

Audiovisual Programs as Sources of Language Input: An Overview

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Abstract

Audiovisual devices such as satellite and conventional televisions can offer easy access to authentic programs which are considered to be a rich source of language input for SLA (Second Language Acquisition). The immediacy of various audiovisual programs ensures that language learners' exposure is up-to-date and embedded in the real world of native speakers. In the same line, in the present paper, some anecdotal as well as experimental studies conducted to highlight the pedagogical values of various audiovisual programs such as news broadcasts, movies, cartoons, series and documentary films are reviewed. The related literature indicates that most of the studies are anecdotal which highlight the pedagogical values of various audiovisual programs as sources of authentic language input particularly in an EFL context where access to social interaction in English as a potential source of language input is limited. As a result, teachers are encouraged to expose the language learners to various audiovisual programs to enhance second language acquisition.

Keywords: audiovisual programs, language input, second language acquisition
Sources of language input in EFL/ESL contexts

Various sources of language input are available in English as a second language (ESL) and English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts. Before the discussion on the sources of language input in EFL and ESL contexts is put forth, the concepts of ESL and EFL contexts need to be elaborated. An ESL context is an environment where English language is spoken in society as the official language or the medium of communication among people from different countries. In fact, English language plays an institutional and social role in the community in an ESL context (Ellis, 2008). According to Ellis (2008), in an ESL context, English language functions as a means of communication among members who speak various languages. In contrast, an EFL context refers to an environment where English language is not the primary or secondary spoken language. Indeed, English is considered as a foreign language rather than a second language and the use is limited to language classrooms (Freed, 1995). In EFL contexts, English language has no major role in society and is learnt in the classroom setting (Ellis, 2008).

Back to the discussion on the available sources of language input in EFL/ESL contexts, it should be mentioned that in ESL contexts, people can have interaction with other people from different countries using the English language. English is then considered as a source of language input which can facilitate and pave the way for SLA (Gass, 1997). The social interaction in ESL contexts is one of the authentic sources of language input which can help language learners acquire the language in informal settings. This has been emphasized by Long's (1996) Interaction Hypothesis in which conversational interaction enhances SLA. Accordingly, negotiation of meaning which triggers interactional adjustments by the native speakers or more proficient interlocutors in social interaction can contribute to SLA. In contrast, in an EFL context, social interaction as a source of language input in an informal language learning setting is lacking. English is not used as a medium of communication or for other purposes in society in the EFL

contexts. Indeed, the use of English language is mainly limited to formal settings at universities, language institutes or language classrooms. As a matter of fact, in EFL contexts, limited usage of English language can only be observed when language learners use English language in interactions with their instructors and their peers.

In short, examples of learning the language in informal setting include learners' interaction with native or non-native speakers in the target language country or a country where English is the second language. Besides, learners' use of different technologies at home or at work via watching a movie or listening to music or song which provide appropriate language input is considered as another example of language learning in informal settings (Lightbown & Spada, 2001).

In a nutshell, by viewing, for example, a movie or listening to a song, language learners indirectly get involved in the language learning process when they try to understand the movie or the song by using different language learning strategies (Pemberton, Fallahkhair & Mosthoff, 2004). The various types of audiovisual programs are considered to be authentic language materials which have the potential to provide the necessary language input for SLA in informal setting by indirectly involving the language learners in the language learning process (Pemberton et al., 2004).

Authentic Language Input

Using authentic language input through authentic materials in foreign/second language learning has a long history. For example, Henry Sweet (1899, cited in Gilmore, 2007) is considered as one of the first linguists who utilized authentic texts because he was aware of their potential advantages over contrived materials.

In order to determine the definition of authentic language input as precisely as possible, the term authenticity should be considered first. Taylor (1994) considered different types of authenticity as falling into three categories: authenticity of the task, authenticity of language input, and authenticity of the situation. Authentic language input is any material which has not been explicitly prepared for the purpose of language teaching such as movies, singing shows, stories, games, and plays. Although these materials are not made for language teaching purposes, they contain the characteristics of language used by the native speakers (Taylor, 1994).

In relation to the concept of authentic language input, Nunan (1999) described authentic language materials as written or spoken language materials that have been produced in real communication. In fact, these spoken or written language materials are not specifically produced for the very purpose of language teaching. Nunan (1999) further highlights the assumption that authentic language input can be extracted from various sources such as news, movies, singing shows, series, and comedies, recorded conversations, meetings, and newspapers. Gilmore (2007) also defined authentic language input as the language conveying a real message produced by a real speaker or writer for a real audience. In short, the point can be concluded that authentic materials that are not initially made for language teaching purposes extracted from various print or audiovisual sources which may have the potential to be utilized for language learning purposes.

