

# Facilitating Discussions of Newspaper Articles in the ESL/EFL Classroom

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This is a lesson plan for facilitating a forty-minute discussion lesson of any newspaper article.

## Introduction

This article reviews some techniques for using newspaper articles in ESL/EFL classes and presents a content free lesson plan for facilitating a forty-minute discussion lesson of any newspaper article.

Much has been written about the value of newspapers in education (Aiex 2000, Antepara 2003, Chandler 1990, Dycus 1996, Kitao 1996). However, in the context of ESL/EFL instruction one of the greatest hindrances to using newspaper articles is their sheer linguistic complexity, even advanced students experience difficulties coming to grips with the vocabulary and various conventions employed by journalists. For language teachers the 'shelf life' of a newspaper article lesson can be quite limited.

For ESL/EFL students, newspaper texts are among the most difficult they may encounter. Not only do ESL/EFL students lack the relative cultural knowledge native speakers bring to bear when reading newspapers, there is also the issue of grammatical complexity; newspapers employ a number of conventions that are only found in newspapers (Bermejo 2000, Kitao 1996). Swan (1995), for example, devotes a couple of pages to only some of the grammatical complexities of newspapers. Moreover, newspapers are lexically complex; due to a lack of space newspaper articles tend to package as much detail as possible into the smallest possible space, which results in a high density of information (Bermejo 2000).

## Newspapers and ESL/EFL Students

EFL students are inefficient readers (Grundy 1993). They often try to process what they read piece by piece and this can greatly inhibit their efforts at getting even a general understanding of a newspaper article. They tend to read each sentence, two or three times in order to process it and this approach obviously increases in complexity as they continue reading the article. Each time they encounter additional information, it is added to what has already been read, and this brings about a restructuring of the whole, which may require the student to return to something they have already read in order to clarify the new sentence.

In addition, ESL/EFL students tend to approach newspapers articles in class from the perspective of form -- grammar and vocabulary, rather than the purpose for which it was intended, to inform. Students need to be reminded to focus on meaning rather than form.

These difficulties notwithstanding, there are several solid reasons for exposing ESL/EFL students to newspapers. The texts are authentic and compelling (Aiex 2000, Chandler 1990), qualities that heighten motivation (Aiex 2000, Bermejo 2000, Antepara 2003, Grundy 1993). They are readily available, so they can be used in any ESL/EFL context where English language newspapers exist (Aiex 2000, Bermejo 2000, Dycus 1996, Chandler 1990). They are authentic and the focus is on meaning rather than form (Bermejo 2000). Moreover, research suggests that reading in general is important to general language competence, so the ability to read and understand newspapers can be seen to support successful second language acquisition (Antepara 2003, Taiwo 2004).

## Developing the Lesson Plan

In order to understand how this lesson plan developed, it is necessary for me to first outline my objectives. They were twofold:

1. I wanted the benefits of using authentic materials, for example, exposure to cultural knowledge, enhanced motivation, authentic responses to the material, etc.
2. I also wanted to develop students' general reading fluency and their ability to use context to garner the meaning of unknown words.

In practice I found that the vibrant discussions I had planned never came to fruition as I ended up explaining the meaning of vocabulary to students. Whereas I had planned to spend most of the time discussing the students' personal responses to the issues raised in the article in an attempt to expand world knowledge, I often found myself doing the complete opposite of what I had planned and my dynamic newspaper article lesson degenerated into a series of lengthy explanations of the vocabulary or journalistic conventions used. I found this to be self-defeating.

Techniques for teaching newspaper articles abound. However, the techniques I have read about seemed to work well in longer lessons (60-90 minutes) where there was time to explain vocabulary, if necessary and then talk about the content of the article, they did not work so well within my teaching context where lessons are generally short -- at only 40 minutes. Moreover, I found preparing newspaper articles to be somewhat labour intensive and given the transient nature of news, I wanted to get some value for my efforts. It was with this in mind that I came up with the idea for a content-free generic newspaper article lesson.

In order to make the most of my forty-minute lesson, I decided to incorporate some of the techniques I had read about into this content free lesson plan.

