

Language Learning Behind the Screen: Movies for Second Language Acquisition

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Abstract

Teaching English through movies, TV-shows, and video clips is a relatively modern way of enhancing language acquisition. The benefits of using American movies for improving students' English language proficiency have been studied by many researchers (e.g., Webb, 2011; Gormly, 2013; Lavaur & Bairstow, 2011; Etemadi, 2012) who supported the idea that, unlike traditional language instruction, authentic American TV-shows are able to target all major language aspects as a unit without separating each individual skill, thus increasing the effectiveness of language instruction. This paper explains the benefits of using video materials for English language instruction. It will cover the organizational process of implementing TV-shows into language learning course which includes (1) objectives, (2) relevance and appropriateness criteria, and (3) genre selection. The author will also introduce the principles of developing the course structure, which will consist of different types of pre-watching, while-watching, and post-watching activities. These principles and strategies form a comprehensive guideline to effectively implement TV-shows into second language instruction.

Keywords: second language acquisition, TV-shows, TV-series, course development

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Introduction

When learning a foreign language, it is hard to overestimate the importance of the authentic exposure to the language used in its intended cultural context with all the variety and diversity of cultures elements it comes with. As an English as a second language learner myself, I studied the language in my home country Ukraine, which is a non-English speaking country, and the limited exposure to authentic English complicated my language acquisition process.

While learning English in Ukraine, there were three crucial components offered by the multimedia content which provided me authentic exposure to the English language – music, videogames, and movies/TV-shows. When I listened to my favorite English songs, I wanted to know what they were about, so I looked for the lyrics and did my best to translate them using a dictionary. If I was lucky and there was already a translated version of that song on the internet, I would look at both English and Ukrainian versions, line to line, learning new words and idioms. I didn't have to force myself to memorize new words or grammatical constructions; I simply remembered my favorite songs to which I listened daily, and I easily memorized even advanced-level vocabulary. The songs also helped me understand the context in which I could use those words. In other words, songs gave me the intrinsic motivation to memorize words and grammar constructions that, if learned routinely in class, would be much harder to retain.

Similarly, when I was growing up, there were very few videogames that were translated into Ukrainian or Russian. To play adventure videogames, which is the type of videogames I liked most growing up, it was crucial to understand dialogues, names of objects and action verbs. Learning verbs like *give*, *pick up*, *push*, *pull*, *look at*, *talk to*, felt effortless because the knowledge would be constantly reinforced in games.

Even though both songs and videogames provide an important contextual component, songs are missing the visual component which often is representative of culture, and the visuals in videogames are often exaggerated and don't accurately represent the cultural context. Movies and TV-shows fill this gap, because, in addition to authentic language exposure, they also provide cultural contexts. Language and culture are inseparable, and language constitutes a large part of one's identity (Kucher, 2019). Learning to communicate in a different language requires more than knowing how to merely translate sentences, but also understanding “the values and representation the speakers of the language have of the world and how these speakers represent themselves in their cultural production” (Kramsch, 1998). Authentic video materials are one of the most effective media tools for communication among cultures. In no more than half a century, movies have dominated the lives of communities and changed many of their habits (Hafez, 2007).

Another benefit of using TV-shows is that they provide multisensory information about the language use in combination with learning about cultures, traditions, lifestyles, and beliefs, which transforms learning into a dynamic process. In traditional language programs skills are separated into classes – Reading, Writing, Listening, Speaking, and Grammar. Movies and TV-shows allow students to synthesize their knowledge and develop language skills more naturally as a complex unit without artificially isolating each skill. They deliver information about different

cultures, traditions, lifestyles, and beliefs, and are one of the most dynamic and accessible ways of learning any language.

In 2016 I facilitated the development of an English learning course based on the use of American TV-series which was added to the curriculum of one of the intensive English programs in Texas. I will explain the principles that guided me in the TV-show selection, and the strategies I used to develop the course structure including various types of activities and recommendations.

Movies Vs. TV-Shows

Movies and TV-shows both provide authentic environments for learning a language within its cultural contexts, however they differ in the ways they can be applied in classroom. I will briefly analyze movies and TV-shows from the perspectives of their affordances, limitations, and possible approaches.

