

Using audiovisual material to develop selective listening skills of children from different cultures learning Italian as a second language

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Abstract

Children from other cultures attending regular lessons at school have often problems to face texts containing specific language of different areas, even if they've lived in a new country since their early childhood. Starting from a real experience conducted in a classroom the paper will show how the use of Disney video material about animals (inspired by The Jungle book and mixing cartoons and film's elements) can develop the ability of selective listening in children with different language-level and how it can improve their scientific language's command at the same time. At the beginning I will examine the importance of using video in language learning and teaching especially from a child-centred perspective. Then, taking into consideration the relationship between image and listened "text", I will show the criteria of analyzing the listened and watched "text". The found principles should give impulse to prepare different worksheets which should be used as while-listening / while-watching activities and should be tailored to the individual needs of the students. I will finally show in details how the realized material has been used in a didactic unit (about 5 hours) in classes for students of different cultures with a A2/B1 level of the CEFRL. The unit also included speaking and writing activities aiming to promote and stimulate the students' learning autonomy.

1. Introduction

It is well-known that immigrant children require less time to acquire conversational fluency in their second language (the basic interpersonal communicative skills, which Cummins [1.] defined by the acronymus BICS) as compared to grade-appropriate academic proficiency in that language (cognitive academic language proficiency, CALP). Conversely school life imposes the use and command of the CALP in a very large amount and there is often not enough time to wait for the consolidation of the CALP of the immigrant children in the regular classes. The academic language is very complex and not only in its written form. Children come also in touch with this kind of language by listening it in many situations. Common cases are both when the contents are transmitted by the teacher through her/his speech and everytime that children try to watch programs on TV which require a thorough lexical competence. The lack of a solid vocabulary in some specific fields causes frustration in similar situations, because there is no chance to stop the "river of words" and to reflect on them. Special language classes for immigrant children with an advanced level of Italian gave me the chance to reflect about the possibility to facilitate the acquire of academic language by focusing on the skill "listening".

1.2 Why a documentary video?

I decided to develop a longer didactic unity using a DVD where listening comprehension has priority over other skills. I had a very good experience with a 20 minute Disney documentary about animals inserted in the Jungle Book DVD.[2] Seven wild animals are presented, cartoon and real images are

mixed, giving reality and imagination the same meaning and resulting very inviting for the children at the same time. As a documentary it maintains a certain obligation towards "truth". It shows correspondence (statements and details of film are not lies or fiction but in accordance with scientific reality) and coherence (the film constitutes a well-argued, not contradictory whole) [3] It is an expository documentary in which an unseen speaker performs a voiceover commentary that literally explains the images that we are seeing. Differently from the classical expository documentary, the audience is here "empowered" by this kind of approach and doesn't find itself in a subordinate role, because a certain amount of interactive mode filmmaking is featured. Children are deeply involved through rhetorical questions about the animal life, making them part of the described situations. The film includes the presented animals in their real environment and give a short, effective description of them. There are typical sound effects coming from the jungle, noises of the animals included. Its best quality lies in divulging an authentic, not simplified text and in transmitting in any case the basics of a correct academic language. The risk is that such a well-realizes video material remains solely a lazy medium, providing little room for one's imagination to thrive. For this reason it's necessary to create the base for an active viewing, so that students take an active part in video teaching presentation. Active viewing increases the students' enjoyment and satisfaction and focuses their attention on the main idea of the video presentation.[4]

