Five Ideas for Using Authentic Television Clips

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Television offers many opportunities for materials development. Below are five prototype lessons based around different genres of television material: soap opera; film; comedy; advertising and news broadcast. Before you press the record button, keep in mind that you need very little material to make a good lesson. The lessons below are designed for intensive viewing, where three minutes or less can offer plenty of language and content.

Lesson 1: Soap Opera

Level: Depends on level of difficulty of the language in the clip.

Aim: To focus on English conversation strategies

Material needed: A short soap opera scene with a self-contained conversation - keep it to one minute if possible, one which involves a good level of interaction, for example where a problem is being discussed or where interactants are gossiping.

Preparation: Transcribe the dialogue and cut it up so that each utterance is on a separate strip. Back the strips onto card. Make enough sets of cards so that there will be one per group.

In class:

1) Explain the background to the scene: provide any necessary information about the clip and the soap opera. For example, it may be worthwhile playing the clip with the sound turned off so as to introduce the characters and their relationships.

2) Set the task: in groups, students must sort out the conversation into the right order. Help start the process by providing the first line.

3) As students are sorting out the dialogue, play the clip without the sound so to offer non-verbal clues.

4) Get each group to perform their version of the dialogue.

5) Play the clip with the sound turned on this time while students check their predictions.

Modification: To modify the task for lower levels or if the 'text' is long, three or four utterances could be placed on each strip.

Lesson 2: Film

Level: Intermediate to Advanced

Aim: To practise reading and speaking. To focus on the relationship between written and spoken language.

Material needed: Find a novel that has been made into a film, preferably one that the students are not likely to have seen. Then select an extract from the book that has been included in the film (even if it differs slightly).

Preparation: Prepare the extract from the book for a reading lesson.

In class:

1) Having focused on the extract from the book as a reading lesson, organise students into groups.

2) Set the task: students are asked to work in groups to decide how they would adapt this scene for film. Ask them to focus on as many considerations as they can think of, for example,

a description of the actors who should play each part; what the soundtrack should be, what kind of setting and background and so on. Some students may even want to do a 'storyboard' with camera angles.

3) Ask each group to present feedback on their considerations.

4) Play the extract and ask students to prepare to review it.

5) Each group discusses what they thought of the extract and whether their version would have been better

Lesson 3: A Comedy Programme

Level: Any level

Aim: To enhance vocabulary in a particular lexical area. To practise speaking and writing. Material needed: A scene from a comedy programme that can be understood even without the soundtrack. Mr Bean is particularly suitable for this.

Preparation: You will need to have some monolingual dictionaries.

In class:

1) Set the task: organise the class into pairs and ask each pair to watch the scene and try to come up with the best description of what happened. They can make notes and use the dictionaries, but they will have to give an oral presentation to the class on their version of events.

2) Play the scene as many times as is necessary.

3) Eventually, each pair presents an account.

4) The class then synthesises the descriptions into one written account, which a student writes on the board in collaboration with the whole class using the best phrases from different groups.

Lesson 4: Advertisement

Level: Intermediate to Advanced

Aim: To focus on the use of language in advertising. To practise speaking, listening and writing

Material needed: Two advertisements where a product or service is advertised using a voice-over. A script rich in adjectives is particularly suitable, for example '…for unbeatable value…' '…with an excellent range of…' and so on. You will also need a number of pictures of products, these could be spoof items, for example a cream that cures baldness.

In class:

1) Set task 1: watch the advertisements and list the images associated with each product, for example, happy families; healthy children; warm cosy house; glamourous lifestyle; beautiful fun people and so on.

2) Seek whole class feedback and collate ideas on the blackboard.

3) Set task 2: Ask students to watch the advertisements again and this time working in pairs try to make a list of the adjectives used.

4) Play the advertisements as many times as is necessary.

5) Get pairs to team up so as to compare. Eventually collate these on the blackboard.

6) Set task 3 - writing an advertising script: distribute the pictures of products to the students in groups and set the task of writing an advertisement script. Also ask each group to consider what images they would use for the advertisement.

7) Each group presents their advertisement. Modification: If you give all groups the same product, you could ask them to vote on the best proposed advertisement.

Lesson 5: News Reports

Level: Upper-Intermediate to Advanced

Aim: To practise listening; To raise genreawareness; To focus on lexical patterns in specific genres

Material needed: A newspaper article about an accident and the corresponding television news story.

Preparation: Prepare the newspaper article as a gapfilling exercise, taking out key phrases, for example: a _____ is helping Gardaí with their inquiries. [youth]; the _____ happened [incident]; a _____ is being sent to the DPP [file]. Provide the key words either at the top of the handout or on the blackboard.

In class:

1) Set task 1: ask students to predict phrases they expect to find in a newspaper article about the incident you have selected. Write these on the blackboard. Then distribute the gapfilling tasksheet and ask students to check if any of the predicted words are there. Then ask them to try to fill in the blanks.

2) Students cross check in pairs before doing whole-class feedback.

3) Set task 2: explain that you will now be showing the television news report of this incident and ask students to predict what will be said. Allow about five minutes for students to prepare the news script in pairs.

4) Students 'perform' their predictions.

5) Play the television report and ask them to (a) make a list any new or synonymous phrases used to talk about the same incident. (b) identify any phrases which are specific to either newspaper or spoken broadcast (for example, if talking about a fire, the word blaze may be used in the newspaper but not in the television report).

6) As a follow up, students could take the same incident reported in a different newspaper and check if there are any lexical differences. This comparative task would be made more interesting if a tabloid version were used.

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