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A CASE FOR USING NEWSPAPERS IN THE TEACHING AND LEARNING OF ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

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An increasing number of teachers are turning to the use of authentic materials in language teaching these days. This is in response to a call and need to teach the use of language in realistic ways.

What are authentic materials?

Authentic materials are pieces of language either spoken or written, originally meant for communication in a non-teaching situation. Materials such as these are linguistically rich, more interesting and provide students with the opportunity to extend their experience of English. Textbooks, no matter how cleverly contrived, can never be entirely natural. The manner in which the structures and functions of language are presented in the textbooks, can and may misguide the second language (L2) learner into believing that that is the way in which the language is actually used.

Of the many useful tools and authentic materials for English language teaching and learning the daily newspapers surely rank as

"an endless source of materials for the innovative teacher."
(English Teaching Forum Jan. 1986)

Yet it is an overlooked resource.

Reasons for using the newspaper in the ESL Classroom

- it is affordable (50 sen) and easily available
- it deals with realities and so provides for motivated reading
- it contains a wealth of information that is wide ranging advertisements, entertainment, sports, current issues, cartoons, comics, reviews, special features, etc.

- it makes for purposeful reading i.e. there are authentic reasons for reading (the term authentic is used to mean the uses to which we put reading in our daily lives outside the classroom)
- it helps students develop reading (receptive) and writing (productive) skills
- it helps students develop logical thinking (receptive skills)
- it promotes communication and interaction among students
- it helps to bridge the gap between the classroom and the real world
- it makes for a more exciting teaching-learning process in the hands of an innovative teacher
- students feel a sense of pride and achievement at being able to read the newspaper
- students will continue reading the newspaper throughout their adult life

"Newspapers can put the sparkle back into the dull, tedious, treadmill lesson,"

according to The Guardian and the Daily Mirror.

Personally I have found teaching English the "newspaper way" to be a very rewarding experience. The main reason being that it makes for an activity-oriented lesson which is more student-centred than teacher-centred. As teachers/teacher trainers we all know that students enjoy "learning-by-doing", that is, actually getting involved in the learning process. Of course there is no denying that the ultimate success in 'staging' such a lesson entails much "behind the scenes" preparation by the teacher. But an intrinsically motivated teacher will have no problem in devising engaging lessons that will incorporate the syllabus item to be taught. Anyway, teachers need not fear venturing out of the prescribed syllabus if this means extending their students' experience in the English Language.

Since English Language is a compulsory subject in the teacher-training programme it is felt that the newspaper can become an effective teaching-learning tool in the hands of a teacher-trainer in the ESL Classroom to help raise the level of proficiency of both English option and non-English option students. It is relevant to mention here that there being no specified textbook to be adhered to (which is as it should be)

"the individual lecturer is at liberty to modify or add onto what is suggested ... according to his/her resources and preferences" (Sukatan Pelajaran Pengajian Inggeris perkara 2.2.4 m.s. (ix).

Left to his/her own devices the teacher-trainer has the option to turn to the newspaper to create a potentially more interesting and stimulating lesson for the students.

How to use the newspaper?

When making a bulk order, back copies as well as current copies of the newspaper can be obtained at a discounted price from the newspaper circulation department. However it is not necessary that each student should possess one copy of the newspaper. Group-sharing will, in fact, promote communication and interaction among students. Sometimes it is necessary for students to possess different copies of the newspaper for pair work and information gap activities. It therefore really depends on the learning task involved. It is of course recommended that the newspapers be brought into the classroom in their authentic form as this is bound to create enthusiasm for a start. But where this is not practical, clippings or cutouts of relevant material or photocopies of the same will do just as nicely.

Suggested activities

Listed below are some examples of teaching-learning activities using newspapers that could vitalize our teaching in the ESL Classroom. It is hoped that more trainers/teachers will make good use of the newspapers to devise a variety of other relevant task-based learning activities for their use in the ESL Classroom. The activities are prefaced (E) Elementary, (I) Intermediate, (A) Advanced, or Any Level, as a rough indication of the level for which they are intended. In most cases, however, it is possible to adapt the activities to suit a particular level.

