

TEMA 67

Los medios de comunicación en lengua inglesa (1): El estilo periodístico. La prensa. Periódicos de calidad y periódicos sensacionalistas

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I. INTRODUCTION AND RELEVANCE OF THE TOPIC

Modern technology and the development of online news feeds has radically changed the way we obtain and read news. The decline in printed media has not only led to a reduction in consumption of journalistic reporting; instead, it means that written news stories are ever more present in our daily lives and available at any time and this has many advantages.

Newspapers are read and, indeed, needed by many professionals from all walks of life; they broaden knowledge, form the backbone of many conversations and, more importantly for us, can enhance student learning both linguistically and culturally. Additionally, tasks involving the reading and writing of press articles or even more ambitious projects, such as the creation of class newsletters, can serve as a meaningful stimulus for language production.

However, several issues arise when employing press-related activities. Firstly, there is a question of comprehensibility of texts as a large number of authentic articles may be beyond students' current communicative competence. Secondly, there is a problem with the journalistic nature of writing, including the use of headlines, reporting language and changes in register. Additionally, producing newspaper-type articles or even class newsletters are challenging endeavours; apart from potential difficulties in language production and the actual organizations of larger projects is potentially motivating but also demanding, thus requiring information, motivation and pedagogical judiciousness.

This topic deals with some of the most important characteristics of newspapers and journalistic writing, with a particular focus on the press of the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States (US). Given the spread of online versions of print media and the fact that certain newspapers have been found to have artificially inflated their sales figures in order to gain more revenue, it is somewhat difficult to know the precise size of readership. However, the selection of newspapers examined will be based on current popularity figures. In addition to examining these aspects, this topic also discusses the use of newspapers as authentic materials in the language class.

II. DEVELOPMENT OF THE TOPIC

1. SECTIONS, STYLES AND STRUCTURES IN NEWSPAPERS AND SUPPLEMENTS

In dealing with journalism, it is necessary to highlight the fact that there are a number of different journalism genres which will often influence the writing style. This section examines some of the most salient features in terms of the different types of story which may appear in the press as well as a number of stylistic and structural considerations.

1.1. MAJOR SECTIONS

Perhaps the most important type of article is the news story or feature articles, which are often of national or international importance, which are intended to convey factual information. Within the most important news stories, we normally find five components. The first element is the **headline**, which is normally accompanied by an image and frequently presented in short, attention grabbing format. Entire headlines in British sensationalist headlines may be written in capital letters, while quality papers in Britain and US normally use capitalisation on the first letter and on proper nouns only. Sentences are on most occasions not finished, linkers are usually omitted and sometimes they make use of humour and puns. An example of a headline is

- “*Sanders beats Clinton in Florida Democratic caucus as focus turns to New York*” or
- “*Biden to address the nation as Covid deaths rise sharply before Thanksgiving*”.

A headline may also be followed by a smaller secondary headline, often called **subhead**. The **byline** is the second element which tells us who wrote the story and the city from which it is reported. The **lead** is the first paragraph, which essentially constitutes the ‘who, what, where, why and how’ of the news story and, like headlines, attempts to hold the reader’s attention. It is probably the most difficult part to write for a journalist and tends to avoid descriptive and superfluous writing. The next section is the actual **news story** itself, which may provide quotes from witnesses, interested parties or other relevant individuals to the piece. Finally, **additional information** may be included. This information is not essential to the writing and sometimes does not actually get published.

Another major component of a newspaper is the editorial, which periodically presents the newspaper’s stance on a given situation or issue. While the editorial presents facts, it also engages in explaining, criticizing, persuading or praising. It is argumentative in nature and sometimes calls upon the audience to think or act in a certain manner; in this sense, editorials are characterised by the emotive and phatic communicative functions. Like news stories, the editorial has an introduction, main body and a conclusion, although unlike them, the conclusion is often solid and gives a powerful and opinionated summary.

Additionally, like editorials, *letters to the editor* also give opinions; here however, the style and structure depends on the individual member of the public. Most newspapers also carry a *business section*, which provides information and analysis of market economies and companies which may or may not be known to the general public. This type of journalism frequently includes tables or figures as

supporting material and occasionally includes advice for general consumers who do not necessarily possess a specific interest or knowledge in finance.

