

3. Television, dialogue journals, and feedback in the EFL classroom

Mark Ennis

"Like other baby boomers, I grew up with TV, the medium that years ago permanently implanted 'Does she or doesn't she?' and 'I can't believe I ate the whole thing' into my brain."

Donna Britt

In this paper I will describe a content-based approach to working with TV with EFL students to develop the four skills and stimulate cultural awareness. As a living medium, TV lends itself to an unstructured Silent Way-style approach to classwork based on ongoing feedback, which is particularly effective when coupled with reflective writing. Students build up a personal lexicon of items gleaned collectively from classwork, the process of which seems to have a strong impact on recall, even after a great deal of time.

The interactive model of reading (Smith: 1985) suggests that reading is seeking answers to questions formulated in an ongoing unconscious interactive process with a text, a sort of "psycholinguistic guessing game" (Goodman). B. Mikulecky stipulates that practicing reading strategies with students has a positive impact on reading skills. I believe that the decoding we do when watching TV involves similar processes and the same skills, and working with TV in the same way as a text can provide students with a powerfully meaningful in-class learning experience.

Meaning in these classes is discovered and explored together as a group. The teacher assumes the role of facilitator (Clark and Silberstein: 1979) rather than sole possessor of the correct information, providing students with the opportunity to freely interact, ask their own questions, and watch and talk back to the TV, consistent with the unfolding spontaneous nature of the medium. As the focus is on content, personal significance is valued rather than perfect comprehension. Is it not presumptuous for teachers to decide beforehand what is important for students in what they see?

If culture is a network of reference points the mastery of which leads to cultural competence, American culture's network is intimately related to TV. Working with cultural icons such as Mr. Spock or Peg Bundy can provide the EFL student with

unique insights into culture and language. Reflecting on them in journal writing can in addition to providing writing practice, sharpen students' observation skills, and allow them to make connections between what they see in class and their lives.

Combining TV viewing, discussion, writing, and reading journal entries all in the target language, covers the four skills in a complementary, non-contrived way, permitting communicative input and output to flow naturally, allowing for cultural and linguistic schema building in "whole" situational contexts, as well as work on the formal elements of language, through feedback, for those who choose to do so. Visual, oral, and written "comprehensible input" is provided by TV, discussion, and journal entries.

Classwork involves watching small chunks of TV, eliciting student comments and questions and adding my own. There is no game plan - classroom viewing and discussion is organized improvisation - and no direct error correction in class, unless students request it. How time is divided between viewing and discussing and the size of the chunks we see depends on the group and the excerpt. Sometimes groups enter deep discussions and spend only a small amount of time watching TV, and sometimes they spend more time watching and less time discussing.

I act as note taker in the viewing/discussion part of the class, as students can not take notes, watch TV, and adequately participate in discussion at the same time. If they want to keep a particular lexical item, they signal me to write it down for them on a sheet of paper which I photocopy and distribute at the end of class. This "claiming" of words in the group seems to help encode items in their memories, which becomes evident during review sessions. Students tend to remember the words they asked for better than the others, as well as who asked for what, saying, "That was your word!"

Parts of the Class

Warm up I begin the class with brief small talk to warm them up to hearing English before watching TV, and return their journals from the previous class.

Transition to Viewing I then open a discussion that will lead to viewing. In one class we watched *The Wonder Years*, about a boy growing up in the suburbs in the U.S. in the 60's. I asked if French suburbs resembled American ones, to connect what we were going to watch with their own experience, and help build sufficient schema to ease them into viewing the video with "cultural goggles" similar to the ones an American audience might see it through.

Viewing and discussion Beginning with commercials provides an easy transition to a "gist listening" mode. Para and extra-linguistic features, often glaringly obvious in them, provide a wealth of material for examining culture, and are often fun to watch. We watch a few and if they are not too captivating, begin a program. I generally show a minute or so and stop, ask for comments, ask a few questions, and then work my way through a show, chunk by chunk, looping back to watch a second or third time, pausing here and there to look at and discuss some detail, according to student response. Sometimes notetaking, running the VCR, and managing a discussion at the same time can be a juggling act. If I need time to write something complicated down, I go back into what we have already seen far enough to give myself time to do this. The students always seem happy to have another crack at what they may have been struggling to understand.

The rate at which we proceed depends on the feedback I get from my students. I see immediately if they are having difficulty understanding or not, or how interested they may or may not be. Most TV shows are quite easy to work with; they are shot in such a way that there are breaks between shots and camera shifts that tell you how big the chunk you are watching should be and where to pause. The storyline or unfolding action helps too.

