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Tuning In: Using the News for a Content-Based ESL Class

Vast amounts of daily news content are widely available and easily accessible, and they can be converted into materials for intermediate and advanced ESL classes. This article will describe the why and how for integrating news media sources into a multiskills ESL classroom. Through the news, students are immediately engaged with the material because they are viewing articles and news stories that are happening in the world. Additionally, the authentic nature of the material presents a broad spectrum of vocabulary and sentence structures. While students are not expected to understand every word or phrase, the exposure to authentic text in an ESL class is tremendously beneficial. This article will take a 1st-person perspective on the implementation of the news-based course, as well as ideas on how to use the news as a supplemental resource in other ESL classes, such as speaking, composition, or grammar/vocabulary classes.

Introduction

ESL practitioners bring a variety of interdisciplinary expertise into the classroom and can draw upon their knowledge of other fields to create interesting and engaging lessons. One of these fields that I have incorporated into my TESOL teaching is my interest in news media. Because of my experience in using news media sources to investigate current events and world affairs, I decided to implement news-based curriculum in an intermediate elective course at an International English Program in Northern California. The notion of authenticity was at the core of this class. Authenticity, defined by Morrow (1977) as "real language, produced by a real speaker or writer for a real audience and designed to convey a real message" (p. 13), has been a topic of interest for ESL researchers since the 1970s. This definition poses some problems, however, as it is not clear what is meant

by "real," and it begs the question of what counts as "unreal." Furthermore, Gilmore (2007) rightly warns that authentic material can come in many different forms and "authentic" is not synonymous with quality or even appropriateness; indeed, authentic materials ought to be carefully selected just as any other classroom material should be. If the selected materials are too abstract or contain too many low-frequency words (see Widdowson [1998] for examples), the resulting materials do not yield many benefits for students. That said, authentic materials can promote cognitive awareness and lower affective filters (Bacon & Finnemann, 1990) and present valuable learning opportunities as long as high-challenge tasks are accompanied by high support (Mariani, 1997). It is not the goal of this article to enter the debate between authenticity/inauthenticity, so I will use the term "authentic material" as a matter of convenience, given that all of the news sources discussed below do not specifically cater to ESL students but instead were created for the general English-speaking population.

While the literature around authentic materials proliferates, the literature around using news in the ESL classroom is sparse, focusing on pedagogical suggestions (Brinton & Gaskill, 1978), learning outcomes (Bahrani & Tam, 2011), and selection of materials (Bell, 2003). In terms of listening exercises, Brinton and Gaskill (1978) recommended using news broadcasts for listening activities, noting that although these lessons may have required substantial preparation (the instructor had to transcribe the broadcasts beforehand) and students may have felt overwhelmed by listening to the speed of native speech, students showed greater motivation and enthusiasm for the material. However, they also noted that much of their evidence had been anecdotal. More recently, researchers such as Bahrani and Tam (2011) have investigated the link between exposure to TV and radio news and speaking proficiency in an EFL setting in Iran, finding that the group exposed to news media improved more than the group exposed to non-news media, even though the two groups were exposed to the same amount of content. The fact that the news media offered high-interest material spoken at a nativelike rate offset the difficulty of the material, allowing the students to eventually comprehend the stories and even produce more effective speech. Still, one component that is not discussed in depth is the importance of the selection of the content, which must be carefully considered. Bell (2003) distinguishes between news stories that have *exogenous* and *endogenous* content, for which the former requires background knowledge and the latter can be understood without any specialized knowledge. In actuality, news stories likely fall on a spectrum of required background knowledge to permit understanding, but this distinction is still useful as more exog-

enous stories may require more scaffolding and prelistening exercises. Moreover, highly specialized exogenous contexts may best be avoided. Other considerations include linguistic difficulty and the quantity of visual accompaniment (Bell, 2003).

Class Structure

The literature has provided theoretical background and pedagogical techniques for applying authentic news materials in the ESL classroom. My task was to create and implement the news-based curriculum, using my prior knowledge and experience with news information sources. Given that this material is abundant and highly unpredictable, I decided to create a skeletal structure with explorative activities and discussions that could work with the news of the day, as well as longer projects that students could develop through time. In this way, the students would have an idea about where the class was going in terms of the final projects and regularity of assignments and vocabulary exams, but they would still have the sense that the content was unknown, even to the instructor. It was important that for this class to succeed, the students had to be engaged with the material. For this to happen, I as the instructor needed to strike a balance between allowing the students to select news topics and choosing news stories myself that I thought would interest the students. In essence, the foundation of this class was to empower the students to help guide and shape the content with the teacher.

