

The Potential Value of Video Materials in the Oral Communication Classroom in Relation to Audio Materials

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In this paper I want to examine the usefulness of videotaped materials in the foreign language classroom for those who teach their mother tongue. I will concentrate on the use of video in oral communication classes, but first of all I feel the need to justify the use of audio materials, the precursors of video materials as the first realistic sound reproductions, in the oral language classroom. We need to look at the similarities and differences between audio and visual materials, both in their content and in the actual uses to which they can be put, in order to discover the potential of video materials and to see if they can add to, replace, or merely duplicate the uses which audio materials are put to.

Native speakers by their very nature are producers of natural language. Why, then, do they find sound recordings necessary in the classroom? One answer may seem obvious, that the teacher provides only one example of how the language is spoken whereas the students may need to be exposed to different vocabularies, accents, intonation and stress (British, American, etc.). Another is that an individual teacher will be unable to reproduce anything but a monologue. Even so, the question still needs asking. It is obvious that oral communication presupposes comprehension, and students who can't understand natural speech will be at a loss when they encounter it in its natural setting. Therefore authenticity, by which I mean intonation, rhythm and speed approximating that of a native speaker, must be a determining factor in the selection of audio materials if learners are to benefit from exposure to recordings of the spoken language. The same criteria apply to video materials which include an audio soundtrack.

Video, with its visual element, automatically adds something that the teachers cannot provide on their own in the classroom. It can show action in a way that can be apprehended more easily than by listening to an audio tape; it can show body language and gesture which inevitably differ from culture to culture, even within the English-speaking world; it can show appearance; and it can show the setting. All of these are aspects of our world that language, as heard on an audio tape, is only one disembodied part of. Because audio tapes deal with one part of the language, the spoken element, they are bound to be more specific in their uses. Video, by uniting several elements of language, will give an overall view of the language and should be exploited in different ways from audio if it is to be anything but an audio tape with complementary pictures.

Audio and video materials can be loosely categorized as follows :

- a) Recordings of language programs made for broadcast
- b) Scripted commercial broadcasts : comedy, drama, films, and advertisements in the case of video; advertisements and mostly pre -1960 dramatizations in the case of radio.
- c) Partially - scripted or spontaneous materials : documentaries, educational programs for native speakers, and the news in the case of video; talk shows, call - in advice programs, and disc jockey patter in the case of radio.
- d) Language - teaching materials for the classroom

In Japan, the national broadcasting company, NHK, runs a series of programs both on the radio and on television for students of English, French and several other languages. Because they are designed to be broadcast within the country, they depend heavily on the mother tongue for grammatical explanations and for translation of the dramatized sections. In an oral communication class the use of the student's mother tongue can be a time - saving device for getting across instructions to elementary and intermediate students, but translation of the entire text is detrimental to fluency; it reinforces the idea that the units of different languages are equal and that one only has to replace them quickly to be fluent. While translation may be unavoidable in broadcasts, only the dramatizations in the target language itself should be used in the classroom.

The BBC has produced several programs for television entirely in the target language. Of the three elementary - intermediate English courses that I have been able to compare, "On We Go" and "People You Meet" do not meet the requirements of authenticity. The former, because of its attempts to make the dialogue comprehensible to elementary students, uses such slow speech that the actor's dialogue becomes entirely mechanical. "People You Meet", by emphasizing particular forms ("ought to", "must", "mustn't", "should", and "needn't" in the segment I watched), suffers from the same stilted treatment. "Follow Me" is the only one which provides authenticity : first, a documentary - style sketch of everyday life, e. g., someone buying a train ticket, followed by captions of the particular structures being emphasized *within the natural context*; a more complex dramatization which incorporates the same structures in a humorous context; a song which includes the structures as a reinforcement of the grammar; and finally a longer non - fiction portion (the one I watched showed an English class being taken to a brewery). For more advanced students of English the BBC has come out with "The Bellcrest Story" and "The Sadrina Project" in both of which the English is authentic, a natural outcome of designing a course for learners whose large vocabularies and firm grasp of basic forms no longer require so many concessions.