Balancing viewing and discussion time, and knowing when to shift from one to the other also depends on reading students' ongoing feedback, (smiling, yawning, asking to see something again, etc.), and how communicative and cohesive the group is. Deciding what to watch and what to skip, or selective viewing, is also a question of awareness. I am only rarely able to show an entire show from beginning to end in one class, so a certain amount of picking and choosing is necessary. As my main objective is student response, this is not important.

With groups for whom listening comprehension is a real challenge, or with particularly difficult videos, I sometimes distribute a vocabulary list beforehand, telling my students, "listen for the items, and say stop when you hear them." We then re-view the sequence a few times and look at the context to derive meaning. A variation on this is a "listen for the information" question list, which structures the task of listening in a way that can make weaker students feel more secure. I do not use these systematically, however, as I feel this sort of activity can send the wrong messages, and create a false dependence on the written word.

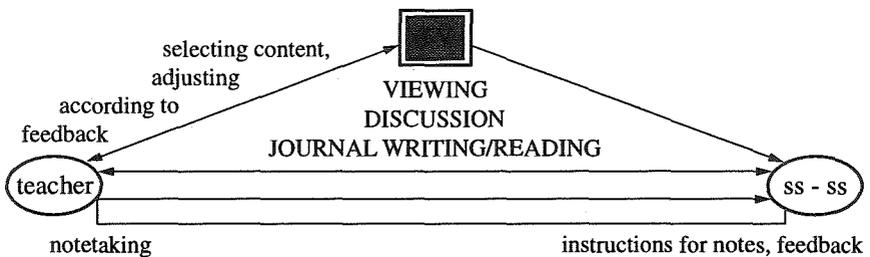
"Pleasure viewing" at the end, that is, watching a long - no more than four or five minutes - uninterrupted segment of what we have seen, gives the students a chance to relax and watch what we have been working on and see how their

comprehension has progressed since the beginning of the class, while providing a bridge into writing.

Transition to writing At this point, I turn off the TV, the most delicate moment of the class. It can seem brutal to just stop and say, "okay, now write for ten minutes." I remind the students of what we have seen and discussed to ease their return from the grip of television and enter an expressive writing mode, and ask several questions, telling them to choose one to write on, or ignore them entirely. I do not prepare these questions in advance; they emerge from the content of the class as we go. They can be specific, such as: "Was it ethical for Victor to have done that?"; or more general: "What struck you in what we saw tonight, and what questions does it raise for you?"; "Has anything like that happened to you?"; "What do the different things we watched tonight have in common?"

Writing I then leave the room to photocopy my notes, and stay out of the classroom until the ten minute writing time is up. My departure and subsequent return mark the beginning and end of writing time. Although writing is essentially a solitary activity, writing together seems to stimulate them.

Finishing up After ten minutes, I return to the room, distribute my notes, and ask for final comments and questions, and collect their journals.



Writing Instructions

In the first class I give the following instructions:

Freewriting Write for ten minutes by putting your pen to the page and trying to keep it moving without stopping. Write fast; think of it as a race.

Suspending Judgement You should pay no attention to form as you write - you will have an opportunity to do that later. Form is not the point. Using foreign words is okay if helps get your idea across.

Presence Be "present" in your writing; share your ideas and impressions with me directly on paper. Tell me something I don't know. If you do not know what to write, use the present moment as a point of departure, with "I don't know what to write about, because...", "I feel strange about writing in English, but...", etc...

Writing to your reader Write in the first person, and to remember that you are writing to me and for yourselves. Think of it as a conversation on paper, as a letter if you like. (Some do, and begin with "Dear Mark".)

Feedback on form The type of feedback is your choice, and can vary from no feedback at all to correction of all errors. Choose one of five feedback modes from the symbol sheet, and they mark each journal entry with the corresponding number. No feedback at all, or a form of your own choosing, is fine too. Feedback is for you, my interest is in content. Most writing errors seem to be due to inattention and can be fixed with a simple reread.

In class and at home In addition to in-class writing, you can respond to my entries at home, for ten minutes like in class. (This hopefully minimizes writer's block, with the security a time limit can give, and also guarantees that not everyone will write volumes.)

