

Improving Reading Comprehension Skills in ESL Classes through Newspaper Articles

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Abstract: Newspapers offer good chances of reading practice for ESL learners of different proficiency levels. Since newspaper articles are authentic in terms of language they use, experiences they report, and culture they reflect they may attract ESL learners' attention with their headlines, content areas, and pictures. On the other hand, they are difficult to handle for exactly the same reasons. To start with, we had better take a close look into the nature of reading comprehension.

Traditionally, in the study of second language comprehension, it has been the text (language to be comprehended) to blame for failures to comprehend not the reader or listener. Failures to comprehend a well-formed text passage have been attributed to some unknown language elements like words and grammatical rules. But today it is believed that it is not the text but the previously acquired knowledge that makes the comprehension possible. Immanuel Kant claimed as long ago as 1781 that 'new information, new concepts, new ideas can have meaning only when they can be related to something the individual already knows' (Rumelhart:1980).

One of the obvious reasons why a reader fails to understand a text is that the schema involved is culturally specific and does not exist for the reader. If the implicit culture content knowledge presupposed by a text interacts with the reader's own background knowledge of content, that text is easier to read and understand than rhetorically and syntactically equivalent text based on a less familiar and more distant culture (Anderson: 1979).

Key Words: Newspaper, reading comprehension skills

Introduction

Newspapers offer good chances of reading practice for ESL learners of different proficiency levels. Since newspaper articles are authentic in terms of language they use, experiences they report, and culture they reflect they may attract ESL learners' attention with their headlines, content areas, and pictures. On the other hand, they are difficult to handle for exactly the same reasons.

To start with, we had better take a close look into the nature of reading comprehension. Traditionally, in the study of second language comprehension, it has been the text (language to be comprehended) to blame for failures to comprehend not the reader or listener. Failures to comprehend a well-formed text passage have been attributed to some unknown language elements like words and grammatical rules. But today it is believed that it is not the text but the previously acquired knowledge that makes the comprehension possible. Immanuel Kant claimed as long ago as 1781 that 'new information, new concepts, new ideas can have meaning only when they can be related to something the individual already knows' (Rumelhart:1980).

This previously acquired world knowledge is often called *background knowledge*, and knowledge structures as *schemata*. Comprehending a text involves an interactive process between the text and the reader's background knowledge about that topic. When we read we try to map the information input in the text against our existing schema or schemata concerning that piece of information. If there is a mismatch the reader is forced to revise his/her interpretation to make this new information compatible with the previous information to make the whole text cohere (Carell:1983).

The background knowledge involved in reading comprehension is of 2 types:

- a) Formal schema
- b) Content schema

Formal schema is genre knowledge, background knowledge of the formal, textual organizational structures of various discourse types such as, differences in genre, structure of recipe, tales, arbitraries etc. *Content schema*

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is the background knowledge of content area of a text such as history of needle making, nuclear centers in Iran, Turkey's Cyprus policy etc. (Widdowson: 2007).

A successful reader is usually equipped with both of these knowledge structures and thus can constitute an efficient interaction between linguistic knowledge and world knowledge. One of the obvious reasons why a reader fails to understand a text is that the schema involved is culturally specific and does not exist for the reader. If the implicit culture content knowledge presupposed by a text interacts with the reader's own background knowledge of content, that text is easier to read and understand than rhetorically and syntactically equivalent text based on a less familiar and more distant culture (Anderson: 1999).

Examples: Would you please have a quick look at these four articles.

The Tylenol Tragedy

The Tylenol tragedy has touched off a wave of renewed concern this October about pint-size Smurfs, E.T's, and Wonder women accepting candy from strangers. As the 31st approaches, city officials in dozens of towns across the country have banned trick-or-treating altogether, or restricted it to daylight hours.

-Can you put these four articles in order from the easiest to the most difficult?

