

Bringing Students' Media Reports to the EFL Classroom: Reflecting on Enhancing the Applicability of Psychology to Daily Life

Cindy J. Lahar

Over two decades ago Surlin (1977) argued that we should increase the use of mass media in the classroom in order to enhance teaching. It is difficult to determine what increase there has been in the last 20 years, but it is certainly not a new idea to bring media into the classroom. Through these decades there have been ample reports of media use in university courses. For example, Sorensen (1976) reported on a media project where students were asked to search popular media for items that fit the course content and then rate them for the relevance to the course. In the 1980's Ruppert (1983) described his requirement that students create media journals in his psychology courses. He noted that the journals not only increased opportunities for the students to see the relevance of psychology in the media, but also encouraged students to work on their reading and writing skills. Melamed (1989) has also called for increased use of media in classrooms across the curriculum, arguing specifically that media literacy is a skill that should be learned in college courses.

In this article I will describe my experiences of developing a course assignment which I have used at two different post-secondary educational institutions. I call the assignment Watch and Report and it is an assignment that aims to bridge classroom learning and daily life for students by having them watch for news items that are relevant to course topics. They are asked to report on the relevant media item to the class in a brief presentation. This has proven to be a valuable assignment for increasing critical thinking and for applying classroom learning to everyday experiences. I have found this to be true both in a large university in Canada and in a small college in Japan. Although the requirement was not originally conceived as a lesson in language learning, after using this assignment in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, I have come to see it also as a vehicle for language education. I have been pleasantly surprised at the language teaching potential that accompanied the teaching goals I originally had in mind when first using this assignment in Canada.

Background of the Watch and Report assignment

I began my university teaching career at a large university in Western Canada in the early 1990s. The model of teaching was, of course, traditional lectures accompanied by textbook readings. A major reason that lectures are the norm at this university is that the class sizes tend to be large. In the mid-1990s, educational budgets in Alberta were slashed and at the same time the number of students enrolled in the university was increased. The class sizes concomitantly increased in order to handle these changes. We were all faced with larger and larger class sizes.

For example, the first class in introductory psychology that I taught had 150 students enrolled in 1993 and 1994. The next year I taught the same course to 400 students. Likewise, the first year of a statistics and research methods class had 63 students enrolled. The next year there were 72 students in the course. The year I left Canada (1997), I taught the same course to 288 students in a single classroom (actually in a lecture theatre). I quickly realized that traditional lectures failed to offer daily applications of the materials I was teaching. I taught psychology classes, and many students are attracted to psychology because of the opportunity to learn about themselves or about applied aspects of course topics, yet they fail to take the step beyond the classroom and apply the theories and data that they learn in class to their daily lives.

One simple, yet powerful, addition to classroom lectures began as a challenge to myself during my first semester teaching a course in the Psychology of Adult Development. I always read the newspaper before leaving for work, and each day I noticed articles that related directly to the topics I was covering in class. I began to bring in a news item each day, and I started each class by discussing how the things going on in the local and world news were directly related to the things we were learning in class. For example, each day there were relevant news stories that described the demographics of our aging population, articles on retirement issues (e.g. pension plans, changes in health care, and adaptation to change), frequent news of medical advances in the areas of osteoporosis or heart disease, ample advances in Alzheimer's disease, many descriptors of death and the forces that surround death, and images of older adults (both good and bad). One specific example was a day that I was introducing the chapter on wisdom and intelligence in older adulthood. I found in my morning paper an article titled "Elders offering wisdom" (*Calgary Herald*, October 27, 1993). This article described an elders conference in the Yukon Territory and the importance of preserving the wisdom and knowledge held by the elders in the Yukon First Nations. This news article was the perfect introduction into the chapter material.

My simple challenge was easily accomplished. By the end of the semester, I had proven to my students, as well as to myself, that within a rather small sample (the daily *Calgary Herald*), I could find a relevant article each day that complimented class topics. With that first test under my belt, I expanded the challenge the next time I taught this class. In 1994, I challenged my students to join me in this exercise. Not only did I continue my daily search for news articles, but I also asked the students to do the same by bringing in media reports relevant to our class. I even made this a graded assignment and asked that each student make at least one report to the class during the term. I gave each student five percent toward their final grade for completing the assignment. The response was tremendous. More in-depth discussions ensued, even from the shiest of students. Creativity began to blossom in the students. Media reports became an expanded category—including video clips collected from the television, printouts from internet sites, articles from magazines, and many accompanying personal accounts of people and events related to older adulthood and development. The course evaluations were full of positive comments about the experience, providing me with encouragement to continue the challenge.