Initial Questionnaire

At the beginning of the class, the students filled out an initial written questionnaire with the following questions:

1. How often do you watch the news?
2. Which kinds of news stories do you watch?
3. Which news media sources do you use? (newspaper, magazine, television, online, radio, other) Please list.
4. Which topics/countries/events are you most interested in following this quarter?
5. Why do you think it is important to follow the news?
6. Do you think that some news media sources are more trustworthy and reliable than others? Explain.

These questions guided initial discussions about the students' personal experiences with following news (questions 1-5) as well as their thoughts and background knowledge of news media organizations as a whole (question 6). Responses were then compiled and representa-

tive responses were displayed anonymously to the class to help spur discussion. As a teacher, I was particularly interested in their responses to question 5 to know more about their motivation for following the news and why they thought it was important to stay informed. Depending on their answers, I could then build upon and foster their motivation.

Course Materials

Materials for the course are plentiful and easily accessible, making the challenge one of selection. This section will describe some of the course material that I selected for my class, including a weekly news magazine, various online news sources, television and radio news, and even local newspapers.

Many news magazines offer reduced-rate subscriptions for classes, making this an attractive option compared to expensive textbooks. Additionally, as new editions of the magazine came every week, students would come to class excited, knowing that they would receive the latest copy. The magazine that I chose for my class is a weekly news magazine called *The Week,* which is a compilation of the top news stories from a variety of sources across the globe on a wide range of topics. Most of the articles in the magazine are short, varying from one paragraph to one page. While the brevity may create an air of simplicity, the articles are written in a sophisticated manner, creating many opportunities to discuss vocabulary and grammar. Along with weekly printed news issues, I incorporated online news media sources. In an effort to narrow the many online sources available, I introduced some mainstream media (FOX, CNN, *The New York Times*, for example), as well as some independent media, such as NPR or *DemocracyNow*. Additionally, students can watch television news for homework, and radio news provides great listening exercises. I also introduced articles from the campus newspaper because it is free and covers local news stories. Finally, if the students needed a break from the gravity of the mainstream news, I included some more lighthearted news sources, such as satirical news or political cartoons.

Classroom Activities

A wide range of activities can be implemented in the class, some of which can be completed in one lesson, while others may last several days or even weeks. This section will describe some of the classroom activities that took place in my class.

The first activity is an exploration of world news. For this exercise, I asked the students to find a news article from each part of the world (North America, South America, Africa, Europe, the Middle East, and

Asia). With partners, students summarized what they read and then tried to explain the articles to other groups of students. This type of read-summarize (written or oral)-share pattern works well with new articles.

Another activity involved looking at controversial topics, which inevitably arise in the news. These topics can be engaging points of departure for classroom activities and discussions. I have found that students are keenly interested in controversial topics such as gun control, for example, if they come from countries with strict gun laws. Controversial topics can easily be turned into lively discussions, debate-style activities, or explorations of bias in the media. For students who gravitated toward a particular controversial topic, I encouraged them to consider following that topic for their final project (which I discuss below).

Discussion-based activities were also common in the classroom. While the content of the class is largely unpredictable, given that it is guided by the news of the day, certain discussions inevitably arise. Two examples of discussion topics that often arose were the concept of bias and negativity. A brief example of political punditry can exemplify a biased, subjective perspective, as can op-ed pieces. It may not be easy for students to distinguish between pundits and reporters, but it is an important question to dissect to critically interpret that piece of news. Some students from countries who have government-controlled media have commented on how the news is biased in their country. After all, bias is likely to result if there is no separation between the state and the press. Another source of bias comes from media dependency on advertisements and sponsors, leading to the question of how money and private interests may influence the news. The question of bias comes in many forms, but it must be addressed to give the students proper tools for better understanding the news stories that they read. Another inevitable conversation revolves around negativity in the news cycle. It quickly becomes apparent after surveying the news that much of the news covers stories of death and violence. In my experience, questions such as these can be anticipated but do not need to be imposed, as they naturally arise in the class discussions.

