Letters to the Editor: Making them Work in the English Language Classroom

Dr. Sreehari Pusuluri
Assistant Professor, Department of English, Al-Jouf University, Saudi Arabia

Abstract: This paper examines varied ways in which letters to the editor (LTEs) can be used in the English language classroom. Using newspapers has great potential for ESL/EFL classroom. This paper offers several ways in which LTEs can be exploited in the English language classroom. One of the chief aims of using LTEs is to develop students’ written communication skills in a self-motivating life long way. Development of reading comprehension, vocabulary enhancement, topical information and linguistic forms for debates and discussion are other benefits that can be accrued. Reading LTEs in regional and national newspapers widens readers’ awareness on current affairs and on several issues of national interest. When one practices composing LTEs, s/he learns how to write with impact to an authentic audience on a topic of their interest or common interest. This helps them to broaden their understanding of a topic by reading several news items, articles, editorials and letters. In the process, they expand their knowledge of linguistic skills, critical thinking skills and multicultural skills. Reading and composition of letters can be an uplifting experience for the language learner under the care of a teacher who makes informed choices in the use of such materials in the English language classroom.

Keywords: letters to editor, English language classroom, written communication skills, development of reading and vocabulary, debates and discussions

1. Introduction

One of the chief aims of education/teaching is to make students learn on their own and for life. To achieve this, most language teachers want their students to involve themselves with several out of class activities. Reading of English newspapers is one such activity that has vital influence on language learning process. Motivation to learn lifelong in an autonomous way can be promoted among at least a few students with the habit of writing letters to the editor of newspapers.

2. Significance of Newspapers

Newspapers are an example of authentic materials. Authentic materials mean “exposure to real language and its use in its own community” (Widdowson, 1990). Commenting on the benefits of authentic materials Daniela Tamo says, “Bringing authentic materials into the classroom can be motivating for the students, as it adds a real-life element to the student’s learning experience. Authentic materials is significant since it increases students’ motivation for learning, makes the learner be exposed
to the “real” language. Of course, we should always remember that we should bear in mind the task, not the material. This means that, for example, instead of asking a beginner student to read a full-page article that’s over their heads, we should ask them to read the headline and guess what the article will be about.”

Newspapers are exploited in the language classroom for varied purposes. Used as sources of supplementary material by most language teachers, they serve purposes such as getting up-to-date information on current affairs, gathering ideas for classroom discussions and debates, presenting students with samples of written pieces of varied discourse modes and styles, familiarizing students with multicultural skills and critical thinking skills.

3. Features of Newspapers

A teacher can use different sections of the newspapers for different purposes. Naveen K. Mehta sums up varied sections of the newspapers thus:

1. News Stories:

The front page is considered as the mirror of any newspaper. It contains all the breaking or important news in it. The headlines of the front page are prepared meticulously with an aim to draw the attention of the readers.

2. Feature Stories:

Feature stories are very helpful in sharing information on the topics of reader’s interest. These stories may be based upon a trend, event, situation etc.

3. Special Features:

Special features are meant to have a healthy discussion on a specific issue or a special case/event/story.

4. Editorial and Letters to the Editor:

Editorial columns reflect the views of the editor/ editorial team/guest writer. Editorial columns are considered very insightful and thought provoking ones. They help the readers to build up their thoughts and views and promote a high level of thinking skills. The Letters to the Editors represent the opinions of the readers. It is helpful in bringing out the views of the readers before other readers.

5. Advertisements/Classified:

The advertisements/classified items are very helpful for the readers to know more about an existing or a newly launched product(s).

6. Miscellaneous Items:

In a newspaper, the readers can easily find time table of trains/ flights, schedule of events, television, theatre, movies etc. we can also get useful information on weather, fashion, share-market, trade and business etc.
4. Why Letters to the Editor

This paper focuses on making use of letters to the editor section of the newspapers for a wide variety of purposes in the English language classroom with a view to making learners autonomous in acquiring several linguistic skills and non-linguistic skills.

An opinion piece or letter to the editor is written to express one’s views on current affairs, to oppose or support a burning issue or an issue of local or national importance or to comment on a newspaper’s editorial, article or any news item.

Jennifer Allman feels:

“…a letter to the editor can be written by anyone who wants to share an opinion with others who read a particular newspaper. Usually kept to a maximum of 300 words, such letters can be written for a variety of reasons, including supporting, refuting or otherwise expressing an emotion about a current topic, influence public opinion, educate others, try to gain volunteers for a cause, or appeal to elected officials on a political issue.”

