Using Authentic Video in the Language Classroom


Part A Introduction

This book is about learning English using authentic video, that is, all the kinds of program you normally see at the cinema, on TV or on DVD: feature films, documentaries, commercials, game shows, etc. Video is a wonderful resource for opening up the English-language world and can be used with great pleasure and profit—and very little sweat.

The assumptions are that you enjoy video and television yourself; you have access to some English video material and a video player; you have tried out video for teaching and found it promising; and you would like some ideas about using it more. You may not, however, have strong convictions about the value of authentic video. Many feel that it is a fun extra, but generally too difficult for most students. The question of difficulty is indeed crucial and will be discussed later (see pages 118-22). But first let's start with some of the reasons why authentic video is an essential element of learning languages today. I hope these will not only encourage you to use video but also give you ammunition for persuading school managers or budget controllers of the institutional need for video equipment and software.

Why use authentic video?

Accessibility
There are now few countries without access to English-language television programs and feature films. You can watch the TV news on the Internet, pick up sports programs on satellite TV, and rent or buy video cassettes and DVDs directly or by post. In many countries, English-language feature films with English subtitles are sold in newsagents. The supply is enormous and the materials are very high quality, relatively cheap and constantly renewed. Audio-visual input is now as accessible as print. It's a resource we can't ignore, and our students certainly won't.

Motivation
Many of you will have experienced the compelling power of video in the classroom, a power that is even enhanced by concentration on short sequences. The eye is caught, and this excites interest in the meaning of the words. Authenticity itself is an inducement - there is a special thrill in being able to understand and enjoy the real thing. In addition, video is today's medium. Print may still be powerful but many people spend more time with audio-visual media; video techniques, discourses and clichés are more familiar to them than the world of books and papers.
Uses in language teaching

What is not so much appreciated is the range of uses of authentic video in language teaching and how it stretches the boundaries of the classroom. What is it good for?

**For its own sake** People want access to the world of English-language media: they want to be able to view the news, get information from advertisements, see a film—in short, to use these language products like normal consumers. This may well be one of your students' major goals in learning English and in all fairness they ought to be able to get a glimpse of their goals. If we are prepared to teach 'reading newspapers' or 'conversation' we should also teach these major audio-visual genres.

**For comprehension of the spoken language** Video brings us all kinds of voices in all kinds of situations, with full contextual back-up. One obvious advantage for comprehension is the visual dimension, particularly for pragmatic understanding in dialogue; also important is the access to a variety of recognizable genres and the long-term contextual understanding built up as the program develops.

**As a language model** Authentic video provides a vast up-to-date linguistic resource of accents, vocabulary, grammar and syntax, and all kinds of discourse, which shows us language in most of its uses and contexts—something neither course book nor classroom can do. Authentic video can be a model for specific language items or a general pool for students to pick and choose from. Each genre contributes its own particular discourse structures and lexis; drama video is particularly valuable because it illustrates the kind of interactive language most foreign-language students seldom encounter.

**For culture** Video is a window on English-language culture. Apart from giving access to global cultural products like feature films, it also shows how people live and think and behave—local culture with a small 'c'. A small amount of showing is worth hours of telling from a teacher or a course book.

**As a stimulus for input** Video can be used for discussions, for writing assignments, as input for projects or the study of other subjects. The 'film of the book' is particularly useful in the study of literature, and work-based scenarios and training films are useful in special-purpose language teaching.

**As a moving picture book** Video gives access to things, places, people, events and behavior, regardless of the language used, and is worth thousands of picture dictionaries and magazines.

