

# Teaching EFL/ESL Students How to Read Time and Newsweek

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Time and Newsweek have been favourite sources of teaching material at advanced levels for several reasons:

- These magazines are easily available all over the world and they can be taken to class as examples of "authentic" English because they are written by native speakers for native speakers.
- The lesson will focus on meaning rather than on form, which is the best way to promote language acquisition, according to authors like Prahbu (1987) or Nunan (1989).
- Students will find these texts especially motivating because they will learn something new about the modern world while practising English: the lessons will have signification, relevance and the perceived value of the activities will increase (Williams and Burden: 1997).

But teachers have a decisive role to play as "mediators" (Williams and Burden: 1997) to help students cope with the challenge of reading these texts. First of all, we have to be aware of the "house style" of these publications. Then, we have to design lesson plans which train students to deal with the peculiarities of this style, those that hinder and those that facilitate reading comprehension. In other words, we have to teach how to read Time and Newsweek as particular examples of authentic journalistic style.

## Tackling Lexical Complexity in Time and Newsweek

The first area where both native and non-native readers need help when reading Time and Newsweek stories is vocabulary. The choice of vocabulary in these magazines has been described as "whimsical" (Hughes: 1992), and Nigel Ross (1995) has pointed out that their stories often mix together all types of register. In the story "CASE Study" (Newsweek, January 24, 2000), there coexist high register expressions (abundance, rancor, nascent, succinctly, mentor, when need be), technical words (gyroscope, venture capital, CEO, synergy), recent coinages (digerati), informal language (bucks, cocky, to flop, clunky, cool, cheesy), colloquialisms (schmoozing, hobnob, jittery), buzz words and popular constructions (low tech, overarching, overextended, overeager), slang (geeky, techie) or even words the journalists themselves have made up (nonflashy, techno-zillionaires). And it is not unusual to come across literary terms, archaisms or foreign borrowings in other stories ("Plus Ça Change", Time February 7, 2000).

The idea behind this linguistic exhibition is to create a distinctive house style which is dynamic or "racy" (Ross: 1995, 16), where the references to pop culture and buzz words bring freshness and vitality, the technical words underline the objectivity and reliability of the information, the literary terms are appreciated by the educated reader, and there is still room for playfulness and some exotic flavour. Students should be aware of this peculiarity and should take it as a stylistic convention which appeals to an international, educated, often dynamic readership. So, as a cautionary first step, students should be discouraged from underlining every unfamiliar word they come across, because that only focuses their attention on the particular and the unknown; learners should be trained instead to get the message of the story without being dazzled by the impressive display of lexicon. Teachers have to promote a "top-down" comprehension strategy, from the context and general ideas to the specific detail, so that students can guess the meaning of unknown words from contextual clues and can gauge the real dimension individual words with regard to the meaning of the text as a whole.

## Using Highlighted Information to Get the Gist of the Story

Journalistic stories offer several ways to grasp the gist of the story: the headline, the first paragraph (lead) that expands the information of the headline, the picture and the caption, the subheadings, the charts and other visual information. In Time and Newsweek headlines are usually eye-catchers that imitate the technique of advertising gimmicks by engaging the reader in a quick intellectual game based on alliteration ("Hunting the Hackers", Newsweek February 21, 2000), rhyme ("Behind the Hack Attack", Time

February 21, 2000), hints or puns that try to establish a double or sometimes triple channel of communication - a complicity - with the reader at a glance. They very often make a reference to the title of a famous film, song, book, to an idiom or to a common expression, for example, in Newsweek January 24, 2000, the cover says "Citizen Case", and in the articles inside you can find "Desperately Seeking a Deal", "Something Old, Something New", "CASE Study". In the issue of February 21, 2000, you almost hear the tune as you stumble over "So Many Causes, So Little Time", and in Time October 11, 1999, you can read "All the King's Women", "Forgive Us Our Debts", "A Cinema Very Near You", "The Real Thing", "Every Breath you Take", "A Brave New Web", or "Silicon Valet". Memory retrieval and association of ideas is a popular intellectual game among the readers of these American magazines, but our students will probably be confused by these conceptual loops as appetisers, so learners should always read the headline together with the subheading, the caption, the highlighted sentences, the quotations and the visual information, if they want to understand the main idea in the story. The discussion of the full meaning of the headline should be postponed until the end of the class.

The cognitive process of determining the gist of the story will trigger the students' comprehension strategies: students will activate their relevant world knowledge and they will start anticipating the content of the story. The interplay between prior knowledge, new information and predictions will probably create a moment of cognitive uncertainty, so, at this point, a natural communicative task would be to allow students to discuss their guesses in pairs, which, in turn, will be very favourable for the dynamics of the class, as it will introduce a break of oral interaction in the reading comprehension lesson.

