

Use of Authentic Videos in the Classroom

— Capturing Real-life Language from Closed-captioned Films —

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Abstract

This paper is intended to examine the use of “authentic” texts in the classroom, focusing on film videos as an example of such texts. After briefly discussing the definition of “authenticity”, this paper examines why authentic texts are advantageous and what specific problems they might pose to both teachers and students.

Then, feedback from the students, with regard to their material preference, will be presented, which indicated their strong preference for authentic materials and the difficulty most of them felt about the speech speed. As a solution to this challenge, this paper suggests the use of closed captioned film videos, reviewing the findings of the past research studies on their use in the classroom.

1. Introduction

In recent years the need for and usefulness of authentic materials have been increasingly acknowledged in EFL classrooms in Japan. Currently, authenticity is highly valued by many Japanese teachers of English. For instance, the use of film videos has become very popular in Japan, and many teachers share the view that their use can offer authentic teaching/learning materials and make it possible to produce real-life situations in the classroom.

This paper is intended to examine the use of authentic texts in the classroom, focusing on film videos as an example of such texts. It also discusses why authentic texts are advantageous and what specific problems they might pose to both teachers and students.

After presenting and analyzing feedback from students with regard to their material preference, this paper suggests the use of closed captioned film videos as a solution to the difficulty most students surveyed felt about the fast rate of speaking, reviewing the findings of the past research studies on the use of closed captions in the classroom.

2. What are “authentic” texts?

Before discussing the main issue of this paper, the term “authentic” should be clearly defined. Although LDCE¹ defines the term “authentic” as “done or made in the traditional or original way”, it is used in a variety of ways in association with language teaching and learning. For example, Garza (1991) defines the term as “materials that are originally produced in a given language for a native-speaking audience of that language, and not for learners of the language as a foreign language” (p. 241). His definition excludes many language materials produced for use in the language classroom, even though they may have been produced by native speakers of the target language. According to Garza, however, authentic materials include virtually all television programming, motion pictures, documentaries, news broadcasts, commercial advertisements, and entertainment videos.

In Natusch (1990: 19), the term is used to refer to the naturally occurring speech uttered by people in real-life situations. He makes a clear distinction between authentic speech and the

rehearsed lines spoken by actors, and does not consider films authentic, since they are but a simulation of reality. Moreover, he excludes speech by native language teachers, saying that “it [authentic speech] is also quite different from the clear and simplified speech uttered by teachers modeling language patterns on video or in a classroom situation” (1990: 19).

Some also doubt whether the language spoken in movies is authentic simply because it is not spontaneous speech, but spoken based on screenplays. Porter and Roberts (1988: 177), however, define authentic language as “the real thing”, or instances of spoken language which were not initiated for the purpose of teaching, and include film dialogues as authentic texts. Ur also lists “watching a film/theater show/television program” as one example of real-life listening (1984: 2).

Following Porter and Roberts (1987), in the context of this paper, the term “authentic” texts refers to instances of spoken language which are not intended for the purpose of language teaching, and includes texts in motion pictures and other TV programs.

Compared with the vast variety of film videos available, there are only a limited number of TV programs and commercials available for possible classroom use in Japan. In considering this current EFL situation in Japan, this paper discusses the use of authentic texts, focusing on film videos as an example of such texts.

3. Why are authentic texts necessary?

At the beginning stages of learning a language, there is a need for speech used by teachers to be slow and clear. However, it quickly becomes apparent to learners that this is not the language they encounter in the speech world beyond the classroom walls. Native speakers other than language teachers tend to speak more quickly, mumble, and use contracted forms, different stress and intonation patterns, and unfamiliar and new words. In short, language which the learner hears outside the classroom seems much less predictable. There is a need, therefore, even in the early stages, to expose learners to samples of language spoken by non-teacher native speakers.

