Using New Media in the Task-Based German Conversation Classroom

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ABSTRACT

The main purpose of this study is to demonstrate how new audiovisual media, such as YouTube, can be effectively combined with task-based teaching approaches for communicative language teaching at the advanced level.

Based on an examination of prior research, this study generates a set of criteria which are essential to the development of task-based units that utilize authentic video material to increase students' cultural awareness and communicative skills.

The proposed sample units serve as models for instructors to use the presented criteria for the creation of further language activities and units that will effectively incorporate new media and task-based teaching within an engaging, student-centered learning environment.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

<u>Background of the Topic</u>

Second Language (SL) teachers have been using video materials in the classrooms at all levels for quite some time now. Affordable technical equipment, the wide availability of authentic video materials, and the students' high level of sympathy and familiarity with new media, all make it easier than ever to provide students with a glance at authentic filmic texts and life within the target culture.

Providing effective instruction, teachers can allow their students to derive more from video than passive enjoyment. Within well-planned, engaging activities, video can be an excellent tool for communicative classes, such as conversation classes. Not only can authentic audiovisual material raise the cultural awareness of students, it will also improve their communication skills.

The integration of culture in language curricula is both beneficial and desirable because it is difficult to communicate effectively in a language while being ignorant of its culture. Many students have not had the opportunity to have a meaningful and extensive first-hand encounter with the target culture by travelling to the target country, nor may they ever be able to experience the culture in that way during the years of their language instruction. Filmic texts can provide a window to the target culture and allow teachers to establish a controlled classroom setting, where students have the possibility of observing native speakers in contextualized situations. Therefore, Second language (SL) Teachers are well-advised to explore and utilize audiovisual media to provide their students with a taste of the target culture and teach them to communicate effectively.

One of the foremost goals of any SL teacher should be to improve the communicative competence of their students for real-life purposes. Teachers want their students to be able to communicate in the Target Language (TL). Communication essentially revolves around tasks, whether it is ordering food in a restaurant, making small talk about the weather, scheduling an appointment on the phone, or

trying to acquire a position through a job interview. Communication is not arbitrary. There is a purpose to it, it is a practical act that leads to an outcome which the speaker, native or not, wants to achieve (Littlejohn & Foss, 2004). All the situations mentioned above, as well as many others, present tasks the SL students need to master as they develop their communication skills in the TL.

In recent years, advocates of communicative and task-based approaches to language teaching have been recognizing the usefulness and potential of utilizing tasks as the core units of language instruction. This study focuses on how teachers can utilize video materials, especially new media like the video sharing website YouTube, as effective language input for introducing task-based activities that aim at improving the learners' communicative skills and cultural knowledge.

Statement of the Problem

The ways in which languages are taught have undergone shift and development over time. As instructors and researchers gain new insights into language teaching, the media that are available to aid language teaching are subject to constant change and expansion. With the ubiquity

of the internet and new media, like YouTube, which are accessible through it, language teachers have an immense variety of video materials at their disposal. Now, rare authentic SL video material, ranging from home videos to TV commercials, is just a mouse click away.

Unfortunately, many teachers do not recognize the benefits and the potential of video material for their teaching (Davis, 1998). Teachers must adapt their methods and move with the times, but, as Pusack and Otto (1997) point out, this can be quite challenging:

> Those who venture in this arena soon find that it is not for the fainthearted, not only because of the constant and inexorable evolution in the technologies themselves, but because of the ever-present challenge to determine how best to exploit new technologies to improve language instruction. (p. 2)

Therefore, educators in today's classrooms face the challenge of finding effective teaching strategies that employ and integrate new media in engaging ways for the teaching of second languages. Further research must show how this new arsenal of media can be incorporated and maximized for language instruction.

Purpose of the Study

Both task-based teaching approaches and new media are recent phenomena of promising efficiency in the field of SL instruction that demand further attention. This study is an attempt to demonstrate how new media and task-based teaching approaches can be joined for effective language instruction at the advanced level. After an investigation of educational research on the use of video materials for SL teaching in the context of task-based language instruction, this study generates a set of criteria based on the previous research. These criteria will be applied to develop effective teaching strategies and techniques that integrate video material, especially new media, for communicative language classes, such as conversation classes, in a task-based learning environment. The same criteria can also be used to assess learner outcomes. The resulting activities can be integrated into existing curricula, while both fostering the students' communicative competence in the target language (TL) and enhancing their cultural awareness of the target culture.

Definition of Terms

Audiovisual media: Transmission tools that deliver information through both sound and visual components. In this study, the terms *audiovisual media, filmic texts, movie clips, movie segments, video,* and *video material* are used interchangeably.

Authentic video material: Video material in the TL that was originally produced for an audience of native speakers of the TL rather than SL classroom settings.