It is clear that Turkish readers lack the necessary background knowledge to be able to understand the Tylenol Tragedy. What background information do we need to be able to understand this article? Halloween is celebrated on the night of October 31. On that night ghosts and witches walk the earth. Children dressed in costumes may do the spirits' "tricks" for them. To protect their homes, neighbors must give the children "treats" of cookies or candy. From these examples we can draw this conclusion: Some background knowledge about British and American Culture in general and their newspapers and magazines in particular will be of great help to understand and appreciate what we read. First off all, our students should know that there are two types of newspapers, i.e., *quality* and *tabloid*. Quality newspapers are also known as *broadsheets* or *heavies* and they are considered to be informative and objective. They present the reader with serious news with details and comment on political and economic issues and social and world events. Tabloids, on the other hand, are considered to be more entertaining than informative and they contain many photographs, attention grabbing headlines, sensational stories and scandals (Sanderson: 1999).

Here is a list of British and American newspapers

British newspapers

The Daily Telegraph, *Financial Times*, *The Guardian* and *The Times* are known as the quality newspapers, appealing mainly to the upper and middle classes.

The Daily Telegraph is right-of-centre in its views and contains reports on national and international news.

Financial Times contains a comprehensive coverage of industry, commerce and public affairs and is read mainly by professional and business people.

The Guardian is the only 'quality' newspaper with liberal/left -of-centre politics. As well as a wide coverage of news events, it also reports on social issues, the arts education etc.

The Times takes a middle-of-the-road-view, claiming to represent the views of the establishment and is especially well-known for its correspondence column.

Daily Express, *Daily Mail*, *Daily Mirror*, *Daily Star* and *The Sun* are popular, tabloid newspapers—they are smaller in size and contain more photographs and appeal mainly to the working and middle classes.

Daily Mail and *Daily Express* take a right-of-centre viewpoint on most issues.

Daily Mirror usually supports the Labour party.

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The Sun and *Daily Star* are well-known for their pin-ups. *The Sun* has a larger circulation than any other daily newspaper.

The Observer is a serious national Sunday newspaper and is read mainly by the professional middle classes.

American Newspapers

The Newyork Times is a serious daily newspaper read on a national scale covering national and international news.

The Wall Street Journal is a business/investment daily newspaper but it also carries news of national importance.

The Washington Post is a serious daily newspaper with full coverage of Congress.

International Herald Tribune is a daily newspaper produced in Paris and sold in most countries of the world. It covers American and international news and contains advertisements and reviews.

Magazines

Newsweek is a weekly American news magazine which covers American and international news and a wide range of topics. There is also an international addition.

Punch is a weekly British satirical magazine which is well-known for its cartoons.

Time is sold all over the world and contains articles on US and world news as well as general articles on culture, medicine etc.

Newspapers especially tabloids use some tabloidese/journalese e.i. some short sensational and often exaggerated and ambiguous words in their headlines. Here is a list of words of this kind.

A) The Vocabulary of Tabloids

<u>Headline word</u>	<u>Meaning</u>
ACCORD	agreement
AID	help
AXE	cut, destroy, take away
BACK	support
BAN	prohibition
BAR	exclude, prohibit
BID	attempt
BLAST	explosion
BLAZE	fire
BLOW	injury
BOOST	help, incentive
CLASH	dispute
COUP	revolution
CURB	restraint, limit
CUT	reduction
DEAL	agreement
DRIVE	campaign, effort
ENVOY	diplomat
EXIT	leave
GEMS	jewels
GO-AHEAD	approval
GUNMAN	man with gun

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HALT	stop
HAUL	large quantity first stolen and later discovered
HEAD	lead, direct
HELD	retained, kept in custody
HIT	affect badly
JET	aeroplane
JOBLESS	unemployed
KEY	essential, vital
LINK	connection
MAN	representative
NET	total
ORDEAL	painful experience, drama
OUST	push out, drive out, replace
OUTPUT	production
PACT	agreement, treaty
PAY	wages, salary
PIT	coal mine
PLEA	request for help
PLEDGE	promise
PLUNGE	step fall
POLL	election, public opinion survey
PRESS FOR	demand, ask for
PROBE	investigate
QUIT	leave, resign
RAID	attack, robbery
RIDDLE	mystery
ROW	argument, dispute
SCARE	public alarm
SPLIT	divide
SQUEEZE	shortage, scarcity
STORM	angry reaction, dispute
STRIFE	conflict
SWITCH	change, deviation
SWOOP	sudden attack or raid
TALK	discussion
TOP	exceed
VOW	promise
WALKOUT	strike
WED	marry

Newspaper headlines also use different grammatical structures.

