

## **English Language E03 / E08**

**Area: Reading, Writing, Speaking**

**Title: Using Newspapers to Teach English**

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### **Introducing newspapers into the primary school-based curriculum**

Most teachers recognize the potential of newspapers in English language teaching. Various kinds of text types that students learn in the textbook can be found in newspapers. These include news reports, advertisements, announcements, crossword puzzles, film and book reviews, weather reports, TV programmes, letters to the editor, recipes, coupons, captions and comics. Nevertheless, scaffolding students to move from textbooks to authentic printed materials is not an easy task (Salama, 1974). Diverse topics, unfamiliar vocabulary and layouts in newspapers are hurdles that our students need to overcome. Recently a number of newspapers (e.g. *Goodies*, *Seven*, *The Junior Standard*, *Daily 5*, *Daily 7*, *Daily 10*) that target at pre-primary and primary students have been produced. These simplified versions of newspapers share the following features:

- real local and international stories are selected
- layouts are clear with large print and rich illustrations
- language is real (in some parts, Chinese translations/glossary and audio recordings are provided to assist reading)
- different text types such as recipes, captions, comics, word games and letters are included

These kinds of newspapers can help students (i) progress from tackling familiar pedagogical tasks to real-world tasks, (ii) increase their knowledge of the outside world, and (iii) arouse their interest and motivation in learning English (Olivares & Lisi-Pawlak, 1991).

### **Experience at Tin Shui Wai Catholic Primary School**

To start with, teachers at *Tin Shui Wai Catholic Primary School* recommended *Goodies* to Key Stage 2 students. The initial responses were good, but the enthusiasm gradually wore off. Students forgot to pick up their subscriptions at the collection points. Teachers realized the need to help students cultivate the habit of reading English newspapers. Their concern was discussed in the co-planning meetings. P.5 teachers decided to integrate newspapers into the school-based curriculum, with one lesson per every alternate week assigned to newspaper activities.

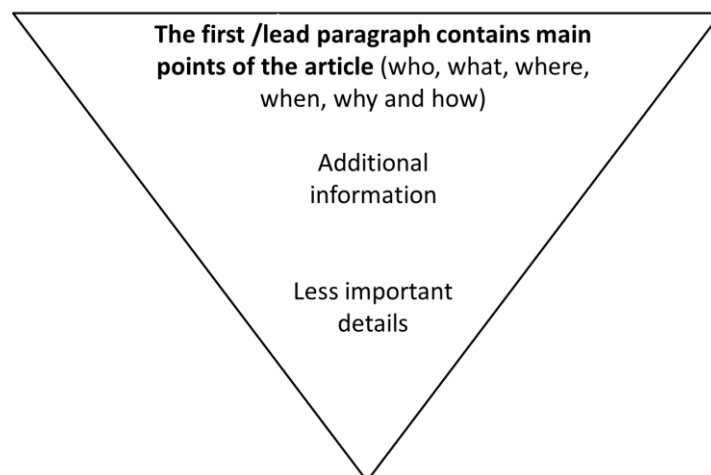
Since the Key Stage 2 curriculum was already very tight, teachers needed to partially or completely omit certain modules in the textbook in order to create space in the curriculum for newspaper activities. Moreover, students were asked to subscribe their own copies of newspapers.

Much flexibility was built into this component of the curriculum. Teachers could choose different texts and activities to suit the interests and ability range of their class.

### **Using newspapers to teach English**

#### ***Reading newspaper articles and writing news summary***

Among various text types in newspapers, teachers identify newspaper articles as the prime focus. Initially, teachers revise the key text features of newspaper articles with students. This is very important as students may either forget the features learned in the textbook or fail to relate knowledge from textbooks to authentic tasks in the real world. Students are reminded of basic features such as *headline*, *by-line*, *introduction*, *body*, *quote*, *photograph* and *caption*. They are asked to look for these features in authentic newspapers. Moreover, the inverted pyramid writing style is taught explicitly in class. Students learn that the first paragraph of the news report usually contains the important information of who, what, where, when, why and how. Less important information is placed at the end of the article (see diagram below). This structure allows readers to get the gist of the article in a short span of time without reading the whole text.



