

# Creating ESL/EFL Lessons Based on News and Current Events

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This article explains the rationale for using lessons based on current news and explains how teachers can create such lessons. There is also a ready-made sample lesson that teachers can use that clearly demonstrates how the author creates such lessons.

## Introduction

The transitory nature of news creates a largely unavoidable gap in the availability of up-to-date materials that focus on current events. This can be to the dissatisfaction of students who wish to study the latest news in their English classes. One solution to this is for teachers to create their own lessons, possible even for news that is still breaking. This article attempts to provide a rationale for lessons based on the latest news, considerations when selecting and creating such materials and a sample current events lesson with an outline of some ideas behind the activities used.

## A Rationale for Lessons Based on the Latest News

### Student Motivation

Students may be more motivated when studying with lessons based on the latest news and current events than when using the relatively dated materials of coursebooks. Whether students' knowledge of the news item is sparse or in-depth, they may welcome the opportunity to use English to understand more about events unfolding around them. There may be an additional element of "prestige value" in the lessons as students feel they are learning more than just English. The up-to-date content may heighten student expectations of and their interest in future lessons.

I frequently find students were are willing to challenge themselves with news materials that are beyond their assessed levels, simply because they think the lessons are more "inspiring". They also spend considerably longer on homework assignments.

### Authenticity

The reading texts and listening from VOA are written by professional journalists and therefore constitute authentic news materials. This may heighten students' interest in them and create a sense of accomplishment in interacting with real news articles. It may also avoid the potential pitfalls of teachers writing their own texts and perhaps creating contrived and unauthentic language.

Communication between students discussing news items is also likely to be authentic. Students have a natural inclination to talk about news, even in the English classroom. Discussing news creates a meaningful context for students to communicate in English and may have more communicative saliency than, for example, a typical ESL classroom activity, such as practicing asking about lost umbrellas. There is also the real possibility of students being informed of major world news stories via their English learning materials, which will foster genuine responses and interest. Authenticity is thus present in both the medium and the message with news lessons.

### Technology

Today's technology puts at the teacher's disposal a wealth of Internet resources and computer software. Teachers can easily create lessons from news that is literally a few hours old. The Internet means teachers can tailor lessons to students' needs and interests.

Students could be encouraged to request the kind of news from which they wish to study. Such timely lessons may foster a sense of appreciation from students that is rarely, if ever, experienced with coursebooks. Technology also means teachers can create lessons that complement other areas of the curriculum.

## **Some Points to Consider When Choosing News Items**

### **Relevance and Interest**

Not all students will have sufficient background knowledge of or interest in some subjects to enable them to understand the news content, which will hinder their contribution in class. There is the danger that topics of any nature may be off-putting for many students. A balance should be found between more generic topics, that have broader appeal, and headline news, that is likely to be more relevant and of greater interest to students.

The teacher should also be confident of his/her ability to create interactive exercises from the news story. Conducting a mental lesson plan while surveying headlines for potential lessons can prevent a situation in which the teacher cannot think of a fluency based activity when planning.

### **Appropriateness of Topic**

The teacher must consider the potential negative effects more emotive topics may have on students. In a multi-lingual class, the possibility of friction between students of differing nationalities, religions, races, etc. may be high with news items dealing with contentious issues. Similarly, lessons on topics such as cancer, death or taboo subjects may be interesting and provide a welcome change of topic for some students, but may be inappropriate and offensive for others.

### **The "Shelf Life" of the Lesson**

The fact that news, and thus news lessons, can quickly become obsolete perhaps needs to be considered when planning. Even a week can make a news lesson redundant. Although it may still be pedagogically sound, its authenticity and newsworthiness may disappear, perhaps along with the students' interest. A balance should be found between the relevance of a news item and its potential to motivate students and its classroom longevity.

The text used for the sample lesson is a public domain article from the "Special English" section of the Voice of America (VOA) website. I deemed it suitable for confident pre-intermediate students. I usually choose more high profile news items that are likely to be in the media both in English and the students' own languages and therefore of immediate relevance in a current events lesson. However, such lessons are somewhat transitory in nature due to the short-lived nature of their being news. I selected the particular article for this essay because of the timeless nature of the topic, which will make the lesson relevant for many years to come.

### **Article Length**

VOA articles come as "short reports" and "long reports". The shorter texts, at 400 words in length, may be too long and daunting for lower level students. The teacher may wish to spend two lessons on one article or cover half of the article in class and assign the remainder as homework. The sample lesson accompanying this essay seems to include sufficient material for two lessons.

