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## **Extensive Viewing: Language learning through watching television**

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### **Introduction**

Television is a source of information and entertainment, and for many people it is an integral part of daily life. A survey of the average household television viewing time in 13 countries revealed that television was watched from 2.43 hours per day in Sweden to 8.18 hours per day in the United States (OECD, 2007). In fact, television might be the greatest source of first language input. Canadians and Americans watch television five times more than they read (Statistics Canada, 1998, United States Department of Labor, 2006).

The greatest value of television for language learning might be its potential to provide large amounts of L2 spoken input, which can contribute to the development of vocabulary knowledge and listening comprehension, as well as other aspects of L2 learning. Perhaps the greatest challenge in L2 learning in the EFL context, where L2 input is typically lacking, is developing a vocabulary size beyond the most frequent 2000 words. Cobb (2007) found that although extensive reading might be an effective method of developing word knowledge, there are likely to be insufficient encounters with lower frequency words to develop much vocabulary knowledge beyond the high frequency words. Research investigating the lexical profiles of different discourse types indicated that a vocabulary size of 8000-9000 word families is necessary to understand newspapers and novels (Nation, 2006). Since there is clearly not enough classroom time to teach that many words, L2 learning programs need to find ways to help their learners reach this language learning target. Watching L2 television

extensively as a supplement to extensive reading could help to fill the need for greater L2 input.

Extensive viewing involves regular silent uninterrupted viewing of L2 television inside and outside of the classroom. It was proposed as an approach to improve vocabulary learning through increasing the amount of meaning-focused spoken input that EFL learners receive (Webb, 2009). [There is also an argument for including L2 movies within an extensive viewing approach (see Webb & Rodgers, 2009a; Webb, 2010b); however, because L2 television offers advantages over movies such as shorter running times and the development of background knowledge through viewing different episodes of one program, it should represent the core material in an extensive viewing approach]. The primary aim of extensive viewing is to encourage regular independent out-of-class L2 television viewing after initial classroom-based viewing. The purpose of a classroom-based viewing program is to raise awareness of the benefits of L2 television for language learning, teach learners strategies that can be used to support their comprehension, and demonstrate that through implementing a principled extensive viewing approach, comprehension may be sufficient for pleasurable viewing.

Although extensive viewing might begin in the classroom, its greatest value lies in out-of-class viewing. The reason for this is that the gains made through classroom-based viewing in one or two courses may be relatively small; 20-40 hours of meaning-focused input, while useful, can account for only so much learning. However, if participation in a classroom-based extensive viewing program motivates learners to do one or two hours of out-of class viewing per week, the gains made through an additional 52-104 hours per year may be considerable. It is the long-term benefits of autonomous extensive viewing that should be carefully considered in any discussion of the value of television rather than the relative language learning gains of a classroom-based extensive viewing program.

There has been a great deal of research demonstrating the value of extensive reading. However, television has been neglected to a large degree in the language learning literature. This may be due in part to the perception of television as a source of entertainment rather than education, as well as the greater challenges of researching a discourse type that is not easily manipulated. However, the research findings, while limited to a relatively small number of studies, do consistently indicate that watching L2 television may contribute to incidental vocabulary learning gains in the same way as reading L2 books.

In a corpus-driven study of the vocabulary in television programs, Webb & Rodgers (2009b) found that with a relatively small amount of television viewing of unrelated programs (35 hours), there was a relatively large amount of repetition among lower frequency words. They concluded that with regular viewing over a long period of time, there is the potential for large gains in vocabulary knowledge. Rodgers (2013) research is the most comprehensive study of language learning with television. He

found that university students learning EFL in Japan incidentally learned vocabulary through watching ten 43-minute episodes of an American drama over 10 weeks, and that their vocabulary gains were similar in size to those made through reading a graded reader over a similar length of time (Horst, Cobb, and Meara, 1998). The finding that watching television contributes to vocabulary learning is supported by a number of studies that have shown that L2 words are learned through watching short videos (e.g., Rice & Woodsmall, 1988). Rodgers (2013) research also revealed that the participants' listening comprehension improved from the first episode viewed to the tenth and final episode. Taken together, these studies indicate the potential that television may have as a resource for extensive learning. However, further research is needed to support a learning approach that may initially be controversial.

### **Vignette**

Haruna is a first-year university student in Japan and is beginning her seventh year of formal English language instruction. She has always done well in her English language classes, but despite this feels that her listening comprehension is poor. Although she can understand dialogues from course books, and the speech of her teacher and other students in the classroom, she has struggled to understand English spoken to her when traveling abroad, and conversations between friends who are native English speakers. When she discusses this with her teacher, he suggests that she enrol in the extensive viewing course next semester.

