

# Incorporating authentic materials in activities for English Minor Program courses

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**Abstract:** Instructors in the English Minor Program of Rikkyo have an option to freely choose materials they intend to use in their classes. If they consider not just the class objectives but the overall goals of the program which are aimed at developing the skills and proficiency of students in preparation for endeavors such as participation in study-abroad programs and overseas training, this will lead them to recognizing the value of using authentic materials. This paper looks into the use of news media as authentic materials in Current English Reading courses and how it addresses the need to provide students with exposure to “real” English in terms of language and content. Concrete examples of classroom activities that effectively incorporate news media, specifically newspapers and magazines, are presented along with suggestions and advice based on actual experience. These activities demonstrate that when teachers have a clear understanding of the advantages of using authentic material, with some inventiveness and creativity, they are able to provide relevance, immediacy, and pragmatic value to their students’ learning.

**Keywords:** *Authentic materials, class activities, Current English*

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## Background

A common concern I have at the start of every semester which I found is shared by fellow adjunct lecturers at the Rikkyo Language Center as well as others who teach in the Zenkari English Program is regarding the selection and use of materials for their classes. For mandatory courses, a list of options for designated textbooks is given out and we need only pick from the list. These textbooks readily come with supplementary materials such as a teacher’s manual, CD-ROM or DVD, or an online web site.

Things are quite different for the English Minor Program subjects. Most Minor Program classes do not require a prescribed textbook although a reference or two might be suggested in the unified syllabus of that class. This means that instructors for these classes are freer in deciding what material they would like to use and thus, they have as much freedom about how they would utilize these for activities and tasks. Understandably an instructor might take a practical approach and just refer to TeachNet to check textbooks used in previous semesters and adopt one for their class.

However, if we think about the aim of the English Minor Program towards raising and improving students' proficiency levels in order to prepare them for real-life experiences beyond their student life in Rikkyo, it becomes an important consideration for instructors of Minor Program courses to actively seek and search for materials that will not only meet the needs and interests of the students, but also utilize "real" English, i.e. authentic English as spoken and written by those who use it as their first language (or the L1). Authentic materials, when carefully and appropriately selected and adapted, have a significant role to play in the Minor Program classroom when both teachers and students recognize their value and potential in supporting and enhancing the learning process.

## **Defining authentic materials**

While language educators and researchers have defined the term *authentic material* in many different ways, I refer to it here as materials that are intended for L1 speakers and not created or developed for the purpose of language teaching, and which we use in classroom activities whether in written, spoken, audio, or visual form. I would like to think of them as objects or artifacts associated with daily life that convey linguistic and/or cultural information and may be part of a communicative discourse.

The following are examples of authentic materials based on categories listed by Oura (2001) which she adapted from examples given by Gebhard (as cited in Oura, 2001, pp. 67-68):

- Listening/viewing materials such as movies, movie trailers, videos (e.g. YouTube), TV programs, TV commercials, radio ads, news clips, talks/lectures/discussions (including TED talks), websites, Internet and smartphone applications, documentaries, cartoons, and songs
- Visual materials such as slides, photos, street signs, paintings, drawings, and picture books
- Printed materials such as newspapers, magazines, advertisements, novels, short stories, song lyrics, scripts, recipes, brochures, catalogs, comic books, maps, and TV guides

Some of these are deemed requisite to particular Minor Program courses, e.g. news media such as newspapers and magazines, TV news, and video clips for Current English; films, movie trailers, and scripts for English through Movies; or TV/radio commercials and print ads for Advertisement English.

## **Identifying benefits of using authentic materials**

One major advantage of authentic materials is that they provide the opportunity for students to learn *real* English as opposed to *textbook* English that has been regarded as

simplified, contrived, and unnatural and does not always show how the language is used in actual situation contexts involving English speakers (Gilmore 2007, Hwang 2005, Su 2008). Other benefits that directly relate to learning and classroom activities that have been mentioned in different studies on authentic materials include:

- Their content is not as regulated nor as rigid as those found in textbooks or materials made for the classroom. Thus, it offers a variety of topics that can meet students' different needs and specific interests.
- This variety also gives teachers flexibility in adapting the content to learning objectives and could enhance creativity in planning tasks and activities.
- They offer different types of stimulating and informative discourse that encourage interactive learning using “realistic (and) ready-to-use language” (Hwang, 2005).
- They could be used for learning and understanding culture (Kilickaya, 2004).
- They allow students to see the “immediate relevance” or to easily make a connection between their lessons and what they encounter outside the classroom (Brosnan, et al. as cited in Oura, 2001, p. 70).

