

Improved Listening Comprehension Through Video

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Unfortunately for many students, listening to audio tapes produces the same results as trying to learn a language over the telephone — frustration and boredom. Yet few TESOL instructors would advocate disposing of audio tapes. Perhaps our repertoire of tools, while effective to a large extent, needs simply to be augmented. Despite our best efforts as teachers, the second language classroom, especially the EFL classroom, simply lacks some of the prime ingredients of the human interactive aspects of language learning needed to aid comprehension and make learning meaningful.

Comprehensible Input and Cultural Cues

The typical foreign language classroom lacks sufficient depth in supplying the non-linguistic cues that aid listening comprehension. One reason could be an overly narrow definition of comprehensible input. “One of the obvious things we all know is the fact that we communicate with our facial expressions, clothing, gestures, tone of voice . . . as well as through spoken or written words” (Fanselow, 1992, p. 148). In addition, the rate of delivery, eye contact, body language, schemata, situational contexts, and especially cultural references aid native speakers in comprehending a message.

The language redundancy provided by these non-linguistic cues fills in communication gaps and reinforces and clarifies meaning, not written scripts of conversation. As is, the typical language classroom can provide only a single model in the teacher and limited support in the form of modified discourse, print sources (including scripted textual drills), computers, and photographs. Such models and techniques are effective. Nevertheless, studies (e.g., Hanley, Herron, and Cole (1995)) suggest that more is needed to provide truly comprehensible input. The use of video can fill the gap.

Jorden (1991) says, “The linguistic code is only part of the challenge of learning a foreign language: the delivery system must be analyzed and drilled with equal emphasis, and video is an ideal medium for this component of foreign language learning” (p. 386). This delivery system includes non-linguistic conversation cues within cultural and situational contexts which supply redundancies and elaborations that native speakers and non-native speakers alike use in normal listening comprehension. Video-based language

classes can present the whole delivery system (comprehensible input, redefined) in a framework that also addresses psychological needs of the students, such as attitude.

Before video-based learning can be considered seriously, however, definitions of comprehensible input in the classroom need to be expanded to include not only modified discourse, but also cultural and other non-linguistic cues, as well as the effect of class materials and teaching methodology on student attitudes and motivation to learn. “Theorists today stress the importance . . . of providing the language learner with contextualized and meaningful input (Herron, 1994, p. 190). Such input suggests much more than listening to speech and reading, regardless how varied and interesting the supplemental material may be. Krashen (1988) says, “There are basically two ways in which the teacher can aid comprehension, linguistic and non-linguistic” (p. 334). This type of “contextualized and meaningful input” (including the nonlinguistic) nearly completes the definition of comprehensible input that students need to fully acquire a second language.

Research on the Benefits of Video Learning

Non-linguistic cues and the specifics of video notwithstanding, several studies have shown that syntactic modifications (such as restatements or other forms of repetition) provide “information redundancies and elaborations” (Rubin, 1994, p. 203) that aid language students in listening comprehension. One study by Chaudron in 1983 and another by Chiang and Dunkel in 1992 showed that redundancy improved listening comprehension. “Chiang and Dunkel found that modification (repetition of constituents, paraphrase, and use of synonyms) works best with high-intermediate students as compared to low-intermediate students” (Rubin, 1994, p. 203). Studies by Pica, Young, Doughty, and Glisan found similar evidence that redundancy helps listening comprehension for low-intermediate and advanced students respectively (Rubin, 1994, p. 203).

It is reasonable to deduce that other forms of redundancy and elaboration may likewise aid in listening comprehension, and effective listening in the classroom can itself act as a marker or advance organizer for comprehending later reading passages. The use of video can, therefore, potentially aid language students in not only listening comprehension, but also reading comprehension. Furthermore, acquired cultural and contextual cues provided by video learning may enhance an ESL student’s comprehension of class lectures in the target language.

Research studies support the idea that contextual cues related to the language culture can serve as one form of redundancy and elaboration that aids listening comprehension. Schumann’s Acculturation Model holds the premise that, “Acculturation, and hence SLA,

is determined by the degree of *social* and *psychological distance* between the learner and the target language culture” (Ellis, 1988, p. 305). Language teachers report success in the classroom with cultural studies. Rivera, who teaches Spanish classes at Artesia High School in Artesia, California, includes cultural studies in her classes. “Discussions [of culture] are conducted entirely in the target language aided by props, maps, and a lot of visuals” (Richard-Amato, 1988, p. 271-272).

Jorden (1991) advances the theories of cultural language acquisition with the concepts of acquired culture versus *learned* culture. Jorden defines acquired culture as:

the mindset, the patterns of behavior, generally outside the consciousness of natives of the society. Acquired culture, like acquired spoken language, is gained without awareness, and it becomes so much a part of natural, automatic, daily behavior that it is often assumed by natives to be universal human behavior. (p. 384)

Learned culture, by contrast, is cultural behavior that is studied, much like Krashen’s concept of learned knowledge (Jorden, 1991, p. 384). Of course, cultural studies are already part of many foreign language classrooms, such as Rivera’s in California. These are effective in the area of learned culture; however, Jorden makes a further observation, “Target native instructors are particularly apt to overlook . . . the need for [acquired culture] instruction” (p. 385). This is where video instruction can be of immense help in the classroom.

