

# Using CNN News Video in the EFL Classroom

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CNN at low levels? It can't be done. It is too difficult. The reporters speak too fast, the content is too complex and the vocabulary is too difficult. This is true for some TV news reports, but certainly not all of them. With careful selection and some very simple techniques news reports can become accessible to even the lowest levels. At Simul Academy in Japan, we successfully use news reports at all levels from pre-interpreting to the falsest of false beginners and we have found that generally it is not the report that matters so much as the way that we use it. In this paper I present some ideas that anyone can use at any level to stimulate interest, guide students to understanding, encouraging them to try to listen to news programs in English and foster a more global view of the world.

## Programs

Why CNN? Well it is the most influential news source on the face of the planet. The enormous impact of CNN on news media in recent years cannot be underestimated. It has global recognition as a quality information source, used by presidents and government ministers world wide. CNN programming contains a huge variety of material on any topic and of any length that you could ever wish to deal with in a classroom. Perhaps best of all, CNN provides transcripts for most of its shows at

<http://www.CNN.com/TRANSCRIPTS/index.html>

Below I have listed some of the programs I find most useful with a general description of the program content. More information can be found at the CNN website:

<http://www.CNN.com>

## Program Content

### Travel Watch

Profiles of different countries, places of interest and general travel information. Pacing is slow and clear and the vocabulary level is relatively low.

### Future Watch

Deals with a huge variety of topics, all concerned with the future of society in different parts of the world.

### Business Asia

Focuses on Asian issues and the business community in general. Gives good explanations of complex business situations.

### CNN Headline News

Short, up to date reports on what is happening around the world. Also has longer reports on breaking news and events as they happen.

### Larry King

Interviews with a variety of people from Magic Johnson to Hillary Clinton and Tom Cruise.

## **Entertainment Today**

News and information on everything in the entertainment field: movies, music, stars and gossip.

## **Earth Watch**

Covers all things environmental. Often has longer reports that can split into smaller sections. Topics include commercials, exercise machines, hotels, restaurants and cleaning products. Fun for short listening exercises.

## **Infomercials**

Short pieces about how CNN works, the UN and its work and mini-films about other organizations. Great for background information and short listenings.

## **CNN Presents**

Hour long programs with in-depth reports on the same theme. Reports are generally ten to fifteen minutes long but can often be edited. These programs would be useful to a theme-based or content-based course, or for more extensive listening.

## **Crossfire**

Fiery discussion program with highly opinionated representatives from the right and the left. This program is useful for showing students what a lively discussion is. They do not have to understand what is being said, just watch the dynamic way in which the participants speak to each other. Great for presenting pragmatics, interruption techniques, clarification and other discussion skills.

## **Report Content**

The content of the programs you use in class is important and should depend primarily on your students interests and background knowledge. The content of reports can be either a turn-on or a turn-off for the class. If it is too far outside their experience, students may switch off. Students often tell me they can't understand reports because they do not know anything about the content. They feel more comfortable listening to content that is familiar and that they can make predictions about. In linguistic terms, they need to have schemata available to help them comprehend the information presented. Because of this, it is worthwhile asking students about their interests, or giving them a choice of which reports they would like to work with since this is a way of having them predict report content and activate schemata before they watch, as well as giving them some responsibility over course content (Cook, 1989). Negotiating the content of the class in this way will ensure that interest is piqued by the time you actually present the class with the report and will ensure that the content of your class is more relevant to the learners (Nunan 1988). Given the choice, students are more likely to choose something that they find very interesting, or already know something about rather than something that is completely alien.

When one of my low-intermediate class were choosing a video recently, they started to ask each other questions about what the videos could be about and what content they might have. They were immediately engaged in the topic, they were predicting the content of the video and were visibly excited by being given the opportunity to choose their own listening material. When I played the video, I noticed that they were concentrating very hard on the content. Despite the difficulty of the report, the students engaged in prediction of content, gist listening, listening for specific information and concluded the lesson with a lively discussion on the topic at the focus of the report. I think that had I not given them the choice, their involvement in the lesson may have been less intense.

