
American Lifestyles and Culture Through Television

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Ed. note: The following is a continuation of the article "Teacher-Made Materials: Video Tape" that appeared in the January 1987 issue (Vol. 20, No. 1) of the TESL Reporter. The authors discuss using off-air recordings and follow this with an example of a lesson, including a sample lesson plan, vocabulary, and exercises. Adjustments in the sample lesson are made for different levels of ESL students.

Television programs contain a wealth of culture and examples of the American lifestyle. By taping selected programs and bringing them into the classroom, ESL teachers can help their students gain a better understanding of American culture by seeing it in a context rather than merely being told what American culture is like. Not only can students develop an understanding of the culture and the diversity in American lifestyles through television, but they will also appreciate the culture more and will tend to be less critical of it. In addition, through experience with television programs, ESL students can improve in two basic language skills—listening and speaking—thereby gaining the confidence they need to interact more freely with Americans.

Selecting a Program

The teacher should decide ahead of time what he wants to look for in a program. An important matter to consider is its length. For example, since the class will

most likely listen to a tape more than once in a class period, five to ten minutes is a suitable length. This will also give the students time to think about what they heard without feeling overwhelmed or frustrated. If a program of this length cannot be found, then a thirty-minute program may be divided into suitable segments.

A teacher can also begin by first choosing the topic he wants to discuss, or the aspect of culture he wants to point out. For example, if the teacher chooses to talk about an important monument that represents a part of American culture, or to introduce clothing or the food industry, he can look in the TV guide for various documentaries and short programs on that particular subject. CNN, the Cable News Network, has good ten to twenty-minute programs that are ideal for this purpose.

One possible program is "On the Menu" which could be used to introduce American food and recipes to a beginning level class and following directions to an advanced level class. Another CNN program is "Style with Elsa Clinch" which could be employed to introduce the names of various clothing styles in the U.S. and elsewhere. "Heroes" is another good program with many short capsules of information approximately five minutes in duration. One particular capsule centered around the men who built the Golden Gate Bridge, which is very much a part of American society. We will use this example in order

to show just what can be done with such a program.

The Golden Gate Bridge is a good subject for a culture capsule to present in an ESL class. The bridge is a part of American history and one of the many feats that Americans are proud of. Most Americans recognize the bridge immediately when shown a picture of it. Likewise, the lives of the men who designed and built it are very important to mention and can give ESL students an inside view of America. The focus in this lesson, then, is to show ESL students an example of an average American on the job and to introduce a symbol that is very much a part of the United States.

Both of these objectives can help to broaden the ESL student's understanding of the United States and its people. If the teacher chooses to build a lesson around this program, he must next tape and preview it. Federal copyright laws state that a teacher may copy a program and use it for educational purposes. After forty-five days the tape must be destroyed or the rights bought. (Legal concerns were discussed in Goldberg and Eichelberger's article in the January 1987 [Vol. 20, No. 1] *TESL Reporter*.)

After previewing the tape, the teacher can prepare his lesson plans. First, it is helpful to have the script of the program. If the local or national television station cannot provide a copy, it may be necessary for the teacher to try to write it down. This takes a while but is well worth the effort, and it can be filed for later use. From the script and by listening to the tape, the teacher can prepare an introduction to the topic and several worksheets that prepare the students to listen to the

tape.

A Sample Lesson Plan

This lesson plan has been tested in a beginning listening comprehension class. The results were positive. The teacher felt that it was complete, and the students enjoyed the variety of the lesson. Thus, it is presented here as a model for other lesson plans designed for low-level ESL listening comprehension classes.

Introduction to the Students

A possible introduction is as follows:

The Golden Gate Bridge was opened in 1937 and is among the longest suspension bridges in the world. It is 8,981 feet long [2,737 meters]. The thirty-five million dollar structure was started in 1933 and designed by Joseph B. Strauss who was the chief engineer.

The teacher may also want to ask questions before or after giving the background information. Some sample questions include:

1. Who knows what this is? [holding a picture of the bridge]
2. Who knows where the Golden Gate Bridge is located?
3. Has anyone here ever seen the Golden Gate Bridge?
4. What might the Golden Gate Bridge symbolize to you?

After the introductions, the teacher can distribute a list of potentially troublesome vocabulary.