Many newspapers also have a *culture or arts section*, though this is most visible on weekend editions (discussed below). In this section, we have critical reviews related to artistic works including areas such as music, cinema, television, theatre and art. This section introduces the public to new ideas and cultural products as well as provides interesting information for international students about the particular home culture.

The majority of newspapers have a *daily sports section* and here, the style and structure may vary depending on the function of the article. In some cases, the story may provide a straightforward summary of results from important sports events; in others it might give a more detailed profile on a sportsperson, and analysis of a game or a strong opinion. Like other journalists, sport journalism needs to be able to produce news quickly and usually have to meet a deadline shortly after an event.

Entertainment sections are important in a number of newspapers, though the degree to which they appear will depend on the type of paper. This section generally includes puzzles, crosswords or Sudoku, as well as horoscopes and sometimes problem pages.

Another important aspect of newspapers are the *advertisements and classified sections*. Both of these are characterised by succinct language, however, commercial advertisements typically employ persuasive elements such as flashy images and catchy phrases.

In addition to these sections, many newspapers have *extra supplements and magazines*, particularly in their Sunday editions. Magazines are also, of course, sold as individual products and they differ substantially from newspapers. Firstly, they are generally more expensive, given the fact that they contain glossy, high-resolution pictures and cost more to produce. The other main differences are in the readership, since magazines generally have a more specific target audience. The articles presented in magazines are often read in the comfort of one's home, the dentist's, or the hairdresser's, as opposed to the newspaper, which is read everywhere from bars to the office at break time.

1.2. STYLES AND CHARACTERISTICS OF JOURNALISTIC ARTICLES

Several factors come into play when it comes to judging and selecting the news stories in a paper. Among these factors we can find the following:

Relevance

The degree to which it is relevant to the target audience (if there is no effect, maybe there is no news)

| | |
|-----------------------|--|
| Timeliness | The recency of events |
| Simplification | How easy is to simplify or summarise the story |
| Impact | Impact is determined by the number of people affected. The more people affected, the bigger the impact |
| Proximity | The closer your audience is to the event, the greater its news value. If a train crashes in Iran, it may receive less attention. If it does in your town, it will play on page one |
| Prominence | The more famous or important the person being affected, the more prominent the news. If President Trump goes jogging, reporters take pictures. If your neighbour goes jogging, nothing happens |
| Conflict | War, politics and crime are the most common news events of all |

In addition to these points, sensationalist stories are more likely to reach the front pages of newspapers and, increasingly, strange or odd stories also find their way into newspaper columns.

The style of writing employed in a newspaper article is, to a large extent, influenced by the type of newspaper (i.e. quality vs. sensationalist) and the type of article (i.e. major world event vs. an oddity). In more serious articles from the quality press, there is a likelihood for sentences to be more formal, longer and with words that are less frequently employed. The style most frequently employed in quality papers is news style and the text type is expository. Serious papers are arguably more likely to adhere to professional standards and normally present news in a fairly balanced way. News stories tend to avoid jargon and idioms; they use active and explicit prose, focusing on accuracy, brevity and clarity.

These are just some of the stylistic elements of feature articles; however, as mentioned in the previous section, there are several types of feature articles, ranging from editorials to business and sports articles. Essentially, however, all of the articles tell some sort of story with a beginning, a middle and an end. The style will ultimately depend on a number of factors including not only the type of article, but also the category of newspaper (i.e. tabloids or quality papers) and, indeed, the country in which it is published. These issues are discussed in the following sections.

2. QUALITY, MID-MARKET AND POPULAR PRESS IN BRITAIN

The history of the British press can be traced some over the last 300 years to the time of William of Orange. Since then, a number of important and not-so important newspapers and newsletters have come and gone. More newspapers are read in Britain than in most other developed countries. There are over 125 daily and Sunday newspapers, a number of which have a long history of publication and while many of them may have certain political affiliations or tendencies, almost all of them are financially independent from political parties.