It was unfortunate that this class was faced with a particularly large increase in size. When the enrollment reached 200 in 1996, I was not able to conceive of a viable way of continuing this exercise as a graded assignment in the course.

Therefore, in response I returned to my personal exercise of bringing in news reports. I began each class with my report from the contemporary media. Some students also voluntarily brought items in, but because of the sheer number of students, it was not possible to give all students a turn at reporting what they had found. I hoped that my daily demonstration of finding a relevant article would help them see the application of classroom knowledge to the real world. For example, when I lectured on the physical changes in older adulthood, I believe it was made more meaningful when I brought a news article from that day's paper which offered some concrete solutions for handling the effects of aging on the human body (Wigod, 1996). I will never know how successful I was in this case. I did not directly assess student work, nor did I assess their opinions about these exercises. However, I did notice positive comments on teaching evaluations stating that students appreciated a chance to consider the relationship of the daily news to our class.

Thus far, I have been describing only the evolution of the student media assignment in a class on Adult Development and Aging. Certainly developmental psychology is a great venue for demonstrating the everyday application of classroom knowledge. In fact, other teachers have used similar assignments in developmental psychology classes. Ward (1985) used the media to assist students' understanding of Adolescent Psychology. He required students to observe some type of media (such as television) and watch for specific themes relevant to the course. It's not clear how these students reported their findings to the teacher or to the class, nor whether this was a graded assignment. Certainly finding bridges between the news and the classroom is not only useful for developmental psychology, but for almost any content course.

When I was developing the Watch and Report in that developmental psychology course, I was at the same time using this assignment in my other classes as well. Every area of psychology has some real-world context in which to frame the everyday nature of the lectures in terms of the external world. For example, even when I describe parts of a neuron or teach about neurotransmitter systems to introductory psychology students, I can easily pluck from the media some application of these materials to the students' lives. The news items in this case might relate to descriptions of recreational drug use or drug addiction or even an explanation of how a turkey dinner will lead to sleepiness. All of these things are directly related to neurotransmission in the brain. The fact is that biological, social, cognitive, health, and clinical psychology are all well represented in the news if one keeps an open eye.

Other psychology classes I have taught include courses on research methodology and statistics. One might think that in this area it would be more difficult to make use of the daily paper. However, again each day I can find ample statistical references in the news. There are of course charts, graphs, and statistics provided with many news stories. These can all be examined with a critical eye. Yet there is also applicability of methodological lecture topics. Consider the normal curve, indeed, most things around us are normally distributed. We select an orange from the produce section, and we look for the larger, or better-colored selections from hundreds that vary in size or in color from each other in a way that is normally distributed. The point is that beyond preparing students to be intelligent media consumers, it is useful to consistently demonstrate outside the classroom the applicability of those things learned in the classroom. For many years, researchers

have suggested that increased use of the media in the college classroom can enhance learning (see for example Kirsh, 1996; Kozma, 1991; Surlin, 1977). Furthermore, this is not simply a lesson for psychology topics, but for all liberal arts classes.

In 1998, I left Canada to work at Miyazaki International College (MIC) in Japan. MIC is a small liberal arts college that teaches psychology classes (among other disciplines) at all levels of the curriculum. Classes are very small compared to the ones I was teaching in Canada; therefore, I was able to return to using Watch and Report as a graded assignment in all my courses. Since one of this college's missions is to nurture global and environmental awareness in students, it seemed especially apropos to add the Watch and Report assignment because of the potential of helping students keep abreast of the local and global news. MIC teaches Japanese students in English, and the teaching of English skills is a critical aspect of the MIC curriculum. I recognized the Watch and Report as a potentially fruitful assignment in terms of building language skills in these students. Sagliano (1996) recognized a similar exercise as useful for language education as well. She asked students to present summaries of environmentally focused news articles in a first year philosophy course at MIC. The opportunity to read and prepare the presentation served to increase opportunities for learning English both in and outside of the classroom.

