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Video as a Bridge for Integrating the Four Skills

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**Abstract**

This paper, based on a presentation given under the same name at the 4<sup>th</sup> *Annual CamTESOL Conference on English Language Teaching: "Building Bridges to the World"* on 24 February 2008 in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, offers advice on integrating the teaching of the four language skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking) in their cultural context through the use of video clips. The paper targets teachers whose students are from the medium to high level of English proficiency. Samples lessons with differing emphasis are provided. The paper concludes that properly used videos can be an effective means of teaching and learning the English skills necessary for bridging the gap between cultures.

### **Video as a Bridge for Integrating the Four Skills**

Cultures and their languages are essentially conservative and insular. They find safety and security in the traditional, the known and accustomed responses to given situations. But the twenty-first century with its Internet, satellite TV, and cell-phones has destroyed the traditional borders between countries and peoples. We no longer can count on living in a neighborhood bounded by fences, or insurmountable mountains or rivers or oceans. The barriers between peoples are no longer physical. However, socially the barriers remain immense. Thus, there is a desperate need for building bridges, linguistic and cultural, between peoples.

To some extent, cultural links can be formed almost spontaneously through education and exposure to another country's music and visual media. But, for more intensive and sustainable cultural contact, mutual understanding of each other's or a common language is essential.

Unfortunately, there are hundreds of languages and most people have neither the time nor opportunity to learn more than one. Luckily for its native speakers and unluckily for the rest of the world, English has become the world's most spoken second language, the closest thing we have to a common world language.

However, access to English and its power to bridge the gaps between peoples is not easy to come by. Although a great deal of language can be learned implicitly, simply through exposure, using that method alone is slow and inefficient. Explicit instruction can speed up the learning process (Ellis, 2005, p. 307).

### **Method**

This paper offers an approach using TV programs as a basis for assisting learners in developing the four skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking while at the same time getting acquainted with an English speaking environment (McKeon, 1994, p. 23), blending the implicit and explicit elements of language learning. The clips of programs used are carefully selected to suit the age and linguistic competence of the learners, as well as their need for material that will stimulate them visually and intellectually (Krashen & Terrell, 1993, p. 132).

The method is to give a general introduction to the scenes to be shown, show them in their entirety, explain and discuss each scene in detail, offer the students exercises to confirm and reinforce their comprehension, and use written summaries

and oral presentation to encourage production (Rivers, 1983, pp. 22-23). In the process, it is essential for the teacher to clarify elements of context, language, and culture that may be unfamiliar to the learners (Brown, 1994, p. 25). In addition, to maximize exposure to the target language input, the home language of the learners is avoided (Dulay, et al., 1982, p. 269). The teacher's explanation in English of the scenes presented serves as an active and critical element in the learner's input.

### **Material**

For the purposes of this paper, three scenes from the 1970 comedy series "Taxi" will be used. "Taxi" was written to be performed before live audiences, giving it the need for instant comprehension. The writing is superbly colloquial and the acting exemplary in comic timing and gesture. Each scene is about two or three minutes long, well within the attention span of virtually any student.

Three scenes will be presented here as sample lessons, including possible teacher explanations and analysis of the setting and dialog.

### **Sample lessons**

#### ***Introduction to the three scenes to be presented***

The setting of all three scenes is the garage of a taxi company in New York. The important characters in this clip are Latka Gravas, Tony Banta, Alex Reiger, and Louie DePalma. Latka, an immigrant who speaks little English, is a mechanic. Tony and Alex are drivers. Louie is the dispatcher and boss of the garage. The video of the three scenes is shown without subtitles but with credits:

Taxi: Season 1, Episode 10, November 21, 1978 (ABC), "Men Are Such Beasts"

Writer: Ed Weinberger, Stan Daniels

Director: James Burrows

Show Stars: Judd Hirsch (Alex Reiger), Jeff Conaway (Bobby Wheeler), Danny DeVito (Louie DePalma), Tony Danza (Tony Banta), Marilu Henner (Elaine Nardo), Randall Carver (John Burns), Andy Kaufman (Latka Gravas), J. Alan Thomas (Jeff Bennett)

Guest Stars: Gail Edwards (Denise) , George Reynolds (Cabdriver)

The purpose of this initial showing is to give the students a chance to see the action, hear the dialog, and get a general sense of the context. With students at a lower level, it is a good idea to show the complete set of scenes at the beginning of each lesson.

