

Full Length Research

Exploring innovative activities in using news stories to teach advanced Chinese learners English in a multimedia way

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Accepted 18 May, 2011

The basic reason of selecting English newspapers as a teaching tool is very pragmatic as English newspapers cover an array of information and knowledge and that is too within the reach of learners' computers. The present paper aims to study issues that are interwoven with teaching English through English newspaper in an EFL (English as Foreign Language) classroom.

Key words: News stories, teaching tools, multimedia.

INTRODUCTION

The importance of extensive reading in the English language teaching is well known. The reading of extended passages expands vocabulary, improves writing, and enhances general language competence (Nagy and Herman, 1987; Krashen, 1987; Grabe, 1991). By reading news stories, the learners can gather information on varied subjects including social-political-business issues, sports, entertainment, art, culture, music, education etc. Moreover, the practice of using English newspapers helps the learners in the EFL classroom and in the mundane affairs of their life, in that they put previously learned vocabulary and grammar into meaningful use. The learners can also be encouraged to improve their vocabulary, grammar and thinking skills as regular reading of newspapers can provide them an opportunity to express and exchange their ideas on a wide variety of issues. Despite the benefits of extensive reading, it is difficult for many students to progress from short, intensive passages to longer texts. This is especially true in such countries as China where the grammar-translation method is used to teach English in secondary schools (Hino, 1988). How can teachers help advanced learners make the transition from intensive to extensive reading? News stories provide one answer.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Newspapers can be very inexpensive and compelling

teaching resources for advanced EFL learners. Adapting the newspaper to classroom instruction is a natural way to introduce learners to these cultural and linguistic concepts. Many practitioners (Chavira, 1990; Hess, 1987; Salas-Isnardi, n.d.; Toben, 1987) have compiled detailed and level-appropriate lists of classroom activities for using the newspaper as text. Fenholt (1985) outlines a series of activities that employ the newspaper as a learning resource to develop both reading and life skills. She sees the newspaper as a more comfortable instructional fit for advanced learners. Hunter and McNearney (1988) have designed a series of 12 lessons that use the newspaper in an adult basic education curriculum. Graham's "The Tutor's Toolbox" (1996) contains 25 useful techniques for teaching literacy. It is designed for basic literacy instruction but may also be used in English as a Second Language instruction. One of the suggested techniques uses the newspaper for brief reading workouts, especially with adults. Cohen (1994) provides a curriculum to improve English skills and knowledge of American culture in the adult ESL speaker. The 12-week curriculum was devised to teach grammar and language skills within the context of humorous and relevant stories about daily living and was implemented with 19 learners. The newspaper was used as one instructional tool, among others. Kitao (1995) suggested a number of activities pertaining to teaching of English Language. Sanderson (2002) stated that a very important thing that enhances success in using newspapers in the

classroom is the careful design of tasks. ‘Grade the task – not the material’ is a well-known maxim in language teaching’. Foord (2006) stated that newspapers are much more current than course-books; they make an excellent springboard for lessons, and they feature different types of language (narratives, stories, letters, advertising, reports, etc.). Tafani (2009) analyzes the importance of using mass media in the classroom and finds the ways on using printing and audio-visual media. Because of the prevalence of the Internet and other media in many countries, most learners have some knowledge of current events, and thus a lot of background knowledge with which to decode news stories. Carrell and Eisterhold (1983) gave a good overview of the importance that background knowledge plays in reading. In the past, creative teachers developed their own lessons around the newspaper; however, they were often restricted with the lack of the source in Chinese schools. Currently in the educational context in China, a great number of the schools have acquired sufficient ICT hardware and software with the implementation of Integrating Computers and Networks into Foreign Language Curriculum. (Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, 2006)

In this paper, the author gives a series of activities which include both intensive and extensive reading.

MISCELLANEOUS CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

The six-hour materials are designed for advanced learners with 10 years of English learning experiences. The learner group age ranges from 16 to 18, who are from the same community in Hami Oil Base, Xinjiang, China. The learning and teaching should be preceded in a computer-room with good internet facilities. The class size is supposed to be 30.

Do you read news stories?

Worksheet one: How people get news

A. Newspaper; B. Radio; C. Internet, and D. TV

1. Which of the above media provides you most with:

- International information?
 - National information?
 - Local information?
 - Entertainment?
- What current affairs programme do you watch on the TV or listen to in the radio?
 - If you go to websites for news, which do you prefer and why?
 - How do these media differ in their treatment of news?
 - If you had to rely on only one of the media, which would you choose? Why?