Scripted commercial broadcasts cover a broad range of programs, from

comedy and serious drama to the commercials that interrupt them. Given the vast bulk of televised material in most countries (Japan probably averages 100 hours a day) we must decide what, if any, can be used in the classroom.* A major difference between this kind of material and language teaching programs is that of level; whereas the latter are designed for students at different levels with a limited range of vocabulary and structure, commercial broadcasts have another purpose, entertainment or publicity, and being made for native speakers they make no concessions to the foreign learner. That being said, we can still find useful examples of conversational English comprehensible to intermediate or even to elementary students in soap operas and other dramatizations of real life provided the sequences are of short duration. Advertisements, because of their length, can be shown in their entirety and offer a wealth of visual as well as linguistic information. Commercial broadcasting can be a source of material for the teacher who is willing to sift through its bulk to find examples of language which can be discussed, redeveloped and reenacted in the classroom.

Partially - scripted and spontaneous recordings include examples of non - dramatized natural speech, unrehearsed interviews and monologues. Radio material tends to be too complex and the speech too rapid for all but the most advanced students, and frequent lack of visual back - up makes the video material generally unsuitable for elementary and intermediate students as well. Interviews about the lifestyles of the rich and famous or programs with similar content, however, could provide interesting materials for intermediate students. Generally, this kind of material is better suited for topic discussion in more advanced classes.

Language - teaching video materials have been around for almost 10 years and audio materials much longer. Although there is no universally agreed - upon principle behind their production, they share a similar purpose : to make the target language comprehensible to the language student. The usual means used to be to restrict vocabulary to a minimum, to make speech slower than its natural speed in the mouths of native speakers, and to reduce the complexity and variety of the structures that would normally be found in the same real - life situations. Now, however, with the advent of task -based activities where the student only has to pick out a few pieces of information, classroom materials have become more realistic.

It has been posited that production should come after passive exposure to a foreign language, that is, that speaking and writing should come after reading and listening. This occurs naturally albeit at close frequency in the classroom where the teacher gives an example before requiring learners to produce it. It doesn't follow that audio or video is a good way to introduce new structures.

* There is the problem of possible copyright infringement which must be surmounted before this kind of material is used.

Magaret Allan in Teaching English With Video says, "In language teaching we are accustomed to using dialogues which present very restricted examples of language. This is acceptable in the textbook, and can even be made to work on audio tape, but it is more difficult when we can see real people in a real setting on video. The scene looks awkward and unconvincing if the language is so controlled and repetitive that the interaction becomes quite unnatural. Because of this the language in video materials, even for elementary level, tends to be a little more varied than it would be in the textbook." I bring this up to point out that video, and to my mind audio materials, are ill-suited to the treatment of language on a purely grammatical level. Their value lies in the slice of reality that they bring into the classroom. Their role is rather to introduce context and to reinforce the grammar that has already been learned in the classroom.

Allan, in the above-mentioned book, has printed an extensive list of video materials published up to 1986 when the book first came out. As she indicates, they can be categorized according to their main focus:

- 1) Presenting language situationally or grammatically
- 2) Introducing a country and its culture
- 3) Telling a story for comprehension
- 4) Presenting a topic as a basis for classroom discussion

Based on my experience with a number of English teaching courses I would categorize audio materials as follows:

- 1) Grammar exercises: pattern practice, situational responses
- 2) Dictation: close exercises
- 3) Pronunciation: repetition
- 4) Listening tasks using announcements and dialogues (specific comprehension goals)
- 5) Dialogues, monologues and narratives followed by comprehension questions (general comprehension goals)

Audio materials are more easily defined in terms of teaching goals than are video materials. The shorter history of video as a teaching tool is no doubt responsible for the comparative paucity of video materials, but I believe the nature of video itself dictates a more situational, less grammatical approach compared with audio materials.

Allan says, "The aid that we are most likely to use for the same reasons as video is the audio tape or cassette recorder. We are accustomed to using audio to present examples of language in use. It lets us bring into the classroom different voices and different accents and a skilful use of sound effects can suggest a setting. We can do all of these things better with video. So, if we had the same

range of materials on video as we do on audio, would we continue to use audio in language teaching? The answer is yes, but it would have a more limited role. It would be limited to the function it is most useful for in the language classroom: intensive listening... (Video) is not however so well suited to an intensive, detailed study of spoken language. ”² She goes on to say that video machinery is not accurate enough to be used for that purpose. At the time the book was written it was true, but now video is almost as easy to use as audio. I feel that she is overlooking a point that she made earlier in the book: “Some (visual elements) positively conflict by setting off a train of thought which is quite at variance with the message the audio track carries. Our eyes take in more information than any other of our senses. The visual channel is capable of being a powerful distractor instead of an essential part of the message. ”³ Although she is speaking specifically about documentaries, what she says is relevant for any video material. The danger of distraction may outweigh the benefits of visual support.

