Building Schemata in a Media Supported Course

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Abstract
For a variety of reasons the use of media can be beneficial to the collaborative classroom. Effective collaborative classroom techniques in a media supported lesson can be very beneficial to the ESL classroom for both students and teachers. Introducing media into collaborative groups for a class may also have the potential of having difficulties and drawbacks. Knowing these potential difficulties and drawbacks can be advantageous for a class incorporating media that includes all the language skills in collaborative groups. In this paper, I will present ideas for the teacher to initiate student interest, guide collaborative groups to understanding, encouraging them to comprehend media in English. I will also provide insights that I have found beneficial in developing materials and teaching methods that can be incorporated and practically implemented in their classrooms. I will look at what areas of the curriculum and language can be enhanced and taught by using media from the television series the Simpsons. I will look at the strengths and weaknesses of using this animated media material, and what advantages and disadvantages it will give the teacher in relating media to his or her pupils.

Objectives
The objective of this paper is to explore how using media in a collaborative ESL classroom can be used to benefit and enhance teaching, and enrich student learning. The following is a list of objectives of the class.
1. Intrinsically motivate students by presenting authentic language interaction, providing an authentic look at culture.
2. Expose students to, as explicitly as possible, the nonverbal components of the language (i.e. body language) or what is technically called language paralinguistic features.
3. Develop the idea of ‘acculturation’ and the pragmatic rule of the ethnography of speaking that go hand-in-hand along with the explicit verbal message a native speaker employs in language interaction.
4. Providing lessons and activities that students will implement in collaborative groups, with the aim of developing their language competence and performance.

Introduction
Some teachers may have the impression that media supported lessons can't be introduced effectively in the ESL classroom setting. Teachers may have additional apprehensions about introducing them to a collaborative classroom setting. Reasons for apprehension include that it is too difficult for students, the characters speak too fast, the content is too complex, the vocabulary is too difficult, and groups would have a difficult time discussing the content of the materials in a group setting. This assumption may be true for some media, but certainly not all. With careful
media selection, teacher and student preparation, planning and teaching techniques, media can become comprehensible, and an asset to collaborative classrooms and an effective teaching resource to many levels of English classes. In this paper, I will present ideas to stimulate student interest, guide students to understanding, encouraging them to try to comprehend video media in English. I will also provide insights that I have found beneficial into developing materials to support video media and teaching methods that can be incorporated and practically implemented in their classrooms. I will look at what aspects of the curriculum can be stimulated and taught by using animation from the American television series the Simpsons. I will look at the strengths and weaknesses of using such material, and what advantages and disadvantages it will give the teacher in relating to his/her pupils. The paper will examine the difficulties arising from using such material, discussing various ways of dealing with these problems.

**Unique Teaching Points of Media**

Many videos made for the ESL classroom are made with the intention of teaching a lesson rather than telling a story. These videos often lack the reality and originality that spur creative discussion and inspire the imagination. Video needs to spark classroom creativity and inspire students' imagination in the classroom. Videos should also be chosen for students that deal with contemporary, relevant issues. The situations presented in the video should contain meaningful context relate to the lives of students.

I found the Simpsons television series provides for these student needs. The video keeps students attention; inspires imagination and deals with relevant issues. The Simpsons can be used in a number of ways to focus on particular language targets or specific topics. In addition, the video can offer other unique teaching points and cultural connections such as stereotypes, culture, and voices.

**Advantages of Video in the Collaborative Classroom**

I hope that by incorporating video in the class, students will benefit from the advantages video has to offer the collaborative classroom. I find the following to be advantages in the classroom and use the following as a guideline for using video in the collaborative classroom.

1. Using video material can motivate students. They will have an experience of real feelings of accomplishment when they understand what is going on in a situation where native speakers use English. Thus, an EFL learner will realize that “with a bit of extra effort and practice, along with some help from the teacher, ‘real English’ is not beyond their comprehension” (Stempleski, 1987).

2. In the show, everything is exaggerated, and that includes the voices. In the case of animation, the actor gives animated characters a voice and cannot rely on body language and gestures, and therefore the voice must be sufficient on its own. This is very useful in the class when teaching English as a foreign language. The video provides authentic material that doesn't have the constructed feel of most videos designed for teaching.

The voice will express many valuable entities. It conveys the inflection of the language, specifically when it comes to different emotions. To make the characters stand out there are also a wide variety of ages, socialists and accents in cartoons. Not only are there national and regional differences, but also class structures are
voiced with accents. This gives the student a broad perspective on the language and an understanding of how varied the language is, something that the teacher is unable to do. Video also gives the students a break from the teacher and a variety of more authentic English voices to take after. There are endless variations of English and it is important for students to be exposed to other types of English than the teacher's version. The choice of elements that are shown are often more telling about the culture that created it, than that of the culture being observed (Hamilton 2002). This can provide lively debate or discussions among students. Video material in a non-ELT environment presents real language. The language is real in the sense that native speakers use it in real daily life interaction. Therefore, the EFL learner is exposed to language use in a communicative setting from which s/he can learn the real spoken discourse including sounds, and utterances, and their underlying messages, which are, in most cases, hinted at through the nonverbal explanatory body language.

