From the store to the classroom: teaching with shopping receipts

A simple shopping receipt can be a great authentic tool for an English class. This article describes a number of activities that make use of shopping receipts to practise reading, writing, and speaking skills, as well as some grammar concepts. Elena Shvidko

The modern world provides language teachers with plenty of excellent materials and resources that help them create lesson plans with a variety of engaging and motivating activities. Most teachers use language textbooks, teacher manuals, workbooks, and the internet on a daily basis. Without these valuable resources, the current generation of English teachers would most likely feel poorly equipped and even helpless. However, in this sea of resources, we may forget about the ‘old-school’ materials such as flyers, brochures, newspapers, which are easily accessible and often free of charge.

One day, on my way out from a grocery store, I was looking through my receipt checking the prices and the items I just bought. Suddenly it hit me: this receipt is a perfect teaching tool for my class! What happened after that is obvious: I rushed to my apartment and jotted down the ideas that were already running through my mind.

In what follows, I would like to share some of these ideas. I organised them by proficiency levels using the ‘classic’ nominations of the levels, ie. beginning, intermediate, and advanced. I hope that the activities described here will help you generate more ideas for your own class.

Materials you need: Shopping receipts
(It’s up to you whether you make a photocopy of the same receipt for all of your students or you bring several different receipts. In fact, the nature and the purpose of your activity should be your best advisors.)

Beginning level

1. Practising shopping vocabulary

Use the receipt as an authentic tool to pre-teach shopping vocabulary. Ask the students to name the items on the receipt that they are familiar with, after which you can go over the list and explain those items that they don’t understand. This activity can also be a great opportunity to practise spelling and pronunciation. You can also use it as a vocabulary-building activity by presenting other vocabulary items from the same thematic group as the ones on the receipt.

2. Practising past tense of verbs

Activity A. Give the students a list of verbs related to the shopping process (eg., choose, buy, pay). Using these verbs in the past tense form, the students will have to tell their partner a short story about ‘how they bought’ the items on the receipt. For example, ‘Yesterday, I went to a grocery store. I had to buy something for my party. I needed – _________ and _________, I chose very cheap _________, it was only _________, I bought _________ and I only paid _________.’ This activity is a great exercise for practising both the past tense of verbs and the new shopping vocabulary.

Activity B: With a partner or in small groups, the students ask each other questions: ‘Why did you buy this item?’, ‘How much did you pay for it?’, ‘Was it on sale?’ etc. This activity will also give students a chance to practise asking information questions in the past tense.

3. Practising scanning

For this activity, you need to prepare copies of the same receipt corresponding to the number of the students in your class.

Give a copy of the receipt to each student. Then tell the students that you will ask them to find and mark several items on their receipt. Ask them to stay focused because you will move fast. Here are some examples of the instructions you can give to your students.

- Circle all items that cost less than $2.
- Underline the item that costs more than $4.
- Cross out all items that are uncountable.
In order to complete these tasks, the students have to quickly scan for the items they are asked to find.

**Note:** If you have a small class, you can prepare several sets of coloured pencils and use them for this activity.

### 4. Practising measures

For this activity, you need to prepare copies of the same receipt corresponding to the number of the students in your class. If you want your students to practise a variety of items (such as juice, milk, bread, cereal, toilet paper, fish, tuna, eggs, soap, cabbage, raspberry jam, soda) and measures, you probably need to do some shopping to make a nice receipt.

Give a copy of the receipt to each student. On the board, write the measures that the students will practise for this activity. The examples are: a pound, a loaf, a can, a jar, a tube, a box, a bottle, a bag, a carton, a roll, a bar, etc.

The students will sit/stand in a circle. Each student has to create a sentence using the item from the receipt and match it with one of the measure items from the board. However, before saying their sentence, the students will have to repeat the statements that were made by the previous students.

**Example:** The first student makes a statement: I bought a pound of apples. The person next to the first one continues: I bought a pound of apples and a loaf of bread. Then the next student says: I bought a pound of apples, a loaf of bread, and two cans of soda. And so on. You can also have students pass a ball (or another object) as they speak.

### Intermediate level

#### 1. Practising describing similarities and differences

For this activity, you will need to prepare three receipts with the different payment types: cash, credit card, debit card.