You will agree that it is difficult to fulfill this range of functions except by living in an English-speaking country—an opportunity that most learners do not have. Authentic video helps to substitute for this experience; it brings the English-language world to the learner.
Ways of using video

Types and uses

There is a wide variety of types of video recording and many ways to use them. For example, we have:

- drama video (films, soaps, sitcoms, etc.)
- documentaries
- TV news and weather
- discussions
- interviews
- TV commercials
- sports programs
- talk shows
- game shows
- educational films

and we can use them:

- as complete recordings or short extracts
- for their own sake - just exposing students to the recordings and
- letting them enjoy them
- for the sake of the encounter with the culture
- for listening comprehension
- to provide models of the spoken language
- as input/stimulus for some other activity
- as a moving picture book

Any given sequence can be used in many different ways and for many different purposes. You might like to think about how you personally have already used video (tick the appropriate boxes below) and what remains open to you.

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General guidelines for video activities

These general guidelines apply to most activities with video:

**Setting up** Whatever you want to do—e.g. replaying, slow motion, freezing, covering the screen, turning off sound or picture—if it's new, or the equipment is unfamiliar, try it out beforehand. Also obvious, but vital: don't forget to make sure the equipment is working, the tape or DVD is ready to go (the counter for tapes is on zero), and everyone can see and hear.

**Breaks** Viewing should not be frequently interrupted. As far as possible, do comprehension activities before and after viewing rather than breaking up the sequence for explanations or questions.

**Other activities** Keep writing or reading while viewing to a minimum—it is difficult even for expert speakers.

**Explaining** Find the right balance between explaining too little and explaining too much. Too little help beforehand will leave learners perplexed and frustrated; too much will rob them of the surprise and pleasure that video should bring.

**Sound only** If you want to focus only on sound, you can block viewing by turning down contrast and brightness to zero; more dramatic ways are to turn the screen round, drape a coat over it or tape a newspaper to it. Alternatively, persuade students to sit back and close their eyes: this is more soothing and less frustrating than staring at a blank screen; it also makes them listen really hard and is good for imaginative activities.

**Choice** As far as possible, give students choices, e.g. they can choose which sequences to study from longer program, how often to view in order to understand, what roles to take in group activities, what favorite scenes to present to the class, what vocabulary to note down, etc. Personal choice is not only motivating, it is part of learning: it encourages independence and focuses on real needs.

**Recycling** Language focus activities which encourage independent learning strategies (e.g. Choose your words, Interactive language, Wordhunt) should be repeated frequently: learners need to build up the habit of noticing the details of language use in real contexts.

**Modeling** Students usually do an activity better if they have seen an example of what they are supposed to do or have tried out the activity under the eye of the teacher. Ways of 'modeling' an activity are:
- doing an example of the activity (or the first part) with the class as a whole and then getting students to continue independently
- studying the programs students want to imitate
- giving a 'worked example' for students to refer to when working on their own (there are some in the bank of activities; you can also use good students' previous products)
Some examples of modeled activities are Dossier, Favorite scene, Interview, Lifestyle, Turning points. Modeling gives the rules of the game, but is otherwise very 'loose': it allows free observation, choice of what to imitate and liberty about content. It is particularly important for students working independently; it also has great value for teachers as it reveals not only the language demands of the task, but also students' problems and misunderstandings about what they have to do.

**Narrative tenses** Students usually have good instincts about what tenses to use in telling the story of a film or TV program but it's a good idea to give some advice before they launch into an activity. Make a distinction between telling the story from the outside and telling it from the inside.

**What can we use?**

But we have to go carefully. Watching drama that you don't understand is a very negative experience. You yourself may recall sitting out a foreign-language film to the bitter end after getting lost in the first half hour. If people are to learn through drama, they must understand it. And the fact is that, as normally viewed, most film drama is too difficult for most language students. Students need to have at least lower-intermediate level before they can cope with a full-length feature film without subtitles, and at this level it would still need to be a simple film.

