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# ***NHK News Shower: Topics in an EFL Context***

## **For Japanese Senior High Students**

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### **Abstract:**

Within a second language acquisition course it can be difficult to introduce complex issues. News topics offer excellent opportunities to expand both language acquisition and cultural awareness. The advent of the internet has afforded an excellent chance for students to become familiar with news events that affect the world they live in. For senior high school students, the accession into the adult world may only be one or two years away. Presently a group of students in a Japanese international study program are able to take an elective class that introduces current news issues for scrutiny in Japanese, along with their centre of study, English. The Japanese television broadcaster, NHK has teamed with the American broadcaster ABC to allow short news topics of roughly 5 minutes to be viewed in both Japanese and English. Within the classroom, a native English and Japanese teacher are present to help guide the students in discussion, expand the topic to other issues or offer their own personal experience of world events. All these activities are conducted in English with the students discussing their own views in pairs or larger groups. Through the course of a single lesson, 5-10 news topics may be introduced. By use of this instructional mode students are able to understand in detail news that they may have only vaguely heard about. This method also allows the instructors to present complex topics in lessons that are suitable to their student interests since ABC/NHK news is uploaded 5 days a week.

### **Introduction**

Through the eyes of Japanese senior high school student's world events that take place on the other side of the globe outwardly have no effect on them. But under closer examination it is evident that events that happen today can have lasting effects throughout the planet tomorrow and many tomorrows hence forth. Many of these issues are complex and difficult to understand in a native language and even more so if one is evaluating them in a second or third language. Understanding these events which most often have cultural underlying is a major step in fully comprehending another language; to understand the culture of another group of speakers is to fully comprehend the total aspects of that community. One of the main tasks that mainstream teachers face is to teach English language learners complex content while they are developing English proficiency (Zainuddin & Moore, 2003). To become proficient in a language, learners need to use creative and critical thinking through the target language (Kabilan, 2000). Communicating with others is one thing, but being actively involved with on an intellectual level to discuss certain topics is a sign of equivalent language understanding. The aim of the course is not to just allow students to scrutinize nifty news themes but more importantly to consider the issues and how they relate to their own person lives now and in the future. Many

news topics are wide ranging and will most likely affect their lives after their senior high school courses have been completed.

### **ABC News Shower**

NHK (Nippon Hōsō Kyōkai) commonly referred to as the Japan Broadcasting Corporation through cooperation with CNN (Cable News Network) and ABC (American Broadcasting Company) present news segments bilingually in English with Japanese subtitles. A news topic of roughly one minute in length is replayed numerous times in various formats for English language learners to comprehend more clearly. Each topic is approximately a minute in length. By being re-played in various formats and with Japanese explanations of key words and phrases the overall run-time is around 5 minutes for each subject matter.

### **Broadcast topics**

Admittedly since NHK is teamed up with ABC, an American broadcaster, most of the news items are largely centred on the United States itself. The topics do cover a broad range though and are currently achieved until 2016. There is a new 5-minute news topic post to the NHK web site from Tuesday to Saturday. Major topics such as crime, the economy (local and worldwide), gun control, and homelessness are common but may also include spots on individual people or places. In an American election year (Nov. 2016) the candidates along with their political beliefs and the key issues were widely portrayed in the news. This gave Japanese students an opportunity to learn about certain individuals in more depth beyond a mere name and photo which they may have seen. While some topics are unique to the United States most often the subjects such as jobs, homelessness, ozone layer, or future space exploration are just as relevant for Japanese senior high school students as they would be for American students or any other learners of a similar age, regardless of nationality. This ensures for lively and opinionated discussion between the students and instructors depending on subject matter.

