

# Telenovelas as a Tool for Teaching

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## Introduction

*"In our search for authentic video materials, it is easy to ignore or discount the most obvious and accessible source—broadcast television."*

Authenticity in the foreign language classroom has been a primary goal in our profession for over twenty years. Indeed, the advent of the Natural Approach, with its emphasis on fostering the skills necessary for language learners to comprehend and communicate with native speakers in "real life" situations, instigated a virtual call to arms for authentic classroom materials. While the growing demand for authentic materials is great, the supply of such materials lags far behind. Although authentic literary selections have long been available in readers, and there is a more recent increase in the availability of foreign language films for purchase or rent, it remains the case that long-term, authentic video sources are quite hard to come by.

In our search for authentic video materials, it is easy to ignore or discount the most obvious and accessible source—broadcast television. Television is a powerful medium whose influence on the daily lives of our students should not be discounted. The generation of students currently graduating from high schools and entering our university classes depends on television not only as a means of entertainment but also as a primary source of information. It is only logical, therefore, to capitalize on television's appeal by utilizing it in the language classroom. Recent advances in video technology, the proliferation of home and school VCRs and the growth in number of Spanish-language television stations throughout the country have aided in transforming what was once a novel "culture day" experience—having a foreign language feature film or television program available—into a possible and easily accessible option for many language teachers.

A minimal amount of surfing through the Spanish-language channels quickly leads any viewer to the conclusion that the telenovela—the serialized, self-contained, and distinctly Latin American soap opera—is by far the most popular genre aired. Telenovelas are entertaining, but they are also pedagogically

effective in providing episodic, contextualized, long-term exposure to authentic Spanish, unmodified for a native-speaking audience—in short, precisely how the language is used in the “real world.” Telenovelas provide student viewers with a rich and enjoyable source of input, presented in a medium that is well known to them. Current second language acquisition theory clearly supports the pedagogical value of authentic telenovelas.

## Television and Second Language Acquisition

Current acquisition research and theory place particular emphasis on the development of listening comprehension skills in the acquisition process. Comprehensible input—the linguistic models of sounds, lexicon, and grammatical structures we provide our students—plays a pivotal role in language learners’ ability to comprehend and ultimately produce the target language.

For input to be “comprehended,” students must focus their attention on understanding the meaning of an utterance or discourse (Krashen, 409). Understanding discourse always involves interpreting it with respect to some context. It is therefore logical that language learners, and the classroom activities in which they participate, be focused on deriving the meaning from input instead of focussing on its grammatical form. It has been demonstrated that it is impossible for language learners to focus simultaneously on meaning and form (Van Patten, 414). Research also indicates that language learners are best served when they are taught to attend to the former over the latter (Sharwood-Smith, 242).

Authentic television programming provides student viewers with an abundance of comprehensible input. Not only is the input contextualized within the televised genre (commercial, comedy, etc.), it is also accompanied by valuable visual stimuli and extralinguistic clues that contribute to students’ comprehension. Student viewers are able to see who is speaking and the expressions and gestures these speakers use. Perhaps most importantly, students learn that they are able to derive meaning from the visual context without having to rely exclusively on the dialogue.

Certainly one point of contention in using television programming in the classroom lies in whether it is deemed an “appropriate” source of authentic input, or whether we may be “pandering” to pop-culture by watching television in class. It is important to clarify that the purpose of using authentic television programming as a classroom tool is to promote the second language acquisition process, and the task is not approached with the same “couch potato” strategies—namely,

passive listening and watching—used in watching a native-language program for entertainment. Students must decipher the foreign code when watching an authentic program and concentrate on extracting the meaning from the dialogue and context; to do so, they must be actively involved in the activity. The fact that the medium is familiar to our students, and that the content of a number of programs may be “non-academic” at best, is in fact a positive aspect: authentic television tends to lower student-viewers’ “affective filters” by providing an entertaining element to their language acquisition process. Studies on student attitudes have shown that television or other video programs have positive affective results on learners as viewers (Terrell, 1993; Wen, 1989).

## Telenovelas

The use and classroom utility of authentic television sources has been widely discussed in the literature, with particular emphasis given to the use of television commercials (*ex.*, Wildner-Bassett, 1990; Lawrence, 1987) and newscasts (Weissenreider, 1987). While various types of televised source materials provide the necessary visual stimuli to aid students’ comprehension, only one—the serialized telenovela—lends itself to an on-going, developing, long-term classroom activity.

