

Learning Sociolinguistically Appropriate Language Through the Video Drama *Connect with English*

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Abstract

Video provides 1) simultaneous audio/visual input, and 2) complete and contextualized conversations, and thus proves to be a rich vehicle in foreign language instruction. The video drama *Connect with English* (a.k.a. *Rebecca's Dream*), created to promote English language learning, is particularly outstanding in that it contains an captivating storyline, true-to-life scenarios, on-location scenes, various social interactions, realistic yet easy-to-follow linguistic and cultural information, as well as high-quality filming and acting. This paper discusses how *Connect with English* can help enhance learners' intercultural communicative competence on three levels: cultural awareness, phraseological accuracy, and pragmatic appropriateness. It delineates some of the underlying thought patterns--the values, attitudes, and feelings--in the U.S. society that are portrayed in this drama and shows how they provide insights into the English language norms. Viewing this drama, learners observe American social, cultural, and discursal conventions, and even go through a range of emotional experiences along with the characters. They may develop a better understanding of the U.S. social reality and the English-specific ways of thinking, of lexical/syntactic choices, and of formulaic expressions. As a result, learners may find viewing this drama an effective way to increase their cross-cultural language power. Finally, the importance of approximating sociolinguistically appropriate English language models to minimize the negative effect of native language transfer is emphasized.

I. Video as a Valuable EFL Medium

EFL learners in Taiwan often attribute their inferior speaking ability to “no English environment,” i.e. lack of exposure to English in natural settings. The bulk of English education in Taiwan seems to focus on vocabulary-and-grammar instruction and test taking. It rarely concerns itself with using the language for interaction. While techniques effective in raising test scores have continually been developed, the quest for real-world English proficiency is hardly fulfilled. Lament over low communicative competence in English has been loud and clear, but there seems to be entrenched helplessness about this great gap between the EFL education in the classroom and the real needs of this society.

To remedy the deficiency of natural acquisition contexts, video, a medium of our daily entertainment and information, can play a major role. Many factors in communication are difficult to identify, study, or teach, but are easily accessible to viewers of video. The genre of video drama in particular can work as a useful teaching tool, due to its dynamic combination of sound and visual image as well as comprehensive communicative situations. In a video drama, the characters' genders, relationships, social statuses, and sentiments go hand in hand with the aural stimuli (voices) and visual clues (expressions/ gestures). As such, the video drama is widely recognized to be a valuable vehicle of cultural information that at the same time creates an enjoyable climate for effective learning. It provides a rich source of input, in contrast to EFL textbooks on grammatical structures and exercises in isolation. With video as a popular tool in the foreign language classroom, most "video in teaching" research/books have focused on comprehension measurement and/or suggestions on activities (Chung 2002; Cooper, Lavery & Rinvulcri 1992; Hennessey 1995; Lebedko 1999; Lonergan 1988). This paper, however, tries to take a different approach by addressing how a good videotext can help enhance students' active knowledge or skills in producing English. In view of the fact that many learners with high test scores are still inadequate communicators, emulation of phraseologically accurate and sociolinguistically appropriate English models through the use of a video drama is the main concern of this discussion.

II. CWE as an Outstanding EFL Video Drama

When I first came back to Taiwan, a video drama *Connect with English* (CWE) was brought to my attention. It is a television series produced by several American educational foundations collaboratively to promote English learning. This series tells of an "American dream" story, following the life of an aspiring singer from Boston, who leaves her job, her boyfriend, and her family to pursue her dream of a musical career in San Francisco. Its advisory board is drawn from experts including teachers, authors, scholars, and even social workers who assist new immigrants (Appendix 1). Its true-to-life scenarios are a good simulation of reality. I have a personal fondness for this drama because it parallels my own experience of staying with American families. In Taiwan, I have had success in using this series in a variety of classes, both inside and outside the English department. In general, it is effective in broadening my students' language and cultural experience. In addition to its natural language that reflects native speakers' speech, there is a wealth of paralinguistic and visual cues. For instance, we can hear the hesitation or warmth in one character's voice and the slowing or quickening of another's speech, and we can see his/her smile or frown. Signs, documents, and other realia are also visually available. Viewers can understand the story without lengthy explanations of the plots, settings, or characters. The professional staging and filming closely resemble those of a broadcast TV drama, and thus lend to its authentic quality.