While the instructors have previewed the available news topics there are on occasion some that are pretty straight forward and do not generate a lot of comments or discussion. This being the case, it is easy to proceed to the next topic. Additionally, since this an Internet enabled classroom it is also relatively effortless to augment topics with YouTube videos or other materials. A case in point; an up-to-date news segment displayed an American high school girl who played soccer for her school team. She was asked by the high school football coach if she could kick for the boy's football team. She accepted and has been a part of the boy's team ever since. Many Japanese women have gone overseas in search of their dreams to pursue a career or goal. Another example shared within a lesson was from another YouTube video of a Japanese girl who could not play rugby in Japan since it is considered a boy only sport. She won a contest to travel to Australia. She eventually won a sports scholarship to an Australian university and now resides there while playing on a woman's rugby team. Tying in themes to the Japanese high school student's lives is especially important. This senior high where the news shower lessons are encompassed, up until about ten years ago was an all-girls school. Many of the study programs still have a high percentage of young women in them. Instilling

confidence and believing in one's own abilities is important to know and accept regardless of gender or race or religion.

Additionally, the teachers can share their life experiences on many news clips to bolster comments and talk amongst the class members. An up-to-date news segment covering an important international event had the instructors asking the students to reflect back on major news events in their own lives. "What was the first major news event that they could recall?" "Where were they?" "What were they doing?" "How did they feel when they first heard the news?" All these and further questions and comments can broaden students understanding of the mood and reflect on the time that these events occurred.

### **Technology Applied**

Considering digital technologies' widespread availability and influence in everyday life, the use of different technologies for educational purposes is an important subject for teachers and teacher educators to consider (Flanagan & Shoffner, 2013). Technology is becoming increasingly important in both our personal and professional lives, and our learners are using technology more and more (Dudeney & Hockly, 2007). With the explosion of the Internet's vast repositories of media growing daily, language teachers are receiving almost innumerable amounts of teaching materials from online resources (Tuzi, Mori, & Young, 2008). Technology offers a means to differentiate instruction, motivate students, improve instruction, provide visual cues, and improve learning, especially in the area of literacy (O'Neil & Perez, 2003; Shoffner, de Oliveira & Angus, 2010; Sternberg et al., 2007). As CALL practitioners, new computer technologies present opportunities to find innovative ways in the teaching and learning of languages (Beatty, 2010). This availability of authentic language brings numerous advantages for both lecturer and learner in the Internet Age. But the challenge to intercultural language educators is how to combine classroom teaching with the manifest opportunities offered for formal and informal learning (Corbett, 2010)

The lessons described in this paper are infused with up-to-date computer ware in a climate controlled language lab utilized primarily for that specific purpose. The instructor(s) have a master control panel that regulates student access to all the computers. The visuals may be displayed on a large screen or individually on student monitors. Audio access may be through individual headphones or all allowing over the classroom speakers. Clarity of sound is in this case, impeccable. The NHK news programs can be easily streamed directly from the Internet. The core dialogue which is roughly one minute in length can be displayed:

- ✓ Entirely in English
- ✓ English with Japanese subtitles
- ✓ Entirely in Japanese
- ✓ In printed dialogue form (allowing viewers to read at their own pace)

Within the NHK homepage the individual segments may be started and stopped at any time for further explanation, examples or as appropriate discussion. Segments may also be assigned for homework or to enable a flipped classroom type of learning environment.

While it is not a necessity in these types of courses, the advent of technology and access to the Internet has allowed instructors innumerable options when it comes to lesson planning and implementation. The *NHK News Shower* lessons have instilled motivation in learners and the class has become a very popular course for the Japanese third year senior high school students within this international program. By connecting a specific technology to instruction, students have the opportunity to use the technology that is appropriate for the academic setting (Young & Bush, 2004).

An alternative site that is more grammar and vocabulary based is that of 'Breaking News English'. Similar in their news topics, Breaking News is not video dependant with many lessons being able to be printed out or tasks accomplished on the Internet site itself. Pages and topics can be assigned for homework through any computer that is Internet connected. A huge advantage over NHK News Shower is that Breaking News English has different levels to assist those who may be low, intermediate or advanced learners. The diverse number of levels currently stands at 7, ranging from the lowest of zero to the highest at six. For shorter amounts of time or to convey numerous topics in one lesson an instructor as the added option of choosing mini lessons; in their printed form, these lessons usually do not amount to more than 2 single pages or one double sided page printed out. The speed reading lessons have built in rolling texts to guide the students. In addition, the '5-speed listening' is exactly what it says it is, there are variable speed adjusters to slow down or speed up the listening tasks All lessons may be downloaded to a lecturer or learner's computer. Dictation practice exercises allow the listener to repeatedly replay sequence of the text until they have completely mastered the sentence(s). Past lessons are inventoried and can be accessed by month or alphabetical order listed by title. As a stand-alone study tool or used in tandem with NHK Newshower, the addition of another active learning tool adds excitement and the ability to learn at a pace that students are comfortable with.

