Current News Through English Media: Teaching Critical Consumption of the News

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Abstract

Rikkyo University's new CLIL curriculum includes a course called "Current News Through English Media". The purpose of this course is to allow students to learn about world events from English-language news sources. The design of the course is based around completion of CEFR tasks such as understanding, summarizing, and giving opinions about news texts. In addition to this, when a trial version of this course was taught in 2022, it was decided to also introduce critical reading skills based on concepts from discourse analysis and journalism studies. This included looking at the structure of news stories, how news reportage is affected by bias, and the characteristics of various genres of news reporting such as opinion/ editorial articles. It was found that this encouraged more critical, rather than passive, consumption of news content. Students were able to see how the production of news content influenced how it was presented to the consumer.

Keywords: *Critical thinking, Media, Discourse analysis, CLIL*

Introduction

This article will outline the planning and teaching of a trial course called "Current News Through English Media" in the 2022 academic year. It will begin with a discussion of how the course was developed to conform with Rikkyo's new CLIL curriculum, including consideration of CEFR tasks and a "4C" framework. There was also an added focus on encouraging students to consume news critically. Following this, several lessons which were taught during the course will be described. Finally, the article will conclude with a reflection on the course as well as planned changes for the course in the next academic year.

Course Design

When the framework of CLIL courses was created for Rikkyo's new curriculum, it was decided to offer the Current News through English Media class to increase students' awareness of current issues (Yamamoto & Nitta, 2021). However, the new curriculum has also been

designed from "an action-oriented approach" based on CEFR tasks (Yamamoto & Nitta, 2021). This means it was also necessary to identify tasks for students to complete aside from simply increasing their knowledge of news events. The course description for the trial course as given in the syllabus states:

> The aims of this course are for the students to listen to and read English-language news while learning about a variety of topical issues. The students will be able to read and understand short news texts about current topics. They will also learn to understand recorded news bulletins such as from television or radio. The students will be able to explain the main points of a news story and give their opinion about it.

It was decided not to use a textbook. This was to allow news stories discussed in class to be topical and current. Although a textbook may have had advantages, especially for lower-level students, the news stories included quickly become dated. Not using a textbook also allowed the topics and stories chosen to be tailored to student interests and needs. Instead, stories were taken from English language online news sources. These included both written sources such as newspaper websites and video sources including CNN. This use of authentic materials allows students to learn about different cultures as well as learn English (Mehisto, 2012). In addition, using authentic news material encourages students to think critically about world issues and how they are reported (Moglen, 2014).

4C Framework

When designing the course, the 4C framework also used in the pilot debate course (Nitta & Yamamoto, 2020) was helpful. According to Nitta and Yamamoto (2020), "the four core Cs are designed and organically integrated into the curriculum…the four Cs are not mutually exclusive but are closely integrated and complement each other" (p. 55). These concepts were taken into account when designing this course.

Content (Subject Matter)

Because of the need for the course to be topical, it was difficult to select specific topics in advance. However, because news contains a variety of genres, topics, and media, it is important to cover a wide variety in the course. This could include political news, business news, sports, entertainment, editorials, letters to the editor, and other types of news material. There was a desire to include a variety of news genres and news sources. Finally, because the course was intended to teach listening skills as well as reading skills, it was necessary to include both print and video news (Merino & Massi, 1998).

When selecting topics, there were a number of considerations, including the need to match the CEFR goals set in the syllabus and the skills and strategies outlined in the syllabus

schedule. As much as possible, an attempt was made to move from easier lessons to more difficult lessons. This meant moving from easier and familiar forms of cognition to more challenging and demanding ones, increasing linguistic and cognitive demand–moving from familiar language and content to new language and content, and moving from lower-order thinking skills (remembering, evaluating, applying) to higher order (analyzing, evaluating, creating).

In addition, student interest was taken into account. A survey was given to students in the first class to ask them what areas of news they were interested in studying. These lists were then used in conjunction with the educational needs of the class to determine the topics to be studied in the semester. Students were most interested in events which were current news at the time of the research. For example, 12 students listed Russia's invasion of Ukraine as one of the topics they would like to study. The next most common response was the coronavirus pandemic. However, only five students chose this. Some mentioned that they had been talking about this in classes for two years and were tired of it. Other topics listed by one to three students each were new technology, business, gossip, diplomacy between China and America, international affairs, animals, good news, Japan, and France. Of course, it was not possible to include all of these in the course due to other pedagogical considerations.

