

Authentic English Through Modern Family

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The benefits of using television shows and films in the EFL classroom have been thoroughly researched and documented, and they have proven to be an effective learning tool. Particularly in the Japanese EFL context, using a situation comedy motivates students because they enjoy seeing, hearing, and using the language they learn. This paper shows how the popular American sitcom *Modern Family* can enhance EFL instruction through its up-to-date cultural themes and stereotypes and through its lively use of language, especially slang and idiomatic expressions. The course summary, syllabus, lessons, and testing and evaluation information are provided.

教室外での英語接触量が限られる日本人EFL学習者に、いかに「自然な会話」を教えるかは難しい問題である。そこで、授業に自然な会話を取り入れる容易な方法として、テレビ番組の活用が挙げられる。テレビ番組の会話は、多くのEFL教科書にあるような「作られた」会話よりも優れた教材と言える。従来の研究においても、EFL授業におけるビデオ使用の効果が調査され、その有効性が実証されてきた。特に、日本のEFL環境においては、見る、聞く、さらに学んだ表現を使うといった楽しみが得られるシチュエーション・コメディの活用は、学習者の意欲を高めることにつながる。本研究では、アメリカの人気シチュエーション・コメディである*Modern Family*を取り上げ、最新の文化的題材や語彙を扱いながら、いかにしてより良いEFL教育が行えるかを論じる。コースの概要、シラバス、授業内容、試験、評価方法を提示する。

FOR THE past 5 years, I have been teaching a North American Studies seminar class at Japan Women's University in Tokyo. The goal of the course is to increase students' knowledge and awareness of American culture and increase their vocabulary, particularly slang and idiomatic expressions. In the past, I have chosen Hollywood movies due to their popular appeal and their ability to reflect American culture and modern spoken English. Two years ago, I decided to use American situation comedies, such as *Seinfeld*, because they offer an interesting, and funny, array of characters, social situations, and slang and idioms. They are also shorter than full-length films (about 20 minutes without commercials) and thus easier to use in class. Last year, I decided to use *Modern Family* because it offers an interesting, and humorous take on the American family. This paper explains why and how *Modern Family* can be used to enhance EFL instruction.



JALT2012 CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS

What is Modern Family?

ABC's *Modern Family* is a popular American situation comedy that premiered on September 23, 2009, whereupon it received critical acclaim and attracted over 12 million viewers. The show revolves around the family of Jay Pritchett (Ed O'Neill), his second wife Gloria (Sofia Vergara), his stepson Manny (Rico Rodriguez), and Pritchett's daughter Claire Dunphy (Julie Bowen), her husband Phil (Ty Burrell), and their three children, daughters Haley (Sarah Hyland) and Alex (Ariel Winter), and only son Luke (Nolan Gould); rounding out the cast is Pritchett's gay son Mitchell (Jesse Tyler Ferguson), his partner Cameron (Eric Stonestreet), and their adopted Vietnamese daughter Lily (Aubrey Anderson-Emmons).

The show is presented in a “mockumentary” style—the characters often speak directly to the camera in an interview format, in which they comment on themselves and their relationships with their family members and relatives. As such, the show is a humorous depiction of 21st century American families and their changing attitudes towards social issues such as gay rights. For example, being gay no longer holds the same stigma it once did, and many Americans now accept, or are at least willing to consider the legitimacy of, same-sex marriages. This idea is reflected in *Modern Family* in the relationship between Mitchell and Cameron—and Mitchell's father Jay's continuing struggle to acknowledge and accept that his son is gay. In contrast, Claire and Phil's family are portrayed as a “normal” family of five, with a rebellious eldest daughter, Haley, the “smart” middle daughter, Alex, and their somewhat dysfunctional son, Luke.

