

Using Newspapers in the ESL Classroom

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Received October 20, 1988

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As the title implies, this paper will discuss the use of English language newspapers as instructional material for English language classes. Perhaps the most essential and most fundamental idea presented here is that English language newspapers are especially useful for teaching in Japan. There are four English language daily newspapers distributed throughout Japan and these papers are a valuable resource that is to a large degree ignored by the English teaching community. Newspapers can be used on a day-to-day basis, and they are cheap, interesting, and different. Newspapers are particularly flexible --they can be adapted to most any teaching situation and can be used either to complement other course material or to form the basis or core of most any type of language course. Newspaper stories contain information that is relevant to students and thus allows them to become more involved with and excited about their study materials. Also, since success in the target language within a real context is often important to students, newspaper study gives these students a chance to "prove their mettle" by applying what they know to authentic materials. By using newspapers students are able to challenge themselves with a variety of topics and rhetorical structures, and at the same time develop language skills similar to those cultivated in instructional course books.

Before moving on to the body of this paper there are two remaining points to be made. First, given the ever increasing popularity of video and other types of media in classroom instruction, newspaper should be seen as a cheap, flexible means of introducing and providing backup support for these other types of instructional media--video, news tapes, radio, and so on. Second, English language media is perhaps the closest approximation of a second language environment that there is in Japan. Newspapers are an effective way to bridge the barrier between teaching English as a *foreign* language and teaching English as a *second*

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language. The use of any media (print or broadcast) brings the English speaking world to the student, and moves the student out of an environment in which English is a *foreign* language and into an environment in which English is a *second* language.

The shift from foreign language environment to second language environment is a shift in context, a shift that can be described in terms of schema theory as a change in the priorities assigned to different bodies of information. To the degree that this is true, it is necessary to give a brief account of schema theory.

The next section of this paper consists of a brief description of schema theory. Using this description as a point of departure, I will then go on to discuss a number of specific points concerning the use of newspapers in the ESL classroom.

Schema Theory

Perhaps the best way to begin this description of schema theory is to say what it isn't --that is, to give a general characterization of a traditional perspective of second language comprehension to show how it contrasts with that. First, a traditional perspective puts its emphasis on language as an object that must be understood. This emphasis on the linguistic basis of comprehension is correlated with the belief that each word, and by implication the sentences and texts that words make up, is said to possess a kind of inherent meaning. Meaning is conceived of as an objective property of language that can be discovered and seen by the people who use it. Failure to comprehend a word or a sentence reflects a deficiency of linguistic knowledge, showing that a reader or listener may not "know" the proper vocabulary or grammatical rules that allow them to see what the meaning is. Second, such a perspective focuses on the linguistic basis of comprehension to such a degree that it almost completely ignores that language is comprehended by *somebody*: that there is always a reader or listener involved.

Schema theory, on the other hand, puts a heavy emphasis on readers or listeners--the people who must comprehend something. Schema theory considers that people bring large amounts of world knowledge (different types of information, ideas, attitudes, and beliefs) with them into an interpretive context. Using their linguistic skill as a kind of springboard, people develop expectations and make predictions about meaning with reference to this world knowledge. Generally, schema theory is the formalization of the nature and function of this world knowledge with regard to the comprehension of language. This formalization results in the postulation of abstract knowledge structures which summarize in a general way what is known about a variety of cases that are different in many specific ways. These knowledge structures can be modified to accommodate new information and consist of various component parts that are related to each other in various ways.

The corollaries of this emphasis on world knowledge are as follows. First, the reader or listener becomes an interpreter of information, making inferences and judgements about the

meaning of language cues, rather than simply accumulating arbitrary bits of meaning from a text. Second, a text, whether it is heard or read, does not by itself carry an objective meaning that must be discovered. Instead, a text is taken to provide cues and instructions for readers and listeners that will help them retrieve or construct meaning from their own, previously acquired knowledge. Third, it is the interaction of old knowledge (or world knowledge as it has been referred to here) and new information (different types of texts, whether they are spoken or written) that makes comprehension possible. In fact, according to schema theory it is this interaction between old and new knowledge that is being referred to when the word "comprehension" is used. The idea is that new information can only have meaning when it can be tied or related to something the individual already knows. In passing, note that schema theory can be applied to first as well as second language comprehension.

How does a reader or listener use schemata in order to comprehend something? How does knowledge stored in memory function during the process of interpretation, allowing new knowledge to become a part of memory? In general terms, schemata, or the background knowledge that is already in memory, anchors or provides a reference point by which to organize the new information found in a text. This happens most efficiently when the schemata are stable, clear, and (most important) directly related to the text under consideration. Words that refer to a schema tend to call to mind the schema as a whole, and when a schema has been called to mind it brings with it its component parts, some of which might be particularly strong or salient.

When readers or listeners are able to get an overall impression of a whole text they use this impression to help in making inferences and to deduce what textual detail will probably occur. In this sense readers and listeners may add as much or more information to a text than they receive from it. This concept is somewhat analogous to the ideas of Gestalt psychologists in that the characteristics of a whole experience are believed to be different from the characteristics of its accumulated parts. An efficient reader or listener does not use all the clues to meaning in a text; in fact, a good reader or listener makes a large number of correct predictions as they receive information and therefore does not need to confirm these predictions too carefully. It is this practice that schema theorists have in mind when they say that an author does not really convey ideas to a reader, but that he simply stimulates the reader to construct similar ideas out of existing experience. When people read or listen, they expand on and add to any meaning contained in a text. They integrate the textual clues into a suitable group of ideas that they already possess.

