

Some Possibilities for Using On-line Newspapers in the ESL Classroom

Jarek Krajka

[jkrajka \[at\] batory.plo.lublin.pl](mailto:jkrajka@batory.plo.lublin.pl)

Stefan Batory Pallottine Secondary School, Lublin, Poland

and

Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznan, Poland

Introduction

Gaining access to English speaking newspapers on the Internet presents language teachers with a number of teaching possibilities. This paper outlines the advantages and disadvantages of electronic papers and characterizes some benefits and problems encountered while using them, as well as proposes some suggestions for using on-line papers with the greatest profit for students. Also, it is my intention to try to show how teachers could supplement existing coursebooks with the Internet component. The level of the group to which it may be directed is intended to be intermediate, the necessary resources include a computer lab with Internet access with at least one PC per two students.

One can hardly deny the usefulness of reading English newspapers in the process of learning. If suited to the students' level of English, newspaper articles can be interesting to read and may trigger some in-class discussion, as well as increase students' cultural awareness. The only, and the most crucial, problem with them is the price. The majority of students cannot afford to subscribe to any foreign newspaper. Therefore, electronic newspapers are a great chance for educators and learners, since they are easily accessible and virtually free.

Summary of Previous Research

Paul Seedhouse, in his 1994 article "Using Newspapers on CD-ROM," takes up the issue of newspapers stored on CD-ROM disks. In the article he explains what these are, how they can be obtained and used in language instruction. He gives some ideas for using such electronic papers for reading, preparing topics, discussion in class, language exercises, writing tasks (reconstructing a text from a series of prompts), comprehension and vocabulary exercises. He is especially concerned with these newspapers as the source of materials for ESP instruction, because one can find more material in them than in ESP textbooks, and also ESP textbooks rarely cover narrowly specialized domains of interest, which can be achieved while accessing newspapers on CD-ROM. However, when compared with on-line papers, newspapers on CD-ROM have to be purchased, which may be some barrier for underdeveloped regions, where the cost of having Internet access is the challenge itself. Also, for students to use such CD-ROMs in class, at least one per two students would have to be bought, which makes the cost higher. Newspapers on the Web are virtually free and can be accessed in any moment, even without a teacher's supervision. Perhaps they do not have such searching possibilities or extensive library of back issues, but the price and accessibility of e-papers seem to give them an advantage over CD-ROM papers.

Victoria Muehleisen also discusses the issue of using newspapers in language classroom in her article "Projects Using the Internet In College English Classes." The author strongly advocates using the Internet in foreign language instruction, mainly because learning to use a computer provides a strong intrinsic motivation for learning English, the Internet places English in an international context, Internet projects are interactive and facilities for using the Internet are often readily available. Among various types of resources mentioned, the author mentions also the sites of on-line newspapers, stating that they are useful both as the introduction to the use of the Internet and for doing research for class presentation.

The issue of using on-line newspapers is dealt with in some detail by Ian Brown in his paper "Internet Treasure Hunts - A Treasure of an Activity for Students Learning English." Brown says that he uses newspapers in his class regularly, and once in a while he uses electronic papers, for the students to practice their computer skills as well as to have a greater variety of choice. He uses e-papers as the source of information, benefiting from the easiness of searching, the variety of articles from different parts of the world and their

free character. Among the benefits of using such sites outlined by Brown, the following aspects need to be mentioned: that Internet reading activity builds on students' reading skills, helps them to enlarge vocabulary, forces them to infer unknown words from the context, develops their writing and speaking skills in creating and delivering the presentation to the class, and finally enriches their cultural awareness.

Ken Schmidt in his 1999 article "Online Extensive Reading Opportunities for Lower-Level Learners of EFL/ESL" raises the issue of using the Internet as the source for the reading supplement to the course. He states in his article that the Internet is indeed a great treasure trove of varied reading comprehension input (as the sites of on-line newspapers are). However, the problem is that natural (in the sense of not learner abridged) sites are not accessible for elementary to intermediate learners, since their reading pace and the comprehensibility of the text, as well as the grammar and vocabulary level does not meet the threshold of many Internet materials. In order to remedy this situation, and to provide lower-level learners with some opportunities for a varied and realistic supplement to their extensive reading program, the author provides some useful ideas how the following types of free-access sites could be used with lower-level students: Commercial/Institutional EFL/ESL Sites, Sites from Individual Educators, Learner Produced Materials, Keypal and Discussion Sites, Internet Training for EFL/ESL Students, Quiz Sites, Online Dictionaries and Link Sites. Therefore, this article should be read by educators teaching less fluent students but still willing to enhance their reading programs with the Web materials.

