

Using Newspaper Articles Communicatively in the ESL Classroom

Jonathan Clifton
jonathan.clifton[at]ua.ac.be
University of Antwerp (Antwerp, Belgium)

Introduction

Newspaper articles are a readily available way of introducing students to real and topical English in the classroom. In this article, I offer one way of exploiting newspaper articles based on a variation of the classic jigsaw reading technique in which the class is divided into groups and each group is given a different article to read which they then have to explain to others in the class. The variation on jigsaw reading presented in this article offers teachers a way of maximising student involvement and of covering the four skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking).

Stage One: Preparation

The first stage consists of selecting about eight newspaper articles that you think your students will enjoy. The selection of articles should, of course, be adapted to your class's own interests and abilities but personally I tend to look for the more intriguing stories rather than 'hard' news and current affairs. Whatever articles you choose, there is one golden rule to bear in mind: avoid any articles that might create a negative atmosphere (e.g. disaster stories and so on).

Stage Two: Pre-task Activity

The first stage of the lesson is to write the headlines on the blackboard, or prepare them on slides. Then divide the class into small groups and ask the students to decide what they think the articles will be about.

The purpose of the pre-task exercise is threefold.

1. First, it raises the students' awareness of the texts that they are about to read. Consequently, it creates a 'feeling' for the text and so helps them understand it.
2. Second, even if the students don't predict the content of the article correctly, it will make them curious and it will provide motivation for reading.
3. Third, the pre-reading task is a communicative exercise in its own right which has a real purpose that encourages a free exchange of ideas in the target language.

After a short time, bring the students together as a class and brainstorm the ideas that they have generated. Ask the students to select four of the articles. This gives the students a little more choice over the direction of the lesson and it helps ensure that the articles are of interest to the students. Dealing with articles that are of interest to the students should have a consequent increase in motivation which is, of course, one of the key elements of a successful lesson.

Variation: It might even be possible to download pictures with the articles in which case the pictures can be used as an additional source of speculation about the content of the texts. You could even ask the students to match the pictures to the headlines.

Stage Three: Pre-teaching Vocabulary

When choosing the articles also select four words from each article that you think are essential for an understanding of the text

and which you suspect might be 'new' vocabulary for the class. Now write the four words from each selected texts in a jumbled fashion on the blackboard. Ask the students to work in groups and decide which words go with which texts.

Help the students but at this stage do not reveal the answers. Asking the students to perform a task which requires an active use of the vocabulary should increase the chances of retaining the vocabulary.

Stage Four: Writing

Divide the class into groups of about four students. Ask group A to write four questions about article one, group B to write four questions about article two and so on. The criteria for the questions should be: what do you want to know about article? Since the students have already been asked to predict the content, the ideas and vocabulary for this stage of the lesson should have already been dealt with.

As the students are doing this exercise in groups, monitor the activity and correct any errors.

Asking the students to provide questions for each other provides an intrinsic motivation to write. In other words, the students are not performing a task 'just to be assessed' by the teacher. They are writing for their fellow students and the finished questions have to be understandable for this audience. This, therefore, encourages the students to write accurately; if their colleagues cannot follow their questions then the reading task cannot be carried out. Moreover, it also gives the students practice in producing question forms. This is important because students are normally required to answer questions set by the teacher or course books but they are rarely asked to produce their own questions in either spoken or written form.

Stage Five: Reading

Keep the students in the same groups and ask each group to read one of the articles for which another group has written the questions.

Scan Reading

All too often, reading exercises in class amount to little more than testing (i.e. read this text and answer these questions) without considering the different types of reading skills that students require. One of these neglected skills is 'scan reading' which is the ability to read a text and to pick out key information without ponderously reading every word. To encourage this skill, therefore, first ask your students to scan the text for the vocabulary items that were taught in stage three. Moreover, the students will be curious to see if they predicted correctly which words would be in which text. This provides some intrinsic motivation for the scanning exercise.

Reading for Detail

Having scanned the text for the vocabulary, the students are ready to read the text in detail.

Ask the groups to exchange the questions they have written so that each group has another group's set of questions for their text.