Using authentic materials correspond not only to the learning goals of individual classes but also address the overall learning objectives of the Minor Program in terms of developing communicative and cultural competence in preparation for the practical requirements and rigors of such endeavors as participating in study-abroad programs and overseas training.

Based on my experience handling Minor Program classes for the past few years and having served as the Current English coordinator for the Minor Program committee, I have collected some ideas of how authentic materials, i.e. newspapers and magazines, were used and incorporated in the Minor Program classes, focusing particularly on Current English Reading. These are classes where the use of authentic materials can be maximized owing to the nature of the subject content, and I have personally been able to experiment with different activities in my teaching and will share here some simple, straightforward examples. First, though, I would like to raise a few points that current English instructors might like to take into account when they decide to make use of news media in their classes.

## **Primary considerations for using news media in Current English Reading courses**

Newspapers and magazines, as well as similar media, are a fundamental component of all Current English Reading (from hereon, CE-R) classes and both the printed copies and the online versions are being used although there are instructors who opt to use only the print version. Recommended online and print publications for the different CE-R levels are mentioned in the unified syllabi and the 履修要項 (*Rishu youkou*, or the official Rikkyo course guide). It would be good to introduce a list to students at the start of the semester and inform them of the links to the websites of each publication and of their availability in the Rikkyo library. One option is to bring the class to the library and give the students

an opportunity to peruse the available publications in pairs or groups. Or upon special arrangement with the library staff, instructors can reserve a special room where they can bring in copies of the publications and conduct the class within the library premises.

Since students come from different colleges and departments, I make it a point to introduce them to a variety of publications but also keep in mind the relevance of the content with regards to their backgrounds. For example, I might encourage business and economics majors to read *Financial Times* and *Fortune* magazine, or recommend reading *The Guardian* and *The Independent* to a student who has plans of doing study abroad in the UK or in countries that use British English.

Relevance also pertains to the recentness of the material. The drawback with the exclusive use of textbooks for CE-R classes is that the news and issues that are covered are not necessarily timely or current. When students are able to access and read the most recent editions of newspapers and magazines, it gives them a sense of urgency and interest in what is happening in the world around them and makes them more curious about trends, current events, and burning issues. Teachers should not be surprised to learn that many students have not made a habit of reading newspapers nor watching the news even in Japanese and I have received comments from students who will readily admit to discovering the usefulness of reading newspapers and magazines only upon joining the CE-R class.

When picking out articles from newspapers and magazines to use in class activities, there is a question of whether it will be better to have the teacher make the selection or to make the students choose their own articles. For students, searching for articles is in itself a good exercise for them to become familiar with the structure and content of newspapers and magazines as well as to hone their research skills. Yet at the same time there is a need for teachers to determine which articles to use to make sure the text is suitable to the students' level and helps in developing reading comprehension.

In that case, teachers could draw up a list of pre-selected topics or issues based on the current news and give consideration to students' areas of interest, then allow students to choose from the list before they begin searching for articles. This would avoid problems such as awkward topic choices or articles with no substantial content for language learning. A good combination of news articles and feature stories is also important to consider. At the start of the semester, I use articles that I have chosen as examples, but for the rest of the semester, I give students the opportunity to search for articles on their own. However, before they use these in activities, I would ask them to present the articles to allow me to check the content for appropriateness in vocabulary, grammar, and level of difficulty.

## Six ideas for CE-R class activities using newspapers and magazines

### •*Article discussion*

This is a skill-building activity that has been adapted in many CE-R classes involving using newspaper and/or magazine articles as the point of discussion<sup>1</sup>. Basically, the class is divided into groups each with a leader and in my classes I organize discussion sessions that allow every student to become a group discussion leader. Leaders will prepare an article of about 300-500 words (the teacher assigns the length depending on the students' level) and they need to make sure that they completely understand what the article is about. Copies are given to members of the group a week in advance and for homework, each member has to do the following tasks: (1) identify about 8-10 keywords especially new and unknown vocabulary in the article; (2) identify the basic information given in the news story or feature, or what is referred to as the 5Ws of the article (which answers the *who, what, why, when, and where*, with the addition of *how*); and (3) make their own brief summary of the article. Members share and discuss their answers in the group the following meeting.

