Learning English Through Sport

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My presentation today is entitled "Learning English Through Sport" and what I intend to do is first explain how and why I became interested in combining sport and English language learning and second go through some sport-related materials I have developed over a period of time, both in the UK (briefly) and here in Australia (in more detail). These materials can be divided broadly into two groups, those which can be used as one off lessons and those which can but do not necessarily have to lead to the completion of a project by the students. The aim of this session is to present materials and hopefully to encourage other teachers to exploit the wealth of sport-related material that is to be found all around us in magazines, newspapers, on TV etc. I will also point out some of the difficulties I personally have had both developing and teaching the materials. If time permits there will be some general discussion of issues raised during the presentation.

I first started thinking about using sport in the English language classroom about 8 years ago in the UK. Students would frequently come to me (and other teachers) and ask how they could improve their spoken English. On hearing that they should try to make friends with native speakers they would invariably remark how difficult that was and what could they talk about? It was then that I thought that sport amongst other things might well be a good topic to start a conversation with and after suggesting that there were quite a few clubs in the area who would welcome new members I set about thinking how I might incorporate sport more fully into my teaching. Then, as now, most teachers touched on the topic of sport in class but usually limited themselves to exercises which looked at vocabulary or the rules of certain games, thereby increasing grammatical knowledge and word power but not doing very much in any of the other skills areas. This seemed to me to be an unfortunate waste of an area of experience very close to many students' hearts. I decided, therefore, to develop some materials which were intended to draw on students' existing knowledge of sport and at the same time provide practice in the skills areas usually reserved for general English classes. These materials included readings, either taken from newspapers or written by myself, with general comprehension questions, vocabulary work and discussion points, listenings, in the form of TV programs on certain issues in sport and general worksheets for discussion or vocabulary building. A 10 week program was developed using topics such as The History of Sport, The Olympic Games, Drugs in Sport, Amateurism and Professionalism, The Media and Sport, Dangerous Sports, Sports using Animals and Sports Quotations. As you can see, most of these topics lend themselves well to discussion and indeed it was for this reason that I wanted to use them, so that in each session there was quite a variety of activities. I learned a lot while developing that course. It was successful from my point of view as it held students' interest and helped them to improve their English in the field of sport as well as generally. Feedback after the course was also positive. It was not, however, without some problems. Initially some of the group imagined that we would be focussing on particular sports and were a little surprised to discover that the approach was more general. Others were interested in some topics but not others. I also found that when I
tried to use well tried teaching techniques (jigsaw listenings/readings etc), some students were reluctant to 'study', as it were, and just wanted to get on with the text, video or discussion. This was undoubtedly in part a result of the class dynamic created and the same could have happened in any general English classroom but it set me thinking about other ways of presenting sport-related material in such a way as to appeal to a wider group of interests.

Since that time I have often and successfully used those materials in general English classes depending on the topic or grammatical point being taught. For example, the Drugs in Sport material could be used in the topic area of Health or Drugs. Sports using Animals could be used in the area of Wildlife or Environment and so on.

This year I have been reviewing some of the material that I produced in the UK and have prepared a short course in the language of sport, which I would like to present now for teachers who might be interested in making use of the abundance of material to be found in Australia. It might be useful at this stage to point out that some of the ideas in this presentation might not be appropriate for all learners. Some of them, for example, might suit more active learners - others more passive learners, but most of them are ideas that I feel are workable with students who are interested in sport in general and whose English level is Intermediate and above. I also feel that some of them could, with thought, be adapted to even lower levels but I do not intend to go into that during my presentation today. Moreover, I am fully aware that there is massive scope in this field for creativity so if anyone else has ever given much thought to this subject there will be time at the end of the session or after the session to discuss it further.

For a variety of reasons, including the opportunities it offers to be creative, I have in the last few years become very interested in using the video camera in the classroom and so when the idea struck me to produce a short sports course, it seemed reasonable somehow to incorporate the use of a video camera. The end result of the course was to be a sports news program but the process was to be the most important aspect of the project and where the language work was to be done. As stated the end result was to be a sports news program. There are many such programs on TV but all of them have certain elements in common. There is an introductory stage, in which headlines are given. There are various reports on the outcomes of matches and interviews with sports personalities. There is a results round-up, either in the body of a report or in addition to one, and more often than not there is commentary on short passages, usually the more exciting ones, of matches. These elements were to be the ones we would look at in a certain amount of detail (subject to the time constraints) and attempt to emulate in the production segment of the project. We also drew heavily on newspapers for our raw material and indeed much of the language work done in the preparation stage was transferring the printed word into the spoken word not only in readiness for the production of the sports program, but also as a linguistic exercise in its own right.

I would now like to go through the various stages of the project. Although the course itself was of 10 weeks duration (20 hours teaching time plus home preparation and review), I do not intend to go through each week's work- rather the different activities that made up each stage.

**Introduction to course**
At the beginning of the course there was an introduction outlining to the students the general aims and objectives of the course and what would be required of them. The aims of the course were as follows:

(i) To make sports news and sport in general more accessible to students.

(ii) To increase sport specific vocabulary to facilitate comprehension.

