

Integrating Students' Preferences and Interests in English Lessons

—A Case Study of Using TV News in a Listening and Reading Course—

Young-Mi LIM

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1. Introduction

During the school year of 2012, I was assigned to teach two courses of “Listening and Reading” for first-year students. The students in these two classes majored in agriculture and Engineering at Shinshu University. The main purpose of the course is enhancing students’ listening and reading abilities in English and students take the course for two semesters.

For the first semester of 2012, I chose one textbook which uses adapted National Geographic contents, photography and DVDs, and focuses on enhancing learners’ listening and reading skills. After the semester, I received both positive and negative feedback from the students.

Students are different. They have different motivations and goals for learning language, and their attitudes and preferences for learning language vary. They have different backgrounds and experience of learning English and their preferred learning styles and interest areas are different. Although teachers can find a lot in common among students, there is no single academic path that teachers expect all students to follow. The aim of this paper is to investigate student preferences of interests of curriculum materials of English lessons at Japanese university and identify how they can impact on curriculum development in an EFL setting. Firstly, the paper will investigate interests and preferences of English learners. Secondly, the paper will examine the way to deal with different students and optimize their benefits in one class. Thirdly, the paper will explain characteristics of textbooks. Fourthly, the paper will show a case study of integrating a textbook and authentic materials, and validate the effectiveness of using textbooks and authentic materials in English lessons. Finally, the paper will discuss some issues related to developing curriculum materials in the future.

2. Exploring Students' Interests and Preferences of Learning Materials

The course was taught using a textbook called “Snapshots from the Globe” published by Heinle Cengage Learning. The topics covered in the textbook emphasize the relationship between humans and the environment. From a number of commercial textbooks available, I had chosen the textbook because I assumed that the topics covered would attract students' interest and the textbook would facilitate students' learning. The lessons in the first semester were taught mostly using the textbook. During the course of the first semester, I directly communicated with some students in the classes to collect feedback about the textbook, and they mentioned both positive and negative points about the textbook. Most of students were happy with the textbook, but some students mentioned that (1) it was either too easy or too difficult, (2) some contents were not interesting or appealing to them, (3) some activities and exercises in the textbook were either less challenging or too tough and (4) they had varied willingness and motivation of learning English.

Following the first semester, a survey was conducted at the beginning of the second semester of 2012 which started from October. The aim of the survey was to explore students' interests and preferences of learning materials of English. The survey asked an open question, “What type of articles would you like to read in English?” Students from two classes were chosen for the survey. They are 70 first-year students taking the “Listening and Reading” course at Shinshu University (35 students from the Faculty of Agriculture and 35 students from the Faculty of Engineering). This is a compulsory 2-semester course for the students in both faculties. Their class level was decided based on their English level. There are three levels in the same course (A=Advanced, B=intermediate, C=elementary), the students who participated in the survey all belonged to the lowest level and I was in charge of teaching them.

The results are shown in Table 1. Most students responded with one preferred area whereas some students responded with more than one. From the survey results, students' preferred areas of learning materials of English are mainly divided into four areas. The first area is topics related to their major. Among agriculture students, for example, topics related to agriculture, environment and food were popular while engineering students showed a lot of interest in engineering itself. The second area is topics related to culture and their daily life such as sports, entertainment, anime and fashion. These topics are not directly connected to their academic study but closely related to students' off-campus activities and private life. The third area includes social issues that evoke students' intelligent thought such as political and economic issues. The fourth area is issues related to Japan and other countries.

The survey results revealed that students' interests vary widely. Because of the limitations of

the survey, the results provided no related information about the topics covered in the textbook they use. However, it implies that using only one textbook and teaching only topics covered in the textbook do not match students' needs for topic selection.

Table 1. What kind of article would you like to read in English?

