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Language learning with English audio-visual media among the university students of English language and literature at J. Selye University

Introduction

In our modern world, we are subject to mass information through the internet, visual media, and social media platforms. "Education as such reflects the present-day needs and requirements of the society and flexibly adapts to the changes happening worldwide" (Pauliková 1). So, besides using traditional methods such as teaching from books and with handouts, for (language) teachers, it is inevitable to keep up to date with new methods and use modern materials to help and encourage students – young as well as adult learners, and both beginners and advanced learners – and to develop their language proficiency (speaking, listening, writing, and reading skills) effectively and enjoyably.

There are multiple ways of developing students' listening skills. Students can listen to pedagogic (textbook) and authentic (TV, radio, songs, and podcasts) recordings; listen to the teacher's instructions and his/her talk; students can listen to their peers while cooperating, and they can listen to a guest lecturer. Of the methods and materials mentioned above, the one that students can do regularly and individually outside the classroom and without the teacher's presence is working with visual media in English. More precisely, they can listen to and watch films, sitcoms, and videos in this global language, which is dominant in most platforms where audio-visual media can be retrieved. Since English has thus become a part of the students' everyday lives, contemporary pedagogy has to consider it when designing listening tasks. It should recognize the values of authentic listening in the EFL classroom.

Audio-visual Media in the Classroom

Technology with all its inventions should be a general part of modern education. "With the expansion that technology has had, visual and audio materials have become meaningful elements for teachers to keep in mind when planning their teaching lessons" (Vivialba and Cardona Osorio 2013: 1). Among the advantages of using audio-visual media in education are

- catching students' attention,
- helping them to grasp the meaning of complex concepts or clarify ideas,
- building rapport with learners,
- guiding beginners to be familiarized with authentic materials,
- decreasing anxiety in students,
- controlling their affective filter (Vivialba and Cardona Osorio 2013: 2).

Media can be applied in teaching in multiple ways as it has many forms. Generally, there are three kinds of media: audio, visual, and audio-visual. Firstly, audio media can be listened to (e.g., recording, tape-recording, multitrack recording, digital recording, and radio). For instance, audio media is commonly used in music education to develop students' emotional intelligence (Csehi-Tóth-Bakos 2016: 5). Secondly, visual media can be seen (e.g., realia, pictures, photos, sketches, charts, graphics, boards, posters, cartoons, maps, and globe). Visual media can develop students' visual memory, creativity, and imagination. Finally, media that involve the senses of sight and hearing are called audio-visual media, e.g., field trips, interactive whiteboards, video, videogames, film, tablets, smartphones, and television (Widiatmoko and Endarto 2018: 119; Puskás 2018: 56-57; Tubagus 2020: 58-59). Regarding this media, students can develop their personality and be educated in various ways, using and practicing the previously mentioned skills.

Audio-Visual Media in the EFL Classroom

As Mathew and Alidmat (2013) put it, “[i]t has become a common phenomenon to integrate language textbooks with audio and video as additional or supplementary resources for classroom language learning activities” (86). It is because “language is no longer seen as an isolated phenomenon separate from visual/gestural codes” (Widiatmoko and Endarto 2018: 118). Moreover, since people converse by paying attention to gestures and facial expressions, it is necessary to include features of non-verbal modalities in the context of teaching and learning a foreign language (Widiatmoko and Endarto 2018: 116).

For the same reason, several studies emphasize attempts to combine the state-of-the-art pedagogy with state-of-the-art technology (e.g., Morales and Beltran 2006; Mathew and Alidmat; 2013; Vivalba and Cardona Osorio 2013; Rusmiati 2017; Tubagus 2020). As an example, like video game players’ listening skills can be engaged and improved throughout gaming, a popular audio-visual activity (Zolczer 2019: 233, 234), language learners’ listening skills can be effectively activated throughout listening to and watching films with or without subtitles, which is another attractive audio-visual activity. Finally, audio-visuals “attract the students’ attention and aid concentration,” and they “add variety and interest to a lesson” but also “help to make the associated language memorable” (Gower et al. 2005: 70-71).