### **Technology Unapplied**

Lessons involving current events do not require the latest technology to succeed. There are many options that have worked for years and the Internet has not replaced these fundamental ideas. Simply using computers or connecting to the network does not ensure that teaching is easier and more effective or that adolescents will be automatically well prepared to read, write, and live in the 21st century (Bruce, 2007). Many readers will most likely recall 'current event' classes in their school years. Articles from newspapers were cut out and students sat around in desks or at a table and discussed relevant topics. These types of 'news shower' lessons can still cover the same idea of student interaction and discussion but on a lower technological plane. The lessons obviously do not have to be Internet enhanced; the main aim of the lesson to be 'pupil powered' with students concentrating on discussion and the "what do you think" instead of the "how do we do that". In a second language learning environment, the ability to express

complex topics in simple language shows significant language ability regardless of technology enhancement.

In many instances, the instructor may be the only individual with Internet access. Should not be viewed as a deterrent to effective and meaningful lessons. Many sites such as Breaking News English which has previously been reported above, offers instructors the opportunity to print out or show on a large screen lessons that involve students with current affairs and events. Utilizing technology in teaching is not the aim unless it is actually a course in applying computers to instructional lessons. As the author Rakestraw (2000) has stated;

Where will these new technologies — and others yet to be developed — take us in teaching and learning? How will learning encounters of the future be different from those in classrooms today? No one knows. I will suggest, however, some caution in assessing the full effectiveness of these new technologies and their impact on teaching on the basis merely of the way we are using them today. Imagine an attempt to assess the impact of the automobile on late 20th century culture on the basis of what the Model T could and couldn't do in the early 1900s. Far better, I think, to continue the exploration and use of these new technologies, being careful to consider how and to what extent they facilitate good teaching and learning.

### **Critical Thinking**

The key issue in the news is not only about having the students read an article, learn a few unfamiliar words, phrases and move on but to also reflect on what they have just seen and heard. Current topics in the news can offer learners an opportunity to be introduced to new subject matter. These lessons presented to students are not only attempting to show some snazzy news and move on to the next segment but for students to stop and seriously consider what they have just seen and heard.

Although the teaching of critical thinking skills is a common objective in many ESL textbooks and materials, several authors suggest that many Asian cultures do not lend themselves to overt critical thinking, and to a certain extent, that is true. But we recognize that Asian students can think critically; they simply have not been taught, have not been given the opportunity, or have been discouraged to do so because of their culture (Tuzi, Mori, & Young, 2008).

Students should consider how they would react, what they would do, in a comparable situation. As earlier emphasised most of the news segments are centred on U.S. news such as politics, gun control, or racial issues. Other more global issues, such as the economy, environment, joblessness, food safety, health care, and aging, can affect all of us regardless of country of origin. Since contact with other cultures is a part of our own self-awareness, what we call foreign or strange are parts of our identity that needs to be explored (Torres-Martinez, 2015).

Teachers should facilitate and encourage creative and critical thinking skills by viewing their learners differently from what they had presumed. They also need

to change their pedagogical views and adopt a more flexible attitude towards their teaching and not be too concentrated and dependent on textbooks and their schools' aspirations, which are usually exam-oriented (Kabilan, 2000).

It is commonly observed that Japanese have difficulty expressing their opinion (one likely result of the collectivist nature of Japanese society) (Long, 2003). Japanese students in general due to cultural norms are influenced into a group think mentality in many instances. These lessons attempt to encourage students to not necessarily become a raging maverick or renegade, but to foster an individuality that is in us all.

