

LANGUAGE TEACHING AND MEDIA LITERACY

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1. Introduction

The purpose of this article is to present a proposal for using media resources in the classroom. The underlying reason is to raise awareness of the potential that the mass media product offers in teaching a foreign language and to point out that we have more material within easy reach than we believe. First, I will discuss the role of mass media in language development and language teaching in particular. Second, I will put forward a proposal for using mass media products which involves discussing the role of mother tongue and of genre theory with regard to dealing with diversity– or different levels– in the classroom. Third, I will give some examples of the types of exercises that may be useful and easy to design for using mass media resources in teaching English, or any other foreign language.

2. The Mass Media

As teachers of foreign languages, we are now teaching a generation that is privileged in their knowledge of mass media. As argued by Connell *et al.* (1996:10), "no generation has a bigger media history because no previous generation has had access to so many different kinds of media and such a range of media products". Before radio and television, the students' only access to knowledge was the school. Nowadays, the media precede us. When students come to school, they have already learned a great deal from TV, radio, internet, etc., a fact that we should not ignore but take advantage of. There is practically no way of avoiding the mass media. They are part of our life. Thus, if we teach students how to analyse mass media products we are helping the student to develop a whole range of individual, practical, social, cultural and intellectual skills which they will need in the future. We ought to start taking TV, computer games, internet, etc. seriously and use them not only as teaching material but as an efficient way to motivate the students. We should make them understand how these mass media work, that is, our students should be media literate.

Among the mass media, it is clear that television has the greatest significant and continued impact on our present culture. Watching television is the third activity— after work and sleep— which occupies most of our time; more than 56% of the Spanish population admits that TV is their only pastime (Ferrés 1998). As argued by Gronbeck (1979:3) with regard to television: "it is specially important... because of television's pervasiveness and potential power, that students of all ages be taught a critical attitude and method for exercising that attitude." Along the same lines, Ferrés (1998:15) argues "si educar exige preparar a los ciudadanos para integrarse de una manera reflexiva y crítica en la sociedad, ¿cómo se integrarán unos ciudadanos que no estén preparados para realizar de una manera crítica aquella actividad a la que más horas dedican?" My question is addressed to teachers of foreign languages. That is, if we admit that the mass media have a crucial role in language development, as they do in any societal change, should we not as teachers of English as a foreign language be teaching our students about the language of the mass media? Although it may seem sometimes irrelevant to do exercises based on vocabulary, grammatical structures, pragmatic failure, etc (cf. Gregori, Pennock and Bou 1998), based on certain mass media products, it is not. These exercises help to raise awareness about language features and, in particular, about generic conventions, a first step for developing a critical attitude. As Christie (1985:22) argues: "learning the genres of one's culture is both part of entering into it with understanding, and part of developing the necessary ability to change it." Thus, if students learn about different genres used in the mass media, they will be conscious about what they want to keep and what they want to change in them.

3. Genre studies

The study of genres has long figured in both academic and media discourse (cf. Altman 1998, Bakhtin 1979, Bhatia 1993, Ventola 1987, Swales 1990, Martin 1985, McCarthy 1998). Hymes (1967:25) includes *genre* as one of his components of speech and argues that "the notion of genre implies the possibility of identifying formal characteristics traditionally recognised" (1972:65). Genre is, paradoxically, a difficult concept to define but an easy one to understand. The existence of genres is openly admitted in both linguistics and media studies. Borrowing Halliday's words, I believe that "there is a generic structure in all discourse, including the most spontaneous conversation" (Halliday 1978:134) and that, as argued by McCarthy (1998), one has to analyse and go deeply into examples of the same genre to understand each structure.

