

Oil spill

Level

Pre-intermediate and above (equivalent to CEF level A2–B1 and above)

Comment

This lesson is about the oil spill in April 2010 in the Gulf of Mexico, off the US coast. Events are changing fast so if possible check the latest news before your lesson. If you anticipate that your students know little about the spill and particularly if your students are low-level, give an overview of what has happened at the start – you could make use of the graphics and videos (see *Related websites*) to help students before they read the text.

How to use the lesson

- 1 Write up the words *Oil disaster* and elicit from students anything they know about the recent spill: where it happened; why it is so worrying; who is responsible. At this stage elicit and clarify the oil-related words necessary to understand the text: *(oil) spill, (oil) rig, (oil) leak, barrel (of oil)*, using drawings or pictures and/or explanations. Write these words up on the board.
- 2 Elicit some ideas of how to contain or stop the oil, a task which links directly to exercise 2. Write any suggestions up in note form on the board, briefly highlighting words which might be useful for the reading.
- 3 Students complete exercise 1. Give them a time-limit (2–4 minutes depending on your students' level) to encourage them to read for gist.
- 4 Students complete exercise 2. Refer them to the Glossary before they start. Early finishers should work in pairs to think of possible problems with some of the methods used: booms require a calm sea; chemicals used to break up the oil are very toxic to wildlife too; planes only reach a small portion of the oil, etc. Discuss some of these as a whole class after feedback on exercise 2.
- 5 Lower-level students will need dictionaries for exercise 3. Be prepared to guide learners to the appropriate paragraphs as necessary.
- 6 Exercise 4 provides for an optional language focus on the present continuous for events happening around now, events which are temporary. Put the examples on the board. Focus on the meaning of the metaphor: *locals ... are holding their breath*.
- 7 Divide the class into 'Fishermen/fisherwomen' and 'US President' and give out role-cards. Let students sit in same role pairs/threes initially to help them develop ideas. Go round to ensure that the card/situation is clear. After a few minutes re-group students into mixed pairs for the role-play. Indicate how long you expect them to talk, eg 4–7 minutes. Monitor and note down any points of interest on content or language.
- 8 To balance the lesson you could include the following writing task, if appropriate. The text mentions that human hair is being used to fill the booms (this is because it is very absorbent – see *Related websites* for more information on this).

Writing task: Students imagine they are the mayor from one of the affected regions, eg Louisiana. Write a letter requesting hair donations from hair salons in states across America. In the letter they should outline the oil situation; explain why the hair is needed; the possible consequences of the catastrophe, etc.

Fisherman/fisherwoman

You have been fishing in this area for years. *(How long exactly? What kind of fish?)*
 Your family have fished here for generations. *(How many?)* You are very angry and upset at the situation. You cannot fish and your livelihood is in danger. *(What about the rest of the fishing community?)* You have a family to feed. *(How large is your family?)*

Explain to the President your situation, your worries about your job, family; your fear for your own/the region's future. *(What you would like him to do exactly?)*

US President

You are visiting a part of Alabama to see the damage of the oil spill with your own eyes. You are going to talk to a local fisherman/woman. Find out the details of his/her situation by asking questions. *(What kind of questions will you ask?)* Give sympathy *(How will you do this in English?)* and promise to help. *(What are you going to do?)*

Answer key

1

g, c, a, d, e, b (f is not used)

2

Not mentioned: 3, 5, 7, 10

3

- 1 turtles, whales, water birds, crab, shrimp, oysters
- 2 1,500 metres, 5,000 barrels of oil*, \$33,000,000, 25%
- 3 fish-oil factories, canning industries and sea-food restaurants
- 4 it is safer than fossil fuels; experts say that there are insufficient fossil fuels to meet global needs

* one barrel = approx 160 litres

4

The firm is spending about \$33,000,000 a day
 locals ... are holding their breath
 BP and the authorities are working hard to limit the danger
 BP are building a new oil rig

Related websites

- The following websites might be useful, for either yourself or your students.
- <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/8680460.stm> (recent strategies used)
 - <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/8651333.stm> (contains useful graphics and maps)
 - <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/magazine/7960144.stm> (Exxon Valdez disaster)
 - <http://www1.voanews.com/english/news/american-life/Both-Old-and-New-Cutting-Edge-Technology-Used-in-Oil-Spill---92970759.html>
 - <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/8672124.stm> (the use of hair)