

USING UNGRADED, OFF-AIR VIDEO MATERIALS WITH LOW-LEVEL LEARNERS

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Introduction

This article examines the creation of teaching materials based around a video recording of an off-air broadcast. Given the fact that the vast majority of the learners taught by this writer have low- to mid-intermediate English language ability, the goal in undertaking this project was to see if ungraded video material could be used in such challenging circumstances.

This project comprises an extract of off-air video from the BBC's *The Travel Show* series, a set of teaching materials (learners' worksheets and a document entitled 'The Travel Show in Peru - Suggestions For Teachers'). This article will explain the choice of video material, the design of the teaching materials and the results observed from using the material with the target learners. The results of a survey of the target learners' experience, interests and needs, as well as the other print materials are available separately from the following Internet web site address:

<http://www.woollerton.com/edu/resources2.shtml>. The material is to be found at the link listed as the 'The Travel Show'.

The learners

The video material was selected and the print materials were created for use with university and junior college students. These learners are: 18 and 22 years of age; mostly female; of low to mid-intermediate speaking ability, but with better reading and listening comprehension; almost all Japanese nationals, but a small number are Chinese, Taiwanese or Korean nationals. Generally speaking, most of the learners are not particularly motivated to study and many do not have a great amount of time for study, as they must do part-time jobs to support themselves while enrolled at their respective educational institutions. Most of the learners are studying English because they wish to improve their oral competence. Most are compelled to do so anyway. A few of the learners at the university

are compelled to study English, but do not wish to do so. Another factor is that most of the learners have a lack of confidence with their oral output and have under-developed study skills.

To assess the experience, interests and needs of the target learners, the results of a questionnaire, distributed to the learners at the beginning of the 2000-1 academic year, were examined. It should be noted, however, that this survey was not originally conceived in relation to this project. There were four questions on the survey which, in particular, were relevant to the issue of the students' interests, needs, motivation and ability. These were as follows: What are your hobbies and interests?; Have you been to any foreign countries?; Which countries would you like to visit?; What do you think is the best reason to study English? The results were compiled and the document summarising the results is accessible on the Internet (see page 1). Learners' responses to the questions confirmed the preconceived notions of this writer regarding student interest and ability. This, in turn, determined decisions in selecting the off-air material for this assignment. Specifically, most of the students have a limited range of interests and these are commonly things like travel, shopping, watching television, listening to music, and watching films. In general, the learners are not interested in subjects such as politics, social issues, et cetera. Many are interested in travelling abroad, but in the main, the learners' experience has, so far, been limited to a few destinations, if any. Many learners have some desire to use their knowledge of English in the future for travelling or working abroad or for communicating with foreigners that they meet.

Selection of the video material

Several criteria were used to select the video material. Firstly, it was important to select video material which would provide for an 'attractive, enjoyable working environment' (Tomalin, 1991:48), and 'to provide material of which the content is relevant to students needs and interests' (Willis, 1993) as cited by Motteram & Slaouti, (1999: Unit 1:5-6). Tomalin made his point in relation to children, but it is no less applicable to older learners.

From the results of the survey of the target learners, it was clear that a topic such as travel and tourism would be of interest to the students, but equally, cooking, cinema, music or shopping could have been chosen. Such off-air video material on any of these kinds of topics therefore stands a chance of successful exploitation in the language classroom because, as Allan and Arcario both state, it will be 'material with a focus on cultural features' (Allan, 1985/1991:55) which by its relevance and authenticity is a 'stimulus for activities' (Arcario, undated: 110) and because such material 'gets students talking, offering

variety and entertainment' (Allan, 1985/1991:48-49)

The next issue which had to be considered concerned the question of what is generally available for recording off-air. Teaching ESL students in countries in which the target language is not the same as the language contained in the bulk of those countries' television broadcasts, severely limits the teacher's range of options. In the country where the learning is taking place, Japan, there are only three broadcasters that have authentic English language programmes readily available to choose from: CNN International, The Discovery Channel, and BBC World.

