

## CAN "VOICE OF AMERICA" BE A RESOURCEFUL SITE FOR ESP TEACHERS?

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**Abstract:** *It has long been demonstrated that the Internet can be turned into a very rich data bank from where teachers can select ready-made materials, can access information to cater for different topics, find images to illustrate their lessons, create assessment sheets or produce quizzes which can be used both in class or as homework materials. Nevertheless, sometimes teachers, especially when it comes to ESP, feel lost and do not know which sources can be reliable or which are appropriate for use in class. The aim of this paper is to bring to your attention a very resourceful site for teachers teaching in the military, Voice of America (VOA), and to exemplify how the materials found on this site can be turned into valuable teaching materials aiming at all four skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing, with a focus on Listening.*

**Keywords:** *Internet, VOA, ESP, Listening teaching materials*

### INTRODUCTION

There are numerous ways in which teachers nowadays can find ready-made materials at just one click on an Internet site. Internet has turned into the most resourceful online library for teachers regardless of their level of competence: from beginners to the most experienced ones, from kindergarten teachers to university professors, from teachers to trainers, each can have their resource or can build their own data bank of teaching/training materials just using the Internet. Nevertheless, things are not so easy anymore when it comes to English for Specific Purposes (ESP) even though more attention has been paid lately to English language for different occupations. The sphere is even more restricted when one searches for teaching English materials on topics such as air force, land force, or naval force. There have been published a few textbooks but they are expensive and are not always easy to find.

In our search for materials which are not only useful and trustworthy but also free of any charge we have come across **Voice of America (VOA)**. VOA is the official external broadcast institution of the United States federal government. It started its transmissions under this name on the 1<sup>st</sup> of February 1942, during the WW II, as an initiative to provide war news and commentary. The VOA provides programming for broadcast on radio, TV, and the Internet outside of the U.S., in English and some foreign languages. A 1976 law signed by President Gerald Ford requires the VOA to "serve as a consistently reliable and authoritative source of news."

The VOA site, [www.voanews.com](http://www.voanews.com), is very user-friendly and can be handled easily by anyone, regardless of their computer literacy. The main topics refer to science and technology, health, entertainment, and economy in general. Those who are interested in events taking place on a certain part of the world can choose to read about USA, Africa, Asia, Mideast or Europe.

The site is updated every day with news, videos and special reports. The videos can be easily turned into valuable teaching materials as they can be downloaded and saved for future reference and the transcript can be easily copied from the site. There is also a section called **Learning English**. This section approaches topics on different levels of difficulty. Thus, there are Level one, Level two and Level three teaching materials. There are also sections for Video and Audio materials. Materials found in Level one and Level two are short articles on different topics of interest. The third level contains short stories, usually divided in two parts. The aim is to learn English as one reads and listens to a weekly show with short stories of famous American novelists. Adaptations are written at the intermediate and upper-beginner level and are read one-third slower than regular VOA English. Each story can be downloaded and a copy of the transcript can be found for each audio. There are even lesson plans for teachers and they can be used as they are or they can be adapted according to the teacher's class needs. There is not an archive section but those interested in previous stories can easily find them by

clicking on *Previous* or *Next* which can be found at the bottom of each page.

One of the stories is *The Open Boat* by Stephen Crane and is a very good example of how specialized terminology can be introduced to students in a pleasant and easy way. The lesson plan which accompanies the listening part contains all the necessary ingredients of a good plan: the three PPP (prepare, present, and practice), the evaluation part and ways in which the topic can be expanded. At the end of the lesson plan there is also a pertinent explanation of the CALLA approach (Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach) as well as a list of language learning strategies (Metacognitive and Task-based strategies).

### METHOD

Still, there are so many interesting topics which are of interest for students but they do not have lesson plans and this sometimes makes it difficult for teachers in the ESP field, especially beginners, to use them properly. Thus, the authors of this article want to demonstrate how easily a subject of interest for students in the military can be turned into a perfect lesson. It has been chosen a podcast from VOA about the situation in Darfur and it has been turned into a *Teaching Listening* lesson. A copy of the transcript has also been downloaded from the site. Apart from the materials found on the VOA site, pictures from the Internet and a short movie from YouTube have also been turned into teaching materials. They are used mainly in the Pre-listening phase to predict the topic and in the Post-listening to discuss about values.

