

ELT



Ireland bulletin

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Real(ly useful) News

by Richy Neylon (Teacher, Centre of English Studies)

Connecting the classroom with the real world has always struck me as an integral part of our role as language teachers. As well as being a source of new language, the world outside the classroom provides learners with a familiar foundation on which they can meaningfully express target language in a personalised way. Often this connection is made by getting students to draw on their own life experiences but there are some lexical sets which the learners' own experiences may not reach. This shortcoming can, at least in part, be addressed by making use of coverage of current events.

Using the news can bring up topics that learners may have had no personal involvement with but are very relevant in our world today. News stories provide a bridge between the classroom and the outside world for learners. Language which has just been covered can be seen in its natural habitat in newspapers or heard on the TV or radio. Language which the learners have encountered while consuming news can also be brought into the classroom.

These days we have an almost never-ending supply of news which can provide learners with a rich source of language on topics that are of interest to them and therefore motivating. This information on the world around them, whether it be garnered from a trusty old newspaper or a 360-degree video link that has been shared with them on social media, can be used to mine for collocations, examples of grammar being covered in the class and as source of material for both extensive reading and listening.

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There is lots of scope for the teacher to provide support throughout. For example, while correcting the first drafts, the teacher can give as much guidance as the learners need and also take note of any upcoming vocabulary that may need to be pre-taught to other students before the presentations (this could be done through a prediction activity involving headlines



The use of the news:
Any newspaper can be put to good use in class.

Pic by google image
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News in the class

News can be used in many different ways. As well as intensive class activities such as developing reading and listening skills, news content can be exploited in a more individualised way by just asking learners to pick a story that is of interest to them and explain why. This is a useful way of finding out what the class like, helping to guide selection of future stimulating material, a key aspect of the teacher's role (Wilson, 2008). Shorter segments of news from an audio source can be used for transcription or dictations, helping to highlight use of grammar or features of connected speech.

In my experience, I have found using news works best with higher level learners (from B2 up). Giving these more advanced learners ownership of the stories they bring to the classroom provides them with a task that can be as challenging as they want it to be and also motivating.

Articles and audio taken from news sources like online newspapers and podcasts can be used in many different ways. They can be used for standard classroom activities such as prediction, deducing meaning from context, summarising and following for detail. They can be used as an authentic source of lexis or grammar (e.g. a crime report highlighting passives). It is also possible to use news as a topic that provides a thread linking activities throughout a week.

Here is an outline of one way that this could be done. First, the topic of news is introduced to the class and students talk about what stories are currently making the headlines. Learners are then informed that they will, at a later date, give a presentation about a news article. Learners have a quick browse of the headlines in class and pick the stories that interest them the most and say why. At this point the teacher can give some links to English language news sources. This gets the ball rolling and the students are not tied down to any particular story and they may find something that grabs their attention later. Students are then asked to summarise a news story for homework. Students summarise using their own sentences but they are encouraged to use topic specific collocations from the original articles. The first draft is corrected by the teachers using an error correction code and students then prepare a final draft. Students give their presentations. The format for this can vary from a relaxed summary from their seat to acting out a televised news report. The presentations are used as the basis for discussion and other activities.

from the presentations). New vocabulary can be consolidated later in both controlled and freer practice activities giving learners some record of what was covered and possibly sparking interest in a news story in which they now have key vocabulary.

Potential pitfalls

There are some pitfalls with using news. Controversial topics are forever in the headlines. These can be somewhat negotiated by telling students not to cover politics or religion, at this point it can also be explained to learners that formal exams in English tend to avoid controversial topics like these anyway. At the correction of the first draft, the teacher will also have a chance to filter anything that might not be appropriate for all members of the class (e.g. more adult topics in a class which has a young student). As with a lot of topics in the classroom, it is important here that the teacher considers what will work well with their class.

During the presentations it is up to the teacher to use their judgement on how formal they are to be (can learners remain seated and speak in a chatty style or should they stand and make eye contact with everyone, use gestures, etc.?). Presentations which are too formal can be intimidating for some learners but this is also an opportunity to do some work on giving presentations with the classes such as introducing speeches or even more advanced tips such as avoiding crutch words (the 'ums' and 'ahs') for more advanced learners.

It can also be a good idea to set a time limit for the presentations so nobody takes over the class and this also adds the challenge of students needing to get the article's key information across in a limited time.

Variations

Another option is for learners to collaborate on their presentations. This works better with bigger classes, reducing presentation time and also making the task more communicative. However, it also means learners do need to put the work in so the workload is shared. In this case, learners can summarise the same story and work together to make a joint summary of what they believe contains the most useful information.

Giving feedback

In feedback sessions I feel it is best to focus on the positives, highlighting well used grammatical structures and lexis to the class from each speech because this builds confidence surrounding the learners attempts at reading English alone (Lewis,1993). Highlighting language and boarding it means it is available to learners for post-presentation discussion.

Error correction for the presentation part depends on the learners. At this point the teacher has already corrected a draft of what the learner is going to say and perhaps praise might be best for some learners from this point or a spread of errors can be looked at from all learners so weaker students don't stress and feel their work is inferior.

Reaction

I have received mixed reactions from different classes on this. There can be widely varying amounts of effort put into building up to the presentation. But motivated classes really get into it and it seems to give them a big sense of achievement. Bringing their own topic to the class, catching the interest of their peers and stirring up debate inspires some learners to put in even more effort for their next presentation. Also, in the following classes, it is common to hear students discuss how stories that were covered are developing. The activity resulted in some learners consistently doing more writing and using lexis from their own reading in class.

The main aim of all this is to get learners engaging more with the language outside the classroom. Extensive reading and listening are essential for language learning (Krashen, 2004 and Wilson, 2008). Presentations providing key vocabulary of what they will see, hear and read in the media around them in the hours and days following the lesson will hopefully shed light on the wealth of (hopefully real) news sources they encounter throughout their day.

Further Reading:

- Krashen, S. 2004 The Power of Reading: Insights from the Research (2nd edn) Heinemann
- Lewis, M 1993 The Lexical Approach: The State of ELT and a Way Forward Language Teaching Publications
- Wilson J.J. 2008 How to Teach Listening Pearson Longman

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