Communcative language teaching: "An approach to teaching that is directed at developing communicative abilities in the learners either by teaching aspects of communicative competence (the weak version) or by creating conditions for learners to learn through communicating (the strong version)" (Ellis, 2003, p. 340).

Conversation: "An interaction sequence with a defined beginning and end, turn-taking and some sort of purpose or a set of goals" (Littlejohn & Foss, 2004, p. 142).

Culture: The concept of culture represents the "system of shared beliefs, values, customs, behaviors, and artifacts that the members of a society use to cope with this world and with one another" (Bates & Plog, 1988, p.7).

Motivation: Biehler and Snowman (1997) define motivation as "the forces that account for the arousal, selection, direction, and continuation of behavior" (p. 399).

*New media: M*edia of high authenticity that are produced by native TL speakers and made available to the public through the internet.

Second language (SL): A language being studied other than the learner's native language. The terms '*second language*' (SL) and '*target language*' (TL) are used interchangeably in this study.

Task:

A piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing, or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form. The task should also have a sense of completeness, being able to stand alone as a communicative act in its own right. (Nunan, 1989, p. 10)

Ellis (2003) additionally emphasizes that tasks should foster the pragmatic use of the TL and should ideally involve real-world processes of language use.

Task-basked language teaching: Language instruction that is based on practical tasks to be performed by the learners.

YouTube: A video-sharing website, created in 2005, where users can upload, view and share video clips.

CHAPTER II

Review of the Literature

In order to investigate the importance of video materials for language teaching and to study the effectiveness of audiovisual input in task-based communicative activities, the existing research needs to be reviewed. This review will illustrate the emergence and history of foreign movies in the SL classroom, as well as the benefits of video and movie segments as a teaching medium for second languages and culture. Strategies that researchers have been proposing in order to successfully integrate such material into the SL learning process will be described. This review will also present findings from several researchers (Kasakow & McClurg, 1984; Lin & Fox, 1999; Newmark, 1967; Suh, Wasanasomsithi, Short, & Majid, 1999; Van Lommel, Laenen, & d'Ydewalle, 2006) studying the effect of video materials on SL acquisition and student motivation. Included is an overview of the content

standards for language teaching, as developed by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, and a concise description of the communicative and task-based approach of language teaching. These standards and approaches will help to evaluate the effectiveness of the proposed teaching activities.

Movies in the SL classroom

As early as the late 1930s, researchers like Hendrix (1939) and Tatum (1941), noticed the rise of the moving-picture industry and expected great success from utilizing movies in the teaching of foreign languages, which was a new field at that time. While Palomo (1940) proposed the development of pedagogical sound films that were to be used specifically for teaching purposes, Hendrix (1939) identified the students' existing familiarity with conventional film as the most outstanding feature that would facilitate and essentially call for their implementation in SL curricula. As the movie industry grew, more researchers came to be interested in the possible benefits for teaching that the emerging medium had to offer. Johnson (1956) noted that the adolescents' rising interest in and familiarity with movies promised a high acceptance on the students' side:

Films play so large a part in the daily life of young Americans, it is only natural they should be used more and more in our schools. We should learn to take full advantage of such equipment for enriching and vitalizing the teaching of foreign languages. (p. 414)

Films in the SL classroom started to gain pedagogic importance in the 1960s when more researchers came to agree that videotexts could offer students the opportunity to experience contact with contextualized language and the culture of the target country, thus facilitating language acquisition (Lonergan, 1984). Carr and Duncan (1987) found that one of the main reasons movies had not been used more for teaching purposes in the past was the expense and inconvenience that was necessary in order to acquire and show movies. Contemporarily, this argument is untenable; movies are nearly ubiquitous and the equipment needed to show them is highly affordable and widely available at teaching institutions.

The rising importance of movies in our society has led to their redefinition in the classroom: In 1996, the National Council of Teachers of English and the International Reading Association stated that literacy in contemporary society is no longer limited to printed text

and spoken language, but also includes the visual language that pertains to film and television (Considine & Baker, 2006).

Oftentimes, today's young people are more familiar with movies and related technology than most adults (DeBell & Chapman, 2003). It is therefore important that teachers try to keep up to date with current trends and turn their students' capacities into an advantage by involving them more in the planning process. The internet, for instance, constitutes a great means of finding useful video material for class and students can easily assist the instructor by looking for videos online. Recently, DeBell and Chapman (2006) published a report on computer and internet usage for the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), the primary federal entity for collecting, analyzing and reporting data related to education in the United States and other nations. This report verified that, by the end of high school, almost all students use computers and a large majority utilize the internet for their entertainment or to accomplish daily tasks. Watching or downloading videos is also among the popular internet activities of students.

