

USING AUDIO AND VIDEO MATERIALS CREATIVELY FOR CONTENT COMPATIBLE TASK-BASED LEARNING IN THE EAP/ESL CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

In an attempt to relate language and cognitive development in the EAP/ESL context, audio and video materials were used for content compatible tasks to encourage meaningful practice of oral and written skills. The aim was also to engage students more actively in their language lessons and help them realize their own standards of proficiency by taking them through a series of staged activities for using language learnt and the eventual refinement of language skills.

Background to the Study

Faced with poor class attendance, a lack of focus among many students and their linguistic deficiencies in spoken and written English, we thought it best to address the problems by re-directing our energies to come up with constructive solutions which incorporate interesting, meaningful and interactive classroom activities. Always mindful of our roles as facilitators to enrich the learning experience of English for our students, we devised activity-related tasks to promote creativity and create opportunities for students to practise the four skills.

There was a novelty in trying out tasks which were neither text-based nor predictable. We attempted to include an element of the unexpected as well as make the tasks "game-like", as students had indicated their preferences for such approaches. The creative content would prove more appealing, especially where (in the case of the video-documentary entitled "*Beyond the Mind's Eye*" produced by Miramar Productions) it was given without any dialogue, thus giving free rein to the imagination. It was also hoped that the music, with its catchy rhythm, would appeal to teenage students. Care was taken to ensure that the video-documentary was well-coordinated and well-strung together, dwelling on abstractions like "metamorphosis", "transformation", "creation", "symbiosis" and "co-existence".

All this would allow our students to respond to and interpret the video-documentary in a number of ways, with no inflexible "right" or "wrong"

responses. As for the audio segment, accuracy of description would help lead students to use appropriate expressions in the course of their work in the laboratories and-for their subject assignments.

The main reason behind the formulating of the tasks was the feedback received from subject lecturers who felt that our students lacked spoken English competency, as they often resorted to giving one-word responses to their lecturers' questions during lessons.

It is hoped that our paper will in some way contribute to increasing student involvement and creativity in our classrooms. When students are enthusiastic and more focused, they are likely to enhance their language performance.

Aims and Objectives

Our aims and objectives are:

1. To discover how much language the students already have, so as to establish the appropriate starting point from which to work.
2. To infuse more interest in English Language lessons.
3. To ensure lessons are learner-centered, communicative and task-based.

What we intend to do is to nurture and create a relevance for language and cognitive development to run in tandem through the selective use of audio and video materials. Besides adding variety to language lesson content, these provide a more universal focus and theme which our students can easily relate to their disciplines.

Among the questions that we perpetually ask ourselves and seek answers for are:

Q: What do Architecture students need in terms of language?

A: They need to be able to explain concepts, conduct oral presentations, verbalize their thoughts and ideas, enhance their visualization, translate ideas and concepts into tangible physical constructions and justify choices made.

One of our Architecture students said: "I need a set of problem-solving skills to think things through, to *verbally* sketch and show, to evaluate ideas and arrive at solutions". Finally, they also need the linguistic and communicative competencies to handle the MUET successfully.

Q: What do our A-Level German engineering students need in terms of language?

A: The language support to help them handle their academic studies with confidence and the linguistic and communicative competencies for the MUET.

Literature Review

Chris Kennedy, the editor of *Innovation and Best Practice* (1999:2), has this advice for English Language teachers:

... we need through negotiation, to fit what we offer with students' demands. ELT will only survive as an active, forward-looking professional activity if it takes note of (current) developments, preferably predicting what further changes may lie ahead. (Kennedy, p.2)

In an ESL environment of linguistic deficiency like ours, it is not encouraging to match teacher expectations with student perceptions of needs. More often than not, the teacher has to take stock of the situation and construct a realistic framework of strategies and teaching materials to ensure they fit or support the students' academic studies. It would be futile to implement short-term measures of transient relevance which ultimately end up underused and redundant.

Learner-centered, Communicative and Task-based Approach

The main contention of this paper rests on Widdowson's call for teaching language as communication (1978, p.16). We believe that the communicative strategies provide meaningful means, and effective ways to enable ESL learners especially those in EAP and ESP courses at our institution, to relate to the language they are taught.

Snow, Met and Genesee (1992), Swain (1995) and Brewster (1999) have added precious fuel to Widdowson's contention with their arguments for tying language to content in EAC (Language Across the Curriculum) programs. In their view, language is most effectively learnt in meaningful, purposeful, social and academic contexts. The integration of language and content adds variety to language lessons for the integrated practice of the four skills. The success of these initiatives rests very much on how the teacher develops potential subject content and manipulates language inputs within a scaffolding framework to achieve the desired goals of language learning.

