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NEWSPAPERS: A TOOL FOR LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

Elizabeth YOSHIKAWA*

A known aid to improve language proficiency is reading. This is particularly true for ESL students; the more proficient the reader the better the language skills of the student. Reading newspapers, is a linguistic challenge for any level of ESL learner. At the advanced level, if the reading of newspapers is broken down into several tasks, the challenge of reading newspapers is not as frustrating and it enables students to not only understand the linguistically complex language, but also improves their knowledge of vocabulary. The following paper will discuss how to divide newspaper reading into tasks so as to aid advanced ESL students in their language acquisition.

INTRODUCTION

Reading is an excellent way for student to reinforce their knowledge of grammar structures, improve their writing ability, and to increase their understanding of vocabulary. Reading newspapers offer several benefits for students in that they are much more current than course books, they enable exposure to cultural knowledge, and they present different types of language, in terms of letters, reports, stories, and narratives. After students achieve a certain degree of English proficiency acquiring grammar is no longer the primary issue in language acquisition, and students concentrate on increasing their knowledge of vocabulary. Reading newspapers in class offers advance level learners of English a positive challenge where they can reinforce their language skills as well as increase their confidence in their overall English use. By selecting newspapers articles that address students’ interests the instructor will energize and motivate them to read and acquire more English. In this paper, I will present a method of teaching the reading of newspapers, which involves six tasks. By breaking down the reading of newspaper articles into six tasks it enables

* Instructor of English as a Foreign Language, School of Economics, Kwansei Gakuin University
students to approach the article in a way that promotes reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition.

There is widely believed to be a connection between language proficiency and reading ability. This is particularly true for the student of English as a second language (ELS). Both Devine (1993) and Day and Bamford (1998) suggest that reading promotes language competence, which in turn promotes reading proficiency. In the ESL classroom, the value of reading newspapers has widely been written about. Reading newspapers can enhance the ELS learner’s general language competence, increase their exposure to English, and increase their knowledge of vocabulary (Aiex, 2000; Antepara, 2003; Kitao 1996). Reading can also have a positive effect on the ESL students’ writing skills. Studies of second language learners by Hafiz & Tudor (1898) and Robb & Susser (1989) indicate that students who are prolific readers also significantly improved in their writing skills. However newspapers are not easy to read, they are linguistically complex, and ESL students also often lack the relative cultural knowledge that native speakers of English bring with them when reading the newspaper. Furthermore ESL students are typically not skilled readers. ESL students often process what they read section by section (Grundy, 1993). Rather than focusing on meaning, ESL students usually concentrate on form. When reading newspapers, this piecemeal method of reading can limit FSI. students’ overall comprehension of an article as they inefficiently combine the different pieces they have read to create the whole. It is therefore necessary that the language instructor presents newspaper articles in a way that promotes general language competence. If this is successfully achieved students will not be overwhelmed by the language in the article, and their ability to read and understand the article will further their ESL acquisition.

A teaching method that can be used to achieve the goal of increasing advanced level students’ vocabulary base and reading competence when reading newspapers is through task-based language activities. Based on the communicative method of language teaching, in the task-based method presented below the language activities are designed to activate students’ current language schema and to motivate them for further language acquisition. This leads to the question ‘What is a task?’ According to Willis (1996, p. 4) a task is an activity “where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose (goal) in order to achieve an outcome.” The students begin with the task. Once the task is completed the instructor highlights the language used, and makes adjustments or corrections to the students’ work. During the task stage, the instructor acts only as an observer and does not assist the students, nor does the instructor ‘present’ the language in use. It is only when the task has been completed that the instructor becomes a language informant.

