

# **TV SHOWS AND LANGUAGE LEARNING: TIPS FOR TEACHERS**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Teaching English through movies, TV shows, and video clips is a relatively modern way of enhancing language acquisition. The benefits of using American movies for improving students' English language proficiency have been studied by many researchers (e.g., Webb, 2011; Gormly, 2013; Lavaur & Bairstow, 2011; Etemadi, 2012) who supported the idea that, unlike traditional ESL instruction, authentic American movies are able to target all major language aspects as a unit without separating each individual skill, thus increasing the effectiveness of language instruction. This paper explains the benefits of using video materials for English language instruction and provides tips and ideas for effective incorporation of American TV shows in English teaching programs.*

## **LEARNING WITH TECHNOLOGIES**

Over the years, different aspects of our daily lives have been increasingly mediated by technological advancement. Technology has become faster, smaller, more affordable, and therefore, more accessible and desirable by the public (Araya & Gamboa, 2012). Since the introduction of technology in the educational field, learning spaces have undergone dramatic transformations to match the ever-changing digital landscape of society. It calls for the development of new methods of English language instruction.

Although the use of digital devices and computer applications in an ESL classroom has been steadily gaining popularity in recent years, it is important to focus on the ways it can promote and improve language development compared to the traditional means of instruction. Appropriate and structured use of technology in education has proven to have positive effects reflected in improved student achievement and motivation (Sivin-Kachala and Bialo, 2000). It has the ability to engage students in a learning process inside and outside of school and even accommodate students with special needs by improving their attitudes towards learning and increasing their self-esteem.

Movies are one of the most effective media tools for communication among cultures. In no more than half a century, movies have dominated the lives of communities and changed many of their habits (Hafez, 2007). They deliver information about different cultures, traditions, lifestyles, and beliefs and are one of the most dynamic and accessible ways of learning English.

## **Movies for Second Language Acquisition**

Studies confirm that watching movies and making them part of the curriculum help learners to develop the major language skills - reading, listening, speaking, and writing. Nath, Mohamad, and Yamat (2017) discovered that movies facilitate students' language acquisition by reducing language learning-related anxiety, which increases learners' motivation and concentration in the learning process. The study also reports that learning with movies increases students' confidence and motivation and reduced anxiety, leading to smoother and more effective learning.

Adapting movies to language learning provides a structured organization of the learning process due to a gradual development of a movie plot or a thematic division of TV-show

episodes. It also allows flexibility and creativity in designing lesson plans. As stated by Chapple and Curtis (2000), “film-based activities exploit the content that is motivating for students, and visual clues can help with comprehending the language” (p. 421). Teachers can develop and adapt accompanying activities and apply appropriate teaching strategies to benefit each learner based on his or her individual interests, needs, and learning styles.

Movies also offer a lot of flexibility for the instructor. Teachers can choose which movies to watch, whether to watch sections or the full feature, and what activities to do along with the movies to maximize language learning. The activities used along with the movies are especially important. Tuncay (2014) found that the activities completed in parallel with the movie contributed most to student learning.

## **Language and Culture**

Many scholars argue that movies fill the necessary gap in language learning by providing authenticity to a language learning class. As Ismaili (2013) points out, this is due to exposure to ‘real language’ and to the important element of cultural context of that language offered by movies.

In a language learning process, teachers are often the only people with whom the students communicate in the target language. It evokes a problem of getting accustomed to one and the same speech pattern, intonation, style, and mannerisms, which may make it difficult to understand native speakers in the future due to various accents and specific communication styles that may be different from their teachers’. Therefore, supplementing language instruction with watching movies and/or TV shows in the target language can provide authentic listening and speaking practices in a classroom that can facilitate students' listening skills development

more effectively than regular listening-speaking classes where students are only exposed to their teacher's speech.

As we know, language constitutes a large part of one's identity and culture. Thus, language and culture are inseparable, and we cannot approach teaching a language effectively without making immediate connections to its cultural context. Learning to communicate in a different language requires more than knowing how to merely translate sentences, but also understanding "the values and representation the speakers of the language have of the world and how these speakers represent themselves in their cultural production" (Kramsch, 1998).