1.2 Realizing active viewing

One of the best ways to realize active viewing is to activate progressive knowledges, creating what can be called a pre-active viewing activity. The children had to write everything they know about one of the animals that they were going to see. This was also a sort of prediction and is excellent for speculation. This activity also fires the imagination of the students by leading them predicting and deducing further information about the characters they are going to discover. A good prediction work can also be an activity where children are piloted in what they are going to see. If we let them guess if the animals have some uncommon characteristics or not and let them verifying that by watching, we build a while watching activity which stimulates their curiosity. I did it through right/wrong statements where the children had to guess some uncommon characteristics about the animals. After viewing the documentary for the first time and verifying the former activity trough prepared second worksheets with solution, children had to do a very challenging activity: they had to write the animals in the viewing order. The crucial part of the didactic unit is for the teacher the creation of the activity 5. Considering that the presentation includes information about many aspects of animals' life (food, free activities, physical characteristics, weight and dimensions, different races, particular use of the body, way of hunting prey for food, peculiar abilities) it is possible to extrapolate and reformulate them using a child centred language. So different listening tasks can be created, using grids with rows and columns (see the activities' description above). At this point the teacher has the chance to think of the different levels and attitudes of her/his students and distribute the stripes according to them.[5] Each stripe had the same work instruction but was related to different topics. The time for a second listening has come. Instead of verifying it by worksheets with solution, another form of controlling is recommended: children listened and watched the video for the third time with the stripe of a mate, they controlled what was written on it and completed it. Other tasks can be prepared: for instance a detailed listening of a video segment accompanied by the written transcription. As a final task, completing the information about the animals from the activity 1, could "close the circle".

1.3 Description of the activities and practical implications

Activity 1

What do you already know?



Work with a class mate. Write down everything you know about one of these animals: the vultures, the tiger, the bear, the panther, the monkeys, the pythons, the elephant. You have ten minutes! You can describe the animal, tell where it lives, what it can do, how he hunts ist preys for food, what it eats or other things.

In the children's mind raised automatically "visual thoughts" about the animals, because they furnished details about colours and dimensions of the described elements. In this way they spontaneously projected themselves in an optical dimension.

(La scimmia è marrone, ha il naso grande e le mani lunghissime ... I elefanti hanno una proboscide lunga che la usano per prendere erba e nutrirsi.... La tigre è arancione , ha le strisce nere, il naso ce l'ha nero, ha il muso bianco e sei baffi attaccati al muso)

Activity 2

Before watching

Read these sentences. Do you think it's true that...

Tigers get easily tired after running long ways	yes	no
Panthers are not very heavy	yes	no
Urangos must catch tree bunches using both feet and hands	yes	no
Elephants need to sleep very much	yes	no
Vulture spend their spare time cleaning their feathers	yes	no
There are very few kinds of pythons	yes	no
Bears learn very early climbing on trees	yes	no

Activity 3

Now we are going to watch the video. (first viewing) While watching proof if it's true what you have thought. How many answers were right? Proof it with the control sheet and write your score! ___/7

Activity 4

Try to remember in which order the animals you saw are coming on screen and write it down

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____

Proof it with the second worksheet for the solution

This kind of activity required a large amount of concentration: children had to review the whole documentary with their mind. They had to realise that such a mental operation is not so easy as they could have thought at a first time.

I gave each child a stripe of the Activity 5. Each stripe had the same following work instruction:

Activity 5 (second viewing)

Watch, listen and write! Don't worry if you are not able to write everything!

In the following lines I list the different kinds of Activity 5 and number it as a table.

Table 1.
What do they eat?

Bears	
Elephants	
Vultures	
Orangutans	

Table 2.
What's their weight and how big are they?

<i>animal</i>	<i>weight</i>	<i>Length or width</i>
panthers		
Big elephants		
Little elephants		
vultures		
pythons		
tigers		

Table 3.
What do they can do very well?

Children bears	
Adult bears	
Panthers	
elephants	
orangutans	
vultures	
pythons	
tiger	

Table 4.
What do they do to enjoy themselves?

Bears	
Panthers	
orangutans	
Vultures	

Table 5.
What do they look like?

<i>Skin or fur colour</i>	<i>Has it got stripes or spots?</i>	
	yes	no

<i>Skin or fur colour</i>	<i>Has it got stripes or spots?</i>	
	yes	no
	yes	no

Table 6.
 Some animals use a special part of their body. What for?

Elephants use their trunk	
Panthers have long tails	
Elephants use their ears	
Pythons use their tongue	

Table 7.
 There are several races of these animals. What are their names?

<i>Bears</i>	
Elephants	
Monkeys	

Table 8.
 How do these animals hunt their preys for food?

Vultures	
Pythons	
tigers	

Using this kind of listening tasks was very challenging for the children, and permitted them to complete the information about their favourite animals begun in the activity one.

References

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