

Teaching Tips

Welcoming an American Sit-com to the ESL Classroom

Maya Moore, Rogue Community College

Videos are not considered required materials for most ESL classrooms, and in fact many instructors don't bother to use them. This can be either because their classrooms lack the equipment or because the video theme or grammar point does not closely reflect class objectives. But videos do provide context in a way no other medium can—not even cartoon strips or role-playing. For one, stories presented on video are three-dimensional with “real” people speaking and acting. The teacher does not necessarily present or explain, as the story unfolds naturally before students' eyes. Also, unlike in reading and generated grammar sentences, the people in videos speak quickly and somewhat naturally, depending on the series. Every utterance is linked to another utterance or action.

Lately it's been a challenge to find videos that suit my upper-intermediate class. Crossroads Café, which is actually geared for a multi-level classroom, is a wonderful series for most students. Yet, the grammar points are too simple for most intermediate to advanced students. In addition, the actors speak more slowly than in real-life and sometimes in a contrived manner, since they are playing characters with accents. There are many other high quality video series, including Side-by-Side Interactive and Top Notch TV. Again, these seem geared towards lower levels, and they can be expensive.

I don't blame teachers for not using mod-

ern sit-coms. During my own quest I found that American sit-coms tend to offer humor that is either too subtle or inappropriate (in my opinion) for the classroom. I was disheartened when I realized lesbianism was being introduced in the very first episode of Friends, not the kind of topic I want to joke about with my students!

I eventually settled on two episodes, “Happy Birthdays” and “Max's Big Adventure,” from the sit-com “George Lopez.” This show features the famous Latino comedian playing himself. First of all, the protagonist is a man of Hispanic descent who is living with his wife and two children in the suburbs of Los Angeles. These are characters I would hope at least some students could relate to. I also liked that the main character, George, is in a position of new power. He has just been promoted to supervisor at the airplane parts factory where he has worked “on the line” for many years. So, the Lopez family is of Hispanic origin, yet middle class, with a lot of the same problems and concerns that other middle-class Americans have.

Another phenomenon that I've seen with my Level 4 students is that many have been living in Southern Oregon long enough to own their own homes and run their own businesses. This is a far cry from Mr. Brashov of Crossroads Café, who in one episode doesn't seem to understand the process of obtaining a bank loan. Many of the popular textbooks also fail to reflect this

*the story unfolds naturally
before students' eyes*

level of autonomy. In many instances textbooks feature characters who are either newly arrived immigrants or working at minimum wage jobs.

In “George Lopez,” the actors speak quite clearly, with barely any accent (they were born in the US, after all). They have specific personality traits expressed by their actions. George’s mother Bennie, for example, is always tough and sarcastic, and we learn that she is a single mom who raised George in extreme poverty. George’s best friend Ernie, on the other hand, is a grown man in his thirties who still lives with his parents. Ernie’s situation is fodder for numerous jokes, which leads me to the main reason I like the series. The jokes are really funny, in a slapstick laugh-out-loud way.

Suggestions for using the video

The importance of using closed captioning was made painfully clear during my first attempt. I could not find a well-functioning DVD player, and the students told me that they could only understand about 30-40% of what was said. The second time met with greater success when I procured well-functioning equipment that had the option of closed captioning. Here is a brief lesson plan for the first scene in “Max’s Big Adventure,” where a police officer comes to arrest one of George’s employees at the parts factory.

Total time: about 30 minutes

1. Go over vocabulary words, such as “warrant,” “shred,” “felon,” “wrestle,” and “carpool”.
2. Read through comprehension questions with the class. (Mine were really basic, such as “Why was Reggie being arrested? What did he do?” Answer: He beat up a man in a bar. “Why was Bennie upset about the arrest?” Answer: Reggie has the best car in the carpool.)
3. Play the video segment.

4. Students work in groups of three or four to answer the questions.
5. Go over answers with students and explain any jokes they didn’t understand.
6. Play the segment again.

I introduced the rest of the video story by asking students how they felt about children walking to school alone. The episode addressed this issue, as well as the theme of keeping kids safe and how much to tell them about the “real world.” I played the episode with subtitles, stopping it only occasionally to check in with the students about how much of the story they comprehended. We capped the episode with a lively discussion, in the same small groups, about how and when to introduce issues of safety and explain “real world dangers” to children. One student described how she used fairy tales such as Little Red Riding Hood to explain dangers to her toddler. Another student, who was a preschool teacher, described some of the approaches used at the school where he worked. The discussion lasted about twenty minutes and brought up other related issues and vocabulary.

After my brief yet positive experience with “Max’s Big Adventure,” I believe a curriculum package could be successfully built around the George Lopez series, divided into manageable segments, with worksheets to practice grammar (they use a lot of present perfect tense), vocabulary and comprehension questions. Any takers? Until there are, I think that with minimal preparation, George Lopez can still be a fun and innovative, not to mention hilarious, addition to the intermediate- or advanced-level ESL classroom.

Maya Moore teaches English as a Second Language and Academic Skills classes at Rogue Community College in Medford. She is also owner and director of The Language Spot, a language-learning center in Ashland, Oregon. She received her Ed.M in Adult Education from Oregon State University in 2006.