## **Strategies for Using Videos in Language Teaching**

The utilization of movies and TV shows in a language acquisition process is a growing trend. Gormly (2013) researched language programs based on learning with the help of films and assumed that while academic learning is important and classes can be valuable, watching movies can add a new dimension to learning that can easily fit into a program curriculum, especially if this process is highly developed and organized.

## **Organization Process**

In 2016, an English learning course based on the use of American TV shows was developed and added to the curriculum of one of the intensive English programs in Texas. The organization of the course was based on King's (2010) tips and Rivera's (2015) classification of different genres of American television according to their levels of difficulty for understanding by English learners.

### *Relevance and Appropriateness*

King (2010) believes that the effectiveness of using video materials is largely attributed to the choice of a film. It is crucial for teachers to preview movies for appropriateness according to the level and needs of their students, such as vocabulary, accent, pace, and the quality of the audio track as well as their overall suitability for classroom use. If pacing or poor contextualization make the movie inaccessible to students, they are likely to become frustrated and disinterested. Additionally, the movies should correspond to the age groups and maturity levels of the students watching them. If the language learners are interested in the movie, it will give much more positive results for their language acquisition.

Alberta Learning (2003) provides valuable suggestions concerning appropriateness of different films for classroom use. The guidelines provided in the document can be easily adaptable for a multicultural ESL audience. Some of the factors that are important for a movie or a TV-show selection are the presence of a significant social statement and a possible negative emotional response.

### *Genre Selection*

Rivera (2015) defines *sitcoms* as the genre most appropriate for beginning and low-intermediate learners due to simple plots and common situations to which students can relate. Learners can often guess what is happening on the screen based on visual cues even if they lack the language skills. *Drama* and *action* require higher listening skills and vocabulary knowledge, yet, because the plot is often built on common human feelings and emotions such as love, hate, and friendship, these movies make a good choice for intermediate-level learners. *Documentaries* and *detective* genres are the most challenging movies to watch, according to

Rivera. Understanding such videos is heavily based on following the narrative, and having a strong vocabulary base is necessary for effective use of these genres. Rivera recommends using them for advanced language learners.

Based on King and Rivera's recommendations, we created a library of TV shows appropriate for different levels of English Instruction:

- Beginning, Low-Intermediate: *Middle, Seinfeld, How I Met Your Mother.*
- Intermediate: *Heroes, Monk, Gilmore Girls.*
- High-Intermediate, Advanced: *Arrow, Breaking Bad, Joan of Arcadia.*

## COURSE STRUCTURE

Prior to starting the course, it is advised to introduce students to the basic terminology relating to TV shows. We designed a sheet that explains the meaning of the terms *series, episode, genre, character, protagonist, antagonist, motivation, plot, conflict, climax, and resolution.* Making sure that students understand the meaning of these terms allowed more active participation, and students felt more confident contributing to TV-series discussions.

There are three categories for activities used for effective language learning with movies: *pre-watching, while-watching, and post-watching.*

### *Pre-Watching*

While developing pre-watching activities, instructors should keep in mind students' prior vocabulary knowledge and cultural elements in the episode that might be confusing or unclear for viewers. A warm-up discussion is a necessary part of a pre-viewing activity as it will help students grasp the theme and the context of the series, understand the general idea, and draw

connections to their own experiences. For example, in *Gilmore Girls, Episode 1*, Lorelei Gilmore's daughter gets accepted to a prestigious private school. Appendix A introduces a set of warm-up questions for a pre-viewing discussion that will guide students to understanding the theme of the episode. A teacher may also prepare a short introduction about the main characters of the episode, especially if they are being introduced for the first time. Having a background knowledge prior to watching also adds to students' confidence and excitement about the series.

When selecting the vocabulary to introduce to students prior to watching, a teacher should choose the words and idioms that might hinder understanding of the plot. Depending on the focus of the course, the emphasis may be made either on vocabulary learning or on the development of listening skills, and the activities can be adjusted accordingly.

### *While-Watching*

Depending on the students' language levels, effective while-watching activities include catching specific information about the main characters such as names, occupations, relations to each other, etc. They may also be directed towards understanding specific elements of the plot, characters' dialogues, or conflicts. Examples of while-watching activities are presented in Appendix B.