Communication (Language Learning and Using)

The skills to be taught during the course were based on the CEFR objectives set in the syllabus. The course objectives were taken from CEFR B1 and B1+.

- understand the main points of news bulletins (B1)
- recognize significant points in straightforward news articles (B1)
- make basic inferences or predictions about text content from headings, titles, or headlines. (B1)
- understand a large part of many TV programs on topics of personal interest such as interviews, short lectures, and news reports (B1+)
- understand short texts on subjects in which people give their points of view (B1+)
- summarize and give their opinion about an article, interview or documentary and answer questions about the topic (B1+)

Some of these skills (i.e., making inferences, summarizing, etc.) were previously studied by students during their 1st year Reading & Writing courses. To help students read and analyze stories more critically, it was also decided to introduce a few basic concepts and ideas from Journalism Studies and Critical Discourse Analysis. Students were introduced to ideas such as how people and events are represented, the use of quotations to support a point of view, bias in the news, and the narrative structure of news stories. In this way, as well as learning about current events, students learn to look critically at any text. This approach accustoms students to

thinking about how the news is presented rather than simply looking at the content of the news itself (Park, 2011). It has also been found that teaching these kinds of skills and techniques to students improves their critical language awareness (Dar et al., 2010; Hashemi & Ghanizadeh, 2012).

Cognition (Learning and Thinking Processes)

Instead of simply reading articles passively to learn what they say about current events, students have to use a variety of thinking skills. They first read or listen to a text and must carefully analyze it to develop their own opinion on an issue. They also have to support their opinions using reference to the text itself and its context, as well as their own experiences and backgrounds.

Culture (Developing Intercultural Understanding and Global Citizenship)

Because of the focus of this course, students learn about a wide variety of global issues. They are also encouraged to think about how perceptions and reporting of these issues can vary from culture to culture. It is also hoped that students will learn not to accept the perspective of the media they are exposed to uncritically and will instead learn to examine issues from a variety of perspectives.

Course Schedule

In each class a different news topic was covered. Students were given an article to read or a video to watch to prepare for the class. They were generally sent a link to the story a week before each class. This allowed the content presented in the class to remain as current as possible while also allowing students to preview what would be studied. In addition, academic and news reading skills were introduced and practiced. These skills included general academic skills such as skimming, summarizing, and inferring meaning from context. More specifically, news-related skills such as identifying the parts of a news story, understanding the main points of a news story, identifying bias, and understanding points of view were also included.

Sample Lessons

This article will discuss three examples of lessons given during the course. The lessons chosen for discussion in this section are ones which focus on skills specific to the genre of news stories. This includes examining how news stories are structured as compared to a standard narrative, looking at how bias can influence the reporting of a story, and seeing how opinion/editorial articles differ from more straightforward news reporting.

The Structure of News Stories

The main focus of this lesson is on making students aware of the structural differences between a personal narrative and a news article. Labov and Waletzky (1967) and Labov (1972) have identified six elements of a narrative: the abstract (the main point of the narrative), orientation (who, when, where), complicating action (the main events of the story), evaluation (why the story is important), resolution (the conclusion), and coda (marks the end of the story). In a narrative, these elements generally appear in this order.

In a news article, many of these elements also appear, albeit with several important differences (Bell, 1991). For example, the abstract and the orientation tend to appear in the first paragraph of the story. The evaluation also often occurs at the beginning of the article to show why the story is newsworthy. In contrast to a standard narrative, the resolution does not appear in its chronological place at the end of the story. If the news story has a resolution, it will also be described at the beginning of the article. Another difference is that news stories are rarely told in chronological order. News value dictates the order in which events appear in the article. Finally, because the function of a coda is to mark the end of the narrative and allow others to respond, it is not necessary in a news article.

