

How to Effectively Use News Articles in the EFL Classroom

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News articles can be an invaluable resource for teaching intermediate and advanced students. However, teaching a news lesson isn't as simple as cutting an article from a newspaper and taking it to the classroom. This article proposes a structured approach to teaching news articles in the EFL classroom. Some example activities are also suggested.

Introduction

News articles are a good teaching resource for intermediate and advance students. They are real, relevant, current, and interesting. Like all lessons, news lessons should be structured and have a clear goal. Articles can be used to work on speaking, listening, reading, writing, and vocabulary. Generally, it's a good idea to focus more on one of these skills, but of course, all skills will still be practiced.

Selection Criteria

The first place to start when teaching an effective news lesson is with the article itself. Teachers should consider the following when selecting an article:

- **Appropriateness:** Is the topic appropriate? Is it suitable for the class level and age group? Could it be upsetting to some students?
- **Interest:** Will the students be interested in this topic?
- **Length:** Is it too long? Articles that are particularly long should be avoided. Reading news articles is demanding and if they are too long, students will be discouraged. It will also take time to process reducing talk time. Long articles should be edited (200-300 words is a good length. As a rule-of-thumb, a one page double-spaced essay equals about 250 words).
- **Language:** Does the article contain a useful lexical set (e.g., crime, medicine, etc) or useful grammar components? Is there too much unknown vocabulary?
- **Generative Potential:** Is the article generative? That is, can you think of an effective activity to follow the article? Articles that lend themselves to discussions, debates, or role play are desirable. You want the students to be able to further practice the language after the reading and listening.

Lesson Structure

As mentioned above, news lessons should be structured. A well-structured news lesson comprises the following six stages: warm up, pre-reading/listening activities, reading/listening to the article, application/follow-up, feedback and correction, and homework. Below I'll present the aims of each stage and suggest some activities. I suggest between 60-90 minutes for a class.

Warm Up

The warm-up should raise awareness of the topic and activate pre-existing knowledge and language. As in regular lessons, Teachers should avoid correcting students here. This allows students to relax, get into English-mode, and to build confidence. Some suggested activities are:

- **Warm-up questions:** These should be related to the topic. The teacher can write the questions on the blackboard or dictate them.
- **Quizzes:** Quizzes are a good way to test their knowledge of the topic and people in the article.
- **Describing/discussing pictures related to the article:** In pairs or groups, students speculate about the picture. At this point, they shouldn't know what the article is about.
- **Brainstorming:** Have the students brainstorm vocabulary related to the article's topic.
- **Do you agree/disagree?:** Prepare a list of four to five statements related to the article. Students pair up and ask each other if they agree or disagree citing reasons.
- **Ranking:** Students rank a list that the teacher has prepared. For example, if the article were about dieting, the instructor could prepare a list of common dieting fads. The students have to rank them from most effective to least.

Pre-reading/listening

The lesson proper should always begin with pre-reading/listening activities. Unlike the warm-up activities, these activities are directly related to the text and serve to get students interested in the topic, build confidence, and prepare them for the task ahead. It's common for instructors in news lessons to carefully pre-teach the vocabulary. If the focus of the lesson is vocabulary building, this is fine. However, the teacher should ensure that the vocabulary will be recycled in the application. If not, it is not a good use of time. Why are the students spending 10 minutes learning vocabulary they won't use again? However, the focus of the lesson doesn't have to be vocabulary-building. If the article has been well-selected, written, or edited, it is possible for students to focus on other skills such as reading or listening. If they come across an unknown word, it is a good opportunity for them to develop strategies such as asking others, guessing from context, and building their ambiguity filter.

Here are some suggested activities:

- **Synonym matching:** Students match words taken from the article and match with synonyms.
- **Fill-in-the-blank:** Students are given a set of sentences from the article and have to fill-in-the-blanks using a provided vocabulary list. An alternative is to have the students try to fill in the blanks using their imagination first and then repeating this activity while looking at a provided vocabulary list.
- **Story speculation:** The students predict the story from the headline and/or the article's picture.
- **Vocabulary speculation:** Students are given the headline and predict words they expect to read. (As students read the article in the next stage they can check the words they find. The student with the most correct predictions wins.)
- **Vocabulary selection/sort:** Students are given a list of words, some word are from the article, some words are not. The students read the headline and then decide which ones they think are from the article.
- **Sentence selection:** As in the previous example, but with sentences instead of words.
- **True or False:** The instructor provides the students with a list of sentences about the article. Some are true, others are false. The students read them, and then decided whether they are true or false. The students can check their answers in the next stage.