## **Conclusion**

In today's ever-changing world it is difficult to keep abreast of all the latest news. In the international spectrum world events can have replicating results. For those with busy schedules such as students there is most often little or no time to keep up with the latest news. Of course, the Internet is not only a forum where people from different cultures can meet; it is also an inexhaustible source of information about different cultures and societies (Corbett, 2010). Additionally, many events on the world stage are somewhat complex to understand. This is especially true for native speakers and even more so for those studying a second or third language. However, the learning of another culture should never be a one-way street; it is equally important to learn about the culture in which you are living (McKay, 2010).

Fortunately, some international news organizations have teamed up to share their results with accompanying broadcasting companies. In this way, news reports gathered in English can then be rebroadcast in another language which in this case is Japanese, and presented to EFL learners in a suitable learning environment. The news flashes or 'showers' are presented in 5-minute segments with each of these topics broken down into easier to understand parts by being entirely in English, only Japanese subtitles, and finally a combination of both English and Japanese. Throughout the short news broadcast American slang or extensive vocabulary is also expanded upon and defined. In this way, the students can acquire total comprehension of a certain topic in a short amount of time. Additional guided discussion by both a native English instructor and Japanese teacher further expand the student's awareness.

The lessons described in this article are carried out in a fully equipped language lab that allows each student access to a computer and monitor but depending upon school resources these types of lesson can be achieved on a much lower or no tech scale. Using a teacher only monitor and overhead an instructor can present the same material to students. If no technology or Internet device is accessible similar types of lessons can be accomplished with newspapers or magazine clippings. The only necessity is that the news materials presented match the learner's language level and abilities. Within this frame of a course the old current events classes of the past have become technology enhanced so today's senior high school students can enter the world of tomorrow. Being that much more knowledgeable of world events and being able to express their opinions in more than one language can only add to their future success.

In an Internet world that is constantly evolving it is becoming more and more difficult to keep abreast of contemporary global events. This is especially true for those individuals in rigorous

study modes such as senior high school students. Any free time they may have is most likely spent in ways to de-stress. Opportunities to listen to music, chat with friends, or partake if only briefly in a leisure activity of their choosing. The events of the world commonly only involve going to and from school intermixed with large blocks of study and exam times.

NHK News Shower offers English language instructors a tool to include the latest news as broadcast by ABC. The news outlet ABC has teamed up with NHK to distribute short five-minute news clips of current events in the United States of America along with more international events. The broadcasts in the news shower are actual news items taken from the evening news. The shows are produced almost daily with the EFL learner in mind. The new clips are very short but are replayed three times. The initial playing is entirely in English with English subtitles, the second time is in English with Japanese subtitles and the final viewing is in English with no subtitles. The news can be started and stopped at any time for instructor explanations or student discussion. Additionally, to not only practice aural and oral skills, each broadcast has key words or phrase to assist in vocabulary expansion.

An ever-evolving inventory of news shows dates back two years with an option to choose topics by key word or useful phrase. This gives instructors full discretion in what they would like to introduce to their learners. Since these are authentic news accounts the level of English for involved students should be high intermediate to advance. Pairs or small groups are ideal for discussion or other tasks. Students have the opportunity to compare, contrast and evaluate how the broadcasts relate or differ to events in their own country.

The topic selection, as earlier stated, is quite broad and thus gives teachers the time to elaborate and expand student comprehension. At the senior high school where this author instructs, the learning process is achieved through team-teaching with a Japanese teacher and a native English instructor. For further understanding and to allow a bit of student freedom, students have been allowed to comprise and act out skits from words or phrases from prior lessons. This method gives learners the flexibility to formulate their understanding of the words or expressions in a fun and many times humorous manner. The benefit of this is that students are less stressed and the interaction between their fellow classmates allows for a more relaxed atmosphere.

NHK News Shower is a free on-line tool that can be used in a assortment of ways to maximize understanding and comprehension of more complex words and phrases in the English language. The broadcasts are currently all free to observe. Access is available through YouTube, or through all major browsers for convenient in class or home viewing. Expanded language learning in a current events format allows for learners whether they are senior high students or otherwise, to keep abreast of the world they are about to integrate into.

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