

USING ONLINE ARTICLES TO IMPROVE COMMUNICATION SKILLS FOR FIRST YEAR NON-ENGLISH MAJORS AT HNUE

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I. INTRODUCTION

As teachers teaching English as a foreign language (EFL), we obviously should not rely heavily on course books, which may restrict our creativeness and our learners' interest in learning. Apart from course books, there are a variety of resources for English language teaching such as books, magazines, newspapers, TV, radio, Internet, videos, etc. In the light of Communicative Language Teaching approach, these alternative resources may help improve communication skills for EFL learners since they provide real topics for discussions, native accents for speaking and listening practice, authentic language etc.

In the age of the Internet, many of us, young and old, cannot imagine how we could survive without the web. We surf the Internet almost everyday, for almost everything from how to cook a dish to what are the planets in the Solar System. It is the popularity and the availability of the Internet that inspire me to adapt it to my lessons. More importantly, online news has greater advantages over newspapers in the sense that online articles are much more easily to obtain regardless of host countries, topics and ages.

Non-English major students at Hanoi National of Education (HNUE) generally have limited command of English. Among many reasons is the restricted exposure to the foreign language. English teaching and learning take place mostly in the classroom. Online articles offer EFL learners at HNUE opportunities to approach authentic materials, which will definitely have a positive effect on their English language learning.

The aims of my study include (1) to explore the theoretical background of adapting articles in teaching English to first year non-English majors HNUE; (2)

to provide EFL teachers with selective criteria when they want to use articles communicatively in their class; (3) to provide techniques to build a news lesson in the light of CLT approach.

II. DEVELOPMENT

1. Literature reviews

The introduction of the Communicative Language Teaching approach (CLT) in Vietnam in the early 1990s has created a new trend of English teaching and learning to meet the social needs for foreign language proficiency. With the development of CLT, there has been a shift from a focus on English as a system to be studied to a focus on English as a tool for communication. This shift of focus has led to the selection of the content of teaching and learning which match the need and the level of a particular class. Until recently, material development received proper attention from teachers as well as educational authorities. Books (course books and reference books) used to be the dominant materials in language classrooms where English was taught as a foreign language. Obviously, no books can be ideal for any class and an effective teacher needs to be able to evaluate, adapt and produce materials which provide their learners exposure to the language in use (Carter, R. and Nunan, D., 2001).

A noticeable question related to material development is whether texts used in EFL classrooms should be contrived or authentic. In course books, the language to be learned is presented in short, easy texts or dialogues in order to help learners focus on the target feature. However, these contrived materials over – protect learners and do not prepare them for the reality of the language use. Authentic materials, on the other hand, provide meaningful exposure to language. According to Carter, R. and Nunan, D. (2001), most researchers argue for authenticity and stress its motivating effect on learners. Newspapers are widely considered an invaluable source of authentic for English language teaching.

Grundy (1993) stressed nine reasons for using news articles in EFL class. Firstly, they are available world-wide on a daily basis. They are cheap and plentiful, and their authentic English is useful for language lessons. Secondly, articles contain a very wide variety of text types and an immense range of information. The next two points to be addressed are the reading habit will be built and by reading news, learners can exercise such reading skills as skimming, scanning, word guessing, etc. News articles help bridge the gap between the outside world and the language classrooms; they help to integrate many skills: reading, writing, listening and speaking. News articles are current, which may attract attention from learners and curiosity also promotes motivation in language learning. Last but not least, Grundy (1993) believed that news articles offer “a short – cut” to the host culture and society; that it, newspapers are probably the best source of information about the host cultures and about the most important people and aspects in the host society.