Review of Research on Using Video in the EFL Classroom

The benefits of using films and television shows in the EFL classroom have been widely researched and documented, and

many researchers have shown them to be effective learning tools (e.g., James, 2011; Huang, 2005; Vélez, 2004; Washburn, 2001). Naturally occurring conversation in movies and television may be more beneficial for communicative learning than concocted texts that appear in many textbooks (Quaglio, 2008). Carter and McCarthy (1995), for example, claimed that effectively fostering speaking skills requires instruction to focus on spoken, not written, English, and there is “a lack of fit” (p. 142) between real conversations and textbook dialogs. Moreover, learners in Japan are not usually exposed to spoken English outside of the classroom; therefore, a reliance on textbook English may not adequately prepare learners for understanding or participating in real conversations. However, instructors can easily bring television dialogs into the classroom as a viable alternative, and situation comedies are a rich source of authentic dialog and thus particularly valuable for pragmatic teaching and learning (Washburn, 2001).

One reason television situation comedies provide a more effective language resource for EFL learners is that, as Katchen pointed out, they are “made to sound natural to native speakers” (2003, para. 17), so in this respect, they represent authentic language. Of course, the dialog found in situation comedies is scripted, so one could argue that it is not truly authentic. Widowson (1990), for example, claimed: “authenticity of language in the classroom is . . . to some extent, an illusion” (pp. 44-45). However, compared to the static written dialogs found in textbooks, television sitcoms offer a plausible depiction of real conversations between real people.

Perhaps more importantly, particularly in the Japanese context where low motivation is a common problem in English language classrooms, using a situation comedy such as *Modern Family* may motivate students because it is entertaining to watch. Students can identify with the characters, which may in turn motivate them to use the language they hear the characters

using. A considerable amount of research has shown that “positive attitude and motivation are closely related to success in learning a second language” (Bai, 2008, p. 12). From my experience teaching university Japanese students, I know they want to learn English slang, idioms, and colloquial expressions. Indeed, I believe this is an important part of language teaching because “knowledge of slang and idioms is fundamental to nonnative speakers’ understanding of the language that native speakers actually use” (Burke, 1998).

In addition to their lively depiction of contemporary slang and idiomatic and colloquial expressions, sitcoms can provide Japanese learners with a window into American society. *Modern Family* pokes fun at American social stereotypes while it is still couched in fairly accurate—at least by Hollywood standards—American cultural and social situations. For example, Gloria is presented as a typical hot-blooded—as well as hot-tempered—Latina woman who is not afraid to both show and act on her emotions. Her husband Jay is depicted as a conservative WASP with a trophy wife. And both Mitchell and Cameron are presented as “sensitive” gay men, though Cameron exhibits machismo when the situation warrants. Such situations and the language used in them give students a way into understanding stereotypes and other prevailing attitudes in American society.

American television situation comedies and dramas, like Hollywood movies, serve an important cultural function in the US because they “affirm and maintain the culture of which they are a part” (Maltby & Craven 1995, p. 8) and they “present a portrait of national life” (Burgoyne, 1996, p. 121). In addition, they “reveal directly or indirectly, something about [Americans’] national experience, identity, culture, temperament, ideologies, and aesthetic principles” (Belton, 1994, p. 123).

Of course, it could be argued that English is an international language and not tied to any particular culture. Furthermore, movies reveal something about American life to Americans,

but this cultural understanding may not be apparent to non-Americans who are not familiar with the language or the culture. However, because of its domestic setting, which Japanese students can easily compare and relate to their own family experience, *Modern Family* offers a more accessible resource for introducing American culture than many other sitcoms or full-length Hollywood films.

Course Summary

The course described in this paper was designed to increase students’ awareness of American culture and humor, increase their knowledge of American slang, idioms, and colloquial expressions, and improve their listening comprehension skills. Each week, students watched two 20-25 minute episodes from Season 1 of *Modern Family*. Prior to each class, students were required to download, print, and study the scripts that had been emailed by the instructor.

