

## Desingning A Course Around Biography-Based Units

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### Abstract

This is article given about biographical context to be an effective and engaging focus for a English course. A biography enables students to learn a language for speaking or writing about life, specific vocabulary related to certain professions, and topics and topics related to their experience and culture.

**Keywords:** design, courses, English language, contexts, Biography, grammar, skills.

**Introduction:** Entire courses have been successfully designed around biographies. In 1999, our university began offering intensive, one-month, noncredit courses for English language study. After initial experimentation with various themes, we decided to develop each course around a series of four week-long biography-based-units. Biographies gave students rich language to talk or write about life, specific vocabulary related to certain professions, and themes and topics related to their experiences and cultures. They also provided authentic contexts for review and recycling of important vocabulary in each successive week. We chose biography subjects who were famous in their field-so that it was easy to find information-but whose life stories were not very familiar to our students-so the students were learning new information no matter what their background, level, or prior education had been.

**Literature review.** Some of the most successful units were created around the lives of Frank Lloyd Wright (architect), Wilma Rudolph (athlete), Estee Lauder (businessperson), and Milton Hershey (confectioner and philanthropist) [1,2,3,4].

We wrote two biographies for each person, aiming one at the high-beginner/low-intermediate level and the other and intermediate and above. We also found, adapted, and wrote materials that would work with a range of proficiency levels. Where possibly, we tried to draw comparisons or make connections with previously studied themes and topics. The students were engaged, and their language skills progressed. They also gave positive feedback about the course materials. We became convinced of the beauty of biographies [4,5,6,7].

Other teachers have also found biographical content to be an effective and engaging focus for a course. Wyle (2009) describe a course entitled Exploring the English-Speaking World through the Biography, developed for a university English class in Japan. The rationale for the course is to use methods and materials different from the typical grammar-and-four-skills instruction used in most English classes while acquainting students with a variety of international figures. Wolf (1994) describes revamping a world civilization course for a freshman university class in the United States by using biographies that he wrote. For each unit, he compares two figures whose stories depict the ideas and sociopolitical issues of a certain historical period. His goals were to make the course more engaging and relevant to the students while leading them to use higher-order thinking skills [8,9,10,11].

**Research Methodology.** People are the center of every field-from astronomy to zoology-and from every place-from Andorra to Zanzibar. Thus, content learning in nearly any subject can be introduced through biographies. Similarly, biographies provide an effective means to introduce both local and global themes in an English course [12,13,14,15].

### **Finding biographies and biography-based materials**

Teachers who want to use biographical texts will find a wide range of resources, from free online materials to photocopiable teacher handbooks and collections of biographies available from reputable publishers including Cambridge, MacMillan, Oxford, Penguin, and Pro Lingua Associates. Teachers might also consider using quality books originally written for young or adolescent English speakers (Malu 2013). The moderate length texts, simple narratives, concrete language, and compelling stories (Cho and Krashen 1994) found in such literature can serve as a bridge to more complex academic language for high school and adult EFL readers (Temple, Martinez, and Yokota 2011). Online biography collections provide useful background reading for teachers, inspiration for materials developers, and pleasure or self-study reading for individual learners. Examples are listed here, along with brief annotations based on our experience [16,17,18].

- **Biography.com** at <http://www.biography.com/> is affiliated with a television network, so it is commercialized. Nevertheless, there are dozens of biographies in print and mini-video format about famous (in famous) people throughout famous the ages and around the world. Print biographies are illustrated and include both a synopsis and a full text. They are not written with language learners in mind, but they could be used as a teacher resource or for self-study by advanced students. The mini videos are action-packed and engaging, an perfect for introducing a subject of study or for closing class [19,20].
- **Biography online** at <http://www.biographyonline.net/> was created by Tejvan Pettinger, a developer of educational websites in the United Kingdom. His biography collection athletes, entrepreneurs, and scientist who are (ore have been) influential, inspirational, or successful despite personal hardship. While not designed specifically for language learners, these biographies can be used to challenge intermediate-level leaners, extend learning in students who have some background knowledge about certain career or personality, and give teachers ideas about interesting biographical subjects [21].
- **Infoplease** at <http://www.infoplease.com/people.html> is an online encyclopedia. Its biography page contains links to over 30,000 entries categorized by occupation. This resource is useful for teachers or students who want to browse for names in a particular category. However, the entries themselves are probably too difficult for most EFL classroom use [22,23].
- **Stories About people** at <http://www.manythings.org/voa/people/> is a collection of over 250 biographies and accompanying MP3 files from the Voice of America series by the same name. Stories are about two pages or 15 minutes in length [24,25].

**Analysis and results.** The beauty of biographical texts is that they can serve as stand-alone lessons or provide the starting block for a thematically focused unit. They can also become the core of an entire course. At the outset of this article, we gave three reasons for using biographical texts in English classes: their universal, story-like appeal; their transparent organization; and their capacity for review. Teachers who use biographies in any or all of these three ways will discover that biographies are also ideal for differentiating instruction in multilevel language classes because biographical passages for the same subject are readily available on various levels.

**Conclusion/Recommendations.** They foster both language-focused learning and fluency development. They lend themselves to integrated-skills practice with authentic or authentic-like texts. Finally, they provide repeated opportunities for noticing and reviewing target-language features in subsequent biography-based lessons. Biographies have all these benefits-and they provide pleasurable reading about people who are interesting and often inspiring to students and teachers alike.

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