*“Real communication is episodic in nature.”*

The distinct advantage telenovelas have over other television programming is found in their continuity and episodic organization. Spanish-language telenovelas are broadcast daily, Monday through Friday, typically for an hour. Unlike American soap operas, telenovelas are self-contained stories that come to a final resolution after anywhere from two to six months. Viewers, therefore, become involved in the twists and turns of the storyline(s), a story centered on the same characters who quickly become familiar to them, over an extended period of time. In comparative terms, feature films offer a similar progression in plot, yet their duration of one to three hours does not permit the long-term contact with the characters or the plot afforded by telenovelas.

Real communication is episodic in nature. The events described in any discourse build upon prior events, resulting in a type of “unraveling” of meaning. The natural episodic structure of communication, when it is present in foreign language classroom activities, aids in learners’ comprehension of the code by allowing them to understand the subtleties of the target language in much the same way that first language acquirers develop native-speaker “intuitions.” Research indicates that the coherent sequence of episodically organized discourse makes sense to learners; they are better able to process input that is sequential and related to the structure of

daily life and experiences (Oller, 142).

Background knowledge of the genre, or schemata also plays an influential role in aiding student viewers' comprehension of a telenovela. Most learners are at least somewhat familiar with the soap opera genre and can predict rather accurately the "typical" twists in the plot they will see. Even a slight familiarity with soap operas will lead students to guess that there will certainly be some type of love interest, probably thwarted by one or several evil characters; there will be a number of dramatic moments of deep despair, unrequited love, and possibly even a death. This background knowledge that the students bring to the task is triggered when they see their predictions come true, or it is restructured when the plot takes an unexpected turn. Students can also develop a familiarity with the characters and prior plot developments, aided by the episodic organization of the program, and they are therefore able to call on their knowledge of prior events in understanding present and future actions (Gee, 42-43).

## **Pedagogically Prepared Video**

There is no doubt that authentic video can be difficult to incorporate thematically and grammatically into the established curriculum. Some researchers believe that the lack of controlled grammatical structure found in authentic source materials may initially confuse and frustrate students (Duquette, Dunnett & Papalia, 100). Others have argued that the language contained in most authentic television programs is too difficult for students, particularly beginners (Joiner, 53), while the rapidity of the speech, differences in accents, and background noise may "overload students' receptive system" (Richardson & Scinicariello, 51).

As an alternative to authentic video, foreign language instructors have available to them commercially prepared video programs, that is, video programs produced and distributed by a commercial publishing house either to follow a specific textbook or to supplement it. Such commercial videos offer the contextualized language samples and visual stimuli found in authentic programs, yet they typically avoid the rapidity of speech, variation in registers, and lack of controlled grammatical structure found in authentic video by consciously structuring the use of grammatical and lexical items in the program. At the same time they run the risk of presenting overly-simplified or unnatural language samples, characteristics which are due either to the slowed rates of speech they use and/or their unnatural focus on specific grammatical structures (Beeching, 17).

Some scholars maintain that foreign language instructors

would be best served by using a combination of authentic and pedagogically prepared videos, the former for promoting communicative skills and the latter for instructional purposes (Omaggio & Hadley, 82). This statement illustrates the significant difference between authentic and commercially prepared. Krashen (1982) draws a dichotomy between acquisition, a natural process by which learners "pick up" a language, and learning, a conscious process based on the formal study of lexicon, morphology, syntax, and semantics (9). According to this well-known framework, both are necessary components in cultivating mature target language skills.

*"Also it is important to bear in mind that students' receptive skills are often far more advanced than their productive skills."*

A focus on formal learning is evident in several of the most widely available video products on the market. The most well known commercially prepared video series available to instructors is *Destinos* (Annenberg/CPB Collection, 1992), a program which adapts the format of the Latin American telenovela, presumably for the reasons previously outlined here. Each episode of *Destinos* follows the investigation of attorney Raquel Rodriguez, who is hired to locate the writer of a mysterious letter sent to her client and to substantiate its claims, as she travels to Spain, Argentina, Puerto Rico, and Mexico. Within its developing plot, *Destinos* is rich in shot-on-location cultural highlights, explained by an off-screen narrator, who, along with the main character, also provides explanations of lexical and grammatical items used in each episode. Indeed, each half-hour episode revolves around a particular corpus of vocabulary, such as numbers (episodes 3, 7, and 12), food (episodes 13, 14, and 18), and family members (episodes 2 and 20), as well as one or more grammatical structures. Additionally, grammatical and lexical explanations are inserted periodically in each episode, and review episodes are interspersed throughout the series (episodes 25, 26, 36, and 48-51).

