

How do you ...? Use film viewing to enhance students' analytical skills?

By ALL



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Many teachers, and I have been one of them, treat listening skills as something that is innate and that can be neither learnt nor taught. That is, as something that students either can or cannot do, and as something that teachers have no control over. However, trial and error in lessons has shown me how, irrespectively of students' level in the L2, there are certain things that we can teach students to make them better listeners and to help them understand how to improve their (foreign) language comprehension.

The starting point will be preventing our students from being passive listeners, (those who just sit down and receive language input), and instead helping them become active listeners, (those who will listen and use certain tools to process language and to maximise the amount of language they understand).

In this *How do you ...?* section I will discuss some ways to improve the analytical skills of language learners, which will help our students become active listeners. Following on from this discussion, in the *How do you...?* section of the following issue of *Vida Hispánica* I will suggest ways in which students can practise and use those skills as tools to enhance their language comprehension. Analytical skills will be the tools that enable our students improve language comprehension, which is why I believe that it is important to consider analytical skills and language comprehension as a unity as two entities which go hand in hand. However, presenting each of them in a *How do you...?* section will give readers the opportunity to practise these analytical skills with their students before focusing on improving language comprehension.

Although I have decided to present analytical skills first, I understand that different types of learners will operate differently, so some teachers might decide to use the techniques presented in the next issue first and then move onto analytical skills, especially with beginners or with younger learners. Different researchers will have different views on what to work on first, or on what to do and what not to do, however, what I present here is what I have tried and has worked for my students, but obviously, the day these techniques stop working I will change the way I approach listening skills and listening exercises. At the end of the day, that is what we all do in teaching; we use what works for us and for our students until it stops working, and then we try to come up with another way of doing things.

ENHANCING ANALYTICAL SKILLS

PRE-VIEWING

Does the image aid the understanding of the audio?

Many times we treat the image and the audio as two different items, when it would be better to consider both when deciding what clip of a film or TV programme to show our students. Therefore, it is important to focus not only on the difficulty of the listening, but also on how much the image aids the understanding. It is important to choose a clip whose image aids understanding. For example, many music videos usually have nothing to do with the lyrics of the song, instead, we could use scenes from films with a high number of visual clues. Scenes that work well are those that tend to be heavily scripted, such as dialogues where the characters are shopping, or ordering food or drink at a restaurant.

Example: The students could try to write a dialogue for one of the final scenes from *Valentín*, specially the part of the following link that starts at 5:40.

Analysing semantic fields

A way of developing students' analytical skills is by getting them used to guessing beforehand the language that will come up in a given conversation. We can tell students what the scene that they are going to watch is about (school life, travelling, etc.), so that they can predict what kind of vocabulary they are going to need. We could even ask students to write down a list of words and expressions related to that topic and share them with the rest of the class. After watching the video, one exercise that we could do is to ask students to identify the words and expressions mentioned before in class that have come up in the video. This approach might be more suitable for beginners than for advanced learners, although we can use it with students of all abilities. This type of exercise is also good to introduce cultural differences, such as the use of *me da* in Spanish to order things in a shop, or to revise content from previous lessons.

Example: For this exercise, we could use the following clip where we have a couple having dinner at a restaurant (1:30-3:50).

Analysis of regional accents

This would work better with advanced learners, as beginner and intermediate learners will not cope very well with non-standard accents. One of the joys of teaching advanced learners is to use authentic materials in lessons, and most likely in those authentic materials we will come across accents that vary from the target model that we have taught our students. If a specific film or video has someone speaking in a regional accent that we believe will be difficult for our students to understand, we could start by explaining to our students how the main characteristics of that regional accent vary from the variety of Spanish we use as target model in class. For example, in the Spanish version of *Shrek*, Puss in boots has a strong Western Andalusian accent (Seville/Malaga), so we could tell our students about the substitution in this accent of Castilian [x] by [h] in words like *jefe*, similar to the sound in English words like *hello*. We could also tell students about the aspiration of /s/ at the end of syllables, which makes words like *dos* sound [doh] in this variety of Spanish. For further details on Western Andalusian accents, readers can check Zamora Vicente (1996) or Alvar (1991).

Example: In the following scenes of *Shrek* students can write comments on the features of Puss in boots' Andalusian accent.

