Video as a Resource for Teaching American Culture

Maria G. Lebedko

Far Eastern State University, Russia

"English teachers all over the world cry out for materials which can make English come alive for their students. TV, video, and the newer video-related technologies provide just such a resource . . ." (Susan Stempleski, 1995a, p. 48).

The advantages of using video in the EFL classroom are many and obvious. Authors point out high motivation, and an "enjoyable learning environment" (Stempleski, 1995a p. 48). Videos increase oral comprehension, "stimulate student interaction and communication with other classmates," "promote cross-cultural awareness," and "are adaptable for use with students at any English-language proficiency level" (Rice, 1993, p. vii). Tomalin (1992) assumes that "Video communicates meaning better than any other media" (p. 49). The usefulness of this technology is almost universally recognized. Many proponents of using video for EFL teaching maintain that it can be successfully used for teaching culture and agree that videos stimulate students to acquire the target culture, as well as language (e.g., Henly, 1993; Ladau-Harjulin, 1992; Stempleski, 1992; Tomalin, 1992).

The concept of culture has given rise to a lot of debate in the literature. Out of many definitions—symbolic, cognitive, behaviorist, functionalist, psychological, sociological, anthropological—the two latter ones are of paramount importance to an EFL teacher (See discussion in Omaggio-Hadley, 1993, p. 362ff.; Robinson, 1985, pp. 7–12). Many authors distinguish between "little-c" and "big-C" cultures. Thus, Brooks (1976) distinguishes between "culture as *everything* in human life" ("little-c"), and "Culture as the *best* of everything in human life" (p. 20). The connotations of "little-c" culture are so subtle and intangible that it is difficult to study, identify, observe, and teach them. In this article, culture is understood as "everything in human life." Videos are a perfect resource for teaching culture, but the question arises as to how to maximize the benefits of videos for teaching culture. The difficulty lies in designing the accompanying tasks. I would like to underscore that teaching culture requires different methods and techniques. It requires a special set of tasks and a special taxonomy of exercises.

An Example

For teaching American culture (dating patterns, superstitions, holidays—Halloween—and traditional American marriage and child rearing), I use *Popeye, the*

Sailor animated cartoons series, namely, *Parlez Vous Woo?*; *I Don't Scare; Fright to the Finish; Bride and Gloom*. Most scholars advocate the use of short segments, "bite-sized" chunks (Stempleski, 1995b, p. 49), based on the assumption that "5–10 minutes of video can easily provide enough work for an hour-long period" (Arcario, 1992, p. 119). I believe that cartoons meet this goal.

The structure of each unit falls into the three parts recognized in modern methodology: previewing, viewing and postviewing. I offer the taxonomy of Topic Focus (TF), Language Focus (LF), and Culture Focus (CF) exercises. Since the goal of TF exercises is to raise the student's interest in the topic, they are in the previewing section. They mostly consist of general and personalized questions.

Because a film "may go beyond the learner's linguistic and conceptual competence" (Massi & Meriño, 1996, p. 21) I include LF exercises to eliminate language difficulties, to raise language competence and to enlarge the student's vocabulary. LF exercises are in all three parts of a unit. These exercises (both in-class and take-home) may include assignments to work on the vocabulary, identify words or phrases and insert them into gaps (fill-in-the-gap exercises), and find context sentences for active vocabulary. The goal of many LF exercises is to help students generate their own speech using the new words they have acquired watching a film or video segment. These exercises consist of reading and translating sentences (intended for developing translation skills), finding definitions in a dictionary (fosters synonym and collocation acquisition), commenting on the active words, giving sentences of their own, playing guessing and matching games based on definitions, doing cross-word puzzles, acrostics, and other word games based on authentic sentences used as clues. My own view is that if such LF exercises keep the general tone of the video cartoons, they are great fun even for adult learners.

Moreover, all the LF exercises are saturated with cultural information. I use this technique to make exercises all-embracing: e.g., students learn about "blind" dating or group dating patterns in the U.S. indirectly, from working on LF exercises (*Parlez Vous Woo?*). In short, the purpose of LF exercises is two-fold: to eliminate possible language difficulties and indirectly widen the knowledge of American culture.

The main goal of CF exercises is to attract students' attention to those cultural issues they may leave unnoticed and to highlight cross-cultural issues. Covering all three sections of a unit, CF exercises include the following:

• observation of a culture pattern (the first acquaintance with American culture);

• identification of a "culture-loaded" phenomenon (e.g., While watching the cartoon *I Don't Scare*, the teacher might make a list of "good luck" and "bad luck" superstitions.);

- identification and comparison of cross-cultural issues (e.g., One might compare American and Russian superstitions);

- commentary on the customs, traditions, behavior in a postviewing section (e.g., "Why was Olive so scared on seeing Popeye opening an umbrella in the house?");

- mastering communication and developing cultural competence through role plays, simulations, and discussions. Going from the assumption that videos can be used as springboards for other activities (Stoller, 1992; Tomalin, 1992), I integrate the related material and the video into one whole so that the message of a cartoon is disclosed directly by CF exercises and indirectly by LF exercises.