Vocabulary and Grammar in Context

Vocabulary development was a central and stated goal of the news class, and as such, students were encouraged to highlight all new vocabulary items (including individual words, phrasal verbs, expressions, and idioms). As a weekly assignment, students had to input at least five vocabulary items that they encountered in the news into a class vocabulary database, which was made accessible to everyone.

Then, every two weeks, I would review the database and choose 20 vocabulary items that I thought were the most relevant, common, and useful, from which I created a study guide, and ultimately 10-15 words were chosen for a vocabulary exam that contained a cloze section, a multiple-choice definition section, and a write-your-own-sentence section. Because vocabulary was a central component of the class, the students paid close attention to the words that they read, and subsequently these words were routinely discussed in class. Additionally, *vocabulary recycling* (Brinton & Gaskill, 1978) occurred as news stories developed through time. Consistent with the foundational idea for the class, the vocabulary items came from the articles that the students read or encountered in an authentic context.

Grammar instruction, on the other hand, was not a stated goal of the class, but as the news is written in a sophisticated manner, the construction of the sentences would inevitably confuse the students. Whereas most grammar textbooks teach tenses in isolation, sentences from news articles, and most authentic material for that matter, use a variety of tense, aspect, and mood that are all intertwined. As a result, I would deal with grammar questions as they arose, or I would do some verb form–identifying exercises such as having the students find all of the sentences with simple past or present perfect. Then I would ask the students to think about and explain why that tense was used. Again, the students were analyzing English not in a textbook, but rather in an authentic context.

Final Project Ideas

Final projects create opportunities for students to engage with the news on their own terms and on topics that interest them. In this section, I will present two ideas for final projects: an oral presentation and a written composition. In the oral presentation final project, the students chose among three options:

1. *Examining bias in the media*, in which a student chose a controversial topic such as gun control, immigration, same-sex marriage, and so forth, and looked at a variety of sources to see where each one stands in terms of their biases;
2. *Focusing on a particular story*, in which a student chose a story that had been in the news for a while and discussed the developments of the story through time; and
3. *Exploring the image of a country*, in which a student selected a country to focus on (not the US, not their own), and chose three news stories to examine how the news influences their image of that country.

As a part of the final project, the students had to give an oral presentation and then lead a short classroom discussion on their topic. For the composition-based final project, I asked students to become reporters and write a news article about a local story; it had to include interviews, independent research, and perhaps even attending a local event (depending on the topic). Then the articles were compiled to create a class news magazine. In leading up to this final project, I had a journalist from the university newspaper share her process in researching and writing news articles. The final product was a news magazine that mirrored our weekly news magazine, complete with front and back cover, table of contents, and even fake advertisements. The nicety of this composition-based final project was the tangible product that students were able to keep as a class memento.

Discussion

My passion for learning about world affairs in the news led me to incorporate this interest into an authentic, communicative ESL course. In my experience, using a variety of news sources as the foundational material for an elective class created ample opportunities for the students to engage with the language in a new and unique way. Incorporating news sources into my ESL teaching allowed students to examine world issues and controversial topics. Using biased or negatively themed news media as a medium for English lessons gave them the chance to practice thinking critically and discussing sensitive topics. The authentic news materials provided opportunities to improve their knowledge of vocabulary and grammar. The theme of collaboration throughout, exemplified by the in-class discussions and final projects, gave students the chance to use English in a cooperative way.

While using the news can be incorporated into a class on its own, as I have done, it can also be supplemental to an already structured reading, writing, listening, or speaking course. For example, a daily assignment could be for the students to watch the news at home, which could then be used as a daily warm-up conversational activity. Or students could keep a news journal for a writing class, in which they follow stories of their choosing. And for in-class activities, radio stories from NPR or news podcasts make for engaging, challenging listening practice.

The relative lack of research that focuses on the effect of the news on the English learner makes incorporating the news into ESL teaching an area for further inquiry. I taught this course to intermediate-level students who both struggled and benefited greatly by working with the news sources introduced in the class. This material would likely be difficult for beginning-level students; however, even with

lower-level students, the news could still be introduced in the class either through ESL news sites or through increased scaffolding.

In sum, working with news sources as a medium for ESL instruction not only gives students opportunities for improving their language skills, but also for increasing their critical-thinking and collaborative abilities. Incorporating news media into the ESL classroom gives them the tools and the confidence to follow the news in class, and also to continue to follow the news well into the future.

Author

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