	Area	No. of respondents in each faculty		Specific topics mentioned in the survey
		Agriculture	Engineering	
Issues related to students' major	Agriculture	8	0	Farming, livestock production, food problems
	Engineering	0	8	Mechanical engineering, robotics, control systems, engines
	Environment	5	0	Animals, forests, environmental destruction
	Scientific articles	5	0	Papers written by professors, Nature magazine
	Instruction manuals	0	1	
	Famous people	0	1	Steve Jobs interview
Culture and daily life	Sports	2	8	Baseball, soccer
	Culture	5	3	Gossip, celebrity interviews, music, movie subtitles, anime, fashion, social networking
	English books	3	0	Books originally written in English
Social issues	Newspaper articles	7	1	Current affairs, any articles
	Politics	5	2	Territorial disputes
	Economy	4	2	
	Technology	3	0	Space industry, advanced technology
Japan and other countries	World news	2	3	World news unreported in Japan
	Japan	4	1	Military affairs, foreign relations, Japanese news in foreign newspapers

3. Characteristics of textbooks

Frymier (1991) states that teachers are required to differentiate curriculum materials to maximize learners' opportunities and meet each student's unique needs. He also stresses that usually teachers choose and decide which textbook and workbook students should use, but

professionals selecting curriculum materials could ignore students' interests and preferences (e.g. by an adaption to one textbook to teach many students). Traditionally, many textbooks have been chosen by teachers to teach EFL lessons. Besides, the adaption to a textbook or a few textbooks for teaching a large class still remains popular among English teachers. One of the key reasons to choose textbooks for EFL lessons is that they enable teachers to design, develop and monitor the course easily because they are handy to use and require less time and effort for lesson preparation.

Chou (2010) pointed out the four main advantages of using course books to teach English. The course book has a clearly identified set of achievement objectives. Another advantage is that it has a consistency in the topics and genres in the four skills areas (listening, speaking, reading, and writing). Also, ready-made activities and lessons make it easy for teachers to prepare. Finally, choosing a course book is the cheapest and most convenient way of providing learning materials to each student (Chou 2010; Kayapinar, 2009).

Certainly, many textbooks published these days offer great value to the users, providing accompanying workbooks, CDs, CD-ROMs, DVDs, teachers manuals, test generators, assessment forms and a range of activities to be used inside and outside the class. Yet some possible disadvantages of using textbooks raise serious issues. Firstly, topics selected from the textbook authors' point of view do not always help enhance students' English learning and their motivation. General English course books, for example, are often designed to be used for students with different interests and preferences. Using only a textbook may not fulfill individual students' expectations for material selection. Secondly, most commercial textbooks are similar in design. Because of that, similar types of activities and exercises are likely to be repeated in different units and it may cause students to get bored or less interested in the textbook.

Too much reliance on a textbook may sometimes cause harmful effects on both quality of teaching and students' motivation of learning. Lepionka (2006) mentions that good textbooks are organized to fit what is known about the way people learn. On the other hand, Kayapinar (2009) suggests that textbooks work as preplanned teaching materials, so they have a tendency to dictate what is taught, in an intentional order, and they have a serious impact on how teachers use them.

4. The Purpose of Using Authentic Materials in English Lessons

Quite a number of teachers these days create classroom tasks and projects that are interesting and engaging and adapt authentic materials to arouse further interest in language learning (Winkle, 2005). While textbooks are carefully planned, they do not always meet the teachers'

expectations or the needs of learners in the teaching process (Kayapinar, 2009). However, unlike EFL materials, authentic materials are not intended for English learners and they are not graded for learners to comprehend well. In fact, authentic materials are difficult to understand for English learners unless they have background knowledge. In TV news items, for example, the text is spoken fast in condensed form, and specialized vocabulary is used which is not considered important in most syllabuses (Sherman 2003).