As a personal conviction, I promote careful exposure to authentic material at a relatively early stage of English learning. It is observed in Taiwan that a diligent student, with ten years of textbook English instruction, can be so brainwashed with simplified materials that they are disorientated when encountering "English in the real world." What they sorely need is true-to-life but easy-to-follow English models. Although scripted, *Connect with English* offers near-authentic conversation, on-location scenes, and a great variety of social interactions. It brings American society to life, and its realistic discourse serves as a good model for emulation. Therefore, this video drama can be a desirable bridge between textbook English and authentic English.

III. CWE as a Showcase of American Sociolinguistic Conventions

The abundant linguistic input and cultural information in *Connect with English* can help enhance learners' intercultural communicative competence on three levels: cultural awareness,

phraseological accuracy, and pragmatic appropriateness. This drama delineates many of the underlying thought patterns--the values, attitudes, and feelings--in the U.S. society. These thought patterns further provide insights into English language norms. In other words, this drama is a showcase of American social, cultural, and discursal conventions.

3.1 American Cultural/Societal Realities in CWE

It is easy to spot the differences between *Connect with English* and regular American soap operas. For example, CWE's characters are much more like normal Americans in that many of them are ordinary looking, as opposed to the exceptionally attractive actors in regular soap operas. This has added to its realistic quality. Besides, this drama displays the current American cultural landscape, i.e. the "little-c" culture. Its most salient theme is the autonomy of the individual, i.e. a person is free to choose his/her own values and future, which means that taking on challenges is encouraged and making changes is progressive. We can find U.S. cultural/societal realities, both broad and specific, depicted in the drama, e.g. cultural and racial diversity, Catholic traditions, funeral customs (e.g. neighbors bringing food), estranged family members (Rebecca's father and his brother), the Salvation Army (collecting unused goods), the love of chocolate, a turkey for Thanksgiving, even a kid's "blankie." As a reflection of Political Correctness, we see respectable minorities, e.g. a medical doctor of East Indian or Native American descent, an African American woman who directs a day-care center, a happy Mexican American family that owns a successful business, as well as a newly immigrated hard-working Chinese family.

The negative side of the U.S. society is also illustrated in this drama: racism, domestic violence, high costs for college, exorbitant medical and funeral expenses, and annoying insurance handlers (Appendix 2). It even includes some "showbiz weirdoes." Inclusion of such personalities may be an oblique statement suggesting that those often seen in movies and MVs, most likely perceived by people outside the U.S. as normal Americans, are actually not.

3.2 Phraseological Accuracy in CWE

The decontextualized word-in-sentence-pattern approach prevalent in Taiwan often results in awkward English, such as "??Wish you a safe trip" (Have a safe trip), since its equivalent in Chinese *zhu ni yilu pingan* has the same pattern as "Wish you a happy birthday (*zhu ni shengri kuaile*).” This approach fails to recognize that a conventionalized expression needs to be learned as a chunk, because its meaning is unlikely the sum of its constituents. Again, the ubiquity of formulaic expressions in English is often neglected. It is my practice to alert students to expressions that may be peculiar to non-native speakers yet are used by native speakers to promote communication and solidarity. In *Connect with English* there are a plethora of such expressions (Appendix 3).

3.3 Pragmatic Appropriateness in CWE

When it comes to the peculiarity of a language, its phraseology is relatively explicit, relatively "teachable." Nevertheless, learning a language entails how to use it appropriately in different situations, depending on such factors as the relationship between the speakers, the setting, and the context of the situation. Thus, an area in L2 learning that commands even more attention is pragmatics, the actual use of L2 in context. Humans are socio-cultural beings; their thoughts are unwittingly conditioned by the ideas and values of their own language community. Their speech patterns reflect their own social reality. But, while learning a foreign language, students are unlikely aware of the cultural assumptions and stylistic conventions embedded in the L2. They may automatically graft their L1 routines onto their L2, not knowing that a statement completely natural in one language may turn out to be meaningless or even absurd in

another. A case in point: my students invariably write in their compositions a statement “...and I’m no exception,” apparently translated from “...er wo ye bu liwai,” a very common expression in Chinese. But in English-speaking societies, “I’m special” and “Dare to be different” are the prevailing expressions, and are actually part of a larger non-conforming “go for it” mental ecology.

