

# Using English Newspapers in the ESL/EFL Classroom

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This paper documents how the newspaper may be used for promoting learner autonomy in an international classroom with varying levels of English proficiency. It highlights how the authentic use of the language use helps the ESL/EFL teacher turn the newspaper into a powerful tool for encouraging reflections on its relevance to language learning. Similarly, the activities demonstrate how the students' imaginative and creative potential could be exploited for enthusiastic interaction in the class. The focus on meaning and the familiarity with the genre seem to help every learner, irrespective of his/her proficiency in English, participate actively and contribute significantly to the discussions. It may not be out of place to mention here that there are English classrooms in remote areas where the teacher has to be extremely resourceful. And, at such places, we may use old newspapers if the day's newspaper is not available.

## Introduction

The newspaper may be the most commonly read print medium anywhere in the world. More and more parents, in India, are subscribing to at least two newspapers, one in English and the other in their mother tongue. They want their children to learn the languages and improve their awareness of the world. This may be the situation in many countries. Also, many language teachers advise their students to read newspapers online to learn about cultural and political situations.

We used the English newspaper in a multi-national, multi-cultural, and multi-lingual classroom. There were 42 participants from 25 developing countries. While some of them were comfortable with English, the others knew very little English. Most of them were from the diplomatic corps, some civil servants, and some English teachers. The youngest was 26 years old, while the oldest was 59.

## Classroom Activity

Although the students had been given a 'placement' test to determine their proficiency level, they were yet to be divided into groups.

We had three objectives.

- Facilitating interaction among the learners so they get to know each other. There were very few countries which sent more than one representative.
- Encouraging them to appreciate the newspaper as a rich source for learning the language and reading about India.
- Motivating them to adopt a CLIL(Content Language Integrated Learning) approach.

## The Pre-reading Activity : First 20 Minutes

After welcoming the class to the programme, the teacher asked the participants if they read newspapers. Most answered in

the affirmative. While some said that they read them in their native language, others said that they read them in English. This was followed by a general discussion of the reasons for reading newspapers in English. There was a tremendous response as everyone had something to say. If students with elementary proficiency could answer in words, the upper-intermediates gave sentences. They were all busy negotiating English in different ways which included using pocket dictionaries, writing down words, talking to their neighbours and seeking clarification from the teachers. Some of the responses were as follows:

- know what is happening currently
- know more words to use
- new use of the old words
- coinage / making new words
- learn difficult words which lead to the dictionary
- improve reading and writing

The teacher, then, elicited from the class what topics/news are generally found in the newspapers. There was an enthusiastic response from the class. The teacher listed the responses on the blackboard:

- sports
- political
- economic
- social
- cultural
- weather
- ecology
- health
- military
- legal
- security
- editorial
- celebrities
- crosswords
- advertisements
- foreign affairs
- cartoons
- civilization
- programme announcements
- miscellaneous

Then, we divided the class into seven groups of six each. Wherever there were two or more people from the same country, we requested them to sit in different groups. They appreciated the need for it and separated with a smile.

## **The Reading-Writing Activity : 30 Minutes**

Participants in groups will write an international newspaper with each member contributing a news item about his/her country.

We distributed the newspapers along with some paper and gave the following instructions. We also wrote some of them on the board.

- Browse the newspapers for ideas and language.
- Look at the list of topics on the board.
- Think of any news you would like to tell us about your country.
- You can think of advertising too. Something made in your country or some place of interest to tourists.

During the activity, we urged the more proficient members of the group to encourage the less proficient ones to speak and help

them in writing their contribution. We went around and answered various questions students had.

## **Reading Aloud : 30 Minutes**

Each group read aloud its newspaper. In most cases, the participants chose to read their own contribution saying that only they could understand their rough drafts. Some tried to exchange and read each other's features. Only four groups could complete the task. The other three groups read what they had written and promised to complete the page later.

## **Learning Outcomes**

The members of one group developed news items which focused on 'studies' in their country, much influenced by the education supplement they had read.

Another group, the most organized among the entire class included news on different topics including politics, weather, culture, nutrition, presidential elections and sports giving equal representation to the countries they were from.

Group three and four had predominantly focused on their respective countries, not so much to present news from their countries, but mostly the aspects that they were familiar with. Some of them wrote a brief description of their countries while the others wrote about the place they came from. We realized that they needed more help with exploiting the newspaper as a source of ideas and language. However, some of them gave creative and catchy captions too.

A few of the interesting features that emerged were as follows:

- flavours and foods
- Theatre of Nature
- celebrity actress
- Independence Day celebration
- advertisement
- tourism investment opportunity
- job advertisement

## **A Few More Reflections**

Why is it that some participants preferred to describe their countries?

This being the very first session of the programme, it appeared that the ice had not been broken among the participants yet. Not many knew the names or the nationalities of their classmates. They were eager as 'cultural ambassadors' to share information on their country. So, they might have considered describing their places a good introduction to themselves.

## **Was the Task Difficult?**

They did not think so. In fact, they were so engrossed in reading and trying to make sense that they were left with very little time to think and write about any news about their country. While some were interested in the celebrities page, others were looking over the sports page. Some participants looked for news about their countries and were very happy when they found them.

The activity involved reading, writing, and presenting the report orally. They enjoyed every stage and particularly the last one. They read enthusiastically and uninhibitedly.

## **Spin Offs**

The activity raised the participants's meta awareness of various reading strategies. For instance, making use of background

knowledge, inferencing, and monitoring comprehension (both local and global).

## **Beyond This Classroom**

Quite a few participants wanted to borrow the newspapers so they could read them later. This filled us with a sense of fulfillment.

While documenting this experience, we thought of a follow up activity which did not occur to us at the time of the class. The participants are in constant touch with people through the phone and the email. They could write a brief note on any news from their countries that they would like to share with others and put it on the notice board. This will certainly highlight their concerns, create a discussion forum, and help perspectives emerge.

Variations of this activity such as preparing a regional page or national page might work equally well in any classroom. Especially in the developing countries where there are many rural and first generation learners in the urban English classroom. These activities create opportunities for the class to understand each other as humans with values and concerns and not just ESL learners.

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