
Developing Authentic Video Materials for Improving Upper-Level Students' Listening Comprehension

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Introduction

According to one author's estimate, when it comes to communication, the average adult spends approximately nine percent of the time writing, sixteen percent reading, thirty percent speaking, and forty-five percent listening (Rivers, 1978). This estimate emphasizes the importance of listening in communication.

In spite of the importance given to listening in foreign language acquisition, many upper-level Japanese students still lack sufficient listening comprehension skills to adequately understand authentic English language materials, such as satellite and bilingual TV programs and video tapes of foreign movies. Many students report that they don't really know what the speakers are talking about or that they have no ideas what is being said.

The reason that many students don't understand authentic listening materials is because of the inter-relationship of several language components involved in listening comprehension. These include phonological (elisions, reductions and contractions, etc.), syntactic, lexical, and organizational (discourse) elements. Because these components are inter-related, a problem with one many affect students' comprehension of the overall message (Wilcox and Greathouse, 1978).

The purpose of this paper is to present a model for developing materials to use with authentic videos in EFL classes and effectively improve students' listening comprehension. This report describes the process we underwent in planning and implementing a video course to be incorporated into our institution's upper-level curriculum.

The paper also explores the results of teacher surveys (65 participants), conducted in the spring of 1993, and student surveys (379 participants), conducted in December, 1993, to aid us in our ongoing evaluation of the video course. Our work has been based on the premise that developing authentic video materials suitable to students' needs will help them to improve and build confidence in their listening comprehension.

Using Authentic Video Materials

The use of authentic materials in the classroom has been supported by many researchers. First of all, Krashen (1982) points out that authentic learning experiences provide learners an opportunity to acquire the target language. Also

Clarke states "the language of the real world is what learners need to be exposed to because that language is uncompromising towards the learner and reflects real-world goals" (Clarke, 1989, p. 73). For using videos in classrooms, Stempleski and Tomalin (1990) state that moving pictures together with sound present language more comprehensively and realistically than any other teaching medium. For listening exercises, Ur (1984) points out that using authentic videos provides useful listening practice for high-level learners.

For many years, ECC has used various commercial textbooks in upper-level classes; however, materials that adequately satisfy the needs and objectives of upper-level students have been few and far between. Given this, and the recognition of continuing deficiencies in students' comprehension of authentic listening materials, the long-held idea of incorporating authentic videos into the upper-level curriculum at ECC was finally realized in the new video course introduced in upper-level classes in the spring of 1993.

Upper-Level ECC Classes and Students

There are two upper-level courses at ECC: pre-advanced and advanced. Both pre-advanced and advanced students study for 105 minutes, twice a week, in a one year program. With the inclusion of videos in the 1993-94 curriculum, one class a week is devoted to video. The average class size is from five to ten students, and there are about eighty upper-level classes throughout ECC districts in Japan.

The students in upper levels tend to be in college or working outside the home, and most of them study English for the purposes of traveling, working or studying abroad, satisfying a work requirement, or as a hobby.

General Course Objectives

Before formulating course objectives, we consulted Richards' taxonomy of listening skills (1985) and Lund's (1990) taxonomy of "real-world listening behaviors". Then general course objectives were delineated as follows:

By participating in the video course, it was hoped that students would be able to develop and enhance the following micro-skills for listening comprehension:

- focused listening for key words and ideas
- guessing meanings of words from context
- recognizing functions of stress and intonation in language nuisances (irony, sarcasm, etc.)
- predicting and inferring causes and effects
- identifying topics and situations.

Students also would be able to practice and improve in the following speaking skills:

- increase active vocabulary, particularly with regard to idiomatic and colloquial expressions
- use a variety of language structures appropriately and more confidently
- give detailed descriptions and supported opinions.
- analyze and discuss sophisticated or abstract topics.

Concerning the use of video tapes, ECC has a contract with NBC (National Broadcasting Corporation) in America as its video suppliers and is authorized by NBC to use their videos, photographs, and transcripts.

The process of selecting videos begins with a thorough screening of a list of thirty to forty videos provided by NBC. Those programs which appear to offer the best teaching/learning opportunities are requested for viewing. Then Japanese and native staff members, along with some additional pre-advanced/advanced level Japanese volunteers, watch the videos and consider the following points:

- Is the level of language appropriate for pre-advanced/advanced students?
- Are there any controversial/out-of-date topics?
- Would the program content be interesting or informative to most Japanese students?
- Is everyday English used?
- Does the vocabulary load seem reasonable for students at this level?

Other aspects of the video taken into consideration include listening speed, accents of the speakers, naturalness of the dialogs/conversations, and cultural content of the program. Feedback and reviews on a variety of videos are shared among ECC's districts across Japan before final video selections are made. (Four videos were chosen for the 1993-94 curriculum.)

