

Closed-Captioned Video and the ESL Classroom: A Multi-Sensory Approach

James L. Rowland

Abstract

Traditional ESL instruction accepts the idea that a student's ability to visualize text and to create mental pictures of letters and whole words is important in comprehension. Closed-captioned videotext with high audio/video correlation allows the learner to see, hear, and contextualize words and sentences simultaneously.

Introduction

Closed-captioned video presentations can be useful in English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction. Video topics rich with the history and culture of the target language provide a meaningful context for language learning.

I started using closed-captioning in 1991 to assist children to learn to read. Students reported that closed-captioning and sub-titles helped them with spelling, reading, writing, and word recognition, which seems reasonable. Before we speak or write, we create a mental representation of words, and then we recite or pen them.

I used closed-captioned videos in China and Mexico. I imbedded closed-captioned text on copies of several videos. The text appears on the video like the title and the credits of a film and can be viewed on any television-video equipment. These videos are informative, entertaining, and culturally and historically objective. Closed-captioned videos create a successful learning opportunity by obtaining and maintaining students' attention. They have often been overlooked as they were developed for individuals with learning disabilities.

James L. Rowland is the Director of American Language School and teaches English at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

Literature

Supportive literature assists in developing new uses for closed-captioned videos. Peter Shea (1995) noted that closed-captioning is more effective and a better learning tool than videos without closed-captioning (p. 4). Shea suggests that teachers “should consider gauging content to the zone of proximal development of the students to which the material is to be presented” (p. 4). Lower-level learners benefit from closed-captioned videos as they unite meaning, thought, and speech. This is similar to Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development, which is not unlike our teachable moment. Closed-captioned videos produce this moment.

Vocabulary acquisition is a challenging aspect of any language learning experience. Donna Tatsuki (1998) defines not easily understood vocabulary as hot spots. Tatsuki (1996) encourages note taking, word recognition, and varied writing tasks to support vocabulary retention and mastery of hot spots. These techniques, common to traditional ESL instruction, should be used with the videos.

The closed-captioned visual text allows the student to visualize word and sentence patterns. Pattern recognition provides access to images and features that allow the student to perceive events or action. Bransford et al. notes that this type of experience affords students opportunities to “form rich mental models,” which is “particularly important for lower achieving students and for students with low knowledge in the domain of interest” (cite in Baron, 1989, p. 2) In addition, “video allows students to develop skills of pattern recognition which are related to visual and auditory cues rather than to events labeled by the teacher” (p. 2). Closed-caption videos provide this holistic instructional approach to ESL students. This integration of sound, pictures, objects, and words promotes additional cognitive processing, which provides an opportunity for different styles of thinking and learning.

Observations

Students have been able to write simple sentence after watching a 25-minute closed-captioned video. Their ability to observe the dialogue, in sentence form, apparently assisted them.

I administered questionnaires in China and Mexico which are based on examples in *Action Research: A Guide for the Teacher Researcher* (Mills,

2000). My Chinese assistant, Shen Zhiyuan (Eric Shen), noted that student interacted with the closed-captioned text. Steve Zhou, a student, reported that closed-captioned videos create interest in learning English. Bao Feng (Frank Bao), an English teacher, uses closed-captioned videos to teach English. He “absolutely” believes that closed-captioned videos assist students with “good listening abilities.” He stated, “Students are not afraid to speak,” and they make them better at “listening and speaking.” Cynthia, Frank’s student, responded that some of the videos were too difficult. This supports Shea’s (1995) warning (p. 4). Cynthia also noted, supporting Frank’s observation, that students realized their need to spend more time listening to and reading English, which caused them to work harder. Another teacher, Ji Feng (Charlie), responded that “in the long run, watching video is a more effective way to learn English than just studying it in class.” Charlie agreed that closed-captioned viewers “are better than others in their spoken English.”

While conducting classes in Mexico, I realized that local instructors are necessary in order to establish rapport and bridge the cultural and comfort gap that exists when non-local teachers are involved. One of my instructor related, “Unfortunately, it was in my later years of foreign language classes that videos were used to teach students about a certain country’s culture”; this is an instructional sequence that is still popular. This supports the observation that “an approach that envisions the teaching of language and culture in a serial fashion misses the important point that the two are intertwined” (Hadley, 2001, p. 347). This instructor suggested that “videos manage to combine information in a visual/informational format that cannot be done in lectures.” As Hadley (2001) notes, our mission “is not to impart facts, but to help students attain the skills that are necessary to make sense out of the facts they themselves discover in their study of the target culture” (p. 347). This instructor also mentioned that “I would hesitate to use only ‘pure’ informational videos, which can tend to be dry and lose the attention of the audience.” Closed-captioned language instruction is ensync with these observations and Hadley’s “intertwined” method.

