

USING NEWSPAPER TEXT IN THE TEACHING OF GRAMMAR

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ABSTRACT

In this article the author presents a case for the use of newspaper text as suitable material for the teaching, exploration and learning of grammar in the English language classroom in Malaysia. As well as considering the rationale for the employment of such material, the writer also outlines several possible constraints that might arise and ways to overcome them. Several examples of how such material could be exploited are presented as practical illustrations of how useful newspaper text can be in the teaching and learning of English, grammar.

Introduction

The notion of using newspaper text as a resource for language learning is not very original. In Malaysia for example, the leading English language dailies the *New Straits Times* and *The Star* run well established and widely employed Newspaper in English (NIE) initiatives in Malaysian schools and colleges. This type of project aims to encourage the use of the newspaper as a language learning resource. Penny Ur's popular classroom ideas book has several suggested activities that utilize newspaper text (Ur 1988). In an edition of a leading English language teaching (ELT) journal two articles appear which exploit newspaper articles; one of the purpose of "language awareness" (Wright and Bolitho, 1993) and the other for "genre analysis" (Flowerdew, 1993). There are examples of whole textbooks devoted to the exploitation of newspaper based material for language learning purposes. "Scoop" by Barry Baddock (1984) is one such title.

In this article the focus will be on the use of newspaper material for the purpose of exploring the grammar of English. Whatever the different arguments, positions and ideas put forward by ELT professionals about the role and nature of grammar, no serious teacher

"... interested in the development of second and foreign language has ever suggested that learners do not need to master the grammatical system of the target language..." (Nunan, 1991: 152)

Or take the position of Widdowson (1990) who states that: "language learning is essentially learning how grammar functions in the achievement of meaning..." (ibid: 97) The debate on how best to teach English as a second or foreign language seeks to facilitate the development of target language competence in learners, in the most effective way. This debate has necessarily included the issue of what grammar to teach, how to teach it, how much to teach, and how explicitly to teach it. There seemed to be an assumption at one point that increasingly 'modern' methodology and approaches were marginalizing the role and importance of grammar (or at least formal grammar study) in the EL classroom. This was articulated by EL course designers in Kuwait for instance, who asked: "If language is a means of communication, does it not seem more important to you to make somebody understand what you want or make a grammatically perfect statement?" (Sawaan, 1987) Since then there has been a growing realization that effective communication and effective grammar are linked, grammar allows us "to mean" in a language. The need for grammar therefore is a real one. What the more recent emphasis on learner centeredness and communication in ELT has done is to encourage a more imaginative and eclectic approach to the area of grammar teaching and learning. We now have an ideal where grammar is not the sole focus of lessons but rather an integral part of learning to communicate effectively in the target language. Into this frame, newspaper text as a resource for grammar activities fits in.

The issue of grammar and its place in the ELT syllabus is not confined to ideology or methodology. The definition of the term is difficult in itself. Crystal's interpretation (1971) of grammar as the "... patterns of syntax, word structure (morphology) and meaning..." (ibid: 55) appears to offer a reasonable working definition for the purposes of a simple paper like this. The descriptive categories used in the examples and descriptions that follow are labels that are familiar and "traditional" in the sense that they represent a shared grammar metalanguage. Of course there may be quibbles about the exact purview of terms and the scope of definitions, but generally the categories used are part of the common terminology ELT professionals and learners use to depict the grammar of English.

Rationale

Teachers can find newspaper materials a useful source of enrichment in the teaching of grammar for a number of reasons. It is useful to consider three main areas related to the rationale for using such text.

Methodological/Professional

Much of the prescribed grammar material teachers and learners have to use is limiting and limited. Many materials appear to be based on a rather restricted "rules, examples and exercises" approach. It is restricted because most often it is concerned with sentence level and discrete point items. This can appear abstract and help lend a rarefied and academic air to the study of grammar. Learners do not often show much improvement in other areas of target language competence despite success in 'mastering' this type of grammar. A good example of this approach is the series of grammar texts by Betty Azar. These books focus at the sentence, discrete point level and by themselves may not help learners improve their language performance. Materials which are more embedded in context and which show "grammar in action" help illustrate how grammar contributes to communicative effectiveness. Newspaper material is just such material.