B) The structure of headlines

1-Articles and verb 'to be' are frequently omitted, e.g. PET PLAN APPROVED, MAN HELD.

2-Simple Present Tense is used for present and past events,e.g.WOMEN DRIVE BETTER THAN MEN CLAIMS REPORT; DYNAMITE KILLS 52(meaning killed),US VISIT TESTS THE POPE AS POTENTIAL WORLD LEADER.

3-Present Continuous Tense is used to describe something that is developing, e.g. RAIL CHAOS GETTING WORSE.

4-The infinitive is used to refer to future, e.g. POPE TO VISIT US.

5-In passive sentences the auxiliary is omitted and past participle is used,e.g. HIJACKER ARRESTED.

6-A series of nouns are blocked together and used as adjectives, e.g. SOCCER BOY RAIL VICTIM.

How to Use them in the Classroom.

Teachers can use headlines and articles in several different ways:

- a- matching the articles and headlines
- b- Finding the synonyms of some headline words in the article.
- c- Making appropriate headlines for articles.
- d- Putting sentences into headline forms.
- e- Finding out different meanings in the ambiguous headlines, etc.

A- Explain two different meanings of the following ambiguous headlines.

- 1-Kids make nutritious snacks
- 2-Squad helps dog bite victim
- 3- Miners refuse to work after death
- 4- Hospitals are used by 7 foot doctors
- 5- Panda mating fails; veterinarian takes over
- 6- Lung cancer in women mushrooms
- 7- Eye drops off shelf
- 8- Teacher strikes idle kids
- 9- Juvenile court to try shooting defendant
- 10- Stolen painting found by tree
- 11- Drunken drivers paid \$1000
- 12- Local high school dropouts cut in half.
- 13- Include your children when baking cookies.

B- Find the word(s) in the article which have the same meaning as the underlined word in the headline.

C- Match the following headlines and articles.

1-Actress weds

2-Mother's plea for son fails

**3-Job row may
hit children's
hospital**

**4- Bush ban on pupils
after attack
on crew**

**5- £1 million
heroin haul**

**6- Crime profit
tops £166m**

**7-Young wife's bid
to beat fear**

Newspaper articles

As for articles, newspapers make use of various articles in different genres such as News in Brief, Home News, Business News, Technology and Science, Comment, Editorials, Letters to the Editor, Motoring News, Television, The Arts, Sport, Advertisements, Features, Travel Politics, Movies, Theatre, Arbituraries, Health, Books, Education, Home-Garden, Real Estate, Fashion-Style, Automobiles Magazine, etc.

Teachers may bring these genres in to the classroom for the students to develop various reading strategies, for different genres require different strategies. For small *adds*, for instance, students can be asked to match the headlines and the adds or to answer some skimming and scanning questions. For *comments* and *editorials* they may be asked to make inferences or to discuss the writer's view, etc. (Sharma: 2007, Bakhshandah: 2009).

Now, let's do a sample reading lesson using a newspaper article. Could you please take a look at the article in your hands?

A-

- 1- Which newspaper is it taken from?
- 2- What kind of article is it? What is its genre?
- 3- How are editorials different from other types of articles?
- 4- Are all priests men? Do you know any women priests?
- 5- In Turkey, do we have any women imams?

B- 6- What is the passage about? Look very quickly through the article. Do not worry about the detail or vocabulary you don't know. You only need to get a very general idea of the contents

C- Now read these questions and find the answers

7- According to the editorial why did some women demand for priesthood?
What was the real incentive?

8- How would ordination of women put off Christian re-unification?

D- A follow up activity

9- Could this article be published in a left-of-center newspaper? In Turkey? If so would meaning change?

--- Questions in (A) are pre-reading questions and aim to activate students' background knowledge about this topic and thus help them make predictions about the content of the text.

--- By the question in (B) it is intended to develop readers' skimming skills by finding the gist of the article.

--- Questions in (D) aim to make the students comment on the topic and may be used as a follow-up activity.

--- Furthermore questions in (B) and (C) have been used to specify a purpose for reading.

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