“Of all the new technologies being adapted for foreign language study, video held the most promise for introducing the learner to a spoken language with a cultural orientation” (Jorden, 1991, p. 386). Since culture is but one non-linguistic cue that aids both listening and reading comprehension, Jorden’s view is not surprising. Several studies have concluded that the use of video improves listening comprehension. For instance, Rubin (1994) found that “the listening comprehension of high-beginning Spanish students who watched dramas on video improved significantly over students who received no video support for their listening training” (p. 204). In another experiment by Secules et al., second semester university French students were divided into control and experimental groups with the control group using a direct method text and the experimental group using the *French in Action* video series. “The experimental group scored higher overall in listening comprehension than the control group” (Rubin, 1994, p. 205). Also, Herron et al., found that “for first year university French students listening comprehension improved more after one year’s exposure to a video-based curriculum than after the same length of exposure to a text and audio-based curriculum” (Rubin, 1994, p. 205).

Apparently the language comprehension of non-native speakers benefits as much as that of native speakers from a total delivery system of linguistic and culture specific non-linguistic input. In fact, Vogely (1995) broadly—and appropriately—defines language comprehension as “a process of constructing meaning based on multidimensional relationships between the learner and all of the internal and external influences and the intrinsic and extrinsic elements involved in that learner’s reality” (p. 41). A video-based curriculum can address all of those issues, within their cultural contexts, in a way that textbooks and audio tapes alone cannot.

Video in the Classroom

Baltova (1994) says, “In real life listening comprehension we not only ‘listen’ but more often than not ‘view’ the message as well, and interpret the two modes of information in a similar way” (p. 508). Video tapes provide the “two modes” and so have proven much more interesting with their engaging stories, cultural contexts, and listening/viewing interaction. The results of Herron’s studies favored the Advance Organizer + Video condition. Herron’s conclusions are that use of an advance organizer enhances student comprehension of a foreign language video, and that “simply providing video material is not enough” (p. 194). The likely order of class material would be: Advance Organizer for the video, followed by the video with class reinforcement and a second viewing, and ending with a written text. In this context, advance organizers work in a way similar to schemata but are not precisely the same. In 1960, Ausubel used this term to describe a process of “linking the ‘unfamiliar’ to what is already known by the learner” (Hanley et al., 1995, p. 57).

In this case, the “unfamiliar” is the video scenario and, depending on the nature of the course, an accompanying written text. The teacher should choose a video based on the content area lesson, conversational topic (greetings, telling time, etc.) or the written text. Instructional videos, movie or daytime TV segments, or taped commercials are all appropriate. For further inspiration, teachers can peruse the *French in Action* or *Destinos: An Introduction to Spanish* video series. The lessons presented are all designed for enhanced comprehension within an informative cultural context and entertaining story. Try to find similar tapes in English in which the language is spoken clearly and relatively slowly.

Depending on the class level and content, the video could run from one to thirty minutes. From the prepared video tape, the teacher would then prepare an advance organizer consisting of three segments. The first is a casual class discussion to lower the affective filter. Such a discussion, familiar to ESL and EFL teachers, would introduce the video topic along with two or three relevant vocabulary words. The second (introduced or

not, depending on the teacher's philosophy) is a more complete vocabulary list, introduced verbally and in written form, including flash cards, pictures, or any other instructional aids. The third segment would include any new grammatical forms which the teacher wants to introduce through the video.

If the grammar lesson concludes the first day's class, the next class would begin with a short review of the vocabulary and topic. Depending on the nature of the course, this can include journal writing. The teacher then shows the video for the first time. Allow students to work in small groups following the video. Encourage students to use the new vocabulary as they respond to pictures, realia, or discussion questions relevant to the material covered in the video. A general class discussion can follow.

The next class segment begins with a second viewing of the video, followed by a first silent reading of the accompanying text and a multiple choice or true/false comprehension check (or the comprehension check alone if the class focuses on conversation). After the individual work, pair students or sit them in small groups. Have them discuss their answers orally, with the teacher moving from group to group. Students should be encouraged to reread confusing parts, model how they arrived at their answers, discuss vocabulary, etcetera. The segment can conclude with a third viewing for lower levels and then the teacher's preferred assessment tool.

Conclusion

Student interest and comprehension should both rise significantly with the addition of the videotape to the lesson; however, a videotape is not a complete lesson plan. Research results suggest that video would work well as a comprehension aid to augment—not replace—traditional classroom methodology within well-defined parameters. The video does not become culturally enhanced comprehensible input without a teacher's moderation and a good advance organizer.

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