**What makes films easy or difficult?**

What hinders comprehension is:

- high verbal density, i.e. a lot of speech with very little action (e.g. Woody Allen films)

- words which don't match the action, e.g. in smart dinner-table conversation; or words which are in conflict with the action or are an ironic commentary on it, as in send-ups and satires like Indiana Jones or Monty Python

- a high degree of naturalism in the speech, e.g. everyone talking at once, mumbled asides, actors with their backs to the camera, inconsequential dialogue

- cartoons - mouths, faces and body language are not as expressive as those of real people

- dialect and regional accents - local color in the film generally means local confusion in the viewer, and many excellent soap operas are inaccessible to language learners as a result

- period language, e.g. Shakespeare remains difficult in spite of some wonderful adaptations; however, in film adaptations of classic novels (e.g. Jane Austen and Dickens) careful scriptwriting and clear drama-school enunciation often triumph over archaic language
What helps comprehension is:

- unambiguous action (westerns, crime), with plenty of action between speech and a close connection between speech and action, e.g. a cowboy spits out his chewing-gum, takes a long look at the saloon bar, and slowly drawls, 'I'm just gonna go in there and rearrange the furniture,' and then goes and does it

- clear conventional story lines: straightforward love stories aimed at adolescents (e.g. Bring It On); children's film drama (e.g. Babe, the Wallace and Grommit series); epics (e.g. Titanic, Jurassic Park) and science-fiction drama (e.g. Close Encounters, Star Wars), which have simple plot lines and time-consuming special effects which lighten the verbal comprehension burden

- stylized acting: old 'canned drama' movies are acted like plays—only one character speaks at a time, always clearly and always to camera; classics like High Noon, Mutiny on the Bounty, Casablanca, Gone with the Wind share this kind of clarity

- anything which slows down the diction: films where one of the main characters isn't able to communicate very well because he or she is an alien, a foreigner, deaf, dumb, whatever it takes to produce slow halting language which has to be interpreted both for the other characters and for us, the audience, e.g. Nell, Rainman, ET, Children of a Lesser God, Regarding Henry, Down By Law, Awakenings, Dances with Wolves, The Piano and many episodes of Star Trek

- Students are the best judges of what is 'frustration level' in film drama. If they are viewing on their own, suggest that they either look for material which is easy enough to make the experience a pleasure (Grading), or find ways of making the viewing easier. Give them advice on what to start with and whether or how to use subtitles (see below). A checklist for discussing the use of feature films with students is given in the activity Learning English with films.

**Subtitles and dubbing**

Some films and drama series have built-in aids to comprehension in the form of dubbing and subtitling. Captioned films are also available in several languages if you have a decoder, and most DVDs give you a choice of languages for both dubbing and subtitling. How useful are they for language learners?

When thinking whether or how to use these aids we must recognize that the eye is more powerful than the ear, and (all other things being equal) will dominate. If viewers are offered both reading and listening, they will read in preference to listening, unless their aural skills are much greater than their reading skills. Indeed, people will read subtitles even if they have no need of them, e.g. when watching a film in their own language with subtitles also in their own language (or another language they know). If they are second-language learners with relatively weak aural comprehension, they will tend to substitute reading for listening.
There are four possibilities:

English drama dubbed into the learners' language, with the soundtrack in the learners' language, obviously does nothing for the learners' English. If you have the original English version, it is interesting to compare it with the dubbed translation, but this is usually too far from the original to act as a 'model translation'.

Drama in the learners' language subtitled in English aimed at English native speakers can be bought in England or through big video suppliers and may also be available on DVDs. It is clearly very little use for listening comprehension and is rarely used in language teaching, but it has great potential for vocabulary extension, especially the recognition of interactive language. Provided the viewer can read English, the eye is drawn to the subtitles; at the same time the viewer understands everything, fully contextualized, and can see how it's said in English. Thousands of students swear that this was how they learnt foreign languages.

English drama subtitled in the learners' language is a fairly common resource and sometimes available on DVDs. Although the film provides a running translation, there is probably very little learning of English in this kind of viewing. The viewer tends to rely on the most accessible channel, the written text, and does not process both channels equally—and may indeed 'switch off' the verbal sound completely. However, these versions do introduce the film, and the L1 subtitles can be covered up and used to check comprehension when necessary. They are also useful for translation exercises (Subtitles 1).