After an explanation of the elements of a narrative and how they are used in news media, students were given a short article. In pairs, they identified the different elements as they appeared in the article. They also had to arrange the events of the article into chronological order. The article, with numbers indicating the order of events, appears below:

(4) Tama Zoological Park in Hino, Tokyo, said Wednesday that (2) its baby red kangaroo "Hop" escaped from an enclosed area on Tuesday afternoon. (3) The female kangaroo was rounded up within the park in about 4 minutes and no zookeepers or visitors were injured.

(1) According to the park, Hop was born at the facility in July. (2) At around 2:15 p.m. on Tuesday, she suddenly escaped when a zookeeper took her to sunbathe at a maintenance passage within an enclosed area of the park that is not accessible to the public. (3) When Hop ventured out on the parkway, where park visitors walk, the zookeeper caught her.

(5) "We will try to prevent a recurrence by having several people accompany her in the future," a park official said.

Students were asked to identify the parts of the narrative and discuss why the story is told in this order They were also asked "Do you think this is an important news story? Why do you think it was included in the newspaper?"

Bias in the News

For this lesson, students were given two articles to read for homework. These were an

Asahi Shimbun article (2020) titled "Japan accuses China of pushing territorial claims during pandemic" and an article called "Japanese conservatives disrupt recovering China-Japan ties by hyping Diaoyu Islands dispute" in the Chinese government-sponsored Global Times (Sheng & Xiaojing, 2020). Each of these articles looked at the same issue from the different perspectives of both a Japanese and a Chinese news source. However, care must be taken in the selection of controversial issues such as this, including taking into account the make-up of the class.

We began the lesson by looking at the function and structure of headlines. Students looked at how headlines are written with a specific style of grammar. For example, grammatical words such as articles are often omitted. We also studied the purposes of headlines. They not only give information and summarize the story as briefly as possible; they are also used to manipulate opinion (Reah, 1998). An example of this is the use of words with strong connotation, such as "accuses", "pushing", "disrupt", and "hyping" in the above examples.

After reading through the articles and checking understanding, the students were put in groups for a discussion. This discussion focused on two questions:

- Look at the photo captions. Global Times: "Daioyu Island in the East China Sea and its affiliated islands have always been China's inherent territory". Asahi Shimbun: "The disputed Senkaku islands in the East China Sea in 2013". What do you think about the difference?
- The Global Times blames "Japanese conservatives" for disrupting Japan-China relations. The Asahi Shimbun accuses China of pushing territorial claims and spreading propaganda and disinformation. Do you think the newspapers are biased in reporting this story?

Following the discussions, students were assigned to write a journal entry on Blackboard explaining their ideas on the topic. Below are a few extracts from the journal entries:

- When I read this article, I thought Chinese writer use very offensive words. They insisted this island is ours and Japan always make some problems. He didn't use "discuss" or "dispute" which make the article more neutral. I felt Japan became like a villain. Japan also accused of China's activities and opinion, but Japanese article is more neutral than China's one.
- Firstly, I feel China use little strong word in their news. They said the island is "China's inherent territory". They clearly consist their positions like "This is my island!". Secondary, I felt in the Asahi Shin-bun, there are many Japanese identical expressions. I cannot tell well clearly but Japanese news looks standing neutral position, however they really want to tell that it is mine.
- At today's lesson, we read two newspapers and compared Chinese side and Japan side. I think both two papers have biased. Global times convinced that Diaoyu island

have been always Chinese territory. I think this is a strong bias. At first glance, Asahi newspaper is objective by using the word, that is "dispute". However, when I read this article, I feel this paper doesn't said Japan but only Chinese bad things, for example Chinese are lying that U.S military brought Covid-19.

As can be seen from these journal entries, students were able to understand how word choice and how a story is presented can indicate bias in news reporting. Students see that there is more than one way of looking at a particular issue.

Opinion/Editorial Articles

One objective of this course was to make students aware of the different genres within the broader category of "news". Other than advertising, everything in a newspaper can be divided into three categories: service information (weather forecasts, stock prices, etc.), opinion (editorials, letters to the editor, columns, etc.), and news (Bell, 1991). In this lesson, we examine the differences between a standard news story and an opinion article or editorial. One main difference is that an opinion article is not simply reporting news; it is also giving the writer's ideas about an issue or topic.