Since the complete dialog will follow in the sample lessons, it will not be printed here.

### ***Sample lesson 1***

Each scene is then broken down into its components and examined in detail during one class, noting difficult vocabulary, idioms, and cultural aspects.

For instance in Scene 1, the vocabulary is very simple but also very colloquial. The teacher must be sure that the students understand the situation. Tony has been "seeing" (dating) a new girl. She seems to love him. But for some reason he wants to stop "seeing" her. Latka advises him in an unknown language.

#### *Dialog and explanation of scene 1*

Tony: "I took her out for breakfast."

This story starts in the middle. Tony has taken a woman out for breakfast. To take someone out means to ask someone to go to a place away from home with you for some event. It also usually implies that you pay for the event. Taking someone out for breakfast implies that the night was spent together, perhaps at a party.

Latka: "Da da posibi da."

Latka's tone shows an understanding of the situation, as is confirmed by Tony's reply.

Tony: "You're right. One thing led to another. So, I've been seeing her for a couple of weeks and I'm not so sure I want to go on seeing her."

Tony confirms Latka's understanding and adds that one thing led to another. When you lead someone, you go first and the other person follows. In this case, one thing, breakfast, came first and was followed by another, perhaps lunch, then dinner, then a movie and so on. So, Tony has been seeing the woman, that means dating her, but is thinking of stopping the relationship, breaking up, not seeing her anymore.

Latka: "Dos da kuleba?"

Latka questions him, perhaps asking how he intends to break up.

Tony: "Can't I just tell her? I mean, I think she likes me. I don't want to hurt the girl."

Tony says that the woman likes him. He wonders if telling her directly that he wants to break up with her might hurt her. The teacher might ask the learners if they have ever had to break off a relationship with a friend and why it was necessary? The more learners become personally involved in the story, the greater their motivation to invest the effort needed to understand it.

Latka: "Be da bose kaleba, posibili da."

But Latka by his tone of voice urges Tony to act. Perhaps he said something like, "Tell

her soon or maybe she'll be hurt more.

Tony: "You're right. The longer I wait, the tougher it's going to get. But, ah, you're right. I've just got to take care of it today."

A tough opponent is difficult to beat in a fight. Here Tony's opponent is the situation and time will make it tougher, more difficult to overcome. His girlfriend may only become more attached to him over time.

Latka: "Ba da kaseba. Bosa posibili da!"

Again, Latka's tone of voice urges Tony on. Perhaps he told Tony to act quickly or the situation will get worse.

Tony: "I will, Latka, I will. All right. Hey, Latka. Tell me something. How come I never understand a single word you're saying, but I always know what you're talking about."

This is one of the mysteries of speech and the human psyche. People who are tuned to each other in a particular context are often able to communicate meaning without words. A glance, a facial expression, a tone of voice, or a gesture can give all the meaning necessary to those who are in a sympathetic relationship. On the other hand, even a full verbal explanation can fail to communicate meaning when the intended receiver is inattentive, preoccupied with other matters, or simply unsympathetic to the message or messenger.

Latka: "Oh! Si si pola kasida. ...puli palida. uh, uh, se le posibili da!"

Latka tries his best to answer what for him is a simple question, even pausing to remember the precise word needed, although his listener cannot understand the word he chooses.

Tony: "Yeah. That must be it."

But Tony understands his answer with certainty: "That must be it."

### *Exercise for scene 1*

Once the students are comfortable with the context, it is a perfect opportunity for them to use their imaginations to write "translations" of Latka's advice to Tony. Their advice must fit Tony's responses. With students at a lower level, this exercise can be done as pair or even group work. However, with such students, it might be best to ask first how they would say goodbye to a friend who is moving away, then a boy- or girlfriend who wants to end a relationship.

### *Writing exercise*

Tony: I took her out for breakfast.

Latka: \_\_\_\_\_.