English drama subtitled in English is available from several sources (including DVDs) and is much appreciated by students; it is also very useful for transcribing the script of a scene. It certainly improves comprehension, but unless the students' aural comprehension is very good they will almost certainly improve their reading rather than their listening skills. If this is what is wanted, fine; if not, turn off the subtitles (for DVDs) or stick a newspaper over the bottom of the screen (for videotapes) and use the subtitles only if needed, as an on-line dictionary. Advise students working on their own to do the same. Such films can also be used for good close-focus listening activities matching speech and writing (Subtitles 2), since the subtitles are often only an approximation of the spoken words.
Part B  Activities with authentic video

Understanding video

One of the main complaints about authentic video is that it is too difficult. There's a lot of justice in this. Obviously students learn best when they understand most of what they hear and comprehension is there a top priority. We need to develop a good feeling for what students manage and how to help them with it. We also need to be sympathetic to what they want to understand.

Clearly the level of language is very important. The elements which make for comprehension difficulty are: high verbal and lexical density; high-speed speech; little support from the visual scene; background noise; dialect or strong regional accents; and 'natural' features like in indistinct articulation and overlap. If you want to decide the difficulty particular sequence, consult your students: they are the experts.

Understanding the whole

We should be aware that comprehension of authentic video is different from (for example) comprehension of course book audio-cassettes, where the material is mainly verbal, self-explanatory, short and complete. First, the visual element provides its own layer of comprehension, which affect the verbal messages in many different ways, highlighting, supplementing, contrasting with them or overriding them. There is also a layer of sound and music which carries its own messages, reinforces verbal or visual messages or sometimes even interferes with them.

This of course is also true of coursebook videos. But with authentic material, there are no concessions to learners' knowledge of culture ideas and this too may present problems. Moreover, we are sometimes working with a whole program, far longer than normal classroom input, and we have to think about how learners grapple with such long structures: how do they recognize the parts? or the significance of utterances in the whole? If on the other hand we are using decontextualised clips, then facilitating comprehension will mean we have to explain or reconstruct the context adequately.

So with authentic video, comprehension of the whole seldom comes from the words alone. As teachers, we must always aim at and check for understanding of the whole as well as comprehension of the words themselves. If we do this, we will discover that students come to many strange, interesting (and sometimes justifiable) conclusions quite different from our own about the meanings of what they have seen.

At the same time we need to encourage global comprehension strategies. For language learners, because so much is obscure, the attention is forced down to details far more often, and when this happens they tend to lose sight of the overall meaning: they often complain that they 'understand all the words but can't answer the question'. Activities which make them look 'upwards and outwards' will help to overcome their fear of not understanding every word. Many activities in this book aim to do this (e.g. Before and after, Character network, Labeling and linking, Matching).
Understanding the parts
Comprehension of the whole does not mean that the details (including words themselves) do not matter. When viewing in our own language we tend to go for the general idea, 'get the message', but it's also natural us to monitor closely for anything which disturbs our overall grasp, we may bend our attention to small points (a word, a sound, a single visual detail) at will. Effective comprehension seems to be 'interactive', calling on global or close-focus strategies at need.

Telling students to just relax and listen for the general meaning helps to overcome tension, but it doesn't always keep them happy as learners. There is a great desire to understand the words, and perhaps this is natural too, an important language-learning strategy which should also encouraged as long as it doesn't increase students' tendency to focus on individual words at the expense of the whole. So there are also many activities in this book which aim at comprehension of the words themselves (e.g. Ad language, Choose your words, Holophrases, Interactive language, Lipreading and mindreading, Matching). In the next section I suggest some general techniques for close comprehension.

In the end, comprehension is a very individual process, and we shouldn’t be too dogmatic or prescriptive. Try lots of approaches, observe what students do, consult them about their difficulties and give instinct its head. Learning has a will of its own!

