

How Could Learning through English News Be Facilitated for College Freshmen?

Chang, Chi-Yu

Associate Professor, Department of Applied English, Ming Chuan University

Abstract

English for journalism is often meant to meet the needs of potential journalists and English learners (Kimura 1995; Evans 2000; Hicks 2008; Knight 2010). A news English class during the fall semester in 2017 is characterized by text and context comprehension drill. It aims to develop its students' English ability with intensive exposure to varied topics. With 66 students signing up, most of whom were freshmen and Mandarin speakers in college, the class was divided into "orientation" and "hands-on activities". This paper is thus intended to discover whether these participants were approaching the goal they had been expected to achieve and to find out what might matter to learning. When approaching the end of the semester, they were invited to a Likert scale survey containing 30 statements (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.958$). The results show that 95% of the respondents agree that this class is of much help in reading, 88.7% in writing, 86.3% in listening, and speaking in 75%. However, according to the survey, the role of the teacher in charge wins strongest approval ratings (96.95%

on average) especially in such aspects as sufficient preparations for lessons, classroom management differing from that in most other classes, effectiveness in helping students think differently in English, and topic diversity in the updates selected for pedagogical purposes. Most survey responses agree that the effort made by the teacher not simply facilitated learning but helped motivate the students to learn. In short, the case suggests a course across two disciplines – English and Journalism – can help college freshmen grow professionally and attitudinally if its teacher chooses to get fully engaged in a creative manner.

**Keywords: Hands-on Practice, Learner Autonomy,
Classroom Management, English as a Medium of
Instruction (EMI)**

Introduction and Literature Review

The course observed for this research is called *Journalism English*, an elective class taught during the fall semester of the 2017-18 academic year, with an objective to especially drill English majors in reading. It is also expected to help train Freshmen learners for broader worldviews, better English in grammar, and higher proficiency in comprehension of news stories. Compared with core courses like those of reading, writing, and oral communication, it is a big class regularly consisting of 60 to 70 students. To manage it in a more efficient way, its teachers would usually have to choose certain teamwork patterns to facilitate teaching and learning. The pedagogical effectiveness and learning outcomes in such non-core courses have thus left doubts to be dispelled. No matter how peripheral it seems, a class in itself characterized by two disciplines – English and Journalism – means something to both teachers and learners.

Despite the aforementioned downsides, the teacher responsible for the course in question then attempted to bring in an innovated mode, which was assumed to better help his students to learn, not just for reaching the course aims but for flipping the way one used to teach it. He took three measures that appeared relatively unique out of those adopted by his colleagues in the Department of Applied English. First, he replaced one-way instruction with bi-lateral exchanges of ideas with his students. Secondly, he spent more time before class thinking twice on the assigned texts so that he would be able to guide his students by way of content-oriented foci without having to rely on any PPT slides; all teaching memos on the classroom board were creatively developed and spontaneously demonstrated to facilitate the orientation for learners.

Thirdly, he managed to raise the attendance rate by collecting classroom participants' feedback every time in class (weekly learning logs/journals by teamwork) instead of giving a roll call. Besides, in his class, all students were expected to use English all the time although this was not a must for them; at all events, he would always express himself in plain but precise English, which was intended to help improve his student's ability to think in English. The teacher had also been aware that average freshmen might feel bewildered and easily get exhausted, so most of the news stories he assigned were not that intimidating in length and not too incomprehensible to read. The hands-on activities he designed were divided into two parts – argumentation practice and sentence imitation. The former required the students to figure out potential perspectives and argue for themselves by quoting pieces of evidence from the assigned news texts. It is because arguments as an art to convince and persuade others require necessary citations to serve as supporting points (Gardiner 2008). The latter aimed to improve the students' command of grammar in writing. In this class, no written tests would be required; instead, the teacher would pay intensive attention to his students' feedback performance and spend much more time reviewing it after class and giving helpful comments when in class.