The Last Class

In the last class of the semester, students look at the lists of my notes from each class, in chronological order, and try to recall the meanings of the items on them, the contexts in which they occurred, who said them, and related details. For example, "Stop yapping!" could bring back the scene of Fred and Ethel Mertz in a cramped Italian train from an *I Love Lucy* episode, and trigger the meaning "shut up!". The memory of details of the scene contributes to the construction, or reconstruction, of meaning. Students can reconstruct the storyline of what we watched as they go, and discussions we have had, using the items listed as markers to recap from.

This recall session parallels the listening comprehension in the viewing/discussion part of class in that it is a group communicative activity where meaning

is constructed. Our memories are selective and sometimes creative; we each remember certain details and not others, more or less accurately, according to what impressed us, or what we noticed at the time. In the example below, I asked the students what they remembered about Ethel and Fred.

Sandrine: Fred is older than Ethel, and bald.

François: Yes, and he's wearing a suit.

Isabelle: Yes, and Ethel's hair is well combed.

François: Yes, and Fred said that he wouldn't care if Ethel was bald if she looked like the Italian women in the magazine.

Isabelle: What magazine?

François: The one Lucy was reading.

Isabelle: Oh, yes.

The students used each other as a resource to supply the missing pieces, with only minimal prompting on my part, each one contributing the bits of what they remembered, which interconnected, and triggered other memories. Sometimes they remember things that I have forgotten. For example, in the class I cited above, Isabelle reminded us of the discussion we had had on how Lucy had messed up her hair to look more sensual and "Italian", and how my students had not made that connection at all, which I had completely forgotten. They were all too happy to refresh my memory.

Overlapping

The four skills interact, overlap, and feed into each other. Many of the reading skills that Mikulecky (1984) outlines, such as: previewing, predicting, questioning, scanning, recognizing the topic, stating main ideas, guessing the meaning of new words, drawing inferences, paraphrasing, reading critically, summarizing, etc., parallel what could be called "viewing skills". While the processes involved are not exactly the same, they are similar to viewing/discussion activities. For example, when we watch a commercial, I ask students to listen for the name of the product, what it is, and why we should buy it. We are in fact, working on the skills of: questioning, stating main ideas, drawing inferences, paraphrasing, "viewing" critically, etc. All of this happens in group conversation, so communication skills are involved as well.

Skills also overlap in dialogue journal writing, as it shares some of the features of oral conversation, among them: negotiation of meaning, elicitation of unknown

information, and reciprocity (Dolly: 1989). Dialogue journals provide a place to practice these conversation management skills, not always possible in the classroom, and allows students to learn grammar, syntax, and vocabulary of the target language inductively, as they read and write, actively engaging them in the process of their own linguistic schema building. As Joy Kreeft observes,

The process of the dialogue journal allows students learning a second language to learn in a manner very similar to the way that a first language is learned—by discovering the rules of language form and use in the context of real, learner-generated communication. (1983, 12)

In these classes, the fine points of what students miss emerge in the form of misunderstanding, communication breakdown, and subsequent clarification, which happens both in the journals and in classroom discussion. Consider the following conversation excerpts from a class on a documentary on “the Endtimers”, a sect in Florida. Paule took the initiative here to repeat the words until Sylvie understood without further explanation.

TV: ...the world will end soon.

Sylvie: endsoon?

Paule: end... soon.

Sylvie: endsoon?

Paule: end... soon!

Sylvie: Oh, end soon!

Bernard clarified with a paraphrase here:

TV: ...God is on our side.

Veronique: (touching her side) On our side?

Bernard: He's with us.

Veronique: Oh!

As these classes are for “advanced intermediate” and “advanced” level students, they generally have sufficient vocabulary to be able to comprehend. However, they often lack the cultural or linguistic background, or schema, to make sense of them. Consider the following exchange from *The Golden Girls*:

Rose: Can I ask a dumb question?

Dorothy: Better than anyone I know!

Native speakers will recognize that the response is not what Rose expected, but a considerable amount of background knowledge is necessary for non-native speakers to make sense of such an exchange. Knowing all of the words does not help get at what it means. But a look at the context, at previous knowledge of the characters, and at what the question itself means, can help students arrive at meaning without direct explanation or translation by the teacher.

Dialogue Journals

Using dialogue journals has opened a communicative door, allowing me to have individual contact with my students in a way that had never been possible before. In them we are able to share ideas and information we could not have in class. Their use seems to contribute to a more open and frank atmosphere in class as well.

