

Using the News to Supplement Cultural Lecture Material: A Look at Learner Beliefs

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Abstract

Engaging students in a lecture course taught in their L2 can be a daunting task. Issues such as selecting materials, pacing, including relevant and thought-provoking content, providing discussion topics and time, and using appropriate means of assessment all plague teachers when planning content-based lecture courses. News articles help alleviate some of these challenges. Students can spend their own time researching the topic in the news and then come to class to share it in small groups. However, using news articles written for native readers can be a strict barrier for implementation. This paper introduces the use of region-specific news sources as a self-study and warm-up discussion activity and explores university student beliefs about the ease of the activity, their enjoyment, and their perceived value. Data was collected by use of a 6-point, 15-item Likert scale and three open questions. Students overall held positive beliefs about the activity and reported that it aided in improving their reading and summarizing skills.

Introduction

The challenge of integrating real-world, authentic English in the language classroom has always been a challenge for EFL teachers. Finding ways to accomplish this without oversaturating and, in doing so, demotivating language learners is one goal many language teachers have. Additionally, learner ability-appropriate content which also piques learner interest and increases engagement while building motivation is the cornerstone of successful material selection.

Linguistically speaking, to achieve authentic language input, L2 learners are exposed to authentic materials including radio, songs, films, dramas, comedies, streaming media from Internet sites like Youtube, and news from the target culture in the target language. While even a decade ago some of these materials would have had a more limited selection, with the spread of online streaming sites like Netflix and Disney+ for TV-related media, Apple, Spotify, and Youtube Music for songs, and many news media companies and newspapers making their content available online,

accessing a variety of materials is no longer a barrier for the average person. This ease of access to materials opens up new avenues educators have to approach authentic material generation.

Literature Review

News articles create an opportunity to bridge this gap and at the same time expose EFL students to new ideas and different cultures. To be understood by a wider audience, news articles are often written in the most precise and direct way possible to prevent misinterpretation and increase accessibility (Blatchford, 1973; Brinton & Gaskill, 1978). Additionally, although often plagued by low-frequency vocabulary, news agenda and topics similar in theme will use specific vocabulary items and structures, thus making it beneficial as a repeated activity due to the increased opportunity for vocabulary recycling. This makes a strong case that if one was to incorporate unedited news articles in their class, repetition of the activity would be a more effective means of implementation.

Regardless of this, while literature on authentic material usage is plentiful (Yadav & Jha, 2019), literature specifically focusing on news articles in the EFL/ESL classroom is quite limited (Molgen, 2014). Topics of existing literature range from using news media such as recorded television or radio broadcasts (Brinton & Gaskill, 1978; Bahrani & Tam, 2011), material selection (Bell, 2003), and using a news-based curriculum (Molgen, 2014). Although requiring significant preparation, Brighton and Gaskill (1978) suggested using news media for listening activities to increase learner motivation and enthusiasm. Bahrani and Tam (2011) showed an improvement of learner listening performance of students exposed to news recordings over those who weren't. Content is equally important when choosing suitable materials based on the learners' level. Identifying which articles require background knowledge (*exogenous*) and which can be understood without any specific prior knowledge (*endogenous*) help instructors plan and prepare additional scaffolding when appropriate (Bell, 2003). Finally, news articles have shown to be a safe medium for introducing controversial or sensitive topics in which students have shown to hold an interest (Molgen, 2014).

Therefore, to get a more well-rounded idea of the potential of using news with EFL students has, it is key to also look closer at students being asked to engage with the materials. This study aims to explore learner beliefs about a warm-up news article activity for a content-based lecture

course where students were tasked with finding an article from a pre-selected list of news sources, reading and summarizing them, and then sharing them in small groups at the beginning of class.

Method

Participants

The participants for this study came from one, second-year and two, third-year, year-long lecture courses, focusing on Oceania culture for the second-year students, and European culture for the third-year students. The courses were taught at a private university in central Japan. Courses lasted 15 weeks, meeting once every week for a duration of 90 minutes, and were conducted in English. The total number of participants was 70 students, both male and female, however, the ratio of male to female was not investigated. Participants belonged to the British and American Studies department and could generally be described as holding positive beliefs toward the usage of English in the classroom. In terms of ability, students generally had a CEFR level of B1 and B2, allowing them to understand the lecture content, assigned reading materials, and media shown in class, with a few outliers in the A2 and C2 levels. Students were not streamed for these courses.

