Using News Stories in the ESL Classroom

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In this article teachers learn how to help students make the transition from intensive to extensive reading by using news stories and the 5 W's of journalism.

Introduction

The importance of extensive reading in the ESL classroom is well known. The reading of extended passages expands vocabulary, improves writing, and enhances general language competence (Nagy & Herman, 1987; Krashen, 1984; Grabe, 1991, respectively). It puts previously learned vocabulary and grammar into meaningful contexts and teaches new words.

Despite the benefits of extensive reading, it is difficult for many students to progress from short, intensive passages to longer texts. This is especially true in countries where the grammar-translation method is used to teach English in secondary schools (Hino, 1988).

How can teachers help students make the transition from intensive to extensive reading? News stories and the 5 W's of journalism provide one answer.

The Structure of News Stories

For the purposes of the ESL reading classroom, news stories may be thought of as having two parts: the first sentence (or lead), and the rest of the story.

The lead contains the most important information in capsule form, one that journalists commonly refer to as the 5 W's: who, what, when, where and why. These questions are crucial for catching a reader's attention and introducing the essential facts of the story. Most leads provide answers to who, what, when and where. Depending on the story, a lead may also answer the questions why and how. Because the lead is so short, it can be used to help students practice intensive reading.

In the rest of the story, the article gives additional information relating to the 5 W's and how. It expands upon any questions already answered in the lead, and often answers other questions that were not addressed there. The second part of the story provides a good opportunity for extensive reading.

Relevance for the ESL Classroom

The 5 W's are not only the building blocks of news stories but also of communicative English. This makes them very useful for ESL students. In addition, because of the prevalence of the Internet and other media in many countries, most students have some knowledge of current events, and thus a lot of background knowledge with which to decode news stories. For a good overview of the importance that schema (background knowledge) plays in reading, see Carrell and Eisterhold, 1983.

This makes news stories, and especially front-page news stories, accessible to the class. The fact that four out of the 5 W's are normally answered in the first sentence not only focuses attention on a short passage but also prepares students to tackle the rest of the story where the same information is repeated and expanded upon. The 5 W's thus provide a transitional device for pulling students deeper into a text and increasing their reading ability.

In this article I will first outline the steps for a general lesson in intensive reading. Then I will go on to give a sample lesson which includes both intensive and extensive reading exercises.

Procedure -- Intensive Reading: The News Lead

Choosing a News Story

There are two ways to begin. The students can suggest news stories they would be interested in reading, or the instructor can choose a story familiar to students. When opting for the first, have students bring in stories and ask them to vote on one they would like to read.

Activating Schema and Teaching New Vocabulary

Once the story is chosen, make a list of 10 key vocabulary words. Vocabulary can be taught by way of semantic maps or other word games. For example, if your students choose a story about a catastrophic earthquake, the vocabulary for the lesson might include tremors, epicenter, aftershocks, shake, shook, and injured. One way to teach these words would be to write earthquake at the top of the blackboard and then two subcategories underneath: nouns and verbs. Words are placed into the appropriate categories (injure and shake into verbs; aftershocks and epicenter into nouns).

Teaching the 5 W's

In most cases, this will only require a quick review of interrogatives.

Intensive Reading

Hand out a copy of the story. Instruct students to read only the first sentence and answer as many of the 5 W's as they can.

Speaking and Pair Work

Here is a chance to incorporate speaking into the reading classroom. Students form pairs and ask/answer each of the five questions. The teacher could prepare a brief exercise to get students ready. For intermediate classes, a simple listen and repeat exercise is usually enough. For example, the teacher could form questions using each of the 5 W's and have students repeat.

Examples:

- Who is this story about?
- What is it about?
- Where did it take place?

For beginning and lower-intermediate classes, this can be done as a dictation.

A Sample Lesson: Arnold Schwarzenegger's Victory in California Gubernatorial Election

(Teachers who are interested in using this story can find it in many English language news databases on October 9, 2003.)

Because Arnold Schwarzenegger's films are so well known, this story provides plenty of schema, or background knowledge, and thus a solid foundation upon which to acquire additional vocabulary and grammar.

Intensive Reading

For the intensive reading portion of this lesson I made sure students understood the following words: election, vote, voters, recall, campaign, governor, actor, ballot, percent, supporters, Democrats and Republicans. I drew a word tree on the board and broke the vocabulary down into categories: People -- voters, governor, actor, supporters, Democrats, Republicans; and nouns -- (things only): election, vote, percent, ballot. I noted the two verbs on the list (recall, vote), and pointed out that vote could be used as both noun and verb. I showed the students two examples of this: "She voted for Arnold Schwarzenegger" (verb); "Schwarzenegger got the most

votes in the election" (noun).

In the intensive reading phase, students were able to provide answers to 4 of the 5 W's: who (Arnold Schwarzenegger); what (elected to replace California governor Gray Davis); when (on October 9, 2003); and where (in California, U.S.A.).   The answering of these questions also provided a good opportunity to review the prepositions in and on. Students practiced making sentences using "on" in sentences about dates: on October 9th, on May 5th, on Wednesday and on Sunday. They also practiced "in" in sentences about place: in California, in Japan, and in Germany.

Extensive Reading

After students found answers to who, what, when and where, they were ready for extensive reading and the second part of the story. In this part of the lesson they added to information already learned from the lead. The extensive reading was broken down into the following two steps:

- Getting additional information relating to who, what, when and where.
- Trying to find answers to how and why.

In the first part, students found the following information:

WHO

- Arnold Schwarzenegger was born in Austria and was a bodybuilder.

WHAT

- With most of the votes counted, the recall was passed by over 50 percent of the voters.
- Lieutenant Governor Cruz Bustamante got 47.0 percent of the vote.
- Arnold Schwarzenegger is a Republican. Democrats have majorities in the California legislature.

In the second part of the extensive reading exercise, students also found the following information:

WHY

- Voters were very dissatisfied with Governor Davis's performance. This was indicated by both election results and news polls showing that three of four voters were critical of Davis.

HOW

- Arnold Schwarzenegger's election victory was the result of a highly unusual campaign in which more than 135 candidates ran.

Conclusion

News stories provide a wealth of material for the ESL classroom. The 5 W's improve both intensive and extensive reading skills by helping the student focus on specific information (in the lead), and information that is a little more general (in the rest of the story). Students feel a sense of accomplishment at having acquired information about the world while improving their ESL reading ability.

References

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