

# **Tasks for Fostering Student Interest in World News**

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In recent years teaching materials providing learners with exposure to natural English have flooded the market, with authentic English drawn from a variety of sources including movies, television shows, Ted Talks and news broadcasts. The author has been teaching a two-semester Advanced Communication course focusing on American television news broadcasts for the past ten years. This article reports on the restructuring of the course to incorporate more task-based activities using topical news stories.

Communication DI and DII are open to sophomores, juniors and seniors at a women's college where the instructor teaches part-time. The majority of the 24 students enrolled in the course last year were majoring in English Linguistics or Literature. The course is a requirement for students working towards a junior or senior high school teaching license in English. While there is a range of English proficiency levels among the group, the average is high, with many students hoping to pursue careers or do graduate work in a field related to English.

## **Course Goals**

Specific goals for the course are left to the instructor and have shifted over the years as a result of curriculum change and to more closely meet the needs of the students, many of whom take the class hoping to improve TOEFL scores or prepare for job hunting, where an awareness of current issues can be beneficial. Also weighing in are the full-time faculty members who regularly urge the instructor

to provide feedback on the students' writing, as all seniors are required to write a graduation thesis in English.

For the past several years, the main text for the two-semester sequence has been from the *ABC World News* series. The fifteen units in each edition contain a variety of U.S. and international new stories which challenge the learners with pre-and post-viewing activities to develop listening and discussion skills as they learn about the world. Translation exercises as well as pronunciation and grammar sections are also included. The author has presented elsewhere on her rationale and strategies for teaching news-based materials (Yamane & Yamane, 2012; Yamane & Yamane, 2014) as well as on activities to promote vocabulary building and using context and visual clues to develop inferencing skills (Yamane, 2013.)

A more recent aim of the course has been to motivate students to regularly follow the current news outside of class. An informal survey the first week of class revealed that the majority of students get their news in the form of occasional Yahoo snippets on their phones, with only one or two watching televised news shows several times a week and a surprisingly large number not following it at all. Since spring 2016, the instructor has gradually reworked the course to focus on helping students become more aware of available resources, better informed about world and national events and to think critically about news issues.

Careful consideration has been put into creating a syllabus that incorporates meaningful outside assignments that build on the tasks done in class. Topical news reports can be used in a myriad of ways to raise the students' level of curiosity and engagement in class. The instructor intentionally varies the way that she uses the text and outside resources from week to week and semester to semester, so there is no "typical" lesson. This short article introduces several in-

class tasks and homework assignments that have been integrated into the course to help achieve the goals highlighted above.

## **Activities**

### ***News Hunt***

As part of their first homework assignment, students were required to search for a minimum of 10 free sources of English news on or off campus that can be easily accessed. No more than three online sources are permitted. The hunt this past semester turned up a list of cable and domestic television news broadcasts, online news sources, radio news shows, and newspapers and news magazines available in the school library and International Center (and in a few cases, recycled by professors with subscriptions.) After sharing the list with their classmates the findings were compiled (see Appendix A), with additional sources added throughout the semester. It should be noted that in previous years the instructor had provided a list of resources prior to assigning the tasks outlined below, but having the students search was in itself a learning experience.

### ***News Blast***

One of the regular in-class activities is the News Blast, which occupies the first 15 minutes of each lesson. Students are expected to keep up with the news on a weekly basis and are challenged to consult a variety of news sources and mediums. They are asked to form small groups as they enter the classroom and to begin reviewing news highlights of the past week. The instructor writes an equation on the blackboard at the sound of the chime. “Three X 4” signals to the students that they should select three news stories and prepare four facts about each. Sometimes the emphasis is on more factual information, in which case the equation might be 2X6 or even 1X10. To elicit a wider range of stories the equation is adjusted. Students are allowed to consult dictionaries but not smart phones.

Likewise, they can write brief notes, but do not have sufficient time to write out detailed sentences. When the instructor announces that time is up groups volunteer to share a story. Because each group must contribute and no repeats are allowed, students are generally eager to volunteer. Key vocabulary from the stories is noted on the board and incorporated into future quizzes. This activity gets students to class on time, wakes them up and the peer pressure element ensures that they do not come unprepared and unable to contribute. (A confession: what initially began as a stalling tactic to provide the instructor time to set up new AV equipment has become a meaningful part of the course.)