Implementation of News Exposure

The main theme of the three courses was to introduce physical and geopolitical geography, history, economy, traditions, cultural events, and the way of life for each respective region. To achieve this, the courses set out goals for students to achieve by the conclusion of the semester. The goals were as follows:

1. Listen to and understand lectures about the main themes
2. Conduct independent research on two topics and give two 5-minute presentations about each
3. Read news articles or watch news media from the country and summarize them
4. Discuss the news in small groups for 10 minutes
5. Create a note diary, including notes from each lecture and summaries of each news media

For the goals related to news media, students were tasked with finding a news article or other media related to the region being studied and summarizing it in preparation for class each week. Students were given a list of possible sources to select from. These sources were chosen to either

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represent different areas of the respective region, or to provide students with various perspectives of the respective region (Table 1). Students were encouraged to investigate sources and topics which interested them most in the hope that it would help maintain motivation and keep students engaged. Additionally, students had to use a note diary handout to record their article summary (Appendix A) that was used to help students prepare for the in-class discussion and was collected at the end of the semester as a way for the teacher to check their work.

Table 1

News Sources Provided to Students to Use for the Activity

| Oceania culture course | European culture course |
|--|--|
| Sydney Morning Herald: http://smh.com.au/ | The Guardian: https://www.theguardian.com |
| New Zealand Herald: https://www.nzherald.co.nz/ | BBC News: https://www.bbc.com/news/world/europe |
| Hawaii News Now: http://hawaiinewsnow.com/ | CNN: https://edition.cnn.com/EUROPE/ |
| The Guam Daily Post: http://www.postguam.com/ | Iceland News: https://www.icenews.is |
| Fiji Sun: http://www.fjijisun.com.fj/ | Ansamed: https://www.ansamed.info/ansamed/en/ |
| Samoa Observer: http://samoaobserver.ws/ | Eurasianet: https://eurasianet.org |
| | Al Jazeera: https://aljazeera.com/topics/regios/europe.html |

For the first 10 minutes of each class, students were divided into random groups of two to three and asked to share the articles which they had summarized and discuss the content with their group members. This activity was chosen for several reasons: (1) students were able to begin class by engaging with their classmates in their L2, essentially putting them into “English mode”, (2) by having the knowledge that students would be expected to share the article with their classmates, there was added pressure to complete the task each week, (3) it was the expectation of the lecturer that by having students engage with each other first, they would be more receptive to the daily lecture, (4) by having student-centered discussions, they could have more opportunities to engage with topic-specific language, which was expected to give them increased confidence during other discussions and their presentations, and finally (5) by summarizing and sharing the news, students could be exposed to a wider range of information about each region not covered in the lectures. During these 10 minutes, the teacher would then walk around the room, listening to the various discussions and intermittently joining the conversation by asking one or two questions. After 10 minutes, the class would continue with that day’s lecture.

Data Collection

Students were given a single 15-item Likert scale questionnaire near the end of the second semester (Appendix B). The 6-point Likert scale ranged from 1 representing “Strongly Disagree” to 6 representing “Strongly Agree”. Questions were based around three primary categories of interest: enjoyment of the activity (six items), ease of the activity (six items), and value of the activity (three items). Seven of the questions were designed to have a negative counterpart. For example, the question “I look forward to hearing about my group members articles” had the counterpart “hearing about the news from my group members is boring.” Additionally, the questionnaire contained three open questions. Both the Likert-scale and open questions were written in English only, but for the open questions, students were instructed that they could use either English or Japanese when answering. The open-question responses were coded organized based on the content. Responses are listed in order of dominance.

Findings & Discussion

Likert Scores. When prompted with statements reflecting the ease of various parts of the activity, student’s beliefs were shown to be neither strongly in agreement nor disagreement. When given the statement “finding a news article is easy” (Figure 1, next page), students gave it an average of 4.33. Of the three aspects of ease investigated, finding the article was the highest ranked by students. One possible reason for this could be the skills required to accomplish the task. Students only needed to assess the obvious qualities of each article, such as content based on the title, length, and complexity of vocabulary, when deciding which one to read.

Students were also given prompts about the ease of reading a news article (Figure 2, next page). With an average value of 3.67, students remained only slightly in agreement with the statement. This could be attributed to the difficulty of the material, as it was not specifically designed for language learners but rather native speakers, thus challenging the lower-level students more.