Some closed-captioned videos that meet these historic and cultural criteria are the Charlie Brown/Peanuts cartoon-style videos. These are the holiday series: New Year’s, Valentine’s Day, Arbor Day, Easter, Halloween, Thanksgiving, and Christmas. Others include This is America--Charlie Brown series, The Mayflower, Constitution, Presidency, Trans-Continental Railroad, Music and Heroes of America, and NASA.

The use of closed-captioned video presentations works with both children and adults. When used with children,

- A local teacher should be available to assist in the creation of a learning atmosphere.
- Student participation and attendance should be consistent.
- The room selected for instruction should be a classroom.
- The television should be at the eye level of a seated student.
- Closed-captioned videos should be used with traditional ESL instruction.

When used with adults,

- Adults are generally more motivated.
- Adults attend most classes.
- The position of the television is not a problem with the adults.
- Class time should be 1½ hour to allow time to discuss the 25-minute video.

Findings

The uniformity of the observations establishes merit for my summary. One instructor felt that the “younger students had a more difficult time paying attention to the videos for their entire duration, while the adults seemed to have no problem.” Increasing vocabulary and cultural knowledge are benefits, “especially when re-addressed by the instructors.” Creating an interest in the culture of the people who speak a language is an important part of these closed-captioned video presentations. The Standards for Foreign Language Learning (Standards 2.1 and 2.2) and Comparisons (Standards 4.1 and 4.2) “emphasize the need for students to develop an awareness of the cultural framework or ‘perspectives’ of the culture whose language they are studying” (Hadley 2001, p. 39). Additional instructor observations are:

- Students not only were introduced to a new vocabulary but were also introduced to a new culture and some of our history.
- I think it’s important for all people to hear and learn about other cultures and to learn respect and understanding for other people and their countries.
- The students often used the closed-captioning to choose out single words.
- The closed-captioned videos seemed to benefit the students’ vocabulary the most.

Student comments were as follows:

- I will try to see often.
- If I have an opportunity to watch the videos I can learn more.
- Yes, because in different videos I learn new words.

The questionnaires substantiated the students' ability to read the questions and write their answers in English.

Continuation

Input from people, actively involved in day-to-day occupational experience are the best source of information. Multiple intelligence and learning style research suggests that students are both visual and auditory. This multi-sensory approach to language instruction allows the student to see, hear, and contextualize what is on the screen. The level of difficulty and length can be personalized. This technique is not meant to stand-alone; it is a language learning stimulator.

John Dewey (1938) believed in "the principle of continuity of experience" (p. 35). Please join me in this "continuity of experience" and continuous discovery.

References

- Barron, L. (1989). Enhancing learning in at-risk students: Applications of video technology. *Eric Digest*. (On-Line, ERIC Identifier: ED318464). Retrieved January 30, 2003, from <http://askeric@eric.syr.edu/plweb/cgi/obtain.pl>.
- Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and education*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.
- Hadley, A. O. (2001). *Teaching language in context* (3rd Ed.). Florence, KY: Heinle & Heinle.
- Mills, G. E. (2000). *Action research: A guide for the teacher researcher*. Columbus, OH: Merrill.
- Shea, P. (1995). *Video captioning and language learning: A review of the literature with implications for multimedia design*. SUNY at Albany [On-line]. Retrieved January 31, 2003, from <http://sunnyfact.buffalo.edu/cit95/papers/CIT95-PA.SHEA>.
- Tatsuki, D. (1996, February). Ideas on using videos. *The Internet TESL Journal*, 2(2) [On-line]. Retrieved January 31, 2003, from <http://www.iteslj.org>.
- Tatsuki, D. H. (1998, November). Comprehension hot spots in movies: Scenes and dialogues that are difficult for ESL/EFL students to understand. *The Internet TESL Journal*, 2(2) [On-line]. Retrieved January 31, 2003, from <http://www.iteslj.org>.