## **Journalistic Style and Density of Information**

Once the oral exchange has built up confidence, students are ready to come down to the text proper, and deal with style problems such as vocabulary. They will probably find a second difficulty: the density of the information. Journalistic stories are complex and ambitious, they tell new events, but they also include quotations, background and consequences of those events (Bell: 1991), so editors very often have to package the information in a way that is sometimes forced and can be difficult to understand. Time and Newsweek tend to overuse noun phrases to put together sentences that sprawl in several domains, and miss the point in an unnecessarily complicated syntax, for example in "Targets of Opportunity" (Time, February 21, 2000) we can find this sentence:

European companies, pressed by the bigger-is-better mentality of the new technology-based global economy -not to mention a growing corporate concern for shareholder value- started rushing to the altar in droves, sometimes with a shotgun in view.

Very often, these noun phrases are woven in long lists, to give detailed descriptions in the shortest possible space, "Ivan the III" (Time, February 21, 2000), begins:

When an authority on Russia says the country is going crazy, it evokes images in the West of a nation in political and economic turmoil; of brutal regional warfare; of barons and mafiosi getting richer while the poor steadily get poorer.

Finally some journalists are carried away by the tricks of the trade and they compress so much information together that sentences turn into strings of headlines which summarise whole stories in two or three words, as in "Setting their Sails" (Time, February 21, 2000):

Competition for the jewelled silver America's Cup is usually as nasty as it comes: rule books ignored, bitter courtroom clashes, moneyed bullies and sore losers.

Density is one of the factors that increases the complexity of communicative tasks (Skehan, 1998: 99), and is probably the most difficult aspect of the style of Time and Newsweek. Students will have to slow down their reading speed at certain points, and they will sometimes have to read some sentences twice in order to swallow these tablets of fortified information. Nevertheless, the density of these passages can be played down if we draw the students' attention to the general layout of the discourse, because the great advantage of the style of Time and Newsweek is that the textual organisation is very predictable and this can be an invaluable aid in reading these stories faster and more efficiently.

## **Topic Sentences and Paragraph Structure: When House Style Facilitates Comprehension**

The stories in Time and Newsweek, unlike those in daily or weekly newspapers, are always very neatly organised, ideas are ordered

in paragraphs of around 125 words, ranging from 70 to 250 words, with very rare exceptions to this rule. Each paragraph is usually made up of 6 to 15 sentences, and the structure of those paragraphs is very regular: there is always a topic sentence, usually at the beginning or at the end of the paragraph and the other sentences expand that idea or give examples to support it. The only exception to this, is the first paragraph, which, as opposed to the lead in newspaper stories, does not explain the headline, but tries to personalise the story and bring it closer to the reader by describing a particular scene or an actor in the event. It is another rhetorical trick to attract the reader's attention.

Teachers have to make active use of the predictability of text organisation and topic sentences to help students understand these stories better. Topic sentences can be approached in a communicative class in the following way: after reading and answering some comprehension questions, students can be asked to summarise in pairs several paragraphs in one sentence; then we can compare as a class the paragraph summaries that different pairs have produced. It will dawn on students that the summaries of the paragraphs are written word for word in the paragraphs themselves, which, in turn, will give the teacher an excellent opportunity to point out how useful and how easy spotting topic sentences is, when we need to skim the text quickly and accurately. Later in the course, when students have become familiar with the function and location of topic sentences, a proper skimming task could be undertaken after discussing predictions and before reading the text to answer the comprehension questions.

## **Conclusion: a Standard Lesson Plan to Read Time and Newsweek Stories**

A standard lesson plan to read Time and Newsweek stories in the EFL/ESL class could be the following:

1. Read the highlighted information (headline, subheadings, caption, look at the pictures and charts).
2. Discuss your predictions in pairs and then as a class.
3. Skim the text in one or two minutes, to find the backbone of the story, the aspects of the story that are going to be covered. Try to find the topic sentences to do this. When students are not yet familiar with the concept, function and location of topic sentences, stages 3 and 4 can be done after the reading comprehension (6).
4. Discuss these summaries in pairs and as a class, if it is necessary.
5. Read the story at your own speed.
6. Discuss comprehension questions in pairs and as a class.
7. Discuss the meaning of unknown words, difficult sentences or the headline in pairs.
8. As a follow-up activity, give your opinions about the content of the story.

This lesson can be dynamic, motivating and amusing because it will include a variety of tasks such as reading highlighted information, anticipation, skimming, reading for specific comprehension, vocabulary and syntax analysis, discussions. The lesson will encourage natural, meaningful communication and student interaction in the EFL classroom because learners will have to think and use English to solve the tasks. But teachers have to play a decisive role as mediators in this learning experience: we have know very well the peculiarities of Time and Newsweek stories so that we can plan activities that teach our students how to read this particular example of journalistic style.

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