All in all, by using audio-visual materials, students break with regular listening exercises to turn to something else that, although it requires their attention and concentration, also helps maintain their interest in the given curriculum and keep their attention and motivation.

Listening skills in focus

In training future English language teachers, a great emphasis must be placed on language proficiency, and it is because, as Puskás (2020) claims, “only effective and highly proficient second language users can properly teach the language and well-prepared, motivated trainees can become teachers who can develop their expertise with experience” (53). Therefore, developing listening skills – one of the basic language skills – is a must, especially when considering that among the language skills, “listening is the first skill that the ELLs acquire initially” (Odilovna Djaborova 2020: 212).

Language learners are instructed to listen to audio and audio-visual recordings for many reasons, each closely connected to the types of listening activities. Among them are the following:

- Listening for gist, when the learner needs to know the general or central idea of what is being said, who is speaking to whom and why, and how successful they are in communicating their point.
- Listening for specific information means that the learner listens selectively for the specific information (e.g., hearing the news about something).
- Learners listen in detail when they need to find errors or determine differences between one passage and another. In this case, they cannot ignore anything because they do not know precisely what information will help them achieve their task.
- Inferential listening is when they wish to know how the speaker feels (Wilson 2008: 10).

The success of listening can be affected by numerous factors, such as characteristics of the message (e.g., simple mishearing, unknown words), characteristics of the delivery (e.g., the speakers ramble on, duration, number of speakers, accent, rhythm pattern of English speech, different ways of pronouncing the ‘same’ sound, changes in sounds when they occur in rapid, connected speech, and the weak relationship between English sounds and the way they are spelled in the written language), characteristics of the listener (e.g., lack of concentration, anxiety, tiredness, boredom or the listener having a cold (blocked organs), characteristics of the environment (e.g., the temperature of the room, background noise or defective equipment which affects the clarity of a recording), and the role of memory in listening (Wilson 2008: 10-15; Zerín 2009: 23, qt. Rixon 1986). In a word, listening “requires the ability to understand phonology, syntax, lexis and information content within real-time [and] Apart

from time pressure, there are also problems stemming from inexplicit information given by the speaker and environmental obstructions” (Zerin 2009: 22).

I support the use of authentic audio-visual materials in the EFL Classroom. I agree with Vivialba and Cardona Osorio (2013). They think language learners should be “exposed to audio-visual material from native speakers since they begin the language learning process to develop listening skills which help them to learn the language easily”(2). Although, I would add that it is necessary to set measurable goals in this respect: to work with audio-visual aids that satisfy the learners’ needs and age level and achieve goals that match the overall expectations of audio-visual resources; that is, “to improve the language proficiency of the students” (Mathew and Alidmat 2013: 87).

By definition, “any text is ‘authentic’ if it was produced in response to real-life communicative needs rather than as an imitation of real-life communicative needs. The term can be applied to any text, written or spoken, and concerning any kind of situation of language use” (Morales and Beltran 2006: 106; qt. Underwood 1990). The advantages of authentic listening are as follows: it allows sufficient access to environmental cues; listening segments come in short sounds; and listening requires reciprocity and frequent listener response” (Morales and Beltran 2006: 107).

It does not mean that pedagogic listening is not worth dealing with compared to authentic materials. However, it has some setbacks. Morals and Beltrán (2006) scrutinize it as follows:

“Most of the written texts are usually edited and not authentic. This means that a publishing house creates these texts in order to have students practice listening, but in many of them there does not exist real speed and pronunciation. Also, many of these listening texts are recorded by native speakers but involve the listeners in an unreal and almost perfect language use. Without any doubt, this material helps students to develop listening skills, but the exclusive use of this kind of text causes them to get used to listening to clear language without allowing for misunderstanding. This type of listening creates big problems when learners have to face communicative situations with native speakers because learners are not used to facing this sort of speech. The decodification process will take more time or, in some cases, they will not be able to decode at all” (106).

