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ABSTRACT

Students in Taiwan are required to learn English, and schools are placing even more emphasis on listening and speaking skills. At the same time, English-language programming is widely available in Taiwan via cable television. Cable television is a useful instructional tool for teachers of English as a Second Language. This source of authentic English can be brought into the classroom and used as a teaching resource, and students can be taught how to use it effectively for self-study. High school students can be given a transcript of the video and then use the transcript to practice intonation and pronunciation, to study the grammar and vocabulary of commonly spoken English, and to act out selected scenes. Advice is given regarding how to choose an appropriate program, one that is both entertaining and useful for the purpose of language instruction. Possible activities are also suggested, such as asking students to guess who said what; practicing the proper intonation; discerning the emotion of the characters; completing dialogues; answering comprehension questions; and comparing cultures. Video programming provides an excellent tool for moving students from the artificially slow and clear English of teaching materials to the authentic English used by native English speakers. (KFT)

Off-Air Video for High School English Classes: Some Considerations

A talk presented at Hsinchu Girls' High School
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INTRODUCTION

Students in Taiwan are required to learn English. Despite the necessity of memorizing many grammar rules and vocabulary items in order to pass the critical Joint College Entrance Examination, learning a foreign language can sometimes be fun. Furthermore, our schools are now placing more emphasis on the speaking and listening skills necessary for many professions. Meanwhile, more and more programs in English are coming into our living rooms via cable television. Therefore, it seems reasonable to bring this source of authentic English into the classroom in the role of teaching materials and to help teach students how to use these materials effectively for self-study.

Cable television programs have been used successfully with university students in Taiwan (Katchen, 1995; and others), but can they be used with high school students? We believe they can, even with beginners, although here we have in mind senior high school students, who already have had some exposure to English. The difference lies most in how much we prepare the students for what they are going to see and hear and the kinds of activities we ask them to do. That is, whereas advanced students might be able to debate a controversial topic discussed on a talk show, lower intermediate or high beginner students could try to complete an easier cloze and then use that transcript to practice stress, intonation, and fluency; to study the grammar and vocabulary; and then to act out the scene.

Some people mistakenly believe that using video in the classroom means that the teacher can turn on a two-hour movie and take a rest. In reality, using video requires far more work for the teacher. If we have ever used any ELT videos, such as *Family Album USA*, we have appreciated the many activities and supplemental materials the authors have prepared for us. With off-air video we have to develop all these materials by ourselves, and that really is a lot of work.

High school teachers are very busy people and have much required material to teach. Video use has to be supplemental, but it can add freshness and excitement to a classroom. Television is something students watch for enjoyment; even when we use it to teach, it is hard for students to believe this is really learning. To minimize work, we suggest teachers should start slowly at first, with a few activities spread over a semester. Perhaps two or more teachers can work together in developing materials; gradually they can build up a collection of useful videos with accompanying activities from which to choose.

CHOOSING AN APPROPRIATE VIDEO PROGRAM

As teachers interested in bringing television programs into the classroom, we have to become familiar with what is available on local TV. Many stations broadcast English movies; these are too long for classroom use. A good video lesson can come from a one to three minute film clip, which could be an excerpt from a movie or some other program. Our level of tolerance is much lower in a foreign language; we tend to be more satisfied with shorter bits we understand or are led to understand and we feel a sense of achievement. Therefore, teachers should generally steer away from movies unless the students are really high level or the teacher plans to teach the whole film scene by scene over the whole semester, or just use one or two scenes in class and encourage the students to watch the rest on their own time outside of class (if we have the facilities or the film is widely available).

While some other genres may be appropriate, we suggest the situation comedy (sitcom) with high school students as a good genre to begin with. There are a number of reasons for this recommendation. First, as the name suggests, the purpose of such programs is to make us laugh. While humor may be different from one culture to another and therefore present teaching challenges, sitcoms also present a chance to show and discuss cultural differences, and we believe this light-hearted genre is most appealing and appropriate for young people.

Second, the sitcom can be presented in a reasonable length of time. Because sitcoms are usually made to fit a half-hour time slot, they run about 22 minutes without the commercials. They can be split into about eight scenes so that the length of each (about two to four minutes) will be ideal for use as an individual unit. That is, we develop different activities for each scene, show the scene, do the activity, show it again to check our work, show a third time for review, then move on to the next scene. This procedure gives us time to concentrate on interesting aspects of each scene, whether there are cultural differences, marked intonation patterns, specialized vocabulary, or other areas of interest.

Third, the structure of the sitcom is predictable. By the end of the second or third scene, a problem or delicate situation is set up, but this problem is always resolved successfully by the end of the show and everything goes back to normal. Furthermore, because the same characters interact each week, we get to know their typical behavior and have a good idea how each will behave in a given situation. Our students tend to have a low tolerance for ambiguity; they want to understand every single word. The sitcom presents an opportunity for them to depend on their real world knowledge to predict what they will see and hear.