At the heart of communicative language teaching is interaction. Interaction neces-
sities that students communicate with each other by interpreting messages in a specific context, negotiating for meaning, and work together to accomplish a set purpose (Brown, 2001; Willis, 1996). In interaction, students exchange thoughts, feelings, and ideas. Through this process students can increase their knowledge of English through listening, or by reading materials, or by taking part in discussions with other students. In the interactive classroom the role of the instructor is to be the initiator and sustainer of interaction between the students. While many students in the ESL classroom initially lack the skills to initiate and maintain communication with each other in English, it is the instructor’s role to provide the stimuli for sustained interaction. These stimuli can be in the form of tasks. Tasks can take the form of individual work, which will later be presented to the group; or pair or small group work, which all necessitate that students interact with each other. Tasks done in group work is beneficial as it requires that students interact and negotiate for meaning with each other as well as increases the students’ individual practice of English. Another advantage of completing task work in groups is the security it offers to students. Working in small groups the individual student usually feels less vulnerable and is more willing to voice their own opinions, whereas they might otherwise fear criticism or rejection by the class at large. Task work requires that the group members support and cooperate with each other in the common goal of completing the task.

In a task-based curriculum, students actively take-part in a series of pedagogical tasks. The tasks are sequenced and build upon the previous ones to enable students to perform the final task as well as the ultimate task of interaction (Brown, 2001; Larsen-Freeman, 2000; Willis, 1996). The central purpose of the task-based class is language learning. Overall, tasks focus on communication in terms of language negotiation between students and the language knowledge that the students possess and the new language that they acquire. Typically a task-based class is builds upon three types of tasks. First students are presented with an information-gap activity. In this activity it is necessary for students to exchange information and ideas to complete the task. This is followed by an activity that requires students to give an opinion. To complete an opinion-gap task, students must express a personal preference, a feeling, or an attitude. The third type of task is project work. Usually in the form of assignments, project work requires students to obtain new information while focusing on meaningful interaction. Assignments are a necessary component as they encourage students to explore the task outside of the classroom. These series of tasks facilitate students to cross the bridge from language study to language use.

While instructors using task-based learning activities can support their students’ cognitive learning skills, it must be noted that it is not necessarily the tasks that cultivate language acquisition. Rather it is the interaction with the instructor and
amongst the students themselves that the tasks foster in addition to the processing of language by each individual that will finally decide what new language will be acquired (Van Avermaet et al, 2006; Verhelst, 2006).

**METHOD**

Students need a purpose for reading. Students who have a purpose for reading will retain more of what they have read than those who do not. When using newspapers with advanced level learners of English I divide the class into six tasks, which require student interaction. Each task is designed to activate the students’ current vocabulary schema so that they are prepared to acquire new vocabulary.

Task One, Headline Presentation, helps prepare students for the reading. Right from the start students are actively involved in the task and must use all their language skills. Before the students even look at the newspaper headline, I teach any unknown words. Then the students work in groups to create spider-grams or word associations for the key word(s) in the headline (see Appendix A). Following this, as a group they present their words to the class. I would then choose to either write the words on the board myself or elect a student to write, which would occasionally necessitate that that student asks for the spelling of specific words. The outcome of this type of task, as Dornyei (2002) explains is to activate students’ pre-existing linguistic knowledge. This type of task also motivates students to invest their mental energy and it increases their interest in the forthcoming task of reading the newspaper article and the language use that will be presented to them.

Once the students have been introduced to the vocabulary in the article I display the headline. I ask students to note the language use of the headline and bring their attention to the fact that newspaper headlines are typically grammatically incorrect. The simplified language used in headlines often requires that the reader possesses the relative cultural knowledge to understand the headline. Focusing on the words in the headline, I ask the students to predict words that may appear in the article. This helps prepare students for the reading of the article. By using these steps in Headline Presentation I am able to manipulate students’ attention to new words in English, which increases the likelihood that students will pay attention to how language is used in a specific context. This task reinforces the language students already know and strongly enhances the acquisition of the new vocabulary (Doughty & Williams, 1998; Ellis, 2002; Long, 1991; Robinson, 2001; Swain & Lapkin, 2001).

After the students have done word associations and read the headline they are ready for Task Two: Text Comprehension Preparation, which is a prediction activity. Prediction is a powerful learning strategy, as it enables students to elicit some of the relevant vocabulary and concepts that may appear in the story. Working in
groups, prediction activities provide students with opportunities to interact with each other. This type of interaction Larsen-Freeman (2000, p. 114) writes can “facilitate language acquisition as (students) have to work to understand each other and to express their own meaning”. Furthermore prediction activities orchestrate student motivation as well as teach grammar in context.