## **Points to Consider When Creating the Lesson**

### **Language**

Recycling language from the news article in every stage of the lesson should provide sufficiently frequent exposure of the target language to facilitate learning. The more often students encounter new language, the greater will be their likelihood of learning it. Teachers should attempt to achieve a balance between consciousness-raising language-focused exercises and communicative, fluency based activities. Teachers might also consider what language is most beneficial for students to learn and how worthwhile is the students' cognitive investment in trying to learn it. Unless the class is English for Specific Purposes (ESP) related, low frequency vocabulary, technical terms, culture-specific slang and other language that may become obsolete might be best omitted from activities.

## Interaction

News provides considerable scope for partnered work. Frequent partner changes can increase the dynamism of the class and provide students with the challenges of talking to many interlocutors about different ideas. Changing partners can refresh tired students, increase confidence, recycle language and provide a genuine and meaningful context to use language associated with reporting, explaining and asking for clarification.

## An All-Skills Lesson

News also provides ample scope for meaningful exposure to language using all four skills. VOA listening files and news articles provide the teacher with sufficient materials to create a pedagogically effective, four-skills based lesson. A teacher who prefers more speaking in class might want to set writing activities as homework and subsequently use the assignments as the basis for speaking activities in the next lesson.

## Classroom Dynamics

Materials could be designed to increase the learner centeredness of the lesson from a traditional teacher-led class. Designing lessons to maximize partnered work frees the teacher to monitor, listen for mistakes and spend more time with individual students. This would allow students more time to work on language analysis, speaking and listening. It might also increase learner independence and foster self-study skills. With the teacher being less of a focus, students may become more responsible for their own learning. Indeed, if teachers make repeated use of activity types over multiple lessons, students should become more familiar with activity instructions and formats. This may allow students to conduct much of the lesson by themselves.

## A Sample Lesson

I created an example lesson around the "timeless" theme of laughter. I created a staged lesson that incorporated warm ups, pre-reading/listening, while-reading and listening, a fluency activity and homework. I recycled language throughout and maximize partnered interaction.

**Editor's Note:** You can open the sample lesson in a new window, then resize both windows so you can refer to the lesson as you read this explanation.

- [Study Suggests Laughter Is Good for the Heart](#)

## Warm Ups

I created a variety of warm ups to increase the options available to suit the dynamics of different classes. I wanted to allow for factors such as accommodating for latecomers, the time of the day or week (a high energy activity may be required to activate students in Friday afternoon classes) and compensating for misjudged degrees of activity difficulty. A variety of warm ups also allows for a more democratic classroom if students choose which activities they want to do. Any warm ups not used can be utilized elsewhere, to change pace or direction, for a "cooler" to end the lesson or to change other class variables.

With introducing language in the warm up activities, it is perhaps worth considering the balance between the purpose of the warm up as a lighter introduction to the lesson, and the degree of difficulty presented by language items. The teacher might want to limit the potential amount of time spent by students looking in dictionaries or asking for clarification.

The warm ups in this lesson form ideas templates that can be easily adapted for other lessons. The first activity simply involves students writing brief notes based on the lesson theme and then chatting about them. The second and third warm ups pre-teach vocabulary from the article, while the final exercise introduces students to ideas and vocabulary. These serve as a useful introduction to language from the article that students might consider problematic or daunting if met in a "cold" reading or listening. Students may feel a sense of achievement if they understand a word in context that they learnt earlier in the lesson.

## Pre-reading/listening Activities

Pre-reading/listening activities served several aims in my lesson. These were to (1) provide for the learning of vocabulary, lexical patterns and grammar; (2) set students up to succeed in the listening or reading, or at least ease the strain of having to negotiate a large chunk of English unprepared; and (3) encourage a degree of learner autonomy by increasing the reliance on their own analytical skills.

Many pre-reading or listening activities are available that focus on grammar, lexis, functions or phonology. I used two, the first of which is a True/False activity.

### **True/False Activity**

I selected this for the following advantages:

- It focuses students' attention on meaning at the sentence level. Sentence "a" in my activity might get students thinking about whether laughter could be a bad medicine.
- It can be used to introduce synonyms and antonyms. Sentence "b" exposes students to "increased" and "decreased" blood flow.
- It provides a further opportunity to recycle language.
- It introduces language in easily assimilated chunks.
- The truth or falseness of the choices focuses students' attention on the language when checked against the full text.