The demonstration is intended to be shared with teachers and it can be showed in a teacher training session or it can be studied individually for anyone interested in the subject. The aim of the session is to increase the teachers' awareness of the stages of a listening session. At the end of the session, if the objectives are accomplished, the teachers will have shared knowledge of different listening input formats and will have experienced and reflected upon different types of listening tasks. The participants to the session will first play the role of their students, following the instructions step by step and solving all the tasks and will end by putting back their "teacher hats" and discussing the procedures or any suggestions which might arise during the session.

### PROCEDURE

The session is divided into several parts. At the beginning, teachers will be given some "food for thought" by being asked to discuss in small groups about different types of listening materials which can be used in class. The trainer will display a list with types of listening and will confront the participants' results with it, discussing any differences. A good example of types of listening can be found in *Teaching Listening Comprehension*, a book written by Penny Ur.

The next stage is the *Pre-listening* phase in which participants are given an example of how the topic can be predicted. By doing this, participants start to think about the topic, raising a number of issues that will be discussed later on the recording. This preparation may help them to hear these things being discussed later. A combination of short recordings and pictures

will be used. The more varied the materials, the more stimulating it will be for discussions. This phase is followed by a *Pre-teach vocabulary* activity in which participants receive a list of words and their definitions and are asked to match them. This activity can be done individually or in groups, depending on the way the teacher wants to expend the activity at the end of the lesson. If she decides to assign students to work individually because she thinks they need to practice writing, she can then ask them to write as homework a short news report about the situation in Darfur in which they are to include all the new words. If on the contrary, she thinks students lack speaking practice, she can assign them to prepare in small groups a news report (again using all the new words) and to present it in front of the other participants. Time is essential for this extra activity and the teacher has to be careful not to overload her students.

The main part of the session will be devoted to the *While-listening* activity. Some of the possible types of activities during this phase are: *Listening for the main idea; Listening for details; Recognizing comparisons; Listening with the transcript; Recognizing speaker's intentions; Listening and note taking; Recognizing contrast; Listening for specific vocabulary; Mini-dictation/dictation; Listening for the most important theme;*

### Conclusion

Having in mind that this session is intended for teachers, as it was mentioned at the beginning of this article, a session review is necessary. The teachers will put on again their "teacher-hats" and will discuss the steps in planning a listening session as well as any other comments coming along. The trainer will also distribute the script and teachers will discuss other ways in which the material can be exploited. The teachers will be encouraged to be creative and to design activities for different levels demonstrating thus that the same material can be used for different groups of students with different control of the English language.

As a final remark and to answer the question we started the article with, we highly recommend VOA to any teacher who looks for reliable teaching materials and for up to date news reports from all over the world which can be easily turned into valuable materials for class.

### Script

#### **WFP: BANDITRY ENDANGERING FOOD DISTRIBUTION TO MILLIONS IN DARFUR**

*The United Nations World Food Program says increasing banditry in Sudan's conflict-ridden Darfur region is endangering its ability to feed up to three million people there. Lisa Schlein reports from Geneva.*

Fighting between Sudanese-backed militia and rebel groups continue to kill and displace many people in Darfur. The insecurity generated from the ongoing conflict continues to hamper the delivery of humanitarian assistance.

But, the World Food Program says it is the rising banditry in the region that most threatens its ability to distribute food to millions of homeless people in Darfur. WFP spokeswoman, Christiane Berthiaume, tells VOA 26 trucks have been stolen and 15 drivers abducted since the beginning of the year.

"Every week, we have to face these kinds of events where the trucks are stopped by roadblocks - people, bandits, armed people who ask for money - take the trucks, take sometimes also the drivers," she said. "It has been going on for many months now. Often the drivers are sent back and sometimes the food is stolen. Sometimes they even attack trucks without any food because they take the trucks."

The World Food Program's food distribution operation in Darfur is huge. The agency estimates more than three million people are fed through its programs, depending on the season.

In order to maintain the program, it has to bring in 40,000 tons of food every month. Berthiaume says it takes 1,400 trucks to carry the food from the port of entry to the warehouses to the beneficiaries.

She says delivering food in Darfur is difficult even in the best of times. Berthiaume says the trucks have to traverse 3,000 kilometers of largely bad roads.

She says the period between January and May is very crucial and WFP is worried by the increasing risks.

"We need to pre-position food before the start of the rainy season," said Berthiaume. "We are doing it right now. But again, if the insecurity prevails, if those attacks prevail, we are indeed running the risk that the drivers and the company might be afraid and might decide that they will slow down. So, we need more security on those roads and it is not easy to get it."

