

Editor's note: Some errors showed up in the first appearance of this article in the Spring 2016 *Idiom*, so we are reprinting it here with the corrections made.

Teaching Authentic Language Using Visual Media

by Alicia Salazar

Along with colleagues Melissa Diamond and Rebecca Chiarelli-Shay, I had the opportunity to present on the topic of teaching authentic language using visual media at both the NYS TESOL and LI ESOL conferences in 2015. Our presentation demonstrated ways to use visual media to enhance the learning experience of college-age students in an aural/oral class—an area that could benefit from more material development. This development, however, is not necessarily something that any given text can capture in its entirety because it is dependent on the learners, the teacher, and what is occurring in their shared environment, leading to a contextual—perhaps even ecological—type of learning process (van Lier, 2004).

The presentation introduced ways we incorporate visual media to teach authentic language and enhance our students' experiences as a result. The goal of our pedagogical practices is to make content more comprehensible and retainable while allowing students to make personal connections to the content. If this goal is attained, we will have more successful—not just learners—but active *users* of English. Most language teachers would agree that students need to make personal investments to their language learning experience in order to see progress and achieve their learning objectives. Thus, an objective for ELL students is not simply repeating or mimicking language use, but to *incorporate* the newly acquired language in ways that learners make it a part of who they are.

Using Pictures

The first technique we discussed included a method for learning academic vocabulary. In our advanced-level aural/oral skills classes, while students are equipped with the necessary skills to acquire more advanced language, the majority of them thrive with the use of techniques that one might see in a low-level class—specifically, the use of pictures to teach new vocabulary. A textbook full of images, however, misses the mark, for it might give the impression of being an elementary text. Therefore, even more important, to promote depth of learning it is critical that students can make a personal connection to these visual representations. To facilitate this connection, students are asked to draw or find their own representations of a word. In this effort, students analyze and express their understanding of new vocabulary words, which in turn allows teachers to understand the students' perspectives and adjust any misconceptions.

The vocabulary that students are expected to learn is generally abstract, as are the visuals students generate in this process. Subsequently, this activity compels the student and his or her classmates to really think about the relationship between the word and the image. Indeed, it is a common practice to decrease the use of visual aids as students become more advanced in language acquisition so that they start to hone in on specific cognitive skills such as decoding. Still, at an advanced level, more visual stimuli have shown to be beneficial among our students in making new concepts more comprehensible.

TED Talks

A second approach we discussed at our presentation is the use of TED Talks. One of the most significant benefits in this approach is the stockpile of exemplary examples of oral presentations utilizing a variety of skills that our ELL students should strive to acquire—something I have found a textbook cannot adequately model for them. Students can better understand the use of body language, visual aids, organizational structure, and even humor through viewing TED Talks. Furthermore, there is a vast array of topics, lessons, research, idioms, jargon, and other resources available through these Talks. Finally, this resource is great in preparing students for the lecture-style classes that they will certainly encounter in their academic careers.

American Television Shows

What seems to be the most appealing activity in our presentation to enhance students' learning is related to the use of American television shows. Through this entertaining and ubiquitous medium, students learn idiomatic language, which allows for further analysis on the use, form, and meaning of everyday speech (Celce-Murcia, 2001). In our presentation, we shared an activity devised to guide students to use and analyze authentic, idiomatic language and subsequently include it into their own colloquial repertoire by practicing its use.

In this activity, students complete a short video that allows them not just to share their idioms and their understanding of them, but also to practice repeatedly before submitting their work. Technology has evolved to the point where students do not generally need explicit instruction in its use to integrate it into their learning practices. They can easily use their cell phone or the school's computers to record and rerecord videos to observe their own speech, allowing them the opportunity to identify and correct their own errors. Furthermore, they deepen their understanding of their newly acquired language by analyzing and discussing it with others, and they also perform a scripted dialogue to show they understand how to use these newly learned idioms appropriately.. An example of the students' work can be seen on YouTube (https://youtu.be/oj_-4SO1w8w).

Enabling Students

Language instructors are constantly faced with the challenge of finding teaching material that will reach all students and will aid in teaching authentic language in an ever-changing world. Valuable material is not always something that hours need be spent laboring over or that requires a textbook; by utilizing tools readily available to students and permitting them to take responsibility, meaningful learning occurs. We have to allow our learning environment to be one that evolves in order to support our students with the appropriate means to reach the world outside of our classroom walls.

References

- Celce-Murcia, M. (Ed). (2001). *Teaching English as a second or foreign language*. Boston, MA: Heinle & Heinle.
- van Lier, L. (2004). *The ecology and semiotics of language learning: A sociocultural perspective*. Dordrecht, the Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers.

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