

FOUR LESSONS WITH A NEWSPAPER

Natalie Hess

Northern Arizona University in Yuma

In spite of the ubiquitous presence of computers and television screens in our lives, people are still buying, selling, and reading newspapers. There are, of course, many reasons why we still enjoy newspapers: they crunch; they don't demand disks, outlets or plugs; they can be stuffed into handbags; they can be pitched into wastebaskets; they can be cut up; and they can be filed. Their editorial pages make us thoughtful or argumentative. Their comic pages make us smile. Their sport pages and advice columns give us parallel lives. And perhaps, best of all, as one of my students put it, "Reading the newspaper makes you interesting!" He was the one who really got me going.

Throughout my more-than-thirty-year career as an ELL-educator, I have frequently used newspapers as texts in my classes, and have found them rewarding and worthwhile. A current newspaper brings an aura of freshness and the authenticity to the classroom. However, it is well to remember that the essence and nature of a newspaper is its temporality. A newspaper should not be used for more than one week. If kept longer, it gets a stale feeling and loses its vitality. The time has come demote it to a liner of your garbage can or a wrap for your fish.

The activities below follow four days in the life of a newspaper used as text in an advanced ELL class.

Lesson One—Getting Ready

The first lesson is the most important one, as it builds the background and creates impetus and excitement for our future work. Please note that the first three activities are conducted before students actually even look at a newspaper.

Activity One: Building background

On the board, I write, “Why do people read newspapers?”

In small circles of five, students brainstorm for ideas. This is not a time to discuss or argue. Going clock-wise in their circles, students toss out ideas, while the assigned recorder in each group writes down each contribution. Later, each group reads its collection, and as ideas are voiced, other groups cross repeated contributions off their lists. One student writes up all the ideas mentioned on the board.

Here are some that are frequently mentioned:

- Newspapers tell you what to think.
- Newspapers are interesting.
- You learn what is happening in the world.
- If you read the same paper every day, it is your friend.
- I like looking at the pictures.
- It gives people something to talk about.
- I like to read my horoscope.
- I like to read about famous people.
- I read newspapers from home because they help me to remember things.

When all the ideas are on the board, students talk about what is real and relevant to them.

Activity Two: Pictures as predictors

In preparation for this activity, I cut out some crucial pictures from the newspaper that we will study. I provide each small group with a picture. Their task is to come up with as many topics as possible that might relate to the picture. Once all the topics have been collected, they are to create as many headlines as possible for articles that could emerge from their topics. As the groups later provide feedback to the entire class, we discuss headline language and edit as we write up all the suggested headlines on the board.

Activity Three: Headlines as predictors

This strategy is in many ways the upside-down of the previous one. This time, groups of students are given somewhat ambiguous headlines taken from the same newspaper. Their work consists of deciding what the articles under these headlines could be about. The headlines may or may not be connected to the pictures previously studied. Interestingly, students usually do make such connections. There are no right or wrong answers, but a great deal of interesting language emerges in the feed-back session.

Activity Four: Matching first paragraphs and headlines

This matching technique combines the work of the previous two. Here, students will be provided with the first paragraphs of all the articles that belonged to the headlines they had previously been given. The work of the groups, now, is to match headline with article and to understand what hint there is in that first paragraph that makes them believe that it belongs to a certain headline. A great deal of interesting group discussion emerges through the decision making process. In the feedback session, the headlines are not

always matched with the “correct” article, but the reasoning behind the connections are invariably interesting.

Activity Four: Getting Stuck

At last, newspapers are distributed. Students are usually eager to find how they did in their mixing and matching. Oh’s and Ah’s emerge. We talk about what students would do with this newspaper if it were written in their own language. The consensus usually is that they would look at the headlines, and then glance through the entire paper to find and read any item of particular interest. I direct them to do just that, allowing about twenty minutes for them to get stuck on a certain article. After they have read for a while, they talk to partners about the article that interested them and explain why it became their choice reading.

Activity Five: Sorting

As a class, we now look through the entire paper, dividing it into logical sections: international news, local news, opinions, advertisements, advice columns, sport pages, business pages and advertisements.

