Using News Reports in Language Education

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The proliferation of news outlets with a digital presence in recent years has enabled language education to embrace current affairs in (and outside of) the classroom at a level which classic language-learning text books simply cannot rival. The inclusion of such material as a means of instruction allows language education to be as connected to the world in which students inhabit as possible. This chapter details how news reports, be they in video or textual form and obtained online, can be used in language education in a variety of ways. Clear instructions of how news reports have been successfully used in language classes, methodology and the exploration of learning results enables replication by other teachers, as do indications of how to adapt material to suit differing student profiles, classroom activities and language levels.

ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND

The Universidad Francisco de Vitoria is a Spanish private university located in Madrid. Founded in 1993, the university forms part of a network of international universities in Europe, Mexico and South America. The Universidad Francisco de Vitoria currently offers 39 degree programmes within the faculties of Law and Social Science, Biomedical Science, Business and Economical Science and Communicational Science.
More than 60% of students studying at the university receive some instruction in English, be it general English classes or degree-specific English (ESP – English for Specific Purposes). Teachers from the Language Department use degree-specific material to enhance what students learn and place continual emphasis on language accuracy. All students, regardless of their degree programme, are expected to demonstrate a minimum English level of B1, as defined by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

CURRENT CHALLENGES FACING THE ORGANIZATION

Although previously stated that students enrolling at the Universidad Francisco de Vitoria are expected to demonstrate a minimum B1 level in English, in practice, there are some students who are shy of a B1 level when enrolment commences. Those students therefore struggle with some of the content presented to them in English, which is aimed at a B1 audience and above.

For operational reasons, English classes are treated similarly to classes taught in a student’s native language; students are not strictly divided by English level and class numbers can be high, although never exceeding 40 students. Teaching students in their non-native language presents numerous challenges with respect to their understanding and ability to participate in class activities. When there are students with English levels ranging from a low B1 to a potentially high C1, those challenges can become more complex and resistance from students to engage with class content may result.

SOLUTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It is important that teachers recognise the complexities of challenges or problems that may hinder meeting academic objectives and accordingly adapt material to suit the students’ individual needs. The author will suggest ways in which material can be adapted to suit a range of needs and language levels. News reports for instance, lend themselves readily to language classes, in the sense that they differ in length and use of language, depending entirely on the publication or broadcaster (producing them). Where a two-minute video news report can be shown to a low-B1 group with the sole objective of asking students to identify specific vocabulary mentioned orally, written newspaper reports from different publications could be exploited in high-B2 classes with the purpose of detecting style differences in the use of language or to note specific grammar points (between publications).
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