



Commodities in the ESL Classroom

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Introduction

As a teacher of lower level students in a business administration faculty, I have struggled to find interesting business and economics content in English that my students can handle. Over the past few years, I've been adding materials to a course that now covers an entire semester. What started as a single lesson on *coffee* has grown to include a number of broad categories, such as precious metals (*gold, silver*), natural resources (*oil, gas, coal, water, timber*), animal products (*beef, fish, shrimp*) and crops (*corn, rice, tobacco, coffee*).

An ESL lesson on commodities has a number of advantages, but presents a number of challenges to the instructor. Every class is different, and it may be necessary to create original material or, at least, re-write material to make it level appropriate. Fortunately for the experienced teacher, Wikipedia can provide enough background information on commodities for most lessons. Of course, it's preferable for the teacher to do some background reading and acquire some "expertise" in each topic, which makes presentations go much smoother.

Powerpoint and Film

Of course, just reading about commodities is boring for most students, so I tend to include visuals as much as possible. A PowerPoint presentation can be good, and giving students a pre/post quiz can help focus their attention. There are a number of films, which can be used in conjunction with lessons on commodities. For lower level classes, it's usually necessary to either provide films with subtitles or films in Japanese. This presents some challenges for the teacher, of course. I've found that watching a short (20 minute) Japanese film can help aid overall student comprehension of the issue, and doesn't preclude an English discussion afterward. The key is to provide questions, which will get students talking.

One good source of films is the Japanese NPO *Parc*. They have more than a dozen films dealing with food, shrimp, coffee etc. which are short enough to be seen and discussed in a 90 minute class. They're good for Japanese students, since much of the information is Japan-specific (in contrast to most English films that provide either American or British points of view). Of course, they come with an environmentalist/social justice bias, but at the same time, they provide a good medium for students to be exposed to views they might not get elsewhere.

Parc films have two different prices, one price for personal use and one price for library use (usually double), so clarify what is appropriate in your case before you place an order. Other films I have used to discuss commodities in class are:

- *Farm to Market* (targeted at native English speaking primary school students)
- *Blue Gold* (about water)
- *Flow* (about water)
- *King Corn* (on the American corn industry, with a focus on corn syrup)
- *Crude* (oil exploration in Ecuador: one sided but interesting, cameo by pop singer Sting)
- *Food, Inc.* (on the American food industry)
- *Darwin's Nightmare* (covers fish, AIDS and poverty in Tanzania)
- *Blood Diamond* (big budget Hollywood film with DiCaprio, but gets the message across)

Realia and the Media

In addition to films, getting students involved in bringing examples of the commodity to class can be an effective exercise. I often ask students to visit a supermarket and take pictures of product labels, with the aim of discussing country of origin, price, and food miles. Some products, like water and chocolate, are easily brought to class and can be good ways to initiate discussion.

Asking students to keep an eye on the news headlines (in Japanese or English) can be useful, as energy and commodity issues are forever appearing. Flexibility is the key, as current events can help to raise interest and warrant additional time on a single commodity. Although I create a rough outline to cover 6-9 different commodities in a 15-week period, I may spend 3-4 weeks on a single topic if interest holds and materials are abundant. For example, in the aftermath of the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami, energy and food safety have become water-cooler talk, so focusing on energy or an affected commodity such as fish, rice, vegetables or beef would be ideal.

Student Poster Presentations

Depending on class size, poster presentations can be an interesting way to get students involved in research and discussion. I sometimes lay out a 5-week timetable for the assembly of materials and student written drafts, with the final week for poster presentations. I ask students to evaluate their peers using a simple score sheet with room for about 10

Different commodities. I allow them to do any commodity that we haven't covered in class during the term and encourage them to think of questions (which often go unanswered, but that's OK).

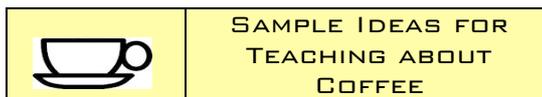
Here's an example of part of the worksheet I give students on presentation day:

<p>Commodity Name: _____</p> <p>_____/10 English (clear, easy to understand)</p> <p>_____/10 Artistic skills (color, pictures, layout)</p> <p>_____/10 Message (interesting, good information, easy to understand)</p> <p>My question for the presenter: _____</p> <p>_____</p>
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Teaching about a commodity that students are already familiar with opens the door to dealing with many global issues: history, geography, economics, politics, war and the environment to name but a few. More adventurous teachers might want to explore illegal commodity trade, but of course that may open many more cans of worms!

To Sum Up:

1. Have students brainstorm commodities and their uses.
2. Have them list the Top Ten in terms of value (lists are easy to find on the internet)
3. Have students create maps of where they think these originate and how they are traded.
4. Create appropriate level readings (100-300 words) with comprehension questions.
5. Create PowerPoint presentations with interesting visuals and pre/post tests.
6. Prepare teacher mini-lectures (5-10 minutes)
7. Have students monitor news headlines
8. Use films in Japanese or in English (with subtitles). Provide pre/post tests or quizzes.
9. Have students work in pairs or small groups to create poster presentations.
10. Send students to stores and supermarkets to photograph items and collect price/origin data.
11. See if your library has graded non-fiction readers that students (or you) can access.
12. Don't be constrained by a syllabus; allow the pace of the class to dictate the overall number of commodities that you cover.
13. Do some reading (beyond Wikipedia) on each topic to educate yourself beforehand. Your knowledge about commodities will provide confidence during your mini-lectures.
14. Give both sides of an issue and let students decide where they stand.
15. Give your opinion at the end of class, but make it clear that this is your personal view.



