

# ELT RESOURCES REVIEW

## Local news teaches students about their new language and their new home

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*Summary: This article describes a regional OER website that grew out of one teacher's desire to find additional uses for the news stories he created for his ESOL classes at a publicly-funded community college. This small project is now a statewide resource that generates multi-level, multi-modal local news stories (including self-correcting H5P exercises) to help students practice English while learning about Oregon.*

*Keywords: OER (open educational resources); news stories; H5P, website, Oregon*

In the fields of ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) and ABE (Adult Basic Education), many instructors, myself included, use news stories and current events as content for teaching reading. We are fortunate that there are multiple educational websites—some even free—with reliable material about global happenings, such as [Breaking News English](#), [News in Levels](#), [BBC Learning English](#), and [VOA News](#). I use these sites often because they have interesting stories and a variety of activities aligned to multiple levels of learning. What has been consistently missing from them, however, is a stream of local news, something my students, many of whom have only recently arrived to Oregon as immigrants or refugees, want and need in order to learn about their new home and be informed residents and citizens.

In an attempt to fill this gap, I began to invest an hour or two each week creating new lessons around local news stories. I chose stories that I thought would motivate my students to read as well as help them to understand important topics in

the news. I collected and condensed information, graded text, and created exercises to practice skills such as vocabulary, grammar, and identification of main ideas and supporting details. Yet as soon as class was over, the activity was, as is said, “old news.” After all that work, it seemed a shame to see these materials dismissed so quickly.

So in 2018, instead of relegating the stories to the archives folder of my Google Drive, I used them to launch [ESOL News Oregon](#), a source of local news geared for adult English language learners. ESOL News Oregon is now a growing site that offers three new articles each week summarizing news from around the state. Posts have ranged from summaries of shifting COVID policies and complicated ballot measures, to human interest stories like the giant pumpkin regatta in Tualatin and the rescue of a man from the summit of Mt. Hood. Stories are labeled with word count and [Lexile level](#) (a measure of difficulty), and grouped into beginner, intermediate, or advanced levels. There is one story for each level each week that classes are in session, and each story includes a related image or video, a set of online self-correcting exercises created using [H5P](#) technology, and citations of information sources. Since ESOL News Oregon is a simple Google site hosted by Portland Community College, its URL is long, but a short link of [tinyurl.com/esolnewsoregon](https://tinyurl.com/esolnewsoregon) allows teachers and students quick and easy access. Now, some four years later, this all-volunteer labor-of-love has become a growing collection of more than 500 stories, including many with audio narration by my PCC colleagues Davida Jordan, Eric Dodson, and others. The addition of media, including occasional YouTube clips, extends the use of these stories to listening and speaking classes as well.

Currently, the site receives about 300 views each week while classes are in session. Students welcome the stories about real people and current events that often feature landmarks they recognize, such as the Pacific Coast, downtown Portland, or the Columbia Gorge. For learners, the content is equally as important as developing comprehension and fluency skills;



## The publication process

While ESOL News Oregon itself may have limited use for students in Washington, the project can serve as a model for others who wish to localize their instruction with news from their region. The publication process is relatively straightforward and easily replicable using nearly any web publishing platform. For me, it starts with maintaining a “tickler file” of stories that I believe will motivate my students to read and talk. I check not only traditional news outlets, such as Oregon Public Broadcasting, but also various blogs, websites, and newsrooms of local government, universities, and nonprofit organizations. Then, once a week while classes are in session, I choose three topics, one for each level. While some topics can be difficult to discuss with limited vocabulary, it is surprising what can be communicated at a basic Lexile level of 300L-400L.

After selecting the topics, I write the stories, usually drawing on a variety of sources of information. I document these sources with citations created using the free [MyBib.com](#). I use the Lexile Analyzer as well as a variety of free readability formulas—along with my own experience—to edit and grade the text. I then search sites like Pexels, Pixabay, and Google Image Search to find openly licensed images to accompany the stories. For more specific stories, I sometimes request images from the subjects of the story. YouTube videos can be helpful, too, and can usually be embedded into OER materials without copyright concerns.

To prepare the accompanying self-correcting exercises, I start by using LexTutor to analyze the vocabulary of the story, focusing on academic word list terms and adding any specific terminology necessary to understand the story. Then I prepare a standard set of questions about the main idea and supporting details, and some sort of extension task, such as spelling, error correction, grammar identification, and ordering of events. I build these activities using the H5P service provided by my institution and then embed them in the web page. Like the text, the H5P exercises are also OER that anyone else can download, reuse, and adapt. They are self-correcting and provide students with immediate feedback. Instructors can even embed these H5P activities in their own learning management system, such as D2L/Brightspace, and have the results feed their gradebook if they wish.

Finally, a colleague provides audio narration for one of the stories each week, which I then embed using another H5P tool. All of these pieces are combined on a web page and published weekly. As a news story cycles off the home page, it remains in the site’s searchable archive.

as immigrants and refugees, they naturally want to know more about Oregon in order to better understand and participate in their community.

Instructors value the instant feedback of the online exercises as well as the site’s search function that can help to quickly identify articles from the archives to support a particular classroom topic. For example, when a unit of my reading textbook focused on pets, a search of the news archives provided me with several options, including [a story about a man in Portland who turns Hollywood movies into YouTube cat videos](#). In another reading class, my PCC colleague Davida Jordan gave her intermediate students free rein to choose articles from the archives and report them in small group discussions. Diedre Cain, another ESOL instructor at PCC, wrote on the [Open Oregon website](#), “I used your ESOL News Oregon site often in my PCC ESOL Reading 6 class this term, and my students loved it! More than half of the students reported that they are continuing to read articles on the site regularly even though I am no longer assigning homework on it.” Furthermore, both students and instructors appreciate that the site’s intentionally simple design, which works well on both desktops and mobile devices, is free with no distracting advertising or complicated registration.

Almost all of the site is an open educational resource (OER) with a [Creative Commons license](#). In other words, anyone can utilize the site for any of the [five Rs of OER](#): retain, reuse, revise, remix, and redistribute. While proponents of OER often focus on the financial savings to students, this control over content is another significant advantage. Unlike commercial sources, OER can be easily tailored to local curriculum and standards, student interests, and even teaching styles. Instructors are free to share the site with their students as-is, or they can edit or remix elements as they wish. This open format gives educators greater flexibility to meet the needs of their respective students and their institutions.

While I personally enjoy the pedagogical challenge of finding more and better ways to promote civic engagement while teaching my students to read in English, perhaps the greater reward is sharing these materials so that other instructors, too, can contextualize their students’ learning and promote critical thinking—essential skills for reading, whether it’s a story about a rent strike in Portland or too many bunny rabbits in Cannon Beach.

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