

Learning Vocabulary Through Authentic Video And Subtitles

ABSTRACT

Subtitles can be used together with authentic video to improve word recognition and vocabulary acquisition skills in the EFL class. This atmosphere provides authentic input through three different channels (written text, oral text and images) that contribute to offer a better and potentially longer-lasting mental representation of new and old lexical items.

Video allows us to introduce any aspect of real life into the language learning environment, contextualizing the learning process (Sherman, 2003:1). Besides, it can be used in many different instructional settings, from the classroom to online distance learning campuses. The great value of video lies in its combination of sounds, images, and sometimes text (in the form of subtitles), together with the socio-cultural information about habits, traditions, culture, etc. All this makes it a very comprehensible tool for teaching vocabulary to foreign language students.

1. Theoretical background

Traditionally, two main uses of video have been distinguished: instructional video, specifically created to teach foreign languages, and authentic video materials, such as films, TV series, commercials, etc., originally created for native speakers of the language. Even if it can sometimes be more difficult to handle, it is in fact very functional to use authentic video in the foreign language class, since students can profit more efficiently from this type of input, given its presentation of real (not manipulated) and complete communicative situations, that is what learners really need in real life.

There is an obvious problem in using authentic videos in the foreign language class: they present real language that is not graded nor simplified, and spoken at a normal speed. That is why the video clips need to be prepared in advance, accompanied by the appropriate pre-viewing, viewing and post-viewing activities (some examples of these activities will be provided at the end of this paper). The source of the clips can be sitcoms, soaps, series, films, short films, TV commercials, or documentaries. We are talking about clips because the video sequences need to be short (Stempleski, 1990), around two or three minutes long, to have time to exploit all their contents in class, using the appropriate ad-hoc activities just mentioned. Finally, if we want these clips to be successful as a point of departure to develop foreign language skills, it is necessary for them to be clear, independent, self-contained, and interesting enough to motivate students and stimulate discussion.

Students of all levels can benefit from the use of video, since there are always easier video sequences, spoken at a slower rate, that can match lower level students' needs. Besides, authentic video has an obvious advantage over conventional audio tapes (that are typically very demanding and may damage the students' confidence): the visual dimension, that makes understanding easier through gestures and context (Talaván, 2007).

2. The role of subtitles

Depending on the video clip used and the goal of the lesson, authentic input of this kind can still be very demanding on students. In fact, badly handled video activities can be just as de-motivating. Here is where the use of subtitles can play a key role in the foreign language class, to help overcome this problem. Although subtitles have sometimes been considered as distracting or as a source of laziness in students, nowadays we should realize that 'far from being a distraction and a source of laziness, subtitles might have a potential value in helping the learning acquisition process by providing learners with the key to massive quantities of authentic and comprehensible language input' (Vanderplank, 1988: 272-273). Indeed, text in the form of subtitles helps learners monitor a speech that would probably be lost otherwise. In fact, while TV programs and films that are not subtitled can create a high level of insecurity and anxiety in students, the incorporation of subtitles provides instant feedback and a positive reinforcement that contributes to create a feeling of confidence in learners that can help them feel ready and motivated to watch foreign television, films, etc., with or without the support of subtitles in the near future.

There are different types of possible combinations between audio and subtitles. The main ones are typically known as standard subtitles (foreign language audio with mother tongue captions), bimodal subtitles (foreign language audio with foreign language subtitles), and reversed subtitles (mother tongue audio with foreign captions). The most commonly used combination is the standard one, also called interlingual. The bimodal variety, also called intralingual, is also commonly used in classroom activities; the use of one or another in class will depend on the goal of the lesson and on the students' level.

Obviously, whenever students do not know how to use subtitles efficiently in the language class, they need to learn how to use them as a support (for finding new words, for understanding better, fixing spelling, or any other functional purpose) and not as a way of forgetting the information contained in the aural channel. Here follow some instances of activities learners can perform to achieve this goal; these samples can make use of standard or bimodal subtitles, indistinctively or in combination. First of all, they can watch a clip with subtitles, then without them, and subsequently with subtitles again; this activity can make them realize that subtitles are not so necessary so as to understand the dialogues (this should happen during the second viewing) and that it is possible to listen to the dialogues and read at the same time (this kind of awareness would take place in the third viewing). The previous activity can also be performed changing the order of the subtitles, that is, without-with-without, or using only two viewings (with-without or without-with). Another possible activity that can accompany the previous ones consists in making students note down the words or expressions from the dialogue that do not appear in the subtitles to discuss them in groups afterwards. Finally, accompanying the first and the second activities described above, the class can perform oral pair or group discussions on each student's self assessment of their own degree of understanding when they view the clip with or without subtitles, and how they feel about the experience. Be that as it may, when some or all of these activities are undertaken several times, the learner's mind will quickly learn how to pay equal attention to both channels (aural and textual) at the same time, and so he/she will be able to use subtitles as a support every time he/she faces them.