Audiovisual Programs As Authentic Language Input And Language Learning

Audiovisual news as pedagogically valuable and rich source of authentic language input utilized for language learning has been the focus of many studies since the 1970s (Baker, 1996; Beach & Somerholter, 1997; Bell, 2003; Berber, 1997; Blachford, 1973; Brinton & Gaskill, 1987; Mackenzie, 1997; Poon, 1992). Almost four decades ago, audiovisual news was

anecdotally considered to be a rich source of vocabulary input because the recycling feature of the vocabularies can help language learners build their lexicon (Blachford, 1973). A few years later, Brinton and Gaskill (1987) provided empirical evidence to support the effectiveness of listening to audiovisual news programs on enhancing EFL/ESL language learners' listening skill. The study was carried out in Germany as an EFL context and in the United States of America as an ESL context. During the six-month research period, audiovisual news broadcasts were incorporated in advance EFL/ESL classes once a week. During the study, the 11-15 minute videotaped news materials were prepared for use in both classrooms following a transcript aimed at facilitating comprehension. Subsequently, an English-English gloss of difficult vocabulary items including the definitions and some sentences related to the context in which they would appear in the broadcast were also prepared. Some follow up listening comprehension questions were also prepared to be answered by the students. The results of the study revealed that ESL participants outperformed the EFL ones. Brinton and Gaskill (1987) highlighted the point that EFL learners' insignificant improvement in listening skill might be related to their insufficient amount of exposure to audiovisual news. Classroom materials which were used in that particular EFL context to enhance listening comprehension were not sufficient enough to help the language learners cope with rapid speech. According to Brinton and Gaskill (1987), exposure to audiovisual news language input has the potential to improve the listening skill because different newscasts bring reality into the classroom and enable the students to focus on substantive issues. Additionally, because of the recycling feature of vocabulary in different audiovisual news, EFL/ESL language learners become more familiar with many contextualized vocabulary items during a long period of exposure. Without providing any supportive empirical evidence, Brinton and Gaskill (1987) claimed that by listening to audiovisual news, language learners can enhance other language skills. In the 90s, similar studies empowered by quantitative data also focused on using audiovisual news as a type of authentic language material to improve listening skill (Baker, 1996; Cauldwell, 1996; Poon, 1992).

To go further, the possibility of using audiovisual news reports as language input for lower proficiency levels of EFL/ESL learning has been the focus of a research conducted by Mackenzie (1997). The study was conducted at Simul Academy in Japan. Mackenzie (1997) rejected the idea that the newscasters speak very fast, the content is very multifaceted, the vocabulary is very difficult, and audiovisual news cannot be integrated into low basic levels of language learning situations. As a matter of fact, Mackenzie (1997) highlighted the point that with the careful selection of audiovisual news items and applying some simple techniques, news reports can be used even at elementary or intermediate levels. According to the study, the selection of the content of the news reports should depend mainly on the language learners' interest and background knowledge because they feel more comfortable listening to familiar content. In the same line, Bell (2003) considered content schemata, formal schemata, and linguistic difficulty as three criteria for selecting any types of audiovisual news for EFL classrooms. A similar study was also conducted by Wetzel, Radtke and Stern (1994). However, these studies were also anecdotal and pedagogical in nature.

In short, the review of the literature on the use of audiovisual news as a source of authentic language input for SLA reveals that most of the studies were descriptive and examined the pedagogical value, the possibility of using news at all levels of language learning, and the selection criteria without empirical evidence.

Movies is another type of audiovisual programs which have long been regarded as an important source for foreign language instructors because it is an authentic source of material (Kaiser, 2011). The spoken language of movies often includes various types of speech such as the

speech of various educational levels, the speech of children and non-native speakers, slang and jargon, rural and urban speech, and a range of regional dialects that language learners will encounter in the target language country (Kaiser, 2011). In fact, movies provide language learners with multi-sensory input that is close to what they will likely find and encounter in the real world communication (Arcario, 1993).

The review of the qualitative studies regarding the integration of movies as a source of authentic language input for language learning is limited. For example, a study was conducted by Yuksel (2009) focusing on the effectiveness of viewing captioned movie clip on EFL learners' vocabulary enhancement. The research was carried out with 120 language learners in a preparatory class. The participants were randomly divided into two groups. Before the treatment, the participants in both groups took a sample 20- item vocabulary knowledge scale pre-test. During the study, the participants of group one were exposed to some movie clips with captions while the participants of the second group were exposed to the same movie clips without captions. One month after the treatment, both groups were given another vocabulary knowledge scale test with 20 words as a post-test. The results obtained from the pre-post tests of both groups revealed that both groups demonstrated significant gains. In fact, viewing the movie clips reinforced the expansion of the vocabulary knowledge of the language learners regardless of the presence or the absence of captions (Yuksel, 2009). According to Yuksel (2009), the development in the vocabulary knowledge stems from the importance of encountering the vocabularies in the real context. In fact, incidental vocabulary learning can be facilitated through contextual cues. Accordingly, teachers are encouraged to utilize movies as authentic sources of materials to support learners' vocabulary learning instead of only explaining the vocabularies in an isolated manner (Yuksel, 2009).

