



Back to the Source for Advanced Learners of English

Filip Moens, Carolyn De Meyer

University College Arteveldehogeschool (Belgium)

filip.moens@arteveldehs.be carolyn.demeyer@arteveldehs.be

Abstract

Today's world is interconnected and online: on the spot we can read an Australian newspaper's article and compare it to our local interpretation of the event, we can search a database to see what a Spanish newspaper had to say about it 20 years ago and with the necessary access codes we can explore academic research and publications on the topic. Today's world is also complex and lacks transparency as current media operate from ideological, cultural and historical backgrounds. Furthermore, today's merging and conglomerating of traditional media players further complicates the search for reliable information on current events.

To respond to this complexity and interconnectivity we propose a current affairs based approach of foreign language teaching. For the last four years we have had the opportunity to experiment yearly with some 80 third year students of English as a foreign language, studying to become teachers of English themselves. Our paper will describe these experiences, with reflections both from the lecturer's as the student's point of view.

Due to the nature of our target audience we have focused on three main objectives; how to improve our students' overall language proficiency (make them better language users), how to improve their lifelong language learning skills (use any input as a basis for language learning, and raise their language learning awareness) and how to prepare them to take active part in contemporary society in which media wisdom and critical thinking skills are essential. The first objective might be obvious, the second can be considered the holy grail for all educators, the third one however is a focal point of our programme. We will describe how we search for sources and select the materials used in class, we will present the general outline of our class discussions and we will take a closer look at the didactic and pedagogical ideas that are present throughout our lessons.

Although the ideas we describe are taken out of an English course for advanced students, we strongly believe that more media based, current affairs driven lessons will be essential for the future of education at any level.

If you have trained for a marathon or know someone who has, one of the metaphorical monsters that is inevitably talked about is what is known as "hitting the wall". After months of dedicated training, hundreds of kilometers and perhaps even weeks of swearing off fries, at about the 30th kilometer a runner experiences a feeling of sudden and overwhelming exhaustion that is both physical and mental making it an arduous task to progress further towards the finish line. Now you don't have to be a marathon runner to know the experience of hitting a wall—this is an experience we believe many foreign language learners face when they have reached an advanced stage in the race to reach complete proficiency. They find it increasingly difficult to 'progress' to the finish-line of near native competency. For many years we have recognized this in ourselves and in our students and perhaps this sounds familiar to you too. So, the question is, how do we make it past the wall and continue to progress forward? What kind of training and practice will help students face the wall and continue forward? A marathon runner at running.com related that his epiphany was a chocolate chip muffin [1]. What kind of muffin do language learners need?

We try to find the muffin in a careful selection of sources. The utmost importance of 'input' or source material in the form of written or spoken text is widely acknowledged in second language education research. This is the kind of muffin necessary for increased competence in a foreign language. From Krashen's much talked about theory of language acquisition, which holds that a foreign or second language is 'acquired' incidentally from being exposed to comprehensible input just beyond a learners' current level (the $i + 1$ hypothesis) [2], to Michael Lewis's somewhat more radical lexical approach [3], which emphasizes learning meaningful lexis together with its co-text, and to, more recently, Paul Nation's discussion of the '4 strands' of language learning [4]; there is consensus on the importance of exposing learners to natural language and that there be a priority given to receptive skills as a means of aiding acquisition and as a starting point for foreign language learning.



Today, the sheer volume of 'natural' and 'authentic' material available to learners and teachers of foreign languages, which happily coincides with current insights into foreign language acquisition and learning, should mean that as never before learners and teachers are in a position to more speedily and readily progress to even greater foreign language competence. Our world is connected on-line: we can just as easily consult an Australian newspaper article on a current event, as search a database to find out the Spanish perspective on a similar event 20 years earlier. Yet, this excess of information presents problems of its own. The information available on the Internet is not transparent as most media sources operate from ideological, cultural and historical backgrounds, which is further obfuscated by these media conglomerates' economic objectives, thus making the selection of material for input all the more crucial. This is the case not only for lower level learners of foreign language (where selection and adaptation are necessary and the teacher and classroom may play a more intensive role [5]) but more importantly for upper-intermediate to advanced learners.

