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# **CNN Newsroom: A World of ESL/EFL Possibilities**

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It's the first day of school and the textbooks won't be in for at least another week. Meanwhile, what can the panicked teacher scrape up for class materials? On another occasion, the term is obviously a little longer than the text can make provisions for. What can the teacher use during the last two weeks of school? If the ESL or EFL program is sufficiently prepared to receive it, CNN Newsroom can rescue nearly every intermediate through advanced ESL materials-deficient situation.

## **What is CNN Newsroom?**

Every Monday through Friday at 3:45 AM Eastern Time (USA), a fifteen-minute, commercial-free, cable-delivered news program is aired via cable throughout the world on the regular CNN TV channel. Unfortunately, copyright laws restrict videotaping and later classroom exhibition of most programming—including regular CNN. However, fortunately, since August 14, 1989, Turner Educational Services, Inc. (TESI) has been airing a daily program for classroom use.

Any school may use this program free of charge, the only requirement being to fill out and mail a simple and free "School Enrollment and Licensing Form" to Turner Educational Services, One CNN Center Box 105366, Atlanta, Georgia 30348-5366 USA (the form may be obtained by calling 1-800-344-6219). Upon enrolling, educators may tape CNN Newsroom at school or at home for use in their classrooms, and the tapes may be kept as long as they are needed, provided they are used only within the enrolled school's curriculum. And any country that has access to CNN through cable also receives CNN Newsroom and may take advantage of the educational opportunities that accompany it.

When the new service was first provided, Turner signified his generous intentions as follows: "We want teachers to use CNN Newsroom as they see fit, so we will not ask any school or teacher to sign a contract. CNN Newsroom will be a public service of TBS and the cable industry, without ads. We will offer our nation's schools the best that CNN's 1600 superb television journalists can provide, with our 21 bureaus worldwide and our extensive network of international and domestic broadcast affiliates. We will provide free teaching aids daily by electronic mail. Then we'll let teachers and students decide whether to join in" (as quoted by James M. Haney in 1989 at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association in a paper entitled "TV 101: Good Broadcast Journalism for the Classroom?").

Though CNN Newsroom's intended audience seems to be principally middle and secondary schools, because of the usually slightly simpler news context, CNN

Newsroom is easily adaptable for ESL or EFL audiences. The fifteen-minute broadcast includes a short (40 second to 1 minute), catchy opener usually announcing three news headlines, which is followed by the day's (3 to 4-minute) top story.

Video or sequential pictures may then roll across the screen which often relate to the top story or desk presentation, always with background music (obviously with American middle and high school youth in mind) and the news in words flowing by in timed-reading fashion at the bottom of the screen.

A similar type of news presentation is the "On This Day In (i.e. 1960)" special historical events series wherein three to four events that occurred on this given day are described in pictorial and written form with background music. Another is the "Can You Name This Country?" map and sequential picture series with descriptive words about the country, its culture, and/or historical events. Each day's news also includes a few minutes of a news desk, scheduled thematically as follows: "Future Desk" on Monday; "International Desk" on Tuesday; "Business" on Wednesday; "Science Desk" on Thursday; and "Editor's Desk" on Friday. Finally, "Our World" is a daily feature of issues interesting to most youth in United States schools.

### **Supplemental Teaching Aids**

To supplement the broadcast, free teaching aids are provided daily by such independent electronic mail services as those following (mostly for a nominal transmission fee): MCI Mail, XPress/XChange, GTE Education, FrEdMail, America On Line, Learning Link members such as the national Introlink as well as numerous state-specific guide carriers. Recently, "The Guidelines" have also been available by around 4:00 AM (U.S. Eastern Time) via electronic mail through subscription to <majordomo@tenet.edu> and a message body requesting "subscribe cnn-newsroom".

Each set of guidelines begins with a program rundown of what is included in the 15-minute broadcast, including time lengths for each news section so that a teacher will know how a section of news will fit into a limited class period. A short vocabulary list is followed by substantial groups of discussion questions and then usually by a student activity section, such as completing a chart, doing further interview or library research, doing an experiment, completing an inventory, filling in blanks with jumbled CNN Newsroom headline words, or responding with opinionated answers to discussion questions.