Not much research has been found focused on how classroom learners in college could better learn English through a course of news reading. The fact that such classes in whatever course titles are often offered by English departments helps justify why the topic of this research is worth exploration. Numerous textbooks have been published to cater to the needs of English learners and journalism learners. For example, English writing skills and reporting as a profession could be

considered two important approaches to journalism English (Kimura 1995). Reporting and editing news stories are a profession with its potential to reveal or distort the facts, which is also a matter of grave concern to the career of English users and journalism practitioners (Cotter 2010). To a certain degree, to become a more qualified journalist, one cannot afford to ignore refinement in English writing (Evans 2000). To be more specific, journalism in the English context is a practical skill to help make messages readable (Hicks 2008); surely the skill is also what English majors are expected to be equipped with.

On the other hand, journalistic writing, defined as an approach to better communication, could be improved through rhetoric techniques in English (Knight 2010). Although what news is about and how it can be more effectively and efficiently presented through the mass media are what matters to journalism, what underpins this profession has held much in common with those emphasized in the techniques of English writing (Susan and Featherstone 2005). Journalistic techniques should have been valued in an English department because they are believed to help one better think and communicate (NCTE 2004). However, from the perspective of a peripheral English-speaking country like Ghana, the ability to communicate and present in precise English has been more emphasized than “media knowledge” (Fosu 2011: 52-53). Even in the United States, the problem about insufficient drills in English grammar with journalism students has drawn much attention (Grow 2006).

Methodology

The teacher in charge of the class in question, with a Ph.D. degree of liberal arts, has been working as a full-time associate professor for nearly 16

years at a university in Northern Taiwan. This was the first time he taught a class entitled *Journalism English* although his dissertation is exactly about American reportage on cross-cultural issues. Besides facilitating teaching and learning, he kept alert to whatever feedback and reaction from the classroom participants. The inspiration to design specific survey questions was drawn from his impressions of what was going on during class.

There were 66 students taking the class, most of whom were English majors as college freshmen. Among the 44 survey respondents (the response rate=67%),¹ 18,2% of them were sophomores or above, while 81.8% (n=36) were freshmen. There was only one native speaker of English among all respondents. Only one respondent was the native speaker of English, while 93.2% (n=41) of all respondents were Mandarin speakers. As to gender, 72.7% of the respondents are females (n=32), while 27.3% are males (n=12). The class was an elective course for freshmen, the number of whom usually took about 60; the quota that remained allowed a limited number of non-freshmen to sign up. In the first two weeks, the message regarding a survey to be conducted by the end of the semester was announced to all attendees and posted online through Moodle. Another two measures were taken to help raise the response rate. Although required to come to class on a specific day for the survey, the students were welcomed to fill it out outside of the classroom if an acceptable reason was proposed. Besides, every respondent was requested to leave his/her name and student ID numbers before completion of the survey for bonus marks with the teacher's promise that privacy would not be violated.

¹ If the two students who never showed up are excluded from the course takers, the response rate will increase up to 69%.

Facilitated by Google Forms and based on a 5-point Likert scale, the survey was intended to uncover potential pluses that could be conducive to learning. Since its results were already settled, now they can be retrieved only through the author's Google Drive account.² There were 30 questions in the survey, each expressed in the form of a statement in plain English. The first two questions respectively asked about what gender and status the respondents belonged to, and the 3rd question was about the mother tongue or official language they spoke. Question 18, 20, 21, 22, 23, and 24 suggested what the respondents thought of as instrumental to their learning. Q4 to Q 7 and Q13 to Q17 asked about how the respondents benefited from the class. Q9 to Q12 probed what characterized the class. Besides the 19th question, Q27 to Q30 referred to the teacher's qualities appreciated by the respondents. Q25 and Q26 were about the respondents' willingness to interact with the teacher during class. The reliability analysis of the survey through SPSS shows a high reliability (Cronbach's alpha coefficient=0.958) that helps make the results more convincing. Nevertheless, the positive factors expected to be explored in this research still need justification of their effectiveness. To follow a further study up with qualitative methods is worth taking into account, such as pretest, posttest, control group, and treatment group. As below is how the questions are generally classified:

TABLE 1

Factors To Be Explored	Questions	Factors To Be Explored	Questions
Personal Information (PI)	Q1-Q3	Teaching Materials (TM)	Q9-Q12
Teaching Factors (TF)	Q18-Q24	Teacher's Qualities (TQ)	Q27-Q30
Learning Outcomes (LO)	Q4-Q7, Q13-Q17	Learners' Interaction (LI)	Q25-Q26

² <https://goo.gl/forms/Zizfs6L6s8Ms12JM2>

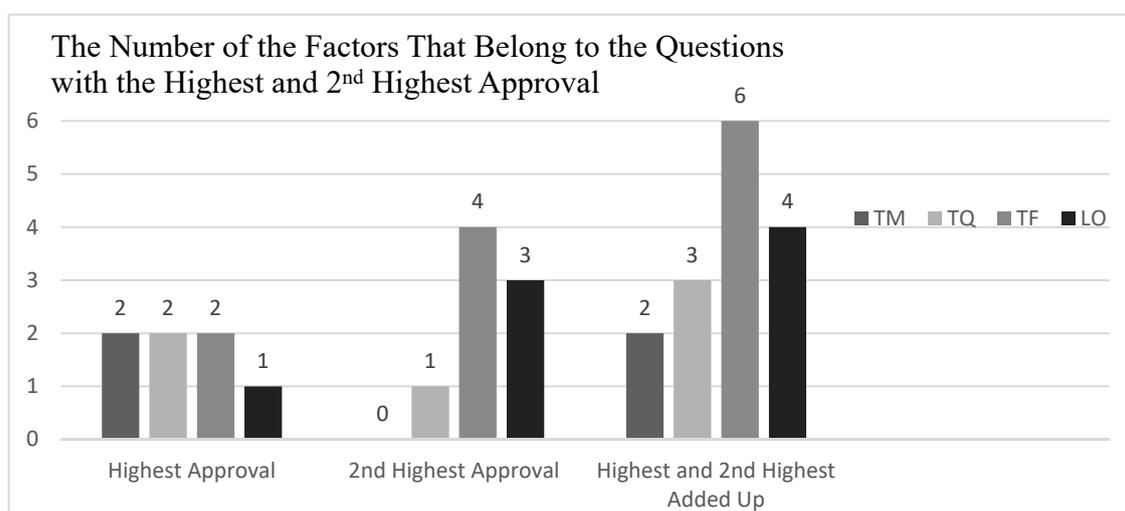
Results

To simplify the analysis and make the results easier understood, this case study finally added up the percentages from “strongly agree” and “agree” and saw both as “approval”; on the other hand, it added up those from “disagree” and “strongly disagree” and treated both as “disapproval”. Most percentages got from the neutral responses were lower than 12%; the only two exceptions were Q12 (20.5%, n=9), which mentioned “In general, the news stories selected for classroom use are not too long,” and Q5 (18.2%, n=8), which stated “The class helps me a lot in English speaking.” The lowest approval rate (75%, n=33) and the highest disapproval rate (6.8%, n=3) were also found in Q5, while the 2nd lowest approval rate (77.3%, n=34) was received in Q12.

Those receiving the highest approval rate (97.7%, n=43) included Q9 “In general, the topics selected for classroom use are new and updated,” Q10 “In general, the topics selected for classroom use belong to diverse and different fields,” Q17 “The class helps improve my ability to think in English,” Q19 “The teacher’s way of teaching differs from that of most other teachers in my department,” Q22 “The teacher’s way of teaching helps me think differently,” Q28 “The teacher makes me feel that he is well prepared for the class,” Q29 “The teacher makes me feel that he fully digests (absorbs) the news text to be discussed”, and Q30 “The teacher’s way of teaching is pretty much like suggesting how to act as an autonomous (independent) learner.” (Figure 1) Those receiving the 2nd highest approval rate (either 95.4% or 95.5%, n=42) were Q6 “The class helps me a lot in English reading,” Q13 “In general, the topics selected for classroom use help me think from different angles or viewpoints,”