Content Obligatory and Content Compatible Tasks

Peter Medgyes (1999, p.136) citing Littlejohn's classification (1992) of "learning content" and "carrier content", talked about the problem faced by EAP/ESP teachers who lack the knowledge of their students' majors. These teachers have to wrestle perpetually with the dichotomy of the "learning content" versus the "carrier content". The indecision certainly does not add to the stature of the teacher or the appeal of the English lessons taught.

How a teacher manages this balancing act may very often be dictated by his teaching style. Rivers (1981) clarifies that formalists tend to emphasize the learning content while the activists are more preoccupied with the carrier content. Snow, Met and Genesee (1992) further explain this problem in the content obligatory and content compatible framework proposed. Table 1 is an attempt to summarize and highlight the main features of these two tasks as outlined by Snow, Met and Genesee (1992) and Brewster (1999, pp.85-86).

Table 1: Characteristics of Content Obligatory and Content Compatible Tasks

Task Considerations	Content Obligatory	Content Compatible
Associated with	specific content objectives drawn from <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • lexical items • structural forms • text-based principles 	general objectives drawn from <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the general language syllabus • teacher's observation of students' language skills and analysis of needs • students' future language needs
Language inputs	structural and functional items for skill development	re-cycled language previously learnt, comprehensible input
Teacher types	Formalists – preoccupied with accuracy of form and learning content	Activists / communicative teachers – preoccupied with carrier content and developing students' ability to use L2
Typical Tasks	drills, dictation, hypothesizing, note-taking, information transfer, comprehension and vocabulary, summary ... etc.	describing a process, expressing opinion, making predictions, justifying choices, dialogue construction, role plays, text construction/ reconstruction ... etc.
Emphasis is on	specialized lexical sets, structural forms, cohesive devices and the formal properties of language	use of visuals, hands-on experience, structured activities which provide "scaffolding" and help students use the L2 as a genuine means of communication.

Considerations in Task Design

Bearing in mind the problems which surround the ELT scene (Medgyes 1999) we have based our task design on the criteria outlined for the content compatible category. Appropriate tasks in our opinion would have the following features:

- be intellectually challenging and stimulating
- allow opportunities for language creation
- have an integrated process-oriented slant
- engage learners in purposeful and motivating language learning
- use contextualized clues
- use visuals to provide greater authenticity and widen the scope of activities
- require hands-on experience
- incorporate comprehensible language inputs
- be learner-centered, communicative, task-based and content integrated
- provide scaffolding to ensure the successful completion of tasks
- encourage teamwork and synergy.

Exploring the Vast Potentials of Audio and Video Materials

There are countless, almost limitless possibilities for using audio and video materials for ELT purposes. The success of such lessons hinges on the teacher's ability to define realistic goals and purposes. "Video guru", Richard Cooper and writers like Alan Maley and Alan Duff have been acknowledged for their prolific contributions in their respective fields of material exploitation. (Thalman, 1997). Audio is a highly flexible, cost effective and user-friendly medium (Rowntree, 1999). When used in combination with pictures (audiovision) it provides rich contextual cues to unlock meaning and widen learners' use of appropriate vocabulary.

More recently, Tatsuki (1996) presented a wealth of creative techniques for teaching with video. Excellent resource books on using video in ELT are available from many websites on the web. The more impressive and teacher-friendly ones listed are those of Oxford University Press, the World Bank and the TESOL France website. Television and News networks like CNN, NBC and Reuters provide full transcripts of news stories for classroom use while the archives of e-discussion groups, like TESL-L, have six files with suggestions for using video cameras, video tapes, and lesson worksheets to accompany music videos for a variety of language activities.

While videos provide visual support, there is a need to supplement key visuals or knowledge frameworks (Mohan,1986) to make the discourse structure

explicit and to facilitate effective communication and learning (Zuo, 1996). Worksheet tasks designed to accompany videos encourage students to get more involved in their own learning and provide greater freedom for expression. These enable students to become active producers of language.

Task Implementation

The following is an outline of the tasks given to the students.

Audio Activity: What's that Sound?

Step 1: Provide background information as introduction and motivation.

Set task objectives or purpose of the activity

(e.g. to develop creative use of language;

to develop more accurate use of vocabulary or

to develop teamwork;)

Provide clear instructions

(e.g. Listen to the sounds as they are played.

Relate the sounds to the given pictures.)

Step 2: Tasks While Listening

Write down what these sounds are.