Porter and Roberts (1987: 177–78) compare linguistic features of authentic texts with those of the ELT listening text, and suggest various authentic listening activities. Listing what it is that “gives away” the ELT listening text, they specifically describe such features as unnatural intonation, excessive enunciation, structural repetition, complete sentences, distinct turn-taking, uniform and slow pace, limited vocabulary, and no mutilation. Just the opposite of these features, therefore, might be called the characteristics of authentic texts.

Porter and Roberts write: “there is a massive mismatch between the characteristics of the discourse we normally listen to and those of the language which the student normally hears in the ELT classroom” (Ibid., p. 178). They strongly advocate the use of authentic texts in the classroom, saying “we cannot expect EFL learners to handle types of language they have never, or hardly ever, been exposed to” (Ibid., p. 179).

Also, Natusch (1990: 19) says: “one of the most common criticisms levelled at ELT video production is that the speech is often stilted and artificial – that is, the speech is not reflective of the utterances heard in real-life situations. Learners soon feel that this is not the language they encounter in the speech world beyond the classroom walls.” These observations may further justify the use of authentic materials such as film videos in the classroom.

Concerning the contents and/or quality of such texts, the films or videos produced solely for language teaching have often been criticized as being dull or not depicting language as it is actually used in everyday life. It is not surprising, therefore, that many teachers have long had a deep sense of dissatisfaction with the overall lack of natural language, characterization, plots, settings and sense of drama in ELT video materials. Referring to this lack of natural language, Horibe (1996: 67) metaphorically compares dialogues in such ELT videos to “canned fish”, while he calls film dialogues “fresh raw fish”.

In addition, numerous research studies on the use of TV programs and film videos all share one very important finding: that student attitudes were extremely positive (Neuman, 1990; Rees, 1993). This strong indication of acceptance on the part of students suggests that film videos are a medium that students can enjoy, and adds to the need for further research in its potential as a means of motivating students in the classroom. Neuman & Koskinen (1992) report that “television had the advantages of being rather easy to access and of providing a shared learning environment that encourages student participation” (p. 102). Moreover, research seems to concur that motivation and time on task is enhanced with such authentic materials. The motivation to learn and to identify with members of the L2 group appears to be an important determinant in successful second language acquisition (Cummins, 1986; Trueba, 1989). Fearing failure, some students may construct an “affective filter,” or defense system, which prevents them from utilizing the input they might receive for language acquisition (Krashen, 1985). In order to lower the filter, Krashen suggests that language programs would be highly motivating, and non-evaluative. This motivational effect of television and film videos is also an important dimension in its possible use in EFL classrooms in Japan.

Referring to the rationale for using videos, Lonergan (1984) and Natusch (1990) gave various reasons for using videos in language classrooms. Essentially, they claimed that: 1) Videos are intrinsically interesting. Students will watch a video even if comprehension is limited; 2) Videos can motivate students to learn more about the characters, situations, and language; 3) Videos can create a climate in which the potential for successful learning is higher; 4) Videos present complete communicative situations where the speakers are visible. This is consistent with real-life situations because the speaker is usually visible to the listener except under special circumstances, e.g., when the speaker is on the phone or the listener is eavesdropping. In this sense, audio tapes and course books cannot replicate real-life communication as well as videos can; 5) With videos, the setting is clearly understood. The viewer knows when and where the communication act is occurring; 6) In videos, dynamic, immediate, and accessible sound and vision facilitate comprehension; 7) Videos show communication in context. The viewer can also see what happened before and after the communication act occurred; and 8) Videos include paralinguistic information – facial expressions, hand gestures, posture, etc. Although these observations are not limited to film videos alone, they also might help further justify the use of authentic videos in the classroom.