One logistical problem that occurred immediately involved reading and writing time and responses. If I collected their journals at the end of class, read and responded to them at home, and gave them back at the beginning of the following class, only to collect them once again at the end of that class, when could they read what I wrote, and respond themselves? The solution was to use two journals, so that in each class they would bring in the one I had given them from the previous class. At the end of each class, they would add a new entry, based on that class, to whatever they might have written at home. So in every class, we exchanged journals. This worked smoothly, and allowed for sustained written conversations with those who chose to follow up on my responses.

Because I would want to have the option of feedback on form if I were writing to a native speaker in another language, I decided to include in each dialogue journal a series of correction symbols and five modes of feedback for work on form:

1. Underline error.
2. Underline errors and mark with symbols
3. Underline and correct
4. Write in symbols at the beginning of the line
5. Other

Most of the students chose some form of feedback, but some preferred not to. Marie-Thérèse wrote:

Being free to write in English without correction is liberating for me.

She added that this had been the first time she had had the opportunity to write in

show. In this entry, I only marked "relation", with a "w". Many students have a negative impression of their ability to function adequately in English. The use of symbols in feedback can provide a kind of mirror to assess their writing, and measure how much progress they have made which can enhance their linguistic self-esteem, though it can have the opposite effect as well. I see no reason to deny students this, as long as they request it.

My Journal Entries

Reading my entries in their dialogue journals made me aware of my attitude. What is an appropriate response? Should I remain as neutral as possible and reflect back what they are trying to communicate, "counseling response"-style? Should I get personal, and answer their anecdotes with my own? Should I give my opinions on things they might not agree with or be able to relate to? Would it be ethical to try to influence them in this way? Should I really distance myself from my "teacher" role in these journals? I decided not to have a strategy, apart from being as open and honest as possible, and trying to avoid sounding like a "know-it-all".

Perhaps not surprisingly, I had as many different kinds of conversations as I had people in class. I decided to take the conversations wherever the students seemed to want to go with them. My answers were as varied as their entries, but over time a pattern emerged. I tended to: acknowledge what my students wrote by repeating or paraphrasing part of it to make sure I understood, comment on it, perhaps establishing parallels with my own experience, and end with questions. This sample of my writing is fairly typical.

Philippe wrote:

Today I'd like speaking about U.S. commercials, because I find that European commercials are more evoluated and give a better impact on the produce. Furthermore, U.S. commercials don't tries to suggest the produce at the consumer, they don't attract the consumer). But I think that may be American consumers prefer this kind of advertisement!

I wrote back:

As an American consumer, I must say I prefer French commercials. As you say, they look more evolved or sophisticated. I watch them here, usually in the U.S. I zap onto another channel when commercials come on. You say that U.S. commercials don't attract the consumer. What do you mean? On the other hand, I think American commercials are often more daring, and are

sometimes of questionable taste. What did you think about the “come back to Ford” commercial we saw? Have you seen anything like that on French TV?

I tried to stay in a responsive mode, and avoid becoming reactive or defensive. This does not mean that I did not express opinions that sometimes contradicted what my students expressed in their journals, especially when they asked for mine. Alice wrote this after watching *The Wonder Years*, part of which was about “values”.

The values seems to change, but it is superficial change, the habits, foods, houses, ideas without experience (timeless). Music changes, peinture, litterature. But human beens don't change.

I wrote:

So you are saying that things change, but only superficially. Do you mean that “human nature” doesn't change? I see things the other way around. I'm not sure what human nature is, or that it exists at all. I feel that I change all the time, and sometimes I feel that the only continuity is this change. Do you change? Are you the same now as 10 years ago? Do you think there are timeless values, or does everything depend on the situation we are in?

She wrote back:

I mean that deeply, human beings don't change. They are egoistic and all things turn about that: wars, revolutions, poverty. We don't change but we have an evolution with new experiences. I think it all depends on the situation we are in.

I wrote back:

So, there is evolution, but only on the surface of things?

Alice had opted for direct correction feedback (3), so on her first entry I wrote “beings” over “beens”, and “painting” over “peinture” and drew lines through the “s” in “seems” and the “the” she put in before “values”. In her response she used the correct form of “human beings”, and correctly used the third person “s” in “depends”. It's clear that she corrected herself because of this, as my writing provided no model for correction. She also chose not to answer some of my questions. This was fine with me, as choice is an important part of student empowerment. My asking multiple questions encouraged her to answer the ones that were relevant to her, and ignore the ones that were not.