Socialization is the means by which each person learns the ways of thinking, behaviors, and norms of the culture. Learning a foreign language actually amounts to socialization in the L2, i.e. internalization of L2 concepts, so as to successfully make pragmatic inferences. Logic varies from culture to culture, so obliviousness or violation of logic cues in the L2 can cause serious confusion. “The pragmatics of knowing the appropriate routines for requesting, complaining, agreeing, praising, and thinking is crucial to effective intercultural communication.” (Lee-Wong 2002:81). In *Connect with English*, such culturally conventionalized expectations manifested in linguistic norms and communicative protocols are well illustrated (Appendix 4).

As a matter of fact, fruitful L2 learning is comparable to an actor’s melding into his character. L2 sophistication means possessing a stock of skills for acting in different social situations, which constitutes cross-cultural communicative competence. However, the lack of awareness among general native speakers about their own pragmatic language use makes them weak informants. Hence, sociolinguistically appropriate expressions are more easily observed than taught. For instance, the most frequent but unconscious “fillers” in American English, e.g. “look,” “listen,” “boy,” “well,” “so,” “you know,” and “I mean,” abound in this drama. These do not usually come with the skeleton sentences in textbook English.

IV. Affective Factor in CWE

Dulay, Krashen, and Burt (1982) made the word “affective” well known in the EFL circle. However, here I am using it in a rather general sense to mean “appealing to emotion.” Whether a video drama can be an effective teaching tool lies in the questions: Whether the story and the acting is absorbing and how well the viewers can relate to its characters. In this respect, *Connect with English* is superior. First of all, its storyline, including family relations, romances, and friendships, provides a familiar yet at the same time exciting learning atmosphere. The impact is obvious even on the “in-film” discussion panelists. We can see that they are emotionally involved with what happens in each episode. Especially after the funeral episode, the panelists can hardly contain their sadness. As such, this drama affords its viewers a vicarious ethnographic experience in which they become participatory observers, exploring the ways people do things in another part of the world. In a traditional (grammar-based/ structuralist/audiolingual) foreign language classroom, the L2 is merely taught as form, with content/culture being an addendum. An ethnographic experience, on the other hand, opens one’s mind to the social realities in the L2 culture. It is a dynamic process that sheds light on how the L2 is actually used. In a similar way, *Connect with English* activates the affective factor in its viewers.

V. Importance of Approximation of Authentic Models

The ostensible thriving of English around the world has created a paradox—a rapid growth in its use as well as a rapid growth in diverse English usages. The problem with “world Englishes” is that there are far too many of them and, if legitimized, could grow even more relentlessly. In Taiwan’s situation, many native-speaking English teachers, perhaps in an effort to avert the criticism of being linguistically imperialistic, tend to be overly accommodating. In other words, they are overly tolerant of errors, which may cause their students’ early fossilization of pidginization. The ideal of globalization may turn out to be a Babel, supposing each non-English-speaking culture puts English words into its own native language structure. The injudicious expansion of non-native varieties of English could ironically lead to communication breakdown instead of mutual understanding. If we argue there is nothing wrong

with “Chinglish,” then we need to be prepared to learn many “outer-circle” as well as “outer-outer-circle” Englishes. Otherwise we will not be able to communicate with other members in the so-called global village. This may well become a reality, not having anything to do with fighting “adulation of the West,” i.e. the core English-speaking cultures. Cultural pride should be reflected in the promotion of one’s own language in the global scene, not in demolishing the standards of English as an international communicative medium. Granted, native language transfer is more or less inevitable in L2 production, but some forms of it may be more acceptable than others. In my opinion, for example, the Malaysian “la” may be OK-la, because it simply adds a cute local flavor yet does not interfere with communication. On the other hand, can we understand expressions such as “*today one big morning (*jintian yi da zao*)”? Without discernment, the localization of English can become monstrous. It is therefore imperative for learners to strive for minimizing the negative effect of native language transfer through approximation of authentic or near-authentic models.