You may use a phrase like: "the ____ing of a/the
____(noun)____"

Play the sounds twice.

Step 3: Share responses and student feedback.

Step 4: Optional follow-up activity.

Play an additional group of sounds related to different situations or emotions

Task: Choose suitable transitions from a given list.

Use the sounds identified in any combination.

Compose an account of the incident.

Give your description a title.

List of transitions provided:

first of all

next

in addition

thus

almost immediately

finally

following that

however

after all

gradually

Step 5: A Journey by Plane [Taken from *Sounds Intriguing* by Alan Maley and Alan Duff (1979)]

Post listening Task: Narrate what happened.

Predict what happened next.

Video Activity: *Beyond the Mind's Eye*

(Refer to Worksheets in Appendices 3a and 3b)

Step 1: Provide background information as introduction and motivation.

Set task objectives or purpose of the activity

(e.g. to develop the creative use of language;

to develop more accurate use of vocabulary or

to develop oral fluency)

Provide clear instructions.

Play video.

Step 2: Tasks While Watching

Sequence the pictures given in the order they appear in the video shown.

Write a suitable caption for each picture.

Play video for the 2nd time.

Step 3: Share responses & student feedback.

Step 4: Post watching Task..

Narrate the sequence of events.

What is the producer's message?

Write a commentary or voice-over for the video segments shown.

(Students can refer to the list of useful phrases given in Appendix 1b)

Step 5: Follow-up developmental task

Predict what the third segment of the video would be like.

If you were the producer, what message would you want to share with viewers?

Are there any elements in the video which have helped you in your discipline of study?

Findings and Student Feedback

The following are some observations, samples of students' work and comments noted.

Audio Activity: What's that Sound?

The first time when this activity was carried out, i.e. in February 2000, quite a few students gave one-word responses such as "drum", "zip", "clock" etc.

There were also instances of inappropriate vocabulary like

"hitting glass" instead of "stirring water ...";
"ignition" instead of "igniting".

Errors in sound identification were common such as "hole puncher" or "stapler" for label maker. This is probably because students rarely use this instrument today.

Coming up with one-word answers arose from students' unfamiliarity with the use of gerunds. However, by April when the activity was carried out for the second time, students were able to produce the correct responses with the help of the given format: "the ___ing of a/the ___(noun)___".

Students commented that accompanying pictures would have enabled them to identify the sounds more accurately in terms of vocabulary and expression.

Expected answers for the taped sounds are:

1. Tap water dripping into a plastic pail.
2. Zipping and unzipping a handbag.
3. Fanning with a piece of folded newspaper.
4. Snipping of a pair of scissors.
5. Stirring a drink / mug of water with a teaspoon.
6. Dropping a bunch / set of keys repeatedly over a hardcover file.
7. Triggering off a spark lighter / gas lighter.
8. Flicking the beads of a miniature abacus.

9. Rolling marbles back and forth in an empty tissue box.
10. The clacking of a label maker.
11. Pulling out pieces of tissue from a box.
12. Opening and shutting the magnetic clasp of a wallet.
13. The ringing of a telephone.

Sound Sequences

A sampling of inappropriate use of vocabulary included the following:

- “order” instead of “instructions”
- “tighten seatbelts” instead of “fasten your seatbelts”
- “going up the plane” instead of “boarding the plane”

Prediction Activity

This activity served to unlock the imagination and language creativity of learners. The apt use of a sprinkling of engineering terms was evident in the description such as “disengage the computer’s command”, “suspended at ..”, “took control of the flight”. Although most versions were not error free, the meaning of the narratives filtered through with ease. Errors with prepositions and vocabulary were common while few problems were encountered with the use of the past tense.

Below is the product of an A-Level engineering student’s efforts. He was helped to edit the surface errors before he came up with this version.

What happened next? Narrate how the story ended.

The passengers panicked and started shouting and the situation went out of control. Everybody was trying to save himself or herself. Suddenly, the plane was suspended at about 30,000 feet above sea level when it got out of control.

The plane started to vibrate violently and there was no electricity for a split second. Then a man came out of the chaotic mess of passengers and moved towards the cockpit. He was an aeronautical engineer who had just got his degree from MIT. After that, the plane started descending and everything was a complete mess. Luggage was scattered everywhere and the kitchen where the food was stored was badly damaged.

At last, Michael arrived at the cockpit but now he had another problem. The door was locked. He forced his entire weight to force the door to unlock. He succeeded after a series of tries. He quickly dashed to the pilot's seat and tried to disengage the computer's command. The situation was getting serious as the plane was at an altitude of 10,000 feet. If he could not make it, nobody would survive this crash.

