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Modern media to motivate language learning

Television, a video recorder and film cassettes add an exciting dimension to the language classroom.

Interest and motivation, essential ingredients of efficient learning, begin when the screen lights up and the foreign language teacher can add visual input to any aspect of English language teaching whether it is lexical or structural. A half-minute clip from a news broadcast of the latest disaster will illustrate vividly the use of the present perfect; the future tenses are likely to feature widely in the weather forecast; passive voice in a cookery excerpt; even elementary students will enjoy adverts using mostly the imperative of present simple. In fact students are greatly encouraged by being able to understand real off-air material.

Visual information available via the television and video not only motivates students but also transmits invaluable cultural background including such things as body language, gesture, social habits and fashions.

However, in my experience, it is not necessary to rely on the excellent but undoubtedly expensive and rather restrictive video courses available on the EFL (English as a Foreign Language) market. Indeed, although desirable, it is not even absolutely essential to have access to programmes broadcast in English. Obviously listening comprehension can only be practised when the programme participants are speaking English but with satellite and cable TV a wealth of pre-recorded video cassettes and films, source material is rarely a problem.

For elementary and lower intermediate students unable to cope with the range and complexity of language used by native English speakers, a brief video clip shown initially without sound, then in either their mother tongue or the target foreign language can initiate a variety of tasks such as predicting, describing people or places, speculating, practising question forms, vocabulary learning and a variety of writing tasks.

■ Spotlighting the aim

Commercial adverts are excellent for beginners who particularly appreciate the change of pace from the book and board. Ways to exploit include:

1. Show the advert once without sound and ask true/false questions to re-inforce vocabulary.
or:
2. Let them form teams to write questions for each other. They check the answers when the advert is replayed.
or:
3. Show a different commercial to each half of the class. Students then form pairs to tell each other what they have seen.
or:
4. Some commercials only name the product in the final seconds. Pause the video cassette before then and ask students to guess what is being advertised/why they think that.
5. Slightly more advanced students enjoy writing their own scripts.

NB. All the above activities are done with the sound turned off.

Soap operas – a short clip will allow students to talk about appearance, personality and relationships of the characters.

In small groups they could plan the story line for the following episodes.

Alternatively choose a scene where some characters have a problem. Ask what advice the students would give. They might also imagine they are those people and write a letter to the problem page of a magazine. Their classmates could reply.

■ Crime reconstructions

British television has a series, echoed in many European countries, where the police ask for help from the public to solve crimes.

This I have used successfully for a variety of tasks, and as much of the language work is done without the sound it could be in the students' first language.

Target structures could be modals of deduction e.g.: may have/might have/could have etc; various interrogative forms; or the narrative tenses.

Method:

Explain to the class that there has been a serious crime which some of them have witnessed.

The class is then divided into two groups: witnesses and policemen. The witnesses watch the video – clip of a reconstruction of the crime without the sound – after all in real life anyone seeing a crime taking place wouldn't expect a

commentary! Meanwhile the other group – the police – prepare questions.

Afterwards the police each interview a witness. This is followed by a reporting back session for the whole class which generally leads to vehement disputes as to the facts. Only then the clip is shown again.

Depending on the teaching objectives, this leads to a written phrase in one of several formats; a newspaper story and/or headline, a detailed physical description as a police poster of a wanted criminal; or of a report of the witnesses' statements.

■ Cartoons

Ask students to sit back to back so only one student in each pair can see the screen. No sound. Ask students to describe in detail what the cartoon character is doing. In a previous lesson verbs of movement should have been taught.

To simplify cartoons further for beginners, prepare a work sheet listing different actions in random order. Pre-teach the target vocabulary, then students watch the recording and number the actions in the order that they happen. Again the sound button is off.

Above are just a few ideas to tune into a universal interest in modern media in the form of the television, video and film cassettes and make them the motivation for stimulating language learning activities.