## **Report Length**

Using reports longer than 3-4 minutes is inadvisable with lower level students. In fact longer reports are also frustrating for higher level students. The problem seems to be that students concentrate a great deal on news reports because of the information density and speed. This seems to take a great deal of mental energy and they can't seem to keep this up for more than a few minutes. Students do become frustrated when they can't understand all the main ideas but there are several ways to deal with this.

## **Use Short Reports**

Shorter does not automatically mean easier but using shorter reports can help concentrate attention. CNN produces many reports that are less than two minutes long. A lot of these reports are snippets of news stories that are developing at the present time. Collected together, they can make an interesting series of similar reports with minor differences. Students can then be asked to spot the difference between the reports. Other short reports contain entertaining stories that are often a little more quirky than longer reports. These may be useful for younger learners, or as light relief from an overly serious class.

Another kind of short report used is the CNN Headline-style group of very short (one or two sentence) summaries of current international situations. Earth Matters has a similar group of short reports called The Reel. These are useful for gist viewing. The task of identifying the general news stories on one playing and then identifying specifically what new developments are being reported in a second and third playing can be a very satisfying experience in itself and need only take fifteen or twenty minutes of class time.

Commercials can be used in a number of ways. I have found that playing them without the picture (remove the yellow cord at the rear of the TV set) two or three times and having students listen for what the product is, and then playing it again with the picture for students to confirm their answers works well.

One of the main problems I have encountered with short reports is the lack of context. They are often so short that students do not have enough information, alternative vocabulary or visual information with which to comprehend the report. Another problem is that the content of the reports can be vacuous. There may be little in the report that can be used for follow-up activities, or little useful information. This lack of practicality or connection to the rest of the lesson can leave students with the feeling that they have done something purposeless.

## **Break The Video Up Into Shorter Sections**

Video news reports are highly organized. There is a set, definable introduction that tells you the gist of what you are going to watch. There is often an explanation of the history of a problem, or a description of a problem and its causes. This can be followed by a series of opinions on the subject and/or a description of a possible solution or alternative solutions. Reports always have some closing remarks that explain the outlook for the future or the attitude of the reporter. Identifying these sections before you use a report in class and using only one section at a time enables you present students with manageable chunks of listening material (Ur, 1984). This is particularly useful when you have a longer 7-15 minute report. One way of identifying sections is to look for discourse markers (Cook, 1989). Often groups of discourse markers occur together: time expressions when talking about the history of a problem, cause and effect markers when describing a problem and opinion markers when experts, or people in the street are interviewed. Drawing students attention to these sections and markers can help them follow the flow of the report.

## **Only Use Part Of A Report**

News reports are patched together from many different pieces of tape and are made to be easily edited. CNN often uses different versions of the same report to fill up different time slots in their programming schedule or to fit the purposes of different programs. In the class we can do the same. You can use only the historical profile of a problem, only the opinions given, or only the introduction to the report.

## **Set A Task Before Students Watch The Video**

Asking questions after watching the video is more like a memory test than a way of helping students understand the content of the report. Setting the task before they watch enables students to focus on particular words or ideas expressed. It is almost like a treasure hunt: the students have to search for the answers while they are listening (Ur, 1984).

## **Teach Note-Taking Strategies**

Note-taking is a very useful skill for students to acquire if they are going to do any kind of extensive listening. It is essentially an aid to memory that helps students to remember what they have listened to by keeping track of what words or ideas they have heard and

noticed. Having information in an accessible visual form using key words, abbreviations and symbols organized in a meaningful way gives students added support when dealing with material that they find difficult to hear.

Furthermore, if they become accomplished note-takers students may find that they can write down representations of words that they have heard but do not know the meaning of. This can be useful in self-study since they can then try to access a dictionary or use the information given around the word to help them understand its meaning.