The Spanish used in *Destinos* is of two types: that used by the narrator and the main character, which is graded and "purposefully comprehensible," and the "more rapid conversational Spanish" present when the characters interact with each other (VanPatten, Marks, & Teschner, xiv). It should be mentioned, too, that in early episodes the off-screen narrator provides explanations in English. Through *Destinos* student viewers are exposed to spoken Spanish, modified to accommodate their beginning level of competency. They also see and hear explanations which are practiced and reinforced in the text- and workbook exercises and they gain cultural knowledge about certain areas of the Spanish-speaking world. It is also assumed that conscious learning of lexical and structural

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usage is facilitated by the visual stimuli, episodic structure, and continuity (there are 52 episodes) of the series.

*Destinos* has as a primary objective the development of “good listening comprehension skills” (VanPatten, Marks, and Teschner, xiii). Indeed, a significant corpus of research exists which points to the value of video programming, both authentic and commercially prepared, in increasing listening abilities (Secules, Herron & Tomasello, 1992). There are no studies, however, which address the supposed advantage of modified language samples, such as those found in *Destinos*, over unmodified natural speech in overall foreign language acquisition. Kelch (1985) shows that a slowed rate of delivery aids non-native speakers’ comprehension of oral input, although the same study demonstrates that grammatical simplification plays no significant role in overall aural comprehension (88). Leow (1993) finds that grammatical simplification does not aid in the comprehension of written input and speculates that there may be a correlation with oral input although his study does not deal with oral language samples (345).

There are, however, writers who argue for the value of exposure to the unmodified language found in authentic television programming. Terrell (1993) shows that exposure to authentic television and feature films lowers students’ affective filters in the classroom and increases their listening comprehension, concluding with the hypothesis that a correlated increase in oral production could be expected as a result. Weyers (1995) demonstrates that after exposure to an authentic telenovela, student viewers experience not only a significant increase in listening comprehension skill, but also significant progress in areas of oral production.

Although linguistic modification may indeed aid in our students’ comprehension of the target language, it cannot give them the practice with the unstructured language they will encounter in the Spanish-speaking world. Beeching (1982) supports this posture by succinctly reminding instructors that many teachers pamper their students, particularly beginners, by providing overly-simplified input when “we overlook the fact that students cope somehow in the real world” (19). Also, it is important to bear in mind that students’ receptive skills are often far more advanced than their productive skills; while they may not be able to handle certain materials well in the productive skills, their ability to comprehend them may be quite good (Omaggio Hadley, 83).

## **Incorporating Telenovelas into the Curriculum**

Incorporating an authentic telenovela into the Spanish curriculum requires a number of considerations extending beyond taping the program, popping it into the VCR and expecting students to understand it. There are methodological as well as legal matters involving copyright laws that must be taken into account. The duration of a telenovela (about one hour/episode) is a principal point of consideration in developing the corresponding classroom activities. For a telenovela activity to be successful, instructors must be conscious of the amount of foreign language input their students can handle. The human mind is limited in the amount of information it can process. It could not be expected that intermediate students, for example, would understand an entire episode presented in its entirety without breaks. The presentation of the same episode in shorter increments, with pauses or breaks to allow for comprehension checks, is a more viable possibility.

One key to using authentic video in the classroom is to present it in "short, meaningful intervals" (Krashen and Terrell, 154). Beginning students are frustrated by more than three or four minutes of continuous dialogue and/or action. Intermediate students are often able to handle approximately ten minutes; advanced students are frequently capable of longer periods of contact with a source recording (Richardson & Scinicariello, 51-52). The typical structure of a telenovela lends itself well to such a division into manageable chunks. Each episode lasts approximately one hour, however the commercial breaks, which occur about every 10 minutes, divide the program into meaningful intervals and provide the students with a short rest between scenes.

The use of a telenovela in the classroom constitutes not only a listening comprehension activity but also a viewing experience. It is essential that the students actively participate through pre-viewing activities, performing some task in lieu of passively watching during the activity, and following up the activity with post-viewing discussion and/or exercises. This requires no small amount of preparatory work for the instructor—who must preview the telenovela, preferably the entire series, and prepare the accompanying activities.

