

# Using Journalism Skills in the Language Classroom

**T**he topic of journalism leads to excellent language-learning activities. This lesson plan features four lessons that can stand alone or can be used as part of a larger project—creating a class newspaper.

## Lesson 1: Discovering the Sections of a Newspaper

The following lesson can be an independent activity with the goal of introducing English language newspapers to the students. Alternatively, it could be used as the beginning of a larger activity in which students write their own class newspaper. With either goal, this lesson is an excellent language learning activity focusing on vocabulary enrichment, reading skills (scanning, skimming, and in-depth reading), and critical thinking skills. It also brings authentic material to the classroom and encourages students to express their opinions and justify their ideas.

### Materials

Before teaching this lesson, collect a variety of newspapers in English. You might be able to collect past issues of newspapers from an embassy or a business where English is spoken or find locally published English language newspapers. If possible, try to collect some international or national newspapers. Have enough newspapers so that three or four students can share a paper. Students do not need to have the same paper or the same date; in fact, this will be a more interesting activity if students have different newspapers.

### Introduction

Tell students that they will be beginning a new project that will focus on real-life (authentic) materials in English. Explain to the students that they will be working in groups to find out basic information about different sections of newspapers.

Hand out sections of newspapers to small groups of students, and ask them to examine their sections to determine what kind of information is included. (Depending on whether you have multiple copies of the same edition or different newspapers that have the same layout or a similar number of sections, you can vary the questions and alter the steps of the activity. For example, if you have a large class and a limited number of newspaper sections, you may want to have the groups divide up the newspaper section by pages; two or three students can scan their page for specific details as well as skim the articles for main ideas.)

### Examining Newspapers

1. Write questions on the blackboard to guide students in their discussion of the newspaper sections. Here are some sample questions:
  - What is the name of the newspaper?

- What is the date on the newspaper?
  - Which section of the newspaper do you have?  
[Possible sections include: national news, world news, local news, sports, comics, editorials, weather, films/movies/plays, television schedule, classified ads.]
  - How many pages are in that section?
  - What kinds of stories are on each page?
  - Which stories have photographs? Write key words to identify the photo(s).
  - Which story do you think is the most important story for this section? Why?
  - Which of the stories is the most interesting to you? Why?
2. Make sure the students are aware that the group activity will have a time limit. (The first time the class does this exercise, you may want to give them an extra three to five minutes.) Also inform the students that they will need to choose a spokesperson to share the information with the rest of the class once the group activity ends.
  3. After several minutes of small group discussions, bring the class together to compare the newspaper sections. Discuss the differences between their newspapers.
    - Do all their newspapers have the same sections?
    - Which ones are different?
    - Do any of the newspapers discuss the same news stories?
    - Do they have the same comic strips?
    - Which sections are the most interesting to class members?
  4. Ask students to return to their small groups to select one or two articles from their newspapers and discuss how the articles were written. You can guide them with questions such as:
    - Did the writer do research?
    - Did the writer interview someone?
    - Who did illustrations? Who took the pictures?
    - Did the writer need to travel somewhere to get the story?
    - Does the article report the facts objectively? Does the information seem reliable and objective? (If not, whose view is represented?)

### Follow-up Activities

Have students work in pairs on one of the activities described below.

- a. Ask students to write a description of their sections of the newspaper. Remind them to do more than list the contents of their sections. Ask them

to explain the purpose of the various stories, photos, etc. in the sections and to say why the information will interest or benefit the readers of the newspaper. (When they finish writing their descriptions, they can exchange papers with another pair and the two pairs can give each other feedback.)

- b. Ask students to compare two or more newspapers or the same section (sports, world news, etc.) from two different newspapers. Have them write a comparison of the two newspapers or two newspaper sections. Besides comparing which stories are included and how much emphasis is given to the stories, students should also include their ideas about why the different newspapers focus on different things as well as their opinions about which newspaper they prefer. (They can also do an oral report for the rest of the class about which newspaper they prefer and why.)
- c. Ask the students to rewrite the first paragraph of a news story that interests them. When rewriting the paragraph, they should change some of the details (for example, the date of the event, the location, the number of people, etc.). After they have rewritten the paragraph, they should exchange paragraphs with another student pair. As the pairs review the paragraphs, they try to find the false information.