At the end of the course, Haruna's teacher advises students to continue the approach that they have taken in class and watch television using a narrow viewing approach at home. Haruna decides to give this a try and rents several DVDs of English language programs. Once she found one that she liked, she watched it in the same way that she would watch Japanese programs; in sequence from the first episode to the last episode. Sometimes she watches an episode more than once when it is a little more difficult to understand. She is happy to study English in this way; it is fun and she can see that she is making progress with her listening comprehension.

### **Principles**

EFL learners may typically experience language learning through watching L2 television in two ways. First, they might encounter L2 television in the classroom. This will usually involve watching random episodes or short excerpts of television programs and then completing activities designed around teaching points. These short intensive viewing activities can be an enjoyable change from more common paper-based learning activities. However, they provide little L2 input, and may do relatively little to develop listening comprehension and vocabulary knowledge.

The second way that EFL learners may experience L2 television is on their own outside of the classroom. For some learners, their determination to learn language through watching television may outweigh any comprehension difficulties that they experience and they may persevere and continue to watch L2 television to some extent. However, the majority of EFL learners may be overwhelmed by the speed of the discourse in L2 television, as well as the amount of connected speech, unfamiliarity with the spoken forms of many known words, and the many unknown

words that are encountered. Eventually, in these cases, learners may simply assume that they are not at the appropriate level for pleasurable viewing or that L2 television is simply too difficult.

If relatively few learners watch much L2 television, the question is then how can we make better use of television as a resource for language learning? In an extensive viewing approach, L2 television viewing begins in the classroom. Classroom-based programs can be designed to provide support for listening comprehension, educate students about the value of watching L2 television regularly, and teach learners about strategies they can use to better understand programs. Through using a principled approach to watching L2 television, students may develop sufficient listening comprehension to motivate autonomous out-of-class extensive viewing.

Extensive viewing programs should be designed around principles that guide students towards comprehensible and pleasurable out-of-class viewing. The following six principles are of greatest importance to starting up an extensive viewing program.

Principle 1: The language learning benefits of extensive viewing must be clear to everyone involved

Television is most commonly seen as a form of entertainment rather than a platform for learning. Because of this, students, teachers, program directors, and parents may be sceptical of the value of extensive viewing. Educating everyone involved about the language learning benefits of extensive viewing is essential before beginning a

classroom-based program that aims to move students toward autonomous out-of-class viewing. The benefits include improved listening comprehension and vocabulary learning (Rodgers, 2013). Vocabulary learning may occur through the learning of new words, as well as consolidating knowledge of partially known words, and improving recognition of the spoken forms of words. It should also be clearly stated that the greatest learning gains from extensive viewing may not occur in the classroom, but outside of the classroom. If students watch L2 television regularly over a long period of time, learning gains should be a function of television viewing time; with greater viewing time, comprehension and vocabulary learning should improve to a larger degree.

#### Principle 2: Learners should be at the appropriate level

Language learners might be motivated to learn through watching television. However, their motivation is likely to be impacted by the extent to which they can understand programs. If learners begin too early, their comprehension may be too low for pleasurable viewing and a lack of enjoyment is likely to discourage further viewing. Because the primary aim of extensive viewing is to increase L2 input, it is important that classroom-based viewing should encourage out-of-class viewing. Webb and Rodgers (2009b) suggested that if learners knew the most frequent 3000 word families, they may be able to adequately understand television. However, Rodgers (2013) found that learners who knew the most frequent 2000 word families but had not yet mastered the 3000 word level had sufficient comprehension of a television program for extensive viewing. These participants also reported that they enjoyed extensive learning with television and found it useful for language learning. This suggests that once students have mastered the 2000 high frequency words, it might be

appropriate for them to begin a classroom-based extensive viewing program.

### Principle 3: Listening comprehension should be supported

An effort should be made to support listening comprehension in the classroom, because improved comprehension may lead to more pleasurable viewing. There are several ways that comprehension of L2 television programs can be supported. First, extensive viewing should incorporate a narrow viewing approach (Rodgers & Webb, 2011). Narrow viewing involves watching different episodes of the same program in chronological order. Through narrow viewing students should develop background knowledge of the characters and their relationships, the setting, and the storyline that aids comprehension of subsequent episodes. Another reason for narrow viewing is that the lexical load of different episodes of the same program is lighter than unrelated episodes of different programs (Rodgers & Webb, 2011). This is because each program tends to contain topic-related vocabulary that often reoccurs. This results in a smaller number of different words used in multiple episodes of one program than in random episodes of different programs. Frequent encounters with topic-related words also has a positive effect on vocabulary learning because repetition with the same words increases the potential for vocabulary learning (Webb, 2007). Teachers should raise awareness of the value of a narrow viewing approach with their students to support out-of-class viewing.