## **Techniques and Activities**

Ur (1984), Rost (1991) and Cooper and Rinvulcri (1991) all provide a huge number of ideas for using audio and video recordings. I will describe some that I have used in class that I think may be useful to teachers starting out with television news in the classroom.

## **Vocabulary And Schemata Generation**

Before watching news videos it is useful to generate a list of vocabulary, concepts, people, places and events that are relevant to the report. If these are made salient before listening, students have more of a chance of understanding what the report is about.

Brainstorming schemata is one way to do this. Introduce the general topic of the report and have students generate all the vocabulary and other information they know about the topic. Writing this information on the board helps share all the information students generate and creates a pool of resources that can support them when they come to listen to the report.

Playing the video without sound (remove the red and white cords from the rear of the TV set or turn the volume down to zero) can also generate a lot of vocabulary. Teachers can aid the process of vocabulary generation by asking questions as students watch the pictures: Who is that? What are they doing? What is this? What is happening here? Where is this? Why are they doing that? Alternatively have students in pairs sit back to back: one watching the screen, the other facing the back of the class. Have the watchers describe what is on the screen to their partner. Play the video once or twice asking students to improve on their description of the video each time. Pausing at important parts or playing the video in slow motion can help by giving students more time to think about vocabulary items and what they are going to say.

After a list of words and phrases has been generated have students listen to the report and simply check off which words they actually hear. A further listening could concentrate on which other words they hear. This can be an introduction to note-taking skills.

When students are more familiar with news material, the introduction to the report can be used to generate predictions about what the body of the report contains. All news reports have an introduction. It can vary a lot in length, but it usually tells either exactly what is in the report, or presents a teaser. Both of these are useful for teaching purposes in that they can help students to predict what the content of the report might be, activating schemata useful to comprehending the report. Schemata unconnected to the report content may also be generated. This presents an opportunity for another listening exercise: check which of the items you have mentioned appear in the report. In effect students generate their own true or false exercise.

Introductions are usually only two or three sentences long and generally use vocabulary relevant to the report making them ideal for dictation or dictogloss exercises. Dictogloss is a very simple text reconstruction technique where a sentence is played once and students are asked to reconstruct it as close to the original as possible. Working from pairs, then combining pairs into groups and so on until the whole class is working on the reconstruction (Davis & Rinvulcri, 1984). I have adapted this to deal with longer introductions by playing the tape twice and having students discuss what they heard in between playings. Introducing this kind of exercise helps to strike a balance between top-down and bottom-up approaches to listening.

## **Gist Listening**

With classes more used to news video, simply ask a question like, What is the topic of this report?, What event is the focus of this report?, Who is at the center of this report and why? This is a much more hands-off approach but can generate a lot of discussion after just one viewing, especially if students are aware of the importance of using the visual information to help them understand the content. This should enable students to get general idea of what the report is about before moving on to more specific listening tasks.

# Listening For Detail

Once students have done any of the above, they should have a good idea of what the report is about and should be ready to move on to some more focused listening.

## Numbers

In reports that have a lot of numbers, have students divide their page in two lengthwise, put the heading numbers on one side and refers to on the other. Have students first listen for only the numbers, on a second playing have them listen for what they refer to. For lower classes or faster reports, stop the tape after the relevant part of the report and replay it if necessary. If there is disagreement about which numbers appear in the report, treat it as a discrimination exercise. Put the possible numbers on the board and have students listen for which one is actually said.

## Time Expressions

In chronologically ordered reports or sections of reports that deal with the history of a situation, have students divide their page in two and take notes on time expressions and event. Follow the same procedure as for numbers above.

## Opinions: Positive or Negative?

In reports that include opinions on the topic of focus, have students indicate whether each opinion is positive or negative. Subsequent listenings can deal with more detailed analysis if necessary.

