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BRINGING LANGUAGE AND CULTURE TO LIFE

– THE SIGNIFICANCE OF AUTHENTIC AUDIOVISUAL INPUT IN ELT

Foreword

High technology and the media have permeated our everyday existence. They are not only an integral part of our daily routine but, for many, also “a primary source of social models and [...] social identities” (Meskill 2002: 23). It is most evident in the case of the New Millennium Learners, so accustomed to this cutting edge reality that life might seem empty without it.

In contrast to these trends, many, if not most Polish educational institutions, continue to rely on the conservative transmission mode of education, noticeable already at the visual level of the teacher-fronted set-up of the classrooms. Similarly, foreign language classrooms in Polish schools still appear to be largely confined to the traditional course book based instruction where the CD is the only resource tool in the hands of the language teacher, and where the CD and the teacher provide the only form of aural input.

Despite EFL teachers' declared willingness to make use of technological innovations in language teaching as well as their asserted familiarity with the plethora of studies conducted on the benefits of technology-enhanced methodologies, most of our EFL classrooms remain set in their ways, unaffected by the world outside.

The aim of the present study is to argue for the obligatory incorporation of authentic audiovisual resources into foreign language education, in particular at the highest proficiency levels. While developing this argument, I focus on a number of key issues: the characteristics and needs of today's C1+ learners, the notion of authentic materials in ELT and their function in the development of advanced students' linguistic, sociolinguistic and cultural competences.

Advanced learners in ELT

This paper concentrates exclusively on the advanced learner. Although a number of the ideas suggested here may be valid for lower proficiency levels, it is at the highest stages of foreign language education that students need to learn and absorb the common as well as the unique in terms of linguistic discourse and sociolinguistic expression. Only then can they finally focus on those aspects of language which had to pass unnoticed at lower stages of their language education.

Advanced level – a description

Advanced learners, as understood in the forthcoming discussion, are learners at level C1 and above, as defined by “The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: learning, teaching, assessment” (CEF). According to CEF (CoE 2006), with regards to the receptive skill of listening, the development of which is central to the present discussion, C1 learners can comprehend a wide range of idiomatic expressions and colloquialisms; follow with considerable ease extended speech on abstract, complex topics i.e. most lectures and discussions, as well as broadcast and recorded audio material.

Therefore, the assumption is that the advanced student is a fairly proficient listener. On the other hand, however, practical experience shows that there are many C1 learners who are “hard of listening” (Vanderplank 1988: 277) and who, although quite good at course book-based listening comprehension activities, continue to struggle while trying to comprehend natural, authentic spoken discourse. That is why, in order to facilitate their further progress, teachers must adopt some solutions which will enable them to equip the learners with competences needed in genuine everyday interaction outside the language classroom.

Advanced learners’ objectives

In the broadest sense, the objective of listening practice is to prepare the learners to function successfully in real-life listening situations (Ur 1984, 1996: 105). Yet, highly advanced learners are expected to (North 2007), and in most cases also would like to effectively understand any spoken discourse regardless of its obscurity, sophistication or complexity levels, preferably with the effectiveness of a well-educated native speaker – WENS (term adopted from North 2005). To assume that this calibre of knowledge and skills will be acquired “by the way,” would be extremely naive. It is indisputable that in order to develop and master such an array of aural receptive abilities, advanced learners need to gain excellent linguistic skills as well as comprehension skills of sociocultural and sociolinguistic references. All these objectives call for much more than the mere ability to “get the gist,” to “get by” fostered by the popular communicative approach.

Language competence is much more than linguistic knowledge alone (Swain 1998, Crozet and Liddicoat 1999, Niemeier 2004). Students also have to learn and understand how the foreign language works and how things are said and done in a given culture. They also need to become familiar with the minutiae of daily life – habits, body language, fashions in clothes, gender roles, relationships within the family and at work – “and indeed the whole feeling of the social landscape” (Sherman 2003: 12). In order to do so, they must not be confined to communicative listening tasks and pseudo-authentic materials available on the CD accompanying their course book. Recordings selected for these kinds of activities at best try to simulate real-life communication in the target language. Unfortunately, they “convey very little information beyond actual semantic content. Most recordings take place against a silent and therefore totally neutral background, the participants are of indeterminate age and character, speak in standard accent [...] and are rarely actually performing a significant communicative transaction” (Ur 1984: 164). Also, the prevailing trend in ELT seems to encourage listening solely for the purpose of

simulated, communicative practice, narrowed down to multiple-choice and T/F questions (Wenzel 2001: 94–95), which, while effective at lower proficiency levels, do not lead to the expected development of linguistic and cultural competences pursued by the very advanced learner.