Thus, psychology is only one of many disciplines that has used media reports to supplement classroom learning. Furthermore, the use of the daily news has been found in language learning environments to assist in language education (see for example, Sagliano, 1996; Tiersky and Hughes, 1996). Now that I have required Watch and Reports from my students in a total of 8 courses at MIC, I agree with Sagliano (1996) on the possible benefits this type of assignment can have in an EFL classroom. See Box 1 for the description of the Watch and Report assignment that I use for my classes at Miyazaki International College. Box 2 provides an example of a recent report from a student in a first year course.

The Watch and Report Assignment

Students must watch for local or global news reports and select one that is related to course content to present (report) to the class. They should watch for any interesting newspaper articles, TV commercials or short news segments, advertisements or local stories that relate to the class topics. They are required to make a brief (3-5 minute) oral presentation about the news item and also to state its relevance to the class topics. They should bring in handouts for all class members that, whenever possible, includes a photocopy of the news item. In most classes, students complete two Watch and Reports during the semester.

Each class session begins with the Watch and Reports that were scheduled for that day. The schedule of all Watch and Reports is handed out at the beginning of term and usually includes reports from two students for each class meeting. The teacher(s) models the expectations for the Watch and Reports by actually demonstrating the assignment many times during the first two weeks of the course.

Box 1

An Example Watch and Report on Architecture of Japanese Homes

While the course subject-matter in a Psychology and Environmental Issues class was local environments such as the family or the home, one student did her Watch and Report on a newspaper article titled "Doors of modest home open to lessons of the past" (Nakamura, 1999). She described the report on traditional building design in Japan. Specifically, she focused on sliding doors in traditional Japanese architecture and the fact that we are less likely to find sliding doors in modern Japanese homes. She connected her description of the article to our class discussion of different environments (such as houses). She concluded her report by offering her opinion on the use of sliding doors in contemporary homes. This was a good example of her applying course content to the reading of a daily newspaper.

Box 2**Teaching opportunities with the Watch and Report assignment**

There are a host of learning opportunities for students within this one assignment. At the very least, this assignment serves to promote critical thinking skills and expand the content base of the course. This was the focus of using this assignment in my classes in Canada, and this goal is equally important for the classes at MIC. What is a noticeably added value of the assignment at MIC is that language proficiency is enhanced and presentation skills are facilitated along with the content-based education.

In order to complete this assignment, students need at least rudimentary research skills, critical thinking skills, and reading skills in order to select an item from the media. They must also use some more specific skills, such as scanning for topics and selecting information that is within the correct set of topics relating to the course. They develop their oral skills by presenting this information to the class. Presentation competence is developed through practice of good posture, eye contact, appropriate pacing, and response to questions. Because students present a Watch and Report more than once in a semester, they increase their general comfort of addressing an audience. Students also learn that practice is a key ingredient in developing many of these skills.

There is a generous learning opportunity for both students and teachers as we listen to all the student reports during the term. Because the topics are student selected, common interest is typically high among the students. The exposure to multiple reports through the semester can offer a time in class to improve listening skills as well as to add content value to the course. Very often I have found that I begin a new lesson directly from the content of students' reports. Many valuable lessons have grown from the ideas that students bring in to the class.

From the teacher's perspective, this assignment is extremely efficient in terms of the amount of time necessary for grading. The grading is done on-line while the student is presenting. I keep a class list in a Watch and Report folder along with a schedule of all reports. All I need to do is jot down a quick note for each student in order to assign a grade. I can use their handout to write down any additional comments or thoughts I have at the time. In my folder, I write down the topic they

selected as well as whether they reached or surpassed my minimum expectations. I expect that students will select a fitting article, and that they will concentrate on presenting this well to the class. They are marked down for reading the presentation and therefore not having eye contact with the audience. They also are marked down for not bringing a handout or for being unprepared on their scheduled date. If they go beyond the minimum expectations and present an excellent report, then I take the time to point out to the class the reasons why their report excelled. This gives all students a chance to learn from each other. They can see many examples of fitting material as well as examples of good (and sometimes bad) presentation style.

