

Using Original Video and Sound Effects to Teach English

Creating specific lessons for different language skills is challenging and time consuming for English teachers, but it is definitely worth the effort. In my experience, teaching language skills through mechanical exercises and traditional fill-in-the-blank, true/false, and multiple-choice assessments does not interest students as much as we expect. This fact inspired me to consider lively, interesting, and meaningful contexts and materials. Although the mechanical exercises and supplementary materials in resource books are useful—and I use a variety of them myself—they do not energize my students. But when I go creative, especially when teaching grammar, in a way students do not expect, I can clearly see the difference. This article will suggest a motivating way to teach grammar with audio-visual techniques, with an example of a lesson on teaching modals of speculation that express degrees of certainty (e.g., *may*, *might*, *could*, *couldn't*).

Media in the language classroom

A well-known way to create meaningful context for teaching English is through using media, which can be delivered through a wide variety of print, audio, and visual formats. The current information age requires teachers to be familiar with media and media literacy. Thoman (2003) argues that media literacy has an influential role in educational programs, including second language learning. Media can be integrated into language lessons in a variety of ways by developing activities based on radio programs, television shows, newspapers, and videos.

Rucynski (2011) integrates television into English as a Second/Foreign Language (ESL/EFL) instruction by demonstrating how a variety of English lessons can be taught with *The Simpsons*, a famous American animated TV series with more than 400 episodes. Radio programs are also an excellent source for teaching ideas because “it is well accepted that language is better acquired or learned

where the focus is on interesting content, and radio can certainly provide interesting content” (Bedjou, 2006, 28). Bedjou (2006) introduces a number of English teaching activities that can be organized around radio programs, specifically VOA Special English programs, and points out the significance of radio as an English teaching tool: “Radio can bring authentic content to the classroom, especially in the EFL environment, where it may not be easy to meet and talk with native speakers of English” (28). Newspapers are another authentic and readily available source for pedagogical material. Pemagbi (1995) notes that the availability, affordability, and relevance of newspapers make them good teaching tools.

Videos in the classroom

Integrating videos into lessons creates enticing visuals and a special interactive environment in the EFL/ESL classroom. Teaching English through videos also allows teachers to be creative when designing language lessons. As Cundell (2008, 17) notes, “One of the most powerful ways that video can be integrated into courses is for the visual representation they provide for learners on otherwise abstract concepts.” This is the idea that compelled me to use a homemade video to teach a one-hour “modals of speculation” lesson for my intermediate students. Videos permitted me to provide my students with audiovisual stimuli to introduce these important modal auxiliaries in a way that made sense to my students.

Rather than search for a video online, I chose to accept the challenge and make my own short video for the lesson. An important point is that I am not an expert in video recording, but I do know how to use my camcorder.

Making the video

To create the desired context to teach modals of speculation, I produced a video to create a speculative context. I first asked someone to videotape me doing actions that generated different sounds while I was getting ready to leave the house for work. These scenes included:

- brushing my teeth with an electric toothbrush

- blow drying my hair
- ironing my clothes with steam
- using a whistling kettle to boil water
- pouring water into a cup
- toasting a piece of bread in the toaster
- leaving the tap dripping
- spraying air freshener
- leaving my cell phone ringing
- locking the door
- waiting for and entering an elevator
- turning on the ignition of the car

While I was doing all these actions, a friend followed me and recorded everything. Even if you do not have anyone to videotape you, you can still make the video by carrying the camera and filming yourself.

Video transfer options

If your class is equipped with a computer and video projector, or you have access to a computer lab, you can record the video using a digital camera or even your mobile phone. Then the only thing you need to do is to insert the camera’s (or the mobile phone’s) memory card into your laptop’s memory stick slot, insert your USB into your laptop’s USB slot, and transfer the video from the memory card to the USB. You can even send the video to your own email account as an attachment if the file is not too big. After recording, I took my camcorder to a local store and had the video transferred to a VHS videotape format, which was necessary because we depend on a TV set and a video player to play the videos.

Setting up the video lesson

Harmer (2007, 310) suggests a variety of viewing techniques when using films and videos in listening activities, including:

- Silent viewing (playing the video without the sound)
- Freeze framing (freezing the picture and asking the students what they think will happen next)
- Partial viewing (covering most of the screen with a piece of paper)
- Picture or speech (half the class watches the video while the other half faces away)
- Subtitled films (students see and hear the English language)
- Picture-less listening (listening to the audio before watching the video)

To awaken students' curiosity, I made use of picture-less technique and had my students listen to the sound of the video first. To focus on modals of speculation, students listen and guess the origin of the sounds they hear in the video. This arouses their curiosity and invites them to speculate.

As Harmer (2007) notes, there are three ways of using this picture-less listening technique when a TV set is available in your classroom: (1) cover the screen with a piece of paper, (2) turn the screen away from students, or (3) turn the brightness control all the way down. If your class is equipped with a computer and video projector, you can simply turn off the projector and have your students listen to the sound. You can also keep the projector on and minimize the window so that the students cannot see the video. You may also ask the students to close their eyes and just listen to the sound, or to move their chairs and sit with their backs to the screen.

I wanted to create a speculating environment from the very beginning of the lesson, so I wrapped the whole screen in newspaper before the beginning of the class. As soon as the students entered the class they were faced with a covered TV, a sight that got their attention; they immediately began speculating why the TV was covered. I could see they were all surprised, and they wanted to know why I had covered the TV. They started talking to each other and guessing why I had done that. A couple of students even asked me why the TV was covered, and I asked them to wait for a moment to see why, and this made them even more curious. Since the students were very excited, I gave them a couple of minutes to talk to each other because what was happening in the class was helping me build the desirable context.