Figure 1

Ease of Finding News Articles

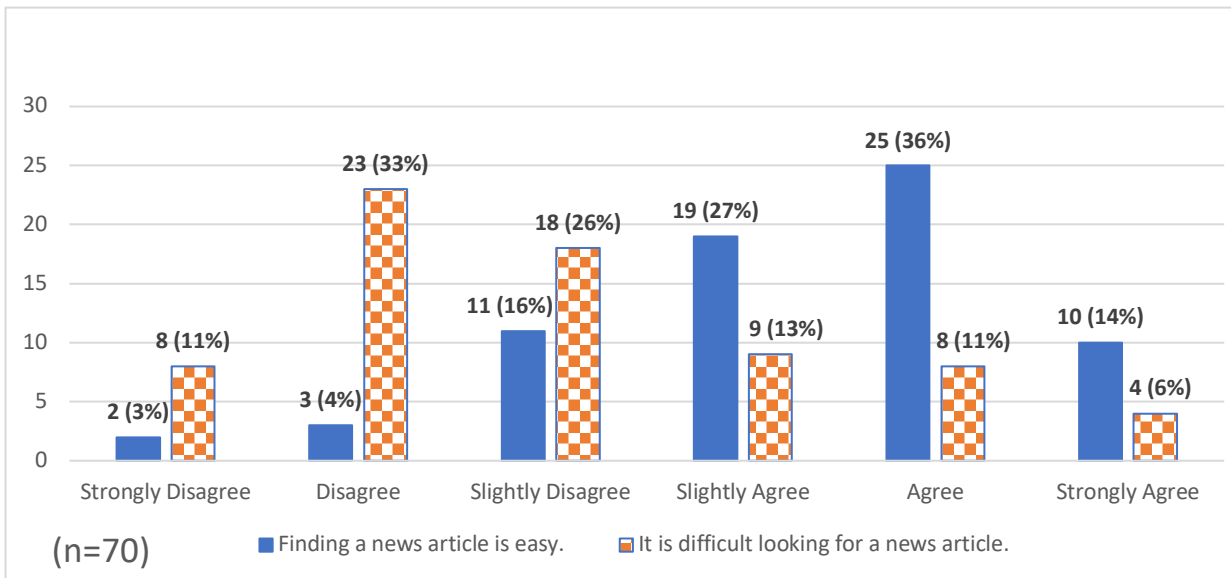
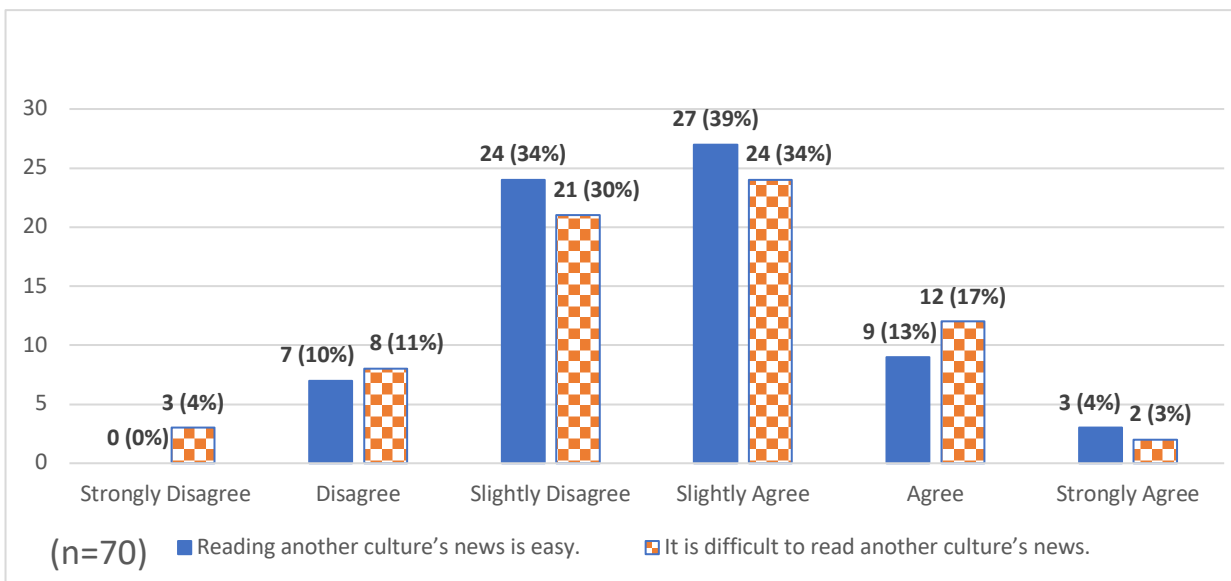


