

Using Newspapers in the Classroom: A Personal Experience

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Abstract

In a country like Malaysia, where the medium of instruction is Bahasa Malaysia (the national language), English is taught as a second language in the national school system. As such, it comes as no surprise that many of the students who enter university lack the reading and writing skills required to complete their course of study. This has prompted the local public universities to conduct English language courses for their undergraduates. At MARA University of Technology, as part of the graduating package, students are required to undergo various English language programs, ranging from proficiency to ESP courses. While they were in the public school system, these students rarely practiced their ability to read in English outside the English language classroom. Many of them did not even take the trouble to read the local English dailies! This article is the result of classroom experience in which English language newspapers were used to encourage functional literacy in English among the students. At the same time, the students were also provided with the necessary experience to improve their reading skills, enhance their knowledge of current issues and improve their writing skills.

Introduction

Almost all the students who enter the university are literate in English; that is, they are able to read in English but many of them are not in the habit of actually using this ability to practice reading outside the demands of the ESL classroom. Hence, functional literacy is confined to reading so as to be able to answer comprehension questions, complete grammar-based exercises, or write a composition/essay. Occasionally, if core subject reference materials are not available in the national language (Bahasa Malaysia), students read books and journals in English to obtain content related-knowledge. As for survival literacy, they are generally content to carry on using their literacy in Bahasa Malaysia, given the fact that almost everyone in the university can communicate in the national language.

The objective of this article is to share an enriching classroom activity called the 'Reading Project', which can be introduced and managed on an on-going basis using any of the local English language newspapers. The main objective is to encourage the students to read any of these local English dailies. At the same time, students are provided with the opportunity to improve their reading skills as well as enhance their knowledge of current issues.

Begin the semester by introducing newspapers into the ESL classroom. Get the students to buy at least one copy of the newspaper per week – usually the Sunday edition of the English daily of your choice. Then talk to them about the advantages of reading newspapers, especially how such on-going reading can help them develop reading, writing, grammar and vocabulary skills. Besides this, also talk to them about the importance of developing schemata so as to widen their general knowledge. Explain to them that reading is a critical skill that is essential for the undergraduates, not only in preparing them for the various English language examinations, but also for ensuring their academic success. Stress the fact that by developing their reading skills, they can better articulate/discuss ideas as well as read and understand a variety of texts. They can also internalize a full range of world background knowledge, language conventions and vocabulary by exposure through reading. Also point out to them that in an academic setting like a university, it is essential to develop their reading skills because they have to carry out research work and write assignments, term papers and reports. And finally, emphasize the fact that if they want to excel, their reading must go beyond the content lecturers' notes and recommended textbooks. They must read journals and reference books as well as related information available on the Internet, all of which are in English. Therefore, there is a dire need not only to

equip themselves with the necessary reading skills but also to train themselves to read and understand texts independently.

Then introduce the on-going Reading Project. The introduction of the Reading Project, if planned well, can take up a whole two-hour lesson. To share this activity with teachers and teaching professionals, a detailed description of how this Reading Project can be introduced and managed is given below.

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