### **Phrase Match**

The second activity selected for this lesson is a phrase match. Additional advantages of this activity include:

- Students must think about syntax. Choice "b" from the activity requires the linking of "A study has linked laughter" with "to increased blood flow", which introduces the pattern "link X to Y".
- It focuses attention on collocation or other lexical or grammatical patterns, which can be later exploited in extended language analysis exercises. In this activity students see that we say "lead a study", "measure changes" and "the body's ability".
- Checking answers later provides a reason for students to read or listen to the text.
- It encourages partnered interaction as students are required to agree on their answers.

Decisions need to be made regarding where best to make the split for the match. A simple example follows using "j" from the activity:

"he does suggest fifteen minutes"                      "of laughter each day"

This requires students to understand the syntax "X minutes of something". Alternatively, a different split could be made:

"he does suggest fifteen"                      "minutes of laughter each day"

This match here is with a number and the word "minutes".

A balance is required between potential learning value and ease of matching. There is sense in including several easy matches to get students off to a confident start and reduce any cognitive overload.

### **While Reading**

Having the students check the answers to pre-reading and pre-listening activities while they read or listen to the text is a worthwhile activity and provides a valid reason to focus on the article. I also used a separate while-reading/listening activity to further recycle language and allow students to interact with the text in a different format. I created an activity which required students to delete words from the text that did not fit. This created the chance to introduce a variety of lexical points. Examples from my materials are in parentheses.

- Synonyms (lessen / reduce)
- Semantic understanding (aerobic / aerosol)
- Homonyms (herd / heard)

- Collocation (under / over stress)
- Antonyms (identical / opposite)
- Different parts of speech (advice / advise)
- Fixed lexical phrases ("So says" or "Such says")
- Similar sounding words that can be used to differentiate pronunciation (artery / archery)

This activity might also be used as a listening activity if the teacher decides it is too challenging as a reading or if time is running short.

## Speaking Activity

I created a task based activity that had the achievable outcome of identifying potential areas of stress for listed scenarios, together with recommendations to reduce this stress by thinking of opportunities to laugh about the stressful situation. The activity utilizes examples for students to discuss that are recognizable in most cultures (visiting in-laws, driving in traffic, etc.). Following the completion of the task, I used various follow up activities for students to recycle language, talk to different partners, critique and provide feedback, engage in question and answer sessions, and talk about their own lives. This format can be used as a template for future lessons.

## Listening

The listening activity is a simple gap fill for students to recycle vocabulary. I also focused on combinations of simple words, which often cause problems for students regarding pronunciation. Students often have problems hearing the linking between the most common of words, such as prepositions, articles, and conjunctions.

## Homework

The activities here are included for written assignments, which can be further exploited in a follow-up lesson.

## Conclusion

It seems likely that news lessons will become increasingly popular with students and become a more regular feature in the ESL curriculum. There are already a number of websites offering daily, weekly or monthly current events lessons. It is also likely ESL training courses will give greater prominence to the ways technology is used in the classroom, such as Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL). These factors will increase options for teachers to teach lessons on the latest news and perhaps encourage them to create the materials themselves.

## Web Links

- Visit the author's website at <http://www.BreakingNewsEnglish.com/> to find free lesson plans based on current events.
- Visit the Voice of America's Special English website at <http://www.voanews.com/specialenglish/> to find stories on current topics written for English learners.

# The Sample Lesson

**Editor's Note:** We have also put the lesson on its own page to make it easy to print for classroom use.

- [Study Suggests Laughter Is Good for the Heart](#)

## Study Suggests Laughter Is Good for the Heart

## The Article

Have you heard the old saying that laughter is the best medicine? Then listen to this. Seriously, research has already shown that mental stress can restrict blood flow to the heart. But now a study has linked laughter to increased blood flow. Laughter appears to cause the tissue inside blood vessels to expand. As a result, laughing may be important to reduce the risk of heart disease.

So says Doctor Michael Miller of the University of Maryland Medical Center. He led a study of twenty men and women, all healthy. To get them to laugh, they watched part of the movie "Kingpin," a nineteen ninety-six comedy. To create the opposite emotions, they watched the opening battle in the nineteen ninety-eight war movie "Saving Private Ryan."

The researchers used ultrasound technology to measure changes in blood flow through an artery in the arm.

Blood flow increased in nineteen of the twenty people after they watched "Kingpin." The increase was an average of twenty-two percent. Doctor Miller says that is similar to the effects of aerobic exercise.

Blood flow decreased in fourteen of the twenty people after they watched "Saving Private Ryan." The decrease was an average of thirty-five percent.

Studies have shown that stress can reduce the body's ability to fight disease. When the body is under stress, it produces hormones such as adrenalin and cortisol. Cortisol is related to fear; adrenalin prepares the body to react. But too much of these hormones can be harmful.

