

Learning with The Irrawaddy, No. 25

To accompany the **December 2007** issue of The Irrawaddy magazine.

Selected article: *Deceptively Calm*, page 39.

TEACHER'S NOTES

Here is the twenty fifth issue of 'Learning with the Irrawaddy', a monthly educational supplement to the Irrawaddy Magazine. It is designed for reading/writing, English or social studies classes in Post-10 schools and adult education classes on the Burma border. With each issue of Irrawaddy magazine, we select one article and design some learning activities for it. The language level in this month's article is slightly easier than usual.

NOTE: YOU DO NOT HAVE TO DO ALL OF THE ACTIVITIES LISTED IN THIS MONTH'S ISSUE. YOU CAN CHOOSE WHICH ACTIVITIES ARE MOST APPROPRIATE DEPENDING ON HOW MUCH TIME YOU HAVE, AND THE LEVEL OF ABILITY OF YOUR LEARNERS.

In this issue we have included:

- ★ this teacher's guide
- ★ some copies of the Irrawaddy magazine
- ★ a class set of photocopies of the article
- ★ a class set of worksheets.

You can teach this to learners with good pre-intermediate English. The timings for each activity are suggestions only. They can be changed depending on the needs of your learners.

A. Activities before reading

Activity 1 Discussion

Write the words 'Deceptively Calm' on the board. Ask learners whether they know the meaning of the two words. Focus particularly on 'deceptively'. What do learners know about the events of September 2007? Why would the 'calm' on the streets of Rangoon be 'deceptive'?

Deceptively is an adverb that means 'misleading'. In this context it is that the situation is not really as it seems. Although the streets of Rangoon seem calm, there are many emotions (particularly anger, resentment, fear, etc.) underneath the surface.

Ask learners what they think the article might be about.

Activity 2 **Brainstorm**

Put learners into groups of 3-5 and ask them to write down words to describe how they think the people of Burma are feeling at the moment. Give them about 5 minutes. Then elicit one idea from each group in turn, write it on the board, and check that the rest of the class understands what the word means.

B. Activities during reading

Activity 3 **Match the vocabulary**

a) Give learners about 5-10 minutes to read the article and underline any words that they don't understand.

b) Give learners 5-10 minutes to complete the matching exercise. Then elicit one answer from a different learner in turn and check agreement with the rest of the class. Here are the answers:

- | | |
|-------------------|---|
| 1. defiance | c. resistance, refusal to obey |
| 2. trishaws | h. three-wheeled bicycle taxi |
| 3. skeptical | k. doubting, disbelieving |
| 4. incantation | m. religious song or chant |
| 5. brutal | b. violent, aggressive |
| 6. self-assured | i. self-confident |
| 7. hardships | j. difficulties, suffering |
| 8. witnessed | d. saw |
| 9. solidarity | l. unity, working together |
| 10. initiatives | g. ideas, plans |
| 11. recollections | f. memories |
| 12. crackdown | e. strong action taken by authorities to stop something |
| 13. naive | a. lacking wisdom and good judgment |

Activity 4 **Gap-fill**

Give learners 10-15 minutes to complete the exercise on their own. Then put them into pairs and ask them to compare answers. Do they agree? Finally, elicit one answer from a different learner in turn and check agreement with the rest of the class. Here are the answers to the gap-fill exercise.

1. There was much solidarity among the protesters. They worked together.
2. There was a lot of defiance among the people. They refused to obey the government's orders.
3. I watch the government TV station but I am skeptical about what they say. I don't really believe it.
4. There was a crackdown on drugs by the police last month. They arrested many people.
5. Treatment of political prisoners in Burma is brutal. They are often tortured.
6. I was there. I witnessed the soldiers attacking the monks.
7. Refugees have a difficult life. They face many hardships.
8. My grandmother often talks about her childhood. She has so many recollections.
9. I like to spend time in the temple. The sound of incantation makes me feel calm.

10. My friend thinks that the military regime really wants to bring democracy to Burma. He is *naive*. He doesn't understand the situation well.
11. The students are very active. They have many *initiatives* that they want to make happen.
12. If there were more *trishaws* and fewer cars the city would be less polluted.
13. He doesn't often doubt himself. He is very *self-assured*.