Activity 1: Getting to know your newspaper (Any Level)

Divide the class into groups of 4 students each. Give each group a copy of the newspaper. This can serve as an introductory activity aimed at the dual purpose of familiarising students with the outlay of the newspaper via the exploitation of reading strategies and skills such as variations in reading rate and scanning in particular. The teacher therefore designs some scanning questions such as

- On what page can you find "Letters to the Editor"?
- Where would you expect to find the news about Misbun wanting to take a break from badminton?
- At what time is "Hiburan Minggu Ini" on TV tonight?
- Which group will be the first to locate the section on Houses to Let"?
- Look for the "Peanuts" comic strip and find out what Snoopy is up to now, etc.

After scanning the newspaper students can be asked to complete the table below

Column	Page
National News	
Editorial	middle page/page 14
Northern Region News	
Entertainment	
Sports	back page/page 27
Comics	
Classified Ads	
Letters to the Editor	middle page/page 15

In this way the students get to know the macrostructure of the newspaper. For interest, the teacher can also provide additional information on the various parts of a newspaper. Students can be asked to label the parts on the newspaper itself. For example:

- Headline
- Caption
- Dateline

- Byline
- Introduction
- Creditline
- Crosshead
- Blurbs
- etc.

With younger learners the teacher can then carry out a name the parts of the newspaper" game-like activity. The teacher tells the class to study the labelled parts for a few minutes. After that she holds up her newspaper (this is not labelled) and calls out the names of the parts for the pupils to identify. For example:

"Crosshead. Who will show the class where to find a crosshead?" and so on.

Pupils come up to the front and identify the parts. (Note: This activity was carried out by the writer in a demonstration lesson with a Standard 6 class of a Primary School in Penang in April 1987 with very encouraging results because of the competitive nature of the activity).

Activity 2: Word building game (*Elementary*)

Students can work individually or in pairs. Students are asked to pick out some long, difficult words from any section of the newspaper. (It does not matter if they do not know the meanings of these words). Students then make as many new words as they possibly can from it within a certain time limit. Examples of words to be used:

- Education
- Reinforcements
- Detrimental
- Advertisements
- Competition
- Appointments

(words taken from New Sunday Times 14 February 1988)

The students/pair with the largest number of words is declared the winner. The teacher can devise a scoring system to determine the winners.

Activity 3: (i) Describing facial expressions - using adjectives (*Elementary/Intermediate*)

It is recommended as a group activity to encourage discussion. Students look for pictures (in the newspaper) of faces showing different expressions. Alternatively students can bring newspaper cut-outs of pictures showing different facial expressions. Students are then asked to describe the facial

expressions - e.g. angry, shocked, tearful, worried, etc. If the students within the same group differ in their analysis of the expressions, encourage them to discuss why. The better students can be encouraged to make up a brief story that may have led to the display of such facial expressions (the accompanying story in the newspaper should be withheld). Such an exercise trains students to predict and to show cause and effect relationships. The weaker students can be encouraged to write a few different sentences describing the same facial expressions. For example:

1. He looks *worried*.
2. He has a worried look on his face.
3. There is a worried expression on his face etc.

(ii) Vocabulary study (*Intermediate/Advanced*)

This is an individualized activity making use of short news items/ news briefs. Ask students to underline any difficult word they may find. Encourage them to make a logical guess at the meaning based on contextual clues. Later, students should look up the dictionary to see if their guess is correct. The teacher can ask the better students to make sentences with the new words.

(iii) Locating specific words (*Intermediate/Advanced*)

This is a group activity. The teacher provides the meanings of some words used in a specific news item. Students skim the news and scan to locate words that match the meanings provided. This activity, when treated as a game, can generate excitement and a sense of competitiveness. **Activity 4: Picture-based comprehension/composition** (*Any level*)

In this group activity, the teacher can choose any suitable picture or series of pictures, and, depending on the level of the students ask them to either describe those pictures or guide them into describing the pictures by posing relevant questions about the pictures. Alternatively, the teacher can list some useful expressions on the blackboard as a guide. (Note: This activity can be used to practise a certain structure/learning unit - e.g. the Present Passive form, time connectors/sequential connectors in processes and procedures/how things are made)

As a follow up activity, students can cut out the picture/pictures, paste and write their own composition or account of how something is done. The more imaginative students could be asked to predict and provide a suitable ending to the picture-story.

