

***English Language  
Teaching Section***

# **News Sharing**

*By Dr. Arlan Parreño*

English 3 is considered by many, if not most, Assumption University students as the most difficult English course. The main reason for this is probably because of the big jump the students have to take from English 2 to English 3 in terms of learning tasks. In terms of reading, students have to deal with short stories or articles of about 300 words in English 1 and 2. In English 3, they usually have to read news reports or opinion articles that can be longer than 300 words. With regard to vocabulary (in the final exam) and error correction, the tests in English 1 and 2 are in sentence format, while in English 3 they are in paragraph or short essay forms. The passages for these tests in English 3 are also adapted from newspapers or other written news sources. Furthermore, writing tasks move from creative/informal and academic (creative story writing, paragraphs, and essays) in English 1 and 2 to formal and business-oriented (e-mails/letters, resumes, and memos) in English 3.

The transition poses big challenges for students, especially in terms of dealing with passages for reading comprehension, error correction, and vocabulary. It appears that students are not accustomed to passages coming from newspapers. The vocabulary, grammar, writing style, and even the topics of these passages seem alien to many AU students, especially the locals. Dealing with such

passages is a daunting, if not impossible, task for them. This phenomenon is natural since they are not familiar with such genre. People can understand what they are reading only when they can integrate the details from what they read with what they already know (Koda, 2004; Macaro, 2005).

### ***What makes reading a challenge***

It cannot be denied that people's ability in reading in a second language is directly related to their overall proficiency in that particular language (Macaro, 2005). However, aside from the challenges of English use in Thailand, the reading difficulty of our English 3 students can also be associated with the reading culture in the country.

"To say that a reading culture is not one of Thailand's strong suits is a gross understatement. Reading, either as a means of self-improvement or just pleasurable escapism, has never been associated with the idea of fun in the Thai social context. Indeed most Thais, if pressed, would admit that reading, a solitary activity, is the direct opposite of having a good time. People who read books are widely frowned upon as introverted, too serious, unsociable or lacking in social skills..." (Govt Must Act on Low Reading Rates, 2007).

This perceived reading culture may have significantly influenced the news reading habit of our local students. However, there can be other factors that make news reading unpopular among students, even among international ones. One of these factors is the perception that news is not fun and that most news is depressing. News reports, most of the time, are negative. As they say, no news is good news.

What fun-loving teens would like to read about political turmoil, corruption, uncertainties in world economies and other serious matters? Another factor is the appeal of modern visual and mobile communication technology. Many people would prefer watching news to reading it, especially now with high and ultra-high definition wide screen TVs, smart phones and tablets. What's more, as we are now in the age of modern information technology, young people, even adults, have so many choices when it comes to having fun and knowing what is happening around us. Facebook, Instagram, and other digital distractions offer more interesting activities, such as making your pimples disappear and showing the new you with pouting lips and different finger positions of the peace sign to the whole social media world, than knowing about global warming or the war on terror.

An informal survey in an English class at Assumption University will reveal how much, or rather how little, our students read news. That is what I have done in my English 3 classes at the beginning of every semester since some years ago. Very few of my students read news, even Thai news. Some of them just watch or listen to news reports, which are mainly in Thai, too. Probably due to the popularity of social networking and modern Internet and communication technology, their main source of news, again mainly in Thai, is Facebook, which seems disturbing because they say that they do not normally check the reliability of the news they see on Facebook.

According to Grabe and Stoller (2002), reading comprehension involves skills that require two kinds of processes: lower level processes and higher level processes. Lower level processes consist of understanding words, syntax and semantic relations in texts. Higher level ones involve comprehending the gist and main ideas of texts by using knowledge of text structure, discourse organization and genre, using metacognitive reading strategies and metalinguistic awareness. Since many AU Thai students are not in the habit of reading news-related articles in English, compounded by their inadequate exposure to other English reading materials, reading and understanding English newspaper articles may seem an insurmountable challenge for them.

## *How to face the challenge*

To be skillful in reading requires "thousands of hours of practice in reading" (Grabe and Stoller, 2002, p. 21). Thus, to be able to conquer reading comprehension tasks involving news-oriented passages in English, one has to spend thousands of hours practicing reading such passages.

The challenge then for teachers of English 3 is how to provide students with the thousands of hours needed for reading practice. Since we only have 90 hours to spend with students in a semester, it is impossible. To be successful in English 3 means to be ready for it, i.e. before getting to English 3. Although we can make suggestions on what may be done in lower English courses and even before entering university, our main concern is how to help them face the challenges of English 3, especially in reading comprehension, vocabulary, and error correction. Since we cannot afford to have all these reading activities during class time, the only way is for them to read independently outside the class.