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Several issues today are affecting how the press operates. Firstly, the development of new technologies and the advancement of smartphones, 5G coverage and social media has meant an increase in digital subscriptions. Another concern is the question of press regulation, which has been hotly debated in Parliament and which has been a source of conflict particularly between celebrities, who want their privacy respected, and the press, which wants freedom of information.

Traditionally, the two types of newspapers have been classified as broadsheets, which were seen as being quality newspapers, and tabloids, which were more sensacionalistas. Despite both terms being still employed, in the early 2000s several quality newspapers went tabloid. Another type of paper, however, has come into play: the mid-market paper, which is aimed at the intermediate market.

Since the availability of online access to newspapers, circulation figures have been steadily diminishing for virtually all of the major newspapers and this trend is particularly true for young people. The most frequently sold papers in the UK include tabloids, which make up over half of the readership, as well as midmarket papers and quality papers, which make up over 20% each. The main characteristics of these papers are discussed in the following sections.

2.1. QUALITY NEWSPAPERS

The Telegraph, the Times, the Guardian and the Independent represent the biggest names in quality newspapers in the UK. Founded in 1785, the Times, and its sister paper The Sunday Times, is Britain's oldest and one of its most respected newspapers. While it is read by a minority of people, the paper is recognised as an authoritative source of current information and is often quoted in televised news media programmes. While the paper has supported both conservative and labour candidate over the years and normally supports whatever government is in power, it is fairly conservative. It does, however, stress that it is politically independent.

A much more conservative paper is *The Daily Telegraph*. With a circulation that is higher than the other quality papers, it has received the nickname of The Torygraph and, indeed, it has always supported the Tory Party. Nevertheless, it does appear to have reporting that is of high quality, objective and comprehensive, particularly in terms of world events.

The Guardian is among the longest established newspapers in the world. As a liberal paper (left to centre paper), The Guardian is known for its support to worthy causes.

The Independent was first published in 1986 and its readership has rapidly grown. The paper began as a broadsheet and later became compact. While its

political stance is left-to-centre, it does take a more market-oriented view on economic issues.

2.2. MID-MARKET TABLOIDS

Mid-market tabloids aim to provide news coverage as well as entertainment for readers, and thus, stand halfway between quality and sensationalist papers. The two most important mid-market papers are the Daily Mail and the Daily Express.

The Daily Mail has the second-largest reader circulation figures. It was originally published to cater for the emerging literate lower-middle class and was particularly interested in having a high percentage of female readership and today it is the only paper with more than 50% of female readers. The current political leaning of the paper is conservative and its treatment of political and social issues often reflects that.

The Daily Express also had an interest in capturing a female readership and it was the first paper to include women-dedicated sections. The paper was rationally conservative, though it did support the Labour Party during the 2001 election. The Express is famous for its continued printing of conspiracy stories over the death of Princess Diana.

2.3. POPULAR PRESS

Tabloids are often referred to as ‘gutter press’ and this is in reference to the type of journalism and presentation employed. They are also known as red-top tabloids because of the way in which the name of the newspaper appears, which is with white letters in a red background.

These tabloids generally have sensationalist headlines in capital letters which often play on words. The topics in tabloids often have to do with sexual scandals, drugs, defamation of celebrities and high-profile gossip. The style of this type of newspaper tends to be simplistic, using straightforward vocabulary and simple grammar, often intended to grab attention and shock readers.

The Sun is the country’s biggest selling newspaper. It is traditionally associated with the Conservative Party, though it usually supports the government in power. The Sun is world famous for its controversial introduction of Page 3 girls and the use of sensational headlines (i.e. Freddie Starr ate my Hamster). The Sun has been charged on several occasions for libel against famous people including Elton John.

Competing with the Sun for audience is the *Daily Mirror*, whose left-wing political stance has made them be very critical over the Liberal Democrats decision to enter into coalition with the Conservative Party.

The Star is the youngest of the three tabloids and was originally aimed at trying to gain readership in the north of England and the Midlands. Like the Sun, it regularly features topless girls and has been credited for having discovered several famous models. It has also been charged with libel cases, including the case it lost to the family of Madeleine McCain, due to its extensive coverage.