### ***News Flash***

Students are normally asked to put away their phones in class but in this course, those phones serve as a valuable tool when following fast-moving news, checking for updates on stories in the textbook, and searching for quick answers to all sorts of questions that arise in class. The students turned to their phones at regular intervals during the U.S. presidential election and more recently, to follow the North Korean missile launches. They worked in pairs to find quick updates after completing Unit 3 (“Cuba’s Gold Rush”) and Unit 13 (“Major Abortion Case: First in Years at Highest Court”) from *ABC World News 19*. Following a story on Daylight Saving Time, students were asked to research the situation in Japan--and were surprised to learn it was once practiced here as well, as an initiative of the U.S.-led occupation army. A quick search on their cell phones can also help students determine background information for current news stories (“Which countries were against the Paris Accord?”) as well as decipher the meaning of political cartoons (“What is the slogan of United Airlines?”)

### ***Roving Reporter***

As an occasional homework assignment, students interview informants about a current news topic or a campus or local event and report to the class. Early in the semester, for example, students were asked to interview people on campus about upcoming campus events or some interesting aspect of school life. They prepared questions, conducted the interviews (mostly in Japanese) and then reported back at a Campus Updates Roundtable, sharing information on various clubs, events, and introducing new professors and international students. This can also serve as a meaningful follow-up assignment to topics from the textbook. Following completion of Unit 6 (“Firestorm: New CDC Recommendations for Women and Alcohol Provoke Controversy”) students were asked to interview several women regarding their reaction to the policy and their own experiences during pregnancy (where applicable.) The following week students were put into groups with classmates to discuss their findings and prepare a short presentation for the class.

### ***News Listening Task***

Students are required to listen carefully to news items from any web-based news media and write up short reports. This can be done as an ongoing assignment (“Listening journals”) constituting part of their grade or as occasional homework. In either case, the students are asked to indicate the title, date and source of the news story, followed by a minimum of five vocabulary items from the story explained in English. They may listen to the news story as many times as necessary. The main part of the journal entry is a summary of the story in the students’ own words. At the end of the report the student is asked to share her opinion about the news story. Students are encouraged to aim for a balance of different news sources and types of news. A sample student report can be seen in Appendix B.

### ***Reaction Papers***

As the name suggests this is a three- to five-page paper reacting to a current news event or a news story from the textbook. The first section should contain a short summary of the news story in the student's own words. That is followed by a personal reaction to the material, including key impressions along with the student's opinion. Finally, the students are asked to add a two- or three-paragraph application section addressing the topic more deeply. Here students are asked to write about how the material relates to their own life experience, to interview someone about how it relates to their life experience or alternatively, to do an Internet search on a related topic. Reaction Papers are assigned twice each semester and graded on content and quality of English. For the second assignment, emphasis is placed on critical thinking and learning from corrections from the first paper. A reaction paper on "Measles on the Move" from *ABC World News 18* can be seen in Appendix C.

### ***Newspaper Activities***

Because the textbook focuses on television news broadcasts, newspaper activities provide balance to the course as well as exposing students to more challenging written text. As a follow-up assignment to a story on the Zika virus in *ABC World News 19*, for example, the author prepared a jigsaw activity from an article from the *Atlantic* entitled "Brazil Declares an End to its Zika Health Emergency" (Phippen, 2017). With more general topics, the students are sometimes asked to find updates on their own, or asked to research the situation in Japan.

The instructor also uses newspaper articles for skimming, scanning and summary practice, focusing on topics of interest to future teachers or of more general cross-cultural interest. *The Japan Times Bilingual Page on Tuesdays* and *The Japan Times on Sunday*

bar-coded articles are particularly good sources, offering interesting content suitable for a variety of tasks such as story and vocabulary prediction, translation, and even dictation activities using the QR code to link to an audio version of the story. Several times during the semester, the instructor also offers extra newspaper reading assignments to the high flyers in the group, particularly students preparing for overseas study. These are ungraded, but checked the following week.

