



Vocabulary in Current Affairs: Source Material

This was originally made for the students in my class “Vocabulary in Current Affairs” at Konstanz University. The class was open to all students interested in talking about current affairs in English. The purpose of this handout was to help them find good and relevant material which they could use as a basis for the session they had to run.

Some background information on the course:

The main aim was to help students acquire more vocabulary through working on interesting and relevant topics, so that they were able to understand more topic-specific words when they heard or read them, and to use them when speaking. Participants were taught how to use an English-English dictionary effectively and practised effective ways of learning vocabulary. All vocabulary dealt with in class was embedded in some topic of genuine interest for the students.

As I chose and 'taught' the first topic, students had a chance to see a variety of ways of doing this. Subsequently, the topics were chosen by the participants, working outside class in small groups. Their task was not to give a presentation but to plan, organise and run a complete session of the class i.e. each group decided not just on the topic but also on how to engage the class in an interesting activity involving the use of specific vocabulary.

Team members met together outside class to brainstorm, collect information and ideas, and decide on a topic of real interest for them. They were encouraged to choose a topic as follows:

- they knew a little about it already
- they wanted to find out more about it
- they wanted to learn the English vocabulary for it
- they wanted to exchange opinions on it in English

The next task was to find an interesting way of

- introducing the topic
- giving the class some background information
- focussing on relevant vocabulary
- generating communication in English

They were of course encouraged to use all kinds of material – from car stickers to food packaging, but they were required to have at least one written text from an authentic source for the class to read.

Some tips for finding material

When you are preparing your session you have several tasks, of which the first is to choose a topic, and the second is to find good material. (After that, of course, you have to transform the material for actual use in class.)

When you are selecting your topic please keep in mind that this class is not about the news of the day, but about current affairs, i.e. issues that bother people, that are on people's minds, in public debate. Topics chosen by students have included: (un)healthy nutrition, single-sex marriages, a ban on smoking, consumerism, Turkey and the EU, immigration to Germany, AIDS, the popularity of fantasy novels and films, state surveillance.

If you want to start off from your own situation, and are already well informed, you can choose issues of immediate relevance to people (of your age) in Germany today, then look for articles on these issues which have appeared in the English-language press. You could also search the English-language press to see whether the same issue is a problem in other countries too. (It generally is!)

Alternatively, you can sit down regularly with the English-language newspapers and find out what the regularly recurring topics are, then choose the one you want to concentrate on.

Obviously, there is endless material including real live English on the Internet. However, keep in mind that the University has a great deal to offer and that material in print can be more useful for this class.

Sources of material in the University

Newspapers:

The library is well stocked with newspapers and magazines, dailies and weeklies, from a variety of English-speaking countries, for example:

(UK based) Guardian, Guardian Weekly, Scotland on Sunday

(US based) International Herald Tribune

Economist – wra2/e80 (world politics, current affairs, business, finance, science, books, arts)

New Statesman – pol2/n75

Ecologist – swa2/e21

Time / Newsweek

The great advantage of reading the complete print version especially of a newspaper is that you can get the whole picture, i.e. not just the latest political events or business news, but articles about things that matter to ordinary people in their everyday lives, within a society. These often relate to family, health care, education, protection from violence - or from too much state interference, and involve the idea of rights: the right to live and the right to die,

and the right to work. Flicking through a newspaper will give you an idea of the relative importance of an issue at a particular time and in a particular country, and you might discover there are interesting issues being discussed that you did not expect to find.

News on TV:

You can watch TV in the Selbstlernzentrum (Self-Access Centre) of the Sprachlehrinstitut. There is BBC World, Sky News and CNN. Hearing how words are pronounced is important! For example: refugees, asylum, catastrophe, sovereignty ...

Past News:

You might think that “old news” is of no relevance, but many of the problems in the news today have been around for quite some time, and the vocabulary is the same (ethnic conflicts, war, hunger and poverty, environmental catastrophes, trade embargoes, refugees, doping, arms deals)

BBC Newsbrief (fse 525/n29) is a monthly digest of the major stories covered by BBC television news from September 89 to June 91.

ITN World News from 1990-1992 (fse 550/i96) has “international events of historic importance”.

1995. A Year to Remember (6 gsx7/t95a) has material from the BBC News Archives.

Britain in View 1994 (fse 527/d98) has an accompanying book with scripts.

For both vocabulary and ideas:

Pros and Cons. The Debater’s Handbook. Michael Jacobson, 1999. (fse 549/j12). This book was actually written for native speakers who like to debate. It is full of issues, with lists of arguments pro and contra.

Collins Cobuild Key Words in Business / Science and Technology / the Media. This is a series of books presenting the relevant vocabulary in a sensible, meaningful context.

Other sources of material

The latest news:

You can get the latest news from
www.reuters.com
and

www.wrx.zen.co.uk, which has links to all UK papers publishing online news and information i.e. it gives you quick access to many more papers than are in the University library.

www.thebigproject.co.uk has links to papers and TV channels worldwide

which publish news in English. This includes Deutsche Welle, which can be very useful as it gives the German perspective on things, in English.

You can also use the online archives of individual newspapers such as the Guardian and the Scotsman to search for articles of interest in the recent past. When tuition fees were an issue in Germany, a search in the Guardian archive found an article “Germans in conflict over tuition fees“, which outlined the problem and provided all the English expressions required for talking about it.

Political speeches:

If you want to listen to, read and print out the speeches of two of the men in power you will find them at

www.gov.uk/government/announcements

and

www.whitehouse.gov/briefingroom

It can be very interesting to look in the archives of both e.g. at the speeches made on the same day by Blair UK and Bush USA on the same issue/event (e. g. the capture of a very important person), and compare them .

Of course you do not need to restrict yourself to the press. Once you have decided on your topic you can search for good material on the Internet. Just make sure that the source is reliable and native-speaker English.

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