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## Using Current Global Issues in EAP Teaching

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**Abstract.** Combining reading, speaking, and listening skills with current global issues is a good idea when teaching English for Academic Purposes (EAP). With that in mind, I designed an English course based on current affairs, and this paper aims to inform EAP instructors about the course design. The course is intended for sophomore students majoring in Electrical/Electronics Engineering and Computer Engineering. It uses articles from electronic newspapers and magazines, and incorporates documentaries from English television channels.

**Key words:** EAP, current e-newspaper/ e-magazine articles, TV documentaries

### EAP Öğretiminde Güncel Küresel Konuların Kullanımı

**Özet.** Akademik Amaçlı İngilizce öğretimi alanında, Elektrik-Elektronik ve Bilgisayar Mühendisliđi Bölümleri ikinci sınıf öğrencilerine yönelik, güncel küresel sorunlara dayalı bir ders tasarlanmıştır. Bu derste elektronik ortamda yayınlanan gazete ve dergi yazılarıyla, İngilizce yayın yapan televizyon kanallarının belgesel programlarından yararlanılmaktadır. Bu dersle öğrencilere okuma/konuşma ve dinleme/konuşma becerileri kazandırmak ve bu becerileri iyileştirmek amaçlanmıştır.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Akademik Amaçlı İngilizce, güncel e-gazete/e-dergi, TV belgeseli

### I. Introduction

Today's English for Academic Purposes (EAP) instructors have a wide variety of materials and resources to choose from when teaching EAP learners. In addition to the variety of textbooks available to teach separate and integrated skills, instructors are now including materials from other sources such as the Internet and television.

I teach English to sophomore students majoring in Electrical/Electronics Engineering and Computer Engineering at a university in Turkey. I designed an English course, called Current Issues in English, tailored towards the students' needs based on current affairs.

After proposing to teach this course and following extensive research, I could not find any textbooks that made use of current global affairs to teach reading, listening, and speaking skills. I was, therefore, driven to find my own resources and materials. The minute I realized that I could select current materials from the Internet and television to teach these skills, I did not hesitate.

## II. Rationale for the Course

Interviews at Department meetings with professors from both the Electrical/Electronics and Computer Engineering Departments and my own class observations have allowed me to understand what exactly were the sophomore students' requirements and needs. As a result, the following were identified:

1. To read and better understand materials for all their courses

All courses in the Electrical/Electronics Engineering Department and most courses in the Computer Engineering Department are taught in English.

2. To become more fluent in spoken English in order to participate in class discussions

Most students from both departments have a good knowledge of grammar when they enter their departments. They have taken a minimum of one year of intensive English courses given by the Foreign Languages Preparatory English Program. However, they are deficient in listening and speaking skills, according to professors, including myself, who teach many courses in both departments.

3. To become more knowledgeable about current world affairs

To justify the importance of including current global affairs in this course, I will quote Hall (October-November, 2005) who lists "...the two roles [of] a language teacher...in society: the conveyor of linguistic knowledge and the educator to enable students to understand better how the modern world functions" (p. 20).

There are twelve weeks of classes for each semester. Each week has three 45-minute classes. Taking this into consideration when planning the course as well as the students' needs identified above, I decided to divide the course into two sections:

1. Section One: Reading / speaking
2. Section Two: Listening / speaking

## III. Sections of the Course

### 1. Section One

#### 1.1 Reading skills

In Section One, week 1 and 2 of Current Issues in English, the focus is on reading and speaking skills. First, the purposes for reading are explained to students.

##### 1.1.1 Purposes for reading

People, in general, read for different reasons and so do students. Some of the reasons for reading I introduce to students are the following:

1. to obtain information;
2. to learn information;
3. to perform a task; and
4. to entertain oneself.

Before students start reading an article, they should understand their purpose for reading. In this way, they can spend more time on specific aspects of the reading. In Current Issues in English, students read articles to answer questions, to write summaries, and to give their perspectives on the topic of the reading and related topics. Then students are lectured on the importance of having good reading strategies (See 1.1.3 for reading strategies) to facilitate reading comprehension. If students learn how to read efficiently, they will reach their reading goal without much struggle, according to the author of "Reading Strategies" (author not named, p. 1).

Once students understand the different purposes for reading, they are introduced to pre-reading activities.

### 1.1.2 Pre-reading activities

In the pre-reading section, students learn that before they read an article, they should preview it. Previewing an article means looking at the title and subtitle, if one is available, carefully to predict what the article will discuss. Then, students scan the introduction to locate the main idea. Once students believe they know what the article is about, they scan the conclusion to confirm their prediction before they read the entire article.

### 1.1.3 Reading strategies

To take advantage of what they read, students should do the reading in an active way. Students should always have a pencil or pen with them to underline important ideas and write comments/reactions on the margins of the article while they read it. As Straschewski (2006) affirms, “Students should be encouraged to ‘mark-up’ what they are reading” (para. 5).