Patricia Hunt states:

“State clearly and simply the reason that prompted your letter. You may react to anything you read in the paper within the past couple of days or comment on how you believe the newspaper covered the story. You may want to state your opinion about an event or how the newspaper reported about it. You may also write to the editor about an oversight, such as a story that you wanted reported but went ignored.”

Commenting on the significance of writing letters to the editor, Traci Gardner opines: “By writing letters on issues that they care about to authentic audiences of readers, students completing this activity have the opportunity to go beyond an "academic exercise" to writing that matters to them and to their readers.”

From an instructor's standpoint, focusing on LTEs section promotes a variety of activities and learning outcomes which are desirable. The letters can be used a) to provide models of clear, concise writing. (organization of ideas, effective use of discourse markers, etc), b) to enrich vocabulary (formal expressions, idiomatic expressions and phrasal verbs, etc), c) to enhance the knowledge of grammar and sentence structure, and d) to collect ideas for discussions, debates and presentations on topics such as euthanasia, capital punishment, etc.

5. Activities with Letters to the Editor

5.1 Developing Written Communication

From my experience, I personally believe that a language teacher can inspire his learners to feel confident about their written communication skills by familiarizing them with LTEs. As a result at least
some learners will practice an out-of-class activity which provides them an opportunity to experience the value of learning English to communicate their feelings, and viewpoints to the world. In some of my classes during discussion on topics like euthanasia, corruption, etc I showed them the letters I wrote to the editor of *The Hindu*. I told them that when my letters were published, I felt reassured about a) my written communication skills b) my knowledge of the world c) my ability to think clearly and d) my social interaction ability. A few students, who were influenced by this, wanted to know what they should do to get their views published. In my classes, on several occasions, I made use of the letters to bring the learners’ attention to composition skills such as organizing thoughts, choosing appropriate vocabulary and style in writing, adopting suitable discourse modes such as narration, argumentation, description, and exposition.

When I shared samples of my published letters with my students, I felt that they served as source of inspiration for at least a few of my students. Some of them took it up as a challenge and succeeded in getting their letters published. They in fact told me that they were happy with their success rate (the number of letters published of the ones they have sent for publication). Some students were initially disappointed when they failed to get their letters published. I told them to be patient and keep writing. I spoke to them about my experiences such as times when had to travel for about 10 kilometers everyday to a nearby town to monitor the paper for my letter and to collect my clips. By way of advising, I gave them some tips for writing effective letters and dos and don’ts to keep in mind when they write LTEs.

5.1.1 Tips for Effective Letters

- Decide on what to write on
- Have a clear thesis or goal
- Have sufficient supporting material
- Organise ideas coherently
- Conclude effectively
- Use correct grammar and spelling
- Use appropriate words
- Use appropriate content (logically sound and culturally sensitive)
- Ensure variety in sentence construction
- Use appropriate discourse modes
- Keep your audience in mind

5.1.2 Dos and don’ts with LTEs

- Do read the editorial section and letters to the editor section regularly
Do observe closely the letters written by others and learn from them
Do write briefly and clearly
Do write regularly
Don’t be too reactive and negative
Don’t be too emotional
Don’t get too personal
Don’t take extreme views

5.1.3 Sample Activity for Development of Written Communication
Teacher gets the students to read some letters related to the topic under discussion and asks the students to analyze the letters paying attention to a checklist such as the one given below. All of the points in the check list may not be used at a time. The teacher needs to decide what points to be given priority.

Check list for analyzing a letter to the editor:
1. Does the letter have a clear thesis?
2. Does the writer give sufficient supporting ideas?
3. Are the ideas organized coherently?
4. Are the ideas logical?
5. Is the conclusion effective?
6. Is the knowledge of grammar and vocabulary commendable?
7. Has the writer varied the length of sentences?
8. Has the writer used discourse markers effectively?
9. Has the writer been polite and tactical?
10. Is the content logically sound and culturally sensitive?

Then ask learners to write their own letter to the editor. They can respond to one of the letters discussed or they can write about a recent news item.

Once the students are ready with their drafts, get them to peer correct their letters. Teacher picks out a letter or two and provides the necessary feedback.

If found suitable, letters can be sent to the newspapers of students’ choice for publication.

