

Shared Identities: Our Interweaving Threads



Desperate Housewives in an EFL classroom

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This article will discuss the use of a popular American television drama, *Desperate Housewives*, as a vehicle for the teaching and learning of pragmatics in a Japanese university English as a Foreign Language classroom. The TV program was successfully used to raise learners' awareness of ways that speakers communicate their messages to hearers even though speakers do not always say exactly what they mean. Classroom methodology, lesson materials, and future course revisions will also be explained.

本稿は、日本の大学の外国語としての英語の授業に於ける、アメリカの人気テレビドラマ「デスパレートな妻たち」の語用論の教授及び学習手段としての利用について検討する。このテレビ番組の利用により、話し手が必ずしも本音を言葉にしていなくても聞き手に意思が伝わる工程を学習者に気づかせることに成功した。教授法、教材、及び今後の授業内容の改訂についても説明している。

Green observed that, as an English conversational strategy, implicature (speaker-implied meaning) is “absolutely unremarkable and ordinary” (1989, p. 92). This remark implies that conversational implicature is a common occurrence in every day life. This ordinary occurrence applies not only to implicature but also to the myriad other ways in which speakers and hearers use verbal and non-verbal language to make meaning in their interactions with each other. This feature of ordinariness warrants the inclusion of the teaching and learning of pragmatics in any Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) context, including university English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, where in some institutions, students have access to study abroad programs, and thus, opportunities to interact on a daily basis with native English speakers in study abroad host countries.

The use of video in TESOL classrooms for pedagogical purposes has become commonplace. Video adds a visual element that perks up lesson plans, and students seem to enjoy learning from visual media. Furthermore, video can provide useful and stimulating ways to incorporate the teaching and learning of various pragmatic aspects of conversational interaction into a course syllabus.

This article will explain how a popular American television drama, *Desperate Housewives*, was used as a vehicle for the teaching and learning of pragmatics in an EFL classroom. For example, some scenes from the drama provided instances of speakers implying meaning by their words, behavior, or facial expressions. Learners were explicitly taught to notice and to understand the speaker-implied meanings.

Various studies have examined the role that the listener plays in verbal communication (e.g., Bartlett, 1932; Grice, 1975; Reddy, 1979; all cited in Brown, 1995). As this research indicates, some degree of listener comprehension seems to be an important element of communication. Therefore, the EFL learners discussed in this article were made aware of ways in which hearers are able to comprehend speaker-implied meaning of messages.

First, the rationale for using *Desperate Housewives* will be explained, and then, a brief description of how it was used will be given. Finally, its use in this particular instance will be evaluated, and some suggestions will be offered on how the methodology and lesson materials could be revised and developed further.

Rationale

The Japanese university classes in which *Desperate Housewives* (*DH*) was used were two required speaking and listening courses called Oral Communication I with 25 students in each class. The 50 first-year students had TOEFL scores of between 450 and 553.

The course book taught discussion principles. Because the students might benefit from watching a discussion among native English speakers and because it might be interesting and enjoyable to them, a short scene from the first season of *DH* was shown, in which four of the show's characters discussed a problem and possible solutions.

Mere serendipity was the source of the decision to use the discussion scene from *DH* instead of a scene from another TV drama; the teacher had recently been privately enjoying the entire first season, and this short scene came immediately to mind. Presumably, other TV shows could also be used to raise pragmatic awareness among L2 learners.

After the lesson that included this *DH* scene, the students unanimously agreed that they wanted to watch more of the story. They had become interested! A listening component to this course was required, so *DH* seemed the obvious choice to fulfill this requirement. Furthermore, it seemed a good opportunity to develop students' awareness of how people make meaning with each other during their various conversational interactions.

Methodology

In his discussion of tasks and listening comprehension, Ellis (2003) described a top-down model of the cognitive processing of a text in which comprehension of a text is enabled through the listener's knowledge of the world and through the information that the listener possesses about the context of the situation. In other words, what a listener knows about the world (schemata) and what a listener can guess about the situational context from clues in the context

help the listener to make sense of what she hears (and sees, in the case of visual media). In Ellis' own words, "When listeners are able to infer what is meant by attending to context and can activate a relevant schema there is little need for them to attend closely to what is actually said" (2003, p. 43). This top-down model of processing a text is what was aimed for in *DH* rather than a bottom-up model, in which a listener attends to the linguistic aspects of conversational interaction, such as pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammatical structures.

