

Teaching Audio-Visual English to University Students: Factors to Consider

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Audio-visual English classes focus on teaching both aural and visual aspects of English as a foreign or second language. A discussion on factors to consider when choosing material for such classes and the rationale for showing full seasons of television series with both English audio and subtitles are presented. The series *LOST* is suggested as suitable material.

「オーディオ・ビジュアル英語」の授業では、オーラルとビジュアルという側面から英語を外国語または第二言語として教える。本稿では、こうした授業で扱う教材を選ぶ際に考慮すべき点や、英語音声に英語字幕を付けてテレビドラマ全体を授業で見せることについて議論していく。テレビドラマの*LOST*は適切な教材として提案されています。

Audio-Visual English

Unlike communication-based classes, which emphasize the production of English, audio-visual English classes focus on the receptive aspects of listening to and watching people using English to communicate. Although the focus is different, audio-visual classes can also be used to promote communicative competence. Video-based spoken English can expose learners to various discourse elements including slang, metaphors, and accents, which students will encounter when they talk to native English or English as a second or foreign language speakers. Thus, to help students improve their communication skills, when choosing materials for audio-visual classes it is important to consider authenticity, use of subtitles, suitability and the degree of frequency of which the language in the material is used by English speakers. The series *LOST* is suggested as suitable material with rationale for the choice.

Authenticity

Realia, such as newspapers, magazines, books, radio broadcasts and television shows are often considered to be authentic materials. Films, in particular, are assumed to be accurate representations of natural and authentic speech (Tatuski, 2006). To determine whether these materials are natural or authentic, both of these terms must be defined.

In a spoken context, a natural conversation is one that occurs spontaneously between two or more people who speak the same language for communication purposes (Al-Surmi, 2012). Authenticity, however, is more difficult to define. Porter and Roberts (1987) suggest that spoken language not intended for non-native learners nor produced for language-learning purposes is authentic. Nunan (1988) suggests that authentic sources are materials produced for purposes other than teaching language. This is echoed by Kaiser (2011), who states that materials can be considered authentic if they are written for native speakers, not language learners. Gilmore (2007) provides an excellent review of the various meanings associated with authenticity and comes to the conclusion that teachers can use any materials they feel will help their students become communicatively competent. With this aim, when using materials for audio-visual classes, speed, intonation, accents, and other discourse factors should be considered along with the type and frequency of language used.

Although scripted material is not natural and has different pragmatic features than spontaneous conversation (Gilmore, 2007; Tatsuki, 2006; Tatsuki & Kite, 2006), it does resemble naturally occurring speech and can be considered authentic under the above definitions. And unlike textbook English, which only provides specific language forms without presenting how or in what context the language can be used, it offers the listener clues through facial expression, intonation and gestures, which are important factors for communicative competence.

In this paper, authentic materials are defined as those that are created for native speakers and not for the purposes of language learning.

Subtitles

When teaching audio-visual material, if subtitles are used, a decision must be made on whether to use target-language (English) or native-language (Japanese) subtitles to accompany the English soundtrack. Multiple studies have shown that the use of target-language subtitles (Vanderplank, 1988)

or close captioning (Huang & Eskey, 2000; Koskinen, Wilson, Gambrell, & Jensema, 1991) accompanying the target-language audio, is beneficial for intermediate-level second language learners, especially those who are exposed to subtitles on a regular basis (Vanderplank, 1988). Japanese students often watch native-language television shows with Japanese subtitles. Thus, exposing them to material subtitled in a foreign language does not force them to undertake an overly unfamiliar task. However, for beginner or low-intermediate learners who may have low second-language reading speeds or a lack of vocabulary, new words and phrases should be introduced prior to viewing to ensure that these students can follow the story (Vanderplank, 2010). The use of target-language subtitles to accompany the target-language soundtrack has also been shown to be effective in both improving listening skills (Bean & Wilson, 1989; Hayati & Mohmedi, 2011; Rokni & Atae, 2014) and increasing vocabulary (Bean & Wilson, 1989; Harji, Woods, & Alavi, 2010).

Appropriate Materials

With an aim of improving communicative competence, material that highly reflects the language used by native speakers in common situations is preferred. Some popular television dramas, such as *24*, *Grey's Anatomy*, *Law and Order*, and *C.S.I.* involve medical, police or legal settings and thus incorporate language not commonly used by native speakers in daily situations. Other shows, such as *Friends*, *Glee* and *Modern Family*, are also popular and offer more commonly-used language. However, the speed and the abundant use of humor and metaphor may inhibit the learners' ability to comprehend the material. Teachers must consider whether these types of materials would benefit their students.

Transcripts can be compared to a corpus to measure whether material reflects the way English is used by native speakers. The New General Service List (Browne, Culligan, & Phillips, 2013), a list of the most frequently used core words that ESL/EFL learners should be taught, can be used to measure the frequency of the words used in materials. By comparing the transcript of an episode of a show to the NGSList, a rating of the frequency of language used in that episode can be calculated. A high rating indicates that the series uses language that highly reflects native-speaker use, whereas a low rating indicates that the language is not used frequently. A series with a higher rating will be more effective in promoting communicative competence.

