

40 or More Suggestions, Ideas, Concepts and Reminders for Teaching English to Vietnamese Students

Ann B. Irish

Vashon Island High School, Vashon, WA, USA (retired)

Abstract

A hodge-podge of pointers to keep in mind when teaching English will be presented in this workshop. Different ideas will relate to grammar, common expressions, vocabulary study, pronunciation, teaching strategies, etc. Examples and explanations will be offered.

Workshop participants will be asked to describe ideas they have found especially useful. The participants may take notes on ideas presented by other teachers at the workshop.

A few examples of pointers that will be included:

- 1. Teach verb phrases as well as verbs.*
- 2. Have students practice using a rising pitch at the end of question sentences (in order not to sound impolite).*
- 3. Encourage students to make vocabulary cards to study new words.*
- 4. Be confident! As a native speaker of Vietnamese and not a native English speaker, you are better able to understand why your students have problems with certain concepts.*

A list of more than 40 suggestions will be available.

40 or More Suggestions

The ideas considered in this workshop touched on many aspects of teaching English, from developing students' confidence to improving their skills in listening, speaking, reading and writing. Here is a sampling of the ideas discussed.

Some of the suggestions presented in the workshop involve using materials, such as flash cards or items from the United States that might be helpful in lessons. The session was opened with a demonstration of some of these.

Students should be encouraged to make flash cards to study vocabulary. The cards can include details such as pronunciation, irregular noun plurals or verb tenses. Teachers can point out that students can keep a small pack of cards, fastened by a rubber band, in a pocket, so that it can easily be pulled out and studied when the student has a free minute or two. Students should study the words in both directions, from Vietnamese to English and from English to Vietnamese.

In order to avoid dependence on the students' native language, a teacher can gather pictures to represent vocabulary words. Using pictures in drills means that the student can relate a word directly to an object or idea without the interference of his or her native language. Simple drawings can represent action verbs, adjectives and nouns; if the image does not indicate a clear object, the teacher can point out its meaning in the students' language the first few times it is shown. Such pictures can be used effectively for very short drills between other exercises in class. The pictures can be used to drill specific grammatical structures such as verb endings and noun plurals. Teachers can create signs or flash cards to use in similar drills, representing numbers large and small, time of day, years, and amounts of money.

Newspaper advertisements, restaurant menus, labels from food packages and cans, ferry and bus schedules, maps, travel brochures and other such items from English-speaking countries often capture the students' interest. Such items can be used to create lesson plans.

Should familiar English nursery rhymes, fables and proverbs be included in the curriculum? Yes; they are important because they are part of the cultural knowledge of native English speakers, and references to them occur in literature and daily life. The internet is a good source of these familiar English sayings.

Tongue-twisters may be used for pronunciation practice, especially the most well-known ones such as "Peter Piper." Teachers can also create their own tongue twisters to emphasize sounds that are particularly troublesome for their students. Tongue twisters, too, are easily found on the internet.

In some languages which frequently use negative questions, answers are constructed differently than in English (Example: "Aren't you going to school today?"). In English, the answer is either, "Yes, I'm going to school today" or "No, I'm not going to school today." In languages including Japanese and Vietnamese, correct answers would be "No, I am going to school today" or "Yes, I'm not going to school today." For native speakers of such languages, developing the ability to answer negative questions in English is extremely difficult and must be practiced and practiced and practiced, because negative questions are extremely common in English.

Teachers should make sure that students are aware of alternative ways in which some information is commonly expressed in English. An example is the time of day; for example, 1:45 is heard either as "one forty-five" or "quarter to two."

When using Vietnamese-English dictionaries to find the English equivalent of a Vietnamese word, students should try to ensure that they have chosen the correct English word by checking its meaning in an English-Vietnamese dictionary.

Teachers might notice that none of the American coins includes the digit that indicates its value, only spelling out the word that represents it. Thus students might be taught the words cent, dime, quarter, half dollar and dollar.

These are just some of the ideas that were presented or discussed in this workshop. Many of these are no doubt already used by many teachers; the workshop is meant to remind teachers of what can be done with simple exercises. The list of suggestions made available to the workshop participants contained 61 items and ended by pointing out that learning another language gives one another soul.

Dr. Ann Irish, a retired American high school teacher and published author, taught English, political science and Japanese in the United States. She has also taught English in Japan. She has offered presentations on teaching English both in Japan and Bangladesh, and in the United States has given presentations on Asian culture.