Newspaper sites are not included by the author in his work, since they represent a level higher than that which can be used by elementary to intermediate students. Instead, he gives a few of newspapers providing some learner abridged, ready made on-line materials for students to read. In fact, original newspapers could be effectively used from the intermediate level up. Various newspapers have a varying level of English, and thus it is possible to some extent for teachers to adjust the input to the level of the class. But I do agree with Schmidt's claim that newspaper sites, not abridged in any way, as well as many other authentic materials on the Web, are beyond the level of elementary to intermediate students.

Kenji Kitao, in the article "Teaching the English Newspaper Effectively," is also concerned with the issue of electronic newspapers and their utilization in English teaching. He states that many of his Japanese students would like to read English newspapers, but it is too difficult for them, partly because they do not possess enough knowledge of the conventions of newspapers and newspaper articles. Since the early 1980s, the author has been teaching students how to read newspapers, and as a result of the lessons students have become interested in reading newspapers and could learn to read them independently using a dictionary. Therefore, the author states, students must be first introduced to the basic features of newspapers, their organization, style and most important concepts such as headline, byline, classified ads, etc. This is crucial mainly because there are substantial differences in the outlook of English and Japanese papers, which may be misleading for students. The author starts from teaching basic concepts to students, and proceeds to some more complicated ones. The conclusion of Kitao's paper is that using on-line newspapers is a profitable element of language instruction, but students first must be familiarized with their features to make the best use of the articles they read.

Some General Issues Concerning On-line Newspapers

The use of the Internet can remove the greatest obstacle in the access to the authentic written word, which is the price. There are a number of newspaper sites on the Internet, some of them including only extracts or titles and general information, while others being complete digital papers with archives going back a few issues. The students can use them for free, if it is the school which pays for the Internet connection (which is usually the case). The other advantages of e-papers are: the possibility to retrieve older issues quickly and without additional expenses, the possibility to change to another paper if the one chosen is inappropriate for some reason, the possibility to bookmark or subscribe to the site (still for free), and the possibility to print it out and use it as normal paper or save it to disk, open it in a word processing program and edit for one's own purposes (providing there is no breach of copyright laws).

As for disadvantages, perhaps the weakest side of e-papers is the fact that many people may find it difficult to read on a computer screen, because of its flicker causing one's eyes to tire. Also, it may be hard for students to concentrate on reading the text when they have such distractions as graphics, animated banner ads, or links to some other, usually more interesting, sites. And finally, there is always a danger that without the proper supervision by the teacher students may simply move from this site to somewhere else or cease to read. Obviously, the issue of student motivation and the active role of the teacher should be taken into consideration here.

At this moment, it should be emphasized that electronic papers, as well as traditional ones, are a source of current information, something that coursebooks are usually short of. The most serious objection to existing books, and the one put forward most often by students, is that the texts and realia included in them are no longer realistic, since the time from the writing of the book to the present

day made them obsolete (which is especially true of units dealing with music and film stars). It becomes obvious that if the teacher wants students to be interested in some topic, it needs to be recent and appealing to them. To cater to the students' needs, and to provide recency and variety, electronic newspapers could be used quite profitably, as will be shown below.

At this point, a common problem arises: how to cut down on searching time and find the real useful gems in the whole lot of rubbish? Here, the great help will be the link given by Ian Brown in his paper entitled "Internet Treasure Hunts - a Treasure of an Activity for Students Learning English," which is the index of on-line newspapers from all over the world. After reading Brown's paper, and being inspired by his suggestions, I decided to check the URL he gives as the central page for newspapers from the whole world. The one that I used was <http://www.webwombat.com.au/intercom/newsprsr/index.htm>. After connecting to the page, one can find a number of countries from all over the world, and after choosing the country there appears a list of on-line newspapers from a given country.

If some newspapers have an English version, it is noted already at this point. The site has only active links, and it connects you quite fast to the newspaper sites in other countries. The benefit of such a site for teachers and learners is enormous: one has all the countries, and all the newspapers together in one place, one does not have to perform a time consuming search with the help of a search engine such as www.yahoo.com or www.altavista.com, which can destroy an on-line lesson with a slower Internet connection. Also, the great advantage of the site is that it is noted in the index for a particular country which papers have English versions.