Vocabulary

1. sky scraper(s)
2. mouth (of a bay)
3. nuts (he was)
4. convey
5. daring
6. aerospace engineer
7. suspension bridge
8. "buck an hour"
9. cable reeler
10. pride
11. "face death"
12. daily basis
13. rivet(s)
14. angle iron
15. "what ya call it"
16. acrobat
17. newcomer
18. girder
19. daredevil
20. tip(py)-toe

Vocabulary Items in Sentence Context

1. These days *sky scrapers* are growing up all around us.
2. He wanted to build a bridge across the *mouth* of the bay.
3. Everyone thought he was *nuts*.
4. How does one *convey* his feelings?
5. He faces danger every day, he is very *daring*.
6. He wants to work with airplanes so he is going to be an *aerospace engineer*.
7. The Golden Gate Bridge is a *suspension bridge*.
8. She earned a "*buck an hour*" as a waitress.
9. A *cable reeler* is someone who works with metal cables.
10. *Pride* can be a virtue or a downfall.
11. Every day the workers faced danger and *death*.

12. I saw her on a *daily basis*.
13. A *rivet* is a metal bolt or pin used to fasten objects together.
14. An *angle iron* is a length of steel or iron that is bent at right angles and is used for support.
15. I used a "*what ya call it*" to fix the car.
16. The *acrobats* did many daring tricks.
17. It was her first time here. She was a *newcomer*.
18. A beam used as a main support for a structure is called a *girder*.
19. Acrobats are sometimes *daredevils* when they do dangerous tricks.
20. I tried to be quiet so I *tippy-toed* out of the room.

Listening Comprehension Practice and Viewing

After introducing and reviewing the vocabulary sheet, the teacher may want to practice some simple listening comprehension exercises.

Beginning Level:

Beginning ESL students will need more practice than advanced ESL students. Therefore, to make the lesson work with a variety of students, the teacher could make up a sequence of exercises ranging from very simple to somewhat difficult. One very simple exercise to begin with is the "circle the word that you hear" exercise. The students can build up their confidence with this exercise and then be ready to go on to a slightly more difficult one. The next possible exercise is the "circle the sentence that you hear." (A sample worksheet follows.)

In addition to providing preparatory listening comprehension practice, the teacher

may want to check the students' comprehension of the program with simple exercises. One simple way to do this is to give the students a sheet of paper with multiple choice answers on it. The teacher can ask the questions orally while the students circle the correct response on their answer sheets.

Sample Listening Comprehension Worksheet

Minimal Pairs: Circle the word that you hear.

1. pride ride bride lied
2. angle anger angry hanger
3. dale tale sale rail
4. pail bail kale gale
5. nut mutt but putt
6. buck puck luck duck
7. cable gable fable sable
8. daring bearing scaring caring

Minimal Sentences: Circle the sentence that you hear.

1. a) That's my pride.
b) That's my ride.
c) That's my bride.
2. a) His anger scares me.
b) His angle scares me.
3. a) Tell him about the sale.
b) Tell him about the rail.
4. a) Where is the pail?
b) Where is the bail?
5. a) Take the buck.
b) Take the duck.
c) Take the puck.
6. a) He's daring.
b) He's staring.
c) He's tearing.
7. a) Give her the mail.
b) Give her the nail.

Multiple Choice Questions for Post-Viewing Discussion:

1. What is meant by "...sky scrapers (are) growing up all around us?"
2. Where is the Golden Gate Bridge?
3. According to the narrator, who are the real heroes of the bridge?
4. How did the workers feel about their jobs?
5. What kind of job was it?
6. What was suspended underneath the bridge?
7. What did the men who were saved by the net call themselves?
8. What took place after the bridge was built?

Answers (and distractors) for the above questions:

1. a) They are falling. b) They are being built.
2. a) San Francisco b) Los Angeles c) Juneau
3. a) the designers b) the workers
4. a) proud b) sad c) indifferent
5. a) easy b) dangerous c) short
6. a) people b) a safety net c) a string
7. a) the saved club b) the halfway to hell club
8. a) a celebration b) nothing c) a dinner

Procedures for Advanced Students

The advanced level of listening comprehension preparation and "testing" consists of a more difficult version of the beginning level exercises. The advanced students begin with the minimal sentences. Then, depending on the teacher's preference, there may be a partial or full dictation taken from the script. After viewing

the tape, the students may answer orally the questions listed in the previous section instead of simply circling the correct answer.

