

ANOTHER TOOL FOR PROMOTING MEANINGFUL LANGUAGE USE IN THE CLASSROOM: "CATALONIA TODAY"

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In order to progress in their acquisition of a language, students need comprehensible input and meaningful interaction in it. Currently most communicative textbooks cater to these needs to a greater or lesser extent, and teachers are adept at finding and developing supplementary material to further stimulate their learners. Now a new source of input has become available in Catalonia which could provide instructors with material that could spark students' interest in an immediate and personal way and which could foster numerous, diverse speaking and writing activities which could be truly communicative, that is, which could involve the students conveying real messages to a real audience and receiving information that they are genuinely interested in.

This source of material is the English-language, Catalan newspaper, *Catalonia Today*, which is published in Barcelona and put together by mostly native-English-speaking journalists who have lived in Catalonia for many years. It came out in mid-June, 2004, as a free 16-page newspaper published Tuesdays through Saturdays and available in such places as hotel lobbies, tourist information offices, some bars and cafes, and in the kiosks along the Rambles and Passeig de Gràcia in Barcelona. Now it has become a much longer weekly paper which can be obtained from kiosks throughout Catalonia for one euro every Thursday, and it is basically geared towards English-speaking foreigners who live in Catalonia and native inhabitants of Catalonia who either know English or are learning it. Therefore, a great deal of the articles, letters, and other information it contains deal with current local news and issues, and thus students from the high school level on up are very likely to find items of great interest in it. It contains such sections as: News, Business, Opinion, Sports, Culture, Cultural Agenda, Lingua Franca, Teach Yourself Catalan, Food and Drink, Special Report/Interview, and the Back Page, with each section lending itself to different kinds of activities.

The News and Business sections, for instance, can be used to provide students with optimal comprehensible input: input which they are motivated to understand because it is relevant and meaningful in their own lives. By way of example, on November 23rd, 2004, one of the main articles was entitled "One traffic death every thirteen hours on Catalonia's roads since start of October," with the subheading of "The home office minister Montserrat Tura has declared an attitude of 'zero tolerance' for dangerous drivers." For older teenagers and adults in Catalonia, this article obviously contains information that they would want to know, as it concerns changes that will occur in the Government's treatment of motorbike and automobile users.

It is likely that they have already learned about some of this information through other sources, but it is also quite possible that *Catalonia Today* could provide them with their first exposure to a given piece of news. However, as reading is an active process of comparing and contrasting what one knows of the world with what a text says, prior knowledge of a subject is a significant aid in exploiting a text to its utmost, facilitating comprehension and freeing up attention to allow learners to focus on *how* things are said in addition to *what* is said. Just in the title of this article, students can see that Ms. Tura's position in English is that of "home office minister," and later they see that some ways of describing the fatality statistics are "intolerable," "horrifying," "outrageous," and "dreadful," that some of the measures to be implemented are "spot checks on roads" and "breathalyser tests," and that some ways to say "because" or "because of" are "as a result of," "as," "in view of," and "as a consequence," depending on the context. In addition, this article can lead to stimulating classroom discussion of driving practices in

this country and among the students. Many of the articles in the News section lend themselves to similar uses as information sources, examples of real language use and points of entry into lively classroom exchanges, while those in the Business section can work very well with adult learners and with students in Business English classes.

Another section which can lead to meaningful classroom debate and which can be extended into writing for a real audience is that of Opinion. Here there is usually a main article written by a columnist and a number of Letters to the Editor. The letters deal with a wide variety of issues in Catalonia and range from complaints about treatment received from authorities and about unfair situations to curiosity on the part of foreigners about behaviours they have observed here. There are even requests from high school students for informants they could interview for their Batxillerat research projects. A significant number of letters contain comments or speculations about the people of Catalonia from foreigners who are trying to understand society here. For instance, a letter in the October 26th edition asked Catalan readers for their views on the graffiti in their cities, since it had become an active topic of discussion in the section and the reader wanted an insider to shed some light on the debate. Another stimulating topic of discussion was people's behaviour on sidewalks. An October 22nd letter painted a funny picture of the "characters" one finds strolling in Catalan cities and offered advice on how to circumvent them. Perhaps a Catalan student could have offered an equally humorous yet respectful portrayal of foreigners' behaviour in some aspect of life here. This section provides an optimal forum for the people of Catalonia and the newcomers to exchange views, and it offers a great opportunity for students to engage in meaningful exchanges in the classroom, which promotes fluency, and then focus on form as they put their ideas down on paper for a much wider audience, which helps them improve their linguistic accuracy.

Sports are always a topic of debate here, even if one has absolutely no liking for them. As is the case with most news sources in this country, football tends to get the most press, but other sports are also covered, and the paper deals with teams, matches and sportspeople here and in other countries, especially Great Britain. Sportswriters tend to use a greater amount of rhetorical devices and colourful language than other kinds of journalists, providing students with a plethora of expressions and techniques they can "steal" in order to spice up their own writing and speech. An October 22nd article on Carlos Sainz' retirement offered up such expressions as "Spanish rally champ calls it a day after 16 years at the wheel" and "Doing things by halves has never been my philosophy" (my underlining), while a November 24th article on a Champions League match made a play on the expression "paint the town red" in the headline "Fans paint the city green and white on the eve of Barça-Celtic clash." Such articles offer students a wealth of synonyms, such as "clash" for "match," "top brass" for "board of directors," and "bow out" for "retire." They also sometimes offer interesting ways of introducing a topic, such as this one from a November 11th article on the possibility of the Barcelona Football Club accepting a gambling company as an advertiser on its team jerseys: "We first heard about it as a whispered rumour running from terminal to terminal through the office. The unthinkable had happened: Barcelona were going to break with tradition by allowing publicity on the team's shirts."