However, as Ellis pointed out (2003), to activate this top-down model, a listener must already possess a sufficient amount of linguistic knowledge and ability in order to automatically process the linguistic elements of a text. Otherwise, the listener will not be able to concentrate on the higher order cognitive processing of this top-down model. In other words, a listener will spend the listening time on trying to catch the speaker's meaning through the speaker's words, pronunciation, and grammar (focus on form) rather than on the "message" (focus on meaning) that is conveyed through relevant schemata and the contextual clues present in the situation. Initially, it was concluded that the students who would be participating in this activity would have the requisite linguistic skills to successfully carry out this activity.

Each episode of the *DH* television series included several continuing plots involving a quartet of housewives, their family members, and their neighbors. The particular plotline used in this activity continued throughout the first TV season. The activity was titled *Who Wrote the Note?* It consisted of eleven scenes and revolved around the question

of who caused the suicide of one of the show's characters. The last of the eleven scenes revealed the answer to this mystery.

For each scene, a worksheet in the form of a chapter was created that included:

- the background and/or synopsis of the scene
- a transcript of the conversation
- a vocabulary list
- a list of questions designed to help lead students to comprehension of the characters' interactions, personalities, behavior, and motives.

Many of the leading questions dealt with pragmatic aspects of the characters' interactions depending on the contents of each scene. There were questions:

- for discerning characters' emotions by reading their faces during conversations
- about implicature-bearing comments made by characters
- for speculating reasons for characters' behavior

For example, in a scene in which a main character received some shocking news, the camera focused on his face as he passed through the emotions of uncertainty, alarm, and distress. A leading question focused students' attention on this character's facial expressions, and asked students to tick off each emotion on their handout as each emotion was shown on the character's face. The character's reaction to the shocking news was important to the viewer's developing impression of this character's personality and motivation.

Another example of how the leading questions intended to aid in raising students' pragmatic awareness occurred in a scene in which the four housewives were discussing a problem. One housewife used the idiomatic expression, "it's now or never." A leading question asked students to think about what she meant by her utterance in the context of this scene and in the context of what viewers knew of the events of the story to that point. Because of new visual-only information received in this scene prior to the character's utterance, students were able to correctly infer her meaning: that the four housewives should take immediate action to solve the problem.

The worksheets were used by student pairs before, during, and after viewing the scenes, and time was given for discussion of the scenes by the student pairs. To conclude the chapter, correct answers to the leading questions and an explanation of the scene's development of the plot were given by the teacher.

Assessment was carried out via mid-course and post-course tests.

Evaluation

Forty-five of the 50 students responded to a 17-question post-activity survey. Student satisfaction was high. A majority of respondents answered that the leading questions helped them to understand the characters' interactions. Also, a majority said that they found the activity enjoyable and interesting. This was an important point as the university's administration emphasized to its English instructors that students enjoy their English classes. Furthermore, it seems to

be generally accepted wisdom that enjoyment of an activity enhances its potential as a learning experience.

Concerning the usefulness of the handouts in general, a slightly smaller majority replied that they understood the handouts well enough to use them and that they had understood what to do to carry out the activity. Most of the students answered that their listening ability improved "somewhat" (rather than "a lot" or "not much"). However, as the term "listening ability" was too general in meaning, it was difficult to know exactly what students thought had improved: their ability to recognize spoken words or their ability to understand the characters' meaning-in-context when using the words? It is evident that the feedback survey in its present form has some inherent weaknesses and needs revision.

In spite of high student satisfaction with the *Who Wrote the Note?* activity, teacher satisfaction was not complete on two counts. Talking together about a text can help discussion partners better understand the text. Brown claimed that successful comprehension of a text can be achieved when a listener and a speaker work together to create "a shared 'mental model' of what is being talked about" (1995, cited in Ellis 2003, p. 44). However, during students' discussion time, some students tended to begin writing the answers to the leading questions on the handout by themselves without talking to a partner. These students were stopped by the teacher from writing and were encouraged to work with their partner. This student behavior could be typical of Japanese classroom culture.

Secondly, students sometimes appeared to have trouble discussing the leading questions. There seemed to be too

much silence during discussion time. Students did not “get on with it.” Again, it might simply be typical Japanese student behavior in a classroom.

