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PASSIVE LEARNING. THE IMPACT OF TV SHOWS ON STUDENTS’ LEARNING BEHAVIOURS AND PERFORMANCE

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ABSTRACT: There is substantial evidence that watching TV in English, especially free voluntary viewing, makes a major contribution to improving listening skills and consequently, has an impact on the productive or active skills of speaking and writing. Often in the process of learning a new language, students begin with receptive understanding of the new items and then later move on to productive use. In the classroom, receptive skills support the productive ones. After a listening activity for example, it may contribute to better speaking and pronunciation outcomes when target words and expressions have been highlighted.

Outside the classroom, when a certain level of proficiency is reached, it is generally recognised that many people are using television shows as both form of entertainment and a way to help them learn English. In this paper there are different steps, through data collection, to be taken into account in order to attain how recent studies have investigated to what extent students make progress when they consider what is more or less effective when doing independent study. That is, incidental learning considered, by means of watching English speaking TV shows in their free time. Basically, the questions that may arise would be: What kind of TV programmes help them learn English? When do we have to choose between L1 or L2 closed captioned videos? At what stage should teachers and students use subtitles or omit them?

To make definite statements on those questions, first, we find foundations in the educational psychology and multimedia learning. Second, there is the revision of concepts like incidental or passive acquisition, understood as unintentional, towards independent learning. Finally, it is relevant to have a look at the breakdown of different studies that conclude what is recommended when it comes to using subtitles at different phases in the acquisition of English as a second language.

1. THE CONCEPT OF MULTIMEDIA LEARNING

Beyond verbal learning, Dr. Richard E. Mayer has focused his interests on multimedia learning, where the understanding of words by a student is enhanced by the use of pictures. In his work, he covers initiatives based on basic findings from cognitive psychology, to help individuals use visual content as an aid for their written presentation.

In his book “Multimedia Learning” (Mayer: 2009) he praises the advances of graphic technology and information technology, and how human understanding has been prompted by means of multimedia instruction.

The charts below show the results of nine studies and the effects of multimedia transfer, showing how animation and illustrations support textual presentations and narration.
Fig. 1 & 2: Multimedia effect: people learn better from words and pictures (dark bars) than from words alone (grey bars)

In his research, based on The Cognitive Theory of Multimedia Learning, Mayer puts forward that animations with narration result in better retention for the audience than narrations only. Voice over documentaries are a good example of holding the attention of the audience compared with solely having an audio explanation. The second group of charts reveal how information is better retained when words are presented with an associated picture.

Instructional media has proved effective since it partakes of how the human mind works when processing new concepts and integrates skills productively. The possibility of immersion and having the chance of communicating with native speakers is a rare opportunity for most English language students. Today, however, multimedia learning doesn’t necessarily have to be fixed to a TV screen or in classroom projector any more. Educational content is available and constantly updated on video streaming channels like Youtube. Likewise, there are myriads of free links and subscription sites that offer immediate access to revisions, videos, music, news vocabulary and more.

2. **STREAMING ON-DEMAND TV SERIES IS CHANGING THE GAME**

It is now, beyond the dawn of the XXI century, when we are witnessing major changes on how students find it easier than before to have access to video streaming and accordingly, being exposed to semi-realistic situations. It is not fake immersion, but the strive of English language learners in order to be able to follow stories set in different times, regions, contexts and registers. Things are changing quickly and technology is moving so fast that it is easy to forget just how rapidly services and habits have accommodated us. Our TV habits are consequently evolving, namely, the consulting firm Deloitte has recently published that U.S. consumers are more inclined to stream entertainment from a broadband Internet service than tune in to live TV.
Ericsson’s research centre Consumerlab has also reported key findings around the world in selected markets resulting in revealing conclusions:

Streamed on-demand content is soaring. In 2015, over 50 percent consumers state that they watch on-demand video content at least once a day, up from 30 percent in 2010.

Millenials, those aged 16–34, prefer video viewing on their mobile screen, mobile, laptop or tablet.

Binging, the watching of multiple episodes of TV and video content in a row, has rapidly become a key part of the TV and media experience.

On the go video is mainly characterized by its mobility and flexibility. High quality content is a breeding ground for TV show fans that may not even consider making an effort to improve their English listening skills.

It is time to work on finding the happy medium when it comes to assessing the optimum ripeness in proficiency for a student, and, as a consequence, a teacher can mentor the student on how to approach the original version.

Three strata may exemplify guidance regarding level:

- **B1 CEFR Intermediate students:**
  6 minute English. BBC Learning English, teaching English to global audiences. Offers free audio, vocabulary related and transcript to learners around the world.

- **B2 CEFR Upper-Intermediate Students:**
  Free online podcasts adapted for language learners and teachers are provided over the net. Extra content worksheets, vocabulary tasks, webquests and transcripts are available if you become a member. There are plenty of examples, e.g. level 3 listenings on www.podsicastsinenglish.com. These are contextualized listenings with interaction among two or more speakers. For situational purposes, sometimes podcasts with real conversations are used (Stanley: 2006).

BBC Learning English short videos called The Flatmates, offer conversations between flatmate characters, speech bubbles are used to help the student answer a comprehension question.

- **C1 CEFR Advanced students:**
  It is a stage when students really take off and they can tailor their election. Nowadays we are spoilt for choice, and little or no adaptation has to be made to the material viewed outside the classroom. The breakdown of options may vary, e.g.