In preparing for text comprehension, I elicit questions from the students. Students are organized into groups of twos or threes with one student elected as the group leader and asked to write their own questions about what they think the reporter of the article might have asked based only on their knowledge of the article’s headline (see Appendix B). Students are reminded to think about the 5 W’s (who, what, where, when, why, and how) when making their predictions. This helps students to conduct a mental picture of what they think the story could be about, judging from only the headline.

In Task Three, the newspaper article is presented to students. There are several ways in which the article can be presented to students. The article could be cut up into pieces. In this method, each group of students receives a portion of the article and they must then try to answer their questions from Task Two based on the information they have. Or the article pieces may be enlarged and posted around the classroom. Students then have to search for the answers to their questions, this encourages students to practice the skimming and scanning method of reading, searching only for the answers to their questions. Another method, which also encourages text skimming and scanning, is to give the text to one member in the group. The other group members then ask their questions from Task Two, requiring that the first group member searches through the article for the answers to their questions. An alternative way to present the article could be as a listening activity. While I read the article to the class, the students listen for possible answers for their prediction questions. At this point it must be stated that students may not understand the whole article. However, in terms of potential language learning students are confronted with new vocabulary and phrases, and they are encouraged to focus on the overall meaning of the article not just the language form presented in the article. At the pragmatic level text presentation challenges students to find links between different information that is spread throughout the article (Larsen-Freeman, 2000; Duran & Ramaut, 2006; Van Avermaet et al., 2006). Through group work students must focus on coherence and negotiating for meaning. The small group work maximizes the amount of interaction and communicative practice students perform. Once students have completed one of the activities in Task Three, they finally read the whole article (see Appendix C).

Typical ESL students try to process what has been read piece by piece. This method of reading, which required bottom-up processing, can greatly inhibit their
ability to understand newspaper articles. Often ESL students re-read each sentence several times before they process it. As they read additional information it is combined with what has already been read, and this leads to a re-structuring of the whole article. This method of reading is inefficient as it often necessitates that the student re-reads certain sentences in order to reach clarification. The aim of Tasks One to Three is to contextualize the newspaper article for the students so that they can work towards understanding the meaning of the whole article, which necessitates top-down processing. By preparing students for the reading of the article, students are encouraged to think about what the article will be about and to think about the possible vocabulary they will encounter. Students are also encouraged to perceive the newspaper article in its intended use, to inform. The activities in Tasks One through Three force students to focus on meaning rather than on form, which over time will improve their reading proficiency and general language use.

Task Four offers students an opportunity to check vocabulary. While Tasks One through Three encouraged students to think about the possible vocabulary in the article, students were primarily focusing on words previously existing in their vocabulary schema. After they have read the article, there might be additional new vocabulary, for the individual student, not previously covered in class. In one activity, working in pairs or small groups students choose five words whose meaning they have not been able to guess from the context of the article to look up in their dictionaries. Then I combine groups, so that they can exchange their new vocabulary information. In another activity I select some of the more complex vocabulary, and I persuade the students to guess the meaning of the words based on what they have read in the article. I might ask if the meaning of “A” is similar to that of “B”. In this way it is the students who are doing the explanations, not me. Another activity that I employ at this stage is a worksheet where students working in groups or pairs must match the words from the article with their definitions (see Appendix D). New vocabulary can be easier to learn when there are contextual clues which conveying the meaning (Larsen-Freeman, 2000; Duran & Ramaut, 2006). Students are not allowed to use a dictionary for this worksheet activity. All these activities in Task Four encourage students to think aloud, and they also enable the teaching of pronunciation when checking answers.