Movies. King (2002) recommends *scene approach* and *whole film approach* when using movies for ESL instruction. In scene approach, teachers may show students one or several specific scenes or segments from the movie, but not the whole production. In whole film approach, teachers show students the movie scene-by-scene in a sequential order, making pauses between the segments for discussions or to check students' understanding. Teachers also pay show the movie in its entirety without making stops, and any activities or discussions will follow after the movie is finished. Selecting an appropriate approach depends on the teacher's objectives and targeted audience.

The strongest argument I make in favor of utilizing video materials in language instruction is that it allows students to synthesize their linguistic knowledge and to build contextual relation to socio-cultural elements presented on the screen. While scene approach is great for teaching vocabulary and grammar, it chops down movies into isolated scenes and strips them down of their large context. As a result, students receive very little information about the characters, relationships, storyline, and are unable to benefit from these contextual cultural elements that movies offer. Movies watched with a scene approach functions the same way as short audio and video clips included in many traditional listening and speaking textbooks.

Using whole-film approach resolves most of the issues with scene approach and allows students to immerse within the socio-cultural context presented on the screen as well as practice their language skills. However, watching a two-hour film is likely to cause cognitive overload in language learners, especially in beginning learners. That is why sequential approach with regular pauses to check students' understanding is recommended for whole-film approach so that a two-hour long movie can be viewed over the course of several class meetings. The challenge with this approach is that it might be harder for students to remember the details of the movie if the viewing is stretched over the week. The beginning of the film may fade away and meaningful discussion might occur only following the scenes that were watched the same day. It may be hard to elicit deep critical discussions about big ideas, overarching concepts, and promote analytical thinking, or discuss the whole movie plot in terms of its developmental points such as midpoint, climax, and resolution.

TV-Shows. Depending on whether teachers plan to use TV-shows once, several times, or every class during the semester, they may choose to watch a single show or multiple shows for language teaching. If teachers choose to use TV-series, they may decide to show the episodes sequentially or selectively, which means they may watch episodes one-by-one in a chronological order, or select the episodes that they find to be more suitable for language instruction. Selective episodes are recommended for TV-shows that introduce a new plot every episode (e.g. sitcoms), and sequential episodes are recommended for shows that have a bigger plot unwrapping with each consecutive episode and introducing new characters (e.g. thrillers, dramas, etc.). Choosing to watch only one TV-series during the semester will allow students to connect to the characters and understand their motives better, however using several TV-series will expose students to a wider variety of speaking styles, life situations, and cultural elements. Each has its benefits and teachers are encouraged to adapt their course structure and TV-series selection to specific objectives of the lessons.

Regardless of the storyline of the entire show, traditionally every episode of any TV-series has its own plot which can be discussed in terms of developmental points, problems, resolutions, characters' actions, cultural themes, etc. Because such episodes are normally between 20 and 40 minutes long, students may watch and discuss the entire episode during a single class, which places TV-shows for language learning in a slightly more advantageous position when compared to movies. In this paper, I will be referring only to TV-shows when discussing strategies for using video materials for second language acquisition.

Objectives and Structure

The first step in designing a program of study using TV-shows is deciding on the main objectives. Linguistic objectives, such as the development of listening, speaking, reading, writing, and vocabulary skills, are usually the initial objectives that educators have in mind when planning language lessons. However, TV-shows allow educators to target cultural and content-relative topics that otherwise would be hard to address in an effective and authentic way. Educators may choose to set as objective to analyze the socio-cultural climate showed on the screen, make connections to the students' home country experience, and critically evaluate the characters' decisions and actions.

Deciding on the structure of the implementation of TV-shows in the program is another important step. The implementation of video materials may occur on the levels of an isolated lesson plan, permanent part of a course, separate course, or the entire program with its own courses. I participated in designing a separate course which became a part of the official curriculum of the intensive English program. It was not a part of a Listening and Speaking class, but a separate course which focused on the comprehensive language skills development and cultural competence.

Criteria for Relevance and Appropriateness

Many professionals in the field addressed the importance of developing appropriateness criteria as guidelines for selecting the most relevant authentic video materials (Kwon, 2004; King, 2010; Rivera, 2015). Drawing from their work, I adapted the general classification of the relevance and appropriateness criteria which

included three groups – *basic criteria*, *linguistic criteria*, and *social-cultural criteria*. Table 1 shows a summary of these criteria.

