VIDEOS AS ICEBREAKERS. A CASE STUDY

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Abstract. *This paper aims at discussing the importance of teaching with videos for the purpose of developing communicative skills and confidence in second language learners. Nowadays generations are accustomed to using the Internet from a very young age, thus it is only natural to tackle resources alike when improving both teaching and learning. Open Education resources carefully selected by the teacher according to students' interests and needs are considered more and more in the classroom and beyond it. This paper is mostly a case study conducted on Pre-Intermediate and Intermediate students of Ovidius University and it monitors their response to watching and debating about short videos shown in the classroom as icebreakers on different topics from the curriculum. It is highly important to cultivate fluency, personal opinions and a general climate of trust and partnership in this manner for the benefit of both sides. Students that are motivated and valued are more likely to be successful outside the classroom, this being the ultimate goal of the teaching-learning process.*

Keywords*: videos, communicative skills, confidence, Open Education resources, case study, icebreakers*

1. Introduction

Teaching is an ongoing process that requires constant participation and updating. If the teacher does not acknowledge the fact that he needs to keep it up with the times and to make his lessons more attractive for his students, he is in danger of losing their involvement in the classroom, not to mention his own routine and lack of motivation. So, what is the purpose of teaching and what do we want to achieve by doing it? These are simple questions to be answered depending on the students' needs and, not in the least, on the style of teaching that each and every one of us has built and favored over time.

We are strongly committed to the idea that teaching has the purpose of facilitating better communication between participants, be it in the classroom, at work or throughout the learners' private lives. As a matter of consequence, we embrace the Communicative Approach/Communicative Language Teaching/CLT, a mixture of methods and views upon issues regarding second language teaching and learning with its origins in the British teaching from the 1970s. The birth certificate of the approach is considered to be the D. A. Wilkins' book of 1976, *National Syllabuses*, which had a great impact on European linguists and was also adopted by the Council of Europe to set the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

There are four skills (listening, speaking, writing and reading) at the core of such an approach to enable the best possible communication between the parties, but there are no fixed rules, which gives a higher freedom to the process itself. *The Syllabuses for Primary Schools* (1981) states that "communicative purposes may be of many different kinds. What is essential in all of them is that at least two parties are involved in an interaction or transaction of some kind where one party has an intention and the other party expands or reacts to the intention" (Richards and Rodgers, 66). CLT is "paramount" (Richards, Rodgers 67) which entitles it to more features to count as noted by Finacchiaro and Brumfit and mentioned by Richards and Rodgers. There are many traits to scrutinize as follows, show the above: 1. If dialogs are used, they support communicative skills and are not learned by heart, 2. Contextualization is key, 3. Language learning means learning to communicate, 4.

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Effectiveness is prioritized, 5. Drilling may happen, but occasionally, 6. Pronunciation does not have to be perfect, but comprehensible, 7. All devices that assist the learners are accepted, 8. All attempts to communicate are encouraged from the very beginning, 9. Native language may be utilized, if necessary, 10. Translation might be employed if the students require it, 11. Reading and writing can be approached from day one, 12. The linguistic system to be targeted will be acquired during the process of learning how to communicate, 13. The most important objective is achieving communicative competence, 14. Linguistic variation is sought and desired in materials and methodology, 15. Sequencing is related to content, function and interest, 16. Teachers ought to be high professionals to motivate the learners, 17. Trial and error push the learner to create language, 18. Fluency is the scope and accuracy is always seen in context, 19. Students are supported to interact in various ways to develop communicative skills, 20. Intrinsic motivation is to arise from the topic discussed, not from the language itself. To sum it up, the proposed view is anti-structural, putting the idea of *learning by doing* at the heart of it. Being a learner-centered experience, it allows substantial power to those involved in the process and it definitely raises confidence and freedom of expression. The theoretical base of such an approach is eclectic, but rich, with many challenges ahead, yet with many more rewards to gain for all that are eager to test it. By comparison with small children acquiring their first language from their parents or from people around them without doing it logically, the learner is facing the process of bringing about (which is unconscious) a linguistic system rather than memorizing it (which is conscious). The range of activities that can be exercised is practically unlimited as far as they facilitate communication. Learners are free negotiators and teachers are facilitators ensuring the flow.

