

Lesson 9: As Olympics near, smog blankets Beijing

Media article

July 27, 2008
Anita Chang
ASSOCIATED PRESS



Note: This article has been modified from www.thestar.com

BEIJING – Thick pollution blanketed the Chinese capital on Sunday – one of the smoggiest days seen in the past month. But a city environmental official promises, the air quality will be good by the time the Beijing Olympics start in 12 days.

Even though city residents drove their own vehicles much less often, it was still difficult to see in parts of the city.

The city's badly polluted air is a serious problem for the athletes. Some athletes are training in South Korea and Japan to avoid breathing the Beijing air until the last possible minute.

The thick haze may be hanging around because the light wind is unable to blow away the fog and pollution. Pollution levels, however, are apparently 20 percent lower than one year ago in similar weather conditions.

Drastic efforts to control pollution include:

- taking half of Beijing's 3.3 million vehicles off the roads
- closing factories in the city
- stopping most construction in the capital



Around 300,000 heavily polluting vehicles, including old industrial trucks, have been banned since July 1, 2008. Even though Beijing has tried to reduce pollution, there is no guarantee that the sky will be blue during the games. No one can control the wind. If the wind blows, it may blow pollution from thousands of kilometres away to Beijing. If the wind does not blow, pollution will not be blown away and it could build up in the city.

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Student worksheet

Answer the following questions. Use the article about the air problems in Beijing to help guide your answers.



1	What were the athletes worried about during the 2008 Olympics in Beijing?	
2	Why was the wind so important during the Olympics?	
3	What actions did Beijing take to lower pollution levels by 20 percent?	
4	What do you think would happen in Beijing if the “drastic” actions to reduce air pollution were done all year round?	
5	Do you think the Beijing government would have been concerned about pollution if the city had not hosted the Olympics?	

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Teacher instructions

Introducing the activity

- Explain to students that during the summer of 2008, one of the concerns about the Beijing Olympics was that the air would be unsafe to breathe. Engage students in a discussion about the Olympics by asking them if they are familiar with the event and whether they watched and remember some of Beijing 2008 summer Olympics.
- Locate the city on a map and ask students if they know how many people live in Beijing and have them estimate the number of people who drive vehicles. (*Some estimates put the population at 15 million.*) Knowing that cars create air pollution, ask them what they think might happen if everyone (or even half of the people) in Beijing drove a car. (*There are more than 3 million vehicles on the Beijing roads - more vehicles than there are people in the City of Toronto! Vehicles were pulled off the road before the 2008 Olympics in an effort to control pollution, but there was still smog.*) Ask students why they think that the smog stuck around and what conditions might help remove it? (*Rain and wind moves it away from the city.*)

Ideas for teaching the article

- Read through the article together with the class, stopping to check for comprehension. After you have finished the article, ask students to recall what they learned about Beijing and its efforts to curb air pollution. Challenge them to think about whether the Beijing government will keep up their efforts to curb air pollution or if they will allow all normal activities to resume.

Ideas for teaching the worksheet

- This exercise is intended to test knowledge (question 1), comprehension (questions 2&3), creative thinking (question 4) and critical thinking (question 5). It can be done as a written assignment or an oral exercise. For the former, review the questions with the class in advance. For the latter, arrange students in groups and have them choose one to be the “journalist” (or interviewer) and one to be the recorder. The journalist will pretend that he/she is interviewing the others for a television news report. The recorder will jot down the responses in 15 second clips. Once completed, have the students present some of their responses. Put the clips together to form a short documentary reflecting the diversity of opinions in the classroom.