In lessons, teachers focus on particular reading skills: making prediction and connecting the headline with the text. Teachers show the newspaper headline on the board and ask students to use 6 wh-words to ask related questions (i.e., information they want to find out in the article). These questions are discussed in groups and in class. Then teachers distribute the newspapers and students read silently to prove and disprove their predictions.

This approach helps arouse students' interest and make their prediction more explicit. Moreover, students' schemata are activated. They are prepared to make use of their prior knowledge and world experience to relate to the facts and ideas that appear in the text. And through regular and systematic exposure to newspaper articles written in the inverted pyramid writing style, students are becoming more familiar with this type of genre. They begin to understand the importance of headlines and lead paragraphs in locating main ideas.

Teachers adopt an integrative approach when they ask students to talk about the main ideas and their views in class. This part is difficult as students may be limited by their life experiences. The following prompts are used to help students structure their feelings, thinking and possible action(s) or advice:

- *I think that this news is (important / interesting / worrying / amusing / shocking...)...*
- *I was (upset / worried / excited / surprised...) when I read this news...*
- *I think / believe / suggest that ...*
- *I need / The government needs to do something...*
- *I want to / plan to / need to do something to help...*

Scaffolding activities such as class discussion and pair/group discussion are used to stimulate pupils' thinking. Then students need to write a short summary based on the newspaper cutting. In the summary, students are asked to present facts and express their views. It is a 3-paragraph structured report. The first paragraph is a short summary of the news, the second paragraph is about personal feelings and the third is about possible suggestions.

The following is a sample of student work (P.6) collected at the end of the term:

*Goodies (G09-G09)*

*11<sup>th</sup> April 2015*

*This article tell us that Taiwan government may fine parents for kids' bad habit which kids are spending too much time in front of electronic gadgets.*

*I think that this news is shocking. It is because the law is so harsh. No countries set up the law like this. I was worried. It is because I play the smartphone all the time. If Hong Kong government sets up this law, result will be disastrous.*

*Technology is well developed nowadays. Many people are using smartphones. I think Taiwan government is right. It is because if the government doesn't set up the harsh law, more and more people will be addicted. I think I will seldom use the smartphone.*

## ***Catering for class diversity***

### ***(1) Doing class debate***

To cater for the needs of high achievers, teachers extend the task further: from news summary to class debate (Williams, 1973). A 'primary' version of debate which focuses less on formal procedures, style and strategy but more on content is introduced to high achievers. Students learn that there are four ways to support their arguments: (i) examples from their own experience, (ii) common sense (what everybody knows), (iii) experts' views (based on research findings) and (iv) research data. Key roles such as judges, presenters, timekeepers, 'for the motion' team and 'against the motion' team are introduced. Simple assessment rubrics in terms of content and presentation skills such as quality of information, organization and mannerism are used to give feedback on learning (see Appendix A).

In debate lessons, teachers use articles in newspapers to arouse students' interest in certain topics. Similar to students in an average class, high achievers make use of the basic information obtained from the newspaper article and write a news summary. Then they research further on the topic and gather more facts and figures from different sources. Ideas are then shared in groups/class and recorded in the column: for the motion and against the motion. Finally, students choose their own standpoints and prepare their own presentation speech for the debate.

The following is a sample of student work on the debate motion: we should not eat animals.

Tin Shui Wai Catholic Primary School (2014/15)  
Primary 6 Debate Workshop Learning Sheet

Class: P.6 E      Name: \_\_\_\_\_ (    )      Date: 4-6-2015

Debate Motion: We shouldn't eat animals

For		Against	
1.	<del>Meat</del> It has been scientifically proven that eating so much red meat is bad for us	1.	We should eat balanced
2.	Eating a variety of plant based foods provides all of the nutrients the human mind and body need to thrive!	2.	Meat has been a part of our diet since the beginning of mankind.
3.	Animals are not ours to eat. They have their own lives, own families and own feelings and thoughts	3.	It is part of the diets of many other species as well and is perfectly natural.
4.	We should eat balanced but many animals become endangered	4.	We have the digestive tracts of omnivorous
5.	eat more veggies make us healthy	5.	Protein from meat is an important of our staple diet.
6.	We will be fat, if we eat a lot of animals.	6.	We can't change because eating meat is our habit.
7.		7.	