Doctor Miller noted that the study could not explain how laughter is responsible for the effects observed. Do the effects come from the movement of muscles, or from a chemical release?

The researchers say laughter may cause the body to release pleasure chemicals, just as when a person exercises. Doctor Miller says these endorphins may block the effect of stress hormones and cause the blood vessels to expand. Laughter may also influence the release of nitric oxide, which too expands blood passages.

The results were presented at a meeting of the American College of Cardiology. Doctor Miller does not advise people to replace exercise with laughter. But, based on the results, he does suggest fifteen minutes of laughter each day.

*This VOA Special English Health Report was written by Cynthia Kirk. (May 24, 2005)*

Source: <http://www.voanews.com/specialenglish/2005-05-24-voa2.cfm>

MP3 File: [se-health-laughter-may-help-the-heart-24may05.mp3](#)

(Right-click or option-click the link to download the MP3 file.)

## Warm Up Ideas

**1. Laughter:** Spend a minute or two writing down all the times you have laughed today or this week. Share what you wrote with your partner. Did he/she also laugh at the things you found funny? Change partners and repeat the activity.

**2. Best Medicine:** There is an old saying that laughter is the best medicine. Do you agree? Which of the things below do you think are the best medicines? Put them in order of the "best medicines".

\_\_\_\_\_ Laughter

\_\_\_\_\_ Pharmacy drugs

\_\_\_\_\_ Sleep

\_\_\_\_\_ Aerobic exercise

\_\_\_\_\_ Hormones

- \_\_\_\_\_ Money
- \_\_\_\_\_ Adrenalin
- \_\_\_\_\_ Vitamin supplements
- \_\_\_\_\_ Lots of fruit and vegetables

**3. Chat:** In pairs / groups, decide which of these topics you would like to talk about (and why) and which you would not like to talk about (and why not).

medicine / mental stress / blood vessels / heart disease / comedy movies

aerobic exercise / hormones / adrenalin / pleasure chemicals / laughter

Have a chat about the topics you decided you liked.

**4. Two-minute Debates:** Students face each other in pairs and engage in the following (for-fun) 2-minute debates. Students A are assigned the first argument, students B the second.

- a. Laughter improves your health. vs. Laughter has no effect on your health.
- b. War movies are more interesting than comedies. vs. Comedies are better.
- c. Laughter is similar to exercising. vs. There is little relation between laughter and exercise
- d. Happy people live longer. vs. Happiness does not affect longevity.
- e. Laughing is better for you than exercising. vs. Exercise is better for you.
- f. People should always believe health reports. vs. Sometimes health reports are dangerous.

## Pre-reading / Listening

### 1. True/False:

With your partner(s), agree on whether the following sentences are true or false:

- a. There's an old saying that laughter is the worst medicine. T / F
- b. A study has linked laughter to decreased blood flow. T / F
- c. People in the study were tickled for 19 minutes to get them to laugh. T / F
- d. Laughter may have similar effects on the body as aerobic exercise. T / F
- e. Laughter can reduce the body's ability to fight disease. T / F
- f. A doctor said he could not explain why laughter is good for us. T / F
- g. Laughter may cause the body to release unpleasant chemicals. T / F
- h. A doctor advised people to replace exercise with laughter. T / F

### 2. Phrase Match:

With your partner(s), agree on the matches of the following phrases from the article:

- |                                    |                                  |
|------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| a. the old saying that laughter is | study of twenty men and women    |
| b. a study has linked              | how laughter is responsible      |
| c. He led a                        | aerobic exercise                 |
| d. technology to measure           | of laughter each day             |
| e. similar to the effects of       | in fourteen of the twenty people |
| f. Blood flow decreased            | can be harmful                   |
| g. stress can reduce the body's    | the best medicine                |
| h. But too much of these hormones  | laughter to increased blood flow |

- i. the study could not explain ability to fight disease
- j. he does suggest fifteen minutes changes in blood flow

## While Reading

### Which Word?

Strike through the incorrect word in each of the pairs in **bold**.

### Study Suggests Laughter Is Good for the Heart

Have you **herd** / **heard** the old saying that laughter is the **best** / **worst** medicine? Then listen to this. Seriously, research has already shown that mental stress can restrict blood flow to the heart. But now a study has linked laughter to increased blood flow. Laughter appears to cause the tissue inside blood vessels to expand. As a result, laughing may be important to **lessen** / **reduce** the risk of heart disease.

**So** / **Such** says Doctor Michael Miller of the University of Maryland Medical Center. He led a study of twenty men and women, all healthy. To get them to laugh, they watched part of the movie "Kingpin," a nineteen ninety-six comedy. To create the **identical** / **opposite** emotions, they watched the opening battle in the nineteen ninety-eight war movie "Saving Private Ryan."