Listening Tasks

These activities serve to build listening skills. If you want to focus on listening skills, it should be read at least two or three times. Two points to consider when setting listening activities: it's a good idea to move from extensive listening activities to more intensive; and if the students can get all the answers correct the first time, the tasks were too easy. If you are hoping to improve listening ability, the students' listening has to be challenged. Here are some possible listening tasks:

- **Listening for gist:** The students could summarize each paragraph.
- **Fill-in-the-blanks:** The teacher reads the story aloud. The students listen and fill in the blanks.
- **Checking pre-listening ideas:** The students listen and check their information from the pre-listening stage (true/false statements, vocabulary speculation, etc.).
- **Listening for pre-set comprehension questions:** These can be written on the board or dictated. After the first listen, have the students compare answers. Then read again until they have the answers. Ideally, the questions should be related to the pre-activities.

Reading Tasks

These activities serve to build reading skills and the article should be read two or more times. As in the listening activities, it is best to move from extensive to more intensive tasks. This means the students will gain a deeper understanding with each successive read.

- **General comprehension questions**
- **Check pre-reading ideas**
- **Skimming/Scanning:** Skimming is when you quickly read through an article. Scanning is when you are looking for specific information.
- **Detailed comprehension questions:** "Which paragraph says (...)?", "What do (these numbers) refer to?", "What do (these people) think?", "Find a word that means (...)", Find today's vocabulary, "How was the "vocabulary" used?"
- **Student generated comprehension questions**
- **Complete the sentence:** Take the beginning of some key sentences from the article and have the students try to complete the sentences from memory.
- **Write a headline for the story/each paragraph**
- **Summarizing:** The students write a sentence summarizing each paragraph.

Application/Follow-up Tasks

Whatever the focus of the lesson, an effective news lesson should extend beyond the article. The students need to have a chance to use the new vocabulary and/or knowledge in a meaningful, less controlled way. The students should be reminded to use the new vocabulary and/or target language as much as possible. As in any lesson, teachers should refrain from jumping in and correcting during this stage. This is the students' time to apply the new language in a free environment. Any mistakes should be noted for the feedback and correction stage.

- **Role Play:** For example, the students could take on character roles from the article and role play the situation. This could be extended to what they think happened next.
- **Discussion:** The teacher can provide questions related to the topic such as "Have you ever experienced such a situation?", "What would you have done in her shoes?", or "What do you think of what he did?" Of course, students should be encouraged to go beyond the article.
- **Debate:** The students have a debate. One idea: If the students did the "Do you agree/disagree?" activity in the warm up, the teacher could tie it to the debate. The students revisit the same statements and debate using the information from the article.

Feedback and Correction

The last five minutes of any lesson should be reserved for feedback and correction. Together, the warm up and the feedback and correction stages are the bookends of an effective lesson. Just as the warm up serves to get them ready for the lesson ahead, this stage acts as a cool down where the students can reflect upon what they have learned. It also guarantees that the students leave the classroom with a clear idea of what they have achieved. There are three things that can be covered here:

- **Correction:** This is a good opportunity for teacher to bring up any mistakes from the application to the class' attention. The benefit of this is that the whole class can benefit from the correction. Mistakes can include level relevant grammatical mistakes, mispronunciations, or vocabulary usage problems.
- **Review:** It's a good idea to briefly review what was covered. The instructor can review new vocabulary or the article itself. It's best to elicit this information and to call for examples. This will not only reinforce the information, but will satisfy the teacher that the students understand what was covered.
- **Feedback and Motivation:** It's important to give some praise and some advice for further improvement or study.

Homework

Homework is important for students to progress in their studies. Most students have little access to English outside of the classroom. Setting homework encourages them to self-study and to re-visit the lesson. This will build retention of new information. Some suggested homework assignments for news lessons are outlined below.

- **Research projects:** Students have to research the topic using Wikipedia and write a report.
- **Comparison activities:** Students have to read the same topic from different news sites to compare how different sources deal with the news.
- **Letter writing:** The students have to write a letter to someone from the article telling them how they feel.
- **Summarizing:** Students summarize the article.
- **Listening:** If the lesson is from a site where a podcast is available, the students should download the mp3 file and listen to it at least two or three times a day. They also can listen and repeat after the recording to work on the prosodic features (e.g., rhythm, pronunciation, and stress).

Conclusion

News articles can be a great teaching resource in the EFL classroom if they are structured well and have a purpose. Teachers can choose their own articles from newspapers or magazines but should bear the proposed selection criteria in mind. Alternatively, teachers can use one of the suggested EFL sites that prepare news materials. Following this lesson structure will lead to more effective and challenging classes.

References

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Appendix

There are sites that provide news articles for EFL teaching.

- www.breakingnewsenglish.com
- www.headsupenglish.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=blogcategory&id=7&Itemid=19

Both sites provide lesson plans and an mp3