
USING NEWSPAPERS IN THE ESL CLASSROOM

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The newspaper is the most widely and constantly read piece of literature published today. As such, it is not only a valid language-learning tool offering up-to-date information on a variety of topics, it is also a wonderful source of authentic text. Yet, it continues to be underused in ESL classrooms and is being overlooked as meaningful and stimulating material for classroom activities. This paper will promote the use of the newspaper for ESL instruction, and suggest a variety of newspaper activities that challenge, motivate and involve learners.

Today's fast changing society requires instructors to constantly add new topics to the existing curriculum without neglecting the basic areas. Newspaper activities, when used to supplement regular classroom instruction, can help close the gap between skills learned in the classroom and skills applied outside school. Furthermore, teachers can choose topics that cover basic areas of concern for society to develop informed, thinking individuals.

So much can be taught from the newspaper because it contains so much. Besides reading material for teaching reading skills, it offers features that can be used to develop other language skills. That is, the diversity of interesting text styles found in headlines, articles, ads, readers' letters, weather reports, comics, and so on, offer a basis from which to develop a variety of communicative skills: after deducing knowledge from a text and learning specific language features, teachers can have students use the new input in a range of communicative activities that practice listening, speaking, and writing skills.

From the wide range of possibilities, it is best if teachers choose activities which contribute to the students' learning objectives and adapt them to a level

appropriate for their ability, maturity and interest level. Easing students into working with the newspaper in this way will help overcome any inhibitions they may have about using it in a second language.

The best thing teachers can do is help students develop themselves into readers who can do read. Perhaps using the newspaper as a medium from which to learn will start many students onto the satisfying habit of daily reading on their own, and in turn, continued ESL learning.

Below are suggestions for some newspaper activities that can be used to supplement classroom ESL instruction. They are a compilation I have acquired over the years from various workshops, books and coworkers. Most of them can be graded to suit your students' level and needs. For example, for beginners, teachers can have learners concentrate on short phrases or words, and very short articles, and use them to complete simple tasks. For intermediate to advanced students, teachers can have students complete different problem-solving tasks with much more complex language.

THE SCAVENGER HUNT

(Practices reading and speaking skills)

This fun activity works well as an ice-braker, and also serves to familiarize students with the different sections of the newspaper.

Handout one newspaper to teams of students, and give them a few minutes to leaf through it. The teacher may want to introduce vocabulary. (for example, classified, headline, colum, editorial, etc.) first.

Call out prepared questions on facts found in the newspaper. In groups, students scan it to find the answer as quickly as possible. The team to yell out the

answer first gets a point, and the team with the most points in the end wins.

The teacher might ask: what store is offering 30% off shoes? or, which team won the football game yesterday? For advanced students the questions could involve more intensive reading. In this case the teacher might ask: why did the police arrest the Japanese man in Singapore? How did Julia Roberts say she felt on her wedding day?

HEADLINES 1

(Grammar exercise)

This activity taken from Baddock (1988) could be used as a follow up to the Scavenger Hunt, or on its own. Simply look at the language used in headlines of newspapers, search for omitted or unusual words, and look at the grammatical devices, and tenses referred to, and get students to deduce meaning from them.

HEADLINES 2 (Gordon, 1979)

(Practices reading and writing skills)

Each student gets a headline and has to write up a story they think goes with it. Then, they are given a variety of news stories and have to match the right one with their story.

MATCHING

(Practices reading (skimming and scanning) skills)

Choose three articles that include a photo accompanied by a caption under it. Photocopy each article so there are enough for teams of 3-4 students. Cut them up so that the photos, their captions, and the articles are all separated, mix them up, and place them in separate envelopes. Hand out one envelope to each team.

Teams skim through the material, and arrange the photos to match the right briefs and articles.

The next activity could be used as a follow-up from this one. First, take away the captions and the articles, leaving students with only the photos.

EYEWITNESS

(Practices writing skills)

Give students a variety of newspaper photos to look at and ask them to choose one they find interesting. Tell them they have been eyewitnesses to the event in the photo, and must write an original news story based

on it. Students explain the circumstances, causes, who's to blame, and provide a headline. They can then present it orally to the class. Lower level students could recreate the captions.

PRESS CONFERENCE

(Practices reading for main ideas, listening, speaking and writing skills.)

This activity taken from Baddock (1988) can be done as a follow-up from the Scavenger Hunt activity for intermediate to advanced students.

Give students a certain amount of time to read the stories on the front page. Tell them they are going to hold a press conference. It is important to put a time limit on it to force students to read for meaning only. When their time is up, tell half the class they will be reporters, the other half to answer the reporters' questions with the aid of the newspaper.

Follow-up: students pick a story they find interesting, and write a summary about it, state their opinion about the topic, or change the ending.

SEQUENCING

(Practices reading, speaking and writing skills)

*A controversial article works well for this activity.

