

How to get to Sesame

Street:

Multimedia Technology and Second Language

Acquisition

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Summer 2003

I was dancing at a packed club in Denver. It was an over 21 crowd, the club was bringing in guest DJ's to help fill up the house. This night it had worked, the guest DJ was famous nationwide and he had a following. A lot of people were dancing and having a great time, when suddenly the beat stopped. A simple, familiar strain of music began to play. "Do do doo dodo... Sunny days..." And then the crowd exploded with cheers, whistles, and shrieks.

The music made the crowd react so strongly that in the later Internet bootleg you can't even hear what the DJ was playing. But I remember it clearly. It was the theme song to Sesame Street. "Can you tell me how to get, how to get to Sesame Street?" Everyone was singing along, smiling, and remembering Burt and Ernie, Maria and Oscar the Grouch. These familiar characters from our childhood, 15 or 20 years ago, are something that we still have in common with the children of today.

Sesame Street is a great program for children. It is multi-cultural, with people of all races living together in harmony with a bunch of silly puppets on one city street that could be anywhere. They teach alphabet, reading, counting, and diversity through songs and sketches. They repeat the main points of the show over and over so that children learn them. They teach important lessons, and life skills. And they do it in a way that makes kids want to watch the program.

Children in America today watch a lot of television. From early ages they start with programs like Sesame Street, channels like Nick Jr., and cartoons like Batman. There is a kind of running joke in this country that television is as good as

a babysitter. Don't want to deal with kids just now? Just plop them down in front of the TV, they'll be fine.

We as educators need to not only recognize this, but to work with it as well. Yes, there is a lot of bad programming out there, but there is a lot of good programming too. And for ESL students television can help to teach language, culture, and even reading skills. We need to help the students develop active viewing habits, so that they are not just watching shows but thinking about them as well. In the classroom we can control their input, keep it healthy and not too overwhelming. But we cannot control their home television viewing habits. So instead we need to make sure that they have healthy viewing habits.

One way to do this is to integrate multi-media technology, television, movies, music, and when possible Internet, into lesson plans. This can have many benefits. There are a lot of teaching tools and methods that involve movies or TV programs. These can usually work really well in the classroom. They can be found on a wide range of topics. Teachers can usually locate something that goes along well with the curriculum. And when done in an interactive manner it's a great way to keep the students interested and involved.

"Television is our most pervasive communication mode. We should not try to compete with it, rather we should harness it's power to make it work for us..." Says Josie Levine. "Today's complex society relies on visual images to communicate. There are a myriad of ways to provide exciting learning experiences using a TV and VCR to link language arts to other subjects."¹

¹ Levine, Josie Avellanet. *Television Opens the World to ESL Students*. Technology Connection, v3 issue8, p.19. Dec, 93.

And it shouldn't stop with just one program, or bit of movie. There should be a lot of activities and discussions based on the topic at hand that the multimedia adds to. Some programs can be a good way to introduce a topic, some can come more towards the end of a unit when the students vocabulary and subject knowledge are more developed. And movies and television programs are a valuable way to teach language, pronunciation, and vocabulary.

This multi-media method is an excellent way to teach ESL students. One man that I talked to said that when he moved here from Germany a few years ago he didn't speak a word of English. He was over thirty years old and trained in some of the best culinary schools in the world. But he couldn't get a job because he had trouble communicating beyond hello and thank you. He tried taking English classes, but they were expensive and he wasn't doing so well. Then a friend gave him the gift of the movie "Showgirls."

This man claims that he learned all of his basic English from watching that movie. He says he must have watched it well over a hundred times, and not just because of the half naked girlies. He did it because it was the only movie he had. Obviously Showgirls is not appropriate classroom materials. The point is it kept him interested when school had failed, and he learned from it. He is now the head chef one of the largest hotels in Albuquerque.

Almost every program on TV today, and almost every movie put out in the last few years has a closed captioning option. Closed captioning means that what is being said is also written at the bottom of the screen. Originally meant for people who are deaf or hard of hearing, in the early nineties it was estimated that

some 40% of closed captioning viewers were people who were learning English as a second language. Some Spanish channels here in NM, including Telemundo, offer some of their more popular programs to be captioned in English so that Spanish learners can watch, or English learners can learn. DVD's usually offer captioning in a few different languages.

There are a lot of options when using captioning in an ESL classroom. You can have the children watch the program with both captions and sound. This allows them to read the words and learn pronunciation at the same time. You can also turn the sound off, so that the students are forced to read the words and figure out from the images what is going on. One teacher says that for some programs she turn the sound off completely and either narrates herself, or has the students narrate to each other what is going on.

There are even some bilingual programs for young children. One good example of this is the program "Dora the Explorer" which runs on Nickelodeon and Nick Jr. Dora is a little Chicano girl who explores the world around here. The people at Nick say that they are very careful with Dora. When she is teaching something she always repeats it at least three times, only sometimes she says it in English and sometimes she says it in Spanish. She also uses a lot of Spanish phrases, like "vamos".

When teaching ESL students the goals one has in mind are more than just linguistic. They have to keep up with or be caught up to the regular subject matter, and they have to learn about American life and culture as well. Programs that children watch everyday can teach life in the US. Short clips from shows like

the Simpson's, King of the Hill, or a variety of sitcoms can be used to stir up discussions. Have the kids experienced anything like that? What is different from what they and what they personally experience? Is that what they think that life in the US is like?