CNN International's output is almost exclusively news. BBC World's broadcasts are largely news programmes, but it also broadcasts a higher percentage of documentaries and special interest programmes. The Discovery Channel broadcasts the greatest range of programmes, but unfortunately, although these are all broadcast with an English audio component, the programmes are also subtitled in Japanese. Although this should not rule out the use of such material altogether, it was felt that it is better to avoid subtitled material as often students concentrate on the subtitles to understand meaning, neglecting the audio track. There can also be a disparity between the subtitle content and the audio content. CNN International's and BBC World's broadcasting is bilingual with two monaural tracks. There is the main track carrying the Japanese language content and a sub track carrying the English. The programmes on CNN International and BBC World are broadcast several times during a week. This allows for the separate recording of the programme in English and in Japanese. Having the same programme in two different languages can present some special opportunities for using the material, although ultimately, these were not employed on this occasion.

There were four travel programme series that were examined for possible use in this project: the Discovery Channel's *Travellers* and *Lonely Planet Guide* and the BBC's *Rough Guide To...* and *The Travel Show*.

The issue of the specific appropriateness of the different extracts of off-air material was then considered. In accordance with Allan's (1991: 23) and Arcario's (in Stempleski & Arcario, undated: 113) factors regarding criteria used in examining and selecting video material, the following were looked at: the degree of visual support; the clarity of picture and sound; the density of the language and its delivery; and the language level and content. Additionally, the material's length and possible pause points were considered.

The *Lonely Planet Guide* and *Rough Guide To...* series were not selected because their presenters' strong accents and colloquial speech would probably prove too difficult for the learners to comprehend. The camera work is visually interesting, but somewhat unsuitable:

rapidly moving, strangely-angled shots and rapidly varying focus could hinder comprehension greatly. Thus, there were two final candidates, *Travellers* and *The Travel Show*.

Both *Travellers* and *The Travel Show* feature clear, unaccented speech by the talent. The pace is fast and the language content is ungraded, so that the low- to mid-intermediate language ability level of the learners determined a design of print materials concentrating on 'language generated by the students about the video programme' rather than 'language generated by the video programme' (Tomalin, 1986, cited by Arcario in Stempleski & Arcario, undated: 110). Consequently, the pace and ungraded language content is less of an issue than it would otherwise be.

An entire edition of *Travellers* lasts 55 minutes and covers just one destination. *The Travel Show*, at 25 minutes, features two entirely separate destinations. *The Travel Show* is therefore more tightly edited and has complete, self-contained sequences which last only 10-13 minutes. Within these, short (two minutes or less), chunkable material can be found. The point has been made by numerous writers (including Tomalin 1986; Willis 1983; and Arcario undated), that short, self-contained chunks of video material are usually more suitable for use in the language classroom. That is certainly true with the learners that this material was intended for. To use *Travellers* would have meant taking an extract from a programme, risking problems of the independence of the video sequence, mentioned by Arcario (undated: 119).

Additionally, the visual and audio components of *The Travel Show* complement each other well. The visual and audio components closely relate and the visual component often features interesting, short montages. Establishing shots are often lengthy and clearly set the scene or the focus of the content, helping learners to more easily establish possible overall meaning of the video material.

Design and description of the print materials

Television and video on the subject of travel and tourism belongs to the documentary genre. More specifically, within documentary, travel/tourism programmes are a sub-category of this genre. The teaching materials include several tasks to exploit the learners' possible expectations of the sub-genre. These are the tasks in Step One.

This material is intended for oral communication classes. The tasks largely reflect this. While not immediately apparent from the learners' materials, this is clearly shown in the teacher's materials which contain numerous suggestions for elicitation of learners' oral responses and peer-to-peer sharing of ideas.

