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<https://doi.org/10.15017/6796358>

出版情報：言語科学. 31, pp.67-84, 1996-02-26. The Institute of Languages and Cultures, Kyushu University
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By Brian Quinn

INTRODUCTION

Newspapers are a valuable language resource for both English teachers and students alike. Numerous new textbooks are published every year based on real or simulated newspaper articles. In addition, many teachers even keep files of various articles that are organized either thematically or based on the language content. English language students at Japanese universities frequently find actual newspaper articles far more stimulating and motivating than traditional textbooks because they provide interesting, relevant, topical, varied and sometimes even rather amusing information. Another important advantage of newspaper articles is that they are also an excellent way to introduce the cultures of such countries as either America, Great Britain or Australia by offering clear insights into these linguistically similar but thoroughly unique societies. Newspapers can demonstrate a nation's preoccupations, good and bad habits, its way of thinking and its prejudices. However, due to the varied and timely nature of many articles, materials gleaned from newspapers can also be extremely chal-

lenging to Japanese university students who are still unfamiliar with their content, vocabulary and style. In particular, because of the wide range in the level of linguistic difficulty of various newspapers, as well as among different articles in the same newspaper, English teachers need to therefore be very careful when selecting and preparing appropriate articles to cover in class. In this brief paper several of the key aspects of successfully incorporating authentic newspaper articles into the Japanese university English curriculum, by both native and non-native English teachers, will be presented, analyzed and discussed, while focusing attention on the advantages as well as some of the pitfalls in using such materials.

COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS

Occasionally an English teacher will come across a newspaper article that is of particular interest to him, either because it is funny, offers a unique point of view or since it might clearly present and analyze an important issue of the day. The teacher might then clip out the article, make a number of copies on the Xerox machine and pass it out to his students to read in class. However, when reading the article again in class, after somewhat impulsively selecting such materials, he frequently comes to realize that what initially seemed clear and concise is actually highly idiomatic (especially regarding humor) or contains vocabulary items that none of his students may either know or comprehend. The novice EFL/ESL teacher therefore soon comes to understand that several criteria must be met before an article can be successfully exploited and smoothly used in

a classroom environment.

Several years ago a native English colleague of mine, who had only recently come to Japan, stopped by my office to tell me about some “great” articles on Japanese society that he had recently read in **The New York Times**. The articles in question were a full half-page in length and had been written by various eminent foreign Japan scholars on such topics as: “The Hollowing Out of Modern Japanese Industry” and various other intellectual enigmas regarding Japanese society. I openly agreed that the articles were both well written and very enlightening. Then, however, to my utter shock and disbelief, he promptly said that such articles would be “perfect” as supplementary materials for his first-year English classes. I diplomatically suggested that such articles “might” be somewhat beyond the ability of most students while, in addition, the contents in the articles would also probably be of extremely limited interest to most 18 or 19-year-old students. He blissfully failed to pick up on my less than subtle hint and apparently went ahead and used these and similar articles in his classes for quite a while. Some two years later, after he had become more of a seasoned veteran of teaching EFL in Japan, I nonchalantly asked how it went with those articles and with obvious hindsight he went on to explain that they were “impossible” to teach and he was never able to finish any of them in class anyway because the students could neither understand the language nor were the least bit interested in the contents. He had thus learned, by experience, that the most important role of the teacher, when selecting newspaper materials is to choose materials that are:

- 1) appropriate for the students' linguistic ability.
- 2) short enough to be easily covered in one class, while leaving a sufficient amount of time for the teacher to introduce both the topic and difficult vocabulary items, as well as to conduct expanded discussions using both pair-work and small groups.
- 3) on topics of genuine interest to the students. Of course, teachers should also select materials that they themselves enjoy as well, however, as educators the primary goal in developing any curriculum or materials should always be to meet the needs of the students.

STRATEGIES FOR UTILIZING NEWSPAPERS

Most language teachers tend to use newspapers in the following three ways:

1. To develop competency in various linguistic areas including reading comprehension, grammar and vocabulary skills.
2. To analyze various aspects of the target society and its culture.
3. To stimulate debate and discussion of the issues raised by particular articles.

All three of these above described methods are valid areas of concentration in the EFL classroom. The teacher can focus on either one, two or all three of these areas when using articles in class depending on the course objectives, class size, student interest or his particular teaching style and philosophy.

