

The role of audiovisual media in the teaching of English

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Visual aids in the teaching of languages may have been used by traditional methods but were never referred to. They were formally introduced in the 1970s by a method known as Total Physical Response, proposed by James Asher in his book *Learning Another Language Through Actions*, where he argued that a target language could be acquired through listening and demonstration. The grammar-translation method had begun its decline, giving way to new experimental methods that included the latest technology as a teaching aid, computers and video amongst others. The use of the video in the teaching of English was introduced in the mid-1980's and although, to some teachers and learners, it may seem that it has always been present, is still a strange phenomenon to most teachers. In a poll carried out among teachers, only thirty per cent of them used the video regularly, and only half of these used it in creative activities. The main reasons why this device is still a stranger to most teachers might be a lack of facilities offered by some educational institutions, and most importantly, that language teachers might be reluctant to introduce it in their classes because they do not know how to exploit this awkward contraption in language learning.

However reluctant teachers may be, the video has given way to an important bibliography in the last

decade, some of which has taken advantage of the advent of the machine but has soon become outdated because they do not explore the great potential of this visual device. They all develop similar activities that are already known to teachers, since they are, in fact, adaptations of older exercises, such as "freeze frames", "jigsaw viewing" or "silent viewing", adapted from picture or listening exercises. Although the video is not more difficult to use than a normal cassette with its play, forward and rewind buttons, its advantages are obviously much greater than using a cassette.

However, a third problem arises at this point: half of the teachers who use the video in their classes tend to do it in a relaxed way due, perhaps, to a certain misconception that turns the machine into a reliable substitute for the teacher. Thus, the use of the video is relegated to a secondary level to play films or series causing the students to view this tool as irrelevant for their learning process. In fact, as Allen points out, "when it first came into the classroom video was seen as a substitute film projector or television set. It is certainly true that it can be used in this way but it is far from being the only way to use the video in the classroom -particularly in language teaching" (1985: 31). Thus the video is not a baby-sitter, it does not do the teaching for us. Students are used to listening to us, speaking to us or using the same class tape almost

every day, so the video can become an adventurous exercise and can help us provide the stimulus for motivating and introducing effective learning experience.

Therefore, a video should be regarded as another teaching tool that needs to be fully exploited to allow the students to be active participants in the class instead of passive listeners and viewers. Whether we use a prepared method such *Grapevine*, *Headway video* or *A Weekend Away* or “authentic material” one may record from any of the satellite TELEVISION channels or from the Spanish TELEVISION, we will be offering our students the possibility to participate in situations that are taking place outside the classroom, they will be able to explore the situation and feel closer to the social-cultural aspects of the second language. They will be able to experience different insights of how people live, work or think in other countries. In other words, they will be given a cultural context.

Besides, we will help our students to make the effort to integrate other signs to understand the language and the message to be conveyed since the video allows the teacher to provide a range of paralinguistic clues: facial expressions, body movements, gestures, etc. These are visual references that are useful for basic comprehension and accurate understanding. They will enable weaker or, at least, less confident students to lose their fear towards the listening comprehension exercise as they will slowly gain confidence in their listening skills.

In the limited time we have been allotted, we shall explore four ways in which students of English can benefit from using the video in the classroom, from beginners to advanced ones, thus confronting those teachers who are indifferent to use the video because their students are either too elementary or too advanced to benefit from using the video. This is an erroneous approach as a videoed programme can be used from the lowest to the highest level and be enjoyed equally as much. For elementary and intermediate levels, we have often used the prepared videos we have previously mentioned. Students have both enjoyed and benefited from the activities, which are not necessarily those designed by the authors. We must bear in mind that even prepared videos can be modified to suit the needs of our students or to liven up exercises that have been carefully prepared, as claimed by their authors, normally belonging to the all

powerful ELT publishing lobby, but which we may find unappealing.

For the more advanced levels we prefer to use “authentic material”, that is, programmes that have been recorded from a satellite channel, such a short news item or a talk show. It is obvious that they will not understand all that is being said but if the task they are asked to do is not too demanding and the teacher manages to convince them that all they have to do is grasp the main idea, they will enjoy watching “real” group could revise different tenses when answering the questions while lower-intermediate students might use comparatives. This video could be shown together with one on Madrid to make the task easier. In this case we could even play a silent video to focus on the language used by the students rather than on the listening side British or American TELEVISION and, most of all, understanding it. Mary Underwood in her book *Teaching English* writes: “Sometimes, listeners can deduce the meaning of a word from its context. This is something that frequently occurs in mother-tongue listening when a word is not understood or not heard properly. For people listening to a foreign language, an unknown word can be like a suddenly dropped barrier causing them to stop and think about the meaning of the word and thus making them miss the next part of the speech. It is believed that this tendency to stop listening and concentrate on the immediate problem often results when learners have been taught their English in a way which has given more emphasis to accuracy than fluency and which has been more concerned with the mastery of the forms of language rather than with how it is used.” In other words, we should teach our students that if they cannot understand one particular word they should continue looking for other clues which may help them work out the meaning of the whole message. This technique should be applied in all the listening exercises done in the classroom but with the video we would have the advantage that the clues that they are looking for are both visual and aural.