Start the activity with discussion questions to warm up the class and to get them thinking about the subject. Then, with the students in small groups, give them an article on the subject that has been separated into several paragraphs, and shuffled. Give students a time limit to read the different paragraphs, and put them back into the original order. Hand out the original copy for comparison.

Follow-up: elicit opinions about the given topic. If there are opposing views on the subject, ask students to form debating teams, prepare their arguments, and perform the debate.

As a writing assignment, students write an editorial expressing their opinion on the given topic.

STORY EXCHANGE

(Practices reading, speaking, listening and writing skills. Allows teachers to assess how much and how well information is being exchanged between students.)

Find two very different articles that would be of interest to your students. They should not be too long. For advanced students, articles should contain more facts and details.

Give half the class (group A) one of the articles to read, and the rest of the class (group B) the other.

Allow students a time limit to read their respective articles. Then tell groups to discuss their news story among themselves. This allows students to go over details and gain clarification on parts they may not have understood. Tell them to go back and reread their articles.

Now, have A students pair up with B students. Tell them to recount their story as precisely as possible to their partner. Listeners take notes, and are encouraged to ask questions for clarification if they do not understand something.

After As and Bs have exchanged stories, they return to their respective groups, and this time discuss the news story they were just told among themselves. The purpose is to verify if they got the facts right, and to add to the information they have as not everyone will have retained the same information.

Then, students write up the other group's news story. After their work has been corrected and handed back, give them the original story to compare with their own work, and have them jot down the facts they missed.

CREATE YOUR OWN AD

(Practices speaking skills)

Cut out a variety of ads from newspapers and distribute several to students in groups of 3-4. Ask each group to choose one they like, and produce a role-play for a TV commercial based on it.

Encourage them to use plenty of adjectives, and other colorful language, as well as props and sound effects. Have them present it before the class.

JOB HUNT

(Looks at grammar techniques, and practices speaking skills)

This activity is especially good for graduating students. Pass out several sections of the classified job section. Let students choose a job ad they would like to apply for and have them write up a letter of application and resume to match it.

Discuss with the class the kinds of questions normally asked, and what one should expect from an interview. Students then prepare questions they would ask in an interview (such as, is there much overtime? what are the fringe benefits? is training provided,

etc.) and questions an employer would ask them, (such as, have you ever been in charge of people? why do you want to work for us, etc.). Have them role-play a job interview, alternating between the role of interviewee and interviewer several times.

EXPAND THE AD (Baddock, 1988)

(Practices grammar, and writing skills)

Look at the grammatical devices used in the classified ads. Analyze condensed sentences, use of abbreviations, and have student expand on them by rewriting them in full.

This activity can be done as a warm-up for the **JOB HUNT**, or if it is an ad for a house for sale, students can continue with the following activity.

HOUSES FOR SALE (Baddock, 1988)

(Practice speaking (descriptive), and writing skills)

After expanding the ad, students choose a house-for-sale ad that appeals to them, and imagine the features they would expect to find in it, such as, the kinds of tenants that would occupy such a house, their furniture, clothes, and lifestyle, allowing them to expand on it as much as they like. Encourage students to bring in pictures to show what they might look like.

Follow-up, students prepare a role-play of someone calling up for information about the house.

Once students are familiar with the language in ads, give out pictures of some houses and have students write up an ad to match one of them.

IDIOMA WITH COMICS

(Practices idiomatic expressions)

Choose 4-5 comics your students would enjoy that contain idiomatic expressions. Photocopy them, and blot out the idioms, then photocopy the blotted out copies and hand out to students. Write out the idioms on the board. Students complete the cartoon by filling in the appropriate idiom.

GUESS THE ENDING

(Practices reading, writing, and speaking)

Give students comics with the endings blotted out. In groups they create their own endings, making up their own punch line. Students then present their work before the class. It is interesting to see how differently groups end the same comic.

Follow up: create their own cartoon and present or role-play them before the class.

ANN LANDERS LETTERS

(Practices reading, writing and speaking)

Choose a few Ann Landers letters you feel would interest your students - without the response letters. In groups, students discuss the problem and decide on advice they would give to the person writing.

Before the class, students tell, **IN THEIR OWN WORDS**, what the person's problems is, and then reads out the advice they would give to that person. This activity often gets the class laughing.

Follow-up: students create their own Ann Landers letters, and send them to their classmates who in turn write them back an advice letter.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

(Practice reading, writing, and speaking skills)

Hand out photo copies of several editorial letters, and discuss with class the types of letters they are. For example, is the writer complaining, criticizing, observing, suggesting, requesting, debating, etc.?

Have students choose one, and summarize what it's about or respond to it.

Follow-up: show class a photo of something controversial, and have them write up a letter referring to it.

These are just a small number of suggestions. The activities that can be done with the newspaper are endless.

Working with newspapers on the classroom involves and challenges students, and exposes them to an abundance of current language, ideas and expressions. Most important, such activities help prepare students to use the newspaper on their own for their own self-learning. Therefore, they make very rewarding classroom activities.

References

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