The vast majority of non-native English teachers in Japan tend to focus their attention on the first method of dealing with newspaper articles since the lesson content and objectives can be clearly taught, controlled and tested (i.e., such as

using vocabulary or translation tests at the end of the semester based on the articles previously covered during the course). As stated previously, it is completely valid, and sometimes even necessary, to deal with newspaper articles in this way. However, due to the timely and often idiomatic nature of many newspaper articles, focusing on grammar, vocabulary and translation alone can often be overwhelming for most students and also make for difficult and rather uninteresting lessons. As a result, newspaper articles tend to not infrequently be overanalyzed as an object for linguistic or cultural dissection. Such an approach can thus lead to a very dry and dull class atmosphere and cause the teacher to focus far more on the text itself than on the theme or topic at hand. In this manner, the article can indeed be thoroughly studied but, at the same time numerous opportunities are at the same time missed for the students to potentially activate their English by also touching on their own personal response to the article in question.

In contrast, when native English teachers use newspaper articles, while not totally overlooking or neglecting grammar and vocabulary skills, it is generally considered to be far more appropriate to concentrate on developing an authentic response from the students. This means that the students should relax and simply read the articles more as a typical American would, for example, while drinking a cup a coffee before heading off to work in the morning. Therefore, by developing activities and exercises which enable the students to read newspapers much as they would a newspaper in their own native language, then the students will hopefully eventually learn how to react to such articles as real

people, not just as English students.

CHOOSING BETWEEN TEXTBOOKS AND RECENT CLIPPINGS

As mentioned earlier, numerous well designed potentially interesting textbooks based on collections of newspaper articles or magazine articles are published every year. One of the major problems of using textbooks based on newspaper articles is that such collections tend to quickly become outdated and thus lose their topicality. An article that is fresh and interesting today often seems strange, unimportant and sometimes may even lack coherency when they are “frozen in time” in the guise of a textbook. On the other hand, such textbooks offer many advantages to the teacher since the articles have often been linguistically carefully selected and or edited for the specific target student users (most commonly for first or second-year university students). The best of such texts often have extensive introductory vocabulary lists and exercises to make reading such articles less threatening. In addition, such texts are often annotated either in the margins or at the end of the text and also frequently contain useful exercises and discussion questions which can therefore dramatically reduce the teacher’s preparation time for such a class.

Ideally, however, the most interesting use of newspapers would be to use recent clippings that are both topical, relevant and of interest to the students. In such a way, the students will not only be afforded ample opportunity to practice English but to also receive useful up-to-date information on various topics they may have either not have known about at all or not yet formed any clear opin-

ions. By incorporating such articles into the classroom, the native English teacher can also help expand their intellectual horizons by showing the students how other nationalities may think or feel about similar problems or modern dilemmas. After gaining a better understanding of how Americans or Britons feel about a certain topic the teacher can then ask the students to give their opinions and later let them compare their thoughts with those of the author of the article or even with the teacher himself. Finally, the EFL teacher can give a written assignment in order for the students to consolidate their ideas in writing on topics similar to those touched upon in the class discussion.

WHICH NEWSPAPERS SHOULD BE USED?

There are numerous ways of using newspaper materials in English classes. If the stated objective of the teacher is to teach students primarily how to navigate thorough a typical newspaper then the course content would differ greatly from that of a general English course which merely uses newspapers in order to deepen the students reading and discussion skills.

When teaching students the mechanics of “how to read a newspaper” the teacher has basically two choices. First of all, he can utilize a textbook that has separate chapters on such topic areas as: reading headlines, world news, local news, weather reports, sports stories, editorials or financial news. These books are very useful in providing students with the essential vocabulary and practice in each subject matter. However, such textbooks usually intentionally contain “neutral” articles that are not as timely or interesting as current stories. There-

fore, when trying to primarily familiarize students with strategies for how to best read a newspaper the ideal course material is to actually order 30 or 40 identical copies of one issue of **USA Today** and then to comprehensively cover the different sections of the same newspaper in a step-by-step fashion throughout the 12 or 13 class meetings in a given semester. The main disadvantage of this method is that the teacher is still dealing with stale or "frozen" news stories, yet in comparison to the available textbooks on the market, the materials are usually only a few weeks or months old. In this manner, by slowly introducing and analyzing stories from all the different sections, after 5 or 6 weeks the students gradually develop their own personal rapport with the style, arrangement and layout of the various articles and, as a result, can truly get to know the feel of reading an authentic newspaper. An added bonus of this method is that after finishing such a course students enjoy occasionally purchasing the paper themselves since they have come to a new understanding about it and are no longer so intimidated by it. **USA Today International** also offers bulk discounts (at about ¥200 per person) so it is actually quite inexpensive for the students and far cheaper than purchasing a traditional textbook. The reason for recommending **USA Today** for Japanese university students is mainly because the paper is relatively easy to understand and written in a simple and straightforward style (in sharp contrast to **The New York Times** or **The Washington Post**, or even the **International Herald Tribune** which are all relatively difficult to comprehend), it has lots of color charts and graphs with numerous photographs, a good number of insightful cartoons, and, finally, the paper is neatly divided into four

major sections entitled: News, Life (lifestyles), Sports and Money (financial news). In addition, there are also regular articles on education, science, health and human behavior. Another reason for recommending this paper is that it offers a wealth of cultural insight and information not readily available to typical Japanese. In many ways a newspaper like **USA Today** is a unique window on the United States and its people. Thus by dissecting one single issue, from cover to cover, over the course of a semester the students can come to better grasp the breadth of issues and wide range of interests included in a typical American newspaper. It is also interesting to note that I have both taught such courses using authentic English newspapers and have also been a student of two such courses (using: **Pravda** in Russian and **Die Zeit** in German) and have found every such experience to be both interesting and extremely rewarding for both the teacher and student alike since it is also often the first time that the teacher himself may have ever read or taught a newspaper from cover to cover.