### **Creating ESL-Related Guidelines**

As the guidelines are predominantly prepared with US middle and high school students in mind, most ESL teachers prefer to prepare their own comprehension materials that will build their students' vocabulary and understanding from a more

multi-lingual, multi-cultural perspective. For example, the March 22, 1994 guidelines spotlighted only ten significant words. In our adaptation for in-house use, fifty-two new regular vocabulary words were added, thirty-nine names of places, people, companies, etc. and six idiomatic phrases, including “tinker with stuff,” “get some training under their belts,” and “hard to come by.”

Our in-house ESL guidelines almost always include a leading multiple-choice question wherein students select the three news headlines among five or six options. The questions immediately following are usually easy true/false or multiple choice; thereafter, students begin to fill in blanks with significant numbers, identifications, and ideas or events. Often a matching exercise is included involving people, places, achievements, and events in a particular news story. Some open-ended question sections conclude the questionnaire: one for reading comprehension, and another for speaking interviews, classroom discussions, or writing assignment topics.

Teachers may opt to create their own grammar, discussion, or pronunciation-oriented exercises. A typical grammar exercise may include the script of a selected news story with blanks where the base forms of given verbs are to be written in correct form and tense, or as a script with articles incorrectly used and x's at the end of each line wherein an article error is to be found by the student. Discussion type questions may relate the news to the students' home countries and cultures. Pronunciation may be enhanced by class repetition of the vocabulary words, in imitation of the teacher's articulation. Indeed, the types of exercises which an ESL teacher can create are quite open and endless.

In creating ESL-related activities, captioned CNN Newsroom videotapes are generally felt necessary in order to obtain correct name spellings as comprehension questions, grammar exercises, and topic discussion questions are prepared. And in fact, captioning is also helpful to the students in the development of certain skills. For example, the sound could be turned off and the captioned message left for the students' reading practice or the sound and captions can be combined for pronunciation improvement. If an educator's TVCR unit was made before July 1993, a closed-captioning decoder unit can be attached to the VCR to record the video with permanent captions; otherwise, the decoders are built-in to the TVCR. Also, since all news, including CNN Newsroom, is presented very quickly, a device to copy the text from closed-captioned programming directly to a PC or Mac is useful, for then the captioned text can be printed for teachers' questionnaire preparation and/or students' comprehension development. (Such a device can be obtained through Pacific Lotus Technology, Inc., 411-108th Avenue NE Suite 235, Bellevue, WA 98004 @ 1-800-243-2710.)

A noncaptioned version of Newsroom can also be provided for advanced listening classes, and is valuable in respect to the fact that closed captioning often overlays and

thus blocks out important original CNN captions below head figures and other originally printed screen messages.

Finally, if desired for some unusual reason, still another videotaped version could be produced with the picture blanked out for listening comprehension without nonverbal gesture support.

### **Networking and Other Possibilities**

Yes, if the school is enrolled, CNN Newsroom could save the day in an urgent materials deficient situation. But one does not have to wait for an urgent situation until students are permitted to benefit from the up-to-date vocabulary and content Newsroom has to offer. Almost any ESL or EFL program can make this dependable broadcast part of its curriculum, with teachers rotating the responsibility to create general comprehension questions, discussion topics, idiom usage studies, and/or grammar exercises.

Upon creation, these exercises can be exchanged within a local network of other teachers within one ESL program or among several international ESL/EFL programs whose educators make use of worldwide electronic mail.

What is more, once an educator gets started with Newsroom, s/he will find that educational opportunities do not end there. Indeed, Turner Educational Services, Inc. (TESI) also offers interactive distance-learning, online resources, and low-cost educational videos, videodiscs, CD-ROMS, etc., as found in TESI's publication, *Television, Technology and Teaching (T3)*.

The boundaries are certainly limitless when an educator begins to use CNN Newsroom. It is only appropriate that we as ESL and EFL educators and students take the opportunity to extend our appreciation to Turner Educational Services, Inc. for making these resources available and affordable.

### **About the Author**

*Priscilla Fawn Whittaker, Director of the Language Center and an ELI Instructor at BYU-Hawaii, recently presented "CNN: Caught Locally Networked!" at TESOL 94. Her E-mail address whittakf@BYUH.edu welcomes ESL-related Newsroom exercises and ideas (preferably in Wordperfect), which she will forward to others interested in sharing Newsroom activities.*