

The role of television and televisual literacy in language teaching and learning

by Dr Richard Kiely

- 1

Part one in the three part series

[To the second article of the series](#)

[To the third article in the series](#)

This is a series of three articles on the use of television as a source of material and activities for the language classroom. This article looks at some background issues, and presents a methodological framework for using television material for developing comprehension skills, analysing language forms in interactions, and more widely, exploring televisual literacy – the skills we use to identify TV genres, programme types, and cultural narratives.

The next article illustrates the application of these principles in the use of 3-minute extract from *The Royle Family* (a BBC situation comedy programme) in a range of lessons over a two-year period. (To appear in early October 2005)

The third article examines some research issues in the use of television in the classroom. It sets out sample enquiries which teachers can develop to understand the impact of television material in their classes, and thus inform both cognitive and socio-cultural perspectives on language learning. (To appear in early November 2005)

Introduction

Technology has changed the life of the language teacher. It has increased the range of resources which teachers can use; it has facilitated display of these resources in ways which eases the task of the teacher; and it has facilitated access to these resources in a way which means that learning can take place beyond the classroom.

Two areas of technology have received a lot of attention in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) methodological literature and in the research which is gradually informing teaching practices. First, the tape recorder has brought sound to the classroom for nearly half a century: as a mainstay of audiolingual approaches, audio recordings have become a TESOL institution, a companion to any serious coursebook, and a focus of teaching skills in initial teacher training courses. Second, the computer is a more recent development, and, although there are still many questions about ways to harness its potential, is fast becoming an essential tool of the trade. Television, a technology

which combines sound and visual information and presents language use in rich social and cultural contexts, has not had the same impact as these technologies. The aim of this article is to explore the potential of television and set out a framework for using television material in language learning and teaching.

Definition

In this article I use *television* to refer to clips, programmes and other material made for television. Such material typically includes advertisements, and programmes such as news, drama, game shows and reality TV. Also included might be films, and home or student made video material. The typical material is particularly relevant to language teaching and learning as it builds on knowledge of popular culture, and develops *tele-visual literacy*. Film and amateur video also have particular qualities which make them relevant to the language teaching task, and to a large extent the same principles relating to use in the classroom apply. In brief, television materials has three features:

- data for comprehension is presented visually and aurally;
- it is grounded in and reflects a contemporary social and cultural context;
- comprehension is facilitated by television literacy from another language context.

Access

Television (and video generally) as a technology has not had as strong an impact as the tape recorder and the computer in language teaching and learning. In social life more generally however, the advent of television has had a strong impact, changing how people live their lives in ways comparable to the development of radio/recorded sound, and of digitised information technology. There are a number of possible reasons for this lack of impact on TEFL practice:

- Video has not been associated with a specific approach to language teaching, such as audio recording for audiolingual and communicative methods, and computers in Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL);
- Television and video have become associated with language learning *without* a teacher, rather than in classroom contexts;
- Television and video involve a combination of aural and video data which present challenges for comprehension in ways which data input through these channels separately does not;
- Television requires machines for recording and playback, which are resource demands many teaching centres have not been able to meet, and coursebook series have not assumed;
- Television represents a form of popular culture, and language teaching has traditionally been associated with the study of literature and other forms of high culture
- Television as authentic data presents language in culturally-specific contexts which can be difficult for learners in other language contexts to understand or appreciate.

Many of these reasons for the lack of uptake of television in TEFL practice are historical or accidental. Four aspects of recent developments of television service provision have increased the likelihood that television can be a useful resource:

- Technological developments mean that television can be accessed through cable, satellite, and internet, so that teachers and students in all parts of the world are likely to be able to access English language television.
- Developments in recording technology mean that it is possible to record and playback easily, often with sub-titles.
- Global trends in the television industry mean that similar formats dominate the schedules in many countries. These include a) news and sports programmes, rich in narrative and interview genres, b) 'franchised' programme types such as reality shows (e.g. Big Brother), and game and quiz shows (e.g. Blind Date; Who wants to be a Millionaire; The Weakest Link), and c) programmes developed from shared social contexts and narratives (e.g. soap operas, crime detection and hospital drama).
- Television broadcasts are increasingly accompanied by web sites and magazines, providing supporting data for comprehension and language learning.