### 1.1.4 Post-reading activities

In the post-reading section, students write a one-sentence summary of the article they have read. Then they share their reactions to the article; that is to say, I ask them what they like/dislike about it and why, etc. While discussing the article, besides the topic of the article itself, other topics may emerge. In the case of the article “Man Dies after 72-hour Gaming Binge” (Robinson, 2007) read by students in the fall semester, types, causes, symptoms, effects, and prevention of different kinds of addiction surfaced. Consequently, a short interesting article, such as the one above, resulted in many topics for discussion.

In Week 2, students are reminded to use the strategies taught in Week 1 while they read the first article. In the next three weeks—weeks 3-5--students read articles by themselves. To conclude the focus on teaching reading skills, I will quote the author of “Reading Strategies” (author no named, 2005: 3) who ends his/her article by saying that the six reading strategies to be used when reading books are the following:

- Knowing what you need to know, and reading appropriately [;]
- Knowing how deeply to read the document: skimming, scanning or studying [;]
- Using active reading techniques to pick out key points and keep your mind focused on the material [;]
- Using the table of contents for reading magazines and newspapers, and clipping useful articles [;]
- Understanding how to extract information from different article types [;]
- Creating your own table of contents for reviewing material [; and]
- Using indexes, tables of contents, and glossaries to help you assimilate technical information.

Although not all the reading strategies above apply to reading articles (some apply to reading textbooks), they should be shared with students to help them with reading across the curriculum.

### 1.1.5 Types of articles

Although students are interested in topics related to technology due to their majors, in Week 1 I ask students what topics they prefer to read to select articles on topics of their choice. The articles students read in this course come from electronic newspapers such as *New York*

*Times*, *USA Today*, *Washington Post* and others, and magazines such as *Scientific American*, *Time*, *Popular Science* and so on. The articles chosen for the course are of two types:

1. news articles; and
2. feature articles.

In news articles, important points are introduced first. In contrast, in feature articles, the most important information is located in the body of the article. Consequently, students must identify the type of article beforehand to know how to read it in order to fully understand it. In 2007, I found an article on the Internet the week before the fall semester started. The article entitled “Man Dies after 72-hour Gaming Binge” (Robinson, 2007) informed readers about a man in China who died after playing computer games at an Internet Café for 72 hours without taking a single break. The topic of the article was interesting for young college students. Furthermore, the article was short and easy to read, and the vocabulary was not difficult for students at the intermediate level to understand.

### ***1.2 Speaking skills***

The next skill taught in Current Issues in English is speaking skills. The strategies below are very helpful to students:

- Students should think in English when trying to communicate their ideas in English instead of thinking in their first language from the beginning of the course. It helps students to acquire fluency in English;
- students should use simple words, phrases, and sentences when speaking English until they feel confident speaking the language;
- students should develop good speaking habits: they should learn to pause while conversing to make their spoken English sound more natural, more authentic. Some of the pauses they can use are *er*, *um*, *erm*, and others; and the fillers are words/phrases such as *well*, *you know*, *I mean*, etc. Dornyei and Thurrell also suggest fillers such as “actually,” “let’s see,” “to be quite honest,” etc. (cited in Cane, 1998: 35). Pauses and fillers allow students to think about what they will say next;
- students should learn about “conversational openings, turn-taking, interrupting, topic shift, conversation closings, and so on.” In topic shifting, for instance, Dornyei and Thurrell suggest that students use phrases such as “Oh, by the way,” “That reminds me of,” “As I was saying,” and so on (cited in Cane, 1998: 34); and
- students should use proper verbal and non-verbal communication: they should keep their tone of voice appropriate for the size of the classroom and maintain eye contact with those they are talking.

### ***1.3 Assessment of Reading and Speaking Skills***

After five weeks of classes, students are evaluated on their reading skills. The examination consists of an article for them to read and 5-8 questions for them to answer. As far as assessing students’ speaking skills, after students learn to communicate in English in a more authentic or fluent manner, according to their instructor, they must participate in class discussions at least once every class, that is, a maximum of three times a week. They participate by introducing new information about the topic of the article read, introducing a topic related to the topic read, etc.

## **2. Section Two**

### **2.1 Listening skills**

Section Two focuses on listening and speaking skills. In Week 7, the focus is on listening skills. Before students learn about listening strategies, they must understand the purposes for listening.

#### **2.1.1 Purposes for listening**

There are several reasons for listening:

1. to obtain information,
2. to follow instructions,
3. to evaluate information,
3. to sympathize, and
4. to have fun.

In addition to the purposes for listening, students should learn about listeners' responsibilities.