5.2 Enhancing Speaking Skills
LTEs might be used in the classroom for developing students’ oral communication skills such as presentations, group discussions and debates. Lack of ideas is one of reasons why some students do not perform satisfactorily during oral communication activities in the classroom. This problem can easily be overcome by making use of LTEs in an appropriate manner.
5.2.1 **Group discussions**

The teacher can use LTEs for conducting group discussions. Teacher prepares students by giving them letters related to a particular topic, such as, for instance, capital punishment and asks them to note down topical information and language forms. Then the teacher allows the students to discuss on the topic for about ten minutes. And then the teacher takes up topical follow-up to have students report to the class on the results of their discussion. This can be followed by error correction where teacher gives feedback on grammar or pronunciation problems s/he noted during the discussion.

5.2.2 **Debates**

Teacher gives students letters relating to an interesting or controversial topic and organizes a debate around it. Teacher then concludes the activity with topical and linguistic follow-up.

5.2.3 **Presentations**

Teacher gives students letters relating to various topics and asks students to read and make some notes on topics of their choice for the oral presentation. The activity might then be concluded with topical and linguistic follow-up.

5.3 **Enriching Vocabulary**

Teachers might use LTEs for a variety of purposes. Suggested below are a few ideas.

5.3.1 **Pre-teach hard words**

Teacher familiarizes students with hard words in letters prior to the reading experience.

5.3.2 **Give repeated exposure**

Teacher collects frequently used words and phrases and discusses with learners to foster stronger understanding and internalization of meaning of such words.

5.3.3 **Restructure the letters**

Teacher restructures letters for vocabulary enrichment in a variety of ways such as teaching hard words. A portion of hard words might be replaced with “easier” synonyms to help the reader understand the overall text.

5.3.4 **Teach types of vocabularies**

Teacher selects some letters and gets the learners to find formal expressions that mean the same as a list of colloquial words. In the same way, learners might be asked to look for idioms and phases that mean the same as a list of meanings.
5.4 Sharpening Reading Skills

Since the LTEs tend to be short, a teacher can use them to develop the following reading skills among the learners. These include a) skimming, b) scanning and c) reading for detail or intensive reading.

Skimming and scanning are two speed reading skills. Skimming is done to get the gist or overall of idea of the texts, paying attention only to the key words. Scanning is performed to look for specific piece of information as quickly as possible. Reading for detail or intensive reading is a skill that involves studying texts carefully and slowly to get an in-depth idea.

Using LTEs teachers can devise activities such as the ones suggested below for sharpening learners’ reading skills. These activities can be conducted and feedback provided with whole class or in groups depending on factors like size of the class, time available, timing of the activity, level of the students and classroom management style of the teacher, etc.

Skimming can be used for getting general idea, for gathering points of view of the writer and for finding the letter pattern (comparison, cause and effect, etc).

Scanning can be used for finding facts, statistics, dates, specific names, etc.

Intensive reading or Reading for detail can be used for drawing attention to distinguishing key points from supporting evidence, to understanding explicitly stated information versus implied meaning, to discover the writer’s bias, to analyze grammatical structures and discourse markers, to understand literal and figurative sense of words, and to discover the sense (derogatory, sarcastic, pejorative, humorous) with which words are employed, etc.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, it may be said that LTEs could be exploited in myriad ways in the English language classroom. Learners of English could gain motivation to develop their written communication that is meaningful and audience - oriented. LTEs serve as rich source of materials not only to develop students’ written communication skills, but also to improve their reading skills, to enrich their knowledge of vocabulary and grammar, to help them gain cultural knowledge and to be up-to-date with the current situation in the whole world.

As for teachers, LTEs can be a rich source of materials for classroom use, easier to handle and alter than the course book material. One of the convenient ways of using LTEs is to supplement the coursebook. Letters relating to the general theme of the units should be taken up for different activities such as reading comprehension and vocabulary work. In this way, the coursebook can be enriched with relevant additional material. Teachers can use letters at different levels for different purposes. Aspects and skills of the language can be stressed at beginner and intermediate level. At advanced levels audience awareness, creativity, critical thinking and multicultural awareness together with language skills can be
taken up. Therefore, all teachers should strongly encourage their students to use LTEs beneficially both in class and/or out of class.

It is my firm conviction that the habit of writing LTEs is one of the practical ways of helping students to master composition skills and critical thinking skills for life. In view of the rich potential the LTEs section has for learners of English, curriculum planners and material producers should take cognizance of this and incorporate the same in the curriculum. Urging educators to take a fresh of the curriculum, Hallman affirms “…opportunities such as writing a letter to the editor exist as crucial sites for educators’ examination, as these are the authentic activities that frequently stress student “action” and response in the classroom. Further, the writing and publishing of the letter is itself evidence that curriculum in the English classroom can engage students in responding to “real” events in the world that concern them.”

References