4. Possible problems with authentic texts

Referring to possible disadvantages entailed in the use of film videos in the EFL classroom, Edasawa et al. (1992) indicated that because a film is basically made for entertainment, not as teaching material, students are less task-oriented and tend to enjoy the film rather than concentrate on the learning activities. Also, for the same reason, there are no course books, teachers’ manuals or transcripts available, which requires teachers to prepare their own lesson plans and worksheets. Preparing a full transcript can be a very time-consuming process, especially for non-native teachers of English. But it is essential for teachers considering using film videos in the classroom. Without a transcript, students could watch a scene over and over, and still not understand what was said. By reading the transcript after listening to the video, however, students can either confirm or invalidate what they had heard.

Another disadvantage is that the language spoken in films is less formal, more difficult and often too rapid, so it may be difficult for non-native speakers to understand it. Edasawa et al. (1992) pointed out that the reasons for the difficulty were “1) fast speech rate and many reduced forms, 2) English rhythm and stress pattern, 3) hesitations and pauses in the middle of an utterance, 4) unstable volume and pitch, 5) more than one utterance simultaneously, 6) sudden changes in the thread of the story, and 7) low redundancy of information” (p. 64).

Concerning this possible disadvantage that authentic videos are too difficult, Stempleski and Tomalin write: "Language level is not necessarily a crucial criterion. In many instances, the picture offers clues to meaning over and above the language on the soundtrack. Thus, much apparently difficult authentic video material can be used with students at a relatively low level of ability (1990: 9)." They even suggest that, "it is probably best for institutions to give beginners and elementary-level students priority in the use of video, since they are likely to benefit most from its power to motivate and to provide direct access to comprehension by putting language in context (Ibid., p. 4)."

Finally, examining the texts of a total of 285 film videos, Sato (1995: 30) points out that too many slang expressions and so-called four-letter words are contained in recent American films, which are very popular with students. Admitting that these are not the words students should learn to produce, Sato strongly suggests that these are expressions they should at least recognize because they are most commonly used in real-life situations.

5. Opinion survey and analysis: Students' views

In the above sections, we have looked at the use of authentic texts in the classroom, focusing on film videos. At this point, it is important to determine how the students feel about working with them. All of the students surveyed were taught by this writer. The students met once a week for a 15-week semester and they all watched and worked with both the authentic film video "Casper²" and the ELT video "Family Album USA" for six weeks each during the semester. Basically the same procedures were followed for the both videos: after watching a video segment, they answered comprehension questions and did partial dictation exercises. Then, students practiced in pairs some useful expressions picked up from the segment.

As van Lier (1988) notes, there is no single best way of doing L2 classroom evaluation. In this case, students were given freedom to comment on the questions asked in any way they wished, rather than answer a written questionnaire. Although questionnaires may present a more objective evaluation of the activity, they tend to force students to think along preconceived guidelines rather than their own impressions and ideas. The questions to the students were (1) *Which material did you like better and why?* and (2) *What did you find most difficult about the material of your choice?* and they were asked to write either in Japanese or in English. All the comments were written in Japanese.

The following survey represents their views:

Respondents: STUDENTS(Ss.)

Group I: 1st year Economics majors, Hiroshima University 60 Ss.

Group II: 1st year Education majors, Hiroshima University 60 Ss.

TOTAL 120 Ss.

Analysis of their comments to the first question revealed that almost all students (117 Ss, 97.5%) preferred the film video.

Eighty-two students (68%) specifically mentioned that they preferred the movie video because the story was more interesting. Comments from this category included statements such as:

- I like movies very much. So I enjoyed this class very much.
- I like "Casper" much better because it is exciting and thrilling.
- I prefer "Casper" because the other one (ELT video) was just like a textbook.

Judging from these comments, the use of the film video seemed to produce a beneficial effect on many students, significantly enhancing their motivation. This motivational effect on students supports the results of earlier research studies mentioned above.

Thirty-seven students (31%) mentioned that they found the language in the film video "the real English", referring to the authenticity of the material, which also supported the above-mentioned teachers' view about the language in so-called ELT videos.

Typical comments from this category included:

- I enjoyed Casper much better, because I felt that I was learning “living” English, although it was very difficult.
- I prefer the movie video, because English in the video seemed more appealing and real to me.