Figure 2

Ease of Reading News Articles

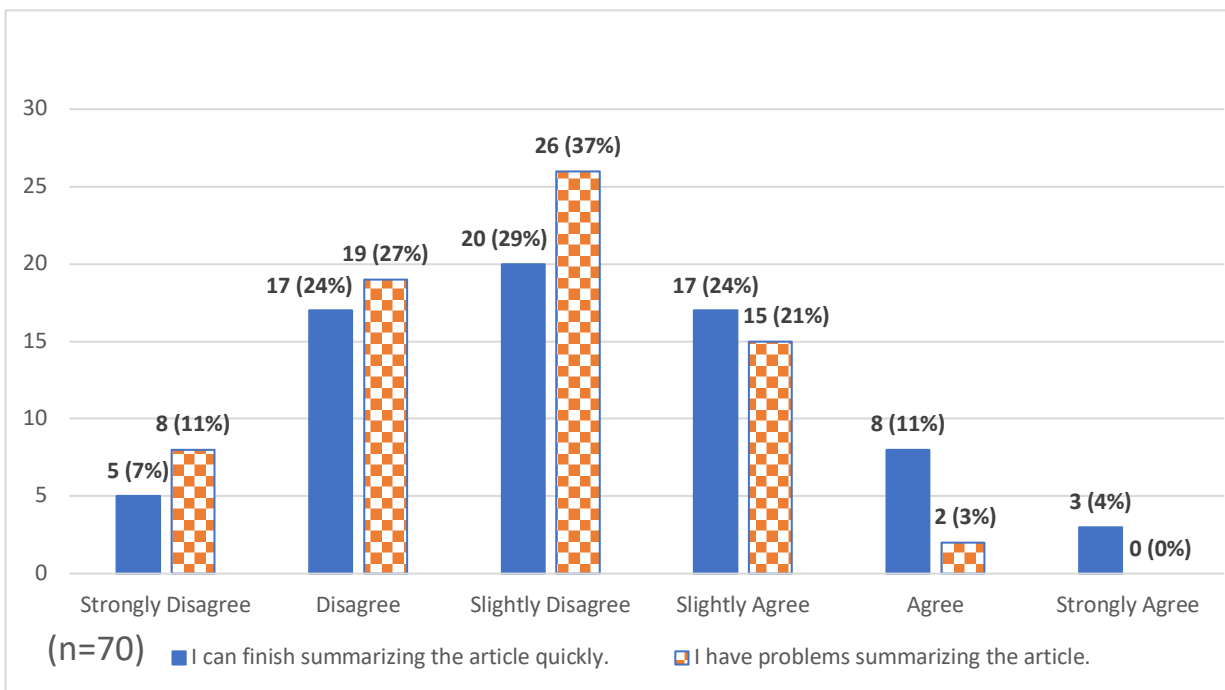


Finally, students were prompted on the ease of summarizing the articles (Figure 3, next page). This received the lowest rank of the three, averaging 3.25. Students slightly disagreed with the statement, which was anticipated as summarizing was the most intensive task of the three, requiring

comprehension, advanced lexical and grammar knowledge, and the ability to simplify complex issues.

Figure 3

Ease of Summarizing News Articles



The next category students were prompted about was the enjoyment of various aspects of the activity. One aspect investigated was the enjoyment of reading news from foreign sources (Figure 4, next page). On average, students valued this at 4.13 and, in conjunction with the ease of reading the article results, revealed that although students might find something challenging, they could still get enjoyment out of the task.

Students were also given statements about their enjoyment of sharing their articles with their group members (Figure 5, next page). The average score was just slightly under the average score for reading the articles, 4.10. This was quite surprising as it was believed by the teacher that students preferred the more social activities in class. Yet, the questionnaire results showed that students had near equal enjoyment of both aspects of the activity.