**News share:** Prior to the Golden Week vacation and periodically thereafter the instructor brought in a selection of *Japan Times*, *New York Times* and *Japan Times on Sunday* newspapers from the month of April. Each student selected one paper. They were asked to look through at their leisure and to (1) note similarities and differences with Japanese newspapers and (2) to select one article to summarize and share with the group. It was stressed that the students should prepare the vocabulary they needed in advance of class so they could “tell” the story without reading, although notes were allowed. They worked in groups of four to five students and were encouraged to ask questions and, when all students had finished, to relate the contents of a groupmate’s story.

**News share variation:** As a variation on the above, students switch partners three times, repeating the news story summary as a 3-2-1 fluency-building exercise. During the third round, no notes are allowed. At the end of the third cycle, students are asked to share a news story that they heard from another classmate.

**The Five W’s:** Each pair of students is provided with a news story and asked to quickly identify the *who*, *where*, *when*, *what*, and *why* of the story and write them on a piece of paper. The papers are collected and redistributed. The new pair uses the Five W’s list and writes the opening paragraph of a news story based on that information. At the end of the activity, students share their stories and the original stories to see how they compare.

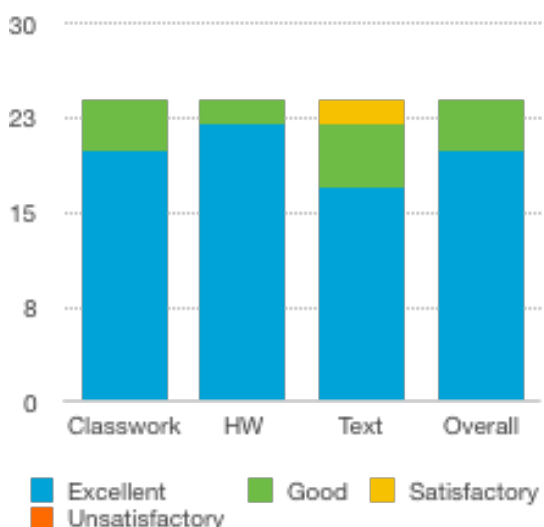
**Political cartoons:** Students work in pairs or groups to identify people and symbols and discuss the meaning of political cartoons. They share their ideas with the other groups. With easily recognizable world leaders like President Trump and Kim Jong Un, political cartoons are more accessible to Japanese students than they were in the past. Numerous sources of political cartoons are available online and some are regularly carried in newspapers. Several good sources are listed in Appendix A.

## Discussion

### *Student Feedback*

Partial results from student evaluations conducted at the end of the spring 2017 semester can be seen in the two charts below. The first chart (*Figure 1*) indicates the students' overall satisfaction with the course. It should be noted that the students have few courses taught by native speakers, so ratings tend to be high. Interestingly, while there were complaints throughout the semester regarding the amount of homework assigned, the work was generally felt to be worthwhile, with several students commenting that they became more confident in their speaking and writing.