Although such issues may result in reluctance of teachers to adapt authentic materials in teaching English, authentic materials have great potential. The first point is that authentic materials such as news items, interviews and radio programs cover diversified subjects so that they enable students to find items interesting to them, or relating to them (Sherman 2003). Students are empowered to find the relevant information for their learning and exposed to a wide range of information sources by becoming aware of different sources. They are driven to find the relevant information and engage actively to access their world or interest in English. Study conducted by Rost suggests that adaption of authentic materials that are relevant to learner goals and interests, and involve self-selection and evaluation increased student motivation and course relevance (Rost 1999; Rost 2002). The second point is that online technologies make it easy for learners to access authentic materials and possible for learners to retrieve authentic materials inside and outside the classroom. TV news companies, such as BBC and CNN, provide news online and frequently update new items. Other materials such as movies and TV dramas are available from the Internet and they are regularly uploaded and available to download. The third point is that learning English through authentic materials not only enriches students' vocabulary, grammatical knowledge and language skills but enhances student awareness of social issues in the world (Wai, 2010).

5. Case Study - Using TV news items in the “Listening and Reading” Lessons

Chen (2011) mentioned that for teaching EFL lessons, the method of creating instructional design models that promote fundamental motivation becomes essential. One of the ways of solving the problem is planning and organizing a course adapting the materials that give freedom of topic choice for both teachers and students. In this part, the ways of using TV news items for listening practice in English class are introduced.

When teachers design learning curriculums, it is crucial to set clear goals and targets for learning. The lesson can be designed by adapting materials based on learners' preferences and interests, but the tasks and goals should be clearly defined. It is the teacher's role to supervise and monitor the process of students' learning. This is done by defining achievable goals, assigning step-by step tasks with some degree of completeness, and introducing learning

strategies that help learners to overcome obstacles in language learning (Rost, 2002; Rost, 1994; Levelt, 1989).

The goal of using the TV news in the elementary course of English lessons at university is not to fully understand the detailed contexts of the TV news. For a start, practical goals can be set to encourage students to learn. For example, the goals could be understanding the structure of the TV news, learning vocabulary, summarizing the news story or researching a news item they would like to study.

Table 2 shows the hierarchical tasks of TV news listening. The goal of the tasks within each group shows the hierarchical relationships for learning. To accomplish higher-level tasks, completing the lower-level tasks becomes the essential prerequisite. The lower-level tasks are integrally related to the higher-level tasks (Stanley, n.d.). Following the task frameworks will help learners to achieve the final goal by experiencing and accomplishing step-by step goals.