Television and authenticity

Thus, the nature of the resource and the facility of access to it suggest that television can be a rich source of data for language learning, beyond as well as within the classroom. Where learning goals are related to communication skills, the authenticity of such data is an important consideration. Television affords authenticity to language learning in three ways:

- It presents language in cultural contexts.
- Language learners tend to be able to 'read' such cultural contexts, in terms of participants' social and economic status, and purposes and motivations in interactions.
- Television viewing is an activity which language learners are familiar with, and engage in for information, education and recreation.

Some teaching principles

Language learning from television is not the same as television viewing. Some principles need to be observed to ensure that the use of television in the classroom provides rich opportunities for language learning.

- Select data (that is clips or programmes) on the basis of language learning objectives and activities;
- Select short pieces (1-5 minutes);
- Provide a transcript and integrate use of the transcript in the activity;
- Mine the activity in ways appropriate to the learners' language level and age – for example, for elementary classes, focus on comprehension and word identification; for university language courses develop the analysis dimension of tasks; for adult or workplace classes explore personal responses to television programme characteristics;

- Link television viewing outside the classroom to language analysis and communication within the classroom;
- Link television viewing to work on other media such as websites, discussion boards, newspapers and magazines;
- Develop student involvement by structuring and facilitating inclusion of student-selected television material.

Activities

The table below has a range of activities which the language teacher might experiment with or develop further. The focus in the three columns relates to

- *A focus on language use:*

The focus here is the development of listening comprehension skills, particularly the skills required where aural data is augmented by visual data in ways which both facilitate comprehension and present information overload challenges.

- *A focus on language forms:*

The focus here is the phonological, lexical and grammar (morphology and syntax) forms of the language. Typically, in a communicative teaching framework, the focus on forms is developed after the comprehension stage.

- *Television as social practice:*

Activities in this column explicitly exploit televisual literacy, instinctive understanding of the purpose and context of events such as sports interviews, interactions in drama programmes, and politeness (or increasing, absence thereof!!) in game shows. The learning derives from analysis of language to understand how intentions are realised and identities are performed. The three rows in the table present three contexts of language teaching and learning:

- whole class;
- project-based; and
- individualised learning.

These are not wholly separate contexts: rather, they represent classroom organisational perspectives for the teacher, which become organically blended as activities develop and learning journeys progress.

Perspectives <i>Contexts</i>	Focus on language use	Focus on language forms	Television as social practice
<i>Whole class activities</i>	Comprehension activities (e.g. worksheets with	Work on transcripts (e.g. gap-filling) focussing on	Activities based on silent viewing: identify news items

	<p>questions);</p> <p>Writing activities (e.g. scripting news stories, interviews, dialogue from soap opera)</p>	<p>the article system, tenses, prepositions, etc</p>	<p>(yesterday's news), character relationships and types (drama and soap operas), words and themes (advertisements) from visual data.</p>
<i>Project-based learning</i>	<p>Presentation in the classroom of analysis of transcripts by groups of students, e.g. tense forms in narratives viewed outside the classroom, e.g news stories; sporting event summaries, clips from drama or soap operas; question forms in interviews.</p>	<p>Follow-up activities to those in cell on left, with more explicit focus on discovering patterns, and re-writing rules</p>	<p>Who watches what; review of television reviews;</p> <p>Develop outline and scripts for new soap opera, or reality television show;</p> <p>Develop ideas for advertisements to appeal to specific groups;</p> <p>Analyse for presentation to the whole class, the reasoning behind choices based on cultural and pragmatic knowledge and television literacy.</p>
<i>Individualised learning</i>	<p>Select a television programme to view and write a review or weekly journal, linking language and other behaviour to social context and</p>	<p>Follow-up activities to those in cell on left, with more explicit focus on grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation issues</p>	<p>Follow-up activities similar to those above, and also including comparisons between television practices in different social contexts, and</p>