After the preparation for the viewing and the initial viewing, both the beginning and the advanced-level students can be given a copy of the script (see appendix) in order to read along with the tape and to double check their comprehension.

Possible Further Assignments

The following are some further possible assignments for use with this same taped program.

For speaking practice, students can be assigned to interview ten Americans about their knowledge of the Golden Gate Bridge. Sample questions that the students might prepare ahead of time are:

1. Where is the Golden Gate Bridge?
2. Have you ever seen it?
3. Have you ever seen a picture of the bridge?
4. Does the Golden Gate Bridge symbolize anything to you?
5. Do you know any trivia about it?

An assignment that concentrates on the writing skill is the composition. Students could write a short composition on the Golden Gate Bridge or on the designer of the bridge, Joseph Strauss. This would also improve their library/reading skills since they would probably use the encyclopedia and/or other reference books as resources.

Conclusion

A lesson plan such as this one is very time-consuming to prepare. However, once it is done, the teacher may use it over and over, assuming the legal rights to the taped program have been purchased. The topic will not be quickly outdated, and the lesson can be used for years.

Appendix: Script

You know these days with sky scrapers growing up all around us, we have a tendency to take these engineering marvels for granted. I guess it's because we figure we can build just about anything. Of course that's not true. It was even less so about fifty years ago when it was one man's dream to build a bridge across the mouth of San Francisco Bay. I gotta tell you, most folks thought he was absolutely nuts...

Few works of man have been as loved and admired as the Golden Gate Bridge. It is a marvel of both design and ambition. A sweeping soaring structure whose bold leap across the Gate still conveys a sense of human daring...

Spanning the Gate was an obsession with engineer Joseph Strauss who spent fifteen years convincing skeptics his bridge could and should be built. In 1933, he finally got his chance, and set out to build the longest suspension bridge the world has ever seen.

Strauss was the genius behind the bridge, but the real heroes of the Golden Gate were the men who built it...

Fifty years ago, Lou Regiardo was a twenty-two year old "buck an hour" cable

reeler who went on to become an aerospace engineer. Larry Lefluer spent months dangling hundreds of feet above the water in the wind and the fog working as a painter. But he remembers those days with pride.

"When you were working on the Golden Gate that was the thing, it was, there was pride in it."

Many of the workers were high steel acrobats who faced danger and death on a daily basis.

"It's scary at first, I tell you. When you're, starting to work you kinda hold on, especially if you're a newcomer, you hold on; in fact, you put your finger prints in all the steel and I mean deep!"

"They would step from one girder to another and, uh, way up in the air and think nothing of it... It was a marvelous thing to see. We used to call them 'sky scaper daredevils'".

"I remember one time I had some, uh, rivets to paint out in the middle of, uh, a cross space, so I started walking out on this little two and a half inch angle iron and I got about half way out before I realized that one of the angles...er...the ends weren't tied down with a bolt or a "what you call it" and it started to go down and I just raised myself up and "tippy-toed" back real easy on the thing".

The towers were the first to go up, then the cable was strung. When the roadway was attached, a revolutionary safety net was suspended underneath, in hopes of snagging falling workmen before they hit the water below.

"I remember I was talking, there was a painter working across from me one day and I talked to him and I was talking to him and all of a sudden he disappeared on the other side and I looked down and here he was, down in the net. And he hit it and I think he was out of it the first bounce, 'cause he came out of the thing like a cat. They had a "halfway-to-hell" club and anyone who fell in and was saved that would have been killed otherwise, become a member of the club. But they figure that there was at least fifty guys that were saved from the net."

But the bridge did take its human toll. Eleven men died. Still that was considered remarkably low for the time.

When the bridge opened in May of 1937, much of San Francisco turned out to celebrate. Strauss and his men were honored as heroes. They had even brought the bridge in under budget.

"That was a glorious day. There were people that were jamming the streets waiting to get on, followed by at least a week of street dancing, picnicing, and things like this. It was a big thrill, very very nice."

"You always think about it, I guess anybody that every worked on it always things of it as 'my bridge'. And I guess that's probably the feeling you have on the thing, it's a pretty thing. It's a beautiful bridge."