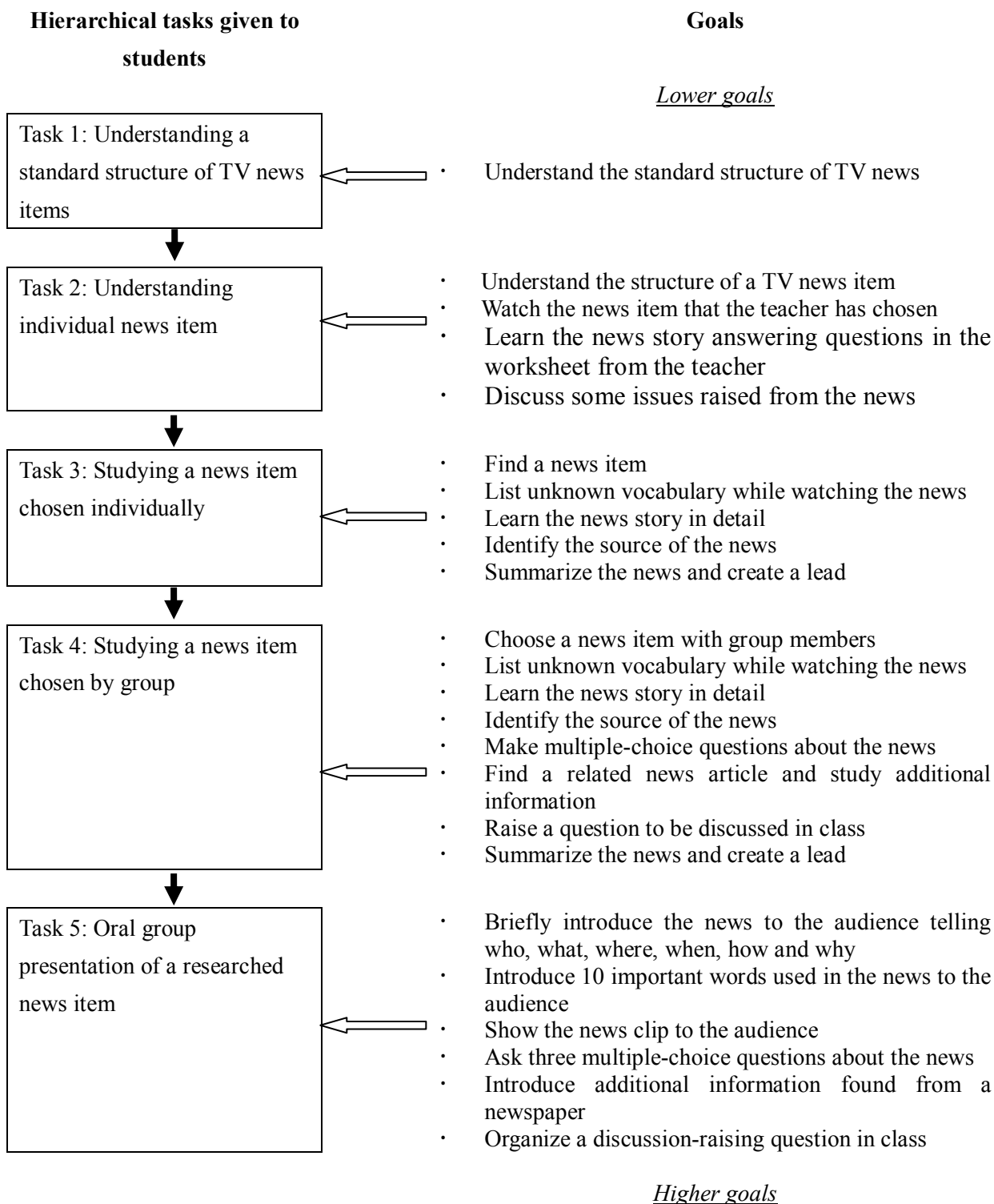
To achieve the first task shown in table 2, the teacher selected an ABC TV news item entitled “Micro-Sleep May Be to Blame for Accidents” broadcast on December 3, 2012. The purpose of the task was to understand the standard structure of TV news. The teacher gave a lecture on several sources in the TV news explaining the lead, the expansion, quotations, graphics and a short conclusion to wind up the news (Sherman, 2003). Then, students were asked to move to the second task, which is to watch the same news clip outside the class and study the gist of the news item by completing the worksheet from the teacher.

In the next lesson, students were assigned to research a news item from one of the TV news companies that the teacher recommended (ABC, CNN and NBC from the U.S. and BBC from the U.K.). The teacher supervised and monitored their study in the class and gave feedback to each student at the point of task completion. Finally, students were divided into groups of five or six students who shared the same interest of TV news. The teacher assigned a group project that asks students to choose, study and analyze a news item they have chosen and give a 10-minute oral presentation in class. Such group work provides better opportunities for students to enhance their strengths and weaknesses of learning. Although topics chosen from each group differ, organizing and giving the group task enables the teacher to evaluate and understand how students gradually obtained the learning skills for watching and understanding the TV news.

Although using the TV news in the English class provides opportunities for students to choose learning materials from their preferred topics, some issues remain such as appropriateness of

material selection for English learning (see Appendix 1), empowerment and involvement of students in the class, and assessment criteria for task completion.