From a task-based perspective, students learn a second language not only to make functional use of it, but as importantly by making functional use of it. At this stage student interaction becomes essential. Students must make use of the language they are learning. In Task Five, students participate in a role-play. Working in pairs offers the students’ abundant opportunities to discuss, share, negotiate and exchange information and ideas (Larsen-Freeman, 2000; Duran & Ramaut, 2006). In Task Five the students act out the article³. The students choose roles from the article,
with one student taking the role of the reporter. The reporter interviews any character the other student chooses from the article. After choosing the roles, the students must establish the day, time, and setting. They then write out their interview, and perform their role-play (see Appendix E). This task teaches students socio-pragmatic awareness (Larsen-Freeman, 2000; Duran & Ramaut, 2006). Due to a lack of language skill and use, students are often unable to show sympathy or empathize, or compliment another person appropriately in English. To be successful English language users, students must know how to show appropriate emotions for the situation. This task therefore encourages students to use appropriate language for the situation. By this stage students are familiar with the article and they are able to elaborate it by expressing their own opinions or verbalizing possible explanations. This task embraces the social nature of learning: learning is fostered by cooperation between students with their instructor, and amongst students themselves. In this way students are not merely language learners, but more importantly they are language users.

The last task involves assessment. In Task Six, student assessment is conducted in two forms. First the students hand-in the written form of their role-play. Re-creating the interview between the reporter and one of the characters in the story not only enables a comprehension check of the story, but it also enables the instructor to check for appropriate language use both empathically and grammatically. The second form of assessment comes in the form of student presentations. As a homework activity students must search for an article related to a hobby or interest they have on the Internet. Students must find an interesting or characteristic headline. Then following Tasks One and Two students prepare themselves to read the article. Once they have written their spider-grams and questions, they read the article and answer their questions. Finally they bring their headlines to class, and present their articles to the class. This task helps students move towards autonomy. By encouraging students to become autonomous, students move out of the confines of the classroom and gain more confidence in their overall language use (Duran & Ramaut 2006). Assignment work therefore encourages both language study and language use.

SUMMARY

After a certain level, the advanced learners of English starts to focus more on acquiring additional vocabulary rather than just on grammar. At this stage the role for

1) Depending on the length of the class, students may not have enough time to create and perform the role-play on the same day. Although students are given time in class to create their role-play, they may actually perform it in the following class, when they would also hand-in their role-play so that I can check their language use and correct any mistakes.
the foreign language instructor cannot merely be to foster student motivation. The goal then becomes how to maintain student motivation. Task-based reading is an excellent motivation activity for advanced level students. It not only reinforces grammar structures, but task-based reading can also introduce new vocabulary in which students can use the context and their own vocabulary base to derive the meaning of new words. Reading newspaper articles offers students a chance to go beyond regular textbooks and act as a springboard for students to jump into the world around them presenting current affairs and stories of interest in English. At this level, task-based reading is one way the instructor can create interesting classes and maintain motivation for learning English. In the task-based class, the ultimate goal is language use, which translates into motivating students to interact with others. The aim of dividing the reading into tasks is to assist ESL readers in both understanding the reading and to increase their confidence in reading which in turn will motivate the students to read more. By utilizing the task-base class, students have ample opportunities to draw upon the English they have previously acquired and use the new vocabulary learnt in class through both the tasks completed in class and those done as homework assignments. Students are therefore able to accomplish the goals of understanding some of the cultural knowledge that native speakers of English utilize when reading and also become more communicatively active.

Appendix A: Word Association: Spider-gram

![Spider-gram diagram]
Appendix B: Student Questions

Assignment ⇒ Look at the headline and think about what types of questions the reporter may have asked. Remember to think of the 5 W’s (who, what, where, when, and how).

Right as many questions as you can.

Man shoots colleague in crocodile’s jaws

1) Did the colleague die?
2) Did the man kill the crocodile?
3) Where were they?
4) Why was the colleague in the crocodile’s mouth?
5) How did it happen?
6) What were the men doing at that time?
7) Who else was there?
8) When did it happen?
9) What were the injuries to the colleague?
10) What were the injuries to the crocodile?