Although a genre is ultimately an abstract conception rather than something that exists empirically in the world (cf. Feuer 1992:144), genre is also, paradoxically, a concept that students can easily grasp, understand and most important, identify. If you ask a student if *Compañeros* and *El Informal* belong to the same genre, they would answer, with no qualms

about it, that they do not. In this sense, studies carried out by Jaglom and Gardner (1981) and Buckingham (1993; quoted in Chandler 1997) have brought about considerable evidence of children using notions of genre, both explicitly and implicitly. As argued by Chandler (1997) children showed an awareness that the programmes could be categorised in several ways. Genre was one of the principles which all of the groups (barring one of the youngest) used in completing the task. Furthermore, the children's repertoire of genre labels increased with age. Buckingham (1993:154) argues that "as their repertoire of terms expands, this enables them to identify finer distinctions between programmes, and to compare them in a greater variety of ways". Hence, a generic approach to media can be very useful in order to classify, organise and use media resources in the classroom.

The problem with a generic approach to media products, in particular with regard to television, is that genres are in a constant state of flux and redefinition (cf. Feuer 1992). Intertextuality and hybridness are two key characteristics of television programmes. Hence, White (1985) states, the difficulty to describe and differentiate television programmes according to generic categories (cf. Altman 1984). It is not difficult to assess what types of mass media products the teacher will come across. We may find examples that can be easily assigned to a particular genre; or, on the contrary, we may find examples that deviate from well-established generic conventions. Concerning our choice of programmes to be used in the classroom, we can choose either or alternate between the two— depending on the purpose of each exercise. Whatever our choice, the fact is that different categories such as soap operas, crime dramas, game shows, etc., may be distinguished by their programming slots and an array of shared conventions, which most of us are, in general terms, familiar with.

Two questions arise here: 1. How does the teacher get hold of the material? 2. How does s/he design exercises based on that material? The first question is inevitably related to the fact that the production of the mass media is massive and that it is impossible to keep up with everything. So, how is the teacher expected to select the material? How long is it going to take him/her to find that material? How useful is that material going to be?

Apart from the material that we can easily buy (cassettes, videos, etc.) we can also devise our own material from television, radio and newspapers data. My first suggestion would be to choose programmes, articles, etc. that are of interest for the students. In doing so, however, one subsequent problem arises: in the case of television programmes, for example, they may be interested in a nationally produced series which is not available in English. Thus, the ensuing question, should we use material which is in the learner's native language? I will answer this question in section 4. The second question relates to a problem that all teachers face: the design of exercises is time-consuming, specially if it has to do with audio-visual material. Thus, if we have a set of exercises that serves as a basis, and that can be adapted to any mass media product, the task may be immensely simplified for the teacher. My purpose here is to present examples of exercises which can be easily updated with whatever programme/printed material

that you may be working with. Such examples are not intended to be exhaustive but illustrative of the types of exercises that one can devise.

4. Mother tongue

The question raised in the discussion above is if the teacher of English as a foreign language or any other foreign language should be encouraged to use, for example, television programmes in the students' mother tongue. That is, should we allow the *input* (Ellis 1985) to be in the learner's native language? The role of the mother tongue in relation to language transfer and its interference in the process of language learning has long been debated, as part of the series of "revolutions that took place in an attempt to reach some consensus about the best way— 'the one true way' (Strasheim 1976) to teach a foreign language" (Omaggio 1993:73). It has often been stated that the influence of the mother tongue is negative rather than positive, "as argued by the notion of transfer invoked during the Contrastive Analysis period since they believed the L1 interfered with L2 learning" (Bou 1998:6). However, this view changed radically— as argued by Bou (1998), in relation to the role of the L1 interlanguage pragmatics— when authors like Selinker (1972), Nemser (1971) and James (1971) treated transfer as one of several processes involved. Consequently, researchers started to investigate how transfer interacts with other processes. Along the same lines Ellis (1994:309) minimised the importance of the L1 and emphasised the similarity between L2 and L1 acquisition. Thus, different approaches have different views on the matter.