3. Springfield, the Simpsons hometown is a miniscule of America, with all the elements and idiosyncrasies of modern suburban life. By watching, students get the insiders view of America. By studying the themes of the show, they can understand what Americans are proud and ashamed of, and what they consider important contemporary issues. These themes then can be introduced and discussed in class. Viewing provides the learner with an aesthetic look at American culture. Through viewing native speakers in real language interaction, the EFL learner is exposed to the cultural aspects that accompany language use in communicative settings.

4. The Simpsons use of stereotypes can be one asset of using the show in the classroom. The use of stereotypes provides a rich source of discussion topics, variation and interest for students. Members of the Simpsons have spent time in various countries, such as Japan, Brazil, England, Canada, France, and Australia. The Simpsons use stereotypes for each its major characters as well as that of particular cultures. In these cases, they often use a large variety, and sometimes extreme, cases of stereotypes, generalizations, and major icons from each of these cultures. As with the use of stereotypes, the Simpsons are full with obscure references, which make it an enjoyable tool for study and teaching. Matt Groening, the creator the show says "I get many letters from teachers and college professors who have used 'The Simpsons" to illustrate some point in class.” Using videotaped material facilitates better comprehension of the intended messages. Besides this, it provides an authentic pattern which, when carefully copied by EFL learners. Moreover, it is obvious that visual clues clarify the meaning since the speaker is going to use language patterns both verbally and non-verbally. By using video, aiming to developed the learners’ listening, comprehension, and cultural understanding. Video gives the use of language a wider and authentic context. To see the language in actual use takes the focus away from the technicalities of the languages on to the content, in line with the present tradition of communicative language teaching. Without much exposure to reading and listening material students who learn languages in classrooms are unlikely to make much progress. It also provides much more information than just the language such as: body language,
nonverbal signals, values, traditions, clothes, food, and social-linguistics.

**Challenges**

Video can be a great tool and offer many advantages in the class. It also offers challenges, these challenges include keeping the class focused on the material and maintaining student understanding. Most students are used to watching TV, and like it, but this also presents difficulties. The teacher must make sure the material and attitudes of the students are geared towards learning even though they are watching a video. The students enjoy watching video and the best learning experiences are when we're not aware that we're learning. Although it may be enjoyable, the teacher should aim at keeping the lesson focused on a learning task.

A second difficulty may be student understanding of the video. The Simpsons use humor of the intricate sort like allusion, satire and sarcasm, the teacher needs to ask the question whether the students will understand the satire or if the shows use of humor and satire are relevant in the students understanding. There is nothing so unfunny as explaining humor in detail, and there are few things as frustrating as not understanding a joke when everybody else is laughing. First of all, the students will not understand it all. Not even longtime fans of the show get all the subversive satire and obscure references. With classes with various levels, students with a higher level of English will understand more of the humor. Consider also the satisfaction it provides to be inside the fold, so to speak. Getting the students to realize that knowledge gives them a funnier world because they will understand more, some might be motivated to turn their brains up a notch. The danger of a few students missing out on some points of satire must be accepted and faced. Students learn in different ways, so this way is not perfect for everybody either. But perhaps it has value for most of the class. Each individual class responds differently to methods of teaching, so nothing can ever be taken for granted. The teacher has to study his class carefully and make decisions based on that.

**Media Collaborative Groups**

The goal of a collaborative media supported lesson is to improve EFL learners’ communicative language skills (i.e., listening, speaking, reading, and writing) with the support of video in a group setting. Working in collaborative groups, having group discussions, working through the video together as a group to gain understanding.

Video has been proven to be an effective resource in teaching English as a foreign/second language. Stempleski (1987) states that, “a rich and exciting source of video software for EFL/ESL classes is authentic material. Video material, designed for its entertaining value rather than language teaching, is a rich and exciting source of video software for instruction in an English as a second language (ESL) classroom.”

The video material that I chose to use as the basis for the class is the American animated series the Simpsons. I chose the Simpsons television series because I thought it would be a valuable source of material for the ESL/EFL classroom. I wanted to present material that would keep the students interest and provide them with current topics to discuss.