Here are suggestions on some of the issues which might be approached while studying about coffee:

Numbers (*economics, business, trade*)

- Have students get numbers on trade and prices, look at graphs
- Survey local coffee shops for pricing, check the availability of Fairtrade

Occupations (*farmer, exporter, etc...*)

- Multiple worker profiles exist on Fairtrade.org
- Have students roleplay a dialogue on pricing

Society (*fairness, equality*)

- What is *Corporate Social Responsibility* (CSR)?
- Survey the web, local businesses to see how it is practiced

Questions to get students thinking:

- How much of what you buy benefits the laborer?
- Do you consider the impact of your purchases on the world economy?
- What industries are dominated by men?
- What industries have slave or child labor?
- How can you make a difference?
- Volunteer organizations in Japan

Vocabulary (*food, processes, etc...*)

- Gather pictures of Fairtrade products to identify
- Discuss the process of growing beans, drying, roasting, grinding, selling

History (*colonialism, slavery, culture*)

- Note the difference in the North-South divide.
- Investigate the coffee/tea culture of Japan
- Ask why underdeveloped countries are poor
- Ask what can be done to correct past wrongs

Geography (*the North-South divide*)

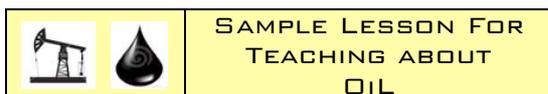
- Use rich-poor maps of the world
- Discuss climate and wealth

Ecology (*shade grown, organic, sustainable*)

- Why does growing differently benefit the planet?
- Discuss the effects of global warming.

Personal Narratives

- Interview people who work in a small local coffee shop. Ask them about the best coffee, how it is produced and about Fairtrade
- Read interviews/profiles of workers at Fairtrade.org



Introduction

In world trade, no other market has as much value as crude oil (petroleum). The price of oil affects almost every economy in the world. Oil is used to produce fuels such as gasoline, kerosene, jet fuel and diesel, but is also an important source in some countries for generating electricity. In addition, petroleum can be made into fertilizer, which helps farmers increase the amount of food they produce. Finally, petroleum is used to produce plastic - a material that surrounds us in our daily lives.

The Price of Oil

- US \$105/barrel (1 barrel-159 liters) (May 2011)

History

Although oil was used 4,000 years ago, it did not become important until the 1850s. Until then, most lighting was from wood, candles and whale oil. Once people learned how to make kerosene, the demand for oil grew. This might have saved some whales from extinction. In the 1900s, oil became important as gasoline and diesel engines became common in cars, trucks and trains. As a result, people began to search for oil all over the world. The price of oil can rise and fall quickly, due to war and politics in oil producing countries.

Types of Oil

Oil is found in many forms (light, heavy, shale), but some are more valuable than others. Some countries have easy access to oil and can sell it for a high price. Others have to spend money to find and process the oil they have. Many countries such as Germany and Japan have no oil.

The Power of Oil

Some oil producing countries can have a lot of influence on other countries through their control of the supply of oil. For a long time, the Soviet Union supported its allies by selling oil at lower than market prices. Venezuela, unlike many countries in South America, is able to resist political pressure from the United States because of its status as an oil exporter. Iran, Saudi Arabia and Libya have also had policies which Western countries objected to. However, because of their oil wealth, they have been able to fight pressure to change. Although many leaders have used oil wealth to buy weapons, build palaces and buy luxury cars, some countries such as Norway have used their oil wealth to invest in the future, and now have excellent free health care and education.

Environment

Perhaps the biggest issue when talking about oil is its effect on the environment. Many people object to drilling for oil in the ocean or in places of natural beauty. Once the oil is out of the ground, it needs to be transported. This is done by oil tankers or pipelines that cut through nature. Oil tankers sometimes spill oil into the sea and onto the coast. Once the oil reaches its destination country, it needs to be refined into fuel such as gasoline. This process is very dirty and creates a lot of smog, bad smells, and greenhouse gases. Finally, the fuel is burned in engines, creating more greenhouse gases.

The Future

If oil is so dirty and causes so many problems, then why do we still use it? Many people call it an addiction, similar to tobacco or alcohol, where although we know it's not good for us, we're unable to change our lifestyles. Others disagree and say we can change, but that it will take strong willpower and sacrifice. Certainly, the world economy requires a huge amount of energy. Right now, about 40% comes from oil. Oil is still one of the cheaper sources of energy. However, if the price rises, people will look for other forms of energy to save money and help the environment.

Questions

1. How much is a barrel of oil? What does it cost?
2. When did people start using oil?
3. When did oil become important?
4. Why do people use oil?
5. What animals were saved by oil?
6. What are the main types of oil?
7. Which South American country produces oil?
8. What other countries are major producers of oil?
9. Which countries do not have any oil?
10. What can we do to "break the addiction" to oil?

TOP 10 COMMODITIES (most traded)

1. Crude oil	5. Brent oil	8. Corn
2. Coffee	6. Silver	9. Wheat
3. Natural gas	7. Sugar	10. Cotton
4. Gold		

Source: www.tiptoptens.com/2011/01/31/top-10-most-traded-commodities/

PARC	Pacific Asian Resource Center
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Japanese site: <www.parc-jp.org/index.html> ▪ English site: <http://en.parc-jp.org:8080/en/> 	

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