The answer to the question of whether we should use material in the learner's mother tongue is twofold. Some teachers would be totally opposed. Some others, like myself, would be— at least to a certain extent— in favour. I believe that there is nothing wrong in using the learner's mother tongue as a stimulus, as a reference resource to help classroom *interaction* (Ellis 1985) and that the learners can largely benefit from it. For one, it is sometimes difficult for the teacher of a foreign language to have access to all the material s/he may think of using in the target language (specially TV and radio programmes). Two, sometimes familiarity with the material used (e.g. in the case of TV series) may be more beneficial since it may increase motivation. And third, because in doing so, our students are practising in the fourth skill— that is, *mediating*— which the Proposal Strasbourg 1996, published by the Council of Europe, has claimed is a reality in the classroom. Hence, the students should be proficient in four skills: speaking, writing, audio-visual reception, oral and written interaction and mediating. Mediating was included since it is a reality in the classroom.

In my opinion, using material in your mother tongue can serve as a prompt to introduce the target language. To give you but an example, showing an extract of a Spanish TV series is a good prompt for a description exercise, since the students know a lot more information about

the character than you may give to them. They will therefore feel confident when providing the description of the characters. Additionally, it 'saves time' since you only need to show a brief extract, or even refer to the character in question– if you do not have a TV set– to start off the description.

5. What programmes are available and what type of exercises can we devise?

There is a large number of genres available, starting with different types of radio programmes, different newspapers and magazines, etc. and television genres such as cartoons (e.g. useful for storytelling, use of verb tenses), films (select a few key scenes to exemplify the progression of the narrative), series (descriptions, cultural conventions, etc.), to mention but some. Nowadays, most TV have teletext where you can find out everyday's programming, even summaries of some of the programmes; additionally, nowadays most televisions have the dual system, already available in some channels (e.g. Canal 9, TV3, Canal 33); and a lot of people have access to satellite and very soon to digital TV. That is, information is certainly more accessible than it was before.

The advantage of devising exercises based on media products is that one can vary the degree of difficulty if you have to deal with different levels within the same group of students. Nowadays, specially with the E.S.O. being implemented in secondary schools in Spain, dealing with different levels in the same classroom has become one of the biggest problems for secondary school teachers. There are two possible ways to deal with it: one, the teacher works separately with small groups; two, the teacher has exercises that can be easily manipulated in order to fit different levels and be able to work with the whole class at the same time. The latter may be possible by 'playing' with the amount of information you give to the students (e.g., sometimes, students with a lower level can be given scrambled lists to order, while more advanced students are not be provided with such list but have to work it out by themselves) as suggested in the exercises below.

The set of exercises presented can be used for teaching any foreign language, you only have to change the target language. My proposal is twofold: on the one hand I will suggest exercises that require having a TV set, or a tape-recorder, computer or printed material in the classroom. On the other hand, however, I suggest a set of exercises in which the mass media are used as REFERENCE, as a starting point, as a PROMPT and effective motivation for initiating interaction in the foreign language. All the exercises are characterised by their FLEXIBILITY. Furthermore, and according to the level of the students, the teacher may decide to use some material in the learner's MOTHER TONGUE (a piece of news from the newspaper, television series, etc.), the underlying purpose being, once more, to make students feel confident about the

topic they are dealing with. Familiarity with the material and with the topic may give the student confidence and enhance motivation.

6. Types of exercises¹

6.1. Mass media and everyday life

EXERCISE 1: Are you a media person?

Put a √ if you have listened to the radio (any programme, including music), watch TV or read a printed publication while you were :

- 1. getting up in the morning _____
- 2. dressing up to come to school _____
- 3. having breakfast _____
- 4. breaking for lunch _____
- 5. enjoying an afternoon _____
- 6. Doing the washing up _____
- 7. Cleaning your motorcycle/ car _____
- 8. having a drink with your friends _____
- 9. studying for an exam _____
- 10. doing the household chores _____

Note: the list can be as long/short as wished. I'd suggest a list of 20 questions. The purpose is to make students realise how our lives are organised by the mass media and to notice their presence in everyday life.