The Simpsons can be used in a number of ways to focus on particular language targets, language skills or specific topics. It includes references to illustrate American culture, pop songs, movies, and numerous other cultural markers, that can give students an insight into American culture. A Simpsons episode “is a text that most of our
students will come across and some will pursue regularly, owing to screen culture and the place of television in their lives“ (Doyle, 1999). I feel that it can be a medium of learning in which most students can connect with and enjoy.

Curriculum

The video collaborative material presented in this paper was taught in two university classes in Japan. One class course title was English 1A. The class consisted of 25 first year Japanese students. The class was a compulsory English class with equal emphasis on speaking, reading, writing, and listening. The students were International Studies majors with various levels of English, but generally at a lower-intermediate level.

The other class was entitled English 2A. The class consisted of 23 first and second year Japanese students. This was an elective English class. The class also had equal emphasis on speaking, reading, writing, and listening. The students were mostly International Studies majors with various levels of English, but generally at an intermediate level.

The classes were broken down into fifteen classes that met once a week for ninety minutes. The class grading encourage student participation and group discussion, with the majority of the class points coming from class preparation and participation in their collaborative group. Grading for the content of the class for the entire semester was evaluated as follows:

a) Thirteen in-class tasks that were worth five points. Each class has an in-class score based on their preparation and participation in their collaborative group.

b) Two quizzes worth ten points each based on the text and material covered in class.

c) One writing assignment, worth ten points.

d) Minus 1 Point is taken away from students who are late to class, sleeping, no text, no dictionary, chattering in Japanese.

Teaching Procedure

When planning my approach to the collaborative video lesson, I kept a three-part lesson in mind. I provide to the students schema by incorporating previewing activities with an episode summary reading assignment and collaborative group worksheet. During the viewing of the video, I provided students with viewing tasks and after the video I provide summary and collaborative group questions and post-viewing exercises.

Milli Fanzy of Kentucky Educational Television (KET, 1999) suggests that teachers should think of using as a three-part lesson, including pre-viewing, viewing, and post-viewing activities.

a) Before presenting the video, engage the students’ interest in what they will be doing, and prepare them to do it successfully.

b) While learners view the video, the teacher should observe their reactions and see what they do not understand, what they are intrigued by, and what bothers them.

c) After the viewing, the teacher should review and clarify complex points, encourage discussion, explain, and assign follow-up activities.

d) It is also important to ensure the suitability, length, clarity, and completeness of the videotaped material.

Creating Schema

It is necessary to make active schemata before students watch, as well as giving them some responsibility over course content (Cook, 1989). Students feel more comfortable listening to content that is familiar and that they can make predictions.
about. Students need to have schemata available to help them comprehend the information presented. Negotiating the content of the class in this way will ensure that interest is piqued by the time the class is presented with the material and will ensure that the content of the class is more relevant to the learners (Nunan 1988).

**Reading**

In an effort to create schema students are assigned an episode summary reading of the video they will watch in class. The reading is an overview of each episode for the students to read, study and acquaint themselves with before viewing the episode (Figure 1). The materials schema is partially addressed for students in the episode reading. Research in cognitive science suggests that knowledge is organized in the form of schemata (Rumelhart, 1980). Schemata consist of stereotypical scenarios, routines and action sequences, which are acquired in the course of an individual's life experience. A schema has also been described in terms of frames and frame systems (Minsky, 1975) and scripts (Schank & Abelson, 1977). Weaver (1994) defines a schema as "an organized chunk of knowledge or experience, often accompanied by feelings". Schemata aid the interpretation of both linguistic and non-linguistic sensory data by providing a context in order to predict meaning and fill in missing information, and this has been amply demonstrated by research in native speaker comprehension of TV news (Bell, 1991).

For correct schema activation to occur, the reader must use the incoming data to locate possible specifics in the schema. This activates the top down processing, which searches for the appropriate schema to account for all the details in the input.

Schema processing can be blocked in two ways. First, it is data-limited and depends on the reader’s ability to receive data. Therefore, factors such as a lack of vocabulary knowledge can derail it. Secondly, the processing system is resource-limited. It cannot use more resources than those available in the working memory. If both the vocabulary and the structure of the text, for example, are unfamiliar, the reader will not be able to allocate sufficient working memory resources to top-down and bottom-up processing. The reading will therefore short-circuit because the process demands of the reading exceed the resources of the learner.

![Figure 1. Reading](image)

**Student Worksheet**

To create schema for the video, the students from the episode summary reading, complete a pre-viewing student worksheet. The worksheet consists of sixteen blanks for key words, three blanks for key points, and...
five blanks for discussion questions. From the reading, individual students fill in the student worksheet before class, filling in their own key words, key points and discussion questions from the reading (Figure 2). For the student’s worksheet, students first choose and complete the key words and key points. These key words and key points are the student’s own opinion of words and phrases that are important in the understanding of the article. The discussion questions are questions that the students think of individually and can ask in their collaborative groups to the other group members about the episode reading while in class. In the collaborative groups the students are to discuss and negotiate the key words and key points, contributing each students ideas and interpretation of the episode summary. Students are then to discuss each other’s discussion questions.