## Lesson 2: Journalistic Writing Skills

This lesson will give students the opportunity to analyze newspaper stories and discuss them; then they will practice writing their own stories in a journalistic style.

### Materials

Photocopies of various articles from English newspapers; or whole newspapers or sections of newspapers from which students can select articles that interest them.

### Introduction

To begin, give students copies of articles or newspapers and ask them to examine one article that interests them to find the answers to the following question words: who, what, when, where, how, why? Tell students they can write brief notes with the answers to the questions. Once they know the answers to the questions, ask them to find a partner who has not read the same story and tell the partner what the story is about, using their notes, if necessary.

### Writing a News Story

1. Tell students to choose an event they are familiar with or something that interests them, such as a sports match, a competition, a school activity, a local celebration. (You can brainstorm with students and write a list of topics on the blackboard.) Tell students that they can write about an event that has recently taken place or one that will occur in the near future. (Remind them about using the appropriate tense.)

2. Once students have selected their topics, remind them that they will be using the question words—who, what, when, where, how, why—as guides when writing their stories. To help students with their prewriting, you can dictate sample questions (below) or write them on the board.
  - **What** is the event? What happened/will happen because of this event?
  - **When** did/will the event take place?
  - **Who** took part/will be taking part in the event?
  - **Where** did/will the event take place?
  - **How**... (Depending on the topic, there could be various “how” questions.)
  - **Why**: Why did/will the event happen? Why did/will the participants do what they did/will be doing?
3. Tell students that newspaper reporters take notes before they write a story. Ask students to write notes, based on the questions, about the event or activity they will write about. (If they can't answer the questions themselves, they will have to do some research or ask other students who know the answers.)
4. After students have finished writing their notes, tell them to write their stories. (You can assign this for homework if there is not enough time for students to write the stories in class.)
5. When students have finished writing their stories, have them read examples of headlines from articles they discussed in previous activities. Talk about which of the question words are answered by the headlines. Then ask students to write headlines for their own stories.
6. When students have finished writing their headlines, you can ask for volunteers to read their news stories to the class, or you can have pairs of students read each other's stories. You can also display the stories in the classroom or collect them and publish them in a class newspaper.

### Alternate Writing Assignment: Letters to the Editor

This activity works well as a follow-up to an introductory overview of newspapers. (See Lesson 1.)

1. Introduce the topic, Letters to the Editor, and ask the class why someone might write a letter to the editor about a newspaper story. Ask whether anyone in the class has ever written a letter to a newspaper editor (or knows anyone who has). Explain that the letters often refer to newspaper articles that were published in the paper recently, not in the issue in which the Letter to the Editor is printed. (If you examine an actual Letter to the Editor in class, most likely, the students will not have read the article that the letter refers to.) You should also discuss the fact that many Letters to the Editor are written in response to controversial subjects reported in news stories or to opinions expressed in editorials (opinion pieces that the editors of a newspaper write about a topic).

2. Ask the students to find the Letters to the Editor page of the newspaper. (If you have a limited number of Letters to the Editor pages for a class to share, you can have students work in small groups.) Have students read two or three Letters to the Editor and then discuss the letters. Ask students to consider the following:

- Was the letter well-written and easy to understand?
- Was the letter interesting? Why or why not?
- Did the writer of the letter express an opinion? If so, what is the writer's opinion?
- Does the writer give facts to support his/her opinion?
- What can you tell about the original article (if you haven't read it) by reading the letter? What was the perspective of the article or the person who wrote it?
- Do you believe the writer of the letter? Do you agree with the writer? Why or why not?

Ask the groups to make comments to the class about one or two of the letters they read.