Student Response

Conversations are built on the relative interests and worldviews of the people involved in them. As we are all different, there was little similarity among the written exchanges. Some people stuck to description, week after week. Anne wrote this several weeks into the course, after watching a *60 Minutes* documentary about Liza Minnelli.

We saw a report about Liza Minnelli. She was the daughter of two famous artists. Her mother was Judy Garland, and her father, Vincent Minnelli, the movie director. Herself said she was spoiled by her father. Very young, she was on stage next to her mother. But she preferred to leave her family, she went alone to the city and became chorus girl under a showbiz name.

I responded with the following.

It sounds like her problems started when she was a child. What do you think about this? Do you think that she left home too soon? I know that here in France people often live with their parents for a long time, compared to the U.S. I left home when I was 17. How about you?

Though some people just would not be coaxed out of impersonal description, many of my students began in that mode and evolved into more opinionated and personal writing, perhaps because of my entries. Some easily connected what we watched with their lives. Catherine, who grew up in Hungary, wrote this after watching an episode of *The Wonder Years*.

In Hungary, when I was in school (in the seventies), we had to learn communist values. Teachers spoke about political and social subjects, but not human or personal values. But in my family, my parents taught me tolerance. And you? What did you learn in your family and in school?

Implications

This approach is based on the following underlying concepts.

- **Student choice** True learner autonomy means respecting student choices and allowing them to work out their problems, both in class and in their writing. As much as possible, I try to stay out of the way, and wait for them to invite me to intervene. For me this has meant learning to share the stage, letting go of the kind of control and expectations I was used to. The result has been a consistent freshness and spontaneity I have not experienced in other kinds of classes.

- **Possession of vocabulary** I find it significant that students tend to remember best the vocabulary items they ask me to write down themselves. Doing this in front of the group turns it into a communicative event, one sometimes remembered by the students who ask, as well as by the others, who often remember who the words "belong to".
- **Challenging memory** Work on remembering vocabulary and what went on the week before seems to develop students' memories and sharpen them over time. TV provides a strong visual context which also aids in triggering memory.
- **Real communication** Our shared ongoing reflection in class and in their journals has allowed us to go beyond language and focus on ideas. Using authentic off-air videos in conjunction is consistent with this. Giving primacy to meaning implies that words and grammar are secondary, and that accuracy is an effect, not a direct aim.
- **Overlapping** The four skills and the content of the course are interwoven. The interactive model of viewing, and of communicative writing, allows for questioning, negotiation of meaning, and clarification. The same lexical items kept popping up in unexpected places, probably due to our heightened awareness of them.
- **Culture** Cultural awareness can emerge through misunderstanding. This becomes evident in conversation and writing about what we see on TV. More and more American shows are being shown on French TV, dubbed into French. They are also dubbed for culture, because as the audience here has a different set of cultural reference points, they take on a new meaning. We watch the same shows, but don't see the same things. One day on an American news broadcast here in Paris, an anchorwoman said, "Yabba dabba doo!". What can this mean to someone who has never heard of Fred Flintstone? Talking and writing about language can provide a new set of reference points to see American culture with. This can change the unfamiliar into the familiar, throwing students back on their own culturally-based assumptions, thereby increasing their awareness. As I share and participate in the process, the same happens to me.

Conclusion

I have, nonetheless, encountered some difficulties with this approach. Timing,

getting through the material I want to cover before time runs out, can be tricky. The gap between what seems to be and what is can be a problem, too. Sometimes things that I would assume are obvious or easy to understand for my students are not, and vice versa. Trying to be receptive to their ongoing feedback is not always enough. I have had some surprises, situations in which I misjudged the level of difficulty, what they seemed to like and what they did not. Videos that I thought did not work well in class generated some interesting journal entries. The contrary has happened as well. Ones that worked well in some classes did not in others. Another problem is remembering to balance talking time and viewing time, that is, knowing when to turn the TV off and move into discussion. It's so easy to get absorbed by what is going on on the screen, and give it too much importance.

Just as the mind tells the eye what it sees in reading (Smith) it also tells the ear what it hears. Classwork consists of putting the pieces together. Working on listening and construction of meaning as group activities has shown me that we do all hear and understand different parts of the whole. Sometimes the conclusions are wrong, but usually the right one emerges as if on its own. The wrong ones can be fun to examine too. Corresponding in dialogue journals allows us to connect the classroom with the rest of our lives and provides keys to understanding the world around us.

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