Figure 4

Enjoyment of Reading News Articles

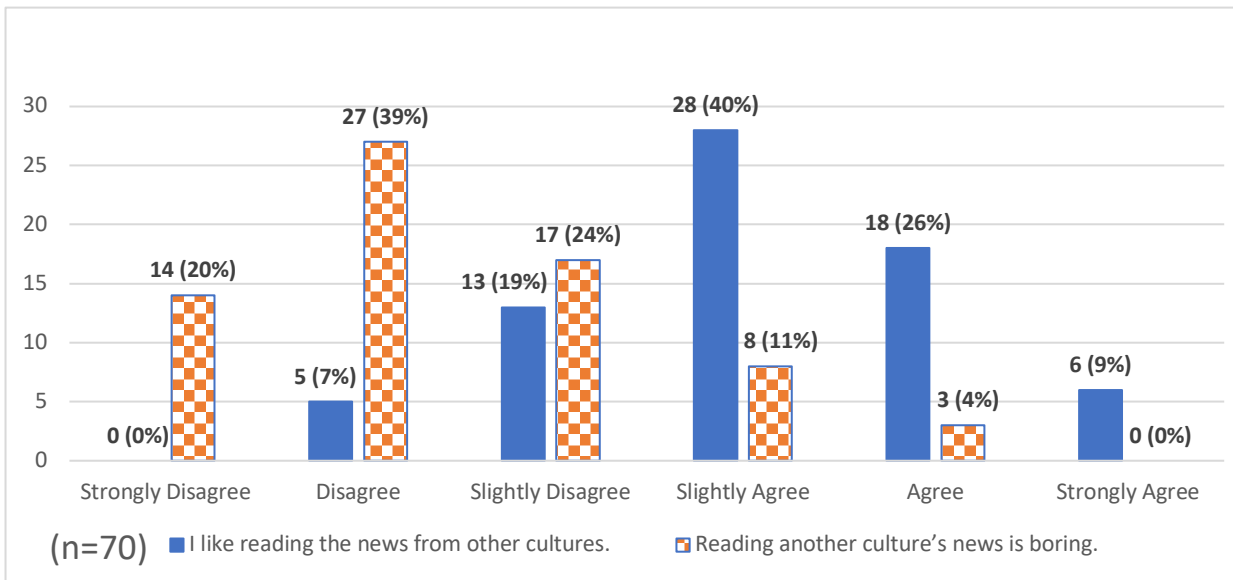
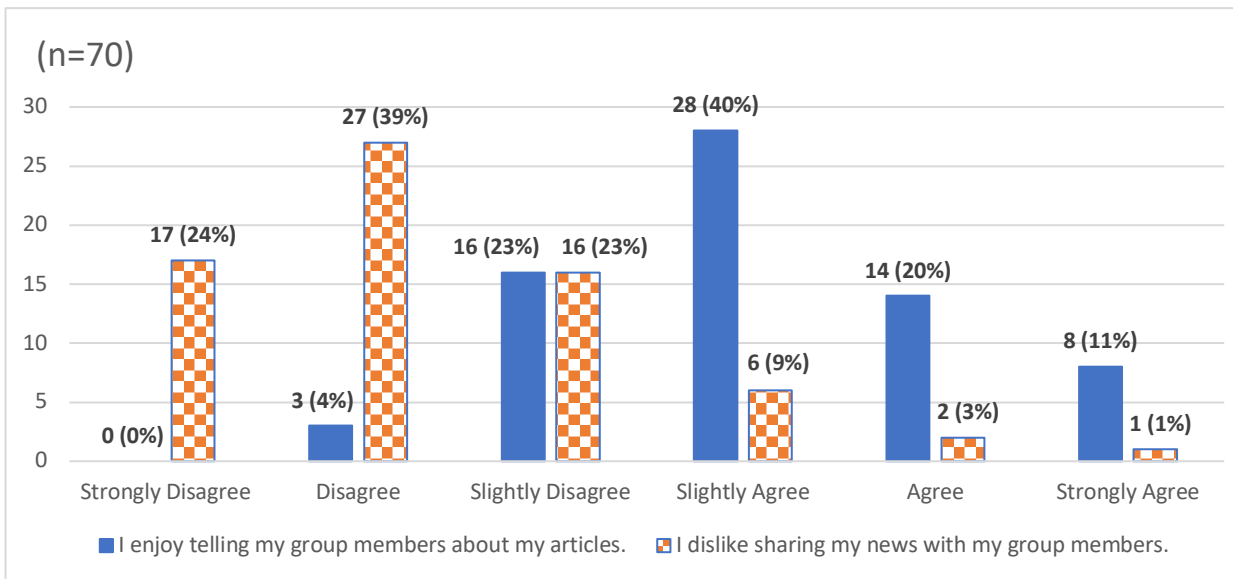


Figure 5

Enjoyment of Sharing News Articles



For the last aspect of enjoyment students were questioned about was their enjoyment of hearing their group members talk about the news (Figure 6, next page). This received the highest average, 4.46. This could be attributed to the fact that students did not have any specific task to perform while listening to their group members and could focus more on the social aspect of the activity.