6. Do you believe what you read in the newspapers? Why? Or why not?

Worksheet two: Basic knowledge of newspapers

- Which newspaper do you read regularly? Which do you prefer and why?
- Name the newspapers you know in the UK and then visit the following website below: <http://www.wrx.zen.co.uk/britnews.htm> and pick out 6 newspapers which you do not know.
- Name the newspapers you know in China and use Google to find out which country has more kinds of newspapers between the UK and China.
- Look at the front pages up around the walls of the classroom to discover their similarities and differences between the British front pages and those from Chinese newspapers basing on the following questions:
 - How are the front pages from the UK different from China?
 - How are they similar?
 - What kinds of news do the editors in each country think is worth putting on the front page?
 - Look at the headline news and then look at the other major news articles on each front page. Would the same news items be on the front page? Why or why not?
 - Look at the pictures on the front page and discover how the pictures are different for the UK and China?

Worksheet three: Reading for fun

- Work in pairs and discuss the usage of newspapers
- Visit the website below and pick out 5 to 10 among the “124 creative ways to reuse the Newspaper” and then discuss your choice with your partner. (http://www.nwanews.com/nie/educators/PDFs/124_ways_to_reuse_the_news.pdf).
- Underline the words you do not know in “124 Creative Ways to Reuse the Newspaper”, and work with your partner to try to guess their meanings.
- Match the words in Column A with those in Column B.

Column A

bib
apron
geodesic
insulation
ransom
shoehorn
swat
putty

Column B

deliverance
paste used in glazing windows
relating to the geometry of curves
a sharp blow or slap
protective clothing
device to help heel into shoe
materials that insulates
protective garment tied over clothes

Worksheet four: The present perfect vs the simple past

- (Pair work) Here are some sentences from media. Fill

in the blanks with the correct verb forms and make the sentences full.

- Once again, bad weather _____ (stop) the National 35th Table Tennis Final in Shanghai.
- Heavy snow _____ (close) hundreds of roads in Urumqi, the capital city of Xinjiang, China.
- The family of a 9/11 victim _____ (release) the tape of his emergency call.
- Bahrain boat _____ (not clear). At least 57 people died from the report of April 1, 2006.
- Rebault's Fernando Alonso _____ (win) the Australian Grand Prix to take an early 14 point lead in the Formula One standings.

2. When Mary checked off, her husband and son had some news to tell her, so did Mary. Please complete the sentences using appropriate forms of the words in the box:

give	win	eat	see	publish
do	burst	go	buy	phone

- Mum! Mum! The dog _____ your supper! She _____ it without being seen.
- Hi, Mary! Tom _____ "Titanic" seven times. He _____ into tears at one plot just now.
- Mum! Dad _____ blood. He _____ to the hospital this morning.
- Hi! Dear. I _____ a lot of money in the lottery. I _____ the Lucky Dip at a gas station.
- Hi! Tom and Jack! My poems _____. The editor _____ to me at 9 AM.

3. (Error-hunting Games) Are the following activity according to the requirements. Those who find the most and 'accurate' errors win (As seen from the extract sourced from: Islington Tribune: 1/4/2006 that there are various verb errors written within the text. My aim is to let the learners to identify those errors.)

Ann is working as an editor of Islington Tribune. She is reading an article written by a Chinese practice journalist living in No 222 Holloway Road, London. The article is to be on the tomorrow's newspaper, but there are some incorrect verb forms in it. Now assuming you are Ann, please put the verbs into the appropriate tenses.

Hours Cut 'Turns the Tide on CPZ Empire'

Anti-parting campaigners in Highbury Barn claimed victory after councillors have voted to cut the hours of two controversial controlled parking zones (CPZs), writes Mark Blunden.

Islington council's east area committee threw out proposals from council officers to continue the existing restrictions, which run from 8.30 am to 6.30 pm Monday to Friday and 10am to 2pm on Saturdays. Instead, councillors have voted to back the results of a survey that revealed 61% of people polled wanted 10am to 2pm restrictions from Monday to Friday and no ban on Saturdays. The new hours will come into effect in July.

Tim Newark, Conservative candidate for Highbury East, has said after last Thursday's meeting:

"It's an amazing victory and it is turning the tide on the council's CPZ money-making empire. "Everyone stuck together for 18 months of hard work to fight this."