3. Putting ideas into practice

Now, let's look at how authentic video accompanied by subtitles can help vocabulary learning in the foreign language class. A subtitled video clip provides a triple connection between image, sound and text, sound and text being linked by translation (Danan, 1992) when standard subtitles are used. This fact is relevant enough when we think about the importance of visual associations in memory for vocabulary learning and how this type of connection generally encourages greater retention in lexical terms. This mnemonic power of images is here enhanced by the presence of sound and text together; when this text appear in the form of translation, the associations in memory are enhanced even further. Hence, the potential usefulness of authentic subtitled video clips in vocabulary learning should not be negated. Canning-Wilson (2000) reaffirms this statement when she suggests that 'images contextualized in video or on its own can help to reinforce language learning, provided the learner can see immediate meaning in terms of vocabulary recognition'.

Vocabulary learning has commonly been one the most neglected areas of language learning, since many educators prefer to dedicate more time and effort to other 'more complicated' issues, leaving vocabulary learning for the student to cope with by himself/herself. Luckily, nowadays, vocabulary learning is claimed to be more complex and less straight forward than what it was often considered to be. Likewise, vocabulary learning through video reproduction has traditionally been scarce, since teachers have typically regarded audio-visual materials as resources used to improve other 'more intricate' learning skills.

In this context, authentic video and subtitles can precisely play an important role to help learners increase and strengthen their foreign language vocabulary, given the appropriate guidance. Any well-prepared learning task using subtitles in authentic video clips (such as the one presented bellow) will encourage a better understanding and acquisition of new vocabulary; new and old lexical items will enter the students' minds more easily given the motivating and comprehensive atmosphere provided by this familiar type of audio-visual environment. When these tasks are prepared using standard subtitles, the translation element enables low level students, who often cannot benefit from most contextual cues when they watch authentic video, to face an easier retrieval of lexical information. The translation element can likewise help higher level students to be conscious of new and unfamiliar vocabulary items that might otherwise be simply lost without the support of subtitles.

This cognitive overloading of information provided by the triple connection of image, sound and text plus the optional element of translation is very positive in terms of vocabulary learning. Some authors have already demonstrated how video clips are more efficient than still pictures when we teach unknown vocabulary items (Al-Seghayer, 2001). Among other reasons, this is due to the fact that video is able to improve the building of a mental image, to create a curiosity that leads to intense focusing, and because it embodies that highly beneficial combination of media already discussed. Quoting Carter and McCarthy (1988), 'the more opportunities that can be found for formal transfer between foreign and mother-tongue words, the better the chances for retention'.

4. Example of task

Many different tasks can make use of authentic video and subtitles to improve foreign language vocabulary; the creativity of the teacher will play a key role here.

A very straight forward example of an easy task to teach vocabulary items is the following. Take a clip from a film, TV show, or sitcom containing someone willing to buy or sell a house, either going to the real state agency or visiting a house. To cut the clip, you can use a freeware software called DVD Shrink (<http://www.dvdshrink.org/what.html>); this offers a very easy and fast way of cutting up any DVD or video file. Once you have the clip, extract all vocabulary items related to the field of housing (renting apartments, buying houses, etc) and include them in a list that you can complete with other relevant words of the field that are not included in the clip.

Start the class with a pre-viewing activity describing the students' houses in pairs or in groups or proposing housing ads for the school newspaper. With such an activity, students can remember all the related vocabulary they already know and the teacher can help them in this process. Then, announce the viewing of a clip related to the topic that has been discussed. The clip can be shown with or without subtitles, and the subtitles can be standard or bimodal; all this will depend on the level of the class and on the goals of the teacher.

After the clip is viewed for the first time, the class discusses its content and students are asked to try to remember all the words or expressions related to housing they have heard. Write them on the blackboard and tell learners to pay close attention to the second viewing of the clip, to write down in their notebooks all words related to the housing field they can hear. After the second viewing, students complete the blackboard's list.

As a post-viewing activity, ask them to perform role-plays imitating the situation of the clip and using as many words related to housing as they can. Then, as homework, tell them to write an essay on a related topic where they can use most of the terms learned in the course of the task.

The task presented here is just a possible instance that follows a particular structure that can fit a 50 minutes lesson. Obviously, any aspect of the task and its development can be changed to suit each teacher's or each classroom's needs.

5. Conclusion

Foreign language words are learned better when directly associated with appropriate nonverbal referents (objects, events, emotions, context, etc.); this efficient association can only be found in real life or in authentic video. In the type of activities advocated in this paper, authentic video is not there to overload learners with unknown language (as the detractors of the use of authentic input could claim); thanks to a series of ad-hoc activities that surround a previously selected clip from beginning to end, the viewing is controlled and directly addressed to the teacher's goals for a particular lesson.

Therefore, just as vocabulary teaching and learning should not be divorced from the classroom setting, vocabulary teaching and learning should not be separated from the use of authentic video in class. On the contrary, it should be stressed and encouraged through different approaches and techniques, such as the use of subtitles.

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NUMBER OF WORDS: 2.376.