Similarly, Sanderson (1999) restated strong arguments in favor of using newspapers in the language classroom. Firstly, Sanderson mentioned the general educational value of newspapers as they “keep us informed about what is happening in the world, extending our knowledge and deepening our understanding”. Secondly, newspapers reflect the culture of a community through the language they use. Thirdly, newspapers reflect changes in the language; they, therefore, provide valuable linguistic data. Newspapers also contain a wide variety of text types and language styles which are not easily found in conventional language – learning materials. Besides, the enormous variety of subject – matter in newspapers make them interesting and motivating for students to work with. Reading newspapers is already an enjoyable and popular pastime. Reading newspapers inside the classroom can help students discover their own tastes and interests, which in turn may extend their contact with English. Newspapers are considered an invaluable source of authentic materials which provide language teachers with limitless supply of teaching materials. Newspaper items vary in

length, in complexity of the language, the subject – matter and content. Thus, they can be used effectively with various level and particularly suitable for mix-ability class.

There remain some difficulties in using newspapers in the language classroom. While EFL students would like to read English newspapers, newspaper texts are among the most difficult they may encounter. Difficulty when working with newspapers may arise from students' lack of cultural knowledge, from grammatical and lexical complexity. Another difficulty emerges from the way learners approach the articles. They tend to read each sentence, two or three times in order to process it. This approach obviously increases complexity and time – consumption, which may decrease their motivation to read. It is the work of language teachers to select articles appropriately and adapt them effectively in their lessons.

2. A communicative news lesson for first – year non – English majors at Hanoi National University of Education.

Learners: 45 first – year non – English majors

Level: Elementary to pre – intermediate

Time: 50 minutes

Unit 9: Old and new (Cutting Edge – Pre-intermediate)

Warm up

The teacher asks the class to discuss in groups: What are the traditional roles of women, say in 1900? What are the modern roles of women in the 21st century?

The teacher shows some photographs of well-known women, asks the class who they are.

The teacher introduces the topic: women now can rule the world.

Pre – reading

In groups, students discuss whether the statements are true or false.

(i) Empowering women makes things better as women are more intelligent than men.

- (ii) The reasons why women are better leaders than men are being studied.
- (iii) To succeed, a woman need to think and act like a man.
- (iv) Communities also benefit from empowering women.
- (v) Women can help to heal the society.

The teacher pre – teaches vocabulary. He/she elicits strategies dealing with unknown words: guessing from the context, from word formation, from synonyms or antonyms. The teacher takes examples from the articles for students to practice.

Guess the meaning of the words:

- (i) Not so long ago, the idea that women might rule the world seemed slightly **ridiculous** - like something out of science fiction.
- (ii) As a huge and growing body of research and experience makes clear, **empowering** women makes things better.
- (iii) With **diversity** you bring different ways of looking at the world, different ways of analysing issues, different ways of offering solutions.
- (iv) Women also bring an inter-generational perspective to their work.
- (v) That's not to say there aren't obstacles, there are. ... Despite these ongoing **challenges**, the benefits of empowering women are undeniable. Women are the engine driving global economic growth.

Reading tasks

In groups, the students read the article and check the true/ false statements. Then, they discuss to give a heading for each paragraph.

Follow-up Tasks

There are alternatives for follow-up tasks. The students are asked to prepare for an interview between a TV presenter and a woman leader. They make questions, and take notes of answers. Then, in each group, students play roles. Alternatively, the teacher generates a discussion on the author's opinions, asking the students whether they disagree with any of those opinions. The teacher should introduce the language of discussion on this stage: how to give personal opinions, how to express agreement and disagreement., how to give comments, etc.

Feedback and Correction

The teacher brings up any common mistakes and gives correction. Then, the teacher can review the article to reinforce the information.

Homework

Groups of students are asked to search for photographs and articles about empowering women in the world and in Vietnam, summarize and bring to the next class and exchange with other groups.

III. CONCLUSION

Undoubtedly, news articles can be a great teaching resource in the EFL communicative classroom. Each teacher should be an effective material developer; that is, they should equip their lessons with additional information and materials. As a result of fact, their students will be motivated intrinsically and, therefore, willingly participate in the lesson. Teachers can choose their own articles from hundreds of websites but should bear the proposed selection criteria in mind. More importantly, teachers have to design the news lesson so as to develop students' communicative skills and motivate them to read more.

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