The same type of course can also be successfully done in Japan using such leading domestically published newspapers as **The Japan Times**, **The Daily Yomiuri** or **The Mainichi Daily News**. However, such publications tend to contain a lot more general world news and far less insight into the target culture. On the other hand, if the main purpose of an English course is mainly to improve reading comprehension in English, then such domestic publications also offer the unique advantage of providing numerous English articles on current Japanese affairs which will, of course, be far more familiar to the students than would similar articles on the USA or Great Britain.

There is no need, however, for the teacher to limit his options to the use of the same issue throughout the course, and indeed the majority of teachers who, in fact, do use authentic materials tend to clip out articles from various newspapers which the teacher personally deems to be appropriate for his students based on either linguistic or thematic reasons. Such a course can either stress stories on culture, politics, entertainment, business, etc., depending on the interests and taste of both the teacher and the students. The great advantage of such a course is that the teacher can constantly make use of the most recent current events in order to provide the students with materials that are of timely interest to them. A striking example of this phenomenon is that most newspaper textbooks have articles on topics which generally happened over 1 year previously, while using fresh stories can provide students with articles that are only a few days old.

Another striking advantage of using domestically published English newspapers in Japan is that such courses can also be effectively used to help students explore and analyze a wide range of current social trends, problems or dilemmas in Japan such as: school bullying, the need for US Armed Forces, the poor job prospects for students, the 50th anniversary of World War II or even the increasing amount of sexual harassment. By using such material as a focal point both native and non-native English teachers can help to guide young students in learning how to clearly express their opinions on a wide range of important social controversies. Due to the exigencies of preparing for the university entrance exams few students have the luxury to discuss and express their opin-

ions in secondary school. Therefore, by presenting such timely articles on Japanese society many Japanese university students can therefore, often for the first time in their lives, truly begin to think critically about a broad array of difficult challenges facing Japan in the coming century. In this manner the teacher is able to help the students simultaneously both improve their English skills and become better citizens all in one stroke, while an added bonus is that the native English teacher can, at the same time, greatly deepen his own knowledge about modern Japanese society as well.

TYPES OF ARTICLES

The most effective newspaper articles are invariably concise, easy to understand and do not contain too many colloquial terms or idiomatic expressions. Therefore, careful and judicious selection is critical in order to compile effective materials. In addition, extreme caution must particularly be taken by monolingual native English teachers or novice EFL instructors who may frequently fail to accurately evaluate the difficulty level or appropriateness of certain articles. To prevent the use of incomprehensible materials native English teachers should ask their native Japanese staff colleagues to evaluate the language suitability of their projected materials. Japanese English instructors are very knowledgeable about what materials may or may not be ideal for students and are always happy to provide valuable input which can thus greatly help in the selection of suitable articles for class use. After teaching in Japan for a few years, however, most native English teachers should develop a pretty good sense

of what articles are appropriate and which ones are not.

The range of articles that could potentially be of interest to students is limitless, however, some of the following topics always prove to be popular: stories on popular film/music personalities, stories about marriage/divorce, stories about food and health, amusing gossip about famous people or royalty, information on jobs and careers, lifestyle trends, travel, personal advice columns and reports on funny or unique incidents. However, the most important factors when selecting articles remain as follows: they should be of high interest to the students and be easy to read. It is also important to help the students to develop visual literacy skills through the use of articles with numerous photographs, illustrations, charts and graphs which are a great help in understanding the salient points of many articles.

When selecting articles from current newspapers the teacher should try to provide a good balance of different types of articles. Even when using a published newspaper textbook, considerable selection will generally be necessary since most books will frequently have more than twice as much material as can be comfortably covered in one semester.