Activity 5 Phrases in context


Put learners into pairs and give them 10 minutes or so to complete the exercise. When they have finished, put the pairs into groups of four and give them a few minutes to compare answers. Do they agree? Finally, elicit one answer from a different learner in turn and check agreement with the rest of the class. Here are the answers to the exercise:


1. *...witnessed the September demonstrations and brutal crackdown at firsthand.* (para. 2)
- c. with their own eyes.
2. *Their recollections tumble out.* (para 2)
- b. They start talking about many memories all at once.
3. *...an older monk had to raise the volume of his incantation to drown him out...* (para. 9)
- a. so that he could not hear him
4. *...two men recounted how they took to the streets...* (para. 10)
- c. went out into the streets
5. *... the realities and hardships of just scraping together an existence...* (para. 14)
- c. just managing to survive


Activity 7 True or False


Give learners 5-10 minutes to correct the statements below on their own. They are ALL false. Then, elicit one answer from a different learner in turn and check agreement with the rest of the class


Here are the correct statements

1.  If we give up now it will be 50 years before we get another chance.

2. 

The violence against the monks by the armed forces was a major sin, according to Buddhist principles. There is no forgiveness.
3. 

For the first time in our life we felt a sense of solidarity with the Buddhist Burmese.
4. 

My classmates never believed that 1988 really happened. Now they have seen the brutality of the military with their own eyes, and they want to do something.
5. 

The harvest doesn't look too good this year, so that is my main worry.

Activity 8 Comprehension

Give learners about 20 minutes to complete the questions below. These are some suggested answers. The learners may use slightly different vocabulary.

1. Why does the writer in Rangoon say that, 'Anything can happen, any time?'

Answer: Anything can happen, at any time, because the people are angry.

2. How does the group in Rangoon describe the way in which soldiers beat people on the heads?

Answer: They say that the soldiers 'beat skulls as if they were crushing ice in a bag.'

3. Why does the author of the article say that words are so important for many Burmese?

Answer: The author says that words are so important because they are all they have these days to battle the regime.

4. What do you think the phrase 'Fear is a habit' means?

Suggested answer: 'Fear is a habit' means that fear can become something that controls you. It is something that you feel very often, or all the time.

5. Why does the young woman in the rice paddy say that she doesn't know what to believe because she only watches government TV?

Suggested answer: She says this because she doesn't believe that the information presented on government TV is totally accurate, fair, or balanced. She thinks that it is biased, so she doesn't think she can trust what she watches.

6. Why does the writer think that the generals have left Rangoon?

Answer: The writer thinks that the generals have left Rangoon because they are too afraid of their own people to live there.

7. Why does the writer in Rangoon compare the regime to a woman with cancer?

Suggested answer: The writer is saying that the military regime is trying to ignore that there is a problem. It is trying to make it seem as though everything is fine to their own people and the outside world. Like the woman with cancer, although it refuses to admit that there are serious problems in the country, it will one day have to face these problems, and the problems will possibly destroy it.

C. Activities after reading

Activity 9 Interviews

Put the learners into pairs. Give them 5 minutes to make a list of all the interviewees that they can identify in the article, and their location. Here is a list:

1. A local male writer in Rangoon
2. A male activist in Mandalay
3. A monk in Mandalay
4. A young monk in Arakan State
5. Two Muslim men in Arakan State
6. A young female student in Rangoon
7. A businessman of Chinese origin in Rangoon
8. A young woman working in the rice paddies near Rangoon

Ask learners why the author of the article spoke to these people. Elicit ideas from learners and check to see if the class agrees.

Suggested answer:

The author wanted to speak to as many different people as possible in as many different places as possible to get a balanced view of how ordinary people in Burma feel about the current situation. Therefore she spoke to people of different of different religions, ethnicities, jobs, gender, locations, ages, etc.

Activity 10 Feelings

Put learners into groups of 3-5. Give them 5-10 minutes to identify the different feelings/emotions that the interviewees express in the text. Elicit one idea from each group and write their suggestions on the board.

Here are some suggestions if learners don't have many ideas:

Angry, disgusted, shocked, resentful, fearful, hopeful, depressed, defiant, uncertain, desperate, skeptical, vengeful, solidary (having solidarity).