Published materials are usually pitched at some kind of "general audience" (Richards, 1992). Therefore, they cannot be expected to meet the specific needs of specific learners. Such materials

may not be at an appropriate level of difficulty for certain groups; they may not match the needs or requirements of learning situations or contexts. Using newspapers offers teachers a wide choice of material to select from with their learners' profiles in mind to enrich and supplement set materials. Teachers select or assign tasks to exploit the material with the focus on their learners and their needs.

The question of cultural appropriacy is one that arises with the use of set texts, especially those which originate in a different cultural setting to that in which they are used. While unfamiliar material may be motivational in itself because of its "strangeness" or novelty, there is an argument for providing English to learners in cultural contexts they are familiar with for positive motivational reasons (Adaskou et al, 1990). When events and phenomena from outside are cross-referenced with the learners' own "whereabouts" or viewed from the local perspective (through coverage in the local newspapers) this may also boost interest. This 'cross-referencing' is certainly possible in the Malaysian ELT context utilizing the country's substantial English language press.

The area of motivation has been touched on in relation to cultural appropriacy. It is also claimed that "authentic" materials, real life language data and so on do contribute to learner interest and motivation. Learners appear to gain some degree of satisfaction from making sense of, and manipulating samples of real life language (Hubbard et al, 1983). Newspaper then, as authentic text, is a useful motivational device for learners.

Practical

Newspaper text is cheap, relatively plentiful, and easily accessible. Other everyday sources of real language data such as television or radio have to be recorded, transcribed, edited and rigorously prepared before use in the classroom. They then present major logistical problems for presentation. Newspaper text on the other hand is "ready for use" and demands no special equipment, expertise or power supply. Newspaper (as organizations) tend to positively encourage the use of their products in educational institutions by teachers and learners, offering discounted cover prices to students and organizing workshops, competitions and activities for teachers and learners.

Newspaper text is easy to physically manipulate. It can be cut out, cut up, jumbled up, rearranged, combined, pasted etc. If reprographic facilities such as photocopying are available, newspaper text is an excellent medium for the preparation of presentable materials through the "cut and paste" method. Alternatively, a whole page or section or newspaper can be utilized with learners seeking out examples of certain language features or following teacher rubrics to do tasks on the text.

In Malaysia local English language newspaper text is widely available. It is also of high standard and offers a good range of choice with four titles (three morning and one evening*) in West Malaysia alone.

Linguistic

Newspaper text is an example of real life language data. For learners with a limited English language environment, newspapers can be a source of enrichment and increased language exposure. This is important given the link that has been postulated between increased levels of target language exposure and correspondingly enhanced degrees of target language competence (Ismail, 1991).

The language in newspapers tends to be more current and mainstream. Other types of text such as those extracted from literary or specialized sources may present encounters with idiomatic, regional,

colloquial, and esoteric or technical usage. Fossilized or stylistic idiosyncrasies may occur. These features may be distracting in a general ELT context.

There is a wide range of routine grammar topics which can be found in newspaper text. The extent of the topics is limited only by the imagination of the teacher.

Constraints

There are of course arguments which highlight limitations in the use of newspaper in the classroom for grammar enrichment.

Language

There is the issue of language data quality. Some question the standard of English found in some newspaper writing. While acknowledging this concern, it is important to point out that such a problem can be seen as an opportunity for language work in the area of error analysis and correction. The style of newspaper journalism, the journalistic genre, is cited as a problem too. For example the "telegraph" nature of headlines presents samples of language not commonly encountered outside newspapers and which could be accused of being ungrammatical "journalese". Headlines however, provide ample material for language work. Learners can be asked to rewrite headlines as "proper", full sentences for example.

Demands on teachers

The use of any extra or outside material is more demanding on teachers. They must organize, design and produce tasks to exploit newspaper text as well as select the text in the first place. Using an article or newspaper text may throw up points of learner questions that the teacher does not anticipate. The use of provided or prescribed course texts and materials offers "... time and cost benefits to teachers and schools..." (Richards, 1992: 4) Newspaper text does offer the most flexibility and ease in terms of its use for supplementing course material. As mentioned earlier, it is physically easy to manipulate and commonly available. Task rubrics can be given orally or written on the board. Using newspaper text for extra material allows teachers to tailor activities to their learners' needs and provides teachers with an opportunity to engage in some professional reflection through the deliberation of questions about the role and purpose of the material:

What do I want my learners to do by way of this material;
 What exercise, task or activity can I think of that will do what I want it to do for my learners;
 How best can I (through this material) assist my learners in the realization of syllabus requirements in this area (grammar)?