Teaching the video lesson

I began by explaining to the students that they were going to listen to a series of sounds and had to guess the origin, which was why I had covered the TV. The students were intrigued. I asked them to note their thoughts while I played the audio of the videotape. To illustrate the procedure and make sure they all understood the instructions, I played the first scene and asked them to guess what the sound was. Then I continued, pausing at the end of

each scene for about 15 seconds to allow them to make notes. I repeated this same process until they had listened to the whole video. Then I played the video again while they checked their notes. Next, students formed pairs and took three minutes to discuss their notes with their partner. Students enjoyed discussing their very different ideas about the origin of the sounds they had heard.

Students then listened to the video once more. But this time, at the end of each scene they discussed their ideas together. After making sure they all understood the instructions, I played the video once more, pausing at the end of each scene to ask them to identify the sound. By asking questions, I encouraged them to use the appropriate grammatical structures. For instance, when I played the part where I was blow drying my hair, I asked, "What could it be? Could it be a vacuum cleaner?" One student said, "Yes, it might be a vacuum cleaner," whereas another one said, "No, it can't be a vacuum cleaner." When they were not able to use the structure, I prompted them to use the modal construction by asking tag questions, such as "It can't be a vacuum cleaner, can it?" In order to respond to my question, students had to use the teaching point.

I elicited their answers—for example, "It might be a vacuum cleaner" or "It can't be a washing machine"—and wrote them on the board. Then I underlined the "modal + verb *to be*" with another color to help them notice the new structure. I continued the process about the origin of all the sounds in the video, and I produced a list of their speculations on the board where the new structure and the modals were underlined and highlighted. Then I removed the newspaper from the TV screen and let them watch the entire video. This was the most interesting part of the lesson because the students had a lot of fun, laughing at some of their speculations. Finally, in order to teach the students where exactly each of the modals on the board could be used, I asked them which of these structures was used for expressing possibility, probability, certainty, and impossibility, and wrote these terms on the board right below the underlined structures. For instance, I asked, "When do we usually use '*must + be*'? Do we use it when we are certain about something? Or do we use it when we think

something is possible?” Some of the students said, “When we are certain about it.” Then I wrote “certainty” on the board right below the structure. Finally, I reviewed the new structures and their usages with the students and answered their questions.

Suggestions for variation

The idea behind video and sound effects lessons can be used to teach a variety of content such as grammar, vocabulary, and creative writing to a wide range of ESL/EFL students.

Teaching grammar

The same video can be used to teach different grammar points, such as present and past simple, present and past progressive, future simple, and “*going to* + infinitive” without *to*, all by using the technique of freeze framing. In order to teach grammar, you need to play the video, freeze frame the picture after each scene, and then ask questions. For instance, freeze frame the picture and ask your students questions like, “What is s/he doing?” “What did s/he do?” “What was s/he doing?” “What is s/he going to do next?” or “What will happen next?” In this way students will be prompted to use the teaching point. Once you elicit their answers, write them on the board and highlight the structure (e.g., “*to be + ing*” form of the verb for present progressive, or “*will + infinitive*” without *to* for future simple). Since the video consists of a sequence of action, adverbs like *first*, *second*, *finally*, *before*, and *later* can also be introduced to and practiced with students.

Teaching vocabulary

The same video that I used with my students can be used to teach vocabulary items on home and kitchen appliances by recording sounds and having students guess the origin. Being careful to respect people’s privacy, you can also take the camera around the school, or even outside the school, and record a variety of interesting sounds. For instance, you can record the sound of students playing at recess, the period between classes, or sounds in the lunchroom and then play the video for your students and have them guess the source of the sound. Or you can record the sounds in a busy coffee shop, a nearby underground station, or a noisy shopping center and play a guessing game with students. You can

even teach vocabulary about different jobs by taking your camera with you to record the butcher who is cutting or grinding meat or the cashier who opens the register and returns your change.

Another interesting variation is to enlist your students to record videos. For example, you can ask them to record sounds during a picnic or some other activity they do on the weekend. These videos can become part of your repertoire to teach grammar and vocabulary. If you think your students might not have access to a camera, you can give them the option of recording sounds with their MP3 and MP4 players.

Teaching writing

The same video that I used in my class can be used as a visual prompt for writing assignments at different levels of English. As George (2002, 12) points out, “Our students have a much richer imagination for what we might accomplish with the visual than our journals have yet to address.” To use videos in the writing class, you can show the video to your students using the picture-less listening technique and ask them to write a story based on the sounds they hear in the video. You do not even have to show them the video, as the soundtrack itself serves as an effective audio prompt for writing. You can also ask your students to videotape random scenes around them and bring their videos to class. Then they can watch the videos together and create stories that match the videos.

Conclusion

Finding appropriate teaching materials is not that hard, as our everyday life serves as a perfect resource for creating effective lessons and activities. An effective lesson does not necessarily require expensive and high-tech materials; oftentimes, breaking the routines will excite students, engage them in the lesson, and teach them the real use of language in context. Thus, one of the easiest and least expensive ways for teachers to prepare the most effective teaching materials is to look around and never underestimate their sense of creativity.

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SHAHLA YASSAEI is a graduate of the MATESOL program at the American University of Sharjah, UAE. She taught English to adult learners in Iran for five years. Currently, she is a PhD student at the University of Reading, UK. Her research areas are teacher training, professional development, and reflective teaching.