Optional activity: When you have enough suggestions, cut out slips of paper and write one of the feelings on each of them. Fold up the pieces of paper and place them in a container. Then rub out the emotions from the board. Divide the class into two teams, A and B. Ask one learner from team A to come up to the front and select one of the pieces of paper and read the word without showing the rest of the class. This learner then has to mime (act without using words) the word to his team (A) for 30 seconds. During this time ONLY Team A is allowed to guess what the word is. Team B is NOT ALLOWED to speak. If Team A guesses the correct word within the 30 seconds they get one point. If Team A do not guess correctly after 30 seconds, then Team B have ONE chance to guess. They have 30 seconds to discuss and then must give you only ONE answer. If the answer is correct they get one point. Then one person from Team B comes up to the front and chooses another piece of paper, and mimes it to Team B. Now Team B has 30 seconds to try and guess the correct answer. If they can't Team A has one chance to guess. Repeat this process until all the word in the container have been used.

Activity 11 Poster

The time that you give learners for this is flexible. Depending on how much time you have. It might be a good homework exercise.

Put learners into pairs and ask them to design a poster illustrating one or more important things in the article. If you can, give each pair a large piece of paper to draw their poster, and some pens. If you don't have large pieces of paper, then learners can stick together smaller pieces. They can also use their own pens and pencils if necessary. They should use mainly pictures, but they can use some words if they want.

When they have finished, ask each pair to present their poster to the class and give a short presentation about it (2 minutes or less).

Activity 12 Discussion

Put learners into groups of 3-5 and ask them to discuss these questions for 5-10 minutes and write down their ideas. Then, elicit one idea in turn from each group and discuss with the rest of the class.

'Deceptively Calm'

by Kim Williams

December 1, 2007

But anger surfaces when people recall the September crackdown

The glimmering pagoda seems to attract people like a large golden magnet. Trishaws are slowly pedalled through the darkness as if the passing of time does not exist. "It seems so calm," says one of the group, a local writer. "Deceptively calm. People are so angry. Anything can happen, any time."



Everyone in the small group, seated at a table in downtown Rangoon, has witnessed the September demonstrations and the brutal crackdown at firsthand. Their recollections tumble out.

"They beat skulls as if they were crushing ice in a bag...Never in the history of our country have the pagodas been so empty...We have no words to describe this...If we give up now it will be 50 years before we get another chance...It is the beginning of the end."

Talking to foreigners has always been an act of defiance in Burma. And for many Burmese, words are all they have these days to battle the regime. So they speak, as soon as they sense a chance—about what they saw, what they feel and think, and about what they want to do.

In Mandalay, a self-assured activist frowned when asked if the protests were over. "If we were so naive to think that we could bring about change at this one time we would deserve rulers like these," he said.

He gave his own version of Aung San Suu Kyi's famous words "Fear is a habit"—saying, "We should not let fear poison us, because then we can't do anything."

A monk sitting next to him agreed and was keen to point out that his pagoda was continuing the religious boycott against the military. "The violence against the monks by the armed forces was a major sin, according to the Buddhist principles. There is no forgiveness for it."

In a remote town in Arakan State, a young monk who participated in the demonstrations struggled to control his anger, and the words just spilled out. "The future life of the military will be very bad. They will not go to hell, but to a place below there."

His voice became so loud that an older monk had to raise the volume of his incantation to drown him out as he prayed with a visiting family of pilgrims.

In a nearby Muslim quarter, two men recounted how they took to the streets in support of demonstrating

monks. “For the first time in our life we felt a sense of solidarity with the Buddhist Burmese,” said one.

Back in Rangoon, a young female student said: “My classmates never believed that 1988 really happened. Now they have seen the brutality of the military with their own eyes, and they want to do something.”

In a modern sports center, a businessman of Chinese origin said after watching BBC coverage of the demonstrations “this government is very cruel,” and then walked rapidly away as if he feared being overheard.

Many Burmese with whom I talked said they want to give initiatives for political change a chance, but after years of disappointments they are skeptical.

The realities and hardships of just scraping together an existence were uppermost in many people’s minds. “I live from day to day,” said one.

“The harvest doesn’t look too good this year, so that is my main worry,” said a young woman working in a rice paddy in the countryside near Rangoon.

Asked about the protests in Rangoon, she shrugged: “I only watch government TV. How do I know what to believe?”

As night falls in Rangoon, the writer in our group surveys the quiet streets where only weeks ago thousands defied the regime. “Our city is so beautiful. And yet the generals are too afraid of their own people to live here.”

He laughs as if that thought is his revenge for what Rangoon has had to suffer. “The regime reminds me of a woman cancer patient. Every day she puts on makeup and puts flowers in her hair. She will never confess to her illness, but she will somehow have to deal with it.”

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