Task Design

It may be useful when thinking about how to frame tasks for newspaper text to label activities on the basis of what learners have to do. One word labels involving a "key verb" which epitomizes the main activity operation are especially amenable so long as teacher and learners are familiar with what the

activity label entails. Over time, a teacher can familiarize his/her class(es) with a taxonomy of terms for task operations. A sample list of such operations might look something like this:

Figure 1: TASK OPERATIONS

Identify	Add	Contrast	Discuss
Locate	Complete	Sequence	Refer
List	Transform	Sort/Categorize	Analyze
Rearrange	Transfer	Illustrate	Deduce
Match	Compare	Write	Explain

The task labels involve various degrees of complexity and demands on the learners (Ellis, 1986; Matthews, 1990). The list is not intended to be exhaustive or definitive and for teachers drawing up their own lists with definitions, it would be a useful exercise to focus on what they could ask learners to do with newspaper material. The tasks can provide discrete or specific practice or exploration of topics or they can be more global. A good example of a global task would be dictogloss (Wajnryb, 1992) procedure applied to a newspaper extract. This activity might be classified as "reconstruct".

A proposed activity stage outline for a lesson or session involving the use of newspaper text would follow the following framework.

1. The Introductory Stage. This would be the point where learners "warm up" and the scene or context of the text is set out. Difficult vocabulary could be pre-taught and rubrics could be presented and elaborated.
2. The Task Phase. Learners work on the text in appropriate interaction modes with teacher monitoring.
3. The Report Stage. Here task products could be presented, compared and discussed by learners.
4. The Follow-up Stage. Review, feedback and extension.

Stages 3 and 4 would include evaluation by both teachers and learners.

EXAMPLES OF MATERIALS

Having looked at rationale, constraints and modus operandi, let us now proceed to some examples of how to exploit newspaper text on the following grammar areas:

Relative clauses
 Reported speech
 Passives
 Referring to future time

The general aim of the activities is to reinforce the form of structures and to enhance learner understanding and application of the grammar involved. Teachers can tailor activities to suit the needs and level of their learners.

RELATIVE CLAUSE STRUCTURES

Newspaper text provides useful examples of relative clause use, both the defining and non-defining types. In recent reports on Russian general election the following examples appeared:

(example 1)
 "...after a win which returned him [Yeltsin] to the Kremlin..."

(example 2)
 Quoting President Teltsin: "...in the new government there will be a place for all those whom you trust..."

(example 3)
 "The State Duma (lower house) which is dominated by communists and nationalists, has to confirm such a

(all taken from "The Star" July 5th 1995)

Depending on the language level of learners, a teacher could set a number of tasks for such text. Learners might be asked to simply locate the various relative pronouns in the text. They could identify "what" returned Yeltsin to the Kremlin (example 1). Who are those "whom" the Russian people can trust (example 2), and what is dominated by communists and nationalists (example 3)? Learners could be assigned a task to sort and categorize examples of relative pronouns or structures according to the criterion of the defining/non-defining type.

As in any newspaper-based activities, learners can be limited to sections of articles, series of articles or can use the whole newspaper.

PASSIVES

Passives are often presented in a very limited way with exercises and activities that give the impression of being some kind of "translation" ritual: There is a focus on form at the expense of function and meaning. This approach can be rather limited in other ways. Learners may be asked to "translate" from active form to passive the following sentence:

John wrote that letter --> --> That letter was written by John.

However, what about other utterances, can they be "translated"?

The cow jumped over the moon, Somebody broke into our house last night, or Mary became President. These examples highlight the artificiality of such transformation exercises.

There are several points about passive structures which are important for learners to be aware of. The role of agents in the passive is one aspect. In a passive structure an agent (agents) may be unknown, unimportant or already mentioned and therefore not appear. Also important is the use of the passive to create a sense of distance, formality and to make the meaning of an utterance more impersonal. Such features of the structure need an expanded and enlivened context for appreciation.

Take something like this headline:

(example 4) SEVERAL SUSPECTS DETAINED
--

Learners could be asked to identify the agent of the action; first by guessing, then by reading the attached text or extract of the pertinent article. The answer may not be as obvious as it appears. Not only the police have the power to detain "suspects". Learners can then select examples of such structures in headlines and present them to other learners, asking them to identify agents for the actions. Alternative answers can be provided, allowing learners to discuss and justify possible answers as in example 5:

(example 5) SERBS CONDEMNED OVER ETHNIC CLEANSING

Who or what condemned the Serbs? Support your answer with some evidence.