Other social issues also come up in sports, such as racism, and the November 2004 issues of Catalonia Today offered ample coverage of the problem of racism in Spanish stadiums, dealing with it in the Sports, News and Opinions sections, and even offering advice based on the experience of the British football league in eradicating it during the 1970s and 80s. Thus, even in the Sports section, Catalonia Today often offers something for everybody's tastes. It does not shy away from controversial social issues, and this could allow English teachers to broach "hot" topics in the classroom while also working on the target language. It would be a way of fulfilling the role of

“educator,” rather than merely “instructor,” which is especially important at the high school level.

The Culture page and the Cultural Agenda tend to focus on events in and around Barcelona, but there is also sometimes some information on happenings in other areas of Catalonia. So, teachers are likely to find articles of interest for their students no matter where they live. One part that is sure to promote conversation is the film section. It discusses movies which are currently playing, providing students with information and language they could use in discussing plans for the weekend and films they have seen or would like to see. It is probably the only source of English-language synopses and reviews of newly released Spanish films, such as “Crimen ferpecto” (in the October 26th edition). It also has a very thorough listing of the films that are being shown in their original version, which is quite useful for those students who seek input outside of the classroom.

As part of the target audience of Catalonia Today is Catalans who speak English as a second or foreign language and Catalan learners of English, the newspaper has a section called “Lingua Franca” which provides readers with self-study lessons on different aspects of the English language. There are such activities as an article accompanied by reading comprehension questions, a section on English usage, and a text which readers need to correct. The answers are given in the subsequent issue. Also, many articles in other sections of the paper give brief language commentaries as the need arises, and there are frequent articles about the state of English-language learning in Catalonia and tools that can be acquired for facilitating it. Thus, this newspaper can be used not only for teacher-initiated activities but also for promoting autonomy in learning. This pedagogical vein continues with the “Teach Yourself Catalan” section, based on Anna Poch and Alan Yates’ book by the same title, which caters to the readers who come from other countries and would like to learn Catalan. Many students of English are also interested in seeing how Catalan is explained to English speakers.

The Food and Drink section deals with Catalan cuisine, offering recipes, background cultural information, and wining and dining recommendations. All of this can lead to healthy discussion, as many people have their own way of making “escudella,” “panellets,” canneloni, and other emblematic dishes in the Catalan diet. Or, perhaps they do not know how to make “escudella,” in which case they learn something new and useful in class. While it is interesting to learn about the foods of other countries, oftentimes this information remains quite theoretical, due to the unavailability of some ingredients. On the other hand, learning about their own cuisine in the target language provides students with the linguistic tools necessary for exchanging their favourite recipes with foreign visitors.

The Special Report/Interview section provides page-long coverage of a topic relevant to people living in Catalonia or an interview with a person who the readers here would find interesting. For instance, the November 23rd edition had an interview with a Flemish worker who has been living in Catalonia for two years. It mentions the method she used to learn Catalan (“by only listening and repeating words and phrases, like a child, and it seems to have worked”), and it discusses the similarities and differences she sees between Belgian society and Catalan society, such as the fact that she could live her whole life only in Flemish if she wanted to or that she was surprised at the prominence that defecation receives in Catalan life, both in terms of expressions and in terms of cultural figures, like the “caganer.” These interviews and special reports tend to provide many talking points for subsequent classroom discussions. In fact, this particular interview, generated the following comment from a Dutch reader in a letter to the editor a few days later: “... the person interviewed says: ‘In Holland and the Dutch part of Belgium, Flemish is spoken by 20 million people.’ There are two very painful mistakes here. Firstly, Holland is just the eastern part of the Netherlands. The second

is that in the Netherlands we speak Dutch and in Belgium they speak Flemish, which is not the same.” Obviously this could lead to a discussion of what is in a name when it comes to dealing with languages and dialects, while the comments in the original interview could spark a discussion about reactions that the students have had when they have come into contact with other cultures.

Finally, the Back Page, CT Back, features the local weather report and a crossword puzzle. Students can benefit much more from reading about and discussing the weather in their own area in English than by focusing on the weather in Wales. Of course weather reports concerning other parts of the globe are important and provide valuable language items, like “gale,” “monsoon,” and “blizzard,” but for most communicative purposes in Catalonia it is better to know such words and expressions as “snow line,” “hail,” “some clouds inland,” and “severe sea conditions, with heavy swells in the northern Balearic Islands.” The crossword puzzle, on the other hand, can provide students with a constant review of vocabulary and spelling and introduce them to new, less frequently encountered words. Although sometimes such puzzles can be difficult and frustrating, Catalonia Today provides the solution on the very same page.

As can be seen, Catalonia Today offers English teachers and students a unique tool for learning English both inside and outside of the classroom, seeing their country and society from a different perspective, and using English to discuss current events and significant aspects of their lives with their classmates and with other readers of the newspaper. Catalonia Today generates quite a bit of debate, and Catalan students of English can contribute a great deal to these discussions, while also engaging in truly meaningful, communicative uses of the target language.