Figure 6

Enjoyment of Listening to Group Members

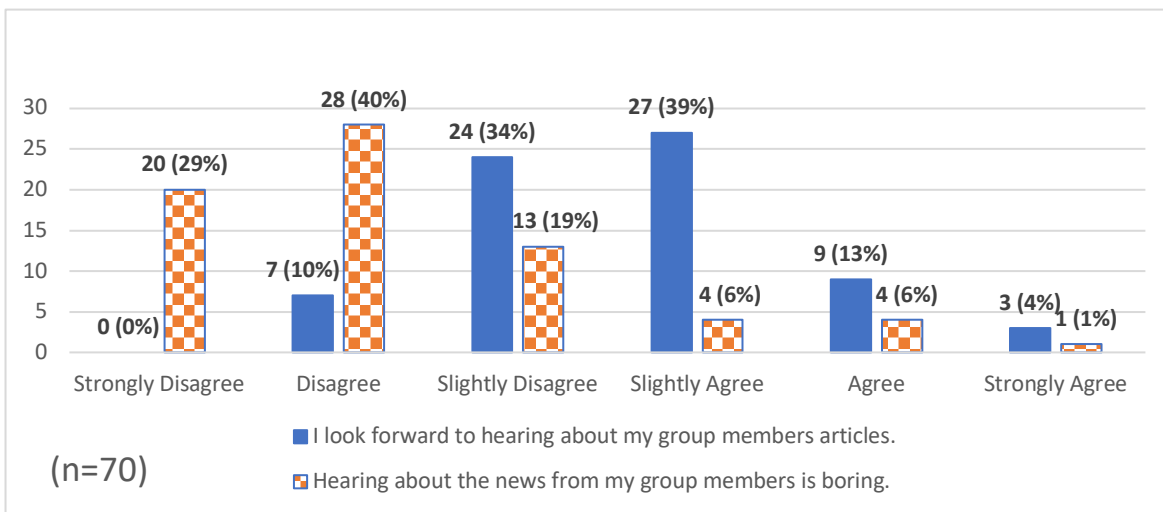
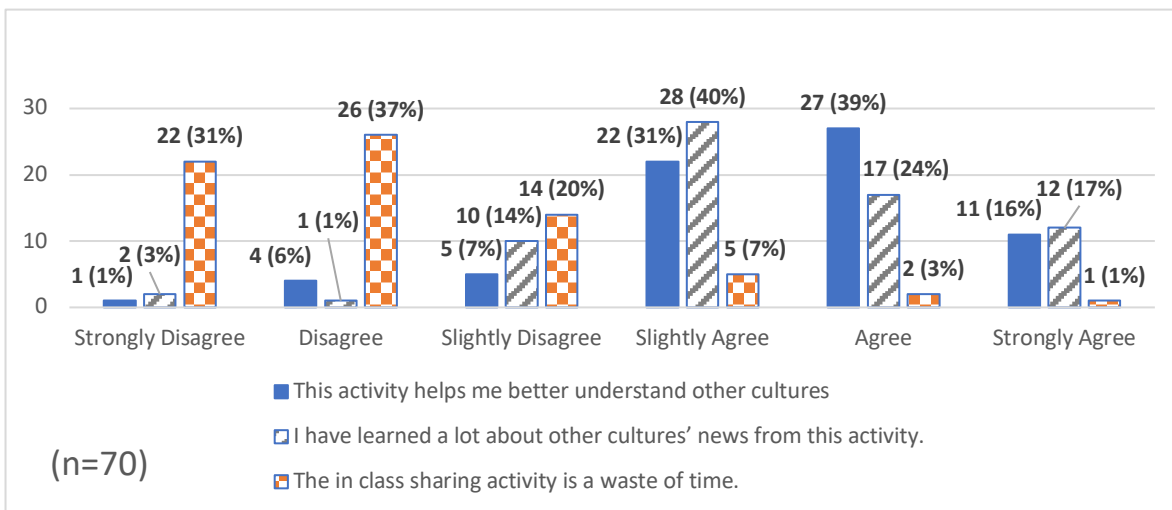


Figure 7

Perceived Value of the Activity



The final category included in the questionnaire focused on the amount of value students placed on the activity (Figure 7, above). For this category, there were two, specific positive questions and one, general negative question. Students showed a strong disagreement of the negative question “the in-class sharing activity is a waste of time”, giving it an average of 2.14. Additionally, students responded positively to the questions “this activity helps me better understand other cultures” and “I have learned a lot about other cultures’ news from this activity”, giving them averages of 4.47

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and 4.32, respectively. Although having minimal teacher input by design, students were able to see the value in the activity and benefit from it in relation to course content.

Short Answers. Students were asked to respond to three open questions in either English or Japanese, however, a majority of responses were given in English. They were not required to answer these questions and some respondents chose not to give a response or did not answer all three questions. The three questions were as listed below:

1. What do you like about the news article activity?
2. What would you change about the news article activity?
3. Do you have any other feedback about the news article activity?

Responses to these questions were coded into five categories based on common themes among them: knowledge about other cultures, activity enjoyment, criticisms, skill improvements, and wants and desires. The responses are presented verbatim.