Activity 5: Reorganizing information with the help of tables. (*Any level*)

Students can work individually. This activity helps students enhance their note-taking skills as they read a news item and extract relevant points from it. In doing so, they learn to discard the unimportant details. A discriminatory skill such as this, is an asset for summary writing. After reading the news report, students fill in a table.

When?	Who?	What?	Where?	Why?
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Activity 6: Working with headlines

There are a number of ways in which headlines can be gainfully employed in the ESL Classroom. By virtue of its telegraphic style the meaning of the headlines is often not very clear. The teacher should explain the function of headlines to students and set them the following tasks.

(i) forming complete sentence(s) from the following headlines (intermediate/Advanced)

GET TOUGH WITH THUGS COPS TOLD

Possible expansion/interpretation:

The police were urged to take firm action against all thugs Other examples of headlines which could be used include:

1. ADDICT GETS 3 MORE YEARS
 2. RESIDENTS UPSET OVER UNCOLLECTED RUBBISH
 3. THE BALIK KAMPUNG LURE
- etc.

(ii) matching news with headlines (Any Level)

Divide the class into 2 groups. One half of the class is provided with headlines. The other half is given the matching news. Students study the information they have. After that they move around looking for possible matches. They are not allowed to refer to the information in the course of doing so. They are encouraged to discuss/ask questions/provide information before they can make their match. The teacher can set a time limit for this activity. It would be more suitably carried out in the hall/field because of the noise level and to allow free movement.

(iii) predicting newsreport/headline (Intermediate/Advanced)

Divide the class into groups of four or five students each. Give each group a headline or a news clipping. The groups with the headlines are asked to make up brief newsreports to accompany the headlines. Meanwhile those with news clippings can be asked to work out suitable headlines. Upon completion of the task, students can check the actual versions found in the newspaper and see how close or how different their interpretations are! Such an activity would generate much discussion among group members. It also helps to bring out the creative ability of students besides enhancing their skill to anticipate and predict through logical thinking.

(iv) Rearranging cut-out words to form headlines (Elementary/Intermediate).

In this pair work activity, students pick an envelope containing cutup words. Students must rearrange the words to form headlines within a limited time.

(v) Using headlines to express feelings and attitudes (Elementary/Intermediate)

Students can be asked to bring in clippings of headlines. Ask the students to read them out in class. Ask other students to express their feelings or attitudes upon hearing the headline. The news item can be classified under "good news" or "bad news". Ask students to encode this feeling or attitude either in spoken and/or written form.

Activity 7: Working with comics/cartoons

People of all age groups enjoy reading comics. Students are no different. Teachers ought therefore to take advantage of this. But some caution is to be exercised in the selection of comics used with regard to the suitability of the language used.

(i) Teaching language functions (Any level)

Students can work in groups. They read the comic strip and discuss it before they finally identify the functions of the utterances made by the characters therein.

(ii) Creating dialogues (Intermediate/Advanced)

This is a group activity. The teacher blanks out the dialogue in some of the balloons. The students make up their own suitable responses for the characters.

(iii) Role play (Any level)

For this group activity, give each group a different comic strip. Ask them to study the roles of the characters. (They can even rename the characters to add some local colour if they like). Tell them to take on the roles of the characters and act out the episode in the class. This can be a very lively session.

(iv) Retelling the story (Intermediate/Advanced)

In this group activity, once again give each group a different comic strip. Tell students to relate the story in their own words. Such an activity will generate much student-talk.

Later they can paste the comic-strip in a scrapbook and write out the brief story underneath.