To acquire these competences students have to expand their linguistic repertoire and understanding of the target culture in order to be later able to interact in it in appropriate and socially acceptable ways. One must not forget that even very advanced learners are not native speakers: although they generally have the ability to understand many sociocultural and sociolinguistic references, in practice, they miss a great deal of linguistic and socioculturally rooted nuances and subtleties: slang, idiomatic expressions, puns, verbal word play, allusions, jokes, sarcasm and irony, to name but a few.

Up to the advanced level, students are not expected to comprehend cultural specificity in the target language simply because their wealth of vocabulary and structures is not extensive enough. The situation changes dramatically at the highest levels of proficiency: now sophisticated sociocultural and sociolinguistic sensitivity becomes indispensable. Since language depends on context and context is cultural, even a student whose knowledge of the foreign language is very good still experience frequent communication problems due to his/her inadequate cultural interpretation. Culture affects the linguistic code. The sociopolitical environment of a given society can penetrate the language to such an extent that many lexical units and phraseologies are very difficult, if not impossible, for a foreign learner's comprehension (Leaver and Shekhtman 2002: 23).

That is why at highly advanced levels of proficiency the learners need to maintain constant contact with the target language culture. As direct and intensive immersion is seldom possible, culture has to be regularly smuggled into the classroom as well as into teaching resources. It is my firm conviction that this requirement can effectively be fulfilled by means of incorporating into ELT complementary authentic video materials, rich in sociolinguistic and cultural associations, which are unavailable in the course books on offer.

The notion of authentic materials and authenticity

The term “authentic” in FLT is very imprecise and, depending on the adopted criteria, can be interpreted in a number of different ways (Dakowska 2001: 127–135, 2005: 183–187). In most FLT materials, the notion “authentic” describes materials, i.e. authentic texts/input data (written or spoken). Some scholars argue that these are materials created by native speakers for native speakers of a given language (Rogers and Medley 1988). Others claim that they are materials which have been “produced for purposes other than to teach language” (Nunan 1988: 99) or, in other words, written for real-life communicative purpose (Lee 1995), not with the foreign language learner in mind (Ur 1996). There are also researchers who question this one-sided line of interpretation, arguing that any text which has been removed from its original context and/or intended audience immediately becomes “inauthentic” (Breen 1985, Widdowson 1998, Chavez 1998). Many insist that authenticity should not be narrowed down to materials alone. Consequently, they extend the interpretation of authenticity and subdivide it into text/input authenticity, task

authenticity, learner authenticity, authenticity of use, interaction and situation (e.g. Breen 1985, Lee 1995, Widdowson 1998, Wenzel 2001).

For the purpose of the present discussion, however, the term “authentic material” is used in the most basic sense, i.e. to describe audiovisual (AV) materials drawn from genuine contexts and sources which have not been created or simplified for the purpose of FLT.

Authentic video in practice: a look at the classroom

Audiovisual materials have been assigned a significant role in foreign language teaching for so long that, in fact, video is no longer perceived as new technology. Nevertheless, despite its seemingly well-established position in FLT, video, even the kind explicitly designed for language teaching, is still a very rare component of our foreign language lessons. The above conclusion stems from over sixty hours of EFL lesson observations and evaluations conducted over a period of the past seven months, as well as the preliminary findings of a questionnaire carried out among randomly selected 118 post-B2 level university and secondary school students in the Gdańsk area. According to the questionnaire over 88 percent of students declare that they have not watched any video material in their compulsory foreign language class in the past two terms, while the remaining 12 percent have done so once or twice in the same period of time. These results are quite illustrative of what goes on in the language classroom. Conclusions drawn from lesson observations and evaluations, unfortunately, largely confirm the data obtained in the preliminary student questionnaire.