The researchers used ultrasound technology to measure changes in blood flow through an **artery** / **archery** in the arm.

Blood flow increased in nineteen of the twenty people after they watched "Kingpin." The increase was an average of twenty-two percent. Doctor Miller says that is similar to the effects of **aerobic** / **aerosol** exercise.

Blood flow decreased in fourteen of the twenty people after they watched "Saving Private Ryan." The **decrease** / **decreased** was an average of thirty-five percent.

Studies have shown that stress can reduce the body's ability to fight disease. When the body is under / over stress, it produces hormones such as adrenalin and cortisol. Cortisol is related to fear; adrenalin prepares the body to react. But too much of these hormones can be harmful.

Doctor Miller noted that the study could not explain how laughter is responsible for the effects reserved / observed. Do the effects come from the movement of muscles, or from a chemical release?

The researchers say laughter may cause the body to release pleasure chemicals, just as when a person exercises. Doctor Miller says these endorphins may **block** / **increase** the effect of stress hormones and cause the blood vessels to expand. Laughter may also influence the release of nitric oxide, which too expands **blood** / **bleeding** passages.

The results were presented at a meeting of the American College of Cardiology. Doctor Miller does not **advise** / **advice** people to replace exercise with laughter. But, based on the results, he does suggest fifteen minutes of laughter each day.

## Speaking

**Laughter Advice:** Imagine you are an expert in laughter therapy. You believe people should laugh as often as they can every day.

In pairs / groups, discuss how the following person might change her lifestyle and laugh more. Parts of her present lifestyle are written in the left column.

1. Write two sources of stress she might experience in the middle column and your recommendations to reduce these and increase laughter in the right column.

Present Lifestyle	Potential stress	Recommendations
Listens to the world news while eating	1.	



breakfast.	2.	
Drives 35 km to work through the city.	1. 2.	
Works as a high school teacher.	1. 2.	
Eats lunch alone in McDonalds.	1. 2.	
Visits her in-laws after work.	1. 2.	
Marks students' homework before going to bed.	1. 2.	

2. Change partners. Show each other your ideas and provide feedback on how to make them better.
3. Discuss whether you would follow the above recommendations in your own life.
4. Return to your original partners. Talk about the feedback you received and revise your original recommendations.
5. Find new partners and make presentations of your ideas. Be prepared to answer questions from your new partners.
6. Discuss how you could change your life to laugh more.

## Listening Gap

Listen and fill in the spaces.

### Study Suggests Laughter Is Good for the Heart

Have you heard the old \_\_\_\_\_ that laughter is the best medicine? Then listen to this. Seriously, research has already shown that mental stress can \_\_\_\_\_ blood flow to the heart. But now a study has linked laughter to increased blood flow. Laughter appears to cause the tissue inside blood vessels to expand. \_\_\_\_\_, laughing may be important to reduce the risk of heart disease.

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Studies have shown that stress can reduce the body's ability to fight disease. When the body is under stress, it produces hormones \_\_\_\_\_ adrenalin and cortisol. Cortisol is related to fear; adrenalin prepares the body to react. But too much of these hormones can be harmful.

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## Homework

- 1. Vocabulary Extensioin:** Choose several of the words from the text. Use a dictionary or Google's search field (or another search engine) to build up more associations / collocations of each word.
- 2. Internet:** Search the Internet and find more information on laughter and health. Share your findings with your class in the next lesson.
- 3. Laughter Advice:** Write a health guideline explaining how people can add more laughter to their everyday lives. Show your guidelines to your classmates in your next lesson. Did you all write about similar things?
- 4. Personal Research:** Monitor your laughter for one day. Write down in a notebook all of the times you laughed, for how long and why. Discuss your findings with your classmates in your next lesson. Were you all equally happy?

## Answers

### 1. True / False:

a. F b. F c. F d. T e. F f. T g. F h. F

### 2. Phrase Match:

- |                                    |                                  |
|------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| a. the old saying that laughter is | the best medicine                |
| b. a study has linked              | laughter to increased blood flow |
| c. He led a                        | study of twenty men and women    |
| d. technology to measure           | changes in blood flow            |
| e. similar to the effects of       | aerobic exercise                 |
| f. Blood flow decreased            | in fourteen of the twenty people |
| g. stress can reduce the body's    | ability to fight disease         |
| h. But too much of these hormones  | can be harmful                   |
| i. the study could not explain     | how laughter is responsible      |
| j. he does suggest fifteen minutes | of laughter each day             |

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