Basic criteria include general guidelines for selecting video materials appropriate for language learning, such as high quality of video and sound, and a linear plot presentation with distinct development point (i.e. midpoint, climax, resolution, etc.). It is also important to make sure that the content in the video materials is age appropriate and generally relatable for the students, especially when reviewing dated TV-shows that represent ways of living and situations which are often much different from contemporary lifestyles.

Linguistic criteria cover language-specific requirements of an effective TV-show for language teaching. Based on the language level of target students, the teacher must critically evaluate the vocabulary complexity, pronunciation clarity, and speech pace dominating in the video materials. It is also preferred that the TV-show highlights predominantly the types of speech considered proper in the society. American TV-shows have the power to introduce different accents to the language learners which is a great advantage over traditional instructional models, however the amount of jargon and slang should be moderate to low.

Social-cultural criteria focus on the appropriateness of the content and social representation in the videos. TV-shows are praised for having the potential to increase the students' motivation to learn the language. That is why teachers need to make sure that the content showed in the series is generally interesting for their age group and social status, and that it is presenting universal themes that all students can relate to regardless of their cultural backgrounds. It is also important that the TV-shows represent a generally positive social message, and that it is ethnically and culturally sensitive. There should be minimum no to representation of bias, stereotyping and discrimination on the screen unless it is a specific target of the movie as a social message.

Following these criteria is a great start for selecting the TV-show collection appropriate for language learners. Nevertheless, we cannot always predict the ways that the students might perceive certain cultural messages or themes. It is imperative to encourage students to speak up if any parts of the video make them feel uncomfortable, or if they find any aspects of the videos offensive. Such disclosure should ensure students that they have the power to address any issues that there might be with the video materials and that they will be resolved.

Basic	Linguistic	Social-Cultural
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Age appropriateness • Linear/sequential presentation • Good or high quality of video and sound • Well-written plot with distinct development points (midpoint, climax, resolution, etc.). • Generally relatable content (especially for dated movies/TV Shows) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vocabulary difficulty • Pronunciation clarity • Speech pace • Proper types of speech styles (colloquial, semi-formal, formal) • Variety of accents • Reasonable amount of jargon and cultural references • Considerable percentage of speech/dialogue. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Universal themes and generally relatable content • Representation of generally positive social message • Minimal representation of bias, stereotyping and discrimination (unless targeted in the movie as a social message) • Ethnically/culturally sensitivity.

Table 1: Criteria for relevance and appropriateness of video materials used for ELT.
Adapted from Kwon, 2004.

Genre Selection

Selecting an appropriate genre for the TV-shows for ESL instruction is instrumental in achieving desired linguistic, cultural and other pedagogical goals. A well-designed organization of the genres according to the language learners' proficiency was developed by King (2010) and Rivera (2015). I adapted their suggestions to create the classification of different genres of American television according to their levels of difficulty for understanding by English learners.

Beginning. Recommended TV-show genres for beginning learners are *sitcoms* and *romcoms*. These genres make a great choice for lower level speakers because they typically have simple plots and describe common situations that students can relate to even if they miss some verbal clues. Allowing beginning students an opportunity to guess the storyline based on visual cues is important to maintain their engagement and motivation and to avoid discouragement at the initial stages of the course introduction. Examples of TV-shows recommended in this genre are *Seinfeld*, *How I Met your Mother*, *Middle*, and *Everybody Loves Raymond*.

Intermediate. Intermediate language learners will benefit most from watching *drama* and *action* series. These genres are known for fast-moving storylines and the emphasis on human feelings and emotions. While students need to rely more on their language skills while watching these shows, the plots are traditionally built on universal themes like love, hate, friendship, family, trust, betrayal, and other feelings, emotions, and human relationships that all students can relate with regardless of the language they speak. Exemplary of this genre are *Gilmore Girls*, *Heroes*, *Lost*, and *Monk*.

Advanced. To present students with the highest challenge, *detective*, *crime*, and *sci-fi* TV-shows are recommended for advanced language learners. Understanding the plot twists of such video materials poses a difficult task and heavily relies on the knowledge of vocabulary, listening skills, and often cultural comprehension. Visual

clues are often unable to help viewers follow the narrative, and that is why such TV-shows make the best choice for advanced learners. A few examples include *Arrow*, *Breaking Bad*, *Mars*, and *Battlestar Galactica*.

Activities

As stated by Kucher (2019), three types of activities are necessary to effectively organize a lesson using TV-shows: *pre-watching*, *while-watching*, and *post-watching*.