Additionally, disadvantages are to be admitted such as the preconceptions related to grammar rules not openly explained or corrections, those not being the goals in the process of teaching-learning. On the other hand, the teacher still remains the researcher, the analyst, the manager of the learning-teaching group and he is the main choice maker with materials. Traditional procedures and resources are not totally rejected by the supporters of the Communicative Approach, but varied and expanded. CLT has not brought up a revolution, it has emphasized an evolution. Some scholars might argue that the teacher should be able to elicit communicative tasks right from the beginning of the process (at lower levels), but we sustain the hypothesis that it is more rewarding and efficient to put it in practice with higher levels (from Pre-Intermediate or B1 students upwards) or, at least, this is what experience has taught us and this is also the case of the survey on students to be discussed further in our paper.

To draw the profile of the approach one more time, we need to underline the meaning it conveys to individual interpretation which is definitely empowering and raises motivation. According to Richards and Rodgers "CLT appealed to those who sought a more humanistic approach to teaching, one in which the interactive processes of communication received priority" (83). We absolutely consider that the method is more contemporary than ever, appealing to our fast pace of life and to our constant necessities to widen our horizon.

2. Preparing the ground

Before we set sail on our journey of knowledge, there is absolute demand of shortly looking into *procedures*, that meaning ways of engineering our communicative purposes. A very popular researcher, Jeremy Harmer, has dedicated a little chapter to teaching with videos in his book, *The Practice of English Language Teaching*. A handful of guidelines that he generously speaks about were furthermore considered by us for our experiment with the students.

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Besides stating that videos in the class "are not just listening exercises with pictures" (Harmer, 285) the researcher firstly takes notice of the advantages of employing such aids. Those strengths would primarily be: 1. *Seeing language in use,* a practice that helps comprehension at a larger extend because paralinguistic support increases the value of words such as facials, gestures, intonation, stress, 2. *Cross- cultural awareness* facilitating students to step outside the classroom somehow and to deal with a different cultural environment built on food, habits, style of living and language, 3. *Power of creation* where students might become directors of short films themselves and innovate with language, 4. *Higher motivation* considering that most of us are visual learners, not to mention the sense of freedom and creativity. We cannot resist the temptation of adding to the list the sense of achievement, the enriching experience of accessing more opinions, many of them, contradictory to yours, the empowering feeling that a person has when he or she exercises the freedom of speech, the imperative of listening to your partners in dialogue.

Disadvantages are far less numerous than advantages, but they are, still. Resultantly, those would be: 1. *The nothing new syndrome* where the pressure might be high on educators to compete for the attention of the youth, used to watching television all the time or to operating devices in general, 2. *Poor quality* of the materials presented can sometimes be a prodigious obstacle if the audience is not enthusiastic enough about the matter, 3. *Poor viewing conditions* which can be another weakness to the intended action, 4. *The stop and start* routine could affect the participation of the assembly if it is not properly balanced so we as educators need to give attention to such an affair with a group that we had worked with for a while, that we had created a bond with and where there is mutual trust and respect, 5. *The length* of the videos is another concern because the risk of losing interest is colossal with longer videos and it can also be unsatisfactory with very short videos; balance, again, seems to be the answer and, knowing your class well, as a mediator of the process 6. *Fingers and thumbs*, suggesting that technology can really turn against you, therefore consider mastering it and checking it before you play any videos or listening tracks to the audience. Besides all the above, one could simply be dealing with a hostile crowd or just not having picked up the right theme to feed the follow-up conversation with. Regardless of any impediments, most educators would value the pluses and employ videos as icebreakers for the simple fact that latter outnumber the former.

Following in the footsteps of the same researcher, Jeremy Harmer, one should count the diversity of the existing videos. Above all, the level of students as second language learners of English is the key to success. Accordingly, there are, at least, three types of videos to cope with: 1. *Off-air programs* selected from a television channel where the teacher has to carefully look into matters of copy-rights, slang or vernacular language that might be inappropriate or difficult for learners to digest, 2. *Real-word videos* showing people asked in the street or recorded by nonprofessionals displaying the same challenges as mentioned before, 3. *Language learning videos realized by publishing houses* with a specific level in mind but having the major drawback of seeming artificial, nonetheless the satisfaction of students understanding the spoken message is expected to be tremendous. Pushing people out of their comfort zone enables progress and that is the case of learners, too, though it needs to be done smoothly, without people even acknowledging it.