	<p>interactional intention;</p> <p>Prepare a transcript of a brief section;</p> <p>Prepare a quiz of comprehension questions for other class members.</p>		<p>personal, reflexive responses (say, from a gender, age, or socio-economic perspectives to TV clips.</p>
--	---	--	--

Conclusion

Television material represents an embarrassment of riches for the language teacher. It provides an extensive range of material, which always involves language in a social context. Comprehension activities can be based narrowly on the language used, or more broadly, engage understanding of the social and cultural issues which our shared televisual literacy increasingly facilitates. Television material can be a mainstay of a course, especially where the learning goals relate to intercultural learning and communication skills, or an occasional activity, supplementing a coursebook-based programme. Either way, it is likely to be most successful where some consensus to work with television data is forged in the learning context;

- the technological demands in terms of recording and playback for both teacher and students are met; and
- there is an interest in culture learning as an integrated part of a language programme.

Article #2

Introduction

In the first article in this series, I explored some ways in which television can be a valuable resource for the EFL or TESOL teacher. In this article I describe my experience with a short segment of a British TV comedy in 6 classroom settings over two years. The lessons start with my language teaching aims – a focus on *Language Use*, followed by an examination of *Language Forms*. These are soon appropriated by the students (mainly upper intermediate/advanced) who develop a focus on *Language as Social Practice*. This involves two aspects of learning Culture: i) learning about British culture, and ii) learning about the relationship between culture and language through relating the social interaction in the television segment to their own social and cultural context.

In this article I set out some background details of the TV programme and my own reasons for using it. Then in a table I set out the 6 instances of classroom use, and how it gradually moved from being an teacher-led activity to a student-led project. In the final

section I relate this to some wider issues in teaching culture in (and beyond) the EFL classroom.

The social context of television viewing

Television is an important mass medium for both information and entertainment, a cultural phenomenon which prevails in most societies. It is thus a culturally shared phenomenon, occupying a central place in family life in a range of socio-economic contexts in different parts of the world, and differing only in such respects as:

- time for TV viewing, say morning and/or evening;
- place for TV viewing, say a bedroom or a communal space; and
- silence or ongoing conversation while TV viewing.

Television viewing was thus, for my students a major cultural practice in their home communities which continued in their daily routine with host families in Britain. It was also the dominant context of interaction and communication with members of the host family - students reported discussing a range of TV programmes in these contexts, and having 'British' aspects of the programmes explained to them. It may be that communal TV viewing of this type presents opportunities for, in socio-cultural learning terms (Lantolf 2000), scaffolded interactions which facilitate communication and learning. The visual and contextual clues in the broadcast material, together with glosses, comments and queries from host family members provides an enhanced opportunity for comprehension and engagement, as well as a context for response and discussion. Thus, for learners residing in the target language communities, especially where they live with host families, television is an opportunity for learning which activities in the classroom might be expected to initiate, prepare for, and support.

Television is not only characterised by the local or context-specific. There have always been shared generic formats for television programmes in different contexts – films, news, etc. This sharing might be seen as increasing, with game show and quiz programme formats such as *Blind Date*, *Big Brother* and *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?* representing a form of globalisation and universal branding of programme formats. The representation of drama on television presents a slightly different case: there are common formats with predictable narratives, such as soap opera and police drama, but the differences are significant. Drama represents relationships and interactions which are configured by community and linguistic norms. TV drama thus provides a useful resource for exploring cultural differences and similarities and engaging with the language features which encode these in the EFL classroom. The TV drama which this article is based on is *The Royle Family*, a situation comedy made for and broadcast by the BBC in 1997-1999.