Fourth, sitcoms usually center around a family; therefore, we have ample opportunity to hear how adults and children interact as well as how adults interact with adults and children with children. Moreover, we can hear different levels of formality as family members encounter those of different ages and social status (e.g., more formal, respectful speech toward a minister or priest).

SELECTING AN APPROPRIATE SITCOM

Not all sitcoms available in Taiwan work well with Taiwan's students. For example, many adults enjoy *The Golden Girls*, a sitcom about four older women sharing a house together, but some university students have said they do not like the show at all. One could speculate that the reason might be related to age: young people may not identify with the problems of their grand-

parents' generation. On the other hand, university students generally enjoy *Three's Company* (available for purchase in Taiwan with English subtitles), whereas this middle-aged American never could see the appeal of the show. A number of other American sitcoms are shown in Taiwan on various local and cable TV stations; most have the original English soundtrack with Chinese subtitles. As the stations change their offerings every few months, the teacher has to keep up with what is available.

Sitcoms are series; each week there is a different story, mostly funny, occasionally serious. The problems are different each week and some of them might make the teacher and the class uncomfortable or just not be very interesting to our students. Most importantly, we would want to choose a program with speech close to the standard the students are learning to help build their confidence in listening to authentic English. For example, if there is a character in one episode who has an unusual accent or uses a lot of slang, we may decide not to use it. In short, the teacher has to choose both the program, the topic of the particular episode, and the language represented carefully.

POSSIBLE ACTIVITIES[1]

Introducing the Characters. Usually at the beginning of each episode, the actors are introduced in their roles. If the students are familiar with the characters, we can ask for some brief descriptions; even of they are not, we can have them guess the roles—father, mother, friend, etc. Some are usually fairly obvious. From the few seconds each character is shown, students may be able to predict something about that character from dress and behavior. This activity helps students get the characters and their relationships straight in their minds.

In one especially good example, *The Simpsons*, an animated situation comedy, the characters are introduced each week in 90 seconds as they leave work (father), school (Bart and Lisa), and return from the supermarket (mother and baby). Students can not only guess their roles (e.g., the man is the father) but also something of their personalities--e.g., Bart is a poor student and a naughty child because he is shown staying after school and writing the same sentence on the board (e.g., I will not xerox my butt; I will not pledge allegiance to Bart), takes no books home, and recklessly rides his skateboard among people and traffic.

Who Said It? We can watch a scene and then give students about five different lines from it and ask students if they remember which character said it (and sometimes also whether they can imitate the intonation with which the line was said). We then watch again, pause at each given sentence, and have students try to say it as the character said it.

Guessing the Intonation. Before we watch a scene, we can give students about five sentences from it and ask students to say it with what they think will be the intonation. We then watch the scene through and ask again. Were their guesses correct? Why not? We should try to choose at least one sentence in which the intonation is marked or somewhat unexpected, and we have an opportunity to illustrate contrastive stress, intonation that indicates sarcasm, and so on, as they appear in context. Then we watch again, pause at the sentence, and have students imitate the

[1]This section appeared in Katchen, J. E. (1996). *Using authentic video in English language teaching: Tips for Taiwan's teachers*. Taipei: The Crane Publishing Co., Ltd.

intonation and expression. As a variation, we can watch the scene first and then give the sentence, as in "Who Said It?"

What Was the Emotion? Before or after watching a scene, we can give students some sentences of the dialogue and ask what emotion (joy, anger, sarcasm, disbelief) was being expressed. This is especially useful when characters are expressing different emotions (one is angry while the other is trying to calm her) or when one character changes emotions (e.g., from anger to acceptance). We can do this activity along with guessing the intonation, since the intonation is often critical to understanding which emotion is being expressed (Lonergan & Vaughan-Rees, 1994).

Completing a Cloze. We can give students the dialogue transcript of a scene, blank out some of the words, then have students fill in these words in class. This is useful when we are first introducing students to the characters. Giving them a partial transcript to fill in helps them get used to understanding new voices. We can blank out single words for harder-to-understand speakers, whole phrases for those easier to understand.

Completing the Dialogue. This activity works best for a scene in which two characters are conversing. We give the students the lines for one of the characters and ask them to fill in the lines of the other. This is harder than a cloze because students have to fill in the whole utterances. To assist them, we initially have them fill in the lines of the character whose lines are shorter, whose English is more standard, whose utterances are more predictable (e.g., the person answering questions rather than the one asking them).

Consider for a moment the role of short-term memory; even native speakers can only repeat lines of perhaps up to ten words maximum. That number is lower for language learners. Therefore, for longer utterances, we must pause after a phrase or short sentence, rewind slightly and repeat.