To facilitate further discussion, the leader also presents to the group members a set of comprehension questions and opinion questions, which the teacher could check beforehand. I remind students to have a mix of topics in each group and make sure their choices do not overlap.

As a variation, a discussion activity could be set up where students look for their own article on the same topic or issue and then the discussion would additionally focus how different the details and ideas were presented in each article.

### •*Newspaper word diary*

The newspaper word diary is meant to encourage students to build their knowledge of news-related vocabulary and to be able to remember these in a more systematic fashion. Students prepare a notebook that they will use for the entire semester in which they list the new words, expressions, phrases, and terminology that they have culled from articles they read. Teachers must remind them that the objective is not in the quantity of words in the list; students should not just simply enumerate all the words they studied but carefully understand each word, its definition and how it is used, before they include it in the list. A good way to start the list is to use the keywords which are covered in article discussion activities. I advise students that they can expand their list later on to include words which they encounter in articles they read outside of class.

Teachers could devise a format for the diary entries to give pertinent information (the name of the publication and title of the article along with the byline, i.e. the date it was published and if available, the writer's name) and to further enrich understanding of the vocabulary, i.e. examples of usage (write down the specific phrases or sentences showing how the words were used), sample sentences (students create their own sentences using the word), graphic representation (drawings or pictures), and a translation or the

equivalent word in Japanese. I also told students they could freely write down any personal thoughts or opinion about the word or the issues surrounding that word. For example, they can write about how the word can be used in other contexts such as being used in other news or current events. Or students can talk about a word's usefulness or difficulty, or what situations they tried using the word. This free-writing task would help students think about how they can manage their vocabulary learning which, in turn, could be linked to a conscious effort to further develop their vocabulary skills.

### •*Section inspection: Spot the difference*

If an instructor discovers that students have not had much opportunity to peruse a newspaper in printed form, it is helpful to first introduce to them the parts of a newspaper to help them remember the names of each part and section. The instructor brings in several copies of the print version of various publications and distributes these to the class that has been divided into smaller groups. All members in the group go over the newspapers and then observe and take note of how different each publication is presented. Instructors can prepare a list of essential newspaper vocabulary words (e.g. front page, headline, byline, letters to the editor, editorial cartoon, etc.) as well as sections of a newspaper (local news, national news, politics, editorial, etc.) and students look up their meaning then identify each part as they scan the newspaper page by page.

If it is possible for students to mark the newspapers, then the teacher could ask them make use of colored markers or highlighters to take down notes on the newspaper itself. Additionally, I also ask my students to write down any comments and opinion about what they observed whether it is about the content (e.g. the kind of language used, the type of news that are on the front page, the choice of the banner headline) or the appearance (e.g. position of each section, newspaper layout, the choice of fonts, the colors, the kind of photos and illustrations used, the kind of advertisements that appear).

A variation to the activity is to use magazines instead of newspapers. I try to have both an activity to introduce newspapers and a separate one to introduce magazines. Another idea is to add an element of culture, for example, by having students go over English-language newspapers from different countries and see how they compare with Japanese newspapers, or with English-language newspapers in Japan.

### •*Mix & match: Guess the section*

This is an activity that may be used as a follow-up activity after students have been introduced to the different parts and sections of a newspaper and will help hone students' vocabulary and inference skills. It is good for studying homonyms, as well as for understanding jargon and technical terminology especially in fields such as sports, health, science and technology, and business. It is also a way for students to learn about puns.

Teachers pick out headlines from different sections of the newspaper that do not give away the content of the article such as the following examples:

*Amazon broadens its terrain* (The New York Times)

*Strikeout streak ends, but Chris Sale outduels Mark Buehrle* (Chicago Tribune)

*Canine companions help people deal with disabilities* (The New York Times)

*Venezuelans return Chávez to power by a landslide* (The Guardian)

Divide the students into pairs or small groups and hand out the sheets with the headlines to each pair/group. Allow them to go over the headlines and make intelligent guesses as they determine what the headline is about and which section of the newspaper it belongs.

Using headlines with idioms and word plays makes the activity more challenging and interesting. In cases where headlines contain cultural references, teachers have to exercise caution when considering their use because these could be difficult to understand without some background knowledge or explanation.