Activity Six: Needle in a haystack

For the scanning assignment that follows, I provide groups with a list of items to be found somewhere in the newspaper. These might be a third-page headline, an advertisement for a particular product, a caption under a picture, or the names of certain personalities. The activity is a competition. The group which most quickly locates the items is the winner. This strategy ends our first two-hour lesson. The assignment for our next lesson is the reading of one article and the writing of a three-sentence summary.

Students must also be able to explain why they chose the particular article. “Because it was short.” is not a permitted answer.

Lesson Two—Reading in Depth

We begin our second lesson as students, in small groups, talk about the articles they have read. We follow the talk with a jig-saw reading of one of longer articles. The jigsaw activity, which I originally learned from “The Jigsaw Classroom” by Eliot Aronson, has now become fairly standard classroom procedure, but for those of you who may be new to ELL, I provide a brief outline below:

- The teacher divides the article into four sections—A, B, C, and D, and pre-teaches some difficult and crucial vocabulary.
- Sections are assigned to individual readers.
- Those who have read the same section get together to discuss what they have read, making sure that everyone in the group understands the content.
- New groups consisting of all sections (A,B,C, and D) are formed and the entire article is summarized.
- Each student re-reads his/her original section choosing one important sentence. They read out these sentences explaining why they have made their choice.
- There is a class discussion on the entire content.
- A re-reading of the entire article with specific questions is assigned for homework

Lesson Three—Sharing Opinions

I write content based questions on the article read at home and post these in strips around the walls of the classroom. I try to have as many strips as there are students in the

class. Students walk around the room with a partner talking about each question. When the “Walk-about” has been completed, each student takes down one question-slip from the wall. Students approach a partner, ask their question, listen to the answer, answer their partner's question, exchange slips and move on to a new partner. I keep the activity going as long as there is interest.

We finish the lesson with a True and False quiz on the article. The assignment for lesson four is the reading of the editorial or another central opinion article. Students are to write a five-paragraph essay on why they agree or disagree with the opinions expressed.

Lesson Four--Writing and Summarizing

The fourth and final lesson consist of writing activities.

Activity One: Sharing Our Articles

We begin by talking in small groups about the written compositions. Each group chooses its best contribution and these are read to the entire class.

Activity Two—“Gisting”

We choose another fairly long article in the paper to do a “gisting” summary. I learned about “gisting” from *Making Content Comprehensible for English Learners: The SIOP Model* by Echevarria, J., Vogt, M-E., Short, D.2004. p. 85, but I have made several changes in the approach.

Here is how my version of the strategy works:

1. the teacher reads a the first paragraph of the article.
2. In groups, students re-read the paragraph—each student reading one sentence.

3. As a class, students vote for the three most important words in the paragraph and these are written up on the board.
4. The Class, with editing help from the instructor, composes one sentence using all tree words.
5. The process is continued for each paragraph until the completion of the article
7. The sentences are read out loud.
8. The class composes a topic sentence.
9. The result is a class summary of the entire article.

Activity Three: Letters to the Editor

We talk about the concept, the purpose, and function of “letters to the editor,” and read some of these. In groups, students brainstorm for possible issues, raised in this newspaper, which we could use when we compose such letters.

In small groups, students compose letters. Everyone in the group makes a copy of the suggested letter. All students take the letters home to polish and re-write. The next day in class, groups will read all contributions and compose a new group effort. I actually send these to the newspaper and occasionally we strike gold—the paper actually prints one of our letters. The resulting joy is pure triumph!

For many more interesting activities on what to do with newspapers in ELL, check out *Newspapers* by Peter Grundy—Oxford University Press--Happy news to you and yours!!!

References

Aronson, E., & Thibodeau, R. (1992). The jigsaw classroom: A cooperative strategy for reducing prejudice. In J. Lynch, C. Modgil, and S. Modgil (Eds.), *Cultural diversity in the schools*. London: Falmer Press.

Echevarria, J., Vogt, M-E., Short, D.(2004). *Making Content Comprehensible for English Learners: The SIOP Model*, Boston, New York, San Francisco: Pearson.

Grundy, P. (1993). *Newspapers*. Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press.

Natalie Hess is a professor of Bilingual/Multicultural Education at Northern Arizona University in Yuma. She has taught ELL and served as teacher educator in six countries and is the author and co-author of several text and teacher-resource books.