6.2. Television

EXERCISE 2. Your favourite programmes. Ask the students to fill in the chart below after discussing with their group. After the discussion ask them to tell the whole class about the results. You will probably get reactions from the students, since they may agree or disagree with the other groups' choices.

<p>LIKE Name 3 of your favourite TV programmes? [find 3 common to <u>all</u> the members of the group]</p>	<p>Why do you like those programmes? what do you like about them? [Give 3 reasons common to <u>all</u> the members of the group]</p>
<p>DISLIKE Which series, television programmes do you dislike? [find 3 common to the group]</p>	<p>Why do you dislike those programmes? what do you dislike about them? [Give 3 reasons common to <u>all</u> the members of the group]</p>

¹ Due to space limitations, I will be able neither to include as many exercises as I would like to, nor to give the full version. I will just give indications as to how to devise different types of exercises.

EXERCISE 3. Identifying Television genres.

You will watch a video with several extracts from different television genres. You will have to identify and give a label to the different genres.

1.	6
2	7
3	8, etc.

Preparation: do a bit of zapping and record different types of programmes from different channels, one bit after the other on the same tape. The extracts should not be longer than five seconds each. You will end up with an video extract which may contain examples of: weather forecast, news, children's programmes, game shows, detective series, etc.

Comments: the main purpose of this exercise is that students realise how much they know about TV genres; and most of all that they are familiar with their generic conventions, allowing an immediate identification. The '*difficulty*' of the exercise may be altered by: a) list of genres: you may decide to provide them with a list of TV genres or not; b) giving them a scrambled list; they will have to order them according to the VCR extract; c) doing first a brainstorming exercise, and writing on the blackboard the genres that they know; d) the exercise can be as long or as brief as we wish, depending on the number of genres we want to introduce.

EXERCISE 4. Television genres. Match these programmes with their genre label.

- | | | | |
|----------------------|---|---|----------------------------|
| 1. Detective series | • | • | a. Nosolomúsica |
| 2. music programme - | • | • | b. Matrimonio con hijos |
| 3. sitcoms | • | • | c. Se ha escrito un crimen |
| 4. cartoons | • | • | d. Bola de Drac |

Note: you can vary this list if you consult your TV guide or teletext. You can also vary the genres according to what is available. If you want, once they've done the matching, you can ask them to name other programmes of the same genre. You can also leave some genres without any possible match and ask them to give you examples.

EXERCISE 5. Teletext

Another possibility is to record some pages from the teletext and ask them to identify the different genres. In that way, they can also become aware that different types of programmes occupy different time slots in the programming.

EXERCISE 6. Identifying actions.

One of the best genres to work with in order to practice actions is cartoons. You may decide to do it with the volume on or off. There are several possibilities: a) Provide the students with a list of actions and they will have to tick only those that are performed by the characters.; b) Do a fill in the gap describing what's going on; c) Devise a true false exercise with actions. The example below is from an episode of the *Pink Panther* entitled *Pink and Quiet*.

The Pink Panther tries to protect himself against the girl. What does he do to get rid of the girl? TRUE or FALSE:

1. The Pink Panther dances with the girl _____
2. The Pink Panther helps the girl to bore a hole in the wall _____
3. The Pink Panther takes the girl back to her parent's caravan _____

EXERCISE 7: POKEMON. Word Formation.

Pokemon is but one example of a 'temporary fashion' (others were e.g. *Dragon Ball* or even films like *Jurassic Park*, or *Star Wars*). Students get hooked on certain programmes– and for a certain period– until something else comes out that they like better. Marketing has a lot to do with it, thus, during that period, it is easy to find and get hold of material related to those products. Sometimes, as is the case with *Pokemon*, we can use that material as an ignition to learn English. Pokemons' names are lexically rich, since they combine both meaning and pronunciation as well as external features (e.g. what each Pokemon is capable of doing and its appearance) which, all together, explain the name assigned to each.