## **A Basic Newspaper Article Lesson**

### **Introduction -- The Headline**

Here I show the students the headline and follow up with the five Ws to have the students speculate on the possible content of the article. I also encourage the students to draw on their general world knowledge.

### **The Story Lead**

Initially, I re-introduce the five Ws by having the students write down the question words in columns on a piece of paper, then I have the students read the story lead to see if they can determine the answer to the questions of who, what, where, when, and why. I then follow this up by having the students compare their notes in pairs. Next, I have the students read the underlined parts of the story to get the gist of the story (I usually underline these myself before class) and then I follow this up by having them go through the five Ws either in pairs or as a whole class activity. By this stage the students usually have a good sense of who, what, where, when. It is also important to enforce strict time limits in all reading stages (one to three minutes, depending on the article).

### **The Remainder of the Story**

In this section students build on the information they learned from reading the story lead. Using the same piece of paper, they read the entire article to get more information about how and why.

### **Vocabulary Building**

When I prepare a newspaper article lesson I also select some of the more complex vocabulary and include it at the end of the article under the heading vocabulary keywords. In this section of the lesson, we review vocabulary keywords and I encourage the students to speculate on the meaning of unknown vocabulary by using yes/no questions; for example "Does x mean y?" This ensures they, rather than me do the explanatory work.

## **Awareness Raising**

In this section I focus on improving the students' exposition skills. I provide them with a basic model they can use to give succinct opinions about the story. I inform them that they should be prepared to make statements about the article and back these up with supporting statements. I also inform them to respond to the opinions of other students (either agree and offer supporting statements or disagree and make debunking statements). I find that covering basics like this helps to facilitate the discussion.

## **Application**

This section is basically a discussion task, the aim of which is to have students respond to the content of the article. Initially I set questions that have the students respond to the content of the article:

- What are the main points of the article?
- What is the nature of the problem that's identified?
- What, if anything, do you think needs to be/can be done about (the problem)?

Once the students had answers these core questions I allowed the students to take the discussion to where they wanted. I found that this freedom, would take the discussion in new and interesting directions that I could not have foreseen.

## **The Story Lead -- The 5Ws and Intensive Extensive Reading**

Antepara's (2003) suggestion of using the journalistic convention of the 5 W's (who, what, where, when, why, how) to guide reading is helpful as this technique provided the students with a framework to guide their processing of the article and this facilitated comprehension. I used it successfully to guide students past the headline and through the story lead.

However, even using this technique my students failed to independently get the gist of the article even after reading it several times. In addition, it was not uncommon for students to be very far off the mark in the guesses they made at unknown words. This inability seemed to exist simply because they failed to get the gist of the article and so did not have a sense of context.

## **The Story Lead -- Highlighting for Gist**

In order to overcome this problem I decided to underline sections of the text that would give the students a sense of the gist of the article and had them read these sections after they had speculated on the headline and read the story lead. This allowed students to get a better sense of gist and allowed them to speak about the contents of the article more confidently before they returned to look at the words they did not know and attempted to get their meaning from context.

## **Vocabulary Building -- Using Context to Guess the Meaning of Unknown Words**

Because they are linguistically complex, newspapers present a unique opportunity for building vocabulary. Whilst there are times when even native speakers might struggle with an unfamiliar word, a buzz word or an unfamiliar technical term, they have an array of strategies they can employ so that they can come away from the article with nearly a complete understanding of the main points of the article. However, it is not uncommon for ESL/EFL students who struggle with the vast array of journalistic conventions, in addition to the unfamiliar vocabulary, to simply give up.

Altman (2002) describes a quick preliminary activity using Yiddish words to introduce the idea of using the words they know around the unknown word to clarify their meaning. I found this to be effective technique, so I decided to make use of a similar technique in my generic lesson plan to help students get around unknown words.

## **Conclusion**

I have found that combing some of the many techniques that exist into a content free newspaper article lesson plan to be advantageous. I am able to get through my lesson plan efficiently within my forty-minute lesson. The plan has allowed me to better achieve my teaching goals and it helps me to prepare newspaper article lessons quickly. Students are motivated and readily take on the challenge that reading newspapers present them with.

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