Teachers can tape overly dramatic shows, like detective or cop shows, or soap operas. Then the students can be shown clips, with the tape being stopped at a crucial point in the plot. Then the students can be asked, what would they do? What would the appropriate thing to do be? What should they do in a situation like this? They can list ideas, and the tape can be played to see what the character does. Did was the character right or wrong? What were the consequences of their actions? It can be a chance for students to discuss the difference between real life and 'reel' life.

There is a lot of variety in the worlds of television and movies. Some of them can be really good, learning tools to help students. But some can do more damage than good. One of the first things that a teacher should do before using any multimedia material in the classroom is to preview it themselves. Make sure that all the language and subject matter is appropriate for the classroom. It doesn't matter if it came from the library, a student, or from the Discovery Channel, previewing is essential.

The Discovery Channel Network, which includes the Learning channel, Animal Planet, Travel Channel, and Discovery Health has a great website with a lot of resources for integrating programs from the television into the classroom.

They have teacher-oriented sites at www.discoveryschool.com, which includes a lot of free resources.

One service that they do is called Assignment Discovery for middle and high school, and TLC Elementary for younger students. They are shows that are run commercial free so that they can be taped, and are copyrighted to be shown in the classroom for up to one year after the original airing date. To go along with these shows the website offers lesson plans, curriculum coordination help, and even handouts that correlate with the program that can be downloaded and copied. Assignment Discovery airs weekdays at 10a.m. MT, on the Discovery Channel. TLC Elementary runs Fridays at 4 a.m. MT. The website gives the schedules for topics.

In addition to the commercial free programs the website offers free video clips. You can search by subject and download short segments about history, science, etc. All you need is one of the free media players. The site even has links to download the media players if your computer doesn't have one. A lot of this is funded through the Cable in the Classroom program, and even the school store has free products that you can order.

The key to using the multimedia in the classroom is making sure that it is used interactively. If the students just watch and digest without thinking then their brains turn off. There is no doubt that simply watching television does not stimulate brain growth. In fact, says Marilee Sprenger, it may result in the loss of neuronal connections. Sprenger researches and writes about the human brain

and education. She suggests that at the very least television viewing be supervised. The point is to get the students away from passive viewing.

There is a Simpson's episode in which Barts' teacher comes in and says "Alright children, today teacher has a hangover so we are just going to sit quietly and watch movies all day." That is the wrong way to use multimedia in the classroom. The children probably already get enough as TV as a babysitter at home. Active watching may include stopping the program to discuss what is being seen or to teach vocabulary. Teachers can also have the children respond to the program, giving them instructions like "raise your hand or stand up when you here one of our vocabulary words."

Students should be given a viewing objective, or a focus for their viewing. It should be explained to them that they are looking for facts, or to learn about science. Some of the multimedia teachers said that they do not turn off the lights in the classroom when viewing a video. Instead the students have worksheets to fill out, or are asked to take notes. Or they simply watch the video with the lights on because the dark allows for attention to wander. I had a bad habit of sleeping in my intro to sociology class when the teacher showed a video.

Part of that, though, was that he showed videos with so much regularity that it became a 'not another movie' kind of thing. After the ninth or tenth movie in as many weeks it didn't even matter how well done it was, or how interesting, or how much it mattered for the test. All that mattered was how long it was, and if I would get a good nap or not. The teacher also failed to add discussion to the movies, he just showed them and expected us to learn the material. The class

was probably too big for real discussions, but at least he could have provided some opening information or closing remarks. Or explained why the movies had anything to do with what we were learning, for some it was very unclear.

Using movies in the classroom can be tricky. A lot of movies are really long, and take up a lot valuable classroom time. Depending on how long the movie is, how relevant it is to the subject matter, and how old the students are they can be cut so that only part of the movie is used. Or it may be shown over several days, so that there is time for other activities.

One teacher I had used the film Dr. Strangelove in class that he taught every year. But rather than show the whole film he had picked out the important parts, at least the parts that were important to his particular class. Then he made a much shorter version of the film that included clips and scenes from the movie but not the whole thing. He could show this in a short, two-hour class and still have time for discussion. He kept the tape handy so that he could use it every year.

If you are going to show an entire movie make sure it is appropriate for the students. Every state has laws governing the usage of movies in the classroom based on their ratings. Here in New Mexico elementary school children can only watch G rated movies. Even High Schoolers have to have permission slips to see R-rated films. Any administration should be able to tell you what is allowed and what isn't.

If an entire movie is shown make sure that there is more done in the classroom than just the movie. The students should read relevant books or

stories, have projects based on the movie, and have homework assignments that bring the movie and the curriculum together. For example an AP English class can read the book *Heart of Darkness*, and watch the movie “Apocalypse Now.” If there is time they can even watch the documentary ‘Hearts of Darkness” about the making of the movie, because it explains what the director wanted to portray. Students can discuss differences between the books they are reading and the movies made about them. It can even be interdisciplinary, with a few different classes tying their work into the same movie together.

The Teachers College at Columbia University in New York did an evaluation of the multimedia teaching method. They found that it “successfully increased students interest, participation, and achievement in all curriculum areas. In particular the method addressed children’s visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learning styles through integrated curriculum. The strategy also highlighted research theories showing that the more connections we make with students past experiences, the more successful the learning experience will be.”²

Multimedia in the classroom can be a good way to get the students interested, thinking, involved, and learning. As long as it doesn’t take over and is relevant to the subject matter, and as long as it is done interactively with a variety of activities. It’s a good way for ESL students to learn not only English, but culture and life in America as well.

² Clovis, Donna L. *Lights, Camera, Action!* Educational Leadership, Nov. 1997

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