

Challenges and Rewards of Teaching a Newspaper Class Liubov Barkova

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Abstract

To get access to unbiased, accurate, objective information is a vital necessity in present-day society. From this perspective, the role of mass media can hardly be overestimated. It is common knowledge that there are different types of mass media: print media (newspapers, magazines), their electronic version (in the Internet) as well as radio and television. The article addresses the issue of using one of the media types, namely newspapers, both printed and electronic variety with a slant on the latter, as a source of not only getting access to information but also an effective way of learning and mastering the English language. The focus is on numerous difficulties and pitfalls that may arise for a language learner (purely linguistic, which manifest themselves in many ways, as well as extra linguistic, mainly social and cultural).

1. Introduction

Mass media keep playing an increasingly important role in the global world. This point is hardly argued. The media have acquired a lot of power nowadays. The mere fact that it is collectively often referred to as "Forth Estate" is proof enough of its unquestionable significance. In the course of time the main functions of the newspaper developed along these lines: from purely informative to both informative and evaluative and, since the material the modern newspaper carries is extremely diverse, an entertaining function can also be added. Published in the 20-th century textbooks on stylistics (Арнольд, 1973; Galperin, 1977; Кожина, 1977), point out a variety of genres and sub-genres that can be singled out within a newspaper. But for all the diversity, they still can be grouped into predominantly informational (for example, brief news items, press reports) or evaluative ones (for example, editorials, feature articles), each characterized by their own specific peculiarities in terms of news selection, ways of presentation and the very choice of the language items used. The newspaper makes an exciting, challenging and rewarding field of research for many professionals: for a journalist, for a linguist, for a politician, for an economist and, of course, for a language instructor.

2. Relevant aspects of theoretical framework

There are numerous approaches to how to use newspapers in the classroom. Some authors see newspapers as "very inexpensive and compelling "textbooks" for adult literacy development", especially for the newly arrived refugee or immigrant, and champion using newspapers in the ESL Literacy Classroom as a way of introducing the newcomers to "the political, social, and business aspects of the local community". They use the newspaper as curriculum and suggest various activities to teach literacy skills for target groups from beginners to advanced (Chandler, 1990). Bill Mascull advocates time-tested method of focusing on thematically arranged key words while teaching a newspaper class (Мэскалл, 2002). We share his point of view which seems relevant, reliable and effective for academic purposes. The advent of the Internet opened up new opportunities of getting access to on line newspapers, benefiting both teachers and students. Many useful, though sometimes arguable suggestions come from a resource site published by Macmillan English Campus. Thus, the article "Classroom 1" by Lindsay Clandfield and Duncan Foord (Clandfield and Foord, 2011) suggests various activities to deal with newspaper and gives food for thought. But, as will be shown later, not every recommendation the authors come up with in the section "Newspaper DOs and DON'Ts" should be taken as gospel truth.

Some of the ideas, worth looking into, may be found in Using the Newspaper in your Classroom (USA Weekend in Education, 2011). Strangely, neither the authors, nor the compilers are mentioned, and among the 26 tips they claim "will help you get the most out of your newspaper use" some, at least, seem doubtful. For instance, they argue that to get the students interested in the newspaper the teacher must give his or her charges time to just read and enjoy the newspaper. "No tests, no follow-up – just a no-strings-attached time to enjoy". Such approach seems to have but limited use, and assessment through various quizzes, tests and the like can't be ignored altogether. Another point for my case that those "tips" and "DO's and DON'Ts" should be taken with a grain of salt is that on some occasions they are mutually contradictory. Interestingly, the two sources mentioned above seem to have polarised opinions on what should be regarded as relevant newspaper vocabulary. While the former states "Don't make a song and dance about teaching words like *headline*, *editorial*, *column*, *leader*. Is it that useful to learners?" (Clandfield and Duncan, 2011), the latter suggests, "Teach students important newspaper terms such as *headline*", *byline*", *mastheads*," *column*," etc.

Then, review the different sections of the newspaper and discuss the type of information that can be found in each one” (USA Weekend in Education, 2011). In terms of methodology, the second point of view is more justified. What is more, these basic newspaper terms may and often will differ not only in the type of information conveyed, but also in a specific lexis used. A brief overview of newspaper-oriented ideas for teachers’ resources leads us to a conclusion that among numerous on line sites catering for ESL needs, quite a few pay their share of attention to ways of teaching newspaper in the classroom approaching it from different angles (some taking a fresh look at things, others – mutually contradictory).