Materials for Teachers and Students

Teacher's Book: The Teacher's Book is an exact copy of the Student's Book and contains teaching procedures, notes, and answers for each section. It also contains a transcript of the video program. A new Teacher's Book is provided for each video program.

Class Video Tape: Only the teacher has a copy of the video tape of each program. ECC does not have the authority to sell or distribute copies of video tapes to students.

Student's Book: The Student's Book contains all of the study materials students need for class. There is a Student's Book for each video program, and each book contains about ten "cuts" (units/lessons).

Video Transcripts: Complete transcripts of each video program are included in the Teacher's Books and are also given to students at the beginning of each video

program. However, students are given the transcript as a home-study aid and are asked not to read ahead in the script to sections that have not yet been viewed/studied in class.

Audio Tapes: The audio tape is the sound track of the video and is to be used as a back-up in case there are technical difficulties with the video tape. The audio tape may also be incorporated into some classroom activities.

Detailed Description of Student's Book

Previewing

Character Descriptions: The section which is dealt with in the first cut of each video, serves as an introduction to the program through the characters, each of which is briefly highlighted to give students a basis for understanding what motivates their speech and actions in the program.

Previewing: This section works as an extension of the warm-up and prepares students for viewing the video by prompting them to think about themes or situations that will occur in the sequence. Often the focus is on evoking students' predictive skills to facilitate their listening comprehension. Previewing questions are also used to engage students in discussion relevant to the lesson's (video) sequence.

Vocabulary: this section prepares students for terms and expressions in the sequence that may be unknown or aurally unfamiliar and give students the opportunity to expand their active and passive vocabularies. As students have the task of matching terms with definitions, their internalization of the terms is enhanced. Furthermore, they may discuss and seek clarification on the terms' meaning and usage with each other and the teacher.

Viewing

General Comprehension: The questions in this section are discussion-oriented, encouraging students to summarize the main occurrences or transactions in each scene, and give students a focus for the first viewing of a sequence. Students should be able to understand the essence of what occurs in the sequence without having to be well informed on details and, therefore, they view the sequence only once in this section.

Specific Listening: Activities, using cloze exercises or guided note-taking grids, are included in some lessons to provide a listening focus and fine-tune students' listening skills.

Specific Comprehension: Questions in this section give students a listening focus for more detailed information about a sequence. Because students are asked for more specific responses (e.g. quotes from the sequence/dialog, etc.), they are shown the designated video clip two times (or more, if they're unable to respond to the

majority of questions after two viewings). Pausing the video is a useful technique for facilitating a viewing exercise or doing comprehension checks.

Silent Viewing: This activity may appear in the viewing section, as well as in the previewing section, to encourage students to hypothesize and make use of visual/paralinguistic cues (e.g. characters' posture, facial expressions, etc.).

Language Nuances & Humor: Various lines quoted from the sequence/dialog contain language nuances which may be difficult for students to comprehend without support in interpreting sarcasm, cultural references, etc. Direct excerpts are taken from the sequence for students to consider with the guidance of questions designed to facilitate students' interpretation of the nuances.

Postviewing

Activity: A variety of postviewing activities have been created/adapted in order for students to practice language used in or related to a given sequence. Activities include roleplays (e.g. of a scene from the day's sequence, with possible variations in language, situation, or cultural context, etc.) and summarization/recall activities in which students summarize a scene or sequence in pairs.

Discussion: Questions in this section reinforce students' overall comprehension of the day's sequence by focusing on conversations/events from the sequence and, in some cases, providing direct quotes. Students further develop their discussion skills by analyzing and personalizing themes from the sequence.

Pilot Testing

In developing the first set of materials, extensive classroom testing was done, which included students surveys. Results were generally positive, indicating that most students found the material useful and helpful to their listening comprehension. Many students indicated that completing the exercises in the student materials enabled them to satisfactorily understand the video sequence by the end of the lesson. Through the active listening format and the structured support of the materials and teaching procedures (taking students through various previewing, viewing, and postviewing exercises) students were able to deal with the video in depth, to the extent that they could discuss and interpret selected language nuances (with the ready assistance of the teacher). Hence, based on the lesson format, student materials, and teacher support, students felt the program content was interesting and that they had learned a lot about the target culture.

Teacher Surveys

In order to find out how teachers felt about the new video course, based on their experience teaching the first video program, *Sara* (a situation comedy), and to

examine ways to improve the student/teacher materials, a survey was administered to sixty-five teachers in the spring of 1993. The questions pertained to the teachers' lesson preparation, the execution of the lessons, and teachers' perceptions of the content of the student and support materials.

In terms of lesson preparation time, some teachers spent a lot of time in the beginning due to their unfamiliarity with the materials and equipment. But gradually preparation time was reduced to that which was standard for most other materials.

Most teachers followed lesson plan guidelines and found that the cuts were easy to teach. However, they could not cover all the sections adequately in each class. Some skipped the postviewing activity in order to get into the discussion section. Others skipped different activities to adjust for time limitations. Lack of time was evidently the biggest problem in getting through a video lesson.