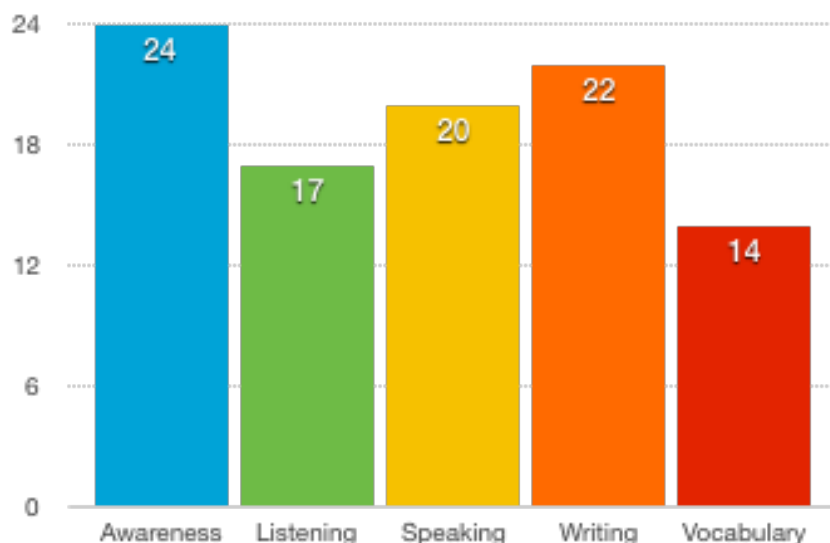
*Figure 1:* Student satisfaction survey





The students were also asked to assess areas in which they felt significant improvement over the course of the semester, as shown in *Figure 2*. “Awareness” was a catch-all category for identifying resources and keeping up with current events. Although not skills *per se*, the author considers these to be among the most important take-aways of the course. The low rating of vocabulary building may have been in part attributable to the fact that the weekly vocabulary quizzes conducted in previous years were eliminated due to time constraints.

*Figure 2:* Self-perceived areas of significant improvement



More important than the numbers are the students’ comments. Many cited the activities using self-selected materials as being particularly valuable. Some specific comments: “I became more interested in world events.”, “I made it my habit to watch the morning news daily so that I could participate actively in the News Blast.”, “We could listen to many kinds of topics and speakers.” and “I could become aware of many free study materials.” All but one student expressed the intention to continue accessing the news on a

regular basis. One mentioned she felt “more adult” because she now makes it a habit to regularly watch and discuss the news with her father.

Although students grumbled about writing the reaction papers, they unanimously felt them to be worthwhile as the comments and corrections provided by the teacher helped them to recognize their idiosyncratic mistakes and to become better writers. As shown in *Figure 2*, when asked to assess areas in which they made significant progress during the semester, writing came in second (surprisingly to the instructor, who actually sensed more growth in the students’ speaking skills.) The students’ goals for the course were also met, as revealed by comments like: “It was good preparation for TOEFL.” and “It helped me SO MUCH for job-hunting.” A number of women also identified increased confidence in expressing their opinions to others.

## **Conclusions**

For Japanese students, there are abundant sources of English news which are free, easy to find, and great for language-based activities. It is rewarding to see keeping up with world events become part of the students’ regular routines. This approach was also seen to reinforce autonomous learning, as the students are given frequent opportunities to select their own news sources and stories to report on. Finally, many of the activities described here ensure that the students assume an active role in class and learn from each other. As their level of involvement increases, they become empowered and gain confidence. Those are a lot of important take-aways which hopefully will serve the students well not only in university but potentially, well beyond. This new focus is a work in progress, but the instructor sees numerous clear benefits and plans to continue to experiment with additional materials and activities throughout the coming semesters.

## Note

The sample news listening journal entry and reaction paper in the Appendices have been included with permission of the students.

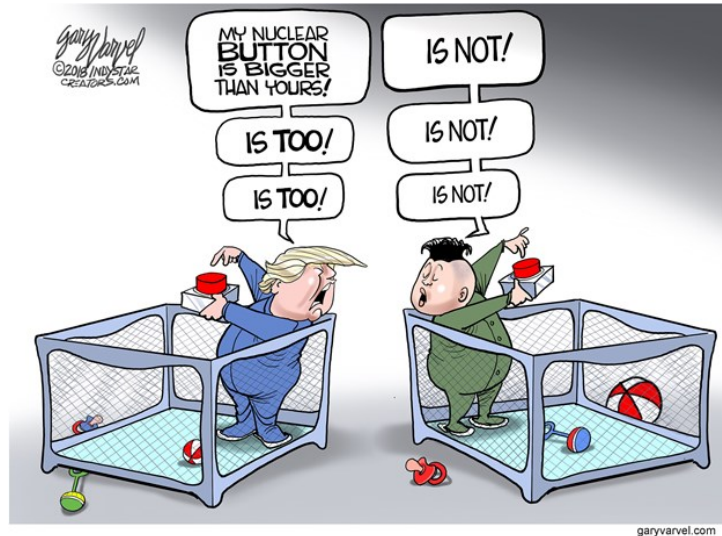
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## Appendix A: Free Sources of English News