Tony: You're right. One thing led to another. So, I've been seeing her for

a couple of weeks and I'm not so sure I want to go on seeing her.

Latka: \_\_\_\_\_.

Tony: Can't I just tell her? I mean, I think she likes me. I don't want to hurt the girl.

Latka: \_\_\_\_\_.

Tony: You're right. The longer I wait, the tougher it's going to get. But, ah, you're right. I've just got to take care of it today.

Latka: \_\_\_\_\_.

Tony: I will, Latka, I will. All right. Hey, Latka. Tell me something. How come I never understand a single word you're saying, but I always know what you're talking about?

Latka: \_\_\_\_\_.

Tony: Yeah. That must be it.

The completed exercise could then be used as a role play, to give the learners a chance to use their own English in a real world situation (Nunan, 1988, 87).

### ***Sample lesson 2***

Scene 2 is fairly long and has vocabulary and concepts that may be troublesome for students. Alex reports that he had an accident. Louie is especially surprised that an expert driver like Alex would hit a parked car. He is even more surprised at the circumstances of the accident.

#### *Dialog and explanation of scene 2*

Alex: "Louie, I just had an accident in 723."

Alex was driving taxi #723.

Others: "Are you okay, man?"

The first thought of the other drivers was for Alex's well-being, his safety and health.

Louie: "Wait a minute. Wait a minute. One thing at a time. Where's the cab?"

Louie's first thought is for the welfare of the taxi-cab, company property.

Alex: "It's upstairs."

The taxi parking garage must be on the upper floor.

Louie: "Latka. Go up and check on the damage. I want a complete report. Was anybody hurt?"

Latka is the mechanic. Louie wants to know first about the condition of the car and only after that about whether any people were hurt.

Alex: "Nah! It was no big deal. I just dented my fender and knocked in

the side of a parked car. It shouldn't be worth more than seven or eight hundred dollars.”

To Alex, it was no big deal, not so important. He knows that the company can fix the taxi and its insurance will pay for the repair of the other car. If the accident is taken care of privately and the police are not involved, the accident will not affect his license. If the police become involved, hitting a parked car is a serious offense.

Louie: “A parked car? Alex Reiger? 180,000 miles without an accident? Voted New York ‘Cabbie of the Month,’ August 1977? Just rams into a parked car?”

For a driver, hitting a parked car is an embarrassment. It usually means that you're an inept or careless driver. But Louie knows the accident statistics of his drivers and that Alex is one of his best.

Alex: “Louie, I just couldn't help it. I was going down Seventy-seventh Street and as I was approaching Third Avenue, this dog runs out in front of my cab. So, either I hit the dog or I swerve and hit the Cordoba that was parked there.”

Alex explains that if he had not turned and hit the parked car, he would have hit a dog. “Swerve” means to turn quickly and sharply.

Louie: “Wait a minute. You mean you had a choice of running over some mutt and ramming into a Cordoba, a Chrysler Cordoba with Corinthian leather? And you chose, you made a conscious choice to hit the Cordoba? Where are your values, Reiger?”

A mutt is a dog with no monetary value. A Cordoba is a well-advertised luxury car and Louie even knows the advertisement by heart: “Chrysler Cordoba with Corinthian leather.” He can't believe that Alex chose to hit the luxury car instead of a worthless dog. For Louie, money is far more important, valuable, than the life of an animal. But Alex values life more than money.

Bobby: “Hey, Louie, why don't you just lay off him, all right!”

To lay off someone means to leave that person alone. When you put or lay something heavy on people, you make them uncomfortable. When you take the burden away, lay it off them, they will be at ease again.

Elaine: “Yeah, he feels bad enough!”

Elaine reminds Louie that Alex feels bad about having an accident and there's no need to make him feel worse. He feels bad enough.

Louie: “Yiih! Were there any witnesses?”

Louie wants to know if anyone had seen the accident.

Alex: "No."

So, no one saw Alex hit the parked car. There were no witnesses, nobody who could say that he did it to the police.

Louie: "What about the owner of the parked car?"

Louie wants to know if the car's owner knows about the accident.

Alex: "He wasn't there. So, I left a note on his windshield."

