



Current Events in the Classroom: News and EFL

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Current Events In The Classroom

News is everywhere. It affects us all. Sometimes we're even part of it. It's so ubiquitous in our lives, for teachers and students alike, that perhaps it should be in classrooms a little more.

What Is News?

The Dictionary.com definition for news runs as follows (the brackets are mine):

- a report of a recent event; intelligence; information (*that interests us and touches or affects our lives*)
- the presentation of a report on recent or new events in a newspaper or periodical or on radio or TV (*or the Internet or by word of mouth that interests us and touches or affects our lives*)
- a person, thing, or event considered as a choice subject for journalistic treatment; newsworthy material (*who or which interests us and touches or affects our lives*)

News ranges over all levels *from global to local to individual*: world news, international news, regional news, national news, local news...

Then of course, there's really important news such as family news, personal news, school news, course news, class news, teacher's news...

News seems to be *everything*: sports news, business news, science news, technology news, education news, entertainment news, health news, celebrity news, politics news, motoring news, lifestyle news, cooking news, news of the arts, book news, food news, agriculture news, mining news, space news, home and garden news, job news, economic news, disaster news, Hollywood news, Bollywood news, traffic news, weather news, travel news, industry news, weird news...

And news seems to be *everywhere*: TV, radio, the Internet, MSN, Yahoo, RSS, Google Alerts, newsletters, news-sheets, headlines in the street, billboards, giant TV screens at train stations, airport departure lounges, coffee shops, airplanes, hanging on doors of hotel rooms every morning, sold in train stations, overheard conversations on the bus, chats with friends...

Why News is Useful in the Classroom

1. **Relevance** - Students like things that are relevant to their lives. A lesson on news about their local

town, a teacher they know or something they asked about yesterday would perhaps be more relevant than the reading on page 38 of their textbook. News content in the classroom can help redress the "relevance balance" of (dare I say it) boring, irrelevant, culturally non-sensical texts. News can be motivating, interesting, and relevant. Because of its relevance, students are likely to have encountered the news in their L1 and bring a background knowledge to the classroom.

2. **Magnitude and impact** - Big news stories get students talking in their own languages. Powerful stories get the whole world talking. Such content provides for a dynamic classroom. It could be either world news or college news.
3. **Informational value** - We get a lot of our information about each other and the world around us from the news. Information gathering and sharing is part of who we are. Students like doing this in class. Furthermore, it can encourage further reading/listening/watching of news stories in English and/or their L1.
4. **Reference to someone famous or important** - People like talking, speculating, gossiping, criticizing, attacking, defending and idolizing people in the news. Why not let all this happen in class? Students love (or hate) reading and hearing about the latest people in the latest stories, fashions, sports, crimes, goings on...
5. **Continuity** - It seems the same news just keeps happening. This is great to recycle vocabulary, work on recurring concepts and ideas for a second or third time, build up students' schemata, etc. It should also motivate students to find out more about the stories in their own language. There is ample chance for the teacher and students to revisit and follow up on news.
6. **Recentness** - We're hungry for news. We need to know *now*. And so do students. BBC says: "Be the first to know". CNN says: "As the news breaks, watch it on CNN". News is living history that becomes part of our everyday lives.
7. **Emotional interest** - News touches our every emotions: it interests, absorbs, shocks, elates, horrifies, amuses, disturbs, calms, titillates us. It fills us with joy, pride, anger, pessimism, optimism, hope, inspiration, trepidation. We will it to happen. We will it to *stop* happening.

8. **Intellectual interest** - We like to think that we're experts. Students do, too. Discussing news items in English gives them confidence in their learning. There may be a "prestige" factor for some students, especially at lower levels, of being able to negotiate news media in English.
9. **It empowers conversation** - "What's the latest on....?" or "Have you heard...?" These are two (among many) very common and natural conversation starters. Students in class will naturally respond to the very authentic and everyday act of receiving real news, which can initiate authentic and engaged conversation.
10. **It provides a sense of oneness with the world** - We all like to know what's happening both in our own backyard, with the people we know, as well as what's happening on the other side of the world. News gives us a foothold into feeling part of our world. It fuels and feeds our desire to keep up to date.

"Much has been said on the utility of newspapers; but one principal advantage which might be derived from newspapers has been neglected; we mean that of reading them in schools."

The Portland Eastern Herald (June 8, 1795)

"News is history in its first and best form, its vivid and fascinating form... History is the pale and tranquil reflection of it." Mark Twain (1906)

"Current events provide authentic learning experiences for students at all grade levels.... In studying current events, students are required to use a range of cognitive, affective, critical thinking and research skills."

Haas, M. and Laughlin, M. (2000) *Teaching Current Events: It's Status in Social Studies Today*.

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**2011 Pan – SIG Conference
May 21 - 22, 2011 Shinshu University**

<http://pansig.org/2011/>

This 2011 *Pan-SIG* conference, sponsored by 22 JALT Special Interest Groups, will be held May 21-22 in Nagano on the theme *Discovering Paths to Fluency*. Make sure to attend! Sample sessions:

- Critical Thinking and Political Awareness
- Content Teaching via Global Issues Materials
- Global Issues Posters for Freshmen Students
- *Kamishibai* Stories: Japan and the Philippines
- Intercultural Training for Exchange Students
- Multinational Workshops for Global Leaders

Time: Saturday & Sunday (9 am - 5 pm each day)

Cost: JALT= 8,500 yen, non-JALT= 10,000 yen

Venue: Shinshu University. Matsumoto City

**Peace Education Summer Seminar
August 13 - 15, 2011 Saitama, Japan**

Theme: Creating a Culture of Peace

This summer's *International Institute on Peace Education* (IIPE) has been postponed. Instead, the *Global Campaign for Peace Education in Japan* (GCPEJ) will hold a 3-day seminar August 13-15 at the National Women's Education Center in Saitama. Plan to attend or submit a proposal!

Cost: 12,000 yen (for 2 nights room + 5 meals)

Proposals: Send a title plus a 100 word summary

Contact: Kazuya Asakawa <kasan@mac.com>.

Proposal deadline: May 31, 2011

**Peace as a Global Language (PGL 2011)
Oct. 22 - 23, 2011 Konan University**

www.pgjapan.org/

This fall's *Peace as a Global Language* (PGL) conference will be held in Nishinomiya (near Kobe) on the theme *Peace Without Boundaries*. The Call for Papers is now out and proposals invited from all interested in working for peace. PGL 2011 will offer an exciting set of sessions on peace themes plus a photo exhibit, a student peace banner workshop and a *Table for Two* Peace Banquet to support the underprivileged around the world. Come and learn how peace education translates to peace activism and social change! Plan to attend or to submit a proposal!

Place: Konan CUBE, Nishinomiya City, Hyogo

Proposals: Specify the type of session you wish

- paper (30 mins), workshop (60 mins), poster
- send a title, 50-word bio & 200-word abstract
- send submissions to: <pgl2011@gmail.com>

Proposal deadline: July 18, 2011

**Gender Awareness in Language Education
May 28, 2011 Kyoto University**

JALT's *Gender Awareness in Language Education* Special Interest Group (GALE) will hold a 1-day conference on the theme *Exploring Gender and its Implications* May 28 in Kyoto.

Cost: Members = 2,000 yen Others = 3,000 yen

Details: GALE website: <<http://gale-sig.org/>>