Q15 “The class helps me better understand what a news text is about,” Q18 “The teacher helps me better understand what a news story is talking about,” Q21 “The teacher’s way of teaching helps me think deeper,” Q23 “The teacher’s guidance during class is very important to me,” Q24 “The teacher’s guidance during class makes me more willing to learn,” and Q27 “The teacher’s English sounds clear and understandable.” (Figure 1)

FIGURE 1



The rest of the relatively higher approval rates ranked from Q14 (93.2%, n=41) “This class helps broaden my horizons,” Q20 “The teacher’s way of teaching leaves not much stress (pressure) on me,” Q8 (90.9%, n=40) “The free app as my ‘textbook’, either English News or VOA Learning, is useful for classroom learning,” Q16 “The class helps improve my grammar,” Q7 (88.7%, n=39) “The class helps me a lot in English writing,” Q11 “In general, the news stories selected for classroom use are not too hard to read,” Q25 “During class, I like to talk with the teacher for advice,” Q4 (86.3%, n=38) “This class helps me a lot in English listening,” to Q26 “During class, I like to invite the teacher to be my working/walking partner.”

Discussion

High unanimity of the survey responses located at “approval” is obvious, while the responses located at “neutrality” and “disapproval” are rare. This helps free the research results from ambiguity. Under such a circumstance, those which slightly differ appear noticeable. Q5, for instance, despite receiving third-fourths of respondents who chose “approval” (with the percentage of “agree” 11.4% higher than that of “strongly agree”), led to relatively more voices that remain reserved about whether the class helped upgrade learners’ English speaking. Since the course of *Journalism English* was aimed at drilling students in reading and further expected to improve their English abilities, this result reflects what was exactly practiced during class; more time was spent and more activities were focused on reading the assigned texts, writing the feedback logs/journals, and listening to/watching onstage guidance. The aforementioned phenomena later became in proportion to how affirmative the responses were as those received in Q6 (regarding reading buildup; n=42 for “approval”; n=2 for “neutrality”), Q7 (regarding writing buildup; n=39 for “approval”; n=4 for “neutrality”), and Q4 (regarding listening buildup; n=38 for “approval”; n=5 for “neutrality”). This implies that more chances to talk during class could have been created for classroom participants if the teacher had placed equal weight on speaking activities.

Q11 and Q12 are similar in more responses located at “agree” than those at “strongly agree” although both questions respectively indicate that the length and difficulty of the chosen texts were fine with most respondents. Nevertheless, this implies that the teacher could have been more selective about the texts because not all freshmen in class had been in readiness for potential challenges. The survey voices which value what

was done in class (n=43 for “approval”) imply not only that the respondents most appreciated the teacher’s attempt to diversify and renew the assigned readings to be assured of equal emphasis on varied topics and current issues (Q9 and Q10) but also that the EMI policy and the teacher’s teaching methods jointly worked to support critical thinking in English (Q17, Q19, and Q22); besides, the teacher acted as a role model of learner autonomy shedding lights and inspiration on the respondents because he was really into and fully engaged in the lessons (Q28, Q29, and Q30). There were many responses whose number (n=42) is close to that of those receiving the highest approval rate. Such pieces of data imply that the respondents learned not only the English reading skill (Q6) but also the profession in journalism (Q15 and Q18), that the respondents benefited much in profound reasoning through multiple aspects from the lesson topics diversely chosen (Q13 and Q21), that the teacher was regarded as indispensable because the way he taught appeared learner-friendly and not so inaccessible (Q23 and Q27), and that the respondents became motivated to learn because of what the teacher did to help (Q24).

Other affirmative voices that supported the findings above can be found in the questions as follows. Q14, which shows that the students’ horizons were broadened, corresponds to Q9, 10, 13, 17, 19, 21, and 22. The 20th question, which shows that the way the teacher taught did not make the respondents feel stressful, corresponds to Q23 and 27. Q8, as aforementioned about teaching materials, corresponds to Q9, 10, 13, and 21. Regarding English skills, Q4, Q7 and 16 correspond to Q6. As corresponding to those questions concerned with the teacher’s role and how the teacher did to help classroom participants, both Q25 and Q26 imply that most students saw the teacher as an experienced expert able and willing to share knowledge and skills.