Allan (1991: 51 - 52) described four discrete stages in a language lesson: elicitation,

presentation, practice and reinforcement. In using a video of this duration (approximately 13 minutes), it was clear that, with the target learners, the video would be used over several lessons. The four-stage lesson notion was discounted. Instead, the aim was to create various tasks that, over several lessons, allowed the learners to deal progressively with the video material. It was hoped that, at the conclusion of the tasks, the learners would have gained some sense of progression through various stages to completion of the project, have some overall sense of understanding of the content of the lesson material, and have realised that they had formed and stated opinions about the video material.

The physical design and layout of print materials is another important consideration. Several commercial ELT video products previously published have included print materials that may be confusing and difficult to work through. The *Grapevine* series (Viney, P & Viney, K, 1991) is a good example of this: The instructions are often not clear, too much information is on each page and there is not enough space for students to write. Print materials with a consistent layout, simple instructions and a manageable content quota per page are needed.

The original concept was for each page to be organized into three columns. The left column contains sub-headings, instructions, symbols to indicate easily the kind of activity, clip duration or video timecodes. The instructions on the print material and those used orally by the teacher are graded and include the use of English lexical items adopted into general use in Japan, in order to facilitate easier comprehension. Also, in order to keep the task instructions for the learners concise, it is intended that the teacher will give supplementary information to the learners when necessary. The central column on each page is the work area for students to complete any writing tasks. The right column is a support area containing graphics or video frames to aid understanding, supplement a task or assist in recalling information with the video. This organizational pattern had to be modified somewhat for the fourth and fifth pages of the learners' worksheets, as there was insufficient space for all of the elements that needed to be included on those pages.

The tasks in the print materials are designed as Lonergan suggests 'to keep the reading and writing load to a minimum' (1988: 11). In the teacher's materials, particular emphasis is given to the idea that the teacher suggest to the learners not to attempt to write while watching the video material. This instruction is also given from time to time in the learners' materials.

Results

A trial of the material was conducted with six groups of learners. Five groups were first

or second year university or junior college students. One was a group of private company employees (mixed ages, all female, all Japanese, of mixed ability, in an elective Business English/English Oral Communication class). The classes had between 3 and 10 learners in attendance.

With all six groups, four pages of print materials were completed by the learners in two classes of eighty to ninety minutes duration. The most difficult tasks were the first two tasks on page one. There may be several reasons for this: poor supplementary explanation of how to complete the tasks by the teacher (this writer); unfamiliarity with the concept of having expectations from a particular genre; and perhaps differences between the structure and nature of television programmes broadcast domestically in Japan compared with those from other countries. It was found that when such notions as expectations of genre and mini-schemata were explained in detail, for example as in themes to be observed in a montage of images accompanied by music used to open a television programme (as in Step One), learners were able to cope with the tasks better.

Subsequent tasks were much more easily accomplished by the learners. In particular, the scene description tasks on page three and the narration/dialogue prediction tasks on page four were particularly successful with the learners in the university and college. Most learners were at first rather apprehensive and reticent to speak, but became more responsive, confident and enthusiastic as they progressed further through the print materials. This can be attributed to an apparent growing sense of familiarity with the types of tasks the learners were required to undertake and a realisation that they could handle those tasks despite the ungraded nature of the video material. That said, progress through the material was still slow and most of this stemmed from the basic difficulty most of the learners have with producing original spoken and written English.

Conclusion

The off-air video clip used in this project would not seem at first to be appropriate for use with low-level learners due mainly to its ungraded language content. It did prove to be useable up to a point, however, because of careful choices that were made regarding the selection of the material and, even more importantly, the use of the video material in conjunction with the design and content of the accompanying print materials. The fact that the content is relevant to the learners' interests is important. Of greater importance is that the tasks are intended to concentrate on language (albeit limited) generated by the learners about the video, that there is very little attention paid to intensive listening tasks, that the tasks are manageable for the learners, that the use of the video is chunked into short

sections, and that the accompanying print materials are simply and clearly laid out.

Notes

- (1) Talent is the term used in professional broadcasting to denote a cast member in front of the camera (such as an actor, presenter or interviewer).

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