3. QUALITY PAPERS AND SUPERMARKET TABLOIDS IN THE USA

Unlike the variety of national papers in the UK, the United States has relatively few national newspapers, as publications tend to be more regional in nature. The major exception to this is USA today, although other more local papers such as The New York Times and The Wall Street Journal are sold nationwide.

Among the more reputable papers we find USA Today, the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal and the Washington Post. USA Today has a national readership in printed version currently standing at over 1.6. million copies and it aims at acting as a nationally unifying corporation. The format of the paper is broadsheet and, while it was initially criticized for being less serious than other papers, it has grown in relevance and has developed a reputation for providing easy-to-read and synthesized news reports. Despite its success, it is difficult for the newspaper to compete with more local publications.

The Wall Street Journal is the biggest selling newspaper in the US and is sold all over the country. Unlike other papers, it focuses on business and finance. The New York Times is also sold across the nation and it outranks USA Today in terms of sales. The paper states that it provides serious, non-sensationalist news to an intellectual audience and today it is recognised as one of the greatest newspapers.

Like Britain, the US also has a series of sensationalist newspapers, often known as supermarket tabloids (i.e. *The National Enquirer*), though most of these are published on a weekly basis. These tabloids receive their name from the fact that they are often positioned near checkouts in supermarkets.

Furthermore, there is an online newspaper of increasing relevance today: *The Huffington Post*. This site offers news, blogs, and original content and covers politics, business, entertainment, environment, technology, media and local news, among other things.

III. CONCLUSION, PEDAGOGICAL AND CURRICULAR CONSIDERATIONS

One of the most important conveyors of information since the 1600s has been the newspaper. Today, available both in print and digital formats, newspapers present us with valuable information at several levels and in a wide variety of areas which are not commonly present together in one place. At the same time, newspapers are particularly user-friendly: unlike televised news sources, they can be read at any time and the order of news pieces and the reading of omission of articles can be decided by the reader. Similarly, they present information in a coherent, concise and sequential way that allows readers to digest large amounts of information in a very short time.

As mentioned in the recently published Companion Volume of the Common European Framework (CoE, 2020), reading takes place for a number of purposes within different genres and with specific functions. In this sense, written news articles and media can provide material for reading for information for pleasure, different styles of journalistic writing and the use of media as a model for learner production.

The importance of the press is included in national legislation. This can be clearly seen in ROYAL DECREE 217/2022, which mentions, for instance, that in the first years of secondary education, students should be able to understand the main ideas of short journalistic texts with support from illustrations and headlines. By the time they get to 4th year, they should be able to locate specific information in medium-length journalistic texts and when they reach 2nd Bachillerato, they should be able to understand information, ideas and implicit opinions in more extended journalistic writing pieces.

In addition to this, there has been an increased focus on TBL and project work and the development of Key Competences, as seen in ROYAL DECREE 217/2022. In this sense, press-based projects and tasks develop all aspects of communicative competence as well as the remaining key competences.

Reading is a fundamental part of the school curriculum and, indeed, national and regional reading plans are an integral part of school life. In the English language class, extensive and intensive reading (i.e. by using skimming, scanning strategies) practices are seen as essential in helping students learn and acquire English. In this sense, newspaper and magazine articles are a potential source of authentic input and possible source of output (i.e. not only exploited for contextualised grammar and vocabulary, but also for further discussion).

Given the authentic nature of media-based activities, the best way to employ them is in a (semi-)authentic communicative situation. Additionally, in order to ensure full engagement and motivation, any press extract should be appropriate to students' level, age and interests. It cannot be automatically assumed that one person's choice of article is going to be of others' appeal. Even though certain press-based activities may not be appropriate for certain levels since students cannot follow at their own pace. Nevertheless, even with groups of students with low levels of communicative competence, it is possible

to introduce some elements from the press and, in this sense, bring in an authentic cultural dimension to the classroom. Some potentially useful activities include:

Compare different ways of presenting the same piece of news in different media

Presenting a piece of news with the of presentation software

Writing an opinion about the article for the newspaper column

Finding out what others think about us (reading news about Spain in international newspapers)

Conducting an interview for a newspaper report

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