A brief description of this target audience, a group of advanced learners of English, that the current affairs based approach to be described below was designed for is in order here. The students who take this course are in their final year of a teacher-training course, which will certify them to become teachers of English in lower secondary education. Rather than earn a B.A. in English and then become certified to teach, as is common in some systems, the majority of our students begin their teacher training after secondary school and work toward a degree which combines educational training and their subject specialization, in this case English. Our students, nearly all of them Flemish, do have the advantage of having been exposed to quite a lot of English in their youth: television programs in Belgium are not dubbed but subtitled so that many students, when they begin their formal education in English at age 12 or 13, are considered 'false-beginners'. Moreover, the common roots of English and Dutch as Germanic languages further facilitates our students' rather quick rise to relative proficiency in English. What we have experienced as problematic in working with this target audience is that many of our students reach a plateau or hit the wall as concerns their level of English, and have perhaps become complacent, or simply struggle to find a way to further perfect their language skills. As future teachers, however, we feel they must be enabled to grow further in their linguistic competence in order to provide the best possible model for the next generation of students. Additionally, the limited time that our future students spend at university (only three years) makes life-long learning skills all the more critical. Lastly, as our students come in contact with quite a bit of English through the Internet, radio and television we find it is vital to aid our students in navigating the world of English at their disposal.

Hence, the course has three central aims: firstly to improve our students' language skills, secondly, to improve their language *learning* skills (to promote life-long learning), and finally to improve their critical thinking skills. We work towards these aims using the principle of 'backward design' as set out in Tomlinson and Mc Tighe's *Integrating Differentiated Instruction: Understanding by Design* [6]. In backward design a teacher begins from the desired objectives, then determines acceptable evidence of having reached those objectives (assessment) and then finally plans activities that will help students reach these objectives. So, our aims having been set, we move next to our exam—our means of assessing whether the objectives have been met.

In order to demonstrate that students are working towards the objectives we have set, we ask them to do two different assignments. Firstly, students read a work of non-fiction and write a two-page paper in which they summarize and respond to one or more of the books' main arguments. Secondly, they also read a new article (which they receive three weeks before the exam) and this they prepare for an oral exam. During the oral exam students answer questions about the new article they have read, delve into the grammar and structure of the text and explain words from context. In preparing both of these assignments, we expect students to apply their language learning skills, their critical thinking skills and also to demonstrate their language skills (reading comprehension, listening comprehension, writing and speaking).

In order to enable our students to reach the course objectives and demonstrate this, we do a variety of different activities during our limited class time (five 4-hour sessions). For example students prepare short presentations on important people in a "Who's who" activity. The students present their important figure without mentioning his or her name, and the rest of the class must listen and guess "who's who". During another session, students prepare a poster to present their interpretation of a short story (this year Hemmingway's "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber") on the basis of a presentation of different types of critical theory. The centerpiece, however, of our course consists of two articles chosen each year from *The New Yorker* magazine. *The New Yorker* is characterized, for our current



norms, by long and comprehensive articles, by page upon page without visuals, only small print text. Likewise, *The New Yorker*'s illustrated covers are themselves indicative of a magazine that swims against the tide of current media, which is at heart essentially visual. In a recent interview with a Belgian quality newspaper, David Remnick, editor of the *New Yorker*, commented that the Internet, rather than creating more spaces to explore topics in depth, has created fewer of them. In fact, this trend may be at the root of the magazine's enduring (albeit counterintuitive) success, Remnick hypothesizes. He holds that more and more people have received a good education and they are increasingly looking for the depth that is generally lacking on-line [7]. These are some of the considerations that led us to place these articles at the center of our course and that make our current affairs approach special. Our primary emphasis is not on quick news bites, or popular tweets but on substantial articles that offer food for thought as well as language to challenge our advanced students, and indeed, we have found that it is essential to offer students content at an advanced level, to provide them with textual material that engages their intellect, in order to improve their language skills as well.