From our evaluation of the video course at that time, including results of the teacher surveys, a few alterations were made in subsequent video materials. In *Hot Pursuit* (the second video program) and *Christmas Eve* (the third video program), we reduced the number of questions in the "Language Nuances" Section and in some cuts, the entire Section was omitted if there was no substantial dialog that warranted highlighting and analysis for the students. In *Christmas Eve*, the previewing questions were reduced to two to save time.

In their section-by-section assessments, teachers differed particularly in their attitudes toward the "Language Nuances and Humor" section, which was seen by some teachers to be the most valuable section and others to be the least valuable. These conflicting results call for some explanation. Those who felt it was most valuable thought that this section was crucial to students' comprehension of the program. Without this section, students would feel dissatisfied because they really want to know what deeper meanings are being expressed or why some scenes could be funny. Teachers who felt it was least valuable thought that this activity was just too difficult for students to handle. They thought that the activity needed a lot of explanation by the teacher. Those who felt it was most enjoyable thought that the students were anxious to understand the nuances and humor.

Concerning support materials, teachers gave very positive feedback, indicating they found the Teacher's Book helpful and useful. They also thought that the Student's Book was well laid out and attractive.

In conclusion, even though there were a few problems, (e.g. running out of time with exercises) and some difficult activities within the cuts, most teachers seemed positive about teaching this new video course. Since the surveys were conducted toward the beginning of the course, some teachers were unsure whether some sections were really working well or not. Therefore, investigation will likely be made to determine how well different sections of the book are working over time.

Student Surveys

In order to collect information for our continuing evaluation of the video course, a survey was administered in December, 1993 at all ECC schools in Japan offering video classes for PA (pre-advanced) and AV (advanced) students. Of 379 respondents to the survey, 240 were PA students and 139 were AV students. The questions pertained to the following: the level of difficulty of the video class, the usefulness of the English used in the video class, the level of students' listening comprehension by the end of each class, the amount of time devoted to listening exercises, how adequately exercises were covered in each class, suggestions for other types of exercises, students' preferences among various types of videos for use in class, and students' overall satisfaction with the video class.

Results and Discussion

The purpose of this survey was to gather information that would help us evaluate and improve the video course. Overall, the survey results were very positive and most students were satisfied with the video course. Although some students felt that the video course was a little too difficult, most of them understood the video by the end of each class. Most students were satisfied with the content of the video programs and felt that the English used in the video class was useful or "OK." In addition, the amount of time devoted to listening exercises seemed to be appropriate, and exercises that teachers chose to do were covered adequately.

In comparing higher and lower-level students within a class, more lower-level students thought the video course was difficult and wanted more time for listening exercises. Accommodating lower-level students would be challenging for teachers because if they spent more time on listening exercises, they would not be able to cover the other sections and some higher-level students could get bored. One way of dealing with this would be for teachers to adapt the materials to students' needs by giving more support in the exercises rather than simply showing the video as many times as students want. Another thing that teachers could do would be to focus on a specific section of the unit and attend to helping students understand that particular section well, rather than deal with every section in the unit. And, on the materials-development end, the writers should continue to assess the amount of material included in each lesson.

Concerning the choice of video programs, some students expressed an interest in using the latest popular American TV programs and movies. Unfortunately, other than watching those videos for personal viewing purposes, such as at home, we are not allowed to use them for public viewing. And it is almost impossible to get permission from suppliers to use them in classrooms. We have considered the possibility of contracting with other corporations (e.g. ABC) as future video suppliers and are continuing to investigate alternative contract options.

As for the availability of classroom videos for students' personal use, according to the contract with NBC, we are not allowed to sell video tapes to the students. However, permission was given for students to rent the videos; therefore, they can now rent any of the videos previously studied from the office of their school.

Finally, the students were interested in doing a variety of exercises for vocabulary, pronunciation, listening, and speaking in the video class. Some students expressed an interest in doing (mechanical) exercises such as memorizing useful expressions or repeating after the characters in the dialog. They were also very motivated to understand the video in much more detail and to practice some expressions used in the video in speaking exercises. Consideration has been given to student's comments/suggestions about exercises, and efforts are being made to accommodate these suggestions where practical and appropriate to the course objectives.

Overall, results of the survey reflected a generally positive perception of the video course by students. Student feedback including additional, written comments, was informative and helpful to our evaluation—certainly, it has factored into the development of subsequent video materials and will continue to do so in the future.

In conclusion, using authentic videos in upper-level classes provides students with consistently good opportunities to be exposed to natural, spoken English and to improve their listening comprehension. With the belief that teacher and student feedback play an important part in assessing any course, we continually examine ways to improve our materials and teaching techniques, in an effort to best accommodate the educational needs and objectives of our students.

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