After struggling for almost ten minutes to disengage the computer's command, he succeeded. Then he took control of the flight and flew the plane to Los Angeles Airport. He was the hero and everybody thanked him for his bravery. He was then offered the position of Head Aircraft Engineer at LA Airport.

~April 2000~

Video Activity

After viewing the video twice, students were able to come up with captions like "Everything must come to an end", "The Good and the Bad", "The Creation of Man", "Butterfly in Flight" and so forth. This seems to show that they are capable of and comfortable with writing short expressions which do not require verbs to express ideas and concepts.

When they were given time to refine and edit their oral presentation into a paragraph for submission, their final products displayed a variety of ideas and different levels of processing. Some came out with very explicit straightforward sequential narration to talk about processes they could or could not identify, while others took it to a higher level of abstraction. Yet others re-worked the ideas into beautiful poetic verses to grace the opening pages of their architectural portfolios.

Parts of an example of a sequential narration:

- How Life Started on Earth
 - ...After a period of time, not only small plants started to grow but also larger and more stable trees appeared as well...
 - ... Then the tunnels were explored At the end of the tunnels, we were surprised as almost everything changed.
 - ... What we could see was something that separated into two physical structures which then combined and flew away in different directions into the darkness... Finally, the earth's surface started to shape itself into hills, mountains, rivers and oceans.

Below are two examples of more abstract end products:

- Dreams are subjective. Beneath their swirling and spiral images lie not on our deepest hopes but also our greatest fears.
- The conclusion of the animation is, if a good seed is thrown into the sea it can transform into an island. So if we human beings are taught to be highly intellectual, just like the seed, we ought to make the world a better place to live in.

An example of a reworked product which verges on the beautiful and sublime:
(This was written to accompany the student's project on the design layout for "Lat's Gallery")

Lat's Gallery

**retrospective for perspective
the journey is full of uncertainties
leads to endless possibilities
doubt will lead to misery
let the past, light the way
so face ourselves and face reality
perhaps reflections could make us see
reflections of our identity
reflections of our humanity
reflections of history
reflections of you and me**

Fadzlan J.

Diploma in Architecture

In their feedback, some students gave encouraging comments and lauded the usefulness of the activity. A few, on the other hand, confessed their lack of satisfaction and blamed themselves for failing to take the initiative.

"I'm not so happy with my performance. ... I think my English this semester is worse than before. I should blame myself for this. I confess that I lack practice."

The emerging pattern of enhanced students' writing ability and their accompanying clearer thinking and refining processes are very encouraging signs. These reaffirm our belief that students when motivated in the right way,

can make appreciable improvement and will work to refine their English language skills with little or no teacher guidance.

Recommendations and Conclusion

Overall, the activities were well received. There was a general enthusiasm among our students for trying them out at each stage. Answers were promptly submitted and they were eager to find out the correct responses although it was made plain that some of the exercises were open to their own interpretations.

It must be cautioned that a single activity, however well designed will not spark off a trail of success. It has to be an on-going effort on the part of the teacher plus the presence of a very supportive framework of resource provision on the part of the parent institution. We have been very fortunate in this respect as we have enjoyed the continuous support of the PPLN UiTM Section 17 Shah Alam Media Unit personnel.

Incorporating the creative use of audio and video materials is certainly a positive step towards generating more meaningful and interactive language learning in the EAP/ESL classroom. Language and cognitive development can be promoted as these non-print materials provide multi-dimensional sensory appeal. Moreover, the universal themes that these materials touch on can be easily integrated into students' academic disciplines.

The fact that students produced work that went beyond their normal level of proficiency and our expectations, was indeed an encouraging indicator of the effectiveness of the activities. Having said that, we believe there is no single magic formula to sustain the interest of students in the language classroom. We have taken the initial steps towards more innovative teaching and learning. Our search for best practice will not end here as innovation is a never-ending process.