Because the owner was not there, Alex left a note with the time and reason for the accident along with his contact information. It's required by law. Alex is an honest driver.

Louie: "Oooh! You left a note on his windshield."

Alex: "Yeah!"

Louie: "Oh, good thinking, Reiger. Otherwise, he might not know where to reach us and we couldn't pay for the damages. Smart! Smart!"

Louie is being sarcastic. He really thinks Alex is stupid. Because Alex left a note, the company will have to pay the owner of the Cordoba for repairs. For Louie, the company's finances are far more important than the law.

Alex: "Louie, you have to leave a note. It's the law."

Louie: "Well, sure it's the law. It's also the law that you can't spit in public. Pueh!"

Alex reminds Louie of the law. But Louie shows his contempt for law by spitting in public, an act that is against the law in many places, including New York City.

Alex: "You have such an elegant way of making a point. Do you know that? Come on, let's get breakfast."

It's Alex's turn to be sarcastic. Spitting is never elegant or beautiful. "Making a point" means stating an idea forcefully.

Louie: "Seven hundred dollars worth of damage."

Alex: "Yeah."

Louie: "Just to avoid hitting a dog. I mean, if you had swerved to avoid hitting an old lady, I could understand. I'm not saying I'd agree. But I could understand. But a dog! Grrr."

For Louie, a dog has no value. Even an old lady has less value for him than an expensive car.

### *Exercises for scene 2*

After confirming that the students understand the vocabulary (cab, dent, damage), grammar and situation, a reading exercise could be assigned to reinforce the new vocabulary. At the lowest level, the vocabulary words could be given.

*Reading exercise:*

( cab, damage, accident, hurt, worth, dented)

Alex: Louie, I just had an \_\_\_\_\_ in 723.

Others: Are you okay, man?

Louie: Wait a minute. Wait a minute. One thing at a time. Where's the \_\_\_\_\_?

Alex: It's upstairs.

Louie: Latka. Go on up and check out the \_\_\_\_\_. I want a complete report. Was anybody \_\_\_\_\_?

Alex: Nah! It was no big deal. I just \_\_\_\_\_ my fender and bumped into the side of a parked car. It shouldn't be \_\_\_\_\_ more than seven or eight hundred dollars.

*Conversation exercise:*

There are also two social questions that demand answers:

Which is more valuable, a dog or a car? Why?

Should people obey the law even when no one is looking? Why?

With a lower level class these questions could be discussed in pairs and the results reported to the class. With a higher level class, the questions could be the subject of a debate.

***Sample lesson 3***

The scene opens with Latka singing while washing a cab. Language learners, including children, often use songs, remembering first the tunes, then often repeated words, and finally the complete song. Songs also serve a role in the acquisition of pronunciation and rhythm.

*Dialog and explanation of Scene 3*

Latka: "Da bi da bida da taxi honey. Da da be ready da da ha bi da."

Louie: "Hey, Reiger! You've got to help me start to fill out this property damage report."

Alex: "Oh, not the box again!"

Louie: "Come on over here."

Accidents always require a damage report for insurance claims and also for the police, if they become involved. Taxi drivers, like most manual workers (and teachers), generally hate paperwork.

Elaine: "What's he doing?"

Bobby: "He's going to re-enact the accident. It's company policy. Come

on.”

Elaine: “Ooh!”

Louie: “Hold the box here.”

Latka: “Okay Latka watch?”

Re-enacting or physically acting out the accident helps in getting the details correct. Louie takes notes to confirm the story. Latka uses a bare minimum of language to express his needs.

Louie: “Yeah. Sit down. All right. Now here's 72nd Street where it intersects with Third Avenue.”

Alex: “That's right.”

Louie: “All right. Now, we've got a stop light here.”

Alex: “Right.”

Louie sets the scene by chalking out a map of the street on a table. He even has a toy dog, car, and traffic light.

Louie: “All right. Okay. Now, what color was the light?”

Alex: “The light was green.”

Louie pulls a switch and the toy traffic light changes from red to green. Latka stares with wonder at the toy light.

Louie: “All right. Now, you were traveling west on 72nd Street.”

Alex: “Right. Okay. I'm traveling in this direction about 30 miles an hour.