On the other hand, this hesitancy might be because of a lack of background knowledge or unfamiliarity with the situations occurring in the scenes. For example, in one particular scene that was pivotal to the development of the plotline, there was a conversation between a private detective and a main character in which the detective revealed by implied meaning that he also provided service as a hired gunman. It was almost impossible for the students to comprehend this new information without a lot of extended scaffolded input from the teacher in the form of elaborated explanation of the scene and additional leading questions posed to the students about the scene. The concept of murder-for-hire as part of the services of a private detective did not seem to be a relevant schema for the students. Referring again to what Ellis (2003) said about schemata and contextual clues, what listeners know about the world and what listeners can guess about a situation based on clues in that situation help them to make sense of what they hear and see.

Future revisions

To address these two concerns, i.e., the fact that some students tended to work alone and that some leading questions seemed to be difficult to discuss, revisions to *Who Wrote the Note?* are needed.

As the activity stands now, students do engage in the types of tasks described by Prabhu (1987, p. 46) as “reasoning-

gap activities,” which involve such cognitive processes as inference, deduction, and practical reasoning. However, can it be said that simply answering questions is a task? Answering questions can indeed generate discussion, but would it not be more productive for discussion to lead to something tangible? Furthermore, development of more complex, engaging tasks would possibly involve students more in the story and give them more ownership of the activity, thus producing an even richer experience.

In light of the decision to make changes to *Who Wrote the Note?*, it would be useful to consider the concept of “task.” Many definitions of task have been offered for both research and pedagogic purposes; this paper will adopt the one offered by Samuda and Bygate: “A task is a holistic activity which engages language use in order to achieve some non-linguistic outcome while meeting a linguistic challenge, with the overall aim of promoting language learning, through process or product or both” (2008, p. 69). According to Samuda and Bygate, “...the task is *holistic* in the sense that it requires learners to decide on potential relevant meanings, and use the phonology, grammar, vocabulary and discourse structures of the language to convey these in order to carry out the task” (p. 13). A non-linguistic outcome is defined as “a *pragmatic* conclusion to the task...for example, laughter, the communication of information, the production of a persuasive stretch of talk or writing, a poem, a list, a brochure, a meal, a T-shirt design, a mural, a song, a diagram, a map, a chart, and so on” (p. 68). When students in a classroom are engaged in carrying out an assigned task in real time, naturally, they use the phonology, grammar, vocabulary and discourse structures available to

them, either from their own interlanguage, or from language present in the task materials, or from language picked up from each other, or from all of the above. If the outcome of a task is a tangible product, such as a chart, the promotion of language-learning might be enhanced more fully than by simply discussing a list of questions as the production of the outcome would seem to involve a greater array of cognitive processes. However, this tentative claim warrants further investigation.

Returning to the two current problems mentioned earlier, possibly by making *Who Wrote the Note?* more task-based as described by Samuda and Bygate, students would be forced to collaborate and speak more. Part of the proposed revisions would be providing them with more substantial goals per chapter and requiring more tangible outcomes or products from their collaborations than what they have been doing heretofore. Also, appropriately designed tasks might be a way to introduce relevant schemata that students might lack but definitely need in order to comprehend the interactions of the show's characters.

Considering the kinds of tasks that could be used, ongoing, long-term tasks could be assigned to student pairs or groups, which would be established at the beginning of *Who Wrote the Note?* The pairs or groups would work on their assigned projects throughout the duration of the activity. Such tasks could include, for example, building a profile of one of the characters as new information is given during the plot's development. This profile could be recorded on a diagram or a chart. Other student pairs could plot the storyline, which could also be charted. There are several related but peripheral mysteries that *Who Wrote the Note?* hints at but

does not follow. These mysteries could be speculated on via the creation of scenarios written by other student pairs or groups. Such tasks seem to qualify as holistic activities that would engage learners in real-world language use for producing non-linguistic outcomes, thus adhering to Samuda and Bygate's criteria of "task" (2008).

Finally, at the end of *Who Wrote the Note?*, there could be a whole class wrap-up session in which student pairs and groups could do presentations on their assignments. These presentations could be attended by guests, perhaps other teachers.

If revised in this way, the methodology would require the creation of a completely new set of lesson materials.

Conclusion

To conclude, it appears that using *Desperate Housewives* in an EFL classroom is an effective way to develop listening comprehension skills and to raise awareness of the pragmatic side of people's interactions. In addition, its value as a tool to raise student interest and motivation has been proven. Obviously, there is still much thinking to be done about how and where to make modifications, and then they will need to be tried out in the classroom.

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Adaptation

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