Additionally, when using audio material, language learners are only expected to use their ears, whereas audio-visual media aid in alleviating listening difficulties and provide a more comprehensible input by visualizing the message (Widiatmoko and Endarto 2018: 118; Brett 1995: 83).

Research Design and Methodology

Subjects

One hundred students were asked to participate in the survey, but finally, the study was conducted with 44 undergraduate students at J. Selye University, Komárno. With an exception (whose native tongue is Spanish), all students are native Hungarians, and in addition to English language and literature, the students’ majors are Hungarian language and literature, Informatics, History, Math, Slovak, and Biology.

Questionnaire

A qualitative method was used to address and explore research questions. During the survey, the education was moved online due to the COVID 19 pandemic, so an online questionnaire (in the form of a Google sheet) was prepared for the subjects.

The questionnaire was designed to obtain information on the use of audio-visual media and its impact on the language learning process among university students of English Language and Literature. Students were told that their responses would be used for research purposes only.

The questionnaire (including 26 questions) had three main parts. The first part aimed at surveying the habits of watching English films and sitcoms. For instance, what dialect do they prefer and why? How often do they watch English films or sitcoms? The second part tried to point out the benefits of watching films and sitcoms in a foreign language, that is, the likely results of individual language improvement. Finally, the third part intended to find challenges and opportunities for language learning by listening in English.

The questionnaire had open-ended and closed-ended questions. Question No. 1, 3, 4, 7, 9, 10, 11, 14, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 24 were close-ended questions where students were expected to choose an option that is true for the them (e.g., yes/no questions). Question No. 2, 5, 6, 8, 12, 13, 15, 23, 25, 26 were open-ended questions. The subjects were expected to respond based on their observation, knowledge, and experience as tertiary students. It was felt that open-ended questions would give more insights by activating students' thought processes.

Data analysis and Findings

The response of the students was calculated in a percentage. According to the results, 95,5% of the subjects watch films/sitcoms in English, and 59, 5% watch films/sitcoms every day (26,2%, once a week and 14,3%, once a month). 68,2% prefer American English when watching films and sitcoms. 27,3% like watching them in British English. 4,6% (two subjects) prefer Australian or other English. Those who chose American English justified their decision by writing that, compared to British English,

- it is easier to understand American English,
- it is more common,
- films in this dialect are easier to access on the internet,
- the speech sounds (pronunciation) seem more natural,
- the speech rate seems more natural,
- they have American friends.

Those who prefer British English explained it in the following way:

- they love hearing it,
- the speaker can sound a lot more intelligent and professional,
- it is fancy,
- this is the way they feel they can improve their language skills and pronunciation,
- they love British humor,
- it is more difficult to understand, and it is good to face challenges.

The remaining 4,5% of the participants that do not watch films/sitcoms in English explained their negative answers to the lack of time or interest.

The participants of the survey have been watching films and sitcoms in English for many years, more precisely from 2 to 20 years:

- 0,5% of the participants (2 students) have been watching them for more than 10 years.
- 23,8% of the subjects (10 students) have been watching films and sitcoms in English for ten years.
- 52,4% (22 students) have been watching films and sitcoms in English for 5-10 years.
- 14,2% of the students (6) have been actively watching films and sitcoms for less than 5 years.

As for the missing numbers, some students did not answer correctly (perhaps not understand the question) or did not answer.

33,3% of the subjects *often* (cc. 5 times out of 10) add subtitles to English films. 42,4% *always* add subtitles, and 24,2% *sometimes* (cc. 3 times out of 10) add subtitles. Most (92,5%) use English subtitles, and a significant number (42,5%) add Hungarian subtitles too. 11,4% do not add subtitles because they either understand everything clearly, or it distracts their attention from watching the film, and they like facing challenges.