After the students have filled in the lines, we may want to put the completed dialogue on an overhead projector for checking. Then we can have half the room read A's part and the other half read B's part, putting in the expression of the characters. We can even have students try to say their parts along with the characters to pick up speed. For variation, we can ask one or two pairs of students to read out the lines with as much expression as they can or even act out their roles in the front of the room.

Answering Comprehension Questions. For some scenes, particularly those toward the end of a sitcom when students want to know what is going to happen, we may not want to spend too much time on language activities. Here it can be useful to just ask a few general comprehension questions to make sure students get the main idea or main point of the scene. If we are using a locally-recorded video, we should also keep in mind that here students may be able to answer the questions by reading the Chinese subtitles instead of listening.

Silent Viewing. We can watch the scene silently, observe the body language, and try to guess the emotions or even try to write the dialogue.

Comparing Cultures. We can watch a scene and ask what would be different or not occur at all in the students' culture. For example, for a scene showing American teenagers at a

party, there is much to comment upon--the clothing, the behavior of the young people, the means of transportation used to get to the party, the activities they are engaged in at the party, what they are eating and drinking. Since research has shown that nonnative speakers see fewer cultural cues in target language videos than native speakers (Tufts & Tudor, 1990), it is important that the teacher draw students' attention to cultural information relevant to understanding the content of the video. That is, what is obvious to the native speaker, for example that a man dressed in a certain way is a postman, may not be observed at all by the nonnative speaker who has never encountered an American postman.

Predicting What Will Happen. After watching at least the first two scenes, we are sometimes at a point where the situation is set up for us, for example, a relative is coming to visit and no one in the family likes this person. We can then ask students, in conversation groups or for a written homework assignment if we are at the end of the class that day, to predict what they think will happen in the show. Although we know by the nature of the genre that there will be a happy ending, there are many possible ways to get there. In the unwelcome relative example, the family may discover, through a number of ways, that the person is not so bad after all, or the person may leave quickly because of the arrival of an even nastier neighbor or relative, or the family members may learn a lesson in tolerance and understanding. In everyday life, in our native language, we are always making guesses about the future, and students should be making educated guesses when they communicate in a foreign language, too. Such gossip is the stuff of ordinary day-to-day conversations.

Other Activities. There are a number of other activities, from the preteaching we do for every lesson to the presentation of new vocabulary and slang, which we all surely do anyway. We could also develop related reading and writing assignments or, if we have the facilities and motivated students, we could show the first few scenes of a sitcom (or excerpt from a movie) and then ask students to watch the rest in a self-access language laboratory. For some more specific ideas that can work for almost any genre, see Stempleski and Tomalin (1990).

A WORD ABOUT SUBTITLES

Subtitles are here to stay; by permitting a larger portion of the Taiwan audience to enjoy programs produced in English-speaking countries, they ensure that cable companies will continue to provide us with TV shows in English. We should be thankful that Chinese are comfortable reading subtitles[2]; many other countries dub in the same often-heard voices and render the programs useless for foreign language teaching and learning.

Some foreign teachers may record programs in the US and bring them to Taiwan; these can certainly be used, especially if a close-captioned decoder[3] will bring out the English captions. However, we believe it is most useful to use programs available in Taiwan, despite Chinese subti-

[2] All Chinese programs in Taiwan, except for cartoons and some news programs, have Chinese subtitles. The reasons given are to promote the use of Mandarin and to allow those from different dialect areas to understand the programs.

[3] A note of caution: most decoders only work with programs/videos made in the same country for which the decoder was made.

tles, because our goal is to introduce English programs to students so that they will watch them on their own time for self-study and improvement of English language skills.

In the past, we were able to cover the bottom of the TV screen where the Chinese subtitles appeared with a strip of paper. Now with more sophisticated equipment and ceiling projectors, this solution does not work. Subtitles still appear on the screen, so we have to find a way to either focus students away from them or to incorporate them into English learning. Activities such as completing a cloze or dialogue, imitating intonation and acting out, culture comparison, and prediction require the use of English. Silent viewing with Chinese subtitles would provide a challenge for creating the correct English equivalents. A further comparison could be done between the original English and the choice of Chinese subtitles and whether there are other or better ways (especially when we are using subtitles generated in Hong Kong) to translate the English idea into Mandarin.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Students want more English input, and this input is available through television. Many students, however, need help in moving from the artificially slow and clear English of language teaching materials to the authentic English used by native speakers for native speakers. This is where teachers need to help students maximize the use of the English they already know and to encourage them to make use of other strategies, such as watching body language and predicting the outcome from their knowledge of genre type. Once students overcome their initial fear of watching authentic video, they seem to enjoy it.

In addition to training students to use authentic video programs outside of class to further their own English language skills, teachers can also use TV programs as teaching materials. Situation comedies are particularly useful because they are rich in examples of many types of English language use and cultural behavior. Although entertaining, they may also provide a starting point for discussion topics. By varying the activities, teachers can enhance student motivation in learning English.

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