In the previous three years we have included articles on important contemporary thinkers: the moral philosopher Derek Parfit ("How to be Good: An Oxford philosopher thinks he can distill all of morality into a formula. Is he right?"), on the neuro-scientist David Eagleman ("The Possibilian"). We have touched on the topics of economics and happiness ("Later: what does procrastination tell us about ourselves?", "Everybody Happy"), on the topics of sexual education ("Too much information") and obesity ("XXXL: why are we so fat?") [8]. We aim to choose articles that we hope will be of interest to our students (as future teachers), but to also make sure that the topics are challenging. In doing this we have gravitated towards topics that are naturally philosophical in nature, exploring questions about right and wrong, how it is that we know and learn, what it means to be happy, or late with your work.

Our procedure to work with the articles is straightforward with each step designed to bring students closer to the goals set out above: improved language skills, improved life-long-learning skills, improved critical thinking skills. We begin our work on each text with a number of pre-reading activities. First and foremost we introduce our students to the *New Yorker*, asking them to note what kind of source we've drawn our articles from and to give them a context for the magazine. By having their attention directed from the start to the fact that each magazine has its own perspective, has a particular target audience in mind, has a "slant"; students are guided to begin each encounter with a new text by reflecting on its source.

What follows are activities that guide students through the text. There are pre-reading activities aimed at engaging students' schemata, guiding them towards important cultural references, and to prepare them to tackle the language in the article. For example, when working with Jill Lepore's article "Too much information: Books about the birds and the bees" students were asked to perform a skit of 5-10 lines using the phrase "too much information", to reformulate the title in more formal language, and to think about the text type. Finally students did a web-quest to find out information about cultural references (ranging from Arthur Conan Doyle, to the Kinsey reports to *Roe vs. Wade*) that they would find in the text. Students will have then linked the article with their own world using the skit, thought briefly about register by reformulating the title, and about the wealth of history and culture that can be found in a text by looking up some of the names and events referred to in the article.

We ask students to answer in-depth content questions about the text. Our questions are designed to point our students to the main ideas of the text, to the text's structure, to nuances in the text. They also challenge students to synthesize the information they have read and to incorporate these ideas into their own body of knowledge. For example, as part of working with the article on the neuro-scientist, David Eagleman, students recreate one of the simple experiments discussed in the text and are asked to link this experience to the content of the article.

In addition to preparing students to be better readers, that is, to improve their reading comprehension skills, at this point we also focus more directly on critical thinking skills. In discussing the article, "How to be Good" our students took part in class in a guided philosophical discussion based on Catherine Mc Call's *CoPi* method [9]. In this method, students read a short text aloud (this creates community) and then think of discussion questions, which are written on the board with the students' names next to them. The discussion leader chooses the most philosophically fruitful question and the discussion begins.

After dealing thoroughly with the content of the articles our students are also challenged to pay closer attention to the language. We have asked them to link vocabulary used in the article to their native Dutch (difficult words tend to be cognates in the two languages), we have asked students to place



vocabulary items in context of the article and to record the items together with their 'co-text' (cf. Lewis 1993). We focus on word formation, on word relationships (synonyms, antonyms, hyponyms and superordinates). We also ask our students to look at the micro-structure of the language of the article, asking them to analyze a few sentences in which they discover the syntactical functions, word-phrases and word-classes. By working on these activities, students' linguistic awareness is further raised.

What we demonstrate in using these two articles from the New Yorker are the 'tools' with which our students can then arm themselves to tackle their work of non-fiction and the new article that they prepare for the exam. In repeating on their own the processes we have guided them through in class, students take one step further towards becoming strong life-long learners, critical thinkers and proficient English speakers. It is our hope that our students implement these strategies in their foreign language classrooms and in their own lives and so break through the wall instead of constantly hitting it.

References

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