Here are a few names of Pokemons. Find out and explain the origin of their name:

1. Aerodactyl	aero (prefix for fly) + dactyl (<i>zoology</i> . any digit or vertebrate) prehistoric creature; it can fly.
2. Blastoise	blast (explosion; to destroy by using explosives)+ tortoise
3. Charizard	char+ lizard
4. Exeggcute	execute+ egg- uses eggs for the battle
5. Gastly	gas + ghastly (unpleasant or shocking, extremely bad)
6. Koffing	coffin= the box or case in which a corpse is placed for burial.
7. Mewtwo	mutant+ two
8. Squirtle	squirrel+ turtle

Each name uses different devices for WORD FORMATION, so in 1) they use *aero-* a learned borrowing from Greek meaning 'air' used in formation of compound names; while in 7), it is a matter of pronunciation; in 6), it is the same sound with two possible spellings, etc. All of them combine different words whose meaning we will have to learn in order to understand the characteristics of each Pokemon.

EXERCISE 8. Stereotypes. Use of adjectives, order of adjectives. Descriptions.

One genre which is well known for its use of stereotypes is the sitcom. Select any sitcom, it doesn't matter if it is in Spanish or English, (e.g. *Siete Vidas*, *Compañeros*, *Al salir de clase*, *Cosas de Casa*, *Sabrina*, *Fawlty Towers*, *Friends*, *De repente Susan*, *Frasier*) and chose one extract in which there are three or more characters. You may decide to provide the students with a list of adjectives– as illustrated below– to prove that sitcoms often function with opposite types of people.

short	average height	middle-aged	unsociable	selfish	clever
tall	talkative	in his/her twenties	easy-going	quiet	stupid

Suggestions: If you do not have a TV set: a) Ask the students to tell you about one character which they all know about– e.g. Valle, in *Compañeros*– and see if they coincide in the description; b) Ask a student or a group of students to describe a character of a series and the others will have to guess who they are talking about.

EXERCISE 9. Storytelling and professional and cultural stereotypes

Switch the volume off. Show them an extract from a sitcom, piece of news, etc, and ask them to describe the situation, what is going on, to tell you what kind of people they think they are. You can give them a guideline, for example: Where are they from?, What are they doing? What are their jobs?, etc.

6.3. Music**EXERCISE 10. Group names & titles of songs. Compounds, Idioms, Fixed phrases. Culture.**

Ask them to bring to class about 10 group names in English. Ask them to explain the meaning of the name of the group: e.g. *Red Hot Chilli Peppers*; *Genesis*; *The Rolling Stones*; *Iron Maiden*; *Foofighters*. Many times you will find that names of groups and titles of songs are good to explain compounds or fixed phrases, or even idioms. Sometimes, they are also useful to explain cultural or historical phenomena.

EXERCISE 11. Music genres.

Here is a list of different labels used for different types of music. Are you able to name a group/ a singer for each type of music? *Suggestions:* the students can bring tapes to illustrate the different types of music. Or, alternatively you can play the tapes they bring and ask the class to identify the music genre to which it belongs.

1. Dance; 2. Soul; 3. Coplas; 4. Heavy metal; 5. Indie; 6. Rock; 7. Pop/chart; 8. Pop español; 9. Rave/jungle; 10. Jazz; 11. House/techno; 12. Rock; 13. Reggae/ragga; 14. Classical; 15. Rap/hip-hop; 16. blues; 17. grunge; 18. gospel; 19. country;

EXERCISE 12. Telling about your favourite song

You can ask the students to bring the lyrics of their favourite song and ask them to tell the class what the song is about, the story behind it. They can bring the copies for everybody and a tape to listen to the song.

EXERCISE 13. Narrative with images

There is usually a story behind each video clip which illustrates the words of the song. Play a video clip and ask them to tell you about the story.

EXERCISE 14. Profiles. Make a profile of your favourite sports presenter, DJ, etc. The same can be applied for any character on television, film, etc.

