

Developing beginner language skills through video (45 minute Workshop)

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Role of visual and verbal information in language learning

The integrated dual-code hypothesis (Mayer and Anderson 1991: 486) suggested that “learners can build both visual and verbal modes of mental representation as well as connections between them”.

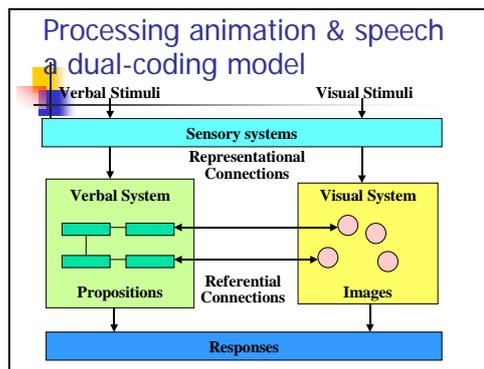


Figure 1 adapted from Mayer, R.E. and Anderson, R. B. (1991). Animations Need Narrations: An experimental test of a dual-coding hypothesis. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 83(4), 486.

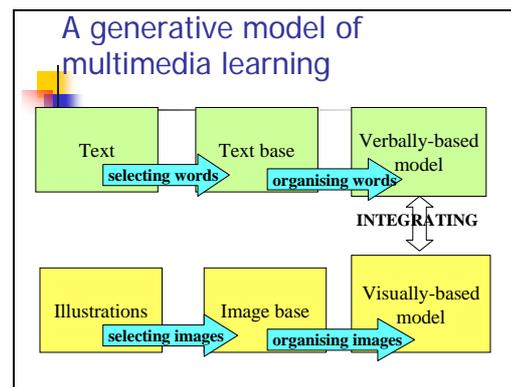


Figure 2 adapted from Mayer, R.E. (1997). Multimedia Learning: Are we asking the right questions? *Educational Psychologist*, 32(1), 5.

Mayer (1997) drew on this in developing a generative theory of multimedia learning. Plass et al (1998) reported that results of their study on the role of visual and verbal information in learning were “consistent with a generative theory of multimedia learning that assumes that learners actively select relevant verbal and visual information, organize the information into coherent mental representations, and integrate these newly constructed visual and verbal representations with one another.” Therefore, for beginners who lack verbal language skills, the availability of visual input may have a contributory influence on their second language development. Burt (1999) concurred that video “is accessible to those who have not yet learned to read and write well, and provides context for learning.” Harben (1999) pointed out that visual context provided by elements such as setting, body language and facial expressions can aid comprehension as well as activate learners’ prior knowledge of the social and cultural aspects of language. Further to this, the simultaneous availability of different modes of information is believed to contribute to improved comprehension of the language input. Based on the results of his study, Brett (1997) suggested that the greater efficiency and focus of using one interface makes it more likely for learners to have greater success rates with comprehension tasks while using multimedia.

Video is the most appropriate medium for beginners because they can draw on both the auditory and visual support in their learning. It is particularly helpful for them to observe

the situations of authentic everyday language use as complete communication events in context. As Canning-Wilson (2000) pointed out, video segments should be short enough for the visual stimuli not to detract from the auditory component. Teachers can fully exploit the audio component to develop both macro and micro listening skills by using video segments of not more than one minute long. In the same vein, Balatova (1994) reported that distraction sets in after the first minute of watching. As the target learners are beginners, teachers may find it more helpful to further break down each scenario into shorter segments.

The use of video can make language more accessible to beginners by:

- making it easier to integrate and contextualise listening, speaking and pronunciation, reading and writing activities (as demonstrated in the workshop)
- motivating learners and helping them in their efforts to use the language naturally in their own lives by seeing how the characters succeed in communicating with native speakers and getting things done in their everyday activities
- bringing native speakers into the classroom (on video), providing additional models for pronunciation, intonation, and rhythm besides that of the teacher
- raising learners' awareness of non-verbal aspects of communication
- increasing listening comprehension: paralinguistic features (facial expression, body language, context, setting...) help learners comprehend more than from listening to audio tape only
- stimulating learner interaction and communication with co-learners as they discuss the video itself or ways in which it relates to their lives and experiences
- raising cross-cultural awareness: learners enjoy observing similarities and differences between the behavior of the characters in a video clip and that of their own families and friends