Some Ideas for Using Newspaper Sites in the Classroom

I would like to present some suggestions for using newspaper sites in the classroom, as the basis for Internet lessons incorporated in the syllabus. One way of benefiting from on-line papers is to use them as a fast and recent source of information about the current affairs of the world. Thus, the students might be asked to work in groups of two, and each group would get some topic to find information about. The recent topics at the moment of writing this paper were the war in Chechnya, earthquakes in Turkey, snowstorms and related problems all over Europe, building the wall dividing Czechs and Gypsies in Usti in the Czech Republic or building the mosque in Nazareth and subsequent protests of all Christian churches in Israel. Of course, these could be supplied with any other incidents, which are currently in the headlines. On the one hand, the students might be asked only to find an English speaking newspaper in their relevant countries (Russia for the first one, Turkey for the second, Slovakia, Austria, and Italy for the third, Czech for the fourth and Israel for the fifth), read about the assigned incidents, make notes or save the page to a disk and later share it with the whole class in an oral presentation. It is crucial to make sure here that all students in the group have to report to the class so that everyone is involved in the activity.

The same activity might be made more demanding and interesting if students are asked not only to find out about the current state of affairs, but also to search through the previous issues (if there are not any, then to find a paper with back issues) and report on the development of the situation. This might be especially interesting with such events as the war in Chechnya and the earthquakes in Turkey, while it might not work with the wall in the Czech Republic. Thus, assigning such a task, the teacher needs to choose the incidents which are dynamic, not very short lasting, and serious enough to re-appear in the papers. Also, he should check prior to the lesson if there are papers in a given country that have previous issues accessible.

With older and more advanced students, the same activity could be modified to introduce the element of comparison between different points of view on the same subject. Thus, in the case of the war in Chechnya, students might first read a Russian paper and get to know the story, and then get access to some Western or American papers. The comparison could trigger some insightful observations about the nature of journalism, the relativity of truth, propaganda and objectivity. This kind of research allows students to observe how the same situation is presented differently according to some political goals.

On-line newspapers are not only a rich resource of current information, they can also be used to familiarize students with the culture of the English speaking countries. The warm-up activity here might be visiting some British or American papers and reading what the current problems are there. To make it more demanding, the idea of treasure hunts (see Brown 1999) could be introduced here. Students might be asked to find out the answers to some questions about persons, events or places, for example the names of some ministers or the purpose of some well known places, in e-papers. Here, the element of competition might be additionally motivating, though it should be observed that it might not give results as good as a contest in a normal language environment - it is beyond doubt that any class is likely to be heterogeneous in terms of computer skills, and such a contest relying heavily on the knowledge of how to operate the Internet browser, the search engine and how to search quickly and efficiently might frustrate the less skilled students and make them abandon the competition altogether.

The more advanced students could be introduced to the division into quality and tabloid papers in the United Kingdom by consulting a representative of both. They could compare the ways of presenting information in tokens of both, including the topics, the ways of their presentation, the layout of articles and the register of language used. After such an analysis made together in class, to apply the knowledge of structures and modes of expressions, they might be asked to take some tabloid story and write it for a quality paper and vice versa. This might produce some very interesting results, being not only great fun but also an important aspect of writing instruction. That is because newspaper texts could be used as authentic models of writing as a product, and the asset of such a solution would be that students would be completely convinced of the reality of the examples. In this way, on-line newspapers might supplement or enrich existing coursebooks, by providing samples of writing pieces, to be used for discussion of style or structures and for modeling students' own writing.

The follow-up of the above activity would be for the students to edit their own newspaper in English on a home page, with one half of the class writing it in the tabloid style, while the other half tries to imitate quality newspapers. The merit of such an activity is that students would be able to apply the theoretical knowledge of the differences between the two genres in practice. After one issue, students could change sides so the tabloid team would become the quality one and vice versa.

On-line newspapers could be used yet in a different way, this time to help students notice the cultural differences in mentality and approach to certain subjects. Thus, each group of two or four (two per one PC) is assigned a particular topic, such as for instance capital punishment, euthanasia, attitude to foreigners, environment protection, etc. Then, they are asked to search newspapers in different countries, preferably those coming from different cultures (for instance an African paper, an Arabic paper, an American paper and a European paper), looking for articles relating to their topic. When found, articles should be read and students should make some notes for the oral presentation in class or for the next lesson. The aim here is not to find too many relevant articles, since one of each culture would be enough, but rather to observe the differences in mentality reflected in newspaper articles. Obviously, the teacher's role here is to choose such topics which are certain to be controversial and treated differently in different countries, and also to help students during this activity by pointing to them which countries the groups should search to get the most observable contrasts. Depending on the amount of time available, students may either read the articles in class, make notes and discuss them together (if there are two hours of English in one block), or they might save the found texts to their personal floppies and read them at home or print them out in class (for those who do not possess PCs at home), to be discussed during the next lesson.