Understanding the words
Many of the activities in Part B are aimed at understanding the full meaning of video material in context. The suggestions here concentrate instead on close comprehension, mainly of the words themselves, and can be used as lead-ins or supplements to the other activities. With variety of such comprehension aids, students can understand, at some level, a good range of video material. There is no suggestion that you must do any or all of them—they are just options which will depend on the material, the level of the group and the other activities you are planning.

Explaining context and content
1) Give plenty of background information before viewing, e.g. explain the situation, describe the characters involved, get students to research the background and brief each other, use parallel texts (e.g. newspaper articles mirroring TV news items) to prepare the ground.
2) Give all proper names and cultural references beforehand and practice the pronunciation. As a recap, go through all the names after viewing asking for more details.
3) Describe the actual content of the video before playing it (this way students hear everything twice).
4) Play the really difficult sequences one by one, explain them, play them again, then play the whole.
5) (For drama) Supplement the preliminary explanation with role play before watching the scene.
6) Take on the role of the narrator yourself. Play the easy bits and paraphrase the rest, fast-forwarding through to the next easy bit.
Anticipations
1) Give the subject, or the opening sentence, and have students anticipate what they'll see and hear: what people will say and what kind of information they will give.
2) View the pictures without the sound and guess what the sequence is about and what the people are saying. Then view with sound.
3) Play a short stand-alone sequence (e.g. a news 'quotation', an interview view clip, an anecdote) for comprehension, and speculate on its role in the whole.
4) Play the sound without vision and have students speculate on what they will see.

Giving vocabulary
1) Give a few key words and expressions in advance. Teach the meanings or get students to find them out beforehand. Ask which ones go together and how. View first just for students to pick up the key words and put them back into context after viewing (e.g. to say who said them and what they refer to).
2) Write up key words with irregular pronunciation but (for a change) don't give the pronunciation. Ask students to notice the pronunciation when they view.
3) Pick out the most important phrases and collocations, discuss them, then drill them (or get students to do so in pairs), giving the first half and demanding the second.
4) Give some vocabulary which gives the skeleton of the story/commentary. Discuss any new meanings, speculate what the sequence might be about, then view.
5) While viewing, write up a number of essential words and expressions and after viewing get students to copy them down. Ask students which ones they know and what they mean, then view again and discuss what the others might mean.
6) With tricky accents, pick out some of the important accented words beforehand and draw attention to how they are pronounced.

Looking for vocabulary
1) After viewing to identify the topic, ask students to view again to find the words which gave them the clues to the topic. Build them into a vocabulary map, then add any that the students have missed and get them to listen again to pick them up.
2) After one viewing, choose some collocations, write them up with one part missing (e.g. [fan] the flames, [put out] the fire) and ask students to listen again for the missing words.
3) Give definitions of a few key words (but not the words themselves) and get students to view to find the words represented by the definitions.

Comprehension checks
1) Ask very simple comprehension questions after the first viewing, more difficult ones after the second viewing, and so on.
2) Get the students to prepare comprehension questions (on what they've seen as well as what they've heard). Check their grammar while they are preparing them, and then have them ask each other the questions from group to group. View again to check the answers.
3) If the content can be represented visually, get students to do this by (for example) moving objects around, walking through the actions, doing a sketch of the scene, etc.
4) Get students to identify the three worst 'black spots' (patches of incomprehension), explain them, and then together try to work out what the problem was.
5) Ask students each to concentrate on one speaker and follow what he/she says, then selects anything he/she says which isn't clear to them and which seems important. Review these parts and explain them.

**Dictation/gapfill**

1) Do very small difficult portions of the text as a gapfill: write them up as you hear them, leaving out a few words for students to complete on second viewing. If they are longer than a sentence or two, prepare them beforehand.

2) Do a 'progressive dictation' of a small part of the text (maximum two or three sentences). Students view, and then call out as much of the text as they can remember. Write up the words, leaving appropriate spaces between for the other words. View again and again, filling in more and more gaps. Alternatively, write up the first words of each natural word group and get students to view again until they have the whole. A good preliminary is simply to get students to count the number of words they hear.