VI. Conclusion: the Power of Context and CWE as a Near-authentic Model

The power of situational and linguistic contexts is intriguing. It is my own experience that a certain expression can trigger a long-lost memory.—It was years ago in a scene in a soap opera or sitcom, in a magazine article or in an American friend’s home where I picked up that expression. Likewise, the rich situational and linguistic contexts in *Connect with English* can sensitize students to English lexical/syntactic choices, formulaic expressions and conversational strategies. Emulation of authentic models of the above elements can be achieved through active viewing. As I mentioned earlier, receptive knowledge of English does not amount to ability for producing English. Students in Taiwan excelling in the former mostly fall short in the latter. Fully utilized, *Connect with English* can serve as a good model to help heighten learners’ cultural awareness, phraseological accuracy and pragmatic appropriateness. It can contribute to their acquisition of the kind of near-native fluency required to reach the ultimate goal of successful intercultural communication.

Appendix 1: About *Connect with English*

The CWE series was authored by Pamela McPartland-Fairman, Michael Berman, Linda Butler, and Maggie Sokolik ([http:// www.textkit.com/1Pamela_McPartland- Fairman.html](http://www.textkit.com/1Pamela_McPartland-Fairman.html)). Its advisory board includes: Anne Dow, former director of the ESL program at Harvard, and Karen Price, Ph.D., currently at Harvard, both international consultants in the field of ESL; David Rosen, Director of the Adult Literacy Resource Institute in Boston; John Fanselow, Teacher's College at Columbia University; teachers Jim Mentel (Los Angeles), Joy Durighello (San Francisco), and Suzanne Liebman (Chicago); Esmer Garza Wear (Texas) and Sheila Acevedo (Florida), both leaders of social service agencies in their respective states; Heide Spruck of ESL; and Annie Chin, of the Asian American Civic Association in Boston.

Appendix 2: Cultural/Societal Realities

The annoying insurance handler / billing clerk

(Rebecca and Kevin start to head for the elevator. A woman emerges from the billing office nearby. She catches them before they get on the elevator.)

Mrs. Smith: Excuse me, excuse me? Hi, are you Ms., ah... Casey?

Rebecca: Yes?

Mrs. Smith: Uh, I’m sorry to bother you at a time like this. My name’s Mrs. Smith. I’m the billing administrator. (looking at a form) Uh, your father’s in room seven-eight-seven, is that right?

Rebecca: Yes, that's right.

Mrs. Smith: Uh, and are you the person we talk to about his account?

Rebecca: (trying to be patient) Yes.

Mrs. Smith: OK, I'd like you to fill out a couple forms for me. I need some additional information...about his insurance.

Rebecca: Can we do this later? My brother and I are going home. We need to get some sleep...

Mrs. Smith: I see. Do you know the name of his Health Maintenance Organization?

Rebecca: No. He was a Boston fireman. They have good coverage.

Kevin: I told the Admitting Office all of this yesterday...

Mrs. Smith: (interrupting) Will you fill these out, please? And return them to me just as soon as you possibly can?

(Rebecca takes the forms, but she is not happy to have to deal with this now. Mrs. Smith turns and heads off down the hall. Rebecca reacts with shock and disgust at Mrs. Smith's behavior. Kevin tries to hide all his feelings.)

Friends/neighbors bringing food over during sad times

Kevin: That was Mrs. Peterson. She dropped this casserole off for us.

Rebecca: That was very nice of her. She's always been a considerate neighbor...You might as well put that in the fridge.

Exorbitant medical/funeral expenses

(Rebecca and Kevin sit at the kitchen table going over the pile of bills.)

Kevin: How much do the bills add up to?

Rebecca: I don't know yet. Not all the doctor and hospital bills are covered by the HMO...And the funeral alone cost four thousand.

Kevin: It cost how much...? Four thousand dollars?

The Salvation Army collecting unused goods

Kevin: These shirts must be twenty years old.

Rebecca: Maybe that's what he meant when he said 'Waste not, want not'... We could give some things to the Salvation Army.

Appendix 3: Expressions That May Confuse Taiwanese Students

- Steve: I'm tired of this. My wife's expecting. The bills are piling up. This (waving the cash) isn't a salary. It's peanuts.

- Kevin: Math is a breeze.

- Sandy: My dreams are real simple - get married, have a family, stuff like that.

- Kevin: I'll pass them all with flying colors.

- Sandy: I'm moving in with Jack.

- Ramon: Where do they get all that energy? I'm beat!

- Professor Thomas: So, do you think you can handle it? We'll do it nice and slow.