Conclusion

By and large, the average highest approval rate was received in the questions on the qualities which the teacher in charge was believed to have had, such as what he did to help during class and how the news stories were selected. This all the more explains how decisively important teachers and teachings are to young learners in college. In this study, freshmen participants are always in desperate need of guidance, so their teacher is expected to help to orient them toward the right track. No matter how “flipped” a classroom could be, the potential price to pay for could be surprisingly high if its teacher chooses to abstain from the role of a learning model.

What matters next is the selection of text materials, which can be put to effective and efficient use if it caters to the needs of specific students. Now that Taiwanese freshmen whose major is English at private universities are often found unable to engage themselves without much difficulty in a class characterized by EMI, and few of them are equally good at the four skills (speaking, reading, listening, and reading), the news stories to be used in the course of *Journalism English* were supposed to mostly cover current issues or/and those concerned with the youth. Then, teachers need to be more independent from any memos; this sounds similar to a situation where a confident, experienced, and well-prepared cook will rarely read the menu at the same time when cooking for a meal. In this case study, the teacher in charge neither bothered to read any notes that had been “prepared” before class nor applied any PPT slides to his teaching, while the students still highly appreciated what he taught and the way he taught and also believed he was well-prepared for lessons. In doing so, like playing it by ear, teachers

somehow will have to turn more or less “creative” for their own onstage survival before their students manage to survive the course.

What remains to be seen as one of the biggest challenges is how a teacher will be able to motivate and mobilize his/her students to learn. According to the case in question, a positive strategy is worth taking into consideration. That is, the teacher in charge would often like to create an equal environment where all participants were nothing less than working partners to each other. Whenever called to share and collaborate, he himself became a favor to his students, who were in a sense welcome to “take advantage of” the teacher to stand out from other teams for better performance and higher grade. The thing is that he tended to inspire them step by step instead of telling them an answer directly until they exhausted whatever errors which could have been made. Learner autonomy takes time, requires patience, and could be ultimately induced by teachers’ passion for teaching and willingness to try new ways of teaching.

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透過新聞英文來學習： 授課教師如何幫助大一新生提升課堂學習效果

張其羽

銘傳大學應用英語學系副教授

摘 要

新聞英文被指涉能兼顧滿足英語學習者與有志從事新聞工作者的學習需求 (Kimura 1995; Evans 2000; Hicks 2008; Knight 2010)。106 學年度上學期一門新聞英文課即以文本和情境理解訓練為特色，令學生密集涉獵多樣題材以培養其英文能力。該課程有 66 名學生修習，絕大多數是以中文為母語的大一新生；上課以教師定向開場，繼之以學生實作，包括造句模擬和論述徵引。職是，本研究意圖探究學生是否步入了專業習得的正軌，並且嘗試發掘正面的課堂學習要素。學期終了，該課程學生參與填答了一份李克特量表式問卷 (30 道題目；克隆巴赫信度係數 0.958)，結果顯示，學生普遍認為這門課程有助於英語文學習，依次分別為閱讀 (95%)、寫作 (88.7%)、聽力 (86.3%) 和口說 (75%)；相較於學習效果，學生對於授課教師扮演角色的認同度最高 (平均 96.95%)，像是備課充分、表達清晰易懂、課室經營別出新裁、有效提升學生英語多元思維，以及注意新聞題材揀擇的多元和時效等，並且認為任課教師的課堂引導能夠引發其學習動機。質言之，本研究案例顯示：跨學科課程 (如英文新聞) 教師如果致力於教學內容的安排、設計與執行而又能求新求變，將能幫助大一學生在專業和態度上有所成長。

關鍵辭：實作練習、自主學習、課堂經營、全英文教學