3. Inform the students that they will write their own individual Letters to the Editor. Tell the students that they can select any newspaper article that they have already read in previous lessons, or they can choose a story from the newspapers being used in this activity. The story can be one that interests the students or makes them react in a positive or negative way. The letters need to be approximately 25 to 75 words in length.

4. When the students have finished writing their letters, ask them to compare letters with a partner, who will try to help correct grammar and spelling mistakes. Walk around the classroom and assist the pairs when they ask you. After receiving feedback from their partners, students rewrite their letters, making corrections and revisions.

5. Ask for volunteers to read their partner's Letter to the Editor to the class. Or, as an alternative, you could collect all the letters and re-distribute them at random to allow the pairs (or small groups) to read and discuss the letters.

### Lesson 3: Interviews

Interviews are a common feature of newspapers. This lesson can be carried out as a class assignment by itself, or it can be made part of a larger project. Either way, conducting an interview and writing it up provide for practice in listening, speaking, and writing skills.

Interviews can be carried out among the students in one classroom only, or the students can go outside the classroom to interview students in other classrooms, teachers, school administrators, parents or other relatives, neighbors, or public officials.

## Interview Activity A: Class Interviews

This is a controlled activity since the teacher can oversee all aspects of it and can guide the students in their selection of questions. This format is appropriate for a low-level language class; yet it provides the opportunity for students to produce “real” language and to learn about each other.

1. Divide the class into pairs. Have the students in each pair take turns interviewing each other. (See Sample Interview Questions below.) Instruct students to listen carefully and to take notes as they interview their partners.
2. When both students have finished interviewing each other, tell them to write up their interviews. Interviews can be written up in question-answer format, or the answers can be paraphrased in paragraph form.

### Sample Interview Questions

The following questions can be used with either a class interview or an out-of-class interview. Write the questions on the blackboard. Tell students to choose among them or to adapt the questions to fit the person they plan to interview.

1. What is your full name? Is there a story about why you were given this name?
2. Where were you born? Where have you lived most of your life?
3. What do you like about living in this city?
4. What are your favorite things to do on a weekend or holiday?
5. Do you have a favorite actor, author, or musician? Why do you like that person?
6. What type of music do you enjoy most: rock, folk, classical?
7. What is your favorite subject (class) in school?
8. What do you plan to do after graduation?
9. What would you like to be doing ten years from now?
10. Do you have a hero? Who is it? Why do you like this person?
11. If you won the lottery, what would you do with the money?

## Interview Activity B: Interviews Outside of Class

This activity can also be guided by the teacher, but the actual interview will take place away from the classroom. That requires more language skill than an in-class student interview, and it is an excellent way to bring new information into the classroom. Students might give oral reports as well as written reports of their interviews. They can use the sample interview questions or write their own interview questions. To ease the difficulty of conducting interviews, students could work in pairs on one interview.

If students decide to interview outside the classroom, here are some steps for them to follow:

1. Tell the interviewee that you are interviewing for a class assignment and would like to include him/her. Ask the person for permission to write up the interview for the teacher and the rest of the class members.
2. If possible, bring a tape recorder and ask the interviewee if you can tape the interview. (Do not tape anyone without permission.) Even if you tape the interview, listen carefully and take notes during the interview.
3. After the interview, carefully listen to the tape several times, writing down the exact words that the interviewee said. This will be the transcription that you use to write up the interview.

If you could not tape the interview, review the notes you took during the interview while the interview is still fresh in your mind. Make corrections and add to your notes as you remember additional information. If a partner helped you conduct the interview, compare your notes with your partner's before you write up the interview.

4. Decide whether you will write the interview in a question-and-answer format, or whether you will write a short article, paraphrasing the interviewee.
5. Before turning in the written report to the teacher, show it to the person you interviewed so that he/she can see if it accurately portrays his/her views.