Table 2. Hierarchical tasks of TV news listening (adopted from Rost, 2002; Rost, 1994; Levelt, 1989; Sherman, 2003)



6. Conclusion

Different students have different expectations for what they want to learn in English lessons and students' interests and preferences of learning materials differ greatly. Although the commercial textbook has been popular among teachers for English lessons, the adoption of the textbook does not guarantee that teachers can successfully plan and implement lessons enhancing students' motivation to learn. Using authentic materials in English lessons enables teachers to involve students in material selection, but it is essential to set up clear goals and targets to use authentic materials for learning. Teaching English lessons by combining textbooks and authentic materials could optimize their benefits and motivate students. With supervision and monitoring work of the teacher, students would be able to accomplish the set goals and tasks. However, further study will be needed for material selection, student empowerment and assessment.

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(Part-time teacher, School of General Education, Shinshu University)
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Appendix. News Items watched by individual students in December 2012

News items watched by students in agriculture			News items watched by students in Engineering		
ID #	Source	News Item	ID#	Source	News Item
A1	ABC	Adam Lanza killing people	E1	NBC	Adam Lanza killing people
A2	NBC	Car crash experiments of Toyota cars	E2	CNN	Call for international ban of autonomous weapons
A3	ABC	Children suffering from mental illness	E3	CNN	Chernobyl Children International
A4	ABC	Conjoined babies	E4	NBC	Christmas in the White House
A5	CNN	Creating fuel from the air	E5	NBC	Death by energy drink
A6	CNN	David Beckham	E6	NBC	Eagle snatching a kid video was fake
A7	CNN	David Beckham	E7	ABC	Fernando Hernandez threatening a teacher
A8	NBC	Deal sea scrolls and Google	E8	ABC	Fernando Hernandez threatening a teacher
A9	NBC	Death by energy drink	E9	ABC	Fiscal cliff in the USA
A10	NBC	Dynamo celebrate Eastern Conference title	E10	CNN	Five star hotel open for penguins
A11	CNN	Ecotourism in Columbia	E11	CNN	Gun controls in the US and UK
A12	BBC	Efforts to protect forest from disease	E12	ABC	Interviewing Dr. Peter Raven about gardens and science
A13	ABC	Fernando Hernandez threatening a teacher	E13	NBC	Introducing a variety of yogurt toppings
A14	CNN	FIFA goal line technology	E14	CNN	Lionel Messi
A15	NBC	Kids suffering allergies	E15	NBC	Mad driver in Australia
A16	NBC	Mad driver in Australia	E16	ABC	Mayan Doomsday
A17	ABC	Many funerals took place in new town	E17	ABC	Mayan Doomsday
A18	ABC	Mayan Doomsday	E18	ABC	Mayan Doomsday
A19	BBC	Mayan Doomsday	E19	ABC	Mayan Doomsday
A20	ABC	Mayan Doomsday	E20	CNN	Monetary easing by the Bank of Japan
A21	ABC	Mistakes in surgery	E21	ABC	Moster storm in Oct
A22	CNN	Monetary easing by the Bank of Japan	E22	ABC	North Korea launching a satellite
A23	NBC	Polar ice melting faster than expected in Greenland	E23	NBC	North Korea launching a satellite
A24	NBC	Rafael Nadal wins the game	E24	ABC	New president elected in South Korea
A25	ABC	Sandy Hook Elementary School	E25	NBC	Proposals to curb gun violence in the USA
A26	ABC	Staying healthy during the party season	E26	CNN	Sasago tunnel in Japan collapsed
A27	NBC	The snowstorm in December	E27	ABC	The storm in December
A28	ABC	This year's newsmakers	E28	NBC	The storm in December
A29	ABC	Turmoil puts Japanese baseball on hold	E29	ABC	The storm in December
A30	ABC	Two brothers' escape from shooting	E30	ABC	Woman buried alive in Avalanche saved
A31	ABC	Why are some flowers red	E31	CNN	World champion skier, Lindsey Vonn interview
A32	CNN	Wind energy in England			
A33	NBC	Winter storm in Chicago			