Eight students (6.7%) answered “more familiar”. They wrote that the material was more familiar to them because they had watched the film video before.

Analysis of the students’ responses to the second question regarding difficulties revealed four categories of answers. In order of frequency they were: (a) too fast (76.7%), (b) many colloquial expressions and idioms (12.5%), (c) many new words (8.3%), and (d) unclear way of speech (3.3%).

A majority of subjects specifically mentioned authentic speech as “too fast”, which means that most of them were overwhelmed by the speed. Some mentioned, however, that the listening exercises were difficult but challenging.

6. Research on closed-captioned TV programs and films

The analysis of the students’ feedback clearly indicated that the fast rate of speaking was the most formidable challenge for them in understanding authentic film videos. It also might show that teachers considering the use of such film videos in the classroom will need to come up with some ways to help students’ comprehension, i.e., make film videos more accessible to the students.

Use of closed captions might be a solution to this challenge. For example, Garza (1991: 246) says: “By providing students with a familiar (i.e., comprehensible) graphic representation of an utterance, they are empowered to begin to assign meaning to previously unintelligible aural entities, gradually building their aural comprehension in relation to their reading comprehension.”

Use of such television programs and/or film videos has been studied for the past fifteen years since the service started in 1980 in the United States³. Following is a summary of the findings of those studies.

Price and Dow (1983) of Harvard University conducted a pilot project to determine whether ESL students, in their language studies, might benefit from closed-captioned television and video programming. This study was the first attempt to empirically examine the effects of captioned television or video materials on ESL students. The results indicated that all subjects, 450 adult ESL students of 76 native language backgrounds, benefited significantly from captioning, even after one viewing. The researchers concluded that captioned video materials might help facilitate the learning of ESL not only by improving the global comprehension of the language of the test material, but also by helping the learner to “acquire more of the cultural script” that native speakers of English share (Ibid., p. 8).

Markham (1989) examined the effects of captioned television videotapes on the listening comprehension of beginning, intermediate, and advanced ESL students, using two videotaped episodes of varying difficulty (taken from the educational science television program *3-2-1 Contact*). A total of 76 university-level ESL students were involved in this study. The results of the study are consistent with earlier findings regarding the benefits of captions for hearing-impaired and hearing first language students, and indicated that ESL students also derived substantial comprehension benefits from viewing videotaped material with captions. Contrary to the researcher’s early anticipation that availability of captions might not be as important for the advanced students, they benefited as much from the captions as any other group. Also, the results did not support another concern that beginners might comprehend neither the captioned episode nor the uncaptioned episode because of their novice level language ability. The beginners clearly performed at a higher level when provided with captioned materials (p. 39). The study concluded that the multisensory characteristics of captioned television seemed to enable ESL students to view words in a meaningful

and stimulating context.

Neuman & Koskinen (1992) focused on Krashen's "comprehensible input" theory, which argues that children's communicative competence in L2 is a function of the amount of "comprehensible input" they receive and understand, without formal reading instruction (Krashen, 1985; Trueba, 1989), and analyzed whether comprehensible input in the form of captioned television, as a multi-sensory, largely entertaining medium might influence ESL students' acquisition of vocabulary and conceptual knowledge. The researchers found that using captioned science materials from the television program *3-2-1 Contact* with 129 Asian and Hispanic seventh and eighth grade ESL students resulted in higher score on tests of word knowledge and recall of the scientific content of the program. In this project, the subjects demonstrated significant improvements in incidental vocabulary learning after prolonged exposure to captioned episodes, although they did not receive any special instruction at all. These results support the theory that multisensory processing of the audio, video, and print components of captioned television enhances language learning and understanding of the content, and, overall, the study demonstrated the power of captioned television to provide "comprehensible input" to language minority students. In addition, the findings of this project suggested that students' ability to acquire vocabulary through context appeared to be influenced by their level of linguistic competence. Those who were most fluent in English gained more vocabulary knowledge than those with limited English proficiency.