This activity could be used to supplement the coursebook. If there is a unit about endangered earth or crime, students might be asked to look for articles relating to the general theme of the unit. In this way, the coursebook can be supplemented with additional texts for reading comprehension and for vocabulary work. Special attention of the teacher should be paid here to selecting the right texts and establishing the appropriate level of comprehensibility of the newspaper text, which is not learner abridged or adapted in any way.

Using On-line Newspaper Sites for Producing Classroom Materials

On-line newspapers constitute a comprehensive, cheap and big archive for materials development. The types of language exercises produced using newspaper texts which follow were inspired by the ideas on using newspapers on CD-ROM given by Seedhouse (1994). Namely, the teacher may find a suitable article, save it to his floppy, then open it in a word processing program and ...

- delete some of the words for the students to fill in the blanks;
- delete the first sentence from each paragraph and ask students to put them back into the correct places in the text;
- highlight some words in the text and make students deduce their meanings from the context or choose the best equivalent from the ones given;
- jumble paragraphs for the students to reorder
- and do many other things.

These are the types of reading comprehension activities which are found in Paper 1 of Cambridge First Certificate in English examination, as well as in other tests in English. Such tests are included in a number of books, but I feel that apart from these ready made materials teachers might also create their own with the help of articles from e-papers. Sometimes ready made tests do not quite match the level of the class, and there is no possibility of making them easier or more difficult. With a teacher made test, any changes or alterations can be made if only the teacher thinks it is necessary for the benefit of learners. Also, the teacher has the freedom to choose the topics that are of interest to his students, which is not always the case with ready made tests. Finally, I think that developing materials for students can give the teacher greater confidence, since he can make the choice to suit the needs of his students.

Editing texts from e-papers is really very easy and time-saving compared to developing materials with traditional methods. The teacher can easily do the things described above using Copy and Paste functions for the text to be printed for class use. If he wants to publish his materials on the class home page and make them accessible to his students (as well as any others) on-line, he might use such features of a word processing program as macros and forms, with the help of which one can supply the texts with gaps for filling, drop down boxes to give the answer, hint buttons to get help while doing the activity, etc. (see Tuzi 1997, where he describes in detail the procedure of creating on-line materials using macros and forms in *Microsoft Word*.) Therefore, creating such language activities from on-line newspapers does not demand too much time or electronic expertise from the teacher, and may pay off in terms of better student motivation. However, and this is the general remark concerning using e-papers in the language classroom, great attention should be paid to the level of comprehensibility of the text, and sometimes the texts should be adapted to the class level in the sense that the teacher should supply some of the new words with the ones that students are familiar with or the ones they have recently learned to reinforce them.

On a more advanced level, and with more motivated students, texts from e-papers could be used to make students themselves write similar quizzes, gapped or jumbled texts. Doing so would not be throwing the burden of the work from teacher to students, but rather its aim would be to encourage students to make conscious choices about important vocabulary or structures. Also, most students love to take the responsibility in their own hands and to show their skills to others. If there was a class home page where such activities could be posted, the authors could be rewarded by having their names put next to their work. Of course, such student made works would have to be checked by the teacher before giving them to the class, but this seems to be a minor factor compared with the obvious advantages of such a solution.

Copyright Issues Connected with the Use of Newspapers

One final issue which should be discussed at this point is the question of copyright preservation and plagiarism. As Kristina Pfaff-Harris states in her paper "Copyright Issues on the Web," copyright allows for the author of a work to retain the right to copy or distribute that work for some time. Copyright does not serve to restrict the availability of the works, but rather is some encouragement for the authors to create more works if their effort is properly estimated.

Pfaff-Harris states that, although international laws differ widely, in the United States a work is copyrighted from the moment of creation, and no official registration is needed for that. The general idea is that no creative work should be copied wholesale without giving credit to the author. Thus, while using the texts of articles from on-line newspapers, which are very easy to copy, paste and alter, teachers should not put them under their own names, but rather credit the author of the text. Most of the activities, such as searching, reading, using the articles for writing some summaries or reports, do not seem to violate the copyright law, as long as the purpose is strictly educational and not intended to make money. Also Seedhouse (1994), while discussing the terms of use of newspapers on CD-ROM, states that as long as the texts of articles are used for non-commercial, educational purposes, it does not infringe upon copyright to read, search or use texts for discussion or report writing, as well as for teachers to edit newspaper articles in order to create language exercises.