6.4. RADIO

EXERCISE 15. Radio genres

What types of programmes do you listen to? Does your favourite radio station have: chat, quiz show, plays, magazine, music, jingles, signature and theme tunes, live performances, self-advertising, a studio-based play, a radio soap opera/play, weather report,

6.5. NEWSPAPERS

EXERCISE 16. Printed mass media

The odd one out. Identify ✓ those examples that belong to the category printed media in the list below.

mainstream newspapers		quality papers	
soap operas		mainstream magazines	
tabloid newspapers		journal	
colour supplement magazine		teenage magazines	
regional newspapers		fanzine	

EXERCISE 17. Do you read any newspaper, magazine, etc. regularly ?

What kind of information does it provide you with? What characteristics do best define the type of publication you normally/ sometimes read?

- a. it's about sports
- b. it gives you the results of football matches.....
- c. Sometime it talks about Rociito and Antonio David's life.....
- d. the publication is in colour.....
- e. it's yellow press.....
- f. there are car advertisements in it
- g. it includes large size colour posters.....
- h. talks about plants and agriculture.....

Note: the list can be as long as you want it to be. Once completed, discuss with them the answers. E.g. probably no one will tick *m*. A variation of this exercise in order to increase 'difficulty' is to ask them to complete a sentence such as the one below and give as many details as possible about the publication they read.

- 1. The publication I normally read.....
- 2. The publication I normally read.....

EXERCISE 18. Newspaper sections.

F	E	A	T	U	R	E	A	R	T	I	C	L	E	S	Y	U	L
A	G	T	F	R	T	H	E	E	D	I	T	O	R	I	A	L	E
L	B	L	O	S	D	R	F	S	E	A	O	T	N	G	A	P	T
J	J	Y	I	N	H	R	N	T	M	S	V	U	L	A	O	I	T
N	E	W	S	R	E	P	O	R	T	S	I	N	N	C	I	B	E
U	Y	B	V	D	A	B	E	S	E	N	N	G	S	T	O	P	R
I	E	L	L	A	D	N	A	C	S	H	D	O	Y	C	L	I	S
L	A	W	E	T	L	I	O	M	G	W	R	U	T	U	K	A	P
R	F	C	Q	S	I	C	A	R	T	O	O	N	S	I	J	T	A
W	B	U	D	E	N	Y	I	S	E	R	M	R	C	V	D	I	G
B	U	S	I	N	E	S	S	N	E	W	S	O	D	Y	A	O	E
S	E	A	V	D	S	P	O	R	T	S	R	E	P	O	R	T	N

Key: News reports; headlines; crossword; cartoons; small adds; scandal; the editorial; the letters page; horoscope; feature articles.

Suggestions: You can bring newspapers to the class or ask the students to bring some, so they can do some previous research about the different sections that newspapers have. Additionally, you can ask them to find the equivalent to those terms in a Spanish publication. Compare Spanish and English newspapers; quality and tabloid; magazines; fanzine, etc. The same exercise can be designed with the contents of any of the mentioned or with the contents of the programming on TV, a server's webpage or any other a page on internet. With TV, you can also differentiate for example between the programming of TV2 and that of TELE 5, in order to show differences between channels..

EXERCISE 19. Fanzine

Fanzines are a good source for specialised vocabulary, slang, colloquial expressions, etc. You can ask them to bring one to the classroom and look at some expressions and vocabulary.

6.6. Computer-multimedia**EXERCISE 20. Computer-games. Genres and instructions.**

What types of games are these? what are the main features of each type of computer game?

Sports	Beat-em-up	Driving Sims	First person perspectives	Platform
Puzzle	Strategy/war games	Flight Sim	Space Sim	Arcade
RPG	God Games			

Suggestions: talking about computer games can be useful in order to find out different genres within computer games and also to practice *instructions*. If you ask them '*how do you play X?*' they will necessarily have to practice certain structures.

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