Unlike other experiments which used NCI⁴-generated paraphrase-type captions, Garza (1991) used verbatim captioning with 35 advanced ESL learners and 20 Russian language learners at university to explore the language learning benefits of merging spoken and printed text in one medium. His study was also the first to specifically focus on advanced ESL students. He chose short (2-4 minute) captioned segments representing five distinctly different types of video material: dramatic, animated, and comedy feature films, documentary programs, and music videos. When, over a period of time, he tested students' ability to use specific vocabulary from the segments in retelling their content, he found a significant increase in comprehension of the segments, as well as recall of the language used in them. The data collected in his study strongly supported a positive correlation between the presence of captions and increased comprehension of the linguistic content of the video material, suggesting the use of captions to bridge the often sizable gap between the development of skills in reading comprehension and listening comprehension, the latter usually lagging significantly behind the former. Interestingly, the results did not support initial concerns that the addition of the written text to already visually and acoustically rich video materials might overload the learner's capacity to comprehend. While this may likely be more of a concern at the beginning levels of instruction, more advanced students seemed to cope with the captioned materials quite well, as demonstrated in both the content-based comprehension checks and in the recall/retell interview sessions. Similarly, concerns that one mode of input might seriously impede another — specifically, that the reading of the captions might override the development of listening comprehension strategies — were also not evidenced in any significant way.

Rees (1993) reports success with Chinese and Japanese students of ESL using captioned news programs and sitcoms (American TV situation comedies) to expand vocabulary, improve listening comprehension, increase knowledge of current affairs and U.S. culture, and stimulate class discussions. Rees used printed-out scripts of programs students had viewed in class for classroom and homework reading.

Webb, Vanderplank, & Parks (1994) suggest using certain closed captioned children's programs, such as *Sesame Street*, *Reading Rainbow* and *3-2-1 Contact*, with adult ESL learners. They claim that the program content, captioning rate, and vocabulary used make these programs suitable for use in the adult ESL classroom and that many adult learners' activities can be designed around them.

In addition to these findings, closed captions have proved to be especially helpful to many

Japanese teachers of English who need full texts of the film videos⁵, because only a limited number of screenplays or course books are currently available for teachers wishing to use film videos in the classroom. Moreover, because of their availability, interest, and familiarity to students, closed-captioned film videos seem to be the most appropriate authentic texts currently available in Japan.

7. Conclusion

Most teachers know, through their own experiences, that motivation is one of the most important factors which influence learners' success in language learning. From the survey, it was found that authentic materials in the form of film videos were useful to motivate students. An overwhelming majority of Japanese students surveyed preferred authentic materials to ELT texts in spite of the difficulty involved. Considering that many students reported being overwhelmed by the fast rate of speaking in the film, closed captions might prove to be an effective tool to help students' comprehension.

Also, the findings of research studies on closed-captioned television and film videos suggest that they may have great potential in the successful instruction of English to Japanese students. The range of related topics worthy of attention and investigation is wide and yet to be fully explored and appreciated. In particular, effective presentation methods, material selection, and research methodology itself should be explored further.

Finally, the use of closed captioned film videos in the classroom is not a panacea solving all the problems Japanese teachers of English are now facing. It is only one of the alternatives, but the writer is strongly convinced that their use provides both learners and teachers with a great variety of ideas and methods for successful language learning.

¹ Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English: Third Edition

² An imported video, which contained no Japanese subtitles, was used, since subtitles were not included in the ELT video.

³ See Kadoyama (1996) for details of the closed caption service in the United States.

⁴ National Captioning Institute. See Kadoyama (1996) for details.

⁵ Various closed caption decoders are available, and some enhanced models can be connected to computers, which enables teachers to easily prepare teaching materials, such as cloze tests, from dialogue transcripts.

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