As with most of the lessons, we begin by reading through a news article on a current news topic. For this lesson, we used a column with the title "Education politics should consider reasons to learn English" (Hattori, 2022). Because this is a topic that all students will already be familiar with, it is possible to focus on how the story is reported rather than on the content itself.

After reading through the article carefully, checking comprehension, and reviewing difficult vocabulary, the students discussed the following question in pairs: "Look at the article carefully. What differences can you see between a column and a standard news article?" Some possible answers for this question could include:

• Use of "I" and personal narratives
• Ends with the author's name and photo
• Arguing in favor of a particular point
• Use of modal verbs like "should" and "may"
• More casual, conversational tone (for example, phrases like "As you may know")

This discussion of the structural and discourse features of the article was followed with a discussion in groups of the issue itself:

• Why do you study English?
• Do you think it will be necessary to study English in the future?
• What are the advantages and disadvantages of using AI for communicating in a foreign language? Do you think it is good to use AI?

Survey Results

In the final week of the course, students were asked to complete a survey through Google Forms. They were asked six questions:

1. What topics were the most interesting this semester? What topics were the least interesting?
2. Do you think you read or watch news more than you did before starting this course? Please explain your answer.
3. Do you think you read news more critically than you did before starting this course? Please explain your answer.
4. Has your opinion about the media changed or stayed the same since starting this course? Why or why not?
5. Will you continue to read or watch the news after finishing this course? Why or why not?
6. Do you have any suggestions for changes to this course?

Four of the students named the story about the Senkaku Islands as the most interesting in the course. One student said "It was interesting to compare the same topic in Japanese and Chinese news site. From that, I learned that I should collect several different news articles when you want to know something and compare them, not try to know from only one article." Another said "The topic about the Senkaku island was the most interesting. Because we read Japanese article and Chinese article, and both have some biases and propaganda. So, I thought it is important for us to read carefully so that prevent misunderstanding of the problem."

Other popular stories covered during the course were a BBC video called "Sexless in Japan", which showed how stereotypes were commonly used in media representation of Japan, and a story about Shohei Ohtani. This was mostly popular with students who were interested in baseball.

The Ohtani story was also mentioned by three students as the least interesting because they were not interested in baseball. Stories about global warming and Covid-19 were also named as the least interesting. The reason for this is that these topics had already been heavily covered in other classes and students were tired of talking about them.

In response to the question, "Do you think you read news more critically than you did before starting this course?", seventeen students replied "Yes". Some of the reasons for this were:

- "learned even news in CNN can be biased and saw how they do it"
- "now I do not believe the news easily, but try to check different media to be sure about the information"

• "I get different perspective that I didn't have"

Two students replied "No" to this question but said this was because they already read the news critically before they took the course. One student replied "I don't know".

In response to the question "Has your opinion about the media changed or stayed the same since starting this course? Why or why not?", fourteen students answered, "Yes, it changed". Many of them said that the reason for this was that the course had made them more aware of bias in the news. For example, one student answered, "Actually my opinion has changed. I learned that some news article like "column" have bias."

Finally, all the students answered "Yes" when asked if they will continue to watch or read the news after completing the course.

Conclusion

As mentioned in the introduction, one of the reasons that this course has been added to the curriculum at Rikkyo was "to increase students' awareness of current issues". By choosing topics based on student interest and on events that were currently happening in the world, students were given the opportunity to think about and discuss a wide range of national and international issues, including the war in the Ukraine, Chinese-Japanese relations, and global warming.

In addition to this, students learned various skills to use when consuming the news. Some of these skills, such as skimming, scanning, and listening for the main idea, may have already been familiar to students from other courses. Others, including identifying bias in a news story, understanding the structure of a narrative in a news story, and distinguishing an opinion/editorial article from news reportage, were more specific to the activity of consuming news content.

Finally, students were encouraged to think about how a story was reported rather than simply accepting the content of the news story. The student responses in the end-of-semester questionnaire showed that students felt that the skills taught in the course allowed them to look at news more critically. For example, they were able to see how a news source's potential bias can influence how a story is presented. Students were encouraged to interpret news events for themselves rather than passively accepting what was presented in a newspaper or on TV news.

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