Comprehension can also be supported through the creation of glossaries that list key words (Webb, 2010c) and materials designed to increase background knowledge of

the characters and storyline. As extensive viewing programs are developed, libraries of materials to support comprehension of different programs can be created and made available to students for their own use. This would be particularly useful in self-access centres where students might be able to choose a program and review supporting materials before viewing. In the classroom, it may also be useful to pre-teach a small number of words that are very frequent in an episode or items that are critical to comprehension. Pre-learning as few as 10 frequently occurring words in an episode can have a relatively large effect on the percentage of known words (Webb, 2010a), and this in turn may have a positive effect on comprehension.

Another useful way to support comprehension is to have students watch an episode of a program more than once. Research has shown that multiple readings of the same text can improve comprehension (Dowhower, 1987) and vocabulary learning (Webb & Chang, 2012). In initial episodes of extensive viewing or in episodes that are more difficult to understand, repeated viewing might provide a way to help learners to better understand a program.

There is also some evidence that L2 captions may provide support for comprehension. For example, Winke, Gass and Sydorenko (2010) found that foreign language learners who watched videos with captions had superior comprehension scores to those who watched without captions. However, Rodgers (2013) found no statistically significant difference between learners who watched 10 episodes of television with captions and those who did not. However, the participants in that study did report that they found extensive viewing with captions to be useful. Rodgers recommended that when captions are available they might support learning, particularly for the more difficult episodes of a television program.

#### Principle 4: Precise comprehension should be a goal rather than a requirement

The degree of listening comprehension when viewing L2 television may move along a continuum from incomprehensible through to degrees of partial comprehension and then finally to precise comprehension. In L1 television viewing, we expect to have precise comprehension. However, in the initial stages of L2 television viewing, comprehension might be less than adequate and the support of teachers may be required. This is why a classroom-based approach is initially necessary. Teachers can support their students' comprehension, make them aware that comprehension should gradually increase over time, and help get them to the point where they can watch L2 television for enjoyment without support.

#### Principle 5: Classroom-based extensive viewing guides out-of-class viewing

It was suggested earlier that when many language learners try to watch L2 television on their own they may be discouraged from subsequent viewing because of a lack of comprehension. One goal of classroom-based extensive viewing is to make students aware that when they have reached the appropriate vocabulary size, they should be able to understand and enjoy watching L2 television. The teacher's job is to show students that this is possible, as well as to teach them strategies to support their comprehension when they are watching television outside of the classroom.

#### Principle 6: Learners should watch L2 television as much as possible

Encouraging learners to watch as much L2 television as possible draws on Day and Bamford's (2002) 10 principles for extensive reading (see also Chapter 1). There may be relatively little gained through viewing L2 television if it is rarely or occasionally watched. However, if L2 television is watched often over a long period of time, then there may be substantial development in vocabulary knowledge, listening comprehension, and other aspects of L2 learning.

Extensive viewing can be contrasted with intensive viewing in the classroom, where students watch short clips in order to learn some aspect of language. Although there is also value to this more typical approach to using television in the classroom, the long-term benefits of extensive viewing will likely far outweigh what can be gained through occasional and sporadic viewing. Extensive viewing also differs from how learners may watch television on their own, where comprehension of a program may be challenging and learners may be quickly discouraged. It is the supportive environment of the classroom-based learning program that may help to move learners beyond the point where they are discouraged by imprecise comprehension.

### **Applications**

One of the positive features of an extensive viewing program is that L2 television programs are a widely available resource for language learning. They can often be viewed on television in foreign language contexts, watched online, rented from DVD shops, or purchased. It is best for students to watch in a context where they have control of the material. A format such as DVD or online streaming is ideal, because it is possible to have repeated viewings of an episode.

Selection of programs for out-of-class viewing should be according to interests. What is interesting and entertaining for one learner may be dull and displeasing for another. Making students aware of the approaches to support comprehension in out-of-class extensive viewing is more important than the choice of programs. Students should be taught about the value of using a narrow viewing approach that begins with episode 1 of season 1, as well as watching the same episode more than once when comprehension is particularly challenging. Similarly, students should be encouraged to continue watching television if they are enjoying the content, but do not have precise comprehension.