TEACHER PREPARATION

After an article is selected then thorough preparation is still required on the part of the teacher before it can be effectively used in the EFL classroom. Original articles should first of all be neatly clipped out of the paper and photocopied onto either A4 or B4 size paper leaving ample clear white margins while care

should be taken never to mark the original article which could reduce the legibility later on for the students. In the next stage, important, difficult or unusual vocabulary items or idiomatic expressions should be neatly underlined and numbered in the margins. Then in the available white margins these items should be numbered and defined either in Japanese or in English as the teacher desires. Next, the final annotated article with both the title of the newspaper and date of publication written clearly on the upper right corner of the page should be photocopied so that all students have their own copy in class. In addition, in order to save precious class time, the teacher should prepare another A4 size sheet consisting of key words or concepts, an introduction of the topic, several general introductory questions related to the topic, and finally several discussion questions (usually around 10) for further pair or group work discussions after reading the article. Finally, the teacher should prepare a written assignment in which the students are again asked to give their own personal impressions, opinions or ideas regarding the article. Such preparation, if done properly, can take quite some time and thus should be done well before the class is scheduled to begin. As mentioned previously, the extreme importance of thorough preparation on the part of the teacher cannot be stressed enough. With such well organized, clear and understandable materials, the students will be able to easily keep up with the article while it is being read and thus not waste any time trying to search unnecessarily for words in their dictionary and thus, as a result, often completely miss the next two or three sentences. In contrast, if the teacher merely photocopies an “interesting” article and then attempts to cover the article

“on the fly”, he will invariably lose many students and also waste large amounts of time trying to explain simple words that could be better spent on providing students with more valuable cultural background information.

CLASS STRUCTURE

At the beginning of class it is not essential that the students preread the articles. Particularly in the present day Japanese first or second year general education environment such an assignment would also be difficult to realistically expect to be completed by today’s students. In addition, if the teacher is using very current articles then he may not even choose the article until a couple of days before the class takes place and this also leaves the teacher with a lot more flexibility in the event that a major story of interest takes place, such as recently happened with Prime Minister Murayama’s resignation or Princess Diana’s dramatic interview.

After handing out the day’s text it is essential to preview the article in order to stimulate interest and understanding of the topic at hand by providing sufficient background information as needed. Next, the teacher should pose some “opening questions” to get the students thinking about the issues related to the article. Then the teacher should practice some of the new vocabulary items with the class before reading the article in order to make the initial reading as smooth as possible. Finally, before starting the article it is helpful to provide students with a brief summary, in one or two sentences, of what the author is trying to say so that the students can then focus on the main message in the article as they

read, instead of wondering what the purpose of the article might be as they read it.

While reading the article, students should take turns reading sections out loud while the teacher helps to clarify word usage and provide additional background information where necessary. Finally, after finishing the article, the teacher should read it again at normal speed so the students can focus on the language and content while also improving their listening comprehension.

After the reading the teacher should then have a brief comprehension check, which can be done using true and false statements. The class should next discuss the important points of the article either in pairs or in small groups using a series of related discussion questions previously prepared by the teacher. Finally the teacher should conduct a broader discussion session on the most important points covered in the article and try to reiterate several of the major opinions or conclusions reached by the class while adding a few of his own comments as deemed necessary.

Before finishing the class, the teacher should then pass out the weekly homework assignment. This should ideally consist of 4 or 5 opinion-type questions regarding the article and the expanded discussion topics. The teacher should next carefully go over each question while also suggesting how they might go about answering them. The major advantage of such a homework assignment is that it helps the students to consolidate much of what they may have already expressed in the earlier discussion section and it also is a great motivational factor for the students to reread the article a few days later as they prepare to write

their answers. Needless to say, the written assignment should also carry the strongest weight when determining the final course grade.

CONCLUSION

One of the ultimate aims of using authentic newspaper articles should, of course, be to eventually give students the confidence to buy and read actual English-language newspapers such as **USA Today**, **The International Herald Tribune**, **The New York Times** or even **The Japan Times** by themselves. In such courses the teacher should try to help familiarize students with English newspapers, while also paying special attention to layout, the use of pictures and style of language. An important advantage in using such newspapers in the classroom is that it dramatically builds the students' reading confidence by regularly promoting such important reading skills as identifying the main idea, distinguishing between the main idea and supporting details, learning how to get meaning from context, and finally practicing how to summarize and paraphrase the acquired information. Another important factor for students when using such materials is also the ability to develop critical thinking skills. In such a course, students continually have opportunities to employ such critical thinking skills as making inferences, drawing conclusions, distinguishing between fact and opinion, and accurately evaluating data. As a result, after successfully completing the course the students' overall confidence level will also generally improve.

Based on the above findings, if EFL specialists, as both language teachers

and cross-cultural facilitators, can help lessen, to some degree, Japanese students' fear of real, natural, everyday, uncut and unmodified English mass media materials, while at the same time piquing their interest in acquiring a better understanding of the target culture, we can then potentially create an environment in which a substantial percentage of our non-specialist English language students can eventually go on to become long-term language learners, where the learning of English language, vocabulary, style, cultural information and different ways of thinking no longer ends in the university classroom but, on the contrary, the university instead becomes the starting point from which an adventure of life-long learning merely begins.

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