car from Korea

7 Research and presentation topics

Topic 1

Find out about ...

- ... the world's largest container ships – their length and capacity.
- ... the top ten container ports in the world.
- ... the port of Rotterdam.
- ... the company Maersk.

Topic 2

Research these three canal projects.

- the widening of the Suez Canal
- the expansion of the Panama Canal
- the new Nicaragua Canal

Find the answers to these questions.

- Where is each canal and what route does it take?
- Which longer routes would ships have to take if these canals didn't exist?
- How long does / will it take to pass through each canal?
- How far advanced are the projects?
- Who hopes to gain from them?
- Who is financing the projects?
- Are there any controversial aspects to the projects?

Topic 3

Find out more about the most commonly used Incoterms.

- What are Incoterms?
- What is 'Incoterms' short for?
- Which of the terms are used in your company or line of work?

Helpful websites:

- <http://www.iccwbo.org/products-and-services/trade-facilitation/incoterms-2010/the-incoterms-rules/>
- <http://www.wpcf.com.au/Shipping-Terms>
- <http://www.mainfreight.com/global/en/basics/freight-basics-inco-terms.aspx>

8 Webquest

Go to a shipping tracking website such as www.vesselfinder.com and see, in real time, where container ships are around the world.

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Vocabulary record: The container story

verb	noun	adjective	adverb
delay			
	shipment		
		sleepy	
			globally

Vocabulary record

PHOTOCOPIABLE
CAN BE DOWNLOADED
FROM WEBSITE