I notice the light is green. So, I start to speed up so I can make it.”

Latka is intrigued that the traffic light actually works. The “miles per hour” may have to be translated to “kilometers per hour for the students ( $30 \times 1.6 = 48$  kph). Many drivers are tempted to go faster to try to get through (make) a light before it changes to red.

Alex: “And just then, all of a sudden, this dog runs out in the middle of the road. So, I swerve to my right. And I hit this parked car right here. And the dog runs off, I don't know, somewhere. And that was it.”

Latka: “Phew! Thank you very much.”

Latka, unlike Louie, is grateful to Alex for saving the dog.

### *Exercises for scene 3*

Although the use of videos automatically links listening to action and context, for fine-tuning listening skills, listening exercises such as fill-in-the-blank or dictation are useful. The accident report in scene 3 could be used with lower level student by asking them to fill in the blanks in the dialog while watching the clip.

### *Listening exercise:*

Louie: All right. Okay. Now, what \_\_\_\_\_ was the light?

Alex: The light was \_\_\_\_\_.

Louie: All right. Now, you were traveling \_\_\_\_\_ on 72nd Street.

Alex: Right. Okay. I'm traveling in this direction about \_\_\_\_\_ miles an hour. I notice the \_\_\_\_\_ is green. So, I speed up so I can make it.

And just then, all of a sudden, this \_\_\_\_\_ runs out in the middle of the road. So, I swerve to my \_\_\_\_\_. And I hit this parked car right here.

And the dog \_\_\_\_\_ off, I don't know, somewhere. And that was it.

Other possibilities include giving one or more letters of the word they are expected to hear or the number of spaces required to spell it:

Latka: Phew! T\_ \_ \_ \_ you very m\_ \_ h.

With dictation, the dialog in the clip may be too fast for many students. If this is the case, the dialog can be played one line at a time and then repeated by the teacher.

#### *Summary of the plot*

It is further important for the students to produce a written summary of the plot (Raimes, 1983, p. 58) and to present that summary without notes directly to the teacher in the case of lower level students or to the whole class with upper level students.

Many learners, who are too shy of their English ability to speak in front of the class, will feel quite comfortable whispering a summary to a teacher stooping at their desk to listen privately.

A written summary compels the learners to be aware of elements of the language that may be glossed over in speech: articles, tense markings, et cetera (Ellis, 2005, p. 323). When followed by an oral summary, they tend to incorporate those elements in their speech patterns, gaining in fluency as well as correctness.

If the level of material is suited to the students and presented clearly, production in writing and speech should be no problem.

#### **Conclusion**

The explanations and exercises presented here are minimal. The possibilities of expansion of both explanation and exercises are limited only by the imagination of the teacher and the motivation of the students. The exercises are just that. They are meant not as tests to be marked, but as opportunities for the students to gain self-confidence in using what they have learned.

However, there is one word of caution. Although it is possible to “see the world in a grain of sand” through the lens of one film clip, limiting students to reviewing one clip repeatedly seeking perfect comprehension will not be profitable for language

learning in the long run. Rather than concentrate too long on one clip, it is better to expose the students to many clips, even full movies. Repeated exposure to language made understandable in a variety of situations is the best way for students to acquire that language.

A great deal of emphasis now is being placed on extensive reading because it stresses such exposure (Krashen, 2006), but unfortunately only through the eyes. There is no doubt about its value. However, for all around training in the four skills, learning through video has definite advantages. The student's senses are totally engaged, the language is received in real time both from the teacher and the video, the lessons can utilize the four basic language skills, while social and cultural values are included in the settings (Matsumoto & O'Donnell, 2006 and 2007).

Moreover, the students can experience a sense of the reality of and an identity with the foreign culture, seeing what makes people laugh and cry, or what motivates them to good or evil. This is in line with Baker & MacIntyre's claim that language mastery involves "taking on the identity and culture of the target language" (2003, p. 73).

As we find ourselves at the beginning edge of the twenty-first century, we owe it to ourselves and our children to find way to increase the use of English as a common language, not to the detriment of local languages, but to make relations among the world's peoples smoother and more reliable, to bridge the gap between cultures.

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