Conversation Lesson - News

Topic

News

Aims

- To develop fluency through a range of speaking activities
- To introduce vocabulary related to news

Age group

Teens

Level

B1

Time

60-120 minutes

Materials

- Conversation Lesson – News student worksheet

Introduction

Where were you when you heard about... ? There are some news stories which leave nobody in any difficulty when answering this question, so even allowing for sensitivity to certain subjects in a classroom situation, there are already dozens of things most people can talk about.

But talking about news doesn't have to mean talking about world news. It can mean making it, inventing stories and reporting fictional events in local situations. In this conversation lesson I take students through several stages which enable them to make conversation about the news from a number of different perspectives.

Not everybody follows the news, so it pays therefore to keep an open mind, and have plenty of activities which don't require masses of detailed knowledge on everybody's part in order to get off the ground.

Just as a brief aside, I regularly use BBC Learning English materials and the Grammar Challenge

series has recently published a lot of podcasts with a focus on news words. These could be a useful extra for you and your students towards the top end of Intermediate and above.

Procedure

1. What's in the news today? (5-10 minutes)	• I try to avoid teacher-centredness, often failing but never going down without a fight. In this case I am happy to begin the class with the group chatting casually with me. It has some value, and after all, conversation classes are intended to put students more at ease with the spoken English language. Asking them how their day has been and what they are planning to do after class is an approach I often use for the first few minutes (I keep meaning to think of more questions, yes)... in this lesson I ask them if they have seen the news today, and we have a brief chat about stories hitting the headlines either locally or globally. • I don't plan the stage, nor do I expect much from it, but despite it being contrary to good teaching practice in many ways, I really do think it's been the best way to start this lesson. • After five or ten minutes we have an idea of what's happening in the world, and the students are all on topic.
2. Task 2: Vocabulary (10-15 minutes)	• Appendix 1 gives a number of sentences which contain relevant lexical items which may or may not be new to the class. What I offer here is a basic selection, but I have used more or different words a number of times. • The task is simple although you may want to modify the sentences to clarify the context in each case, students are expected to read the sentences and identify the meaning of the words in bold without any help from dictionaries or translators. Obviously this happens as part of a conversation about each situation and as I monitor I encourage students to develop the conversation a little when they are happy that they understand the relevant language. I might ask them to talk about the news of the moment and comment whether it be sensationalised etc. • When this has done its course, typically ten minutes later, we come back together to share our understandings of the new words. You can do this as a pyramid discussion if you like, but I recognise that although this is a priority stage (identifying vocabulary useful to the lesson), prolonging the conversation is not hugely beneficial.

	• As I write the words on the board, I invite students to give examples, or to talk about the last time ... etc, or maybe even to invent a human interest story, for example. I'm checking their understanding, but without asking them to repeat what they've already said. • Then I add more words, it pays to have some prepared, mental blocks strike no more so than when at the board, one time I couldn't think of a single news word and it left me very red-faced. Luckily I was helped by a strong class who between them provided a good 20 extra items or so. Sharing our knowledge was a good way for them to explore the topic further, and on this occasion for me to prove I did know something about the presenting topic.

3. Task 3: Discussion questions (10-15 minutes)	• Simple stage, and very effective, maximising speaking without the onus being on students to provide the initiative (they will do that very much in later stages), I give them some questions and invite them to avoid simple and short answers.
	
	In pairs, make conversation about your answers to these questions:
	
	    • *What do you think the main purpose of television news is? To inform, entertain or influence?*
	    • *Do you think people generally take the news at face value?*
	    • *What are some of the differences between television news and the news in the newspapers?*
	    • *What makes a good news story, in your opinion. For example, celebrities and their cars, a general election, the discovery of a cure for a bad disease etc*
	    • *Have you ever been at the location of a big news story? Were the television reports true? If not, what does this make you think about the reliability of television news?*
	
	• To be honest, in this case I do more often than not put pairs with other pairs after ten minutes, not to do it all again but to investigate A, what their views have in common and B, what is different. Then I ask them to report to the class, briefly, what they think. If time permits I ask them if anything surprised them about what their partner said, or if they learned anything.
	
	• It can be an interesting ten to fifteen minute stage, but I wouldn't want it to last much longer, this approach has its value but is not the best way to exploit classroom time, and there's plenty more to do.

4. Task 4: Three news stories	I ask students to think of three news stories from their lifetime. One from the current month, one from the year and one from any period. Then, simply, I stand them up and have them investigate what other members of the class

remember. I write a few questions on the board to prepare in their minds the information they should have ready to give, for example:

- *What news story have you chosen?*

- *When did it happen?*

- *What happened?*

- *Where were you when you heard the news?*

- *How did you find out?*

- Admittedly this is another fairly random activity and can be a bit hit and miss, but the saving graces are essentially that you can either skip it or cut it short. Again, it seems to be a ten minute job, but in that you may need to keep closely to time this might not be a wholly reliable activity. I'm happy to go with the flow, and I join the conversation, encouraging students to develop their questions and answers beyond the original ideas.