#### **2.1.2 Listeners' responsibilities**

When in the presence of a speaker, a listener should do the following:

1. maintain eye contact with the speaker;
2. understand the speaker's verbal and non-verbal (body language, tone of voice) cues; and
3. indicate that he/she is listening to the speaker by using body language to show agreement, disagreement, confusion, sympathy, surprise, etc.

Moreover, students should learn about what possible documentaries will be shown in the course and how long each will last.

#### **2.1.3 Types and length of documentaries**

From Week 8 to Week 14, students watch documentaries on current topics and topics related to their majors. The documentaries are recorded from *CNBC-e*, *Discovery Channel*, *National Geographic*, and other English channels. One documentary that students watched in the course was "How It's Made: Computers" produced by the *Discovery Channel* (2001). The 5-minute documentary introduced students to how the thirty different components of a personal computer were assembled. Many of the documentaries on "How It's Made" are interesting to engineering students due to the topics. I show students a list of all documentaries I have recorded and they choose the ones they want to see. In previous courses, they chose documentaries such as "Electronic Door Locks," "Loud Speakers," "Fiber Optics," "Electric Panels," and many others.

As far as the length of documentaries are concerned, the first documentaries students watch usually last no more than 5 minutes, so students can train themselves to fully concentrate on what they watch. As time passes, 7-10 minute documentaries are shown to students since they are more capable of giving their full attention to watching documentaries. Also, by then students are more able to understand documentaries better.

Before students watch the first documentary, they should be introduced to pre-watching activities.

#### **2.1.4 Pre-watching activities**

To be actively involved in the watching process, students should read information on the topic of the documentary even before they start watching the documentary to feel more confident and knowledgeable discussing the topic, and to understand ideas and unfamiliar vocabulary. This activity is given as homework assignment.

Prior to watching a documentary, students are informed of the title of the documentary and asked what they know about the topic of the specific documentary. They discuss the topic for approximately 10 minutes before they watch the documentary.

#### **2.1.5 Watching strategies**

As students watch a documentary, they should do the following:

- watch the documentary in an active manner -- reflecting upon what they are watching and taking notes. While taking notes, they should remember to continue to listen to the message attentively so as not to miss any important points;
- filter sounds that surround them at the time they are watching a documentary to comprehend the message;
- pay close attention to the images provided to connect them to the message in order to understand the documentary;
- listen carefully to words and phrases used in the message, so that they relate unknown to known vocabulary to help with the comprehension of new words;
- listen to transitional words such as first, second, in addition, also, for example, etc. to understand when the speaker moves from one point to the next or exemplifies a point;
- be aware of the speaker's different tone of voice which may indicate when he/she moves to a new point; and
- understand that when the speaker's voice becomes louder, that may indicate that something is important.

#### **2.1.6 Post-watching activities**

Once they finish watching the documentary, students try to remember what they have watched by writing a summary or jotting down a few more ideas. If students are given questions to respond to before they start watching the documentary, they may start responding to the questions if they have not yet done so. Then they talk about the documentary: what the purpose of the documentary was, what they learned from it, what they thought in relationship to what was discussed/introduced in the documentary, what else they knew to share with the class, etc.

### ***2.2. Assessment of listening and speaking skills***

In week 15, students take an examination. The examination consists of a 5-8 minute long documentary and 5-8 questions. First, students read the questions and ask for clarification in case they do not understand the questions. Second, they watch the documentary once and take notes to help answer the questions or directly answer the questions. Once the documentary is over, they have 15 minutes to respond to the questions. Finally, they watch the documentary a second time and then they are given 15 more minutes to finish the examination.

In reference to the assessment of students' spoken English, students must participate in class discussions before and during the pre-watching sessions, and after they watch a documentary. The way they take part in discussions is evaluated according to the criteria established in paragraph 1.3 Assessing Reading and Speaking Skills.

#### IV. Conclusion

This paper set out to give information to EAP instructors about the design of an English course called Current Issues in English based on current world affairs. The course uses the latest information and feature articles from newspapers and magazines located on the Internet and documentaries recorded from English television channels. Thus, every fall semester students read new articles and watch the latest documentaries.

Taking into account sophomore students' needs, the course was divided into two main sections:

1. Reading / speaking
2. Listening / speaking

Section One aims at educating the students on the purpose for reading and the importance of having good reading strategies. Following that, they are informed about what to do before, during, and after the reading stages. In addition, there is a section on the type of articles selected for the course. In relation to speaking skills, the students are informed of the strategies they can use to become more competent in spoken English. Section Two emphasizes to students the reasons for listening and listeners' responsibilities when the speaker is present. Students are introduced to the types of documentaries shown in the course and are then guided into pre-watching activities, watching strategies, and post-watching activities.

As EAP instructors probably understand, it is possible to design EAP courses using current newspaper and magazine articles from the Internet, and documentaries from English television channels. The ideas presented in this article may be used to design EAP courses for students from different majors.

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