After some contemplation a couple of semesters ago, I devised an activity called "news sharing", and I have been using it in my English 3 classes since then. Although I still have to see positive empirical results, I feel it has benefited my students in one way or another. I have seen how some students come to class always prepared with news reports to share, which showed something

positive: they read. However, the event that really compelled me to write this article is when one of my former students told me that she still continued reading news even after she had passed my English 3 class. The activity may have not altered world events, but it has positively influenced a student's life. For me, that is already worth the effort.

So please allow me to share this maybe not-so-novel "news sharing" activity. May you find it useful, too.

### *How to go about this news sharing activity*

At the beginning of the semester, after discussing the learning tasks in English 3 as well as the importance of reading English news-related articles, I ask my students to read at least one news article every day from reliable sources, for example Bangkok Post, The Nation, CNN, or BBC. I tell them that they can also challenge themselves by gradually increasing the number of articles they read or the amount of time they spend on reading news. Of course, we discuss the benefits of such activity to ignite intrinsic motivation in them. I also tell them that I will randomly call them to share the news they read to the whole class, specifically focusing on the 5Ws and 1H questions (what, who, when, where, why, how). They do not have to memorize the news; they can note down the main details of the report and they can read their notes in class. Moreover, to give added motivation, I employ the carrot approach. I tell them that their

news sharing effort will be rewarded as class participation, i.e. whoever shares news every time they are called will get good class participation scores at the end of the semester.

In the weeks that follow until the end of the semester, we start our class (except quiz days) with the 5-10 minute news sharing activity. Depending on the available time, three to five students are randomly called to share the news they have read. Sometimes, you do not need to call names because some students readily volunteer to share news.

Those who share news are noted on the attendance record. Such notes are taken into consideration, together with other class participation areas, at the end of the semester when it is time to give class participation marks. In every session, different students are called to make sure that each student is given a chance to share. The atmosphere of the activity is informal and conversational, i.e. students do not need to stand up or present at the front and anyone can ask questions or give their opinion about the report being shared.

### ***How to exploit news sharing***

The activity can be exploited in ways deemed appropriate. It can be used to jumpstart relevant lessons or topics. It can also be employed to introduce vocabulary words, i.e. words common in news reports and those that are covered in the course. Moreover, it can be helpful in exposing students to the writing style and structure of newspaper articles.



One interesting activity that can be used in conjunction with news sharing is opinion sharing. Controversial or current issues about the environment, tourism, and even politics sometimes, can bring about lively discussions that can enhance students' world view. Just be careful about the cultural sensitivities and time/lesson focus.

### ***What to watch out for***

Based on my observations, there are some situations that should be considered so that students can truly benefit from the activity. When such situations occur, we need to readily and appropriately address them.

Some students may share news that they have heard or watched, seen on Facebook, or read from Thai news sources, neglecting the main purpose of the activity, which is to practice their English reading skills. To discourage them from doing so, when they share the news, ask them about the sources, too. Politely reject reports that have been only heard or seen and those that come from unreliable sources. Remind them of the importance of reading English news from reliable sources.

Some students may feel daunted by the task. Encourage them to start with short, interesting articles and to gradually increase the level of difficulty of what they read. In addition, some students may tend to simply memorize the reports without understanding them. In this case, ask them basic questions to check their understanding, or ask them about their opinion regarding the issue in the report.

There may also be some students who will simply read news from their smartphones when they are in class. Such students are probably not ready, but they feel they will be called on that day and they do not want to miss the little incentive. Remind them kindly about the value of coming to class prepared. Moreover, some students may constantly read short or marginal news about crimes, which may not widen their horizons in terms of topic variety. Discuss with them the benefits of reading longer and varied newspaper articles. For those who like to share sports or entertainment news, tell them that test passages in English 3 are not normally from sports or entertainment sections. Or, you may want to be a dictator and totally ban the sharing of such news items. However, this does not mean you should discourage them from reading such articles.

Of course, the challenge will also be on us teachers if we are not in the habit of reading news. How can we encourage students to do something that we ourselves do not normally do? Besides, how can we help students understand difficult current issues if we are not aware of those issues? Finally, if news sharing becomes a regular class activity, there may come a time when it will start to feel boring. Thus, if we want to sustain the life of this activity, enthusiasm should be maintained throughout the semester, and that enthusiasm must emanate from us teachers.

## *When to use news sharing*

This news sharing activity can be used in both academic and conversation classes. For academic classes, it can serve as a class opener. In conversation classes, it can be a main activity, exploiting reports in terms of world knowledge, vocabulary, and grammar.

It can also be useful in other English courses, especially in English 4 where reading comprehension, editing and proofreading, and memo report and essay writing tasks also involve articles or topics that are usually adapted from news sources. Furthermore, aside from preparing students for English 3, adopting this activity in English 1 and 2, and even in Basic English, can also develop their reading habits.

As teachers, we need to innovate or adopt various ways to help our students learn. We should help them to do well not only in the confines of the classroom and the exam room but also in the real world where a lot of information goes around every day. Hopefully, this news sharing activity can help them in both.

## ***References***

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