Knowledge about Other Cultures. Overwhelmingly, students often commented on being able to know more about the world outside of Japan while also mentioning that the activity helped expose them to reading materials they otherwise normally would not read.

“I could know what the world is happening. Also it became custom to search world’s news story.” -Participant A

Additionally, some students identified the added benefit of the activity being continuous, as opposed to being infrequent, for example, as how the bi-semester presentations might be viewed.

“I can get latest information as I’m searching the news. I can know what is happening around the world, especially in Europe.” -Participant B

This response reinforces the goal of supplementing lecture material by using the news to explore avenues not covered by the lecturer. In this case, the respondent was able to learn more about current affairs happening in the region they were learning about in class.

“I can deepen my knowledge by knowing about other countries’ culture. I think it’s a good opportunity since normally I couldn’t know about other cultures without taking a course like this.” [translated from L1] -Participant C

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Some students recognized that this was a unique feature that only this type of course could provide. This type of activity was likely not used in the students' general English courses, so it provided the opportunity of giving the students something different, unique, and possibly memorable.

Activity Enjoyment. Several students gave responses expressing their enjoyment of the activity. One common belief held by students was the enjoyment of the social aspect of the activity.

"I like learning new things with my classmates. My classmates choose interesting articles every time, so I enjoy sharing news with them." -Participant D

"I enjoy it as a kind of warm-up activity. I enjoy talking with my classmates." -Participant E

Often, the students took advantage of this activity to speak English with their group members. They would use this time to greet their classmates and share summaries of their articles. Some respondents even commented on how they liked this activity as a warm-up activity.

Criticisms. Students did have several, similar criticisms when it came to the activity: including an active listening/dictation aspect, stricter time for better efficiency, and stricter time for better focus. First, some students wanted an area in their journal to also include notes taken of their group members' shared summaries.

"I want some spaces to write some memo about other's articles." -Participant F

Since there was no dictation component during the summary share, it could not be verified whether students were paying attention to and comprehending their group members' summaries. One of the most common criticisms students held was in relation to the time of the activity. Some students suggested each group member have a limited amount of time to share their article, forcing them to identify and share only the most important parts of their article and to avoid "make [sic] others bored."

"I think its better to have a limitation like 1 minute so that I have to summarize that simply. I also have to pick important parts of the news. A long summarize may make others bored."
-Participant G

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Similarly, several students also commented that the sharing time should be shorter to keep groups who finish early on task.

“I guess that spending time for this activity is a little bit long, so students tend to start talking with friends or doing other things... We can lessen time to do this, I think.” -

Participant H

Classes have a limited amount of time, and time management is a key aspect to being an effective educator. In this quote, it becomes apparent that students were also aware of this and preferred their time not to be wasted. One final criticism that students shared was the need for more guidance when searching for news articles.

“If there is one theme ever week, I would be motivated to find them.” -Participant I

Several students noted that they wanted the teacher to specify a topic for them to focus on when searching for an article. This could indicate that either the teacher could give more structured instructions at the beginning of the semester and gradually give students more agency, or periodically give them a topic that corresponds with the lecture of that day.

Skill Improvements. With any class activity, the goal is always to help students improve in some way. Students recognized this and gave the most responses about how the activity helped improve their skills.

“I could get a lot of perspective and information about culture. And we can improve our summarising, reading, or speaking activity through this activity.” -Participant J

“It's sometimes difficult to summarize some news about other countries but can improve the skill to summarize the thing and think simply.” -Participant K

“I can read the news article faster than before.” -Participant L

By having students read authentic news articles, they were exposed to a writing style they likely were not accustomed to. Through this exposure, they were able to become more accustomed to searching for foreign news sources and reading the material. Additionally, since students were tasked with making weekly summaries of their news articles, they were able to practice this challenging skill. Through this practice, students could increase their confidence when completing

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this portion of the activity. If students had more experience with reading foreign news sources, they may have attempted to incorporate those sources into their own reading habits in the future.

Wants & Desires. Finally, students gave feedback on what they wished the activity would help them improve. It may have been unclear to students whether, or by how much, their summarizing and sharing skills improved. Therefore, some students responded with the following quotes:

“I would like to summarize the news more clearly.” -Participant M

“I want to explain more easily to listeners.” -Participant N

Although students were completing these tasks on a weekly basis, in some cases, students could not notice their ability improving. Therefore, they desired some measurement by which they could clearly see improvement in their skills. It could be reasoned that this is related to their criticism about time management and their concept of what is and is not a valuable use of class time.