Nevertheless, we should choose the activities carefully to avoid preventing clear understanding. In this respect we bluntly oppose the view of those communicative proponents who consider that the ultimate goal of the language class is to introduce authentic material or “realia” at whatever cost, arguing that learners must become accustomed to understanding the target language in the most extreme conditions

such a short conversation in an airport with a noisy background of planes taking off and landing. The level of intrusive background noise, for instance, must be limited to a minimum and even avoided in the case of beginners. Consequently, an important point, we, as teachers, should bear in mind, is the real level of our students' knowledge of L2. If a task is too demanding or a video clip is too dense, we will achieve the opposite effect we are looking for, the class will be demotivated and the idea that "I can't do it" will be general. Thus, it is difficult to agree with those that believe that the same clip can be used for any level, and that everything depends on what they are asked to do with it. Conversely, we believe that we do not need to look for a video where the students will identify all the vocabulary used, but the video clip chosen should be in accordance with the "real" level of their English. This is the reason why we tend to use the graded videos available in the market for the lower levels, where the language used can be controlled by the teacher more easily.

Our experience tells us that learners are reluctant to accept this kind of difficult material and normally switch off. Therefore, the role of teachers is fundamental to assess the level of the materials chosen for their students. There are a number of possibilities open to the teachers that can alleviate the task of searching for the right material. We can select many clips from recent films or a recent news item, even if the students are already familiar with it. Some knowledge of the theme will allow them to work more confidently with it.

This type of exercise may seem to be a little time-consuming for teachers to prepare, but there are some basic exercises that can be modified to do with different videos. Thus, all we have to do is watch the video a couple of times before showing it to our students.

Another factor that may put us off using the video may be the age of our students. We may think that certain exercises will not interest our students, or, in the case of secondary schools, that we might have behaviour problems. Working with students ranging from 14 to 60 upwards, with very different social and cultural backgrounds, we firmly defend the use of the video as a class tool. Grammar and phonetics are necessary and we can even teach these with a video. Besides, we must remember that it is important for our students to see and feel the progress they are

making. Beginners are sometimes demotivated because they think they are not making any progress, while more advanced students may feel the need to come in contact with more "real" situations, that is, the need to leave the classroom boundaries. The video can thus be used as a platform for further practice and extension work.

Our next step is to examine four very different exercises that can be put into practice in the classroom with very different aims. The first exercise that we propose is based on prepared material, a Longman video on various London sites. There is a corresponding workbook that can be used with the video. However, we feel that some of the exercises included are monotonous and unappealing. Thus, we devised a new exercise to make the class more communicative. The classical comprehension exercise that comes in the workbook can be implemented by introducing a number of additional questions for the students to discuss:

1. Do you like London?
2. Would you like to visit it?
3. Have you seen the Big Ben before?
4. Are there any similar clocks in Spanish cities?

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The questions can be modified to suit the level of the group. An upper-intermediate. This type of exercises could be used to practise and revise grammar, to create a situation for communication and finally to introduce the learners to cultural aspects of the target language. Thus, we are totally in favour of the need of adapting even prepared materials for ELT for their use in the classroom.

Our second exercise would be aimed again at lower-intermediate or intermediate students. It is an example of the type of exercises the teacher can do with a short sequence from a film which does not even have to be in English, as the voice does not play an important role in this case (for example in a scene from an episode of the British comedy *Mr Bean*). Below we include a list of short sentences to be used with the scene; they could be made easier or more difficult, depending on the level of the group. Students would watch the sequence twice and working in pairs would try to put the sentences in their correct order. This is a simple exercise and they will be revising or introducing vocabulary in an interesting and lively way. There are a number of variations on this exercise, e. g. the teacher could ask the class to write out a composition with the sentences, using connectors, or,

if the simple past has already been introduced, they could write the sentences in the past or the present continuous. This is the list of sentences:

1. He loses his trunks.
2. Some schoolgirls enter the pool.
3. He goes on to the top diving board.
4. Everybody has to leave the pool.
5. He shakes his feet.
6. He feels very frightened.
7. The attendant tells him off.
8. The boys join him.
9. He sees the diving board.
10. He tries to hide under the water.
11. One of the boys stamps on his hand.
12. A little girl steals his trunks.
13. He plays on the slide.
14. He falls into the water.
15. He goes to the children's swimming pool.