### *Post-Watching*

In beginning and low-intermediate levels, the goal of post-watching activities is to check students' general understanding of the plot and the vocabulary. In addition to an in-class discussion, role playing is another effective and engaging way to see how well students understood the events in the episode and the interaction between the characters. In intermediate and advanced levels, appropriate post-watching activities focus on students' abilities to make

inferences, speculate about future events, express their agreement or disagreement with the characters' actions, and discuss the cultural elements introduced. Appendix C introduces several ways in which post-watching activities can be designed.

## **CONCLUSION**

The increased use of technology in the contemporary world calls for transformations in learning spaces appropriate to this growing development and utilization of digital tools. Numerous studies prove that movies provide an alternative medium for language learning that fills the authenticity gaps common for traditional classrooms with a single teacher. Utilizing authentic movies and TV shows allows students to experience stress-free learning and gain exposure to 'real language' that encompasses various accents and dialects in a contextualized form. This new educational medium provides the necessary link between language and culture that ensures student immersion and deeper understanding of how verbal and non-verbal interaction occurs in an authentic environment, enhances their motivation, and leads to effective development of their language skills.



## **THE AUTHOR**

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## APPENDIX A PRE-WATCHING ACTIVITIES

### Gilmore Girls, Episode 1 “Pilot.”

#### Warm-up Discussion

- 1) Public School VS. Private School. Is it common for parents to send their children to private schools in your country?
- 2) Is it difficult to get into a private school? Is it expensive?
- 3) Why would some people prefer to send their children to private schools? What are the benefits?
- 4) Are there many single-parent families in your country?
- 5) What are the major difficulties that a single mom faces every day?

#### Information about the Episode



#### Stars Hollow

**Stars Hollow** is a fictional town in Connecticut where most major events of *Gilmore Girls* take place. It is depicted as a small community where all the people are very close to each other and know almost everything (if not all) about each other's lives.



**Lorelei Gilmore**

Lorelei Gilmore is a single mother who has lived in Stars Hollow since she was 16. She has a daughter, Rory, and she works as a manager of Independence Inn. Lorelei is extremely humorous and has a witty remark for every situation, often with a pop culture reference.



Rory is Lorelei's only daughter. Rory is an introverted, at times socially awkward person, who feels like a great fit in Stars Hollow, where she seems to feel comfortable being herself as part of the town.

**APPENDIX B**  
**WHILE-WATCHING ACTIVITIES**

**Gilmore Girls, Episode 1 “Pilot.”**

As you watch the first part of the episode, find out the following information:

1. How old is Rory? \_\_\_\_\_

2. Who is this?



Name?

What is his job? \_\_\_\_\_

3. What are Lorelei and her friend happy about when they are in the kitchen and Lorelei reads the letter?
4. Who did Lorelei talk to on the phone and what was the conversation about?
5. “Is it Easter already?”, “Is it Christmas already?” – What can you infer from these remarks about Lorelei’s relationship with Emily and Richard?

**APPENDIX C**  
**POST-WATCHING ACTIVITIES**

**Heroes, Episode 1 “Genesis”**

True or False? In the blank write a T for true or an F for false:

- 1) Mohinder Suresh was a college professor. \_\_\_\_\_
- 2) Nathan Petrelli cares about his brother’s worries. \_\_\_\_\_
- 3) Peter Petrelli is a politician. \_\_\_\_\_
- 4) Mohinder wants to finish his father’s research. \_\_\_\_\_

**Heroes, Episode 2 “Don’t Look Back”**

Role-Play Situations:

- 1) Nathan and Peter - Peter tries to convince Nathan that he (Nathan) flew. Nathan denies it. What arguments will Nathan use? Why should Peter believe him? Role-play the situation with your partner.
- 2) Isaac and Simone - Isaac is confident that his paintings are evil. Simone tries to convince Isaac that he needs help. What arguments do both of them use? Role-play the situation with your partner.

**Gilmore Girls, Episode 1 “Pilot”**

1. In your own words, explain the opposition between Lorelei and Emily. They both have very clear opinions on their past. Whose side would you take in this argument – Lorelei’s or Emily’s? Explain your answer.