The above-described methods and techniques can be beneficial for teaching specific cultural phenomena, with one unit (cartoon) covering one or two major themes.

The question then arises, is it possible to show a continuum of American culture? I present a general overview of American culture in a course "Introduction to American Culture" where I widely integrate video to demonstrate culture patterns. At the final stage of the course, I ask students to analyze the film *Mrs. Doubtfire*. The reasons for choosing the film are based on the following criteria:

- it ranks 14th on All-Time *Top 50 American Movies*, 1994 list indicating that this film is very well known to Americans;

- the film is indicative of American culture: it covers a fairly large range of culture issues and could be regarded as a dissection of present-day American culture;

- my students (of the American Studies Department) are highly motivated to know more about American culture, and are psychologically mature enough to understand the underlying messages.

The film is presented two times (with optional third time). Before the first presentation the students are asked to divide a sheet of paper into two parts, heading the left-hand column "Scene Sequence," and the right-hand column "Cultural Interpretation." The students are asked to watch the film and take notes of scenes and events.

During the second presentation the students are told to focus on cultural interpretation. The following tentative list of cultural categories is offered to students for the cultural analyses (See Appendix for typical student responses):

- Ethos (national identity, national diversity)

- National character

- Values

- Family

- Homes and Houses

- Lifestyle

- Economic-Occupational characteristics

- Family problems

- Judicial institutions

- Entertainment

- Nonverbal behavior (paralanguage, facial expression, kinesics, oculesics, haptics, proxemics, chronemics, artifacts).

My goal is to teach students to observe, identify, and comment on cultural phenomena. I realize that these topics by far do not exhaust the inventory of American culture, but I do believe that the integration of videos into the curriculum enlarges students' awareness and understanding of American culture.

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Acknowledgements

About the Author

Maria is a Professor of English at Far Eastern State University. She has taught courses on American culture and English. Her research presently focuses on the theory of culture and practical applications in teaching EFL. Maria has published extensively on the history of English, methodology of teaching, and American Studies and is a member of professional societies including TESOL, the National Association of Teachers

of English in Russia, the Far Eastern Association of Teachers of English, and the American Studies Association and others.

Appendix

Excerpts from several students' cultural analyses:
(I give students' interpretation of some of the categories as an example of the way they perceived American culture in the film).

National Character:

Self-reliance. "Daniel Hillard is self-reliant. Having lost his job and home he does not accept his brother's offer to stay at his place. He does not want, on the one hand, to violate his brother's privacy and, on the other hand, to lose his independence and freedom. The relations between the brothers and their mother are also indicative of the American character. Children get independent and self-reliant early. Miranda is self-reliant too. Stuart is a macho. Miranda Hillard receives an urgent phone call from her neighbor who tells her that something is wrong in her house. From this fact we can conclude that there is a strong sense of community and neighborliness: they know each other's telephone numbers and keep an eye on the houses."

Friendliness. "In the movie we see casual friendliness everywhere in public places, in the streets, at the office. A good illustration of casual friendliness is the episode when Mrs. Doubtfire first sees Stuart from the window. Their eyes meet, she waves her hand, smiles, says "Hello," but this is not what she thinks or feels about him. When Stuart does not see her, she gives him the finger, a vulgar gesture which shows a real attitude toward Stuart. At least in two episodes we can see that Americans would rather be polite and friendly than hurt other people's feelings. While talking on the phone with his mother Daniel's brother, instead of insulting his mother with his brother's "no" to her offer to stay at her place after the divorce answers, "He says he'll think of it." It is normal within the limits of casual friendliness for Americans to say "Hi," "How are you" or things like these to a stranger. In the movie when Mrs. Doubtfire gets on the bus, the driver greets her though they obviously do not know each other. This is typical of American culture.'

Work Ethic. "Having lost his permanent job, Daniel is ready to take up any job no matter how hard it is. Miranda is on a fast track too."

Practicality, materialism. "Daniel is considered to be a loser by others because he is an exception; he is not practical, or materialistic as others are (Stuart for example)."

Competitiveness. "Miranda and Stuart are highly competitive."

Love of newness and innovation. "Daniel loves everything new; he loves innovation, that is why he devised a new program, a new way of speaking to children."

Nonverbal behavior:

Facial expression. "Most of the persons are very emotional; their faces express their emotions, feelings (joy, happiness disappointment, etc). The most expressive is their youngest daughter: all the emotions are "written" on her face. Americans generally permit more emotions to show on their faces."

Kinesics. "We could watch an "American walk": the walker moves at a rapid pace, holds the chest forward, and swings the arms vigorously. All the characters feel free to be sloppy, slouch down. Moderate gesturing is appropriate, as it is considered by the rules of etiquette. The parents use gestures in the scene of their quarrel which demonstrates their strong emotions. By the way, people who keep their hands and arms very close to their bodies are to be regarded as "too stiff; too formal, up-tight; as inspector lady from the social department. Many gestures are informal and friendly, there is one vulgar gesture: when Mrs. Doubtfire (Mr. Hillard) saw his ex-wife's companion, he was mad and made this gesture from the window. The father and the son devised some very special gesture. The children and the father put their hands over each other's hands to express agreement, or clap their hands. Daniel and his son rub their noses, Daniel waves his hand to greet someone, raises his thumb up (OK-sign). Miranda cuts her throat ("it's awful"-sign; or "I've had enough"-sign). Daniel and his younger daughter cover their mouths with their index finger to show they will keep it a secret. The bus driver ribbed Mrs. Doubtfire (kidding, playing, trying to attract attention). There are parental gestures (hugs, petting)."