New internet phenomena like the website YouTube.com are now providing everybody with an inexhaustible wealth of videos. YouTube is a video-sharing website, created in

2005, where users can upload, view and share video clips. According to the newspaper article "YouTube Serves Up" (2006), 2.5 billion videos were watched on YouTube.com during June 2006. In the same period, 65,000 new videos were being added to the site every single day. As of March 2008, YouTube featured over 75 million videos. With these facts in mind, it is hardly surprising that researchers like Branzburg (2007) and Trier(2007) have been starting to notice the potential of YouTube and are advocating its implementation in school curricula for educational purposes.

The growing confidence in the use of videos for SL teaching is certainly due to the many benefits they offer compared to alternative media.

What makes movies useful for SL teaching?

Some researchers acknowledged the potential of movies very early. Palomo (1940) described the following:

There is a naturalness in the sound film which is not to be found in the other aids. The student sees and hears people talk. Language is presented in an organic context. The foreign scene and the foreign tongue are in harmony. Next to bringing the student to the foreign country, the sound film is the best purveyor

of foreign atmosphere for the language learner. (p. 284)

In Johnson's (1956) experience, the use of movies in the language classroom leads to the following results:

1. Increased ability to understand the spoken language

2. Improvement in pronunciation

3. Acquisition of vocabulary

4. Development of ability in self-expression through speaking and writing

5. Unconscious assimilation of grammatical forms and sentence patterns in context. (p. 414)

Another concise summary of the benefits of video materials in the classroom is provided by Proctor (1990). He described the following:

Feature films are a useful tool for communication interaction because they (a) heighten student interest without sacrificing academic rigor, (b) utilize an existing and available resource with which students are comfortable, (c) allow classes to observe and evaluate communication processes in action, (d) expose students to worlds beyond their own, (e) provide affective as well as cognitive experiences through vicarious involvement, and (f) offer opportunities for

discussion, values clarification, and personal assessment. (p. 4)

Arthur (1999) found video materials to be one of the most versatile tools that teachers can use in the classroom. He summarized the following benefits that video material offers in the language classroom:

- Video can give students realistic models to imitate for role-play.

- Video can increase awareness of other cultures by teaching appropriateness and suitability.

- Video can strengthen audio/visual linguistic perceptions simultaneously.

- Video can widen the classroom repertoire and range of activities.

- Video can help utilize the latest technology to facilitate language learning.

- Video can teach direct observation of the paralinguistic features found in association with the target language.

- Video can be used to help when training students in ESP related scenarios and language.

- Video can offer a visual reinforcement of the target language and can lower anxiety when practicing the skill of listening. (p. 4)

These concise descriptions overlap in certain core areas: (a) Video materials serve as a window to the culture of the people they depict. (b) Video offers effective ways of language acquisition. (c) Movies are effective because students like them and are motivated to work with them. Each of these points needs to be examined in more detail.

Video Materials as a Window to the Target Culture

Bates and Plog (1988) define culture as a "system of shared beliefs, values, customs, behaviors, and artifacts that the members of a society use to cope with this world and with one another" (p.7). Naturally, language teachers want their students to be able to successfully cope with native speakers of the TL. Therefore, the students' cultural awareness is integral for their success as SL speakers and consequently a valuable learning goal. Numerous scholars have highlighted the benefits and consequent necessity of teaching culture in SL classrooms (Lessard-Clouston, 1997).

Accordingly, there has been much debate in research as to how language teachers can bring the target culture into the classroom and provide their students with a rewarding learning experience. Video material in particular has been deemed to be a powerful tool which can open ways of "depicting the foreign language culture more effectively than other instructional materials" (Herron, Morris, Secules, & Curtis, 1995, p. 775). The main reason for this effective depiction is the strong visual link that movies create between the target language and the life of the foreign country. This link vividly impresses the students and is usually much stronger than any textbook description could be (Lottmann, 1961).

Audiovisual material enriches the students' background and often enables them to perceive values and attitudes that are considerably different from their own. While watching a movie, students are likely to identify with some of the characters depicted, and consequently develop an understanding of and sympathy for these people. Since the people in the film are native speakers of the language the students are acquiring, the identification with the movie characters can strongly foster a more positive attitude toward the target culture (Johnson, 1956; Chen & Oller, 2005).

The variety of cultural elements video material can provide is immense. Even commercial movies often feature a natural authenticity. Most of the time, directors strive to evoke an authentic background for their movies in order to reach their primary audience, which is the people of the target country. While this may or may not be a conscious effort of the individual director, SL learners greatly benefit as they are able to encounter a whole array of details about daily life, like patterns of dress, food, transportation, and at times even deeper cultural elements like social roles, institutions, value systems, attitudes or world view of the people in the target country (Carr & Duncan, 1987).

Observing realistic scenes of target language speakers in a controlled classroom setting can not only familiarize students with cultural aspects, but the students can also learn a great deal about the language itself. Culture should, by all means, be a significant aspect of any SL curriculum. However, the actual acquisition of the language must be the main concern in any SL classroom and will therefore be the focus of this literature review as well.