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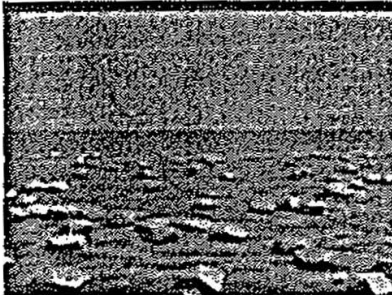
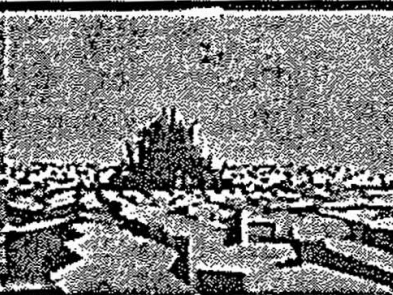

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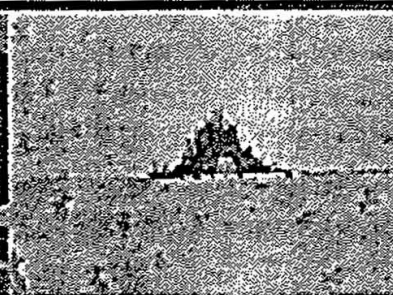
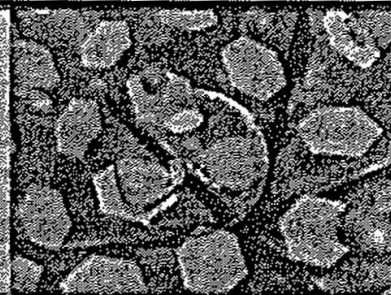
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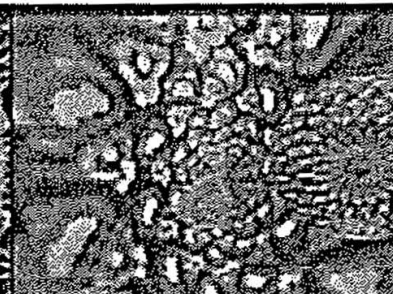
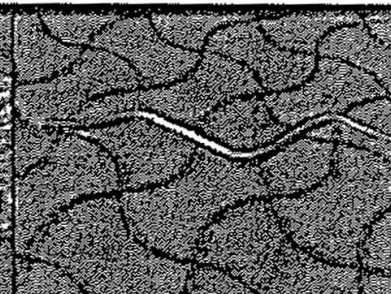
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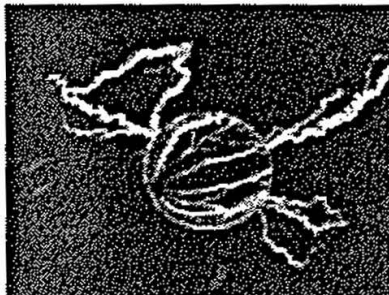
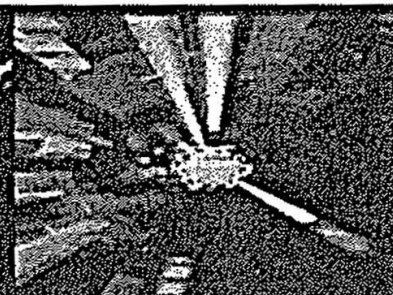

TESL-L (see list of files available from Linda Thalman's "Video Cassettes and the Internet" page at <http://www.wfi.fr/volterre/videoweb.html/>)

Appendix 1a: Video Worksheet: Sequencing of Printed Still-frames

		
A [Sequence No.]] Caption:.....	B [Sequence No.]] Caption:.....	C [Sequence No.]] Caption:.....

		
D [Sequence No.]] Caption:.....	E [Sequence No.]] Caption:.....	F [Sequence No.]] Caption:.....

		
G [Sequence No.]] Caption:.....	H [Sequence No.]] Caption:.....	I [Sequence No.]] Caption:.....

		
J [Sequence No.]] Caption:.....	K [Sequence No.]] Caption:.....	L [Sequence No.]] Caption:.....

Appendix 1b: Video Worksheet – Producer’s message, composing a commentary.

Beyond the Mind’s Eye:

“Imagination will put you in a dream beyond the mind’s eye”

Writing Task 1:

- What is the producer’s message
- Which part(s) of the video do you like or dislike? Why?
- Write a commentary (voice-over) to accompany the video.

In our view, the producer

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

The part which we liked / disliked is the scene which shows

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

Why? (Give reasons to support your answer)

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

Commentary:

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

Useful words & phrases

- flicker – glow – beam – ray – flash
- twinkling – gleaming
- clusters of light
- floating aimlessly
- whirlpool
- rotating spiral
- explosion
- fusion
- merging of shapes and colours
- profusion of colours
- radiating glow
- sprouting plants
- shooting streams of light
- leaves gently unfurl
- lush greenery
- cascading river
- gentle rain
- marine life
- impact
- insects in flight
- seed explodes
- galaxy
- families of trees
- flying over a canyon
- falling into an abyss
- a maze
- flying creatures
- dinosaur
- eerie haunting
- butterfly in flight
- expulsion of seeds
- seed pods
- great velocity
- natural process
- controlled movements