The effect of exposure to movies with and without subtitles on listening comprehension improvement has also been the focus of a research conducted by Hayati and Mohmedi (2011). The study was carried out with 90 intermediate language learners who were randomly divided into three groups of 30 participants at an Islamic Azad University in Iran. During the study which lasted for 6 weeks, group one was exposed to some segments of various movies with English subtitle, group two was exposed to the same segments of the same movies without subtitle, and group three was exposed to the same segments of the same movies with Persian subtitle. At the end of the study, a multiple-choice comprehension test was given to all the three groups to measure their listening comprehension development and provide grounds for comparison. The results of the study were indicative of the fact that the English subtitles group performed significantly much better than the Persian subtitles group and the no subtitle group on the listening comprehension test.

More particularly, the results proved that exposure to movies with English subtitles helped intermediate students in EFL context to develop their listening comprehension significantly. According to Hayati and Mohmedi (2011), for low and intermediate language learners, watching a movie with the first language subtitle is beneficial for the better comprehension of the film because low and intermediate level language learners may have limited range of vocabulary items. On the other hand, intermediate and advance levels language learners may have little problem in understanding the movies without subtitles because their proficiency level is higher.

Cartoons have been widely used as one of the teaching authentic audiovisual materials in language learning classes. The pedagogical value of cartoons as an authentic source of language input has been the focus of limited number of studies (Clark, 2000; Doring, 2002; Rule & Ague, 2005).

Cartoons are also considered as excellent teaching tools because they not only add humor to a topic but also illustrate the idea in a memorable way. In an anecdotal study conducted by Clark (2000), it was highlighted that cartoons can attract the attention of the learners and present information in a nonthreatening atmosphere. Besides, cartoons have the potential to reinforce thinking processes and discussion skills (Clark, 2000). Another study was carried out by Doing (2002) focusing on the effect of exposure to cartoons on language learning. The results of the study were indicative of the fact that the language learners who had exposure to cartoons could produce oral answers that were very proactive and interesting in different discussions held in the classes. Moreover, the discussions were rich and the students had high confidence. It seems that the high confidence that the language learners acquire is due to exposure to cartoons which create low affective filter atmosphere for learning (Doing, 2002).

Rule and Ague (2005) also conducted a study providing evidence of the students' preferences to use cartoons in language learning. Similar to singing shows, cartoons are preferred because they create low affective filter atmosphere which causes a high degree of motivation. The high confidence and motivation achieved through exposure to cartoons is claimed to enhance the memory of the language learners when they try to make a connection between the new materials and the prior knowledge through analogy in a comfortable atmosphere (Rule & Ague, 2005). Without providing empirical evidence, Rule and Ague (2005) also claimed that students who use cartoons can improve different language skills and achieve higher test scores. However, Rule and Ague (2005) did not specify which language skill(s) can be improved through the use of cartoons. The evidence thus far points to cartoons as a source of authentic language input which may prove effective in developing different language skills of differentiated language proficiency language learners.

Series, as a type of authentic source of language input to be employed in language classrooms, has not captured the attention of many researchers. As an exception, Chiu (2006) highlights the use of comedy to enrich language learners' vocabulary based on his own experiences of using comedy in a college course of reading and vocabulary in Taiwan which lasted for one academic semester. For every two-hour reading course, the instructor played one episode of a sample comedy. While watching, each student was required to pick up as many words as he/she wanted to learn from the show. After the end of the show, the students were asked to volunteer to list on the board the vocabulary words they picked from the show. Then, the instructor selected ten words from the list of the words on the board to be discussed according to their meanings in the context of the situation comedy.

Conclusion

Considering the fact that SLA simply cannot take place without having exposure to a sort of language input, various audiovisual programs brought by different technologies have the potential to provide the necessary language input for SLA development particularly in EFL contexts where social interaction as a source of language input does not exist or is limited. In short, wide arrays of audiovisual programs are available as authentic sources of language input for SLA in EFL and ESL contexts. What is concluded from the related studies can be summarized in the following four parts: the claims made by the studies conducted regarding the pedagogical values of the use of various authentic audiovisual programs to provide the necessary language input for SLA are mostly anecdotal, most of the studies have investigated the psychological aspects of various audiovisual programs. For example, cartoons, movies, and singing shows can enhance language learning through creating low affective filter atmosphere,

the related studies have mostly investigated the formal language learning setting. Indeed, informal language learning setting which has a great potential for SLA has not been investigated.

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