Pre-viewing activities are an essential component classroom viewing. Student viewers should have some basic concept of what to expect before embarking on the story they will encounter. A brief prepared synopsis of the main characters and their histories, either presented orally or in writing by the instructor, will give viewers an edge in beginning to match names and faces, as well as answer some basic questions about the early behavior of many of the characters. Learners will re-

quire some time to determine who is who, what the main characters are like, why any particular ill feelings between characters exist, and what relationships exist between the players.

Another typical pre-viewing task is the “brainstorming” session, in which students predict what may happen in a given scene. Since telenovelas are produced for a native-speaking audience, they often contain language that represents a diverse range of linguistic registers. For this reason, a list of some of the more commonly used vocabulary items will be helpful to students. Terrell (1993) reports that in a telenovela activity, he found that some of the words most common to soap operas (i.e., to deceive, to betray, to make jealous, inheritance) were mostly unknown his students (20).

One important note on previewing activities: when first encountering a telenovela, language learners can easily become frustrated, particularly at the beginning of the viewing cycle. It is of utmost importance that instructors be aware of this situation and prepare their students for it. Explain to the students precisely what the objective of the activity is—to understand the *meaning* of the telenovela. Explain to them that they will not understand every word spoken, nor should they expect to. Have them concentrate on the actions, intonation, gestures, and as much of the dialogue as they can. Do not expect them to be able to answer detailed questions concerning the episodes—do expect them, however, to try!

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Tasks designed to accompany video viewing itself should be structured to meet the learners’ current level of linguistic competence. Various researchers maintain that authentic materials need not be adjusted or structured to the students’ level of proficiency although the related task must be so adapted (Bacon & Finnemann, 469). For example, students can be given a list of comprehension questions to complete while watching the episode. These questions can also serve as an “advance organizer” for the episode the learners are about to see and hear. The typical structure of most telenovelas—generally five or six “chunks” divided by commercials—easily allows several questions per “chunk”, presented in chronological order, so that students are guided through the episode.

The type of questions provided is largely dependent on the students’ level of competence. Questions could focus, for example, on descriptions, summaries of actions or dialogue (e.g., when character X and character Y talk on the telephone, what do they talk about?), or discrete point comprehension questions (e.g., at what time did character X and character Y agree to meet for lunch. Questions can be written in Spanish or English and answered in either language, although it is sug-

gested that, early on in the viewing cycle, students be permitted to answer in English. The rationale for permitting English answers is two-fold. Since listening is accomplished in Spanish, students must have understood the spoken Spanish to properly answer a question, Comprehension, therefore, can be proven via any language known to them. Also, requiring students to answer questions in Spanish boils down to measuring one skill—listening/global comprehension—by means of another, writing, a productive skill which may not be as fully developed as students' receptive abilities.

At the conclusion of each episode, post-viewing discussion can serve to address students' concerns or confusion. Student comments, reactions, and predictions about future episodes can be interesting! Familiarity with the characters and plot of a telenovela provide an outstanding springboard for further language work, both oral and written. Students, for example, can practice with the preterit and imperfect by summarizing the actions of the episode, or they can use the future tense to hypothesize about what will happen in the next episode.

## Recording and Copyright

Legal issues regarding copyright are important to consider when incorporating authentic video programming into the foreign language curriculum. Commercial television programs are copyrighted broadcast material and therefore fall under the jurisdiction of the Fair Use Guidelines for Off-Air Videotaping for Educational Use (see Congressional Record, 14 October 1981). According to the Guidelines, a taped broadcast program may be retained by a non-profit educational institution for no more than forty-five (45) days, during which time it may only be used twice in class during the first ten days. However, long-term licenses permitting an instructor to permanently retain off-air videotapes of television programs fall beyond the scope of the Guidelines. As such, videotapes must be licensed by an educational institution in order to be retained either permanently or for a period of time designated by the holder of the copyright. Instructors are directed to contact the local television affiliate, where applicable, or the network office to secure permission and/or licensure.

## Conclusion

One final consideration: enjoy! Telenovelas are meant to entertain the audience and should be approached with that in mind. Students exposed to authentic telenovelas report feeling at ease with the medium and enjoying the experience of understanding a known form of entertainment in a foreign language (Weyers 1995; Terrell 1993).

Authentic telenovelas are a viable and an entertaining

source of comprehensible input which, when used in the foreign language classroom, expose students to authentic samples of "real" target language, used in context by native speakers. They provide visual stimuli and valuable extralinguistic clues in a medium well known to our students. As a long-term classroom project, exposure to Spanish-language telenovelas increases students' ability to decode unmodified authentic language and, as a result, accelerates language acquisition. ♦

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