

Producing Newscasts for the ESL Classroom

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Watching the news on television or the Internet is a great way for students to practice their English and learn more about American culture. However, typically, when we ask our adult intermediate and advanced ELL students whether they regularly watch the news in English, fewer than one third of the hands go up. When we probe further to find out why more students don't watch the news, they say, "Because watching the news in English is just too hard. The people on TV talk too fast and the stories are too quick."

While this is undeniably true for many adult ELLs, the value of engaging students in authentic listening activities like watching TV news in English is too great to pass up. So we decided, "Let's do something with the news *because* it's hard!"

The following is a suggestion for how you, too, can introduce ELLs to TV news in a fun and interactive way by creating and role-playing a newscast in the classroom. This interest-based, collaborative learning project is ideal for listening and speaking classes as well as integrated skills classes that meet two or three times a week. It works for larger classes as well as small ones.

Laying the Groundwork

Week 1: Preparing Your Students

You should prepare at least three weeks ahead for your in-class newscast. Begin by asking students to create a network TV news-watching schedule for themselves for 1 week, during which they watch news in English at least three times for periods of at least 20 minutes. Ask them to record which broadcasts they watch and to capture what type of news they see. Draw their attention in advance to various types of news they are likely to hear: international, national, local, sports, health, consumer affairs, science and technology, human interest, entertainment, weather, and more. During this first week, discuss the advantages as well as the drawbacks of using closed captions to facilitate their understanding of the news.

Week 2: Watching the News

After week 1, talk about the experience of viewing TV news. In our classes, students said the news was difficult, but they agreed that by watching broadcasts several times a week, comprehension became a little easier.

During the second week, ask students to switch to a schedule of *non-network* news (e.g., CNN, MSNBC, Fox, BBC America). Part of the challenge is for students to *find* these alternatives, as cable channels will vary depending on their location and broadcast delivery system. The goal is to provide students with news material that they can compare and contrast to the broadcasts they viewed in week 1. Lastly, ask students to decide which news segments interest them the most.

Week 3: Summarizing the News

At the end of week 2, ask your ELLs to choose a current news story of the type that really interests them. Ask them to listen to it and be ready to summarize it verbally (without reading

from their notes) for the entire class. This gives students an opportunity to practice the kinds of summarizing skills they will need for the actual broadcast. Students enjoy listening to their classmates' brief news summaries at the beginning of week 3.

Launching the Newscast Project

Present the newscast role-play assignment to your class. (See the student handouts, “Planning Your News Broadcast” and “The TV News Show.” You’ll want to customize them for your own classrooms.) Explain that this is a collaborative group effort in which members of each news team not only prepare and deliver their individual news stories but also construct a cohesive newscast. Groups need to give themselves a name; create a tone for their newscast; decide on simple graphics (we were able to project graphics and employ short PowerPoints); and discuss dress, on-air demeanor, and props.

Put students in groups of five or six, mixing the groups in terms of gender, native language, and level of class participation. All groups should be required to include international, national, and local news stories in their broadcast; beyond that, let groups choose which types of news to report on.

Over the course of a week or two, the groups meet in class for broadcast planning meetings. One way to set this up is like this:

- *First planning meeting:* Students decide on who’s covering which current news story; who will anchor the news show; and what the lineup of news reporters will be.
- *Second planning meeting:* Groups fine-tune the lineup; write all the introductions and sign-offs for broadcast; iron out problems.
- *Third planning meeting:* Students rehearse and time their segments; consult instructor on any persistent pronunciation challenges.

Showtime!

In advance of the news day, the class decides if it wants to have student volunteers record the newscasts “live” in the classroom using a smartphone, tablet, or video camera for a subsequent group critique.

Each group presents its broadcast in a predetermined order and without interruption. Many of the news presentations turn out to be remarkably creative. Last semester, for instance, students role-played on-air interviews with Nobel Peace Prize nominee Malala Yousafzai, with a star of the Colombian soccer team, and with the father of a crime victim, complete with costumes and props. One student offered a lightning-fast “round-up” of five of the top news stories of the week, ranging from the U.S. government shutdown in October 2013 to the release of the iPhone 5. Another student—the “entertainment reporter” on her team—offered a quick overview of free events in New York City’s Central Park.

As instructors, we each had a simple evaluation sheet that we filled in during viewing and returned to each member of each group only after all groups had finished. You can also add a peer review component that gives students a chance to provide anonymous written feedback to their classmates.

If the students agree to having their newscasts video-recorded in class, you can view each broadcast the following week. We would advise inviting each student to reflect on his or her own preparation and delivery before opening up to a constructive critique from other members of the groups and the class at large.

Outcomes

During the preparation stage, students were motivated to listen to a variety of news stories and formats and to compare and contrast them. Once in groups, students perceived they had a vital role to play, and the vast majority prepared thoroughly and rehearsed with enthusiasm. They used vocabulary relevant to TV broadcast, and coordinated their work during several planning sessions where listening and speaking were key.

In the end, the level of participation in this project was consistently high. The consensus among our students was that this was among the most engaging projects they had ever had, and students have subsequently informed us that they came to realize the benefit of following the news in English on a regular basis, and many have formed a habit of doing so. Along the way, students gained confidence in their ability to comprehend news in English which, in turn, overcame their previous perception that the news is “just too hard.”