The final desire expressed by one student relates to a reluctance to challenge themselves. In it, they explained that, although they wanted to attempt more challenging articles, they instead chose articles or content that may have appeared easier, more familiar, or more relatable. Thus, students may desire to challenge themselves, but need that extra push by an external force (i.e., a teacher’s command, peer pressure during a group activity, or a change in self-motivation) to make the attempt. This suggests that a slightly more structured approach from the teacher could help give the motivation a student like this required.

Conclusion

Authentic materials do play an important role in the language classroom. With such a plethora of materials available, news articles can provide a near limitless supply of real-world content with which higher level language learners can challenge themselves. The use of articles for this course was multifaceted: learning about culture from authentic sources, using authentic materials, diversifying news habits, increasing confidence when reading an English news source, and providing students with a warm-up to discuss their homework. Based on this, there is evidence that this activity not only provided students with these opportunities, but that students held positive beliefs toward the activity. Almost all students agreed to some degree that the activity aided in understanding cultures from which the newspaper originated. Several students commented about the activity expanding their habits when accessing news. Many students explicitly stated that the

activity helped improve their skill of reading foreign news. Lastly, students found the article share to be the most enjoyable aspect of the activity.

Students do value their time and, even though they may not always directly vocalize it to the teacher, are constantly assessing what they do in the classroom and how it benefits them. While the use of news as a medium for ESL instruction does have its challenges (Moglen, 2014), it still can be used effectively as a discussion tool. Based on student feedback, providing periodic themes or topics for students to search for when choosing an article could help those who rely too much on the familiar. In addition, limiting share time would encourage students to be more concise in their summaries, forcing them to identify only the most important points in an article. However, by shortening the share time, the overall in-class activity time decreases. Therefore, one possible way to mitigate the reduction in time could be by adding a question-and-answer component to keep group members engaged and on task for the full warm-up time and which could then be incorporated into the weekly diary entries. Finally, for students who need extra support, it might be worthwhile to have a more scaffolded approach in whereby they are provided a selection of easier articles at the beginning of the year that gradually get more challenging (or are given complete agency) by the end of the semester to give a greater sense of progression.

The use of news articles is not a universal tool for language teachers. This can be seen in the lack of literature on the subject. Despite this, for motivated English majors, it has shown to be a well-received means to help bridge the gap between classroom and real-world English.

BIO DATA

Chris Lear has been in English education since 2007. After completing 5 years as an ALT in the JET Programme, he went on to get his master's in linguistic science from Nanzan university. He has been a lecturer at universities in Nagoya, Japan since 2015. He is currently a language instructor at Nanzan University. Peer feedback and virtual reality implementation are his areas of research.

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APPENDIX A

Weekly Notes

Name _____

| | |
|---------------------|---------------|
| Newspaper: _____ | Class 2 Notes |
| Article Date: _____ | |
| Summary _____ | |

| | |
|---------------------|---------------|
| Newspaper: _____ | Class 3 Notes |
| Article Date: _____ | |
| Summary _____ | |

| | |
|---------------------|---------------|
| Newspaper: _____ | Class 4 Notes |
| Article Date: _____ | |

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|---------|--|
| Summary | |
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APPENDIX B

This survey is to better understand your opinions of the news article activity in your culture class. Read the statements below about the news article activity and check the answer that best describes your opinion.

In this part we would like you to tell us how much you agree or disagree with the following statements by simply circling a number from 1 to 6. Please do not skip any of the items.

| Strongly disagree | Disagree | Slightly disagree | Slightly agree | Agree | Strongly agree |
|-------------------|----------|-------------------|----------------|-------|----------------|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |

(Ex.) If you strongly agree with the following statement, write this:

| | | | | | | |
|------------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Waking up early is annoying. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | ⑥ |
|------------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Finding a news article is easy. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| 2. I look forward to hearing about my group members articles. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| 3. Reading another culture's news is easy. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| 4. I dislike sharing my news with my group members. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| 5. I can finish summarizing the article quickly. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| 6. Reading another culture's news is boring. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| 7. This activity helps me better understand other cultures. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| 8. It is difficult looking for a news article. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| 9. The in class news sharing activity is a waste of time. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| 10. Hearing about the news from my group members is boring. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| 11. I like reading the news from other cultures. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| 12. It is difficult to read another culture's news. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| 13. I enjoy telling my group members about my articles. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| 14. I have problems summarizing the article. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| 15. I have learned a lot about other cultures' news from this activity. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |

For the questions below, you may answer in English or Japanese.

What do you like about the news article activity?

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What would you change about the news article activity?

Any other feedback about the news article activity?