Printing out the scripts themselves is helpful if the class is large, and it may encourage students to be more invested in the class. In addition, reading and studying both scripts before coming to class helps students understand the dialog and content better in class, as well as improve their listening comprehension skills. Having already gone through the script and dealt with any words they did not know, students can then watch the show in class without English or Japanese subtitles. In fact, I have found that, because the students know they will not be able to rely on subtitles in class, they are more careful about studying the scripts before coming to class.

Students are required to study and learn the slang, idioms, and colloquial expressions that are underlined and explained in footnotes in each script (see Figure 1), as these will be part of both the midterm and final exams.

Modern Family Episode 2: "The Bicycle Thief"

©ABC Television (September 30, 2009)

Written by Bill Wruble; Directed by Jason Winer

SCENE 1: Jay & Gloria

Jay: What's the key to being a really great dad? Ah, that's a tough one.*

*that's a tough one: an idiomatic expression, which means that a question is hard to answer, a problem is hard to solve, or a situation is difficult to figure out and/or resolve

SCENE 2: Mitchell & Cameron

Cameron: Giving them the freedom to be whatever they want to be.

Mitchell: Right. Exactly.

Cameron: Whether that's a painter, a poet, a pilot, a president...

Mitchell: And for us, we're gonna... **

Cameron: ...of a company, or of a country.

Mitchell: Patience.

**gonna: A commonly-used shortened form of *going to*.

SCENE 3: Claire & Phil

Phil: Well, be their *buddy.

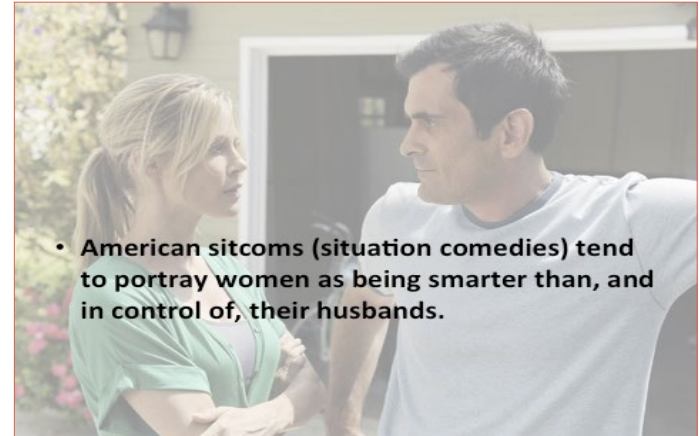
Claire: That's your answer?

*buddy: one of several variations of *friend*

Figure 1. Sample Script

In class, students watch the first episode scene-by-scene, with the instructor stopping after each scene to explain cultural points using PowerPoint slides (See Figure 2). Students are required to take notes on these points since they will also be

included on the midterm and final exams. Students are not required to take notes for the second episode watched in class, but they are responsible for studying and knowing the underlined vocabulary words and phrases in the script.



- **American sitcoms (situation comedies) tend to portray women as being smarter than, and in control of, their husbands.**

Figure 2. Sample PowerPoint Slide

Modern Family offers students a plethora of American cultural situations and characters, both idiosyncratic and stereotypical, which can be explained by the instructor as well as discussed by the students. It also contains a multitude of common slang and idiomatic expressions. Because they will be tested on these points, students are motivated to attend every class and take careful notes. More importantly, they are motivated because they enjoy watching the episodes and learning about American culture while experiencing American humor.

Course Syllabus

The following course is designed for a 15-week semester, but can be shortened and adapted to any semester time frame:

- Week 1: Course introduction/syllabus; Episode 1: *Pilot*
- Week 2: Episodes 2 & 3: *The Bicycle Thief* & *Come Fly with Me*
- Week 3: Episodes 4 & 5: *The Incident* & *Coal Digger*
- Week 4: Episodes 6 & 7: *Run for Your Wife* & *En Garde*
- Week 5: Episodes 8 & 9: *Great Expectations* & *Fizbo*
- Week 6: Episodes 10 & 11: *Undeck the Halls* & *Up All Night*
- Week 7: Episodes 12 & 13: *Not in My House* & *Fifteen Percent*
- Week 8: Midterm Exam (Episodes 2-13)
- Week 9: Episodes 14 & 15: *Moon Landing* & *My Funky Valentine*
- Week 10: Episodes 16 & 17: *Fears* & *Truth Be Told*
- Week 11: Episodes 18 & 19: *Starry Night* & *Game Changer*
- Week 12: Episodes 20 & 21: *Benched* & *Travels with Scout*
- Week 13: Episodes 22 & 23: *Airport 2010* & *Hawaii*
- Week 14: Episode 24: *Family Portrait*
- Week 15: Final Exam (Episodes 14-24)

Testing and Evaluation

The midterm exam (see Figure 3) is based on the cultural notes the students took for even-numbered episodes (2 through 12), and the underlined vocabulary in the odd-numbered episodes (3 through 13).

I. American Culture (Episodes 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, & 12): For each statement, circle T for TRUE or F for FALSE (60 points).

1. *Pho* is a somewhat trendy soup in the U.S. T/F
2. *Time outs* are commonly used to teach American children how to use a clock to tell time. T/F
3. A common tradition in the U.S. is giving pajamas as a gift on Christmas. T/F
4. Although golf is very popular, most Americans do not belong to a country club. T/F
5. American boys use *slumber party* while girls use *sleepover* to describe a party in which friends spend the night together. T/F

II. Vocabulary (Episodes 3, 5, 7, 9, & 11): For each statement, circle T for TRUE or F for FALSE (40 points).

61. *Butterflies* refers to feeling lightheaded or dizzy. T/F
62. *Don't push it* is used when you think someone is asking or expecting too much of you. T/F
63. *Had a blast* is often used to describe a very difficult or frightening experience. T/F
64. *Here's the deal* is used by realtors when negotiating the price of a house with a potential buyer. T/F
65. *Hit the road* is another way of saying, *leave* or *go away*. T/F

Figure 3. Sample Midterm Exam

Similarly, the final exam is based on culture points from the even-numbered episodes (14 through 24), and the vocabulary in the odd-numbered episodes (15 through 23).

Aside from creating the scripts and PowerPoint slides for each class, grading the midterm and final exams is one of the most

time-consuming chores for the instructor, especially if the class has attracted a large number of students. Therefore, it may be advisable to employ a teaching assistant or graduate student to take care of emailing the scripts to the students, keeping attendance, and scoring the exams. Despite the work involved, however, I found this class to be extremely rewarding for both the students and myself. Because this was a large seminar class focused on American culture, I did not include any speaking activities. However, the lessons could easily be adapted to include speaking activities, such as discussion and comprehension questions related to themes in the show. Moreover, with a smaller class, students could be asked to give oral presentations instead of the midterm and final exam.

Conclusion

Research supports the use of video-based instruction in the EFL classroom, particularly as it increases student motivation and provides a more authentic language resource when compared with textbook instruction. A contemporary American situation comedy such as *Modern Family* provides an excellent vehicle for teaching American culture because it provides culturally relevant, vocabulary-enriching, and, perhaps most importantly (from the students' point of view), enjoyable content. Indeed, I have received extremely positive feedback on a course questionnaire completed by my students at the end of the semester. Comments have included: "I look forward to coming to class every week because each episode is so funny and I learn a lot about America and many interesting slang expressions"; "This class is so exciting and fun"; and "I really think my listening has improved because I am getting better at understanding each episode without any subtitles."

Note. Transcripts and PowerPoint slides are available to anyone who would like to use them to teach *Modern Family*.

Bio Data

Douglas E. Forster earned his PhD at Anglia Ruskin University and is an associate professor in the Department of English at Japan Women's University. His research interests include cultural discourse analysis of American films and television shows and extensive EFL reading. The author can be contacted at <forster@fc.jwu.ac.jp>

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