Daniel Michelson, spokesman for Highbury Barn Traders' Associate, has been "delighted" with the decision. He has said: "This can help business and encourage more people to Highbury Barn.

4. Surf on the internet by choosing one of the website, and test how good you are in using the present perfect and the simple past:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/youmeus/learnit/learnitv92.shtml>

<http://www.edufind.com/english/grammar/Tenses6.cfm>

<http://www.englishpage.com/verbpage/verbs5.htm>

<http://www.englishpage.com/verbpage/verbs6.htm>

<http://www.englishpage.com/verbpage/verbs12.htm>

Worksheet five: Improving your listening skills

1. Listen and match:

A	B
The first story is about	Home Fire
The second story is about	Neighbors Fight
The third story is about	Park Attack
The fourth story is about	Ruling by the Courts
The fifth story is about	Fire in Colorado

2. Listen to each of the stories again and answer the following questions.

For story 1:

- Why did they feel lucky to be able to repair damage?
- Why was their outhouse in the yard?

For story 2:

- Whom did the man come up to?
- He was trying to rape her, was he not?

For story 3:

- a. What is his hope?
- b. Who did he call finally?

For story 4:

- a. Did she know if they were in the home before it was burned?
- b. What caused the fire? What is the suggestion from the reading?

For story 5:

- a. What protection do children need?
- b. What was the federal law for?

3. Watch what happened in the UK (<http://search.bbc.co.uk/>) and choose any two pieces news stories to watch and fill in the chart as follows:

title
who
what
where
when

4. (Pair work) Visit the website as follows, read the stories you have heard and study the writing style of one of them (<http://www.cdlponline.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=stories&topicID=5>). Then do the activities as:

Describe an unforgettable experience of yours to your partner. Answer any questions your partner asks when you finish. You can start like this:

I will never forget....

Worksheet six: Improving your reading skills

Pre-reading:

"Impatient and greedy, Brown has now harmed his cause" from the website: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/Columnists/Column/0,,1774017,00.html>:

- 1. Look at the title. What do you think the title will tell you?
- 2. What do you already know about the Brown? Make a list. Write down 6 keywords which you expect to find in the text. Now write down as many associations as you can think of.
- 3. Look at the first and last paragraphs of the news story. Write a sentence which you think will describe the general ideas of the text.

4. What would you like to know? Please write your question.

While-reading:

1. Skim or scan the text. Do not stop at words or sentences you do not understand and answer the following questions:

- a. Was your general idea in (3) correct?
- b. Can you find the answers to any of your questions?
- c. What is it about? Which of your associations are mentioned?

2. Read the text again within 5 min and answer the following questions:

- a. Do you understand the main points? Say what they are.
- b. Who is the author? What is his view to the Brown?
- c. Why does he say the Brown is greedy?
- d. From what facts does he show the Brown is impatient?
- e. Are there many words you do not understand?

(a) Write down up to 10 new words which you do not understand and which you think are important.

(b) Guess their meanings by using the context clue. If necessary, please look less than 5 words up in a dictionary now or later.

(c) Highlight the word or phrases in the article which mean the same as the following:

- (I) Persuade or dissuade by frightening
- (II) Encountering
- (III) Notwithstanding
- (IV) Responsibility
- (V) Merge or unite things
- (VI) Strange or unusual
- (VI) Avoid supporting

(d) Choose the words or phrases which best complete each sentence:

(I) Brown has _____ won an important battle (a) definitely (b) out of question (c) no.

(II) _____, Brown went for broke. (a) And (b) On the other hand (c) But

(III) The _____ is that Labour has broken a cardinal principle and resumed the open public feuding that crippled the party a generation ago (a) consequence (b) elections (c) campaigns.

(IV) That is how the _____ saw John Major's Tories in 1995 and Michael Foot's Labour in 1981 (a) chairpersons (b) supporters (c) reasons.

(V) This _____ is based more on hope than expectation (a) suggestion (b) conclusions (c) curricula

(VI) Look at each paragraph and underline the sentence(s) and phrase(s) which contain the broadest

generalization in the paragraph.

(VII) Look at the remaining sentences in each paragraph: Are they related to the parts you have underlined? If so, how?

(VIII) Choose part of the text and underline all the main verbs. Say what tenses are used. Why are they used? Say whether they are active or passive.

Post-reading:

1. What was the writer's purpose? Who was he writing for?
2. What kind of people like to read this news story?
3. What is your opinion to the story?
4. Did you find any parts of the story difficult? What made it difficult for you?