Appendix C: The newspaper article

Man Shoots Colleague In Crocodile’s Jaw

An Australian crocodile-farm worker has escaped the jaws of death, a bullet and a crocodile in the space of a few seconds. Jason Green was attacked by an angry croc while he was working at the Darwin Crocodile Farm in Australia’s Northern Territory. Mr Green was one of two men who were collecting crocodile eggs along a riverbank. They regularly collect eggs and put them in a special incubator so that the babies hatch safely. Their skins are sold to the Hermes brand to make bags. The female reptile got upset when she saw Mr Green at her nest and immediately attacked him. His quick-thinking colleague Zac Fitzgerald saved his life when he shot the salt-water beast. Mr Green was released from certain death when the croc let go of him and swam away. Unfortunately, Fitzgerald fired a second shot which hit Mr Green in the same arm the crocodile had grabbed.

Mr Green is now recovering in hospital. He needed two operations on his broken arm; one for the crocodile bite and one for the bullet wound. Mr Green was extremely lucky he made it to

hospital in time to save his arm. Fortunately for him, a helicopter was waiting nearby the area that the two workers were collecting eggs. It took just 25 minutes to transport Green from the remote, Outback river to the Royal Darwin Hospital. Jason joked about the attack from his hospital bed. He told his boss: “I don’t think I’ll be at work for a couple of days.” Jason thanked his colleague for saving his life, saying: “Thank God he’s a good shot.” Jason added that he didn’t have any bad feelings toward the croc. “She only sort of poked her nose out at me,” he said. The crocodile survived the gun shot and is now back guarding her nest.

Appendix D: Vocabulary Worksheet
Assignment ⇒ Match the underlined words or phrases from the article with their definitions below by writing numbers in the boxes.

An Australian crocodile-farm worker has (1)escaped the (2)jaws of death, a bullet and a crocodile in the space of a few seconds. Jason Green was attacked by an angry croc while he was working at the Darwin Crocodile Farm in Australia’s Northern Territory. Mr Green was one of two men who were collecting crocodile eggs along a riverbank. They regularly collect eggs and put them in a special (3)incubator so that the babies hatch safely. Their skins are sold to the Hermes brand to make bags. The female (4)reptile got upset when she saw Mr Green at her nest and immediately attacked him. His quick-thinking colleague Zac Fitzgerald saved his life when he shot the saltwater (5)beast. Mr Green was released from certain death when the croc let go of him and swam away. Unfortunately, Fitzgerald fired a second shot which hit Mr Green in the same arm the crocodile had (6)grabbed.

Mr Green is now recovering in hospital. He needed two operations on his broken arm; one for the crocodile bite and one for the bullet (7)wound. Mr Green was extremely lucky he made it to hospital in time to save his arm. Fortunately for him, a helicopter was waiting nearby the area that the two workers were collecting eggs. It took just 25 minutes to transport Green from the (8)remote, Outback river to the Royal Darwin Hospital. Jason joked about the attack from his hospital bed. He told his boss: “I don’t think I’ll be at work for a couple of days.” Jason thanked his colleague for saving his life, saying: “Thank God he’s a good shot.” Jason added that he didn’t have any bad feelings toward the croc. “She only sort of (9)poked her nose out at me,” he said. The crocodile survived the gun shot and is now back (10)guarding her nest.

[ ] a kind of animal with cold blood
[ ] to protect something, to watch over something
[ ] a special box where the temperature is kept at a constant level so that eggs can be artificially hatched.
[ ] certain death
[ ] a large four-footed mammal (animal)
[ ] damage or an injury in which the skin is broken
[ ] to free yourself and get away from danger
[ ] far away from society or any other populated area
[ ] to take hold of something quickly, suddenly, or forcefully
[ ] to push the point of something such as a finger against somebody or something
Appendix E: Student Interview

Interviews

Assignment ⇒ Working in pairs you are now going to recreate the interview between the reporter and one of the characters from the article. Remember to think about the date, the time, and the setting of the story when you create your interview. You must have at least 5 interchanges between the reporter and the other character. You might consider using the following as your first line:

A) Good afternoon, my name is (name), and I work for the Australian Associated Press, I understand that a crocodile attacked you yesterday morning. . . .

B)

A) A) 

B) B)

A) A) 

B) B)

A) A) 

B) B)

A)

REFERENCES