Helping beginners learn with video

Watching television and video can motivate learning because most learners find it entertaining. However, it is important to ensure that learners are actively engaged in their learning rather than just sitting back and passively relaxing. Viewing activities should give learners a purpose in watching a sequence and help them focus on aspects of the video that can benefit their language-learning capabilities. This is the strategy of active viewing described by Lonergan (1984). As a lot of information on videos is non-linguistic, it is also important to assure learners that they need not understand ALL the information. The activities aim to encourage viewing and participation to increase understanding, not to test it. Learners can also be encouraged to predict/discuss in their first language group and collaboratively generate answers in English. On the other hand, transfer activities such as using scenarios as models for role-plays can prepare learners for real-life English use. As well, teachers can create excellent practice opportunities in authentic language use by organising class excursions and visits where learners can draw on peer support.

Some considerations for selecting videos for beginners

- length – maximum of around 1 minute per segment
- contexts – authentic everyday language use
- actions/visual cues – not just talking heads
- option of subtitles – English subtitle for pronunciation practice and reading skill development
- number of characters – not so many in one segment that learners are confused about who's who

Some techniques for teaching with video

(demonstrated with a focus on beginners at the workshop)

As Allan (1985:66) pointed out that there is no single 'right way' to use video, only "as many right ways as there are effective uses", the following are just suggestions for teachers in their exploration of using video in language teaching.

Silent viewing

For silent viewing, teachers can set the volume control to its lowest so that the soundtrack is inaudible. Watching a video sequence without the soundtrack does more than activating learners' schema and prior experience in interpreting what they see. Without the 'distraction' of the spoken word, learners can focus on the essence of communication among people: body language, gestures, facial expressions and the setting. Learners are more motivated to use English by visualising this common need to communicate irrespective of the language spoken. By only taking in the content and context visually, learners are not as anxious as when they have to deal with the language at the same time. In their second viewing with the sound on, they are better able to fit the language they hear into the context they have built in their silent viewing.

Sound only

For sound only activities, teachers can either adjust the brightness control to yield a completely darkened screen or use the audio cassette of the video. Learners can listen to background noises and the accompanying dialogues to predict what is happening: where the characters are and what they are doing. This is most effective when sound effects directly indicate particular locations or activities, eg the sound of an approaching train and the ringing of a telephone. Learners can confirm their guesses by viewing the video straight after listening.

Jigsaw viewing/listening

Jigsaw viewing/listening aims to create a situation in which learners have to collaborate in working out what is actually happening on the video. Besides generating a lot of interaction among learners, this can also help learners appreciate the value of peer

support in the learning process. Jigsaw viewing/listening can be set up by making half of the class do silent viewing while the other half only listen to the soundtrack of the same segment in another room. Teachers can provide viewing and listening task sheets to help learners record information. When the class reunites, viewers and listeners then work in pairs to arrive at the original 'story' by sharing the information they have got.

A variation to the above technique is sitting half of the class with their backs to the television screen. These learners can only listen while those facing the television can watch the video with the sound on. When the sequence is finished, the viewers have to describe what is happening in response to the listeners' questions.

Freeze frame

Teachers can press the *Pause* or *Still* button that "freezes" the picture on the screen. This is useful for introducing new vocabulary eg naming unfamiliar items in English. Teachers can also set up prediction exercises by freezing the frame at the point when a character is about to respond to an utterance and inviting learners to guess the response. Learners can compare their answers immediately by releasing the *Pause* button. This can also be used for pronunciation practice where repeated speaking and listening of an utterance is necessary.

Recapitulation

As demonstrated in the workshop, video is a particularly effective learning medium for beginners, especially in developing listening, speaking and pronunciation skills. Rather than being too difficult for beginners, as often claimed by some teachers, video can make language more accessible to beginners when segments are selected appropriately, the strategy of active viewing is adopted and mutual support among learners is generated.

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