Please tick the following items:

- a. Lack of knowledge about people or ideas mentioned
 - b. Vocabulary: Too many new words
 - c. Grammar: Sentences too long or complicated
 - d. Organization: Too long or/and confusing
5. Draw a diagram or tree charts to show how the text is organized.
 6. Write a summary of the passage in about 150 words.

Worksheet seven: Learn to analyse news

1. Work with your partner, visit <http://search.bbc.co.uk/cgi-bin/search/results.pl?q=news&uri=%2F> to search for today's news and then read/listen/watch a piece of them you are interested in. Discuss it with your partner, talking about your feeling about what you have just read/heard/watched.
2. Do you think that the news items have been adequately presented?
3. What is the angle of story? Is there an obvious bias to one side?
4. What tone of voice does the news items reflect? Does it remain in the same throughout?
5. Write a review to what have read/heard/watched in 150 to 200 words.

DISCUSSION AND INTERPRETATION

Why web-based?

More and more people think "internet offers as a resource, as a text and as a medium." (English 2006) The materials the author chose are via websites, which can be "as a means of enhancing learner learning both within and beyond the classroom" (English 2006).

In the beginning of 2000, each teacher in my school was equipped with a laptop. In November 12th, 2000, the

oil field to which the author's school attached spent RMB 2,000,000 on a 6-in-one Internet Project. The interactive networking of classrooms (via on-line video links) was used. The resources that the teachers could use included a range of media, such as Internet, videos, cassettes, projects, electronic whiteboards and CD-ROMs to support their classroom input. Technology enabled English Language learning tools are available in schools, and it is quite imperative for an EFL teacher to use resources which are readily available to them, including English electronic newspapers.

Why news stories?

The author agree with Diamond (1981), who said that teachers can use newspapers to teach comprehension and critical thinking and to help learners develop sensitivity and awareness of the self, the community, the nation, and the world. However, since almost all newspapers have a great many pages (especially the UK newspapers), covering many aspects, the author argue that news stories should be firstly focused on in teaching English through newspapers, because they are the 'central point' of newspapers. In addition, the English newspapers present English learners a wide variety of writing written in authentic language. Different kinds of texts such as narratives, stories, letters, reports, and advertisements, etc, can serve as examples of writing and be made use of to hone students' writing ability. Further, the English newspapers provide various materials for students to broaden their knowledge. Through reading one can come across with foreign cultures, foreigners' value of life, ways of thinking, belief, behaviours and life trend better. Language is a powerful means of communication. Through reading of English newspapers, students discover life as it happens. With the development of the language ability, students' consciousness of social accountability, cultural backdrop and critical thinking are also developed to a great extent.

In the designed materials of mine, the resources of the news stories chosen are from website like <http://www.guardian.co.uk/>. "News articles via internet are excellent sources of language teaching materials. They are both authentic and topical, they provide useful information, and they are an ideal starting point for generating interesting discussions in the classroom" (McGrath, 2002).

Why lots of speaking practice by means of pair work or group work?

In the activities designed the author like learners to be working in pairs or groups because he advocates the cooperative learning. For advanced Chinese learners, they are often weak in speaking, while pair work and group work emphasizes on oral communication. Each

worksheet that had been designed includes a communicative task which can engage learners in a range of different skill-based activities. Most of the tasks are particularly effective in developing spoken fluency which is generally though not always the primary goal of the advanced learners in China. The author also thinks that learners can work at different levels within pairs or groups to fulfil the information gaps. However, it was realized that a big problem with pair work and group work is keeping the class together and what to do if one group or pair finishes before everybody else. Most of the activities in the study materials involve speaking, which are a special feature of the material.

Conclusion

News stories provide a wealth of material for the EFL classroom. The aforementioned sample lesson plan shows how to improve both intensive and extensive reading skills by helping the student focus on specific information, and information that is a little more general. Students will surely feel a sense of accomplishment at having acquired information about the world while improving their EFL reading ability.

In planning a lesson using a newspaper, the teacher should take into consideration the length of the article, paragraph, the complexity of the language, the density of information, the subject matter and content, the time available and the level of the students (Tafari, 2009). This is high time that scholars must work out a strategy on developing a new teaching model about using the English newspapers as an effective tool to improve English as a language. Hence, the students are expected to be trained in such a manner so that they can be able to read the English newspapers in an organized manner and avail the optimal mileage to hone their English language skills.

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