Oculesics. "Eye contact can be seen in all the scenes, e.g. when the children were introduced to a baby-sitter. We know that eye contact is very important for Americans. If a person does not look straight into his eyes, Americans may decide that this person doesn't tell the truth."

Haptics: "We saw shaking hands during introduction with the children, (Mr. Hillard and the producer). Stuart embraces Miranda. On coming home, Miranda kisses each of her children. Daniel hugs his brother and children. The children hug their parents very often. Adults hug at some distance, put their hands on the shoulder."

Proxemics. The distance between unknown people is more than between the people who know each other or are relatives. During the first meeting the distance between Mrs. Doubtfire and the children is about one meter, the average distance is about 0.5 meters—much more than in Russian culture. There is an example in the movie when

proxemics plays an important role. During the episode when Miranda takes the children home from Daniel's place, Daniel opens the door for them to leave and when Miranda is coming out they both make an awkward movement to enlarge the space between them. They do this because they are divorced. This space shows that their status has changed."

Chronemics. "The tempo of speech is very high. When one person is speaking the other shows his attention by saying words (interjections) like "really," and "wow.""

Artifacts. "In the film there were not many artifacts. Miranda wears earrings, a chain, or beads. Everyday clothes are very sloppy and comfortable, but when they go to the restaurant they wear beautiful clothes or formal suits, the children are well-dressed too. Miranda always wears business formal clothes, she looks very elegant."
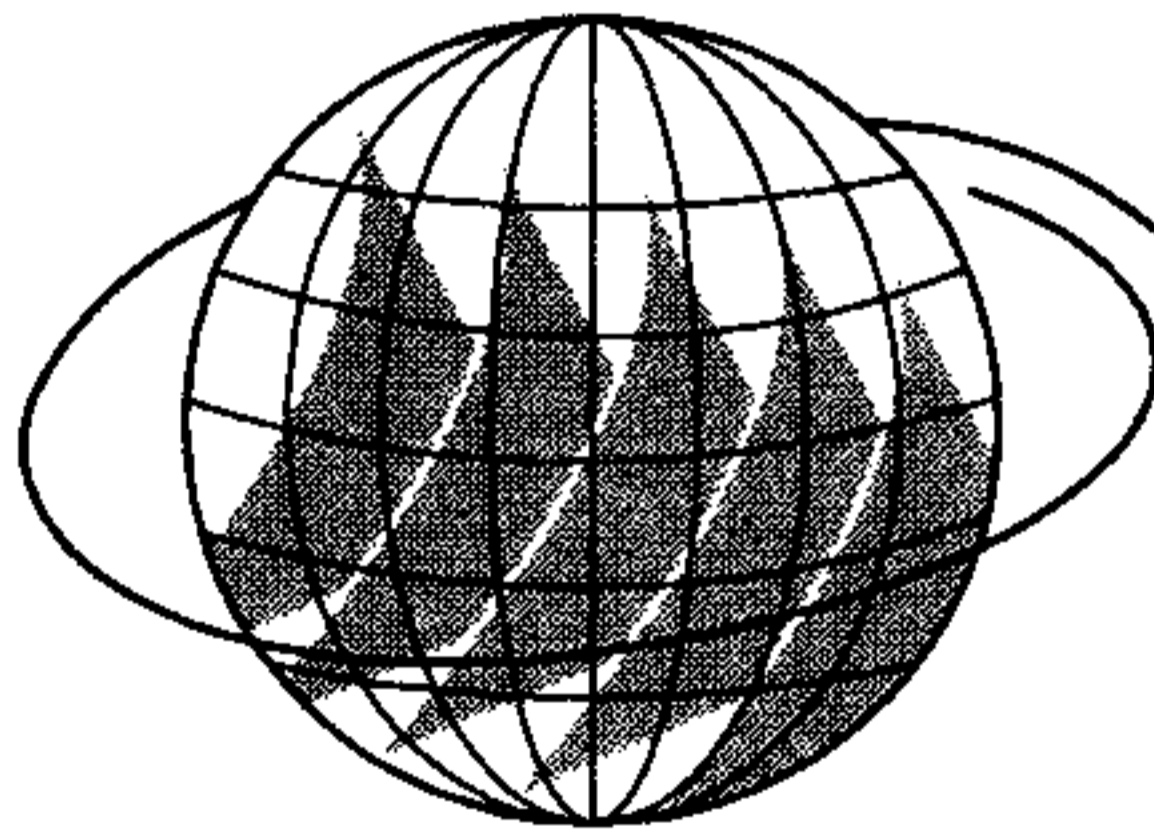
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