Teachers should use two criteria to select a television program for classroom-based extensive viewing. First, the selected program should be one that students are likely to be interested and excited to watch. In a narrow viewing approach where different episodes of a single program are watched this is particularly important because if students enjoy the selected program, they are more likely to be motivated to watch subsequent episodes, attend to the language during viewing, and notice their learning gains. The second criterion for selection is the lexical profile of the television program. Freely available lexical profiling software such as RANGE (Nation & Heatley, 2002) and VocabProfile on Tom Cobb's Compleat Lexical Tutor site allow teachers to analyze the scripts of episodes that are available online to determine the proportion of words at different frequency levels that occur in the scripts. Programs that are easier to understand tend to contain a higher proportion of high frequency words than those that contain a higher proportion of lower frequency words. Teachers

can quickly use lexical profiling software to get an indication of the lexical difficulty of different programs.

### **Payoffs and pitfalls**

There are several challenges to implementing an extensive viewing program. Perhaps the greatest challenge is getting everyone involved to buy into the educational value of language learning through extensive viewing. Because of the fact that television is typically viewed as a form of entertainment rather than a source of learning, many people are likely to be sceptical about the benefits of regular L2 television viewing in the classroom. Educating all stake holders about the value of having students watch L2 television regularly is a necessary prerequisite for classroom-based extensive viewing. Teachers may be hesitant to include extensive viewing in a language learning program if their colleagues and program directors are not aware of the related language learning benefits. Students may also struggle to understand why something designed to entertain is taking up a portion of classroom time. Moreover, the parents of younger students are unlikely to be enthusiastic about a television-based learning course without being informed of the reasons why extensive viewing is useful.

A second challenge is having teachers accept a supporting role in an extensive viewing program rather than a central teacher-fronted role. In other words, teachers may have a difficult time simply letting their students have continued silent uninterrupted viewing of L2 television. However, it is important that classroom-based extensive viewing does not get broken down into watching short segments with the learners focused on completing intensive learning activities. This will move the nature of viewing away from comprehension of meaning-focused input and toward a more

language-focused orientation. Instead pre-learning activities that aim to support comprehension and meaning focused post-viewing activities that have the objective of consolidating knowledge may be most useful.

A third challenge to extensive viewing is setting up a classroom-based program that involves regular viewing over time. If the greatest language learning gains made through extensive viewing come from outside of the classroom, it is fair to question the value of implementing a classroom-based extensive viewing program.

Furthermore, there might be a belief among teachers that students can simply watch a target L2 television program on their own at home, and that valuable teaching time should be spent on language-focused instruction. However, it is critical that extensive viewing first takes place in the classroom. There are several reasons for this. First, it shows students the value that is being placed on meaning-focused language learning with television. If extensive viewing is dismissed as belonging solely outside of the classroom, then many students may not take the task of viewing seriously or quickly give up. Students are more likely to focus their efforts on the aspects of language learning that are emphasized inside the classroom. Second, initial classroom-based viewing ensures that students watch L2 television in an environment where their comprehension can be supported. Third, regular classroom-based viewing over time with support may help students to reach the point where they are motivated to start the same process outside of the classroom. Furthermore, as more and more language learners begin to watch L2 television, there may be a snowball effect where the value of television as a L2 learning resource becomes better known and more and more learners are encouraged to develop knowledge through extensive viewing. Similarly,

because of the popularity of L1 television within society, extensive viewing programs may motivate less proficient learners to reach the point where they can begin a classroom-based extensive viewing program.

## **Resources**

Television shows are widely available. Purchasing DVD's of full seasons of programs is perhaps the most useful way to acquire the materials for classroom-based extensive viewing. This would allow the development of libraries of different programs.

Glossaries, background information, and perceived difficulty levels could be created for each new program over time to support comprehension. Television programs can also be purchased in the same way for out-of-class extensive viewing. However, they may often be streamed online at the sites of the networks that air the programs, or purchased for download. Moreover, rental shops may also stock L2 television programs. Thus, if the technological resources are available to students, it should be relatively easy to find material available for extensive viewing.

## **Discussion questions**

1. To what extent do you currently use television as a resource for language learning?
2. What are the advantages and disadvantages of using television as material for language learning?
3. Who could benefit from participating in an extensive viewing program?
4. What are the challenges to implementing a classroom-based extensive viewing

program in your context?

5. What are the challenges for students moving from a classroom-based extensive viewing program to out-of-class extensive viewing?

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