While the educator can design a whole lesson on watching videos or a series converted to the same topic, our focus is on making it the starting point of our lesson to trigger a follow-up discussion of up to twenty minutes, sufficient to give all the participants the chance of expressing their thoughts and opinions, to interact and to activate critical thinking. Videos as part of lessons are to be utilized, Jeremy Harmer argues, for their topics, language, as a relaxation technique linking two activities or as homework or a self-study task

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with suitable purposes. Our priority is using videos for the topics brought under our attention connected to the material we study and for the spoken language itself, be it of professionals or common people, as a warming-up exercise towards enhancing fluency and confidence in second language students of English.

3. Stepping on the ground

Our experiment was conducted on a group of fifteen undergraduate students of Geography, 1st year of study, from the Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences within "Ovidius" University of Constanta. The students were informed, at the beginning of the seminar, that they are going to watch a video of approximately eight minutes on a certain subject related to our present research on Population Geography that included human interaction, migration, ethnic minorities, gender discrimination as presented in our textbook by Arthur Getis, Mark Bjelland and Victoria Getis, *Introduction to Geography* (fourteenth edition) published by McGraw Hill Education, New York, 2014.

The students were given seven questions on the blackboard and they were asked to write them down and to read them carefully prior to watching the video[10]: *1. Where is the action located? 2. When did the man arrive there? 3. What is Mickail's country of origin? 4. What happened to his family? 5. Why is he stuck in Samoa? 6. Explain "statelessness". 7. How can such a situation be solved?* Note that the students in question were not at their first attempt to view a video as an icebreaker and to debate on it according to our themes of study. Needless to say, the connection between us as teacher and learners was strong enough to allow trust, a comfortable environment and blossoming debates afterwards. They had also been rated as Intermediate (B2 according to the European Language Frame for languages) students at the beginning of the academic year of study, thus their fluency and vocabulary were more than satisfactory, just the right amount to enable flourishing conversations and to support a variety of interventions and to add more.

Jeremy Harmer as someone with a real interest for the process of learning with media also puts under inspection some techniques to stimulate productive skills, especially speaking after having listened or watched a short video. The person in charge of playing the clip can do that *fast forward*, asking the viewers to make predictions about the content and the issues involved, then it can be played as a *silent viewing* that being without the sound with the purpose of motivating the learners to speak to supply for what is missing, then there is the *freeze frame* technique which is good for making presuppositions as to what follows next and to, consequently, unleash speaking and last, but not least, *partial viewing* where parts of the screen are covered and the audience is required to fill in the gaps with their own words and assumptions (Harmer 286-288). These techniques can be combined or one educator can opt for the traditional whole viewing of the video and then build on the debate with the support and the participation of the students. We considered the last possibility to be more suitable for our survey. Subsequently, we opted for watching the entire video two times, the first time being for general comprehension, the gist of it, and the second time to grant the students the opportunity of paying more attention to details (listening for details). After having done so,

[10] *Stateless in America*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_Dol2QbNWfs, according to Jeremy Harmers' classification, the video employed by us qualifies as *an off-air programme* so it does not contain vernacular language or slang but it displays a variety of accents, the main character in the story not being a native American and speaking English as a second language, and also his host, an aboriginal from Samoa, speaking Samoan as his mother tongue, so English with an accent, booth interventions could have been a challenge for some of the students undertaking the experiment. Nevertheless, the students encounter fewer difficulties with the television presenters and the officials due to their standard American English, easier to understand for our Romanian learners than British English as a consequence of media, films, news, music almost all advertising and supporting the first one.

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the final stage of the activity and the most creative and rewarding segment, come into action, the speaking part to boost interpretation, critical thinking, comparison, questioning, problem solving, offering solutions. The students were allowed and encouraged to ask each other questions or to imagine similar scenarios to be solved for their partners in education. The debates lasted more than a quarter of an hour and it could have been longer but for our subtle intervention and control because time management problems can appear. Some of the issues that arose during the discussions are worth mentioning here: comparison with the present massive migration to Europe from Syria or other Muslim countries and the implications such movements of populations can activate, the status of some ethnic communities in Romania such as the Roma community where many members do not possess any sort of identification, birth certificates or else, and thus they do not have access to education, the medical system and become subject to human trafficking and crime, nongovernmental organizations that can advise on legal matters, human rights, rules and regulations aligned all over the world to support human dignity and to avoid discrimination or abuse of any kind.