- ▶ On TV: NHK English News      ニュース英会話(NHK)
- ▶





## Appendix B: Sample News Listening Journal Entry

**Title:** Merkel: Germany Should Learn from Security Shortcomings in Xmas Market Attack

**Source:** VOA News Broadcast

**Date:** December 19, 2017

### Vocabulary:

- chancellor ...the head of the government in some countries
- shortcoming... a fault or failure to meet a certain standard
- aid ...a source of assistance
- sufficient ...adequate
- avert ...to prevent or ward off

**Summary:**

German Chancellor Angela Merkel attended the opening of a memorial in Berlin on December 19, 2017 to honor the memory of the victims of the Christmas market terrorist attack which took place last year. Germany should learn from security shortcomings exposed by a deadly truck attack at a Berlin Christmas market a year ago and increase aid to survivors and families of the victims, Merkel said on Tuesday. Officials admitted their mistakes. President Frank Walter Steinmeyer said support for the victims of the attack came late and was not sufficient. German Justice Minister Heiko Maas said the German government had not been well enough prepared to avert such an attack.

**Opinion:**

I had a shock when I heard about the Christmas market terrorist attack last year. I had thought that Germany was a safe country and I had actually been there, so I was terrified. We cannot expect what happens. We must prepare in order to prevent tragic affairs by anticipating the worst. I hope the world will become a more peaceful place in the near future.

**Appendix C: Sample Reaction Paper**

*“Measles on the Move” (ABC World News 18, Unit 13)*

**I. Summary:**

The measles was thought to have been eliminated from America a long time ago. However, it is going around again. This disease has spread to a lot of states and has been terrifying many people. The infectiousness of measles is extremely strong, so we can be infected by a cough, sneeze, or a touch. What is worse is that we can catch the infection by just breathing the same air with people who have the

measles virus. Actually, because the measles-infected college student had taken the train in the busiest station in America, a lot of people caught infection, and this became one of the main factors of measles outbreak.

In addition, another factor that made measles this rampant was unfounded rumor. Some parents believed that the measles vaccination related in any way to some side effects. These parents were called “anti-vaxxers”, and they prevented their children from being vaccinated. As previously noted, measles has extremely infectious virus. We must be cautious in any places we visit. Furthermore, we should get vaccinated immediately if we have not been vaccinated yet.

## **II. Reaction:**

When I watched this news for the first time, I remembered some infectious diseases that occurred in epidemics in Japan. For instance, many people have influenza and it threatens our health during winter months every year. However, I have never had influenza in my life. I think it is thanks to my daily care not to get cold and other diseases. For example, I wash my hands and gargle every day after I get home. To stay in good health all my life, I intend to be more cautious about protection against cold and disease than ever.

For me, the most impressive and fearful fact in this news was the proliferation of demagogic information. Now that we live in the information society, we can get any information without any difficulty every time and everywhere we want. In addition, anybody can pass on information easily by using internet and social networking service regardless of whether the information is true or untrue. It may seem very convenient for us to live in the information society. However, as evidenced by this news, once the untrue information or rumor spread, it becomes very difficult to get the situation under control. Through this news, I feel once more how

important and difficult it is to make sure whether the abundant information is reliable or not accurately.

### **III. Application:**

In Japan, the same way as the unproven side effects of the vaccination against measles in America, the unproven side effects of the vaccination against cervix cancer have been a problem over the years, too. Just a few years ago, some teenage girls who had been vaccinated against cervix cancer got terrible symptoms like headache, faint, and convulsion. In the worst-case situation, some girls were forced to give up going to school because the convulsions did not stop and they could not study. At first, it was considered that these symptoms were because of the vaccination, but recently research related to this problem suggests that these symptoms have no relation to the vaccination. Of course, the parents of the victims raise objection to the research results, and this still remains a formidable issue.

I have watched the news about the side effects of the vaccination against cervix cancer many times. Whenever I watch the young girls suffer from terrifying symptoms, I always have pain in my heart. They were robbed of not only the chance to enjoy school life, but also the hope for the future because of just one vaccination. Recent research suggests that these side effects are unrelated to the vaccination. However, I think we should refrain from the use of the vaccination against cervix cancer as long as the sufferer appears. I hope that the situation will improve soon.