Another variation could be carried out by an introductory exercise in which the students are given a list of words, such as "swimming trunks, diving board, elephant, slide, schoolgirls". They can be asked to create a short story using all the words provided. The stories created with such a list of unlikely words will be very different and, some of them, hilarious. The next step will be to watch the scene to compare their stories with the real one. A sequence of this type will last six minutes, but could take up to fifty minutes of a class. With this type of exercises, students might practise the skills of listening, speaking, writing and reading and we might emphasize a particular grammar point. Besides, it combines linguistic features of the language with more idiosyncratic aspects such as the British sense of humour.

Our third exercise (see annex) is an example of a worksheet one could use with any piece of news to be recorded from a satellite TELEVISION channel. The procedure is no different to that of a normal listening: students watch the video three times. The first time, they should just watch and grasp the main ideas, the second time they should take down the information they need. After this second viewing, they should be given a few minutes to allow them to compare their notes and discuss what precise information they need to look for in the last viewing. Thus, they would be practising their listening skill as well as the speaking one. Finally, they could also practise the writing skill if we ask them to re-write the story they have heard, to be broadcast by a foreign television adding any

comments they might find necessary. This recording could be around three minutes long and we suggest that the more difficult a video is, the shorter it should be so that it can be exploited more easily and in more depth. For intermediate students, we might use recordings of the special news programmes prepared for children while we could use a traditional news item for advanced students.

The next step to take, once our students are accustomed to watching a video is an even more adventurous project: to make their own video programme. Our experience tells us that students are usually very shy when they are told they are going to be filmed, but with the appropriate preparation, whereby students feel sure of what they are doing, the task can be enjoyed by everybody. The aim of such an activity is to arouse people's creativity and allow them to use the knowledge they have of L2. It will produce humour, concentration, curiosity, playfulness. They will find themselves communicating in the target language while carrying out an exercise they have never done in their mother tongue, and this might even contribute to change their attitude to what they usually consider to be just another subject at school. English becomes something that is alive, something they can actually use to communicate with others.

The video camera has been traditionally used with small groups to help the students analyse their own mistakes. However, as Cooper, Lavery and Rinvulerci say in their book *Video*: "The video camera should not be used as a teaching aid for exclusive use with small groups. Learning groups of varying sizes are usually together for an extended period (...) thus giving everyone a chance for hands-on camera experience" (1991: 39). Most teachers tend to believe that the only thing they can do is follow the course-book, as with large groups problems with discipline or even the possibility of following the work being carried out by the students, seems to be practically impossible. This, however, should not dissuade us from using the video camera. Students are asked to work in small groups so the teacher can go from one group to another and help them with any doubts they may have, they also tend to behave because they are not working on their own they are working as a group and must respond. In some cases the fact that they are going to be watched by the rest of the class and compared, will inevitably cause a feeling of competitive-

ness amongst themselves. At times, a teacher may even be surprised by the creativity and motivation found in some of the so-called difficult students.

Besides, a video made in the classroom is not just a way of keeping our students entertained for a few hours. If we look more closely at the technique of the video we realise that it is an exercise whereby the four skills of reading, speaking, listening and writing are combined. First of all, students are told about the project, the teacher must decide whether it will be within the school boundaries or whether the students will be allowed to leave the school and enter the real world. They should also be given some worksheets containing questions or ideas they must develop before starting the actual filming.

At this stage the groups are formed and the teacher should now move around the class helping them with any doubts they may have concerning grammar or vocabulary, they should be encouraged to use their imagination. Some ideas they may come up with may be to give a description of their school, interviewing other teachers or students of English or even their own teacher. One should, of course be ready to participate in the project, since the traditional role of the teacher is now transformed into that of an active participant who can be a helper and a monitor at times (Campbell & Kryszewska 1992: 6). We are now speaking of a student-centred class where one becomes merely their tutor and *not* their teacher. If, on the other hand, we feel like leaving the school grounds our students could film and describe different areas of the town and even give a short historical background. Here they would need to have access to encyclopaedias, such as the *Britannica* or even a Spanish one they could later translate. But for more elementary students, the task should be adapted to their level, and thus a volunteer could take his or her group home and describe a house or a flat. Names of furniture, rooms and even activities that can be carried out in each room could be mentioned. The possibilities are unlimited.

However, if the teacher feels that this type of project is a little too ambitious, there are some more controlled exercises whereby students are asked to work in the classroom with more limited possibilities.

Therefore, video activities are indeed time-consuming, but they are also rewarding exercises. Students take an active role in a student-centred class and realize that the language acquisition process need

not be boring and dull. A video activity can combine two, three, or even the four skills we expect our students to develop, in a painless way. And finally, our students themselves could have self-access to video exercises in those institutions where video activities are available to them in language laboratories, or even at their homes, thus making the process of learning a foreign language an objective rather than a subject.

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