- a. Dr. Mahathir
- b. The United Nations
- c. The Bosnian Government
- d. The US President
- e. The European Union
- f. The Organization of Islamic Conference

If teachers provide newspaper articles with the headlines removed, learners can be asked to read them and then write their own headlines using a passive construction.

Learners can also explore other aspects of the passive such as tense and time reference. Headlines such as "David Sought", "War Mine Detonated", "Consumers To Be Advised On Next Step" offer some idea of the potential in this area. Learners can be required to expand and complete these headlines as full sentences (with the help of the accompanying reports if necessary) and to discuss and explain their choice of tense(s).

REPORTED SPEECH

This topic is commonly found under "grammar" in syllabi and in grammar textbooks. It is presented as a grammatical phenomenon involving a transformation applying rules such as "the backshift of tenses" for instance. So exercises on reported speech commonly follow this kind of pattern:

"Rewrite each sentence using the words given in the brackets and that.

1. No one is allowed into the hail. (The guard explained)
 2. He doesn't understand the question. (He pretended)"
- (extracted from Lee, 1983: 64)

It does not do justice to the phenomenon of reported speech to try to restrict it to such a narrow focus. Reported forms (much of what is reported is not actually "speech") are a rhetorical phenomenon. For more advanced learners these forms are pertinent to their formal writing. This wider view of the topic allows teachers to consider exploiting it in a more holistic and therefore, more meaningful way. Reported forms can be presented as useful devices for paraphrasing, summarizing, quoting and citing.

Using reportage of court cases that present witness testimony can be a rich vein of speech, both original and reported. To exploit these court articles, learners can be asked to:

- locate, identify and list different reporting verbs and structures used in articles (e.g. "said", "alleged", "claimed", "stated", "according to" etc.)
- replace the given reporting verbs and structures with alternatives
- insert appropriate reporting verbs/structures into a report extract (which has original items blanked out)
- transform original/reported testimony into reported/original form.

This type of transformation exercise is particularly useful for learners in that it can raise their awareness that reported forms often involve a lot of paraphrasing and summarizing on the part of the "reporter". So we find that a sentence like:

(example 6)
Police claimed they found a footprint near the outhouse.

Two groups of learners (who had the complete article) who did this activity produced the following versions of example 6:

1. "We found a footprint near the outhouse"
2. "We saw something on the ground near the outhouse. When ASP Mahpop examined it more closely he realized it was a footprint"

In fact, number 2 is closer to the original testimony, but both versions are perfectly acceptable for the purpose of the activity. Both are equally commendable.

REFERRING TO FUTURE TIME

The stress here is on ways of referring to future time. This involves illustrating the variety of tenses and other structures (e.g. modals) used to express future meaning and trying to highlight the reasons why such choice is available to the utterer. These reasons may include the degree of certainty indicated; the expression of things like prediction, guessing, hopes, fears, probability and intention. Certain newspaper contents may lend themselves to this topic. Astrological predictions (horoscopes) do so to an extent. It is interesting to note that such text uses all kinds of devices to indicate the nature (strength?) of prediction:

(example 7)

Don't look to friends today, you have to depend on yourself. You may meet an old face from your past. Beware! They will bear bad news!

The following is an example of a grid that learners should complete with information found in the horoscope section of the newspaper. They complete the grid with structures which exemplify the semantic categories such as "Prediction", "Warning" etc.

Classify the astrologer's various 'forecasts' (A = Prediction B = Possibility/Probability C = Warning D = Order/Strong Advice E = Not Sure/Other) for each of the following starsigns. Give examples of structure(s) used in the text for each type of forecast:

STARSIGNS	A	B	C	D	E
Sagittarius					
Pisces					
Gemini					
Libra					

Newspapers abound with "future-text". There are reports about future trends, financial predictions, tomorrow's weather, pundits' views on the big match, and the itineraries for political leaders, royalty and other public figures. All of these are potentially rich veins of language data for "ways of talking about the future".

In conclusion then I would like to reiterate my view that newspaper text is a practical and accessible resource for EL grammar teaching and practice. The scope and potential in this area seem to be limited only by the teacher's imagination.

*The four major English language dailies published in Peninsular Malaysia:

The New Straits Times The Star The Sun	morning Publication
The Malay Mail	afternoon Publication

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