

## **MasterChef Teacher: Assembling a Fresh Menu of Timely Lessons Fast**

by [\*Natalia de Cuba Romero\*](#)

After 10 years of teaching intensive English for 20 hours a week over a 15-week semester with the same class (translation: 300 hours of original lessons a semester), you might think our lessons would get stale. But the 24/7 news cycle brings fresh material every day. The problem is how to take breaking news from the radio or the Internet to the classroom quickly without breaking our backs.

As an upper level instructor in the Language Immersion Program at Nassau Community College since the program's inception in 2007, my colleagues and I have developed techniques to create fully integrated, multimedia lesson plans from what appears on the radio, Internet and television. We can turn this content around overnight and sometimes in the time between hearing it on the car radio and getting to class.

We call this process MasterChef Teacher. Like a television cooking show (see [MasterChef](#) on Wikipedia), the news provides us with a box of surprise ingredients. We work, often as a team, foraging for additional items, trimming the fat, chopping, simmering, and assembling the ingredients into a rich multimedia banquet, in a short time period. It requires being attentive to what's happening in the world and developing a cupboard of reliable go-to sources to supplement and garnish the menu. The payoff is highly engaging lessons that are full of language and that can often be repurposed and refreshed semester after semester.

### **The Pantry**

Say you are working on a unit on health. A MasterChef Teacher will turn on the evening news or pop over to [National Public Radio](#) to see what's shaking. Is there a short segment on sugary soft drinks or the latest fitness craze? Has a new superfood popped up or is there an outbreak of some dreadful disease? There is always something new in popular medicine.

Once you've found a topic, visit other reputable media organizations online. Many will layer the material for you: a radio piece or a news clip accompanied by an article ripe for adaptation. If you have colleagues who like to collaborate, shoot them a quick email with the material you plan to adapt. Promise to share and ask them to do the same.

### **Prep**

Now take a look at what you have. Determine your content and skill objectives: For example, in a story on sugary drinks, do you want to focus on nutrition or on the legislative process that regulates food safety?

Once you've decided, copy and paste the article into an editable document and wield the butcher knife fearlessly. This is where you make the text work for your students by carving out hunks of unnecessary verbiage. Depending on their level, you may hack out paragraphs and even sections, or just trim the fat of complex sentences and clauses, or vocabulary that is too advanced.

Here's the basic menu plan for a lesson that will take 1–2 hours, depending on how much conversation you allow. (As an immersion instructor whose college-level ESL classes last from 3–5 hours, I am not pressed for time, but I have also done the listening in class and sent the reading/writing home with the students or continue it the following day. If you are collaborating with colleagues, you may have enough material for several days.)

## Menu Template

- *Appetizer*: 5 prereading/listening questions for conversation/Find Someone
- *Main Course*
  - 5–10 new vocabulary words
  - 5 comprehension questions
  - 5 discussion questions (or repeat of the prereading questions)
- *Dessert*: 1 writing follow-up

## Now You're Cooking

Go to your target vocabulary for the unit and start making your worksheet.

We put a vocabulary list at the top of the page for students to look up in their dictionaries or try to determine meaning from prior knowledge or context. We generally limit new vocabulary to 10 words in any given reading or listening, but we do take the opportunity to reinforce academic words that pop up repeatedly in all content areas (e.g., *challenges*, *obstacles*, *development*, *increase*, *decrease*, *vary*).

Standardize your code for different types of vocabulary. For example, I use **bold** for new words in the text, underlining for words I am reinforcing, and *italics* followed by *italicized synonyms* (in parentheses) for any words I want students to be exposed to without pausing for a dictionary search.

The next step is to number paragraphs. Because I have found that most word-processing programs only number lines, and that can be distracting, I simply number the paragraphs on the original before photocopying. This helps direct the class to the correct spot when necessary.

We build comprehension questions based on the text or the listening or both, giving different types of learners layers to build upon as well as helping to build awareness. We start with a broad context and then get more specific.

- A. Main ideas: What is the subject? What are the most important nuggets of information?
- B. Yes/No questions: details, supporting information
- C. Specific words/phrases/quotes: implied meanings

Now that you have a worksheet and both reading and listening material (the main course), you are ready to put the rest of the menu together. (See a sample worksheet about the Electoral College.)

## Presentation

Make sure to let students know this lesson is based on real-life materials. We have found that students appreciate authentic material and try a little harder when we present it.

It is up to the MasterChef Teacher's discretion whether to serve up the listening or the reading first, but the starters are important to wake up student appetites.

### Starters

The most effortless appetizers are a quick "Find Someone" related to the topic (question-making practice) or a few conversation questions on the board for small group work. For example:

- How many sugary drinks should a person have in a day? A week?
- What kinds of beverages do people like in your country?
- What do you think the effects of sugary drinks are on the body?
- Should the government be allowed to decide how big servings of foods and drinks should be?

The appetizer will give you a little time to queue up your technology.

### Main Course

The main course is composed of the worksheet, accompanied by reading and listening. Review answers with students.

### Dessert

Use one of your conversation questions as a final short writing assignment, or have them write a personal response (free-writing) as a prelude to a longer writing piece.

Online quizzes are pretty irresistible; find reputable ones on your topic like this [Kids Health Quizzes](#) page from nonprofit pediatric group Nemours to help with vocabulary and concepts. You can do them as a class if you have a projector and Internet access or invite students to do them on their tablets or phones at home (I know I am assuming a lot of technology access here. There are many printables also available online for teachers, and magazines are a good source for quizzes on a variety of high-interest topics.).

With any luck, your colleagues will also be adding to the meal. You should note that the first few times you follow this template, it might go slowly. You will get faster as you gauge student reactions and your own needs.

## Resources

MasterChef Teachers are aware of what's going on in the world. They keep an eye on the news. Then they hop over to their favorite media outlets to shop for more goodies.

Here are some of my favorites:

- [CNN.com Student News](#): A daily 10-minute news digest with great background explanations and lively graphics and sound. Also look for interesting archived material under [Black in America](#), and [Latino in America](#).
- [NBCnews.com](#): The Nightly News offers terrific human interest stories in their [Inspiring America](#) segments
- [NPR.org](#): A wide range of radio programs almost invariably accompanied by related, short articles or transcripts
- [NYTimes.com](#): Breaking news, often with video accompaniment as well as [Times Topics](#)
- [TED.com](#): Thought-provoking lectures on an incredible range of topics. Check out [TEDed](#), too, for “lessons worth sharing.”
- [TheMoth.org](#): Stories told live by the people who live them ([Man and Beast](#) by Alan Rabinowitz is especially moving and relevant to ELLs). They have a [new section especially for educators](#).

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