54,5% of the participants usually watch English podcasts, news, and interviews related to the films/sitcoms they are interested in whereas 45,5% do not. The active users visit websites and service providers such as BBC News, CNN, YouTube, IGN, Spotify, Reddit, TikTok, and Instagram.

As to how can English listening skills develop through audio-visual media, the subjects' most common answers were the following:

- "Listening to what I enjoy makes my learning more effective. I can use the subtitle to check my understanding."
- "It helps me with everything, my ear getting used to the accents, the sentence construction, the slang, etc."
- "It can improve our vocabulary and pronunciation as well. Without any recognition, we store everything we see and hear. Even if we do not understand a word or a phrase, the context will help us to understand better."
- "This method can be also useful for those, who do not like to learn vocabulary from words to words, expressions to expressions."
- "We can learn how native speakers use the language."
- "You hear the same expressions a lot of times and you learn them. With listening, you also learn correct pronunciation."
- "Podcasts help us to visualise and understand without subtitles. Films/sitcoms help us to understand with subtitles and how the words are written and pronounced. The interviews are more real-life alike, it shares with us stories of everyday life. You can choose which interview you want to listen to, so you can learn about things in which are you interested in."
- "Perhaps with a lot of repetition. Watching and listening to the same film, etc. several times."
- "Improves vocabulary and pronunciation which makes us more confident while speaking, gives examples of the right usage of intonations and body language."

While watching a movie or listening to a podcast, the student is more engaged in learning the language and can feel more motivated by this type of learning process.

Practise makes perfect. You develop your listening skills over time. The key is consistency and will.

- "In many ways, since we don't have the opportunity to use the language in our environment, that's the best way to hear any English words. My English has improved because I started to watch everything in English, I have learned new words, my pronunciation became more natural, and also, subconsciously I picked up fixed forms, e.g. how to use prepositions – if I had to explain why we use certain prepositions before certain words, I'm not sure I would be able to, but I immediately hear if someone misuses them."
- "Quite easily, and it doesn't feel like learning at all, it is just fun. Even if the person is at a lower language level and doesn't understand some particular words, they can get the gist of what's been told based on the context or the scene."
- "Listeners focus on one topic at a time and learn the vocabulary of that topic, e.g. when watching cooking-related shows they learn ingredients, fruits, vegetables, etc. in English; when listening to crime and investigation shows or podcasts they learn the vocabulary of forensics."

In the subjects' opinion, with using audio-visual media, their listening skills (93,2% of them) and vocabulary (84,1%) have improved the most recognizably. They also feel that this media has had a positive impact on their speaking skills (75%) and language knowledge (50%). Developing reading (45,5%) and writing skills (22,7%) seem to be less likely for them in this respect.

They noticed their language improvement based on the following:

- "I understand the text better than before."
- "I think my speaking skills have improved because it gave me a brief introduction to how native speakers express themselves in their native language. The same applies to vocabulary."
- "I think my reading skills have improved because I noticed a notable difference in my reading speed from reading subtitles."

- "I think my writing and language skills have improved because I saw how the words were structured in the subs."
- "I think all my skills have improved with the help of listening, it is something which affects all skills positively."
- "I've noticed that after watching 3-4 movies a day I was able to speak fluently in English, and I also started to use expressions and phrases that I've never heard before."
- "I think I learned most from the serials (e.g. Criminal Minds, Bones, NCIS) – Sometimes I heard words that were unfamiliar to me, so I searched for them and learned new words. Which was really helpful, and sometimes I use those words... I read many articles, fanfictions, and books on the internet, and I noticed that when I read I can read faster, because I know how to pronounce each word, and my brain processes those information faster."
- "I think my listening skills have improved because I can understand speech better. And in reading, the subtitles help. And my vocabulary has improved because I need to use a dictionary to understand exactly what is happening."
- "I do not need subtitles, my pronunciation improved."
- "I have always had problems with my speaking skills but since I started watching movies with English dubbing or subtitles I have been able to remember useful slangs that are used in everyday life and that can be easily learned by only listening to the speakers."
- "My vocabulary has improved because I got familiar with the patterns in the language, the collocations, the phrasal verbs, and knowing about them and using them leads to native-like fluency."
- "I think my speaking skill has improved because my pronunciation improved as well, so I was braver to talk more in English..."
- "I think my speaking skills have improved because the more I watch films in English the more I can speak fluently."
- "I think all my skills improved because I was listening to English on daily basis, paying attention to people talking about certain topics. I also learnt the pronunciation, of new phrases and this even made reading easier because I encountered fewer and fewer unknown words. By the time my writing skills improved because I learnt new words and learnt to express myself more variably."
- "My listening skills improved because gradually I can understand more and more words and sentences without subtitles."
- I know how to use some idioms, words, or phrases.