## Lesson 4: Creating a Class Newspaper

The creation of a class newspaper is a project that can easily be adapted to the students' interests and abilities whether they be oral skills such as interviewing, written skills such as writing stories, or artistic skills such as drawing or creating cartoons. Students can work in groups or individually. The project can be small or large, and it can take a few days or several weeks, depending on the language level of the students, the size and scope of the newspaper, and the technology available to the teacher and students.

### Teacher Preparation Before Introducing the Project

#### Questions to Consider

What's the best **format**? Before introducing this project to students, determine how you might be able to copy the newspaper. Will the students write it by hand? Will they be able to use a computer? If there is a computer, can you print and make copies? Do you have the ability to scan a drawing onto a disk or to photocopy a drawing? Do you have access to a photocopier? Will you need to pay for making copies? What size of paper is appropriate to use? How will you assemble the pages? The answers to these questions will determine the way you present the project to the students.

Who is the **audience**? This audience for a newspaper can be the students in the class, students in other English classes in the school, the whole school, parents, or people outside the school. (Who the intended audience is might be linked to how easy it will be for you to reproduce the newspaper.)

How much **time** will you spend on this project? It could be several days or several weeks, depending on how much time you have to work on it. The lesson below is divided into stages. You might use one or several stages in each class period, depending on the amount of time you have.

### Stage 1: Planning the Project

1. Explain to students that their project is to write their own newspaper.
2. Ask the class to decide who the audience is. Do they want to write the newspaper to show to the whole school? Do they want to write it to share with another English class? Do they want to write it just for their own class use?
3. Have students choose a name for the newspaper, or make a list of possible names to be decided on later.
4. Ask students which sections they want their newspaper to have, and write these on the board. Discuss what might be in each section. This can be based on their previous analysis of newspapers.
5. Ask students for volunteers to work on each section of the newspaper. You may have several students work together on a section. One group or person needs to design the front page and newspaper's nameplate. They can also decide on whether the final layout will be in one column or several. (This may depend on the type of technology used to produce the final version of the newspaper.)
6. Give students time to work in their section groups to draft a list of what they want to include and how they plan to get the necessary information. Go around to each group as they are talking, and assist them with forming ideas. Be sure that their ideas are appropriate for this project (for instance, they probably cannot travel to find a story or pay for any information).
7. As they work together, students need to keep in mind who their audience is and decide what kind of information would be interesting for that audience. If the newspaper is only for their class, they might only include stories about their classmates. Alternately, they may decide to write stories about national or international events. Let the students decide.

### Stage 2: Getting the Information/Writing Drafts

In their section groups, students begin to work on collecting information and writing drafts. Each section will have different types of tasks. For example, students who need to interview people will have to write interview questions. Some students may be drawing or writing comic strips. Some may need to review other newspapers or written sources for information to write about. Some may need to collect information about local events.

**CAUTION:** It is very important that students write their own material and not copy something from the Internet or from another printed article or story.

**NOTE:** Having students work in groups on different assignments can be difficult. Some groups may work quietly and easily together. Some groups may be very noisy. Some groups may work quickly and efficiently, while others may be slow. You may need to plan alternate work for groups who finish before others. You may also need to make rules for how to work together.

This stage could be completed as homework if you do not have time to work on it in class.

### Stage 3: Checking the Drafts and Rewriting

As groups finish writing drafts, ask them to give their drafts to other students to read and respond to. The other students might have questions about the meaning, or they might suggest corrections in vocabulary or grammar. The writers can decide whether to accept the feedback or not; then they will rewrite the stories accordingly.

As the teacher, you can collect drafts and give feedback to writers.

Remind students that they will be giving their newspaper to other people, so they will want it to be well written. Encourage them to do as much rewriting as possible.

### Stage 4: Putting the Newspaper Together

If you have the use of computers, you can select some of the students to use the computers to write the articles from the drafts provided by their classmates. If there are illustrations, they may need to be scanned into the computer. Otherwise, illustrations or cartoons could be copied on a photocopier.

Determine how many copies of the finished newspaper you want to make.

When your newspaper is finished, distribute copies to other classes, to parents, and to school administrators.