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Broadsheet English: teaching speaking through newspaper articles

Ahmet Selcuk Akdemir ^a*, Muzaffer Barin ^b, Hakan Demiroz ^c

^a*Dept. of English Language Teaching, Erzincan University, Erzincan 24100, Turkey*

^b*Dept. of English Language and Literature, Atatürk University, Erzurum 25100, Turkey*

^c*Dept. of English Language and Literature, Cumhuriyet University, Sivas, 58140, Turkey*

Abstract

The aim of this study is to explore whether newspaper articles can be used as speaking materials in foreign language courses as they include most authentic language patterns. A quasi-experimental study has been carried out at Vocational School of Tourism and Hotel Services in Erzincan University. Thirty-eight preparatory students took part in the study. Speaking courses were designed to include newspaper articles. The study provided evidence to prove the hypothesis: 'Language should be taught by original materials and spoken language is best acquired when it is obtained from authentic sources'

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1. Introduction

Foreign language teaching (FLT) is a complex activity and it involves many conditions likewise most of other educational activities. Piske and Young-Scholten (2009) separated these conditions into four groups: 'proximity to spoken language', 'equality of four skills', 'teaching/learning materials', and 'internal and external interferences of learner'. An ideal teaching atmosphere can only be achieved when these conditions have optimal values in educational setting. 'Proximity to spoken language' is by far the most important condition of all if FLT process is expected to have a communicative approach. There are many studies proving that learning is achieved by obtaining comprehensible input from original or at least authentic settings (Piske and Young-Scholten, 2009).

2. Theoretical framework

In order to overcome the difficulties of teaching English in a country where it is not the primary language for communication, the best and the easiest way is to enhance teaching with authentic and original materials. Materials to be used in FLT should cover spoken language patterns especially if the course is listening and/or speaking.

2.1. Communicative language teaching

When the subject is 'to teach a language to communicate' then Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) appears to be as the inevitable and probably most appropriate approach as it puts emphasis on communication. CLT

* Ahmet Selçuk Akdemir. Tel.: +90 543 380 0336
E-mail address: aselcukakdemir@gmail.com

is based on communicative competence which is described as the knowledge needed to be able to communicate effectively (Thornbury, 2006). CLT aims broadly to apply the theoretical perspective of Communicative Approach (CA) by making communicative competence as the goal of language teaching and by acknowledging the interdependence of language and communication (Larsen–Freeman, 2008). CLT design needs an integration of four skills and even oral or productive skills are emphasized more than receptive ones.

2.2. Authentic materials

Efe, Demiröz, and Akdemir (2011) describes authentic materials as those educational materials which can be used to teach authentic and natural knowledge, competences and abilities. Those materials do not need to be developed or prepared for the purpose of educational. While explaining authentic materials which are used in FLT, Widdowson (1990) emphasizes that those materials are designed to reflect the spoken language to learners. In this context newspaper articles are among the most suitable materials to be used in speaking activities as they include daily spoken and vivid language while conveying news across the cultures and countries. Though having many advantages, newspaper articles has some restrictions which are needed to be considered by teacher before using them in the classroom. Özay (2011) classifies these restrictions as:

Headlines are generally infinitive to refer to the future ('PM to visit Australia' – PM is going to visit Australia).

- Auxiliary is omitted in passive expressions ('Seven killed in explosion' – Seven people have been killed).
- Most headlines are not full sentences and most headlines are used without verbs ('Exeter man's double marriage bid' – There is a bid on Exeter man's double marriage).
- Headlines use noun clauses in which former nouns describes following ones ('Furniture factory pay cut row' – A row about a cut in pay at a factory that makes furniture).
- Many nouns and verbs can be used in both forms for various functions (1. 'US cuts aid to third world' – the US reduces its help – cut: verb, aid: noun 2. 'Aid cuts row' – There has been a disagreement about the reduction in aid – cut: noun, aid: noun).
- A colon (:) is used to separate the subject of the sentence from the information it conveys ('Strikes: PM to act' – Strikes causes PM to act).
- A question mark (?) is used to imply that the information is not certain ('Crisis over by September?').
- Many words are used with different meanings from their ordinary usages ('Edge: move gradually' – 'World edges towards war'. 'Act: take action; do something' – 'Food crisis: Government to act').

As all other authentic materials, newspaper articles may have the handicap of being 'too original to be understood' by elementary learners. In this case the best way is to review the material before using it in the classroom. Akdemir (2010) suggests simplifying the material but he also emphasizes the necessity of 'keeping the authenticity' of the material. Efe et al (2011) also remarks that written materials should be revised and simplified if needed before using in the classroom.