Feedback is essential when we teach because it can definitely guide us to improve our methods and to understand the process by trial and error, the same as our students do. Considering all of the above, our group of students has been surveyed to assess the level of success and practicality such an activity had on them, on their confidence when employing English, on their fluency and on their power of communicating, overall. The following questions were handed to the learners to fill in, on the spot. The first one was: "*Rank the video presented from 1 to 5 (1 being the poorest choice and 5 being the best one)*".

In terms of percentages, our results spoke for themselves. Out of fifteen students, 2 responded with 3 (so, closer to *the best* option), 4 responded with 4 (even closer to the best ranking) and 9 responded with 5 (that meant the video chosen was the best option so the teacher was given absolute credit for it). The outcome has proven remarkable as regards our option and, more than that, remarkable as far as our students' trust and consideration for us is concerned. The second request was: "*Choose only one option for the quality of the video and the viewing conditions: a. unsatisfactory, b. satisfactory, c. excellent".* The outcome comprised: 10 *satisfactory* answers and 5 *unsatisfactory*. The video was played on our personal computer and the people at the back of the room might have encountered some difficulties in seeing and hearing everything, although they were allowed to move around or to change seats. Such limitations are very likely to occur often and it appeals to the flexibility of both sides as long as the effort is worth taking. A fine piece of advice would be to check your equipment prior to proceeding and to make sure everybody is comfortable and ready to give their full attention to the activity in proper conditions. And the last question was: "*Do you think that the activity was useful for increasing your level of English together with your confidence? Write 15 to 30 words to motivate your answers".* Needless to mention that the answers were anonymous with the purpose of improving the quality standards of the educational process undertaken.

We do not intend to reveal all the answers for the last question of the survey, but select some of the most relevant ones for ensuring a balanced feedback. One of the students wrote "I find the activity very useful and fun, even though I use YouTube at home myself and I watch a lot of clips. We can share opinions and speak freely in the classroom, so it is better." Another learner spoke about the role of the teacher "I really trust my teacher as a selector for the videos. This is excellent for practicing my English after viewing and understanding. Still, it can be difficult at times to find the correct words to express my thoughts."

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The majority of the respondents gave positive feedback and the results have reinforced our belief that the more interactive the activity is, the better it reaches its initial objective, to facilitate communication.

4.Conclusion

There is a constant growth in the use of open education resources, especially YouTube, in the academia, even though complete studies are yet to be desired. Along with the teachers incorporating videos in their courses and thus becoming more contemporary with their times, some students' perception has changed as well, even older ones considering it to be a positive thing. Since its boost in 2005, YouTube has turned into one of the largest online video host, being popular for a variety of clips, mostly for entertainment purposes, but also for educational purposes, as a researcher rightly emphasizes some numbers: "As of September 2009 there were 102 university YouTube channels in the UK, and at the time of writing this report over 400 university channels worldwide. There is a creative tension within YouTube as a platform for mainstream broadcasters (maybe even including universities) and as a community of individual content creators who see the site as a social network (Tan, Pearce, 126). The popularity of such means of learning does not imply that learners can stop attending classes because they can watch the same videos at home. It is no replacement for the interaction that takes place in the classroom as it is argued by the same researchers mentioned above in the following:

> this project does not just propose incorporating videos as a replacement for lecture material, or as a way of 'flipping the classroom' where information transmission takes place outside the class allowing for other classroom activities (which might usually be set as homework), but uses videos as a means of supporting and enhancing learning within the traditional classroom environment (Tan, Pearce, 127).

As with our case study, we paid ample attention to the students' answers to improve our strategy, other scholars have done the same. One of the learners required to give his motivation, praised the diversity of opinions and approaches that they can access when watching and talking about a clip in the classroom. The teacher is the authority involved in the selection of clips, but he still needs to consider a wide variety

> I think it's desperately important to get the opinion of others than the lecturer. That's where ideas come from, you get discussions going and you bounce back ideas and this leads to something new doesn't it? If you only just had one opinion you wouldn't learn anything (Tan, Pearce,128).

In other words, the wider the variety of perceptions, the more satisfactory the understanding of the topic discussed, the more people taking part in the discussion, the richer the learning experience.