Berthiaume says the World Food Program may have to resort to airdrops if road transport becomes impossible. But, she says, airdropping food is very expensive and planes are not able to carry the same large quantity of food that trucks can.

#### **EXAMPLES OF TYPES OF LISTENING**

- Listening to the news / weather forecast / sport reports / announcements etc. on the radio;
- Discussing work / current problems with family or colleagues;
- Making arrangements / exchanging news etc. with acquaintances;
- Making arrangements / exchanging news etc. over the telephone;
- Chatting at a party / other social gathering;
- Hearing announcements over the loudspeaker (at a railway station, for example, or airport);
- Receiving instructions on how to do something / get somewhere;
- Attending a lesson / seminar;
- Being interviewed / interviewing;
- Watching a film / theatre show / television program;
- Hearing a speech / lecture;
- Listening to recorded / broadcast songs;

- Attending a formal occasion (wedding / prize-giving / other ceremony);
- Getting professional advice (from a doctor, for example);
- Being tested orally in a subject of study.

(Penny Ur)

**Pre-Listening**

**Predict the topic**

- “What is happening in Darfur today is a scandal, it’s not a problem, it is a scandal.” (Tony Blair)
- **Listening to confirm expectations.** “The conflict ranging in Sudan’s Darfur region since 2003 has claimed over 200,000 lives. Sudan has broken repeated promises to rein in its militia allies in the region and Darfur rebel groups have shown little interest in negotiating a peace agreement. Meanwhile, the suffering of Darfur’s people continues. Darfur where the continued spectacle of men and women and children driven from their homes by murder, rape, and burning of their villages makes a mockery of our claim as an international community to shield people from the worst abuses.” (Kofi Annan)

**Examples of words and their definitions for the Pre-teach vocabulary activity**

1. Militia	a) A military force that is not part of a regular army and is subject to call for service in an emergency
2. To hamper	b) To prevent the free movement, action, or progress of
3. Banditry	c) The practice of plundering in gangs
4. To abduct	d) To carry off by force; kidnap.
5. Roadblock	e) A barricade or obstruction across a road set up to prevent the escape or passage, as of a fugitive or enemy troops
6. To prevail	f) To be greater in strength or influence; triumph; win out
7. To resort	g) The act of turning to for aid or relief; recourse
8. Airdrops	h) A delivery, as of supplies or troops, by parachute from aircraft

**Questions for While-listening activities**

a) Listening for general information

- Which is the main impediment in distributing food to homeless people in Darfur?
- Which program is involved in distributing food in Darfur?
- Which is the main means of transportation used to distribute food?
- Why is the means of transportation currently used preferable to airdrops?

b) Listening for details

- Which are some other impediments that threaten the humanitarian aid in Darfur?
- What human/materiel losses has banditry caused according to Christiane Berthiaume?
- How much food is needed in order to maintain the program?
- What is the distance the trucks have to traverse and in which conditions?
- Which period of the year is considered crucial by the WFP in their food distribution efforts?

**Post Listening Values clarification**

**Jan Egeland** (U.N. Chief of Humanitarian Affairs, November 22, 2006)

*I was there in 2004, when there were one million people in need. I was there again in 2005, when there were two million people in need. On my third visit this spring, there were three million people in need. And now there are four million in desperate need of humanitarian assistance. It’s been one thousand days of fear; it’s been one thousand nights of fear now, since it’s started in northern Darfur. Maybe the best way of explaining to those who have power to influence here, would be to assemble everybody for negotiations in one of the camps. So, they should bring their family, they should bring their wives, and they should bring their children. And then they would see how it is. How it is to have sleepless nights in fear, to have militias or armed men of any group including bandits infiltrate the camp, and kill, and abuse, and rape. I think that would be a major incentive for progress.*

**Session review.** Steps in planning a listening session:

**Listening sessions usually have 3 main phases:**

- Pre-listening
- Listening
- Follow-up

Possible **types of activities** during the While-listening phase:

- Listening for the main ideas
- Listening for details
- Recognizing comparison
- Listening with the transcript
- Recognizing speaker’s intensions
- Listening and note taking
- Recognizing contrast
- Listening for specific vocabulary
- Mini-dictation / dictation
- Listening for the most important theme
- Listening for the outline of a story
- Jigsaw listening

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