We have been looking at video and audio from the point of view of what they tell the audience, their value as tools to improve comprehension, but video materials, more than audio, tend to encourage passivity in students due to the similarities between their format and that of television which learners regard as passive entertainment. The oral communication teacher is looking for what Jack Lonegran in Video in Language Teaching calls active viewing. It is similar in its conception to listening tasks; that is, something “... that can focus the learner’s attention on certain parts of the video presentation: this focus is intended, of course, to benefit the language - learning capabilities of the learners. At the same time, active viewing can increase the enjoyment and satisfaction gained from viewing, as well as maintain the learner’s motivation. The comprehension of video sequences by learners is complex and varies between individuals. As well as the language structures and lexical items used in a communicative situation there are the paralinguistic cues; in the background is a wealth of non - linguistic information. No learner can realistically demonstrate the extent to which all the information received has been understood; it is rarely desirable that learners should even attempt such a comprehension task. For this reason, the viewing guides ... are not intended to test comprehension. (They) are intended to aid comprehension.”⁴ These viewing guides are worksheets to be completed in conjunction with the video material, either during the viewing in such a way that students don’t have to take their eyes off the screen or after the teacher pauses the video at the appropriate scene. The weakness of this technique is that it doesn’t require any oral production on the part of the students; it is another exercise in comprehension that doesn’t necessarily improve on similar comprehension exercises using audio materials.

Communication, however, is a two - way street. Production must be an integral part of the course if video is to play a major role in the oral communication

classroom. It must also justify the larger expense of setting up video equipment by showing either greater or different potentials than audio. The BBC, in a video for English teachers entitled "English Teaching With Video", explores this potential. The following techniques are proposed:

- 1) Silent Viewing: guessing what is being said by the characters
- 2) Prediction: guessing what will happen in the next scene or fragment thereof
- 3) Description: what has happened
- 4) What the characters are thinking
- 5) What the characters' feelings are
- 6) Freeze Frame: stopping the video on a particular frame to try to elicit as much information as possible from learners about the character, the place being shown, the weather, etc.
- 7) Topics: using freeze frames as a jumping - off point for a general discussion on any topic such as "British as sports lovers"
- 8) Roleplay: students perform in similar situations
- 9) Reviewing: students express their opinions on a particular video program ⁵

Of these, prediction, description, topics and roleplay are all possible strategies with audio materials. In the other techniques we begin to discover the unique potential of video materials. Only with video can the teacher show students a silent sequence of events. One video produced by the BBC even makes this its guiding principle. "Speak Easy" is a series of sketches performed by mimes without dialogue. Some background sounds are used to recreate the atmosphere much in the way that backdrops are used in the theater. After watching a sequence or part of one students speculate on the content of the dialogue between the mimes and then reenact the situation using the dialogues which they have made.

An extension of this idea is to use silent movies because of the clarity of their visual information. I first used a Charlie Chaplin short, about 20 minutes in length, in an information gap exercise. I asked half the class to put their heads down during the first viewing of a sequence of about one and a half minutes. The students whose heads were down then had to find out as much as they could about the sequence from their partners who had seen the sequence. At first I provided no extra vocabulary and suggested no questions, but I found such an open - ended activity to go beyond the limits of many student's abilities. Also certain cultural information was incomprehensible to my Japanese students without a previous explanation (e.g. a scene where Chaplin, an escaped convict in clothes stolen from a minister, is expected to give a sermon in a church. He enters, glances at the choir, a

group of hard - looking older men and women, and the number 12 looms ominously in the air, an obvious reference to a jury. He proceeds to make the motions of swearing himself in at a trial when a bible is passed to him, much to the amazement of his assistant). Active viewing tasks, be they written up on the blackboard or passed out as a separate sheet, are necessary to guide the students through an unknown culture and teach them unknown vocabulary. They can also help students focus their attention on important information that sometimes gets ignored in the complexity of the viewing experience.