Compensation strategies

Students usually start feeling anxious when they are doing a listening exercise if they miss a few words, however, it is important to show them how this also happens in their L1 and how they cope with it. It would be useful to talk to students about how they compensate (work out the missing words or meanings) when, for example, they are listening to the radio at home and the reception is a bit poor. Some of the compensation strategies that students will mention will be things like guessing meanings through context, guessing what has happened or what will happen because of the reaction of other people involved in the conversation, etc.

Example: We could start showing an argument scene in *Valentín* on the following link, and then turn the sound off in minute 1:40 and ask what they think each of the characters is saying.

WHILE-VIEWING

Constructing the setting

Ramos Álvarez (2011) suggests a good exercise that develops students' analytical skills. He suggests playing a clip with sound but without showing the image. Our students will have to listen carefully and write a description of the setting (what is happening and where the scene is set). Later on, we can show students the clip with images, and they can discuss the difference between their description and the actual scene setting. They could do this dialogue in pairs and then feedback to the group.

Example: One good scene to use for this exercise is the opening scene of *Historias Mínimas*, where a doctor is checking Don Justo's eyesight.

Analysing the spelling system

Sometimes students are too eager to dismiss those parts of a dialogue that they cannot understand to focus on the parts that they do understand. It is of paramount importance to train our students to decipher the meaning of words or parts of a conversation that they have not understood completely. We could ask students to focus on words or phrases that they do not understand and try to write them down as they think it would be spelt. After that, we could ask students to give the approximate spelling of words, and ask others in the group to offer an alternative spelling. Sometimes, we will end up with incomplete spellings that will remind us of the game *Hangman*, and these will be the most useful examples to work with. Students might miss the first syllable of the word, or the final s at the end of a syllable, but once you have on the board the part of the word they have caught, for example, __ches, we could ask students to work out what word it could be, *noches*, *coches*, etc., which they could guess from the context. It has shocked me to see how many times students have caught most parts of a word or expression but they have not tried to work out what the words were. This exercise will also be useful to make connections between Spanish pronunciation and spelling, such as merging of words when a word finishes on a consonant and the next one starts with a vowel, and also to make them put in practice what they know about the Spanish spelling system to write down words they have never heard before.

Example: One good example for this is the song *20 de abril* by Celtas Cortos. The chorus is particularly fast, and advanced learners will need to use this technique (individually or in pairs), to work out what some parts of the song say.

POST-VIEWING

Anticipation

Another useful exercise suggested by Ramos Álvarez (2011) is to ask students to analyse what has happened so far to work out what will happen next. We could stop the video and ask students to talk in pairs about what they think it is going to happen next and why, and after that, feedback to the whole group. We could then watch the next scene and see who was right. This will be very good practice to discuss the clues that have made different people predict different things, for example, using the expression *solía portarme bien en su casa ...* to work out that the character does no longer behave that way.

Example: Apart from the examples presented by Ramos Álvarez (2011), we could use a scene of *Historias Mínimas* where one of the main characters is at a bakery. We could stop the clip at 1:26 and then again at 1:55.

Constructing the script

Students could analyse the image to guess the script. We could make students watch a video without the sound on and ask them to write what they think the characters are saying. After that, students could talk in pairs about why they have chosen those words. Also in pairs, students can write the script and act it out in class. We could then watch the scene with the sound on to see whose script was the closest and to look out for similarities and differences between their script and the actual one. This will help students infer dialogues from images, thus, using analytical skills to understand the message and becoming less dependent on what they hear to understand a message.

Example: Ramos Álvarez (2011) presents this exercise in his presentation, and he also gives various examples of scenes to use, but apart from those examples, we could use a scene from the film *Valentín* where Valentín has an argument with Leticia.

How important are analytical skills?

It is important to remind ourselves of the importance of analytical skills before we move on to dealing with enhancing language comprehension. Many of us will have seen students of similar abilities perform differently in class exercises or in exams. Some students can outperform others not because they have a more extensive knowledge of the language, but because they have better analytical skills, which results in better exam skills. For example, a given student might just focus on the specific word they need to answer a question instead of trying to understand the whole conversation, or he/she might be able to use context to identify parts of the conversation that are irrelevant for the answers and focus on the sections of the dialogue that are relevant. This is why it is important to work on analytical skills, because it is a way of making students maximise the language they know and it also creates more mature and independent learners. In the next issue of *Vida Hispánica* we will see how we can help our students enhance their comprehension skills.

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