**•Headline cloze: What’s the missing word?**

This is another activity that makes use of newspaper headlines (and can also be used for titles of magazine articles) for students to learn how to infer and to read for meaning. Teachers select a number of headlines/titles that contain an identifiable buzzword or trend word, or an interesting or unique keyword (e.g. place name or a famous person’s name) which is then deleted or crossed out. Taking this headline from Yahoo! News as an example, *Zimbabwe calls for extradition of Cecil the lion’s killer*, the instructor can choose to remove one word, perhaps “Zimbabwe,” or “extradition” so that in the activity sheet, the headline would be presented as: \_\_\_\_\_ *calls for extradition of Cecil the lion’s killer* or *Zimbabwe calls for \_\_\_\_\_ of Cecil the lion’s killer*.

Students are handed the articles with the headlines/titles with missing words and they work in pairs or groups of three to guess the word that completes the headline/title. For advanced level students, instructors could choose to use only the headlines/titles for the activity or depending on the difficulty of the content, they could include only part of the article enough to provide context. For lower level students, the entire text may be used as long as it will still enable student to make inferences.

**•Context clues: Find the meaning**

As students read more and more newspapers and magazines, they will invariably be encountering different forms of journalese, or words and phrases used in newspaper/magazine that might be familiar to L1 readers but are new or unfamiliar for the students and could make them struggle with comprehension. With this activity, as the name suggests, students learn to use context clues that can facilitate reading articles with journalese words in order to accomplish the task of finding their meaning.

Teachers will need to introduce the concept of journalese and context clues prior to the activity<sup>2</sup>. When preparing and selecting articles, check that there are a sufficient number of context clues for the journalese words to be studied within the article. Before the task,

present the journalese words as a list to students to check for pronunciation or familiarity but without defining them. As students read the articles, encourage them to make notes and to mark the context clues all throughout the article that they think helped them in identifying the meaning of the vocabulary words. My students preferred to do this as an individual task after which I asked them to work in pairs or in groups to compare their answers then we would move to discussion to confirm together the meaning of all the vocabulary words. This is a good activity to challenge and encourage students to learn to understand meaning in context without having to consult a dictionary when reading articles.

## Final thoughts

The examples of teaching ideas introduced here demonstrate that there are different ways that authentic materials, specifically news media such as newspapers and magazines, could be effectively incorporated in activities for Minor Program courses such as the Current English Reading classes with some inventiveness and creativity and a clear understanding of the advantages of using authentic materials. Newspapers and magazines are easily accessible both online and through the university holdings and with the advantages they offer in terms of variety, flexibility, and informativeness, it would be a waste not to exploit their use and potential in the classroom.

Considerations have to be given in: selecting the content according to students' level, needs, and interests; identifying what activities to create around the materials; and deciding how to present these and make them appealing to students, and this preparation may entail time and effort on the part of the teacher. Admittedly it discourages some teachers in opting to use authentic materials. Instructors in the English Minor Program need to realize, however, that the exposure we give students inside the classroom to the same materials used by L1 speakers not only provide relevance, immediacy, and pragmatic value to their learning, but also give them the familiarity and confidence to interact with real-life language and content that “reflect genuine communication” (Breen, 1985). In this way, we make them better equipped when they finally step out into the real world and help transform their learning experiences into meaningful knowledge and action.

## Notes

- 1 A model activity for authentic reading material is introduced by Rates (2012) in a separate edition of this journal. This was presented as an idea for encouraging discussion in EFL/ESL classes and would be applicable for CE-R classes.
- 2 I have not found a comprehensive resource that lists commonly-used journalese words which could be introduced in lessons using newspapers and magazines. As reference, instructors may want to consult media resources such as the BBC News Style Guide and The Economist Style Guide that have sections devoted to

journalese and are available online.

On the other hand, there are several online resources that define and explain context clues as well as provide exercises and ideas for lesson plans. The following are links to material created by Sinclair Community College and the Australian NSW Centre for Effective Reading which I found very helpful:

[https://www.sinclair.edu/centers/tlc/pub/handouts\\_worksheets/reading/learning\\_words\\_from\\_context\\_clues.pdf](https://www.sinclair.edu/centers/tlc/pub/handouts_worksheets/reading/learning_words_from_context_clues.pdf)

<http://www.cer.education.nsw.gov.au/documents/249903/250184/Using%20Context.pdf>

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