Divide the students into groups of three and give each group three receipts with the different types of payment. The students will discuss the advantages and disadvantages of these types of payment. This activity is a great opportunity to practise compare and contrast phrases for an essay. To facilitate, you can write these phrases on the board, so the students use them during the activity:

- Likewise
- Similarly
- Both … and …
- Neither … nor …
- Compared to
- Similar to
- As … as …
- In contrast
- Different from
- Unlike
- Whereas/While
- However
- On the other hand, etc.

The other student will respond to these questions according to the information on the receipt. The first student should also make comments, such as ‘Oh that’s a lot!’ or ‘That is very little!’ or ‘That’s too much!’ etc.

#### 2. Practising quantifiers

For this activity, you will need two copies of the same shopping receipt, and one of the receipts will have the quantities blocked out (use a black marker or a whiteout). Divide the students into pairs and give each pair both receipts. The student that has the receipt without the quantities will ask the following questions to the partner:

- How many apples did you buy?
- How much salt did you buy?
- Did you buy a lot of bread?
- Did you buy several cans of soda? etc.

Divide the students into small groups. For this activity, you need to prepare copies of the same receipt without the quantities will ask both receipts. The student that has the receipt without the quantities will ask what the student bought. How much was it? Why did they buy it? And so on.

#### 3. Practising explaining

Expressing opinions might be challenging for some students, especially when given a difficult topic. By using shopping receipts, you can have the students practise explaining relatively easy concepts. For example, you can ask the students to guess the reason why the shopper (the person who owns the receipt) purchased the items on the receipt. Was it a necessity? Was it for fun? Is this receipt an indicator of the regular shopping routine? Or was it an exceptional case? As an extension to this activity, the students can make a list of things that they either enjoy or dislike shopping for and explain why.

You can also ask the students to evaluate the prices on the receipts. Are these items expensive? Cheap? Reasonable? Why? As an extension to this activity, you can divide the students into small groups and have them describe to each other the most expensive item they have ever bought. How much was it? Why did they buy it? And so on.

#### 4. Practising cohesion in writing

For this activity, you need to prepare several different receipts.

Divide the students into small groups. Give a receipt to each student in the group (all receipts should be different). Tell the students that as a group, they will create several shopping stories based on their receipts. At the beginning, each student will write the first sentence of the shopping story according to his/her receipt. Then the students pass the receipt and the paper with their sentence to the student on their left, who will write the next sentence making sure that both sentences are logically connected with each other. And so on.

In the end, each group will have the number of stories that corresponds to the number of students in the group. Have the students read the stories and analyse the connections and transitions between the sentences as well as the general flow of the story.
Notes:
This activity works best when the students sit in a circle. This activity can easily be adapted for the beginning level and used as a past tense exercise.

Advanced level

1. Writing a story/an essay
For this activity, you can either prepare copies of the same receipt corresponding to the number of students in your class or use different receipts. Ask the students to create a story based on the grocery items on their receipt. They can write a story from the perspective of the shopper (the person who bought the items) or from someone else’s perspective. They will need to create a background, a plot, and perhaps even other characters, etc. After the stories are written, ask the students to share them with the class.

2. Practising debating
Prepare the students for the debate by having them discuss as a class some of the advantages and disadvantages of buying with cash, credit cards, or debit cards. Then divide them into three teams and assign one type of payment to each team. Each team has to convince the others that their way of payment is the best and has more advantages over the other two.

3. Practising expressing or defending an opinion (oral discussion or writing)
The receipts can also be a good starting point for further discussions on related topics. For example, you can have the students discuss the following questions (in a group or as a class):

- Why do many people today choose the internet to purchase things?
- What are some advantages and disadvantages of shopping in a store and online shopping?
- Do you think it is a good idea to keep your sales receipts? Why or why not?
- Do you think it is dangerous to have a credit card? Why or why not?
- Do you agree that internet shopping is more cost-effective than shopping in stores? Why or why not?

4. Role plays (with different objectives)
The receipts can also help you come up with many different role play scenarios. Make your role play activity fit the goals and objectives of your class, as well as the specific needs of your students. Below is just one example of a role play situation that makes use of the grocery receipts.

I hope these activities can help you create more ideas for your class. So try them, adjust them as you see fit and remember: save your shopping receipts!

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