Finally, before leaving this part of the discussion, it is important to note that schemata, or abstract knowledge structures, do not function alone. It is generally accepted that people rely on their knowledge of specific instances as well as their schemata, and that these two bodies of knowledge complement each other. Also, while it is important to see that people supply much of their own information in order to comprehend a text, this does not mean that

texts are without any meaning at all. Texts are definitely not empty, but by the same token neither are they full.

Types of Schema

Schemata are typically divided into two categories in order to better understand the role of background knowledge in reading comprehension. The first type of schema is called "content schema" and the second type is called "formal schema." Content schemata account for the background knowledge associated with the content area of a text, while formal schemata account for the background knowledge associated with the formal, rhetorical, and organizational structures of a text. It should be pointed out that linguistic knowledge--a knowledge of vocabulary and grammatical rules--is usually separated from the sphere of background knowledge in general. This is due to the fact that schema theory was developed to account for perceived deficiencies in a purely linguistic model of comprehension.

Beyond this basic distinction the category of content schema is frequently subdivided into four more categories: cultural, subcultural, topical, and idiosyncratic. The third category, topical schemata, is the one that is most directly related to two of the major themes in English teaching today--ESP (English for Special Purposes) and content-based instruction. Also, of the four subdivisions of the category "content schema," it is this subdivision that is most directly related to the use of newspapers, as we shall see below.

As a community, researchers in the fields of ESL (English as a Second Language) and EFL (English as a Foreign Language) have focused their attention on the content side of the distinction presented above. Content-based instruction and ESP are both healthy subfields of English language teaching. Formal schemata have been left by the wayside in the development of schema theory. This is unfortunate, and it seems to be due to the fact that rhetoric and formal organizational structures are too close for comfort to linguistic competency and grammatical rules. Having outlined schema theory and briefly discussed the types of schema that have been delineated, we must return to the main topic under consideration here: the use of newspapers in ESL classrooms.

Newspapers as an Instructional Resource

What is it about newspapers that makes them so useful for teaching? There are several parts to the answer to this question, as we shall see in what follows. Newspapers form a broad corpus of personalized, up-to-date materials. They are personalized in that they reflect a portion of the lives of their readers, in the sense that readers of newspapers to a certain degree "live" in the world which they read about. The fact that newspapers are up-to-date needs no comment. And in spite of complaints about the difficulty of grammar

and vocabulary in newspapers (or certain news magazines) a place for newspapers in the classroom can easily be established. For example, how well a text arouses motivation and enthusiasm is more important than the difficulty of certain linguistic features. Cautiousness about the difficulty of grammar and vocabulary are balanced by the relevance of the stories and articles contained in a newspaper. Many teachers are very willing to accept that learning cultural and rhetorical concepts should have a priority of over learning linguistic concepts such as grammar and vocabulary.

Newspapers are authentic materials. They are not graded, abridged, adapted, simplified, edited, nor in any way specially prepared or reduced for language learners. They are real, and they succeed in their niches in society due to their ability to stimulate and motivate their readers and to provide a service for them. Newspapers serve the people who read them and this indicates a high degree of relevance. In terms of the types of schemata discussed above, newspapers are directly related to the cultures, subcultures, and idiosyncrasies of their readers, and are topically relevant in that they compete to maintain an “edge” over other papers in the degree to which they stimulate interest and serve their readers desires. The practical benefits are obvious. Given their ongoing topical relevance, competency in reading newspapers is a skill that can serve students of English throughout their lives. Also, given their broad distribution (reflecting the present status of English as an international language), newspaper skills can serve those who travel through many parts of the world. Most, if not all, major cities offer English language newspapers for sale to travelers, tourists, and businesspersons.

While some people may stereotype newspapers as being relatively stale and unchanging and complain that they use the same rhetorical and organizational structures throughout, a closer examination will reveal a tremendous amount of linguistic and theoretical variation in this type of media. In fact, it is possible to use certain ongoing similarities as an advantage. Uniformity in either content or theoretical structure (content and formal schema as described above) is a blessing in disguise, allowing a teacher to control certain variables while placing other features on display. Evolving coverage of certain stories allows students to develop stable content for a topic of their own choice. By providing a stable reference point new information can be more easily interpreted, organized, and recalled. In the same manner stories can be selected so that they all show a particular type of rhetorical structure, or so they all show different types of structures. Again, this allows the teacher or student to control for or cultivate a given type of organization. Choosing articles with similar structures can allow students to focus their attention on other problems or give them the opportunity to form generalizations about that type of structure. For example, by studying several “hard news” stories, several editorials, or several movie reviews students can learn what type of organizational format to expect from such articles. Choosing articles with different structures gives students the opportunity to compare and contrast different approaches to the same idea.

The broad topical coverage of most newspapers enables them to be used to complement content-based instruction or programs teaching ESP. Newspaper coverage includes stories on science, politics, government, social sciences, music and art, business, energy and the environment, consumer education, medicine, and so on. Coverage of different topics is as broad as the interests of society itself.

Headlines are a normal point of entry into the text of a newspaper. Since they are one of the more difficult aspects of reading a newspaper more time and attention are often spent on them. Typical exercises for classes using newspapers involve headline writing or rewriting tasks. Headlines may be written for stories that have had their headlines removed, or these abbreviated statements may be rewritten as full, complete, grammatically acceptable sentences. Exercises such as these provide detailed, intensive grammar practice. Filling in the missing words and rewriting headlines is somewhat similar to a cloze exercise, except students are never sure where the "blanks" are or how many words are missing.

Thus, newspapers can be used as material to target a variety of different competencies: formal schemata and rhetorical structures, a broad range of content topics, or comparatively intense grammatical analysis. Not only do they suit the needs of students, newspapers can also satisfy the goals of almost any type of language study.

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