54,5% of the participants did not work with audio-visual media in primary school, whereas 29,5% did. 15,9% cannot remember. However, students had more experience with this media in secondary school. 65,9% watched films in English lessons, but 29,5% did not. 4,5% cannot remember. Working with audio-visual media at J. Selye University showed the highest numbers: 79,5% of the subjects watched them in lessons, 15,5% of them did not, and 4,5% of the students could not remember. 86,8% of the students could recall that worksheets and tasks always accompanied these classes. These tasks mainly focused on listening (78,4% of 37 students) and vocabulary (62,2% of 37 students). Reading comprehension and language knowledge were also among the foci (according to 37,8% and 32,4% of 37 students). Speaking and writing exercises were less common (29,7%, and 18,9% of 37 students). 7,9% state that in lessons, they only passively watched the films without using any materials¹.

45,4% of the participants think that a film-watching-based lesson requires special listening activities because they might help to comprehend the film and acquire the necessary vocabulary or knowledge of grammar. 43, 2% of the subjects believe that working with exercises is not always necessary when watching a film. Finally, 11,4% stated that simply watching a film is entirely sufficient for improving listening skills.

¹ Several students did not answer these questions – hence the number: 37.

79,5% of the teacher trainees participants are convinced that it is necessary to bring films/sitcoms into the EFL classroom, and 18,2% think it can become an adequate but not an essential teaching method:

- "It would be more interesting. If something interests me, I will remember it better."
- "Most people watch videos online (Netflix, HBO GO).We will watch it for our entertainment while we were secretly learning, so why not put it into another context and watch them on the lesson, talk the show out, explain what happened with the characters, how the story went on, what was the main point where was the stress, some critical parts (e.g. Sheldon explain the famous Back to the future timeline - never had have hasn't.)."
- "I think that is the most interesting and entertaining way to teach a foreign language besides video games."
- "They are useful but not necessary, as a recommended self-improvement it should be fine."
- "It brings the real world into the classroom."
- "Most of the students are visual learners, and it's important to catch the learner's attention."
- "I think it is necessary because in these modern days, children are more interested in virtual life. So with these techniques, you can make your lessons more interesting. And of course, with films/sitcoms/interviews, you can show them the original dubbing, real-life conversations, situations."
- "It's necessary to watch films in English class, because not only does it help to teach the language, but it can also make students love English. Because they will see that if they know the language, they will have more opportunities to watch and understand films."
- "It's a ... fun and learning activity at the same time."
- "I think it's a good way of teaching the students because nowadays generations are more compatible learning from a film or video, than reading a whole book...."
- "For the authentic language exposition students need not only the audiotapes which come with their exercise books. You need to have as much "real, authentic" input as possible."
- "A sitcom is way more interesting for students than a random recording for the book that students use in the classroom. It's funny, there are sitcoms with easier language. Students will be more engaged and maybe they will start watching sitcoms, and other shows in English at home."
- "If the teacher or the school does not have access to such good quality teaching-focused material, the next best thing is to bring something from films/sitcoms. It can happen that the students have seen that film in Hungarian, and they can do all the exercises just by remembering, not by understanding English."
- "I think they make the learning process more fun and easier."

Finally, 2,3% (1 student) believe it is not essential to work with audio-visual media in the EFL classroom because such activities "take up too much time."