  - **Sitcoms:** The Big Bang Theory. U.S.A. (2011 to present). Nerdy friends working together and doing scientific research.
  - **Drama:** Downton Abbey. United Kingdom. (2010 to present). British costume drama set in a Yorkshire country estate at the beginning of the XXth Century.
  - **Documentaries:** How It’s Made. Canada (2001 to present). Documentaries that show how common, everyday goods are manufactured.
  - **Cookery:** Jamie’s 15-Minute Meals. United Kingdom (2012). Popular media chef Jamie Oliver hosts half-hour episodes and creates two meals, with each meal taking 15 minutes to prepare.

Amongst these most popular types of TV genres to be recommended now, it is still difficult to foresee new categories that surely will eventually become popular among Generation Z viewers: those who are born from the mid or late 1990s to present day. Nisha Lilia Diu (The Telegraph: 2015) wrote:

This “iGeneration” can’t conceive of a world before everyone owned a mobile phone and would laugh if you told them there only used to be four channels on TV, or that you used to have to
hand over pocket money in a record shop if you wanted to listen to an album (on an antiquated disc known as a CD).

According to the Spanish National Markets and Competition Commission (CNMC), consuming Internet television (via computer, laptop, tablet or mobile phone) is gaining ground among adolescents, as reflected CNMC Household Panel. Thus, Internet consumption increases considerably in the range between 16 and 17 years, which reaches 93.3 %, exceeding the consumption of television in this age group (82%).

All this new data reveals a shifting landscape. When ranking the best soap operas of all time or reviewing “fly on the wall” reality TV programmes, we may notice that there is not so much space for young consumers. Variables like age, maturation, motivation and self-consciousness affects future performance and mastery of the students. It is from early ages until puberty, what is considered the critical period when a language is properly acquired (Lenneberg: 1967).

By means of these new ways of exposure to native-like dialogues, the outcome of a grown-up English student will be exponentially boosted when open to semi-realistic immersion via TV programmes on a regular basis.

3. INCIDENTAL LEARNING. THE TRANSITION FROM INSIDE TO OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM

Intentional learning corresponds to attending language classes. There is point when academic acquisition proves to be insufficient, and this is when incidental learning takes the helm. Hulstijn (1996; cited in Gass: 1999) asserts in terms of cognitive psychology that the definition of incidental learning is: “learning in the absence of an intention to learn”, that is also, that the learner’s attention is focused not on the form but on the meaning.

d’Ydewalle & Van de Poel investigated if children make the effort to process a foreign spoken soundtrack when the native language is available in the subtitles. They posed the question: «Can watching (and enjoying) subtitled television programmes incidentally lead to foreign-language acquisition?». The findings established that there is substantial language acquisition simply by watching subtitled videos. «Contrary to the adults, the children tend to acquire more when the foreign language is in the sound track than in the subtitles” (d’Ydewalle & Van de Poel: 1999).
Adults, despite being outperformed by children in terms of incidental learning through watching television programmes, show a capacity of mental processing that allows them to attend both information channels, spoken soundtrack and subtitles. That is when vocabulary building and grammar acquisition can benefit from a more mature, grown-up learner, who, being aware of the limitations, will surely squeeze every possible opportunity to enhance his or her language skills.

Recent computational models of language acquisition suggest that there are similarities between mechanisms of incidental learning and those of natural language acquisition (Saffran et al.: 1997). Repetition over a skill, context and dictation may sound hackneyed for advanced language learners. Krashen (1989) stated that reading will result in conscious grammar and vocabulary acquisition. Extensive reading activities, for example, are appropriate for low-level ESL learners.


- Unlike at home, for example, in class instruction undertakes certain stages to ensure academic acquisition:
  - Pre-listening task. By asking questions, predicting key words or context.
  - Listenings played twice for further comprehension.
  - Post listening task. Analysis through lexis, grammar and functional language.

4. With or Without Subtitles?

Practising speaking and writing, coupled with corrective feedback, and the habit of reading are proven and effective ways of feeling more comfortable when expressing thoughts in a foreign language.

The use of audio-visual material has been treated as a separate issue. For adult language learners, B1 level and above, watching movies in the target language should first be done with subtitles of the dubbed or original version. Different studies obviously reveal that videos of authentic English programmes aided by subtitles, lead to a better understanding (Vanderplank: 1988).

Further studies should be focused on adhering to the needs and motivations of current students regarding, via conversational or opening gambits, how to ensure on track second language acquisition by means of original version video streaming.

Basing our educational paradigm on how to give advice on the matter. One suggested segmentation would be:

- Listen actively. Make sure that the learner is engaged with the story.
- Micro-listening rewind and repeat. Even include the possibility of viewing an episode that has already been seen dubbed to their first language.
- Guess meaning from context. Verbal and non verbal communication go hand in hand.
- Holistic language acquisition. That eventually and incidentally leads to being able to discern lines through rhythm and intonation along with sentence structures.

To summarise this article, we may say that current studies are being focused mainly on improving incidental vocabulary learning (Gass: 1999) and the effect of using English captions (Yang & Chang: 2014) (Montero, Peters, Clarebout & Desmet: 2014), whereas students...
preferences and intrinsic motivation, being less gradable approaches, have not been taken into account so far.

Accordingly, since few studies have worked out how instructors have to assess what midpoint is advisable taking into account the student’s profile, our studies aim at advising students by tailor-making a portfolio with the highest recommended resources for them.

To account for the need to achieve success in a student’s English learning life, he or she must make good use of up-to-date instructional sites and become accustomed to watching TV shows on a regular basis. On the other hand, English instructors should gradually come to know exactly what point of age and maturity is advisable for a student when watching shows with L1 subtitles, rather than a would-be transitional period with L2 subtitles, and finally, but not necessarily definitively, the viewing of TV shows without any captioning at all.

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