(iii) To improve students' general English ability.

(iv) To generate interest in sport and to encourage students to make the most of their social lives in sport-dominated Australia.

(v) To have fun.

Presentation and Practice

This stage of the project consisted of a variety of language exercises designed to increase sport-specific vocabulary, improve aural and oral skills by focussing on stress, intonation and pitch, and build confidence in the students to use printed matter as a resource for oral presentation. See the appendix for examples of worksheets used (worksheets 1, 2, 2a and 3).

For the most part their potential for exploitation is self-explanatory but naturally teachers could use them in any number of ways. Worksheet 1, for example, could be used for pronunciation work (especially stress) as well as looking at the lexical content. Worksheet 2, similarly, could be used to make definitions What does a soccer player wear on his feet? etc. The newspaper headline exercise (3) was originally designed with a view to getting students to talk to native speakers they know, but with adequate introductory work it could serve as a prompt for students to make TV headlines and possibly even oral reports. The differences between the 2 kinds of headlines and the grammatical conventions used in both could form the basis of a very informative lesson.

Having completed a fair amount of vocabulary work, which naturally led to clarification of sports hitherto unfamiliar, we moved on to the listening stage, during which students were initially exposed to commentary of a variety of sports. This was without doubt the most challenging part of the preparation work as commentators are not known for their clarity of speech, logic or ability to simplify for non-native speakers. Having said that, the length of the commentaries was very short and the main objective was to look at the stress, intonation patterns and pitch exhibited and if possible reproduce it in the production stage of the project. The work done on the commentary pieces went more or less as follows:

• SS listen to 4 commentaries of different sports (tape only) and try to deduce which sports they are. Any clues can be used and it is certainly not the aim to try and understand each word (most native speakers would also be unable to do that).
• On listening a second time, SS try to recognise as many words as they can- names, places or anything else is OK.

• SS then watch video footage of the action from which the tape was taken and do the exercise Worksheet 5, in which they have to describe the action in note form.

• This leads on to a closer examination of the actual language used in the commentaries. I decided to use clozes to highlight key words, but other approaches can be used.

• SS then practise reading aloud and are finally placed alongside the TV where they have to speak their particular piece with the sound turned down and the action in full flow. You can probably imagine the scene without further description from me.

See worksheets 4,5,6 and 7 in the appendix.

There was now one area left to look at before moving on to the production of the program itself. This was the presentation of results. This is naturally a main feature of any sports program and it was therefore important to spend a fair amount of time on this. Again, there are many ways in which this can be approached, but I decided to take the results from the results section of The Sydney Morning Herald as my starting point. We looked at a variety of sports and a variety of results, and ways of presenting them were elicited before more vocabulary work in this area was done. Here is the outline for this segment of the project.

• SS are given a scan reading exercise on the results worksheet. This is to warm them up and ensure that they do not feel threatened by all the printed matter on the page.

• After dealing with and expanding on the vocabulary in the scan reading exercise, SS are shown an OHT of expressions used to describe the outcomes of matches.

• SS then return to the results sheet and in pairs look for examples of matches in which the learned vocabulary is appropriate.

• SS form pairs or small groups and prepare scan reading exercises themselves for use by other SS, the teacher continually checking the appropriacy of the language used.

• SS reform in different groups and ask each other their questions. This could be done in a variety of ways. It could be done as a kind of dictation first, taking 2 or 3 questions from 3 different members of the new group, or as a competition to see who can find the answer the fastest etc.

See worksheets 8,9 and 10 in the appendix.

Production

The groundwork was now laid for the students to produce something themselves. The program they were to make was to be of their own invention but with the proviso that they include certain features, the language of which they had studied in the weeks preceding the production of the program. These features included some headlines,
reports, results and if possible some commentary using the voice over function on the video camera. The various stages of the production segment of the project were explained to the students and thereafter the role of the teacher was to supervise, facilitate and clarify problems the students came across. In addition to this the actual camera work was managed by the teacher. The stages of this segment were as follows:

- In a group or groups students discuss and plan the contents of their program(s).
- They sequence the segments.
- Group members, either alone or in partnership with others, write scripts for their parts of the program. These are checked by the teacher periodically.
- When the scripts are completed, they are sequenced and then orally rehearsed by the whole group so as to give the semblance of a real program.
- The programs are filmed, edited and watched.
- A possible activity after viewing would be a group discussion on the whole project.