With the Chaplin film, and later on with a full - length Hitchcock film, I encouraged students to identify the characters, use the past progressive to describe the opening scene and the simple past to relate what happened. Yet this activity was still open - ended enough to allow advanced students in a class of mixed abilities to use their communicative potential to a greater degree than with a more restricted task.

Allan proposes another way of using the silent viewing technique:

STAGE ONE: PREPARE FOR SILENT VIEWING

Tell the class they will see the sequence without sound and ask them to think about specific questions while they view. The questions could be:

(i) for a dialogue:

Who are the people you see ?

Where are they ?

Why are they there ?

What are they doing ?

(ii) for documentary material:

Where is this place ?

What objects are shown ?

What is the programme about ?

What can you work out about what you see ?

These first questions deliberately focus students on the situation and not the language.

STAGE TWO : FIRST SILENT VIEWING

Play the sequence without sound.

STAGE THREE : DISCUSSION

Class works in groups, comparing notes on their answers, followed by general round - up on group views.

STAGE FOUR A: SECOND SILENT VIEWING TO FOCUS ON LANGUAGE

This time your preview question will be: 'What are they saying ?'

After viewing, the group task is to predict the language they will hear. They could be asked to roleplay a dialogue or to write a commentary, depending what kind of sequence it is.

Or go straight on to...

STAGE FOUR B: VIEW WITH SOUND

Play the sequence with sound. Students check their predictions about the situation, content or language, depending on the preview task they have had.⁶

The first two stages use a kind of speculation that allows the teacher to control the classroom language to make it suitable for almost any level, while the later stages use prediction to draw out students' communicative abilities.

Loneragan demonstrates that the use of prediction is possible even with beginners, this time using both the visual and audial elements of video.

The example below is from the Media Teaching Manual for "Follow Me", unit 7; the learners' possible answers, taken from a sample of the class each time, can be varied, and different from the response given by the actor on the screen; in this example, the scene was played for comedy by the actors:

Customs Officer: Good morning, sir. Are these your suitcases?

Pause button

Learners: Yes/Yes, they are/Yes, that's right.

Pause button release

Priest: Yes, they are.

Customs Officer: And is this your suitcase?

Pause button

Learners: Yes, it is/Yes.

Pause button release

Priest: Yes, it is.

Customs Officer: Would you open this one, please.

Priest: Yes.

Customs Officer: Excuse me, what's this?

Pause button

Learners: Wine/It's wine/It's a bottle of wine.

Pause button release

Priest: It's a bottle. It's a bottle of wine....⁷

Situations such as the above are also springboards from which to jump into roleplays. The advantage that video has over audio material in this case is the presence of visual information that obviates the need for long introductory explanations of the circumstances. Students also benefit from seeing the character's gestures and facial expressions which could give a very different interpretation to a scene which would otherwise seem banal in writing and may be difficult for the learner to interpret correctly if only heard on tape.

Here is an example given by Allan. First I will present the dialogue without any explanatory notes, as it would be heard on an audio tape.

JOHN : Hi, Bill. Join us.
BILL : Thanks.
JOHN : Oh, you haven't met Mary have you ?
BILL : No, I haven't. Hullo Mary. Pleased to meet you.
JOHN : This is my good friend Bill. We were at school together.
MARY : Hullo.⁸

At first glance this is nothing more than an ordinary introduction. When the explanatory notes, what would be the visual information on a video, are included, certain emotional undercurrents become visible. These may or may not be comprehensible to the learners on an audio tape, but they will be more obvious when seen.

*John and Mary are sitting at a table in a cafe. Bill comes in and looks round.
John beckons him over.*

JOHN : Hi Bill.
He points to a chair.
Join us.
BILL : Thanks.
He sits down, smiles at Mary. She doesn't smile back.
JOHN : Oh, you haven't met Mary have you ?
BILL : No I haven't.
Stretches out his hand to Mary.
JOHN : This is my good friend Bill. We were at school
together.
*Mary didn't expect him to shake hands and is a bit slow in putting
out her hand.*
MARY : Hullo.⁹

As Allan puts it, "...the language communicates greetings, introduction, invitation and information. One gesture – indicating the chair – supplements the language it accompanies; the other – the handshake – is a social convention. The smiles – or lack of them – probably tell Bill and Mary something about their attitudes to each other or to the situation they find themselves in." ¹⁰ Unlike the audio version, the video can be used in a speculative exercise where students have to imagine what the characters are thinking and how they feel.