84,1% of the subjects support using a particular sitcom or film accompanied by exercises in their English lessons. In addition, 15,9% of them think that as future teachers, they may use audio-visual media in the EFL classroom. Among the English films and sitcoms that they would use are: Friends, The Big Bang Theory, Young Sheldon, Gilmore Girls, Legally Blonde, Extra English serial on and Learn English with TV series on YouTube, Peaky Blinders, Anne with an E, The Crown, The Office, Modern Family, Sherlock, Mr. Robot, Boondocks, BoJack Horseman, Peppa Pig, The Simpsons, Fawlty Towers, Keeping Up Appearances, Outnumbered, New Girl, The Good Place, Raven, Zack and Cody, The Core, Alexa and Katie, Doctor Who, How I Met Your Mother, Game of Thrones, The Middle, Black Mirror, The Lord of the Rings, Harry Potter films, To All the Boys I have Loved Before, Grease, Ferris Bueller's Day Off, Ready Player One, League of Extraordinary Gentlemen, and Back to the Future.

Students gave the following recommendations and pieces of advice about the ways of using audio-visual media in the English language classroom:

- to choose exciting topics,
- to give homework in connection with audio-visual media,
- to use subtitles,

- to watch a compulsory film and discuss it in class just like with compulsory readings,
- to prepare synonym finding tasks and listening tasks about it,
- music lyrics analysis would be welcome among students,
- to use short videos and to somehow make students part of the lesson,
- to write down all the new words after watching a film, to try to pronounce them, and then re-watch them,
- to have English subs turned on whenever possible since it helps students memorize how particular words/phrases should be pronounced,
- to choose films and sitcoms based on the students' genre of interest.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Audio-visual media has become an essential and natural part of people's everyday lives in the 21st century. Very often, these contents are accessible in English. Therefore, EFL education has to adopt working with this type of media among its methods in order to motivate language learners and offer enjoyable classes and up-to-date materials. First and foremost, language learners must gradually develop their language proficiency: in speaking, reading, writing, and listening. Listening is the first skill that learners start practicing, so even from the beginning, a great emphasis should be placed on interactive and current listening exercises. For example, beginners can watch and listen to cartoons, whereas intermediate, upper-intermediate, and advanced students can work with tasks while watching popular films or sitcoms.

The present questionnaire aimed at surveying students' likely interest in audio-visual media and their personal opinion on the possible use of films and sitcoms in the EFL classroom. My thesis, according to which authentic listening should become an integral part of EFL education, has been justified by the opinions of the students of English language and literature at JSU.

Data analysis indicates that authentic recordings should be used in the EFL classroom in the following way:

- It is good to use a variety of English dialects, yet students prefer American, for it is easier to understand. Here I would remark that as European English language education prefers Received Pronunciation, the standard for British English, British sitcoms, and films should also be incorporated into the curriculum.
- Sitcoms that are available on currently trendy streaming services such as Netflix or HBO GO should be used.
- A preliminary discussion on the students' favorite series, sitcoms, and genres is recommended.
- Series are more preferably and advised than films (e.g., Friends, The Big Bang Theory, Young Sheldon, Gilmore Girls, Extra English serial on and Learn English with TV series on YouTube, Peaky Blinders, Anne with an E, The Crown, The Office, Modern Family, Sherlock, etc.)
- When it comes to teaching B1 and B2 students, teachers should consider working with sitcoms, for an episode is usually 20-25 minute-long.
- As they often watch films and series, compulsory listening assignments can be given to students (similar to reading assignments).
- These assignments are the most effective in terms of TEFL if they are accompanied by exercises (at home or in class).

A language learner whose needs and interests are heard and considered can be equal to a motivated, satisfied and successful language learner. Therefore, based on the active learners' experience and opinions, the paper and its results will hopefully motivate and draw the English language teachers' attention to the importance of bringing authentic listening materials into their EFL classrooms for more effective education.

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