Even at this stage of the proceedings it is possible, if desirable, to make explicit the functions required to carry out the task. Before discussing and planning the program, it would be relevant, for example, to look at the language of planning and making suggestions and then encourage its use in that particular part of the production stage. The same can be said for the language of sequencing and so on. Also, before moving on to the writing stage, groups could reform to tell each other what they have planned to do, thereby using another set of expressions. At the end, naturally, the "could have done" and "should have done" structures might well be practised. The possibilities presented for language learning are endless but the line must be drawn somewhere and teachers will themselves decide which approaches best serve the purpose of realising their objectives. In the case of our project, we did not make such linguistic usages explicit at this stage and students were more or less free to decide what to do. Given the students in the group, I felt they had sufficient linguistic input and did not wish to detract from any feeling of freedom they might have had. Below, however, is a brief outline of possible linguistic focuses for the production stage.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Production Stage</th>
<th>Possible Language Focus</th>
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<tr>
<td>Discussion and Planning</td>
<td>-Let's......</td>
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<td></td>
<td>-I think we should.....</td>
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<td>-Why don't we..?</td>
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<td>-We could</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sequencing</td>
<td>-First, then..after that..etc</td>
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<td></td>
<td>-Next</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-When.........., then..etc</td>
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</table>
The students who followed this course with me managed to produce a video news program and despite the relatively poor spoken English of several members of the class, it was clear that they benefited a great deal from the course. Some of the students took a little time to warm to the idea of "performing" in front of a video camera, but put in a lot of effort, using a lot of English which had until then been unfamiliar to them. Technically, the production experienced a few problems as our editing facilities were a little on the primitive side (2 VCRs and a screen), and some of the more daring activities, such as the timed voice overs, proved to be difficult for the students, whose oral ability was, generally speaking, in the Intermediate range. Having said that, I was happy with the outcome and will hopefully be able to make adaptations and improvements in the future.

APPENDIX

Worksheets used in the presentation are numbered w1, w2, w3 etc.

Worksheets W2, W2a, W3 and W8 are not included as they were not able to be scanned

W1

Can You Match and Event with the Sport?

The World Cup    Cycling
The Olympics    Rugby League
Wimbledon
<table>
<thead>
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<th>Event</th>
<th>Sport</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Commonwealth Games</td>
<td>Soccer (Football)</td>
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<td>The Bledisloe Cup</td>
<td>Tennis</td>
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<td>The Grand Prix</td>
<td>Basketball</td>
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<td>The Melbourne Cup</td>
<td>Motor Racing</td>
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<td>The Grand Final</td>
<td>Rugby Union</td>
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<td>Test Matches</td>
<td>Snow Sports</td>
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<td>International Matches</td>
<td>American Football</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Winter Olympics</td>
<td>Athletics</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Superbowl</td>
<td>Horseracing</td>
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<td>The NBA</td>
<td>Cricket</td>
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<td>The Winfield Cup</td>
<td>Aussie Rules</td>
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<td>The Tour de France</td>
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<td>Sport</td>
<td>Teams</td>
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<td>SPORT</td>
<td>What happens? (Notes)</td>
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NETBALL

Steve.. for Van Dyke. Three three and Van Dyke has all of South Africa's goals and it might run that way for a while.

Anne... beautiful highball put in the back space to Van Dyke.

SteveAt the other end Cusack. Both sides starting to look a little more composed out there. Keevey, Harveyson ...

AnneDalwod a fine defensive...

CRICKET

TonyAnd he's gone for it. It's in the air. It's gonna be caught. Yes he's under .... no, it's gonna go for six. It's gone ... it's a beautiful shot.
NETBALL

Steve ... for Van Dyke. Three three and Van Dyke has ___ of South Africa's ____ and it ___ run that way for a while.

Anne ... beautiful ____ ball put in the _____ space to Van Dyke.

Steve At the _____ end Cusack. Both _____ starting to look a little more ____ out there. Keevey, Harveyson ...

Anne Dalwood a fine _____ ....

CRICKET

Tony And he's _____ for it. It's in the air. It's gonna be _____. Yes he's under ... no, it's gonna go for _____. It's gone .... it's a beautiful ____.
W9

RESULTS - Scan reading exercise

1. How many AFL games were played?
2. Where did the 3 tennis tournaments take place?
3. What was the biggest basketball win?
4. How many runs did Graeme Hick get in the 5th test?
5. Who are Auckland playing next week?
6. How many people watched the Manly v. Penrith rugby league game?
7. What was the highest scoring soccer game in England?
8. What was the biggest margin in the netball?
9. How many sets must you win to win a squash game?
10. Which rugby union team has scored most points this season?
11. Which rugby union team has got most points this season?
12. What team didn't score in the American League baseball?
13. How did the Illawarra Hawsk get on?
14. In the cricket what do the numbers 113, 118 and 152 mean?

Now in pairs look at the results and using the vocabulary we have learned make at least 5 questions of your own.
W10

RESULTS VOCABULARY

Try to use the following words in sentences to describe the results below.

- win
- lose
- beat
- draw
- thrash

Sydney-Geelong 107-105 (basketball)
Italy-Brazil 0-0 (soccer)
Sampras-Agassi 6-0 6-3 6-2 (tennis)

Sydney won against Geelong 107 to 105 in an exciting game.
Geelong lost against Sydney 107 to 105 (105 to 107) in a nailbiter.
Sydney beat Geelong 107 105 (by 2 points) in a close game.
Italy drew 0-0 with Brazil in a tight contest.
Sampras thrashed Agassi (in straight sets) 6-0 3-6 2-6.
Agassi was thrashed by Sampras 0-6 3-6 2-6.

Extension

- to have an easy win over someone
- to have no trouble beating someone
- to scrape a win over someone
- to scrape a draw with someone

Not look through the results and see if you can find some examples of games which can be described using this vocabulary.