Teachers believed that newspapers provided a very good source for bringing in different current and lively topics into the classroom. However, they found that it was important to choose topics that were appealing to students and use scaffolding strategies to help them express their views. When students showed interest in a topic, they usually had diverse views in their news summary. Teachers observed that students shared their views enthusiastically in class. Their active participation might turn into an intense discussion (sometimes even a heated argument), this happened frequently among high achievers. Teachers regarded that as a good sign: students were ready for debate.

## **(2) On-line reading activities**

Students of lower ability read the easier parts of *Goodies*. They are short stories and *Goodies News* which are usually accompanied by audio recordings. Students can read and listen to the text at home. In class, students do on-line quizzes (the comprehension questions are set by teachers) created by a free game-based learning platform called *Kahoot*. The reading games are designed to be competitive and interactive. Through instant computer analysis, teachers know how much students understand the assigned reading and feedback can be given at once. Similar activities can be conducted in the average ability class. Teachers found that low achievers were motivated to read a few more pages of the newspaper. They also tracked students' performance and found great progress in their reading achievements.

## **Impact on teaching and learning**

Teachers reflected that the above newspaper reading activities could help students become more and more independent readers. At the outset, teachers needed to allocate considerable class time for newspaper reading. Gradually, students were able to complete reading and do news summary at home. They came to class with their views prepared and participated in group talk/debate.

Teachers observed that students' views became more and more mature. They were able to relate their daily life experiences and knowledge of the world to the reading. Moreover, they respected other students' opinions and were confident in expressing their own. Some P.6 students found that newspaper articles helped them a lot when they attended interviews conducted by secondary schools. They were able to express their views on current affairs clearly and spontaneously. Most importantly, this initiative helped students cultivate the habit of reading English newspapers and enabled them to experience the use of English for authentic communication.

In this presentation, teachers are going to share with the audience the technical aspects like lesson design, scaffolding steps and the news summary/debate template. Other pedagogical considerations like feedback and catering for class diversity will also be addressed. The audience will be invited to participate in an on-line reading activity developed by the presenters.

## **References:**

1. Olivares, R., & Lisi-Pawlak, C. (1991). *Teaching Language to Minority Students through the Newspapers*. ERIC Digest Number ED367172.
2. Salama, N. (1974). Use the Newspaper! *ELT journal*, 28(4), 336-343.
3. Williams, R. (1973). The local English-medium newspaper in English teaching. *ELT Journal*, 28(1), 47-52.

Appendix A:

**Tin Shui Wai Catholic Primary School (2014/15)**

**Primary 6 Debate Workshop Learning Sheet**

**Class: P.6** \_\_\_\_\_

**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_ ( )

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

Debate Speaker Rubrics

Areas	Beginning (1 mark)	Intermediate (2 marks)	Advanced (3 marks)
(1) Information	<b>Information presented was not adequate.</b> ( )	<b>Accurate information was presented.</b> ( )	<b>Information presented was thorough and accurate.</b> ( )
(2) Understanding	<b>He / She did not understand the topic.</b> ( )	<b>He / She understood the topic.</b> ( )	<b>He / She understood the topic very well.</b> ( )
(3) Use of facts, quotes and statistics	<b>He / She did not use evidence.</b> ( )	<b>He / She used evidence.</b> ( )	<b>He / She used evidence effectively.</b> ( )
(4) Logical flow	<b>No logical arguments.</b> ( )	<b>He / She provided logical argument(s).</b> ( )	<b>He / She used his /her logical argument(s) effectively.</b> ( )
(5) Rebuttal	<b>Rebuttal lacked a powerful argument.</b> ( )	<b>Rebuttal contained a powerful argument.</b> ( )	<b>Rebuttal contained a powerful argument and a strong attack on other side's major debate point.</b> ( )
(6) Presentation	<b>He / She was not poised and confident.</b> ( )	<b>He / She spoke clearly and maintain eye contact with the audience.</b> ( )	<b>He / She was poised, spoke clearly and maintained eye contact with the audience.</b> ( )