- But there is method in my methodology (although not so much *ology*) and with the last question am I rather cunningly leading into the next stage which sees and end to the chat based activities and takes us into the business end of the lesson.

5. Task 5: Types of media (15 minutes)	• Students have by now told each other, and me, how they heard the news. Bringing us back together momentarily I use their answers to make a list on the board which generally takes the form of a list of headings, *TV, Radio, Newspapers, Internet.* (I sometimes teach them about the old *town criers* in England, but don't worry yourself about that.) • Then in pairs students must discuss and write lists for each media, in each case identifying the advantages and disadvantages of each. This can take two minutes or twenty minutes depending on how thoroughly it is done, but as I am keen to keep this going for at least 15 I make sure students discuss each point in detail. • Often I give one media to each group, and assign members to report their findings to other groups upon which they will also gain that groups insight too. It varies according to group size and other matters of classroom management. What doesn't vary is that I expect full involvement for the duration. • A group discussion touches on their findings and I may agree or disagree, and say so. Students are reminded to be critical and alert, respectfully, and

where one group thinks the Internet is more accessible, another group with only a PC at home might argue that the radio is better when on the move. I'd ask why they couldn't buy a newspaper for that purpose, and no doubt they'd tell me they are only published once a day so not useful for hourly updates. We could talk all night.

6. Task 6: Broadcasting order	• Appendix 2 includes a series of events (or non-events) which have happened today. The upcoming bulletin is long enough to announce and describe only six of these events. The students' job is to decide which of them to broadcast, and equally importantly, the order they should be broadcast in.
	• I introduce it by asking what types of stories they see on the news, and what types they usually don't. It goes from here quite nicely into the activity and when I give the instructions and lists out, it seems to get moving quickly enough. There's really little else to add, I find it a fun stage and provided students give reasons and aim to agree with each other it can last for up to twenty minutes. I aim for twelve, roughly, and use three or so to compare our findings. Invariably the Presidential story comes first or maybe second. I ask why in spite of it being obvious, but where students want to inform the nation that a local boy has bought a new bike, I feel blessed for the opportunity to introduce the word *newsworthy*, and point out to them that it isn't. They are usually joking ☺.
7. Task 7: What's the Story? (15 minutes)	• I'm not including materials for this in the appendices simply because the availability of alternatives means most teachers would probably prefer to locate their own news stories. It's otherwise the same, simply get hold of a news story, written, and identify about ten keywords from the text. They should be significant words, prepositions absolutely not; verbs, nouns, adjectives yes, but without being too obvious students should be able to think through the list and get an idea of the story.
	• I usually dictate them, and then ask pairs to piece them together and discuss what the story was. They can move round the class and share, compare or simply poach ideas provided they have given it a fair chance and done their best to tell the story.
	• I join in but of course knowing the story my contribution has to be limited to questions and hints, but the point of this activity is not to guess a news story, it is to improve our speaking, so it matters not if they are horribly wrong. Stress this to them, when you give them the story it can be discouraging to have been wrong but this is not the way they should feel, tell them that the task now is to discuss the differences between the two, theirs and the real

one, and then to discuss the story in general.

• I invite them to share and compare again, this time formally, organising them into fours. I keep them in fours for the next activity.

Task 8: What's the story? (version 2) (15-20 minutes)	• Again, I dictate a list of words in the same style as the first list, only this time they did not come from a news story but from my imagination. The news story is to follow, and in their fours students work together to create a gripping and informative story (written maybe, it's not the objective, but they have to present it so have to remember it) which they will read to the class. • They have to include the words but neither order nor part of speech are important, they can change to verbs, nouns etc and it is not important if they repeat the words (other than of course I actively discourage repetition generally). • I suppose this opens cans of journalistic worms and we could introduce into the lesson discussion about what makes a good news story. Yet however tempting it may be I don't do anything like that, I think it would be a distraction and again, I'm not training journalists, I'm helping speaking skills develop. • When they have prepared their good news stories, they read them to the class, if possible as a TV reporter would. If they can finish with *Name, location* and *it's back to the studio,* even better.
Task 9: Headlines (10 minutes)	• I take in a range of headlines and ask students to discuss the content of the stories. Yes, I talk a little about headlines, how articles are omitted, past tenses are avoided and the future is expressed by the infinitive, but not in any great detail. And in some ways I don't feel that I want to give them the articles to read because we've already done this in Stage 6, and it's not a reading lesson after all. I just want them to talk, usually this is the last activity and free discussion with the level of fluency they have by now reached is not appropriately concluded by reading the newspaper. They could come back to that in the next lesson depending on the objectives of your course. For now, they can talk about Barry Manilow being seen in Harrods', or The British General Election, depending on how they interpret the headline. • Of course, I am sure to feed back to them and this may involve them seeing part or all of the article, but at this stage I am happy to settle for a basic idea, and put the focus on our speaking

Contributed by

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