2.3. Speaking

As an oral and productive skill, speaking should be given enough importance to have its role as the output of FLT process. It, like the other skills, is more complicated than it seems at first and involves more than just pronouncing words (Karakuzu and Akdemir, 2011). Speaking materials can be chosen from various sources but it is important to keep it in context and aligned with the culture of the learners. Newspaper articles, used in this study, have been chosen from daily cultural news of the world and the country (Turkey). Some of them have been re-organized and simplified.

3. Methods and procedures

The aim of this study was to determine whether newspaper articles could be used as speaking materials as they include most actual and living language patterns. A quasi-experimental study was carried out at Vocational School of Tourism and Hotel Services of Erzincan University. 38 preparatory students took part in the study. Speaking courses were constructed to include newspaper articles. In the course of 10 weeks, each having 4 hours of speaking, 8 different newspaper articles were used as speaking materials. Those articles were chosen among cultural and actual news from several various newspapers (the Guardian, Daily Mirror, Daily Express etc.). After reading the articles several times, the teacher gave basic questions to help the students explore the text and the teacher prompted them to talk about the news. Before the study a general proficiency test was used to assess the language levels of the students. During the study four mid-tests were assigned to measure the difference by means of vocabulary, basic expressions and patterns expected to be learnt by the students.

4. Analyses and findings

The general proficiency test, used to determine the levels and backgrounds of the participants, showed that nearly all of the students have grammar rules but they have problems understanding the phrases and they also do not have enough vocabulary to understand basic spoken patterns (see Table 1).

Table 1. Proficiency test results

N: 38							
	Correct	Frequency	Wrong	Frequency	Null	Frequency	Total
Vocabulary (10 Q)	170	% 45	210	% 55	-	% 0	380
Phrases & Expressions (10 Q)	150	% 39	110	% 29	120	% 32	380
Grammar (5 Q)	130	% 68	60	% 32	-	% 0	190
Total (25 Q)	460		370				950

During the study, 4 mid-tests were assigned to assess the difference by means of vocabulary, basic expressions and patterns expected to be learnt by the students. Mid-tests were assigned by the teacher and the students are not allowed to use dictionaries during tests. Forty-five minutes were given to each mid-test. Test questions were derived from the texts. The questions were constructed to direct the students to ask and answer basic questions.

The results provided enough evidence to test the hypothesis: "Language should be taught by original materials and spoken language is best acquired when it is obtained from actual and authentic sources". Mid-test results are given as follows:

Table 2. Mid-test (1)

N: 38							
	Correct	Frequency	Wrong	Frequency	Null	Frequency	Total
Vocabulary (10 Q)	190	% 50	150	% 39	40	% 11	380
Phrases & Expressions (10 Q)	160	% 42	120	% 32	100	% 26	380
Grammar (5 Q)	120	% 63	40	% 21	30	% 16	190

Total (25 Q)	470	310	170	950
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Table 3. Mid-test (2)

N: 38							
	Correct	Frequency	Wrong	Frequency	Null	Frequency	Total
Vocabulary (10 Q)	220	% 58	140	% 37	20	% 5	380
Phrases & Expressions (10 Q)	160	% 42	100	% 26	120	% 32	380
Grammar (5 Q)	110	% 58	50	% 26	30	% 16	190
Total (25 Q)	490		290		170		950

Table 3. Mid-test (3)

N: 38							
	Correct	Frequency	Wrong	Frequency	Null	Frequency	Total
Vocabulary (10 Q)	230	% 61	110	% 29	40	% 10	380
Phrases & Expressions (10 Q)	210	% 55	90	% 24	80	% 21	380
Grammar (5 Q)	120	% 63	20	% 11	50	% 26	190
Total (25 Q)	560		220		170		950

Table 4. Mid-test (4)

N: 38							
	Correct	Frequency	Wrong	Frequency	Null	Frequency	Total
Vocabulary (10 Q)	230	% 61	110	% 29	40	% 10	380
Phrases & Expressions (10 Q)	210	% 55	170	% 45	-	% 0	380
Grammar (5 Q)	130	% 68	40	% 22	20	% 10	190
Total (25 Q)	570		320		60		950

5. Conclusion

Newspaper articles are among the most suitable materials to convey daily spoken language as well as cultural patterns and phrases/idioms. In order to teach speaking effectively daily news can be read and debated orally in the classroom. This will help learners to hear and pronounce English rather than grammar rules or cluster examples such as ‘I am a student’, ‘She goes to cinema every day’ etc.

Students will benefit more if speaking courses are constructed to include newspaper articles. Their benefits will be:

- learning about cultural and everyday usage of language patterns,
- understanding daily news better as they see the same news in their native language,
- asking/answering basic expressions about news they use in the course.

The teacher has also advantages of using newspaper articles to teach speaking. These advantages include:

- direct access to materials,
- time & money saving,
- using up to date materials.

As a conclusion newspaper articles are reasonable sources by many aspects to teach speaking in FLT classrooms.

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