Teaching English with Newspaper Articles

Ann B. Irish, PhD.

Vashon Island High School, Vashon, WA, USA (retired)

Abstract

This workshop will consider how to use a short, noncontroversial newspaper article on a subject that should interest students, in order to enhance their interest in and command of English. Different approaches to be used with students who have different amounts of knowledge will be developed, and examples of newspaper articles to use will be given to teachers attending the workshop.

Some exercises to be explored include:

- 1. Teacher dictating the article to students.*
 - 2. Students reading article aloud*
 - 3. Students rewriting article in their own words*
 - 4. Teacher quizzing students on article content*
 - 5. Students paraphrasing article to other students*
 - 6. Students identifying who, what, where, when, and why*
 - 7. Student groups discussing article*
 - 8. Teacher testing students on important new words they learned from the article*
 - 9. Teacher using the article as the basis for a discussion of cultural implications that the article brings to mind*
- and other ideas ---*

Introduction

Newspaper articles are examples of “real world” English rather than textbooks created specially for the learner. Using the articles can provide a welcome break in the ESL curriculum. These days, many newspapers are available on the internet, making it easier to find suitable articles to use. Also, local English language newspapers exist in many countries where the native language is not English, especially in Asia.

Among the simple articles found in some newspapers are restaurant reviews. Perhaps especially interesting are descriptions of restaurants featuring the cuisine of the students’ country in an English-speaking city.

Perhaps the teacher can find an article about the experiences of a compatriot of the students in an English-speaking country. An obituary of a person who emigrated from the students’ country might be interesting.

Articles from students' newspapers—high school or college—can interest students. Even some of these newspapers are on the internet.

Teachers can adapt articles when it would be useful, simplifying the language or shortening the article.

One article discussed during the workshop involved an American professional basketball player describing her experience playing the game in Spain. She commented to the reporter that she “learned a lot about cultural differences” and also that when she arrived in Spain she knew little Spanish. As a result, she felt that people “thought I was stupid.” (Seattle Times, March 7, 2006) Her observations could encourage students to work harder to learn a foreign language. Discussing this article in Vietnam, however, led to an unexpected difficulty. The workshop participants were not very familiar with basketball.

Another sports-related article might interest Vietnamese students because it tells of an American athlete's visit to Vietnam. Professional baseball player Danny Graves, whose mother is Vietnamese and father American, was born in Vietnam but brought to the United States as a very young child. During his visit, Graves wanted to interest Vietnamese people in baseball (Seattle Times, Jan. 18, 2006). Because the sport is not well-known in Vietnam, however, this article did not produce a lot of interest among workshop attendees. Both these articles illustrate problems that can arise when using articles about sports.

On another subject, a different article discusses the problems government officials can have in international meetings because of a lack of knowledge of foreign languages. Siberian officials have been ordered to learn a foreign language, the article reports, and top officials in Turkmenistan were recently ordered to learn English in six months or lose their jobs! (Guardian Weekly, Feb. 17, 2006) In this article was a name a native English speaker did not know how to pronounce: Saparmurat Niazov. Perhaps the article might help motivate students to learn English, though.

Another article made available to the participants described the destruction of wetlands in Brazil (Seattle Times, Jan. 13, 2006). This article could be especially useful because it deals with a problem of worldwide significance and because it happens to contain especially useful vocabulary (except that students may not need to know the specific words for the animals mentioned in the article as being under threat: jaguars, anteaters, tapirs and crocodiles; the

teacher might decide to translate these words for the students).

Imaginatively used, newspaper articles can serve many purposes in an ESL class. Many different kinds of exercises can be based on use of newspaper articles. The simpler ones include dictation by the teacher, and reading, silently or aloud, by the students—for meaning, pronunciation, fluency or all of these. Newspaper articles lend themselves well to group work; students can discuss the meaning of an article among themselves, encouraging each other. Newspaper articles can also be used to help students build vocabulary and for dictionary practice. Ways to use articles are practically endless.

Both in learning to write well and in reading for understanding, American students learn the importance of who, what, where, when and why in informative writing. A short newspaper article can be an excellent source of this information. In class discussions, writing assignments and exams, students can be asked to identify the five w's in a newspaper article. This exercise can help them develop writing and comprehension skills both in Vietnamese and in English.

Dr. Ann Irish, a retired American high school teacher and published author, taught English, political science and Japanese in the United States. She has also taught English in Japan. She has offered presentations on teaching English both in Japan and Bangladesh, and in the United States has given presentations on Asian culture.