3. Research problem and aim

3.1. The ultimate goal – to teach students to develop a liking for reading newspapers on a regular basis is a challenging long-term aim, which takes all patience and ingenuity on the part of a teacher who, offering different class-room activities, actually addresses immediate tasks through which a learner can develop basic skills (comprehension, reading, speaking and the like).

Solving a particular task is usually no “big deal”. But to elicit and accurately interpret the information the reporter wanted to convey, to be able to distinguish between opinion and information, to grasp cultural connotations – calls for a more mature approach, which students quite often lack. What is more, while “decoding” information a student often stumbles on a variety of hurdles that are hard to overcome for a number of reasons.

3.2. The research aim is to reveal numerous difficulties and pitfalls that may arise for a language learner (purely linguistic, as well as extra linguistic) which by no means should be overlooked by a language instructor teaching a newspaper class.

4. Methods

Approaching material from the perspective of its bilingual perception requires combining traditional linguistic methods, as tools of research, (definition analysis, componential analysis, content analysis) with discourse analysis as a method which adds another dimension to investigation by interpreting socio-cultural phenomena.

5. Analysis of problems facing a Russian learner of English

5.1. Double-take headlines

Let us start by looking into linguistic difficulties, which are numerous and might manifest themselves in many ways: double take headlines; neologisms; abbreviations; allusions; “false friends”; polysemy, inherent in the English language; new meanings that emerge; buzz words that take journalists’ fancy and many others. It seems logical to start the analysis with headlines. When one opens a many-page newspaper, it is the headlines one starts scanning through to decide which story is worth reading, if at all. A headline writer working on an eye-catching, intriguing, suggestive headline needs fairly dramatic, attention-grabbing language items, at the same time being restricted by a very limited space. The result is a very condensed structure with a grammar norm of its own which clashes with traditional grammar rules: omitted articles, prepositions, simplified tense system, noun series used as adjectives are most common among other things. Traditional grammar violations mentioned above are usually accompanied by words often chosen exclusively for their brevity and/or their dramatic quality. This, by itself, presents a difficulty for a language learner, since the result is often, so-called, “double-take” headlines, in other words, ambiguous headlines which allow for different, sometimes incongruous interpretations. Amusing ambiguities of this kind is not a rarity.

According to Ben Zimmer (Zimmer, 2010), the Columbia Journalism Review even published two anthologies of ambiguous “headlineese” in the 1980s. A new term has emerged and seems to be flourishing for such ambivalent headlines: “crash blossoms”. The origin of this neologism as well as other examples of “crash blossoms” given in the article is worth looking into, since it clearly shows that careless use of language items often results in misunderstanding even for native speakers, let alone language learners.

To make things worse, headlines, frequently enough contain abbreviations which are characteristic of the English language, relevant for understanding the message but may be unfamiliar to students. The examples below (Баркова и Лучинина, 2010) illustrate the point.

- 1) Democrats Appeal to *GOP* on Financial Overhaul. *GOP* is a traditional nickname for the Republican Party in the USA and can be decoded as Grand Old Party;
- 2) *OAPS* March against WAR Plans. *OAPS* stands for old-age pensioners;
- 3) *MEPS* Want More Pay. *MEPS* replaces Members of the European Parliament.

Apart from abbreviations, headlines often contain cultural allusions that presuppose background knowledge, which triples the obstacles a language learner has to overcome. Besides, background knowledge can lose its relevance even within a comparatively short period of time.

The headline *ORANGE SQUASHED* does not seem to make much sense, apart from the out of place in this headline literal meaning, if one is unaware of a series of protest and political events that took place in Ukraine from late 2004 to January 2005 in the run-off presidential election when massive civil resistance was dubbed the Orange Revolution. Incidentally, the word “dubbed” has a stylistic label “journalism” (Collins Cobuilt, 2006), which implies that it was one of the many words created by pressmen that took the public fancy, crossed the boarder of media and came to be frequently used in various contexts. Another example of baffling headlines is the headline *TOYOTA (and TOYODA) in the Hot SEAT*. It appears to be puzzling if you do not happen to know that Akio Toyoda is the world-known car giant Toyota CEO. A massive global recall of Toyota vehicles prompted an apology and promise from the company’s president in the year 2010. The use of the idiom *the hot seat*” is not accidental either, since it means “a position in which one must answer difficult questions, take great responsibility” (Longman, 1979).