The question remains: what are the reasons for this widespread absence of audiovisuals in our language classrooms? The information obtained from EFL teachers in personal communication sheds some light on the problem and allows us to identify three major reasons for the current state of things. Firstly, there are many teachers who claim they do not have immediate access to the necessary equipment, reluctantly admitting that the thought itself of having to sign up for a TV set and a DVD player days, if not weeks, before the lesson coupled with the hassle of wheeling the equipment back and forth between the classrooms only to use it for 15–20 minutes are enough of a deterrent. Secondly, there are those who decide not to implement additional materials as they feel “pressed for time” because “there is a course book to cover and a syllabus to follow:” coincidentally, they usually happen to be the ones teaching advanced levels, e.g. A-levels, CAE or CPE exam courses, where the exam/test seems to be the ultimate goal of language education. Last but not least, there are also the teachers who dismiss the value of authentic audiovisuals in formal educational institutions, arguing that they are “only a distraction in the process of teaching,” breed “inactivity and passive viewing” and, as such, “had better be left for after school entertainment.”

A different perspective: advantages for the advanced learner

In contrast to the opinions presented above, among most SLA researchers and FLT methodologists, there seems to be a general consensus as regards the role and benefits of authentic audiovisuals for the language learning process (e.g. Ur 1984, 1996; Rogers and Medley 1988; MacWilliam 1990; Stempleski and Tomalin 2001; Rost 1990, 2002; Harris 2003; Shermann 2003). Their research demonstrates that

the advantages stemming from the regular use of authentic video and television in class are indeed multiple.

To begin with, “the most obvious reason for using video [...] is that language students want it. It is not an indulgence or a frill but central to language learning” (Sherman 2003: 12). It is like a breath of fresh air in an EFL classroom as it replaces the monotony and predictability of the course book or exam oriented lesson. It deals with contemporary issues relevant to students’ lives and conveys real-life language, used by the target language community – also in all down-to-earth situations marginalised by academically or exam-oriented course books for the advanced addressee. It exposes them to different accents, dialects, registers, slang as well as up-to-date vocabulary and colloquialisms. More importantly, however, the language can finally be interpreted in the dense visual context supplied by events, actions, expressions and gestures (Sherman 2003: 13). It is therefore more likely than the semi-authentic AV materials for ELT, not to mention sound-only CD recordings, to awaken students’ true curiosity for language, to sensitise them to the great richness of linguistic expression and, consequently, to enhance their language awareness. Thus, authentic AV recordings are a real learning-well of linguistic and sociolinguistic information delivered in context. What is more, with proper teacher guidance, some of this input can be successfully turned into intake. Not surprisingly then, authentic resources are usually very enthusiastically received by advanced language learners as extremely motivating and interesting. In fact, students tend to perceive them as one of the most supreme sources of linguistic and sociocultural knowledge available outside the target language community. Their strong affective impact also plays an important role in boosting the student’s genuine interest in the content, thus increasing the probability of authentic language use.

Apart from being a potentially convenient springboard for reinforcing students’ receptive skill of listening, authentic AV materials can be immensely motivating to watch, thus engaging students’ long term memory, which, in turn, facilitates the acquisition of language and general knowledge. Consequently, they are also likely to encourage the learners to adopt L2 viewing habits and make independent use of authentic AV sources outside the EFL classroom, thus aiding life-long autonomous learning.

Although in ELT our main concern is language development, the application of authentic AV materials in class should not be limited to the linguistic aim only. Authentic video also embeds the linguistic terms into culturally influenced forms of thinking and sociocultural concepts (Meskill 2002). Due to its wealth and complexity of sociocultural associations and nuances, this type of input is irreplaceable for the development of advanced learners’ knowledge of the social, cultural, economic and political aspects of the target community. This knowledge is a pre-requisite if one wishes to comprehend language with the effectiveness of an educated native speaker. According to Krashinsky (1993: 188): “The idea that is raised by the use of real-life materials is that culture is a reality that is social, political and ideological and that the difficulty of understanding cultural codes stems from the difficulty of viewing the world from another perspective, not grasping another lexical or grammatical code.” Authentic AV input “is a window into [that – M.S.] culture” (Sherman 2003: 12). This contact with the target language and culture, or its lack, enhances or

hinders language acquisition and the development of cultural competence (Meskill 2002).