Regarding concerns about using copyrighted material in classes, under Section 110(1) of the U.S.

Copyright Law, instructors are given permission to show DVDs, etc. if used in an educational face-to-face setting (United States Copyright Office, 2014).

Show the Whole Season

Kaiser (2011) makes an argument for showing clips of film in foreign language classrooms stating that clips provide students with the opportunity to focus deeply on one specific scene allowing them to understand how, why, when and where that particular language is used. The amount of new language in a clip is limited so students have many opportunities to listen repeatedly and acquire the targeted language. However, showing clips has some disadvantages including the fact that they do not provide the viewer with background information and thus decontextualize the language. Also, throughout a film or TV series, the dialogue often echoes earlier script and the juxtaposition of various scenes is an important aspect that aids understanding (Kaiser, 2011). For students to more easily comprehend the language in audio-visual materials, contextual clues, background information and repetitive use of language in different situations should not be excluded. Thus, showing a full season of a TV series is expected to be effective in aiding comprehension.

Comprehension may also be enhanced using a narrow viewing approach. Narrow reading and narrow listening (Krashen, 1996, 2004) have been introduced as effective and efficient ways for second language learners to acquire a target language. For narrow reading, Krashen states the importance of background knowledge as, "a tremendous facilitator of comprehension" (2004, p.17). He suggests narrow reading is potentially motivating for second-language learners because if they are exposed many times to similar material that they are interested in, they will be motivated to study more. He also advocates that it is easier to acquire new language when the reading passage is understood. Therefore, numerous exposures to familiar material will enhance both acquisition and comprehension. Accordingly, viewing a season of one TV series instead of a jumble of various movies or clips can be an example of narrow viewing. Once students learn the background and general context of the show, they can focus on the language and how it is presented. Through watching full episodes of a series each week, students can follow the story easily and will not miss any information that will help them understand past or future episodes. This vital background information helps students understand and comprehend the new story enabling them to focus their attention on and acquire new language.

Suggested Series: LOST

LOST was extremely popular around the world with over 19 million viewers in the US each week for seasons 1 and 2 (Lostpedia, 2014). Every episode ended in a cliffhanger, which compelled viewers to keep tuning in to see what would happen next. This cliffhanger aspect can be exploited to motivate students to come to class and concentrate on the material. Although some of the scenes are violent and scary, the basic content and storyline are easy for students to understand. Initially, two of the characters do not speak English so students can empathize with their plight of being unable to communicate in a foreign language.

The speech in LOST can be considered authentic, that is, written for native speakers, not language learners (Kaiser, 2011; Nunan, 1988). Although scripted, it reflects the language use of people of different ages, cultures and backgrounds. Some characters are from different countries and thus use various accents. Students can hear American, Canadian, British, and Australian accents and learn how to decipher what is being said. This can be effective for preparation for standardized tests, such as TOEIC and TOEFL, which as of 2013, started using the same four English accents (American, Canadian, British and Australian) in the listening sections (Educational Testing Service, 2013).

The vocabulary in LOST comprises language frequently used by native speakers. Comparing the transcript of season 1, episode 1 (excluding proper names and non-linguistic interjections) to the New General Service List (Browne et al., 2013), 93.65% of the script is made up of the first 2000 words on the list. This indicates that students should be able to comprehend the speech from a lexical knowledge aspect. The other 6.35% of the transcript includes less common words that can be introduced prior to viewing the episode.

The script contains slang, common metaphors and idioms, which are often repeated in multiple episodes. For example, the phrase “let someone off the hook” is repeated in episodes 4, 16 and 20 in season 1. If these phrases are taught at first exposure and then mentioned again the next time(s) they appear, students can reflect on previous knowledge and reinforce their vocabulary.

Conclusion

Choosing audio-visual materials to ensure that students will benefit from the class and acquire both language and an idea of how to use it is a difficult task. Using a series that scores highly on a comparison to the New General Service List ensures

students are exposed to frequently-used English that they can use and will need when they converse with an English speaker. The use of target-language subtitles can help improve students' reading abilities and vocabulary while the target-language audio track helps them improve their listening skills. If a series has various accents, students can learn how to adapt in preparation for standardized tests. Showing an entire series allows students to focus on new language instead of trying to figure out what is going on.

LOST is an exciting, language-rich series that provides an opportunity for improving the communicative competence of ESL students through audio-visual classes. Showing students how colloquial English is used builds on their knowledge of textbook English enabling them to enhance their language skills. Through using both target-language subtitles and audio, students are given the opportunity to acquire language visually and audibly.

Following Krashen's (2004) suggestion that students will be motivated to study more if they are interested in the material, future research should examine whether this narrow viewing approach of using a TV series is effective in increasing motivation, vocabulary and retention or improving listening skills. Additionally, comparing the use of target or native-language subtitles will provide insight as to which is more effective in aiding language acquisition.

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