Conclusions

Since students tend to read, hear, and watch a tremendous amount of information via the media, it is important to assist them as intelligent consumers and to prepare them to question what is read and not to passively accept it. In large universities such as the one I taught at in Canada, it has become increasingly difficult to teach critical thinking as the class sizes increase and reduce students' opportunities to be active learners. A media assignment such as Watch and Report has great benefits in large class situations, and even greater benefits when the class size is reasonably small. This assignment keeps students and teachers current on topics presented in the media and also is a cheap and efficient educational tool. It is cheap in terms of time needed for teacher preparation, the time allotted in the classroom, and the time devoted to grading by the instructor(s). On the other hand, it is rich in educational value. It serves to demonstrate to students the outside applications of what they are learning in the classroom. Having students examine media reports is one accessible and inexpensive alternative that represents applying the classroom experience to everyday experience.

In three semesters of teaching at MIC, I have seen approximately 250 Watch and Reports from students. I have come to appreciate the commitment the students have shown in searching for interesting and informative items to share with their classmates. The students have also shown a great commitment to using the activity as a way to improve their speaking and presentation skills. Most of the students have told me that this is a difficult but rewarding assignment for them. The difficulty for the Japanese students has been primarily in cases where they select long newspaper articles in English. Of course, after completing their presentations of the articles, they are typically rewarded with a great sense of accomplishment. At least one third of the class members in one first year class listed this assignment as one of their favorite assignments (rated as one of the top three out of a total of eight assignments across the term), yet they also mentioned they found it very difficult. See Box 3 for some recent comments from students' end of term course evaluations.

Finally, from the EFL teacher's perspective, this assignment develops reading, writing, speaking and listening skills while being relatively easy to prepare and grade. It also increases exposure to content and offers each student opportunities to work on their verbal and non-verbal presentation skills. I am convinced it succeeds well in broadening course content, opening awareness of the applications of classroom learning to everyday experience, and in the case of the EFL classroom, strengthening language learning. In summary, this assignment affords a broad range of instructional benefits for the students and easy implementation for the

instructor while being pedagogically versatile and adaptable to diverse classroom contexts

MIC Student Comments on the Watch and Report Assignment

- "I think Watch and Report was hard for me but this was very good for me because it was a chance that I speak in front of everyone and I can learn lots from [the other student's reports]."
- "The Watch and Report was hard, but I could get some knowledge."
- "I could listen to other student's ideas or opinions from Watch and Reports."

Box 3

Acknowledgements

An early commentary relating to the Watch and Report assignment was published in *New Currents*, a publication of the University of Calgary (December, 1996). I would like to thank Susanna Philippoussis and Tim Stewart for collaborative teaching and extensive discussion of this assignment in the first year courses I have taught at MIC.

References

- Kirsh, S. J. (1996). Newspaper portfolios: Do they work in second-level courses? *Psychology: A Journal of Human Behavior*, 33(1), 35-36.
- Kozma, R. B. (1991). Learning with media. *Review of Educational Research*, 61(2), 179-211.
- Melamed, L. (1989). Sleuthing media "truths": Becoming media literate. *History and Social Science Teacher*, 24(4), 189-193.
- Nakamura, A. (1999, May 16). Life in the Showa era: Doors of modest home opens to lessons of the past. *The Japan Times*, 3.
- Ruppert, J. C. (1983). Media journals: Relevancy and writing in Psychology instruction. Paper presented at the National Meeting of the Association for the Improvement of Community College Teaching, Louisville, KY, November 2-5, 1983.
- Sagliano, J. (1996). Focusing on debate to develop language skills in English as a foreign language (EFL) courses in college. *Comparative Culture*, 2, 104 - 114.
- Sorensen, J. L. (1976). Increasing the relevance of the media to Psychology courses. *Teaching of Psychology*, 3(3), 140-141.
- Surlin, S. H. (1977). Mass media content as a teaching aid. *Florida Speech Communication Journal*, 5(2), 16-19.
- Tiersky, E. and Hughes, R. (1996). *Morning Edition: Mastering reading and language skills with the newspaper*. Lincolnwood, IL: National Textbook Co.
- Ward, T. B. (1985). The Media Project: Enhancing student interest in the Psychology of Adolescence. *Teaching of Psychology*, 12(2), 87-89.
- Wigod, R. (1996, December 2). Body Trouble: Baby boomers confront the ravages of time. *The Calgary Herald*, B7.