Pre-Watching. The first step in planning a lesson is to design a pre-watching discussion about any cultural elements or plot points that might be unclear or confusing for the learners. Students feel more confident and eager to watch the show if they know the initial information about the main characters and the general themes present in the episode.

One example of successfully using a warm-up discussion is when I developed a lesson on the first episode of the TV-show called *Gilmore Girls*. In this episode, a single mother Lorelei Gilmore's daughter gets accepted to a prestigious private school. However, Lorelei doesn't have enough money to pay for her daughter's tuition, and she goes to her parents for help. It is difficult for Lorelei because she and her parents have very complicated past and their relationship is tense.

I managed to recognize three important themes in this episode – private and public schools, being a single parent, and the relationships between parents and children. Here is a set of guiding questions that I have developed to start off the discussion prior to watching the episode:

1. Public School VS. Private School. Is it common for parents to send their children to private schools in your country?
2. Is it difficult to get into a private school? Is it expensive?
3. Why do some parents prefer to send their children to private schools? What are the benefits?
4. Are there many single-parent families in your country?
5. What are the major difficulties that a single parent faces every day?
6. What sources of support does a single mom usually have?
7. How important is it to maintain close relationship to your parents, especially later in life?
8. Are there any situations in life that may cause families to stop or dramatically reduce communication? What situations may that be? Is it common in your country?

Another way to prepare students for watching the show is to prepare short information about the main characters of the episode, especially if they are being introduced for the first time. Having the background knowledge prior to watching also adds to students' confidence and excitement about the series.

Finally, it is important to introduce students to the vocabulary in the episode. When selecting the vocabulary, a teacher should be guided by the students' proficiency level and choose the words and idioms that are most important to understand the plot. When selecting the vocabulary, I also gave preference to words that were on the

Academic Word List (Coxhead, 2000). Because of the program focused on English for Academic Purposes, utilizing the Academic Word List in this course ensured that the new vocabulary was not only useful for understanding the TV-show, but also for their future academic lives.

While-Watching. The purpose of while-watching activities is to activate students' attention to retain specific information about the episode – names of main characters, their relationship to each other, or major plot events. The types of activities appropriate for this purpose are not unlike traditional activities found in language quizzes and tests: identifying true or false statements, matching pictures with descriptions, multiple choice questions, and short answers. It is important to remember that the cognitive load of watching and comprehending the episode combined with multiple while-watching activities can easily overwhelm the learners and may cause them to underperform. I recommend instructors to develop no more than two simple while-watching exercises per episode.

Post-Watching. Activities in post-watching part of the lesson mainly focus on two goals: check students general understanding of the plot and encourage critical and analytical thinking. Understanding the plot and vocabulary is an important goal for beginning level students which can be achieved through asking questions, leading discussions, or role-playing situations from the episode. Additionally, similar exercises to the ones used in while-watching activities may be used for post-watching, however in-class discussions and interactions among students who are eager to share their opinions after watching the episode usually result in better understanding and learning. Depending on the course objectives, instructors may emphasize vocabulary, listening, speaking, and the activities can be adjusted accordingly.

When developing post-watching activities for intermediate and advanced language learners, teachers should allow them take advantage of the group discussions to analyze the episode and critically evaluate the situations they saw on the screen. Students can demonstrate their higher level of thinking beyond simply retelling the plot by making inferences and predictions about the future of the characters or situations. The instructor may also organize a debate where students would pick a side in an argument, use details from the episode to support their points, and convince other students. Post-watching activities are also effective for discussing cultural elements that might be new or unusual for the language learners. Students can compare their own experiences with the situations from the episode and find similarities and differences across cultures and societies. Post-watching activities is a powerful space to reflect on the situations, relationships, opinions, and values as they are perceived by different people.

Conclusion

With the introduction of technology in the educational field, learning spaces have undergone dramatic transformations to match the ever-changing digital landscape of society. It calls for the development of new methods of language instruction. Authentic video materials such as TV-shows introduce the new medium for second language acquisition with the potential to retain high levels of student engagement and motivation, which is typically challenging for a traditional classroom setting. Structured and well-developed models of using video materials for language teaching

have proven to have positive effects reflected in improved high student achievement. Additionally, TV-shows provide an important link between language teaching and cultural immersion which add authenticity to the language learning experience. They target all major language aspects as a unit without separating each individual skill while also expose students to varieties of cultures, social components, and promote high order thinking.

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