## References

Some reports use a lot of references. If you have time, you can isolate the parts of the report that contain them and make up a worksheet exercise asking students to identify what they refer to. Again you can stop the tape and replay sections or play the tape straight through depending on how much support your students need.

## Vocabulary

I am amazed at how often students say, I heard X. What does it mean? A simple exercise is to play the tape and have students find words they do not know. Students can guess how to spell these words using only the sound and then can either use dictionaries to try to find out the meanings of the words, try to work out what they mean from the context of the report, or ask the teacher what they mean.

## Connections Between Ideas

Isolating key terms from the report and asking students to make connections between them is a useful way of having students focus on the structural expressions between content words. Alternatively, provide the linking words and have students fill in the key vocabulary from the report.

## Have Students Generate Their Own Questions

What do the students want to know? What did they have difficulty hearing? Ask them. Students can generate a list of up to ten questions that may or may not be answered in the report. On a first listening for this exercise, have students say whether each question was answered or not. On the second have them search for answers to the questions, and check answers that they have already. These questions might be open or closed, content based or language based. Students might also be encouraged to ask more detailed questions like What did the woman who was interviewed say? This exercise can keep going with students generating ideas until they have extracted all the meaning they need from the report.

## Follow-Up Activities

With news material, it is important to have some kind of follow-up to listening. Presenting the material as is without some kind of examination of the issues presented does not give students a chance to think about the issues for themselves. Furthermore, every news station has an editorial policy and individual reporters have beliefs that come through in their reports. Because of this, issues such as bias and tone of the report can and should be discussed as a follow-up where possible.

Is the report pessimistic or optimistic? Uplifting or depressing? How did the reporters speak? Were they sarcastic, serious, belittling, genuine or reverent? In a report with two sides, how much time was given to each side? What kind of images were used in the report? What message did they give? What kind of language was used in the report? Was it strong or moderate? Was music used in the report? What effect did it have?

## **Summarizing or Retelling The Report**

Having students retell or summarize the report is a useful way of checking comprehension and closing the lesson with a holistic activity that brings together all the information they have heard and all the exercises completed. Alternatively, use the video with picture only, and have the students add a sound track to it. To encourage attention to detail you can play this in slow motion or to encourage speed of delivery, play at normal speed. Giving students control of the speed is another option but often difficult to accomplish.

## **Reacting To The Report**

Students written or spoken reactions to the report should tell you if they comprehended what they were listening to. More controversial reports can generate a lot of discussion and may even lay the foundation for longer term projects. Providing a list of discussion questions, or asking students to ask each other questions about the issues presented in the report can encourage students to use and expand on what they have just listened to.

Debates using the controversy in a report to have students can help students examine the issues in more detail. Divide the class into the different parties represented in the report and have them represent those views as a role-play or formal debate. You may wish to have students research the issues behind the report more before debating the issues.

## **Conclusion**

CNN reports and programming from other TV news broadcasters can be used in the EFL classroom with a little thought on the part of the teacher as to how to support students and how to make the material accessible to them. It is easy to find, manageable, timely and interesting. Because news is constantly changing and goes out of date quite quickly, it is more useful for teachers to learn techniques and activities to use with a wide variety of reports rather than making labor intensive worksheets which may be unusable next time around. Teaching students how to deal with the barrage of information presented in news reports through schemata activation, prediction, confirmation, note-taking and a combination of top-down and bottom-up exercises can help to increase students confidence in their ability to understand TV news and may even stimulate them to access this huge resource by themselves.

## **A Note On Copyright**

Different countries have different laws. Some are stricter than others so you should check on the details in your own country before using any recorded material such as movies, news media, songs, or other audio recordings. In Japan, the general rule appears to be that you can use copyrighted material, as long as by doing so you are not taking money away from the original producers. The law is vague and can be interpreted in a number of ways. To be sure that you are not infringing copyright laws, you should consult a lawyer. (Simons 1995)

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