5.2. “False friends of an interpreter”

Still another challenge for the student is the so-called “false friends”, very typical of newspaper discourse. These are words and phrases in English which, taken literally, appear identical to their Russian counterparts but, in fact, mean entirely different things. Most mistakes in interpreting the meaning of “false friends” stem from the fact that linguistically immature students tend to rely on their native language for help. For a Russian learner of the English language this list of “look-alikes” includes: *ACTUAL*, *EXPERTISE*, *PRETEND*, *PARTISAN*, *ACTING PRESIDENT*, to mention but a few. The interference of the Russian language results in what is known as “typical mistakes”. *Актуальные новости* corresponds in English to *topical news* (not *actual news*); *expertise* is special skill or knowledge that is acquired by training, study or practice and should be translated into Russian as *знания, опыт* and has nothing to do with *экспертиза*, as some students tend to assume. *Pretend* can never be translated as *претендовать*. The right translation is *притворяться*. *Acting president* is not *действующий президент*. It actually means *исполняющий обязанности президента*, while *действующий президент* is *incumbent*.

5.3. New meanings, buzz words, jargon

Newspaper discourse makes a great testing ground for “playing with words”, making the most of words’ potential to manipulate public consciousness. Besides, it is an indispensable springboard for coining new words, modifying existing meanings and even changing them beyond recognition. It should also be borne in mind that when a person is trying to read a newspaper in a foreign language he is getting engaged in cross cultural communication. Thus, linguistic problems, intertwined with cultural implications, multiply difficulties for language learners manifold. It is a rare case when a newly-coined “riddle” is explained right in the text. The fragment from the article on US-China summit, which focuses on different expectations of US President and his Chinese counterpart, is an exclusion, rather than common practice: ‘From the US side there was the expectation of substantive *“deliverables”* – *diplomatic jargon for real results*’... (FlorCruz, 2011).

Much more often one comes across either newly-coined words or familiar words with unfamiliar meanings. *Meme* is a neologism, just registered as “word of the day” and means: an idea, behavior, style, or usage that spreads from person to person within a culture (Merriam-Webster On line Dictionary, 2011). The examples below serve as illustration of words that have changed their meaning. For instance, *Flip-flop* and its derivatives *flip-flopper*, *flip-flopping* have nothing to do with the registered meaning, defining a kind of footwear, sandals. These words are often used in American English in a political context during election campaigns to criticize an opponent for allegedly unreasonable change of opinion on an issue; *to surge* acquired a new meaning during the Iraq war, and, according to Линн Виссон, both noun and verb, popularized by the media, were extensively used to mean *counterinsurgency* (Виссон, 2010); the noun phrase: *double-dip recession*, that emerged in the year 2010, adequately describes a “second period of economic contraction, following a brief period of growth” (Macmillan Open Dictionary, 2010). The list of “problem” words and phrases of this kind could be much longer.

6. Conclusions

The conducted research was based on the assumption that newspaper can be used in the class room not only as a source of information but also an effective way of using up-to-date authentic material for mastering a foreign language. The analysis of the actual newspaper reading matter makes it possible to draw a conclusion that on the way to a near-native command of a foreign language a language learner under a language instructor’s guidance has to overcome a number of obstacles. Purely linguistic difficulties: ambiguous headlines, “false friends” of an interpreter, abbreviations, allusions, neologisms, policemy, new meanings the words develop, among the most relevant, coupled with cultural differences between source language and target language make this ambition a challenging task.

Since students are often linguistically immature and lack background knowledge relevant for another culture, essential for understanding information is likely to be lost on them. So, without first teaching the students awareness how indispensable these factors are, really impressive end results can hardly be achieved. Realization of being able to grasp all relevant implications in an original newspaper text acts like an eye-opener, gives a satisfying feeling, helps to polish general knowledge of a foreign language and is rewarding both for the teacher and for the student.

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