

READ ALL ABOUT IT! - USING A NEWSPAPER ARTICLE

WHY

Many teachers use newspaper articles in a variety of ways. They like to use articles because

- Language learners find them motivating because they are interesting, relevant, topical, varied – and real.
- They open up the foreign language society - - its preoccupations, its habitual ways of thought, and its prejudices. For these very reasons newspaper material is among the most challenging the learner is called upon to face.
- They are readily available (and in this we are fortunate here in Malta – in many countries it is very difficult to get hold of English-language newspapers regularly)
- They are an excellent way of extending classroom immersion in the foreign language.
- Because they are *authentic*, any language they contain which you choose to formally focus on is given extra face validity in the eyes of your learner(s).

HOW

Here is a five-step lesson plan you can use with any newspaper article. This ‘template’ is followed by an actual article I used recently and by some of the activities that went with it.

- 1 I give you a word – guess the headline.
- 2 Predict the text – come up with questions.
- 3 Read the text – are your questions answered?
- 4 Language focus – set a problem which helps your learners to notice (a) language point(s) (grammar or vocabulary)
- 5 Language practice – give your learners some practice in experimenting with the meaning, form and use of one or more of the language points that students have been helped to ‘notice.’

AN EXAMPLE

1 Guess the headline

The headline is: ‘Elderly couple unhurt as fire destroys house’
Write the word ‘destroys’ and elicit the rest of the headline as students call out possible words. Guide them as much as you can without spoonfeeding too much. This should create a sense of excitement. You should end up with the full headline on the board.

2 Write questions

Ask students to work in pairs or small groups and to formulate questions they hope to find answers to. The questions quickly written up on the board, and duplicates deleted or omitted. One or two questions the class came up with, for example, were: *Did anybody die? How did the fire start?*

3 Read the text and find out

Students are then encouraged to quickly read through the text and find out if any of their questions are answered in the text. Set a time limit and ask them not to worry about words they don't know for the time being. When they've finished, quickly go through the questions checking for answers.

Here is the text I used:

Elderly couple unhurt as fire destroys maisonette

AN ELDERLY Marsa couple yesterday escaped unhurt when a fire raged through their ground-floor maisonette in Zerafa Street yesterday.

During the firefighting operation, however, two members of the Civil Protection Department were slightly injured when part of the roof forming part of the first-floor apartment, which is vacant, caved in.

Giovanna Mizzi, 76, who escaped the fire but was apparently suffering from shock, said she was ironing some clothes at about 10 a.m. when she heard an explosion coming from the cooker close by.

"I had just put the kettle on to prepare some hot water to start putting the midday meal together when I heard the explosion.

"The wooden cupboard next to the cooker caught fire and I rushed out of the house calling my husband Emmanuel to come out of the back garden," said Mrs. Mizzi as she was comforted by her daughter Rose, relatives and neighbours.

Mrs Mizzi said they had two gas cylinders which were placed out in the garden. A moment earlier a neighbour had called her to give her a national lottery ticket she bought for her.

"On Friday night, we had finished painting the house and I was dusting the sitting room furniture and preparing to hang the winter curtains.

"Somehow neighbours managed to take out of the house the sitting room furniture before the fire caught up with it but nothing remains of our bedroom furniture. Even the fridge and freezer are gone," she said.

Mrs Mizzi said she and her husband will still be staying temporarily with her sister-in-law but she was concerned about where they would be housed after yesterday's incident.

The Sunday Times 19/11/2000

4 Language Focus

Ask students to cover the text or to put it away and then ask them to solve the following ‘language brainteasers’ **without looking back at the text**. The point is to create a ‘hunger’ for the right answers, and in this way it is hoped that the language you have chosen to focus on might be more memorable.

LEXIS

Without looking back at the text, try and complete these vocabulary collocations.

- 1 A fire _____ through their groundfloor maisonette.
- 2 Two members of the Civil Protection Department were _____ injured when the roof _____.
- 3 “I had just _____ the kettle _____.”
- 4 The wooden cupboard _____ fire.
- 5 I _____ out of the house.

GRAMMAR

A How was the following concept expressed in one sentence?

“I put the kettle on. Immediately afterwards I heard an explosion.”

Which action was first? Was it completed?

Which action happened second? Was it completed?

What is the form of the verb describing the first action? And the second action?

Why do you think the forms are different?

B Put these words in the right order:

Giovanna explosion when ironing she was clothes

heard an some

Which action started first? Which action interrupted her?

What is the form of the first verb?

What is the form of the second verb?

Why are the forms different, do you think?

5 Language Practice

For the **vocabulary**, you can perhaps get students to orally reformulate the story with the condition that they have to use the vocabulary collocations focussed on in 4. Alternatively, they can make up (and write?) their own short newspaper story using these vocabulary collocations

For the **grammar**, course books and grammar supplementary books abound with exercises to practice these uses of the *past perfect v simple past* and the *past continuous v simple past*.

In this way you will have managed to integrate a real-life language skill (reading a newspaper report) with a focus on language systems.

There is so much that can be done with newspapers, and I hope to write a full-scale article detailing some of these many uses. In the meantime, you might like to delve into Newspapers (OUP) by Peter Grundy for some useful ideas. Good luck!

Alan Marsh