Identifying Key Words

In the key words section of the student worksheet, students are to identify sixteen key words from the episode reading. These key words should be words the student feels are necessary in order to understand the episodes meaning (Figure 2). To familiarize the student with the episodes vocabulary, students generate a list of vocabulary, ideas, people, places and events that are relevant to the episode in the key word section before class as homework. In class, students discuss and share key words, word meanings and the part of speech of the word in context of the reading. Students work collaboratively, discussing and negotiating the readings key words in groups.

In the student worksheet, students are also to identify three key points or sentences from the reading. In this section, students are to identify key points from the reading that they feel are necessary in order to understand the reading. In their collaborative groups, students discuss and compare key points, talking about the key points and the reason that they feel the key points are vital in the readings understanding. Identifying key points from the script, before they watch enables students to focus on particular ideas that will be expressed in the video (Figure 2). Students are to complete the key points as homework before class. When students come to class and work in their collaborative groups, they are to discuss and compare key points that they chose from the article. Identifying key points is meant to further acquaint students with the material that they are going to view and facilitate easier and better comprehension, of the video episode.

Making Discussion Questions

To get the students to further think about the episodes content that they will watch, students generate their own discussion questions based on the episode overview reading (Figure 2). Students
complete five discussion questions from the episode summary. These questions will be asked and discussed in the students collaborative group. I hope that by having students ask questions in their collaborative groups, students will further acquaint themselves with the topic of the material, think more about the episodes content, get other members opinions, and share thoughts about the episode in their group. More controversial topics can generate much discussion. Debates using the controversy in the episode can help students examine the subject in more detail.

**Episode Viewing**

After completing the article worksheet, I begin the video viewing exercises. Students have a cloze listening exercise at the beginning of the video and throughout the rest of the video students have listening tasks to complete. By doing previewing exercises such as the article worksheet, students will be able to better anticipate the video content and understand the episodes meaning. They will be more comfortable with the material and be able to make connections from the previewing material and the video episode viewing.

**Cloze Listening**

I believe listening comprehension cloze exercises can be very useful. It can be used for checking of vocabulary learning, or listening for specific words in detail. For this type of listening cloze, the students have a text with some words deleted – as in a regular cloze activity. It requires only a limited response to listening, rather than an extensive response. Students listen to the skit from the episode and fill in the missing words. It is an enjoyable and motivating activity for the students. The Simpsons adds additional challenges and enjoyment with the characters different accents, dialects and slang words. The procedure can be adapted to a variety of content areas (Figure 3).

After listening and completing the worksheet individually, I have students work in their collaborative groups sharing information.

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**Listening Tasks**

Listening tasks are almost like a treasure hunt: the students have to search for the answers while they are listening (Ur, 1984). Students have listening tasks to complete during the listening portion of the lesson. These questions might be open or closed, content based or language based (Figure 4).

From my experience, this exercise helps keep the students focused during the video. I feel it is important to have a listening task that is done during the video. Presenting the material as is without some kind of examination of the issues presented does not give students a chance to think about the issues for themselves. It is almost like a treasure hunt: the students have to
search for the answers while they are listening (Ur, 1984).

Figure 4. Listening Task

A Note On Copyright
Different countries have different laws. Some are stricter than others so you should check on the details in your own country before using any recorded material such as movies, news media, songs, or other audio recordings. In Japan, the rule appears to be that you can use copyrighted material, as long as by doing so you are not taking money away from the original producers. The law is vague and can be interpreted in a number of ways. To be sure that you are not infringing copyright laws, you should consult a lawyer. (Simons 1995)

Summary
Video material can be a very useful resource and asset complimenting the collaborative language teaching-learning process because it combines both fun and pedagogic instructions in authentic material that reflect real interaction, providing opportunities for collaborative group work. By employing videotaped material, teachers can always create an indefinite number of language teaching activities. The devised activities in this paper were mere examples that focus on different language skills that EFL/ESL students can acquire.

It is vitally important that we know how to provide the best setting for learning in class as we can. Humor is one element that may help students overcome nerves and shyness in class, bringing out the best in them. We must, however, employ it with skill. I have tried to show and discuss how "The Simpsons" may be used in teaching, concerning content and a lesser extent, to specific methods. When we sneak knowledge in the back door in the disguise of entertainment, teachers can push the zone of language development. It is entertainment, but the clever teacher can make that his advantage. It is to be hoped that we can spur interest and attentiveness in weary pupils.

References