With regard to using on-line newspaper sites as the resource for creating classroom materials, it seems that as long as the source and the authors are given, and as long as the use is limited to the classroom and not intended to be published in order to raise money, teachers would be allowed to work on the newspaper articles. However, as Pfaff-Harris adds, in case of doubt, the best solution is simply to e-mail the site administrator and ask for permission to use the materials included on the site, indicating clearly the educational purpose. In case of a negative answer, one may try to find some other newspaper which perhaps would not mind the use of its articles in such a way.

In order to obtain detailed information on the copyright law, in addition to consulting the copyright information on the sites of *Daily Telegraph*, *Daily Mail* and some other papers, I also sent an inquiry to syndication departments of a few e-papers, as well as posted an enquiry on TESLCA-L discussion list.

1. The Syndication Department of Telegraph Group Ltd (the publisher of *Daily Telegraph*) replied in their message that since I intended to use their material purely for educational purposes, I could be granted permission to do so. There is no restriction or limitation on the use, which implies that the processes mentioned in my letter (and most notably *editing*) are allowed. This was the most encouraging response.

2. The Syndication of *The Independent* replied that in order to use the copies of articles from *The Independent* I needed to gain

reproduction permission from this department. They said that they would need to know the headline, byline and date of the articles I was going to use, how many copies I wished to make and how exactly the articles would be used. They added that not everything that is published in *The Independent* was their copyright and I might be interested in using the articles by freelance writers who retain their own copyright. In this case permission must be gained from the copyright holder directly. Once they have all the information, they offer to check the copyright situation and process my request for reproduction permission, usually quite quickly. They promised to take into account while considering the permission request that the use of their material would be limited to educational use only for one classroom. Therefore, the use of the articles from *The Independent* demands the request for permission which does not have to be granted, but from the reply it seems that the educational purpose and one classroom only make the situation rather favorable.

3. The Syndication Department of *The Times* responded that the kinds of use of articles enlisted in my letter (printing, editing, creating reading comprehension and vocabulary exercises) is indeed an infringement of their copyright and I would only be able to do this with permission. They advised me to write to the Newspaper Licencing Association (Copy@nla.co.uk) to find out if they could grant me a licence that would cover what I would be going to do in my school. If the licence they offered did not include the kind of things I wished to do with their articles, they asked me to write them again with more details of the numbers involved and whether I wished to use the material in printed, photocopied or electronic form. But they said that I should contact the NLA first. "There is no way in which you can copy, reproduce or use our articles that does not infringe the copyright so you do need a licence of some kind," emphasized the reply from *The Times*.

4. Many messages were received from members of TESLCA-L discussion list. One message states that in the United States the Internet is specifically excluded from the fair educational use (allowing teachers to make up to ten copies of a page from a book and use them up to two semesters), which means that if one wants to use anything from the Net, he always needs to ask for permission. However, there seems to be little chance to enforce such a law, and in consequence newspaper sites may become an entirely public domain quite soon.

From these messages, it seems evident that newspaper materials cannot be freely used without permission. Newspapers should be asked for permission, even though there is no control of how people using the Internet treat the content of newspaper sites. Some newspapers are quite positive about using their materials for educational purposes, while others are stricter. However, it seems that teachers would be able to receive such permission, if not from one paper than from another. There are so many e-papers that finding those granting permission does not seem to be a task impossible to accomplish.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be said that the age of information technology and the Internet open new possibilities for language instruction. The advent of on-line newspapers, being the digital versions of the printed ones, helps learners have access to the news of the English speaking countries at extremely low cost, high speed and enormous variety. It is both students and teachers that might find such sites of equal interest.

For students, reading such digitalised papers is a great chance to improve their reading skills, enrich the vocabulary, gain some cultural knowledge and be up-to-date with the current situation in the whole world. Also, while comparing articles on the same topic from different countries or different types of newspapers, they might learn how to distinguish different points of view, gain first-hand experience of mass media propaganda and manipulation.

As for teachers, electronic newspapers open numerous possibilities both for self development and for enriching the existing coursebook with additional materials. The sites of newspapers, such as for instance *Daily Mirror* or *The Independent*, are not abridged or adapted for the learners of English in any way, so especially non-native teachers can find them stimulating in terms of new sophisticated vocabulary, reading comprehension skills and enlarging one's knowledge of the world. Also, such electronic newspapers can be a rich source of materials for classroom use, easier to handle and alter than the traditional written media. Teachers should be careful with the copyright laws. Therefore, all teachers should be strongly encouraged to start to use newspaper sites in their work, especially to provide recency, variety and interest that their coursebooks often fail to do. E-papers can be used beneficially both on-line in class or off line at home, in a variety of ways. Thus, language teachers should take part in the great technological endeavor of the turn of the century, that is using the Internet in the classroom.

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