The students now have a purpose for the detailed reading: they are looking for specific information to answer. This ensures that the task is 'real' since whenever we read an article, even if we never take time to formulate the questions, we want to know something. If we don't know why we are reading the article then we cannot read it properly. So, as with any reading comprehension exercise, give the students the questions before reading the text. Whether the students find the answers to the questions or not is not the real issue. Even if the students can't find the answers to their colleagues' questions at least they have to understand the text enough to realise that they cannot answer.

The reading should first be done individually but then bring the group together to discuss the answers. In this way the stronger students in the group can help the weaker students and so peer teaching is encouraged. Monitor this stage of the activity and ensure that all the students have understood the texts.

Stage Six: Information Gap

Now form groups of four with one student from each group. Each student tells his/her story to the newly formed group. Monitor as the students are doing this and note any errors.

This stage sets up an information gap exercise whereby the students have an intrinsic purpose for communicating (i.e. retelling a news story that the others in the group do not know). Moreover, the activity is realistic to the extent that retelling an interesting story is a common occurrence outside the world of the classroom. The activity also changes the composition of the groups. This discourages the formation of little cliques of students who always work with each other and so it fosters a better classroom atmosphere.

Stage Seven: Feedback

Ask the students to return to where they were sitting at the start of the lesson. Select students to retell the stories -- though not necessarily the story that they originally read. If the information exchange worked well, all the students should be able to retell all the stories. Ask the other students to monitor their colleagues' versions of the stories, correct any errors and add any forgotten details.

To conclude the lesson, feedback on any errors that you have heard as you were monitoring and that you think that you can deal with appropriately. Store the more serious errors away for 'another time' when you can deal with them more fully.

Conclusion

For teachers with a busy teaching schedule, this classroom activity can provide an enjoyable and interesting lesson in return for a minimum of preparation. It provides ample opportunities for student talking time, whilst also providing a package of motivating and varied exercises that allow the students to practise the four skills.

Appendix: The Activity Summed up in a Lesson Plan.

Objectives: To Practise the Four Skills

Materials: Eight Newspaper Articles

<!--[if ! supportEmptyParas]--> <!--[endif]-->	Classroom configuration	Student activity	Teacher activity
Pre-task activity <!--[if ! supportEmptyParas]--> <!--[endif]--> <!--[if ! supportEmptyParas]--> <!--[endif]-->	group	Brainstorm possible stories behind the headlines	Monitor
<!--[if ! supportEmptyParas]--> <!--[endif]-->	class	Present results of brainstorming	Elicit student answers to previous exercise
<!--[if ! supportEmptyParas]--> <!--[endif]-->	class	Choose four articles	<!--[if ! supportEmptyParas]--> <!--[endif]-->
Pre-teaching vocabulary	group	Predict which words	Write key vocabulary

		match which articles	from the selected articles in a jumbled fashion on the blackboard
Writing	group	Write four questions for another text	Monitor. Pay attention to accuracy of expression
Reading	individual	Scan read for pre-taught vocabulary	<!--[if ! supportEmptyParas]--> <!--[endif]-->
1. scan reading			
2. reading for detail	individual	Answer questions for respective texts that another group has formulated	<!--[if ! supportEmptyParas]--> <!--[endif]-->
<!--[if ! supportEmptyParas]--> <!--[endif]-->	group/peer teaching	Check answers	Monitor
Speaking	group	Explain text to students from other groups	Monitor
Information gap			
Feedback	class	Give oral summary of the stories. Correct and/or add information to these oral summaries	Elicit an oral summary of each text <!--[if ! supportEmptyParas]--> <!--[endif]-->
<!--[if ! supportEmptyParas]--> <!--[endif]-->	<!--[if ! supportEmptyParas]--> <!--[endif]-->	<!--[if ! supportEmptyParas]--> <!--[endif]-->	Feedback on any errors noticed during the lesson

The Internet TESL Journal, Vol. XII, No. 4, April 2006

<http://iteslj.org/>

<http://iteslj.org/Techniques/Clifton-Newspaper.html>