Another possibility with video material is to separate the group into halves and to allow one half to watch the image without sound while the other half listens to the sound without seeing the image. Logistically this would be possible in a lan-

guage laboratory where both a monitor and headphones were available. The students, their curiosity whetted, would compare ideas on the sequence in pairs or in groups of four and come up with interpretations that could then be discussed in class.

The freeze frame technique mentioned on the BBC tape for English teachers is an imaginative exercise for students. One frame, or picture, is frozen on the monitor when the teacher pushes the pause button. The teacher can then either ask questions outright or give the students the questions to discuss so that they can come to a conclusion among themselves. If the monitor shows a face, the questions could be: Who is it? What does the person do? Where is he/she? How old? What do you imagine his/her family to be like? What is he/she doing? Why? Of course the same technique could be applied to a still picture, and there is a textbook, The Mind's Eye, which uses photographs exclusively with similar techniques. Video, however, allows the teacher the leeway to switch from still to moving pictures at will.

Video is a very versatile medium with many uses in the classroom. Who, then, should videos be used with? Allan summarizes her views as follows:

The experiences we organise for our learners vary according to the command of the language they have... With learners in the very early stages, the essence of all that we do is control...

Video's main role at this stage is to provide the learner with stepping stones to real world use of language by giving realistic examples of language in use in a limited range of contexts...

For this we need material which provides as much visual support as possible and situations where the language is highly predictable.

(Intermediate) learners are some way towards developing control of the language they are learning: their store of language has grown to a point where they can adapt, adjust and add to it with some facility... ..the focus should begin to shift from isolated language items to the real use of those items to convey a message... Encourage comment, speculation and prediction rather than asking for reproduction of what they have heard...

(At the advanced level) the focus moves entirely onto the message within the programme and language becomes the tool which gives access to the message. Video can now be used mainly as a source of information and as a stimulus to classroom activity such as debate and discussion.¹¹

In other words the choice of materials for the beginner is almost entirely restricted to videos made for the learner. For intermediate and advanced learners, almost any video material designed for the native speaker can be incorporated into the oral language curriculum as long as it is presented in short segments with a definite purpose

in mind. Students in reading programs do not start off by reading complete novels. Neither should students in oral classes be expected to sit through a 30-minute TV program. The effect of such an experience is likely produce a loss of confidence or boredom due to the inability of many students to understand what is going on. In the oral communication classroom video must be used sparingly and carefully if it is to be effective.

In this paper I have shown that the use of video material has its own place in the oral communication classroom, a different place from the one occupied by audio tapes. While both media can be used for speculative exercises, audio tapes are better suited to intensive listening. In fact many of the newer video courses come with a separate audio tape of the dialogue specifically for listening tasks and close exercises. On the other hand video materials offer the student more possibilities for imaginative exercises through the techniques of silent viewing, freeze frame, and even prediction and description which are more easily employed with the visual support of video than with audio materials. And there is one use for video material in preference to an audio version which I neglected to go into : introducing different countries and customs.

Video and audio are no replacement for the teacher who ultimately bears the responsibility for making sure vocabulary and structures are not only understood but used with a certain competence by the students in his class. Video, and audio, can then be employed to reinforce this learning with their respective strengths. Their ability to capture realistic sound and images ensures their place in the oral communication classroom as valuable examples of the living language and the culture in which it is based.

NOTES

- 1) M.Allan, Teaching English With Video (Essex : Longman Group Limited, 1985) pp.51-52
- 2) Ibid.,p.65
- 3) Ibid.,p.27
- 4) J. Lonergan,Video in Language Teaching (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1984)p. 11
- 5) L. Dunkling, "English Teaching With Video" (London : The British Broadcasting Corporation, 1985)
- 6) Allan, Ibid., p.41
- 7) Lonergan, Ibid., pp.36-37
- 8) Allan, Ibid., p.67
- 9) Ibid., p.67
- 10) Ibid., p.67
- 11) Ibid., p.73, 74