- Rebecca: When I think about leaving, I get butterflies in my stomach.

Appendix 4: Pragmatic Language Use

Opening conversation

Diana: You know you look so familiar to me... Have we met?

Rebecca: I ... don't think so.

Agreeing

Frank: Music school? That'll never pay off. You can't make any money in music.

Dad: You're telling me! I thought she should go to a local college.

Disagreeing

Dad: Why doesn't she study something practical, like business? She'll never make any money with a degree in music.

Kevin: You never know.

Disagreeing (jokingly)

Sandy: Remember, since I gave you the diary, I get to read it.

Rebecca: Over my dead body!

Complimenting

- Rebecca: He's a very distinguished gentleman.

- Nancy: Don't you look nice, all dressed up...

(Rebecca appears at the head of the staircase. She looks entirely different.)

Rebecca: Hello.

Alberto: Rebecca! Is that you?

Rebecca walks down the stairs.

Requesting (& responding reluctantly)

Rebecca: Um, could I use your phone?

Restaurant Worker: Ok, make it snappy though.

Eliciting information (in an interview)

Emma: All right, Rebecca Casey, why should I hire you?

Negotiating

Salesman: Well, for you, I can come down a little in the price. How much do you want to spend?

Rebecca: Fifteen hundred max.

Expressing surprise/disbelief

- Gas Attendant: You drove all the way from Massachusetts by yourself?

Rebecca: Yup.

Gas Attendant: That's a heck of a drive.

- Dad: For crying out loud. Your sister won't be able to see!

- Clerk: The nearest taxi is in Indio, at least an hour away.

Rebecca: Oh, come on.

Clerk: Honest.

Antiphrasis (sarcasm in frustration)

- The last light goes out. They look at each other.

Rebecca: Great! Now what?

Politeness (in small talk)

- Rebecca: (rushing) Yeah... I need a ticket to San Francisco.

Greyhound Agent: Round trip?

Rebecca: I need a one-way ticket to San Francisco.

(The Greyhound agent enters the information at his computer terminal.)

Greyhound Agent: So, what's taking you to San Fran?

Rebecca: Oh, college and a job.

Greyhound Agent: Um, people seem to think you can't tie your shoelaces without a college degree these days...

Politeness (in refraining from talking behind others)

Anne: Brendan's so sad about losing his only brother, but at least they made peace before your father died.

Rebecca: I was happy about that...Um, can I ask you something?

Anne: Yeah.

Rebecca: Dad never told me what their disagreement was about. Do you know?

Anne: (shocked) You mean... you don't know?

Rebecca: No.

Anne: I think it would be better if Brendan told you himself...

Politeness (in asking to be excused)

- Emma: Come in, please. I'm sorry. It's one of those days. Two aides are out sick. You'll have to excuse me. Do you have a resume, Miss...?

- Alberto: Well, I found out I have an early meeting tomorrow morning... so I'm afraid it's gonna have to be an early evening.

Politeness (in being considerate)

(Rebecca gets in and Alberto goes to close the door.)

Alberto: You in?

(Rebecca nods 'yes' from inside the car. Alberto shuts the door and walks over to the driver's side.)

Politeness (in welcoming)

Rebecca: Who is it?

Alberto: It's Alberto.

Rebecca: Oh, c'mon in!

Politeness (in refusing)

Rebecca: No, I don't think so. I don't think that it's safe... but thanks, anyway.

Politeness (in refusing) & imposition

Rebecca: Oh, I don't know, I still have so much to do at the house...

Alberto: I won't take no for an answer... I'll be there in an hour.

Joking/Teasing

- Dad: And here's the title to the car (hands her the title), and I paid for the car insurance.

Rebecca: I'm just speechless.

Dad: You... speechless? Kevin, when's the last time your sister was speechless?

- Emma: That's fine. Lemme see, what else? Oh, ... have you ever been convicted of a felony?

Rebecca: Not recently... Just kidding.

- Sandy: Remember, don't pick up any hitchhikers... except for the cute ones.

- Brendan: Here's where we milk the cows. It takes us two hours to milk the entire herd. And we have to do it twice a day.

Kevin: Even on Sundays?

Brendan: We don't have that many religious cows. (He laughs.) Yup, three-hundred-sixty-five days a year, even on Sundays.

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