Activity 8: Working with letters to the press

(i) Expressing viewpoints (Intermediate/Advanced) In groups, students read selected letters and express their viewpoints. They can be set specific tasks such as:

- Identifying words/expressions that reflect the attitude/bias of writer
- Identifying the main idea in the letter
- Identifying the supportive statements
- Identifying the implied propositions found in the letter

(ii) Letter writing (Intermediate/Advanced)

Teach students the format of writing to the press. Ask them to work out a suitable reply to the letter in activity (i) above. They can agree/disagree or simply state their own viewpoints. Students can be encouraged to send their replies to the press.

As a point of interest, in 1986 I got my students to study several published letters regarding traffic woes in Penang. After ample discussion and work in class well over four lessons, they were encouraged, as a class, to send in a suitable reply expressing their views

- Ask students how they were affected by the traffic congestion
- The daily road risks they were exposed to
- Some suggestions to help ease the congestion

They did send in a reply (after procuring the necessary permission from the principal) and their letter was published in about a week. They were so thrilled about it! (This took place before the fly-over

was built along the junction of Scotland Road and Jalan Mesjid Negeri. In one of their suggestions they proposed the building of a fly-over at this junction. So when work on this project commenced they thought it was their letter which did it!) (iii) Writing suitable replies (Intermediate/Advanced)

This is a group activity. Students study letters from the "Heart to Heart" column. The replies are withheld. Tell students to work out suitable replies. (It will be found that many students enjoy playing the role of "advisors" especially in matters pertaining to the heart!)

Activity 9: Conducting interviews/writing a questionnaire *(Advanced)*

Give each group of students a different news report to study. Get students to design relevant questions that the reporter might have asked before he actually wrote the report for his editor. After that, students can actually conduct interviews in class and this can be tape-recorded for follow-up activities.

Activity 10: Comparing a newspaper article with a news bulletin heard on tv/radio *(Advanced)*

This can be an individualized or group activity depending on the teacher. If the teacher can prerecord the news bulletin for the class to listen to, then it can be carried out as a group activity. Otherwise students listen to it in their own time (at home). This is how to do it. The teacher selects articles bearing important news (current). Students read the news contained in these articles. The students listen to the same news broadcast over tv or radio the same day. (Reading and listening skills) Ask students to make a comparative study of the news read and the news heard. (Students jot down notes) Draw their attention to what is highlighted in the text in both instances. Later a discussion is held in class on this. (Reading, listening, speaking and writing). Such an activity can promote active discussion and a sense of involvement on the part of the students. (Another possibility would be comparing several news articles on the same topic taken from different newspapers - even vernacular newspapers can be used provided that the end product is in English).

Activity 11: Comparing pictures with a similar theme taken from different newspapers *(Any level)*

Very often different newspapers carry different pictures/photographs dealing with a similar subject. (Teachers can make use of the vernacular press too). Cut out these pictures. Let the pupils work in pairs. Give each student one picture. Tell them to find out the difference or even the similarities between the two pictures.

Activity 12: Identification of errors

It cannot be denied that grammatical errors are frequently found in the newspapers. Cut out the news items that contain the errors. Students can work in groups. Tell them to read and identify the error(s). Ask them to provide the correct answer.

Conclusion

As mentioned earlier the twelve activities cited above are only some of the many possible ways of putting the newspaper to judicious use in the ESL classroom. Other sections of the newspaper that make good teaching material are advertisements, the sports page, tv page, etc. It is felt that many teachers do not take to using newspapers too readily because they feel that the level of language content found in newspapers is too difficult for their students. This is not always true. In any case this should not present a problem because what determines the difficulty is not so much the reading text as the task that is required of the students. If the text is difficult then the activity/task set on that text should be one which is well within the ability of the students. In other words the tasks should be graded. In the final analysis it is up to the dedicated and innovative language teacher to devise stimulating and motivating learning activities for her students since the most important factor in the teaching-learning process is the active participation of every student. And a sure source of inspiration in designing such ancillary materials is - the newspaper. Let us, therefore, among other things, encourage our students to read the newspaper.

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