The conclusions that the cited researchers above reached are similar to ours, regardless of the fact that their pilot case study was done on native English speakers, students of sociology, we targeted the exact same goals:

> The results of this research highlight a number of factors surrounding the use of videos in education. Firstly, the role of discussion is highly prized by the students, and the video's role in stimulating this was frequently mentioned. Secondly the students valued the teachers' input into these discussions and appreciated the additional

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> commentary provided whilst watching the videos in class. The results indicate that the students felt that the combination of being able to ask questions and offer opinions as well as the benefit from the additional expertise of the lecturer, meant that the video's quality was somehow 'added to'. It would seem that, even though students had access to and were given exactly the same resources, they still felt that there was added value when these were viewed collectively and the role of the teacher in this process was key. (Burke et all, 5)

Thus, a meeting of minds could not have been more rewarding when it comes to evaluating needs and analyzing results with colleague educators from all over the world.

A different shade of the process in question was brought to light in a study conducted by some American faculty researchers on the usage of the Internet by lecturers, moreover, on their willingness and trust the new tool and to do so for everyone's benefit. We highly appreciate this approach as we will not hesitate to state that younger generations see it natural to incorporate technology into learning, while a different category of teachers, a more traditional one, older in spirit rather than in age, might find it too liberal, lacking structure and eventually sense. As a consequence, there are some realities to meditate on for those of us who are more reluctant to change or who safely stick to more traditional ways of teaching.

The online survey (Burke, S., Snyder and S. Rager, RC. "An assessment of faculty usage of YouTube as a teaching resource" *The Internet Journal of Allied Health Sciences and Practice.* Jan. 2009, volume 7 number 1) that we chose as support for our belief that change should start with the educators was conducted in 2007 among college-level health education faculty related to the usage of YouTube in the process of teaching. Items such as gender, age, years of teaching level of courses taught (undergraduate, graduate), number of courses taught per semester and instructional setting (in-class or online) were taken into consideration by the authors. Looking at numbers and analyzing statistics, even for the common eye, can bring the matter into a new light. The response rate (in other words, the interest manifested by the target group on the topic of the survey) was 40.7% (24 out of 59 faculty completed the poll). 54.2% were females aged between 24 and 60. More than half of the respondents had a teaching experience of more than six years and they were mostly teaching in-class courses for both graduate and undergraduate students. 41.7% reported using YouTube in their courses, regardless of the profile of the group in terms of gender or ethnicity. Lower percentages were obtained for faculty educators at the beginning of their career or over 50 of age. A consistent majority of responses were positive towards the practice in question. Those who reported never using YouTube as a learning tool in the classroom or in online courses, showed a sizeable interest in learning how to apply it as a resource as it is shown in the following:

> Positive perceptions about its use an instructional tool included the following: a wealth of video materials are available, it provides another means for serving information to the students via a new technology that they might find fresh and interesting and to which many of them can relate, it offers real-life examples and visual demonstrations of the topics and concepts covered in class, the quick, short videos it can provide are excellent for use as lecture launches to promote discussion and critical thinking. One of the faculty commented that YouTube was *current, timely, free, diverse-did I mention free?* (Burke, Rager,5).

As it is clearly stated, the advantages are equivalent to those presented at the beginning of our paper when Jeremy Harmer was cited, by us through our own teaching experience, by peers. While the study brought under observation is too small to provide all

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information necessary, one can only build an idea about the impact of using YouTube as a teaching-learning tool. The conclusion is far from being unexpected:

This study showed that overall, faculty who use YouTube in their courses were satisfied with this new technology and found it to be an effective teaching and learning tool, with caveats regarding the need to carefully screen videos for appropriateness and validity, and the recognition of the challenges related to the time involved in creating or finding the right videos for particular course applications. In addition, the study results suggest that faculty who have not yet used YouTube as an instructional tool-particularly those new to teaching and those who are older veteran teachers- appear to be interested in learning more about its potential in the classroom. As one non-user commented, "*I need to plan for incorporating this technology into my courses in the future* (Burke, Rager, 6).

The thought that immediately came to our mind was whether Romanian teachers, especially those in higher education, no matter the faculty and the type of courses they teach, display the same interest with the same desire of becoming better educators and passing on the knowledge to their students in a fun, modern and interactive way. We are pretty confident that many of them have been doing it for a long time, still many need to adapt to more liberal times. It would be of interest to conduct a survey in this respect and to assess their willingness to change for the better, for the sake of times we are living, for the sake of the student's representative of these times, for the greater power of education that liberates minds and enriches spirits. We, as educators, have the duty to be positive, open-minded to new technologies and methods, young at heart, restless in the process we daily conduct in order to support our students to find rewarding jobs, to be competitive on the employment market and, not in the least, to be closer to proficiency in English.

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