Creating cultural awareness involves observing, exploring and comprehending a different reality. "Providing the learner with ample communicative environment caters to [the learner's – M.S.] role of an observer" (Dakowska 2003: 166). Language students, in particular those at the higher proficiency levels, need extensive exposure to realistic interaction as a basis for their own speech (Sherman 2003: 14). Judiciously selected and implemented AV input answers these needs. In fact, "it is an entry ticket to the English speaking world, on a par with [...] other language activities found in EFL course books. It should like them be regarded as a language learning goal in its own right" (Sherman 2003: 13).

Practical implications for the advanced EFL classroom

Although the significance of authentic AV materials in ELT is unquestionable, exposure alone is not sufficient to stretch the advanced students' linguistic and sociocultural powers to the limit. Consequently, the process of viewing has to be purposely integrated with language learning. The success of this venture to a great extent depends on the selection of input and the procedures adopted in class.

Input selection

Today's multitude of potential sources of authentic AV input for ELT is truly impressive. It is easily accessible through satellite and cable TV, the Internet and DVD, and ranges from educational films, documentaries, TV news, interviews, through sports programmes, soap operas, drama series, comedy sketches, to full-length feature films, plays, etc. The process of material selection and task design, of course, will not be complete without considering the academic and/or non-academic interests and needs of the student. These, too, due to affective and motivational factors, are of paramount importance for any language learning activity. As long as the discourse is related to the students' general interests, field of study, current hot issues, or always enthusiastically received entertainment, students' response is very positive.

My experience shows that in case of very advanced L2 students it is a good idea to apply similar criteria of material selection as one would for L1 input. C1 level students of economics, for example, appear to be genuinely interested in and benefit from the latest news programmes and TV interviews in which issues such as unemployment, taxes, bank and company mergers are discussed. However, with a similar class of early education students, these topics are unlikely to gain popularity. Interestingly, they would much rather follow educational TV programmes, or even cartoons, designed for English speaking children, which, conveniently for the latter group, offer ample opportunity to plug many gaps in their lexicon. It is my experience that very many advanced students do not comprehend notions and expressions with which English 3-year-olds are familiar, e.g. "Action Stations," "go tobogganing," "candy floss," "night-night," "play musical statues," "play freeze tag" or "make a snow angel." As follows, even such trivial, ludic and definitely non-academic input as cartoons for pre-schoolers can, to some extent, raise the advanced students' cross-linguistic and cross-cultural competences.

Input exploitation

Ever-newer innovations in digital technology allow for enormous freedom and creativity in terms of the ways AV input can be presented and exploited in a modern EFL classroom. Teachers can now choose from an impressive range of techniques, tools and activities.

To make optimal use of AV-enhanced teaching it is highly recommended that the input meets the following criteria:

- it is suited to the students' interests, linguistic needs and/or general educational goals;
- it is appropriate for the aim of the teacher's procedures in the EFL classroom;
- it is challenging, yet generally comprehensible; characterised by a high degree of naturalism of speech, as well as high verbal density rather than plenty of action;
- it is self-contained, i.e. meaningful and significant but not too long – cutting off a story-line midstream will prove counterproductive (Meskill 2002: 101).

Last but not least, the strategy adopted for video implementation in class must be top-down processing first, rather than bottom-up. Simply stated, first comes the viewing for general comprehension, with the hope for authentic listening/ authentic language use; next come bottom-up processes focusing on the analysis and processing of linguistic data.

Through a variety of approaches, at C1+ level AV input can be effectively used for practising broadly understood listening skills as well as for conscious language study. It is also a convenient springboard for developing follow-up speaking, writing or even reading (AV with L2 subtitles).

As it is beyond the scope of the present article to compile a selection of ready-to-use AV activities, or go into an in-depth discussion of all the possible ways of teaching English with this particular aid, I shall limit myself to presenting only these ideas which I have found particularly fruitful for the advanced level student. These include the following:

1. After a brief introduction by the teacher, students watch the whole programme. Provided its content is characterised by a high degree of cognitive appeal (Wenzel 2001: 46, 53–54), students are likely to become genuinely involved in the listening-viewing process. If this is the case, no standard comprehension-check techniques (e.g. multiple choice or T/F questions) should be assigned as they will inevitably change the character of listening from authentic listening/ authentic language use to listening practice (Wenzel 2001: 51). Rather, it is hoped that the AV input becomes a point of departure for an in-class discussion focusing on its deeper layers, as well as target culture specific political, social or economic issues. A possible follow-up, with the aid of freeze framing, is for the class to concentrate on and discuss visual cultural information such as buildings, institutions, events, signs, notices, etc.
2. Having completed step 1 (above), the teacher can proceed with activities aiming at language development. One idea is for the students to practise the skill of "shadowing" (Dakowska 2005: 30): the teacher pauses the recording sequentially while students repeat in L2 everything that has been said. It is an excellent stimulus for a thorough analysis of the language used in various registers. Slang, colloquialisms or difficult vocabulary hindering full comprehension can

be handled at the moment the problem is discovered. The aim is to improve intensive listening, pronunciation/intonation (for this purpose, however, standard accent recordings only), and expand L2 lexicon. The activity may also aid the development of working memory span for productive tasks (Dakowska 2005: 222).

3. Optionally, instead of “shadowing” the teacher asks the students to perform consecutive interpreting (from L2 to L1) of selected fragments of the AV recording.
4. An even more challenging variation of this procedure is for the students to prepare, with the help of semi-professional subtitling software, L1 or L2 subtitles for selected video clips viewed in class. However, due to reported technological limitations (lack of computer labs at schools and colleges), this idea may not be feasible in many school settings. A possible solution is to turn this kind of task into a homework assignment: individual or group project.
5. Videos can also be used as a basis for comparing L1 subtitles with the original soundtrack, as well as identifying and correcting defective and ambiguous extracts in already available translations.

The list of AV applications presented above is by no means exhaustive. However, the aim of the article is rather to provide a stimulus for language teachers to pursue their own ideas and ways leading to more effective EFL teaching of the E-generation. My conclusions from lesson observations as well as several years of hands-on experience of teaching C1+ levels lead me to suggest that in the process of material selection and task design teachers should remain very open-minded. Rather than subject the input to intense academic scrutiny, they should examine and focus on their learners’ objectives and interests. From the students’ perspective, AV-enhanced learning is usually a very attractive alternative to the classroom routine. Due to its high degree of cognitive appeal, when judiciously selected and implemented, it also tends to leave a more lasting imprint on the student’s cognitive structure than a few pages covered in the EFL course book.

Concluding remarks

Although (it might seem) one can hardly deny the usefulness of authentic AV input in the foreign language classroom, its practical implementation in educational establishments does not match the declared rate of adoption, thus falling short of the expectations of the linguistically and technologically advanced New Millennium Learner.

We should not overlook the fact that these learners come from “a culture dominated by the visual image, and in particular, the moving image” (Maley in the foreword to Stempleski and Tomalin 2001). For the E-generation, authentic audiovisual materials are a natural, convenient and intrinsically motivating medium as well as the source of sociolinguistic, sociocultural and paralinguistic information delivered in full context.

When the input material is selected according to its cognitive potential (Wenzel 2001) and matches the interests and educational needs of the advanced learners, it becomes challenging and cognitively involving. As such, it facilitates

further development of the learners' linguistic repertoire and general knowledge. It "offers an enlargement of [their – M.S.] knowledge of the world and the cultures that it contains. It is in the broadest sense «educational»" (Maley in Stempleski and Tomalin 2001).

As a matter of fact, in the absence of a possibility of direct immersion in the foreign language and culture, the inclusion of supplementary authentic audiovisual data remains one of the best means of bringing the target language and culture to life.

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Stosowanie znajomości języka i kultury w życiu codziennym – znaczenie materiałów autentycznych w nauczaniu angielskiego

Streszczenie

Stosowanie materiałów audiowizualnych na lekcjach języków obcych nie jest niczym nowym, jednak w czasie formalnych lekcji języka obcego, w znacznym stopniu opartych na materiałach podręcznikowych, dosyć rzadko sięgamy po autentyczne programy telewizyjne, seriale, filmy.

Celem niniejszego artykułu jest odpowiedź na sceptycyzm nauczycieli wobec stosowania autentycznych materiałów audiowizualnych i przekonanie ich, że w czasach, gdy ich uczniowie są od urodzenia mieszkańcami zaawansowanego technologicznie świata, oni też powinni do tego świata należeć.

Artykuł omawia emocjonalne, kognitywne i lingwistyczne powody dla których autentyczne materiały audiowizualne powinny być częścią